

Jake's Childhood

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Jake's Childhood:

There was a campfire on Saturday 2021-09-25. It wasn't a special occasion. Just a neighborhood get-together, one that was a little larger than usual. My wife and her best friend were there, my mother and mother-in-law, the neighbors who had invited us, and a few others.

At the campfire, my mother said something similar to this: "I spanked my kids for screaming and crying. If you're screaming, you better be *dying*... or you're gonna get beat."

As she said this, she was smiling and laughing.

The laughter had an effect on me. I didn't say anything; I sat there quietly. However, I felt shock and physical tension. In a single moment, it had all come back.

My brother Ray used to come close to murdering me. Not in a comical way such as TV scenes where Bugs Bunny or the Three Stooges might say "I'll murderize ya". Literally killing me.

It went on for 5 years.

People might say that Ray was "just a kid" and "didn't know what he was doing". The 2nd part isn't true. Ray used to tell me that it made him happy. But the important part is what was said at the campfire and what it tells us about how we perceive ourselves.

The situation was horrible. It shouldn't be permitted to happen to other children. But it does happen every day. It happens because people don't look in the mirror. Instead, they say that nothing happened. Sometimes they laugh at the thought.

Ray Gustafson used to hurt a little boy. Not bully, but close to murder. Again and again forever. Striking with objects, suffocation, and other things. The little boy screamed. For 5 years.

Ages 13 to 17 for Ray. Ages 9 to 13 for the younger boy.

Our mother Marie was a day sleeper. For much of this period, she worked from about 11:30pm to 7:30am. She'd be home and awake for a few hours. Then she'd sleep from 2:30pm to 10:30pm.

When I screamed, Marie would wake up and come. She was irritated at being disturbed. Ray would say, "Jake's just being a baby. He's just a cry-baby. I didn't do anything." Then Marie would beat me.

It wasn't "spanking" for discipline. It was being struck full-force for calling out in pain and fear while Ray was hurting me.

She'd use a thick rubber slipper. It had a sort of whipping action. Usually 25 blows. For calling out while I was being struck or suffocated by my brother.

I had difficulty breathing while Marie was doing this. This part happened with my father as well. It was much worse when my father beat me. However, when Ray struck me, there was no comparison. Ray stopped my breathing again and again. I often felt that I'd die.

Ray Gustafson liked to punch me in the solar plexus area. He was 4 years older. His fist was more or less the size of the entire area. I'd stop breathing or breathe painfully.

He struck me repeatedly on the back once. That stopped my breathing as well. And he used to smother me. Not playfully. He tried to literally kill me again and again. He'd smother me with pillows and blankets.

A few times, Ray trapped me in a sleeping bag. I'd panic. The lack of oxygen and panic would feed on each other.

And if I screamed out of panic, I'd get this type of reaction from my mother: "[pound] Stop [pound] crying! [pound] Shut up! [pound]".

To be fair to Marie, that particular occasion was worse than usual. However, looking back, it's safe to say that the atmosphere wasn't entirely positive.

Sometimes I'd try to phone our father John while Ray was trying to get at me.

John would often be working in an auto shop that he'd made out of our garage. So, he'd be close by and able to respond. But there usually wasn't time to dial before Ray was holding me down and striking me.

John Gustafson wasn't especially helpful. He'd stopped drinking, but he wasn't sane for years afterwards. He'd yell and break things. Marie, Ray, and I were all frightened on those occasions.

So, John was a fallback option at best. In fact, if I phoned him, he'd come in ranting at the top of his lungs and start snapping a thick wide leather belt. Ray and I would run, screaming, but he'd catch us and whale away on both our asses without asking any questions.

I'd scream about what had happened. But John never listened or stopped raging.

Eventually, I worked out a process. I'd phone John and then I'd climb out of a window. The idea was to disappear before John showed up and then he and Ray could talk and leave me out of it.

It was complicated because the window that I used was 6 feet above the ground. I'd grab the ledge and try to let myself down without breaking an arm or a leg. Eventually I figured out that I should keep a ladder outside the window. That worked better.

My mother, though abusive, was more rational than my father was. So, sometimes after she'd beaten me and had woken up more completely, I'd try to talk to her about what had happened. She'd just say, "Waa-aaa, waa-aaa, waa-aaa". Or "Poor baby". Sarcastically.

The reason for this type of reaction is that people shape not just narratives but recollections to cast themselves in the role of hero. This is how abuse is possible. This is how it works.

Did I reshape my own recollections? It seems unlikely that the bruises were imagined.

The sarcasm stopped when I was 12 years old. One day, I took off my clothes except for undershorts.

Then I went to my mother. I showed her that I had bruises from neck to ankles.

It wasn't the first time that I'd had that many bruises. Not by a long shot. The number of bruises varied over the months and years, but it was sometimes that bad.

I showed Marie the bruises. I said, "Look!" I kept pointing to all of the bruises and yelling and crying. Ray was there. Ray said, "He's just clumsy. I didn't do anything." I shouted, "That's not true!"

It was an odd day. But my mother finally believed me. After 3 years of beatings and suffocation incidents that could easily have killed me.

Marie said that she'd talk to my father John. Ray scoffed at the notion that anything was going to happen.

My parents, John and Marie, told Ray that they were going to delay his access to a driver's license for a year because he'd beaten me up. Marie added that this was intended to cover the 3 years of beatings.

Ray Gustafson wasn't pleased that I'd shown Marie my bruises. The loss of the opportunity to drive aggravated him as well. So he continued to beat me up. Actually, the beatings got worse.

This went on for another 2 years.

From ages 12 to 13, I tried not to involve my parents either intentionally or unintentionally during the beatings. After the beatings, I rarely reported the incidents to them.

John continued to recover from his alcoholic stage but it remained risky to call him. And neither parent wanted to know that the beatings were continuing.

So, I was on my own. It was pretty bad at times.

Ray Gustafson and I shared a bedroom for most of our youth. I knew that he'd cheerfully kill me at night if he could figure out a way to do it that was both convenient and safe for him. It wasn't the most relaxing place to sleep.

One time, Ray smiled and looked me in my eyes and said, "I'm going to wake you up sometime by punching you in the stomach. It's coming. Be sure to imagine it."

I started crying. After that I had chronic anxiety. Sleep problems. I literally tried to stay tense in my sleep to protect my solar plexus. It never really ended.

From the earliest memories that I have until Ray left for college, I rarely felt safe. Children and youths should be able to feel safe.

I didn't feel more safe with my parents around. In fact, Marie - my mother - used to beat me and mock me subsequent to the beatings that I received from Ray.

But I don't hate Marie. To the contrary.

When I was age 12, at the same that I disrobed to show my bruises, I shouted at her, "I hate you!" She responded, "I don't care". I didn't mean what I said. The thing is, she did mean what she said. This is the way that things often are.

Even so, in adulthood, I've remained in communication with my parents. I've even tried to build understandings. I don't walk around each day focused on what was done to me.

But whether or not I focus on it, it comes to visit me. It knocks me down to the ground in my head and in my heart as surely as this used to happen physically.

The physical and emotional sides of you are part of a whole. If you dismiss things at the emotional level, you may feel physical distress. It happened to me.

It's important that some things be talked about. That it be made clear that no, it isn't true that "nothing happened" or that an abuse victim was "just clumsy".

It's important because these things will continue otherwise. And because denial brutalizes victims again. There is no escape for anybody in denial.

At the campfire, my mother dismissed 5 years of brutality with a laugh. The floor dropped out from under me.

I've dealt with each of my family members over the years as reasonably as possible.

Even Ray Gustafson, a caricature of a man who has failed himself both as a Christian and as a free spirit.

There is nothing of substance left of Ray, if there ever was a soul behind the fists. Ray is a confused and potentially violent predator who leaves little in his wake besides a trail of drug and alcohol fumes and arrests. However, I've tried to talk to him.

If the wording seems direct, understand that Ray Gustafson tried to physically kill me for 5 years and treated me several times as a sexual plaything. I offer no apologies for perceived condescension.

Nor for talking about what happened. I'm going to say more about the sexual part of it. I don't wish to hear "See No Evil" about that part. It isn't appropriate.

To be honest, I don't care, nor should I be expected to care, that others wish to forget the past. That isn't their decision to make.

Not if the past is my own life. And not if quiet acceptance of abuse puts other children at risk even in a watchful society.

If I'd thought to walk into a police station at age 12 and disrobe there instead of showing my bruises to my mother, things would have gone differently.

Ray and I would have been removed from the household. All four of us might have been happier in the end. However, one does what is possible. One works with what one has. And I've tried to do that for decades.

Over the years, I expected primarily one thing from Ray: That he'd take responsibility. It would have made all the difference. But he isn't able to do so. Nor, I'm afraid, is our mother.

I've tried to create relationships with my parents where none existed in childhood. I recommend this to others. Not denial, not blind forgiveness if none is sought, but communication, closure, and relationships where they're possible.

I've expected the same thing from my parents that I expected of Ray: Take responsibility. My father John has made an effort to do so. It's more difficult for my mother Marie.

It's a common issue and not a conscious decision on Marie's part. People don't look in the mirror. Or,

if they do look in the mirror, they need to see a hero standing there. So, that is what they see.

I needed what had happened not to be dismissed with a laugh. I've written this chapter to stop the racing of my heart, to be able to sleep, and to ask other people out there to talk about things that have happened. Don't dismiss them casually.

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