

A Well-Trained Little Monkey

A memoir by: [REDACTED]

“Nobody realizes that
some people expend tremendous
energy merely to be normal.”
— Albert Camus

“Blessed be the hearts that can bend
They shall never be broken.”
— Albert Camus

“It takes so many pieces of a puzzle for life
to happen, only God knows how they all fit in.”
— words of Our Dear Lord Jesus Christ
from an NDE witness

I never had any proof of the abuse. It was invisible, like it never happened. My father never hit me, never touched me. He was quite careful about that, actually, and demonstrated incredible self-control; he never performed any indecent acts on my body. He never so much as laid a finger on me. All he did was talk. And boy, was he ever good at talking! He had been known as Prince Charming when he was young amongst his circle of women. Except he never really liked women, my father. He pretended to like them. Maybe some of them he really did like, but then he'd pick the most innocent one — maybe even the somewhat naïve one — and play his games.

The abuse was all verbal. I, his daughter Annie, could never go to the police and say, “This is what my father did; this is how he tortures me day after day.” He was very careful. He was most careful about how he appeared in the world; never really cared much about who he actually was. But it was all real. We'd eat dinner each night, then he'd take a bottle of vodka, or whiskey, pick a few instruments of torture, lay them on the table, sit me on the chair, and whisper into my ear all the things he *could* do to me if he chose. Because I was his daughter, I was his property. He owned me. I'm not sure where the world went wrong, but the whole idea of parents being owners of their children always made me somewhat sick. I wish to dear God I had known I could emancipate myself at fourteen. I didn't know. Nor did I have the resources to do it, financial, or even emotional. My spirit had been so pushed inwards by then, I thought I'd

never get it out. I'd just die in that kitchen out of sheer exhaustion of listening day in and day out to his ramblings.

The thing is I had to survive. Every child thinks this way; every child wants to find a way out. So, I'd cling to these small things that I interpreted as love, or at least the appearance of love, the images I had seen in others, or on TV. We would eat dinner together — that was love. Most nights I cooked, looking through all of my mother's recipes, sometimes succeeding and getting praise from my father, but other times he didn't notice my efforts or simply said, "This is disgusting. I wish I had just bought something at the store."

If I had been braver, I'd say, "You go and do that. You go and buy yourself dinner and never realize our meal is about having a relationship with me, not the food." But I wasn't braver. I was eight. My mother had died the previous year. I made easy meals from potatoes, cabbage, sausages, or other meat. I did my best and learned quickly, afraid of him. Fear is a strange thing. It seems a negative emotion, but it made me sharp.

Some days he'd bring food. Usually he'd bring his favorites: veal parmigiana from the Italian grocery store, breaded fish from a Portuguese restaurant, salted herring from a Finnish diner. Those were his favorites, but I ate them with him, afraid of critiquing his gifts. He never bothered asking me what I liked. It'd never even cross his mind actually to think someone else *might* like something different. When he got older, before his death, he became more conscious of the possibility that other people were not like him. It was a revelation to him. It was a surprise that I never liked veal parmigiana, but not in an awakening kind of sense; rather, he thought I was weird for not liking it. He couldn't understand why other people didn't share his tastes. These concepts were beyond him. Ironically, his lack of any compassion or even an inkling of empathy helped me during the course of my own life because I knew how incredibly cruel it was to be in the vicinity of someone who completely doesn't connect with anyone, and doesn't wish to. Like a sociopath. I wouldn't have been surprised, if my father had been tested, that he'd score as a major sociopath. He never loved anyone in his entire life. The closest he got to love was my mother, and he treated her like a little dog he knew would forever be loyal, no matter what happened, no matter what he did. Until she died from sheer exhaustion.

During those meals with me, he pretended, though. He'd tell me about his day; he'd even tell jokes (not always the kind of jokes a little girl should hear, but he didn't have enough consciousness to discriminate between his audience of work buddies and his daughter) and

sometimes he'd even laugh, not to ridicule, but genuinely laugh. I did love those moments. Looking back, these were probably the only sparse moments when I felt any sort of true love; when some other, innocent part of him came out without being guarded. These moments were rare, and I realized much later, as an adult, that it was why he drank. His whole life was a sort of a lie; his days were all performance. There was nothing real in them, not even me, his one and only daughter. No one can survive the pressure of keeping up appearances to that degree without some kind of a release. It was when I understood this that I actually genuinely forgave him. He must've lived in such terrible misery. Buddhists call this place Avicii, the hell of all hells, and often it's completely of our own making. There's always a way out, often a simple way; we just choose not to take it because it's too hard, or can't even see it because seeing it means giving up our pain we've gotten used to and which is familiar like an old friend who keeps abusing us, but we still call it friendship.

During dinner, I also learned to perform to act like a daughter, even though I never felt like that; more like his slave, someone he owned completely and could rule in any cruel way he chose to. But I needed to survive. I wanted to live. I trained myself like a little monkey to survive that hell. I performed like a daughter during dinner, knowing full well what would happen next. The anticipation of it filled me with terror no less than actual torture. It's a strange thing, fear; it can be used to control the mind in ways beyond understanding. Especially a child's understanding. It loops in a circle. The more you're afraid of certain things happening, the more you fear them happening until fear takes over your whole day, night — your whole life. It could be an hour or two of actual torture each day, but the *anticipation* of it becomes a way of life, until you're drowning in fear, until everything is dictated by fear, until every single thing in your whole life is soaked in fear. Layers and layers of fear; the morning is already colored by the events twelve hours ahead, the noon hour brings nausea, the afternoon is marked by spasms of the whole body in preparation for a daily dose of torture.

All he ever did was talk. He'd whisper into my ear as he drank, and nothing about it was sweet. Nothing. His imagination for torture was terrifying; his *pleasure* in seeing another breathe shallow breaths, shaking in his presence, was unimaginable to me. I never understood who'd ever want to do what he did except to imagine someone who never knew love, and his unconscious human desire for it expressed itself in torturing me. Even malice was some sort of an expression of love. I sat there frozen in one position in a chair, his malice oozing out of him

along with the stench of vodka, or whiskey, depending on the day. His whole body pulsated with poisons I'd absorb like a sponge, too young to have had time to build up armor, too innocent to know how, too naïve to know a father wasn't always a friend.

I was fully poisoned by his malice. My young female body never developed. Drowned in constant fear, I never got my period. I'd never have children. Fear killed any possibility of happiness of a loving family, pleasure of the body, joy of love before I ever knew anything about it. I went so deep inside, I never hoped of ever getting out. I'd have been happy just to survive.

I couldn't tell anyone. And it's not because I couldn't actually tell anyone — I tried. But my father was oh so charming to everyone else. Nobody believed me. No one could even imagine who he became when we were alone. No one would ever even consider the possibility he was someone other than the person they knew.

He had so much contempt for women, I sometimes tried to warn them when they flirted with him that they were wasting their time. That he'd never give them the time of day because he already had me to torture, and torture was all he was interested in doing. I warned them that even if he was interested in any sort of a relationship, they should run away. All the women thought I was some sort of a hysterical child who never got over her mother's death — “too attached,” they'd say. He'd laugh at them and say, “See how stupid they are? They can't even tell you didn't even really love your mother. You couldn't have because if you did, she wouldn't have died.”

His dislike for women was beyond anything I could ever articulate. He feared them and hated them because he feared them. My mother, who died when I was only seven years old, was the most god-fearing woman alive. She'd let him abuse her the way he'd later abuse me. Except in my case, I didn't know any better; I didn't know I had a choice to leave. He abused her until one day, when she was seven months pregnant with my baby brother, she went inside herself and never came out. The fear won. She gave birth to a stillborn and died of a broken heart and a broken spirit a few days later. Crying at her hospital bed, I vowed never to have my spirit broken, no matter how many times my heart got shattered and my mind turned inside out by violence. For her. For her un-lived, unhappy life. She had nothing to fight for, not even me,

because I looked so much like my father, my face was a constant reminder of her never-ending agony.

One Easter, when my father's mother, Helene, came to visit and we sat, the three of us, at the table, my paternal grandmother, my father, and me, my mother turned to her friend and said, "Look at the triplets. There's no room in this house except for them three." She was soon dead.

In comparison to the person he became, my father was an angel until alcohol touched his lips. He didn't even have to be drunk; just the scent and taste of it gave him permission to let his demons out. I could never share my truth because no one believed it. He was that good. Once, I tried to tell my great-aunt, his father's sister, Josephine. It had been an emotional day after a particularly nasty and long evening of torture. I never knew how renewed torture could be each and every day over the years; how extremely intelligent and inventive my father's mind actually was. What a waste it actually was, having not been given more love. I was always amazed how the same thing could be said in so many cruel and unusual ways.

"How are you?" my great-aunt asked when I came into her warm and already ginger-scented kitchen. It was Christmas time, and I had come to help her bake.

I just burst into tears in front of her.

"What is it?" she asked, alarmed.

"Dad is being really...really...awful to me."

"Frank? Your father? I don't believe it. He's the most amazing man I've ever known, and I've known him for most of his life."

"But he's really...nasty."

"I don't believe you. That handsome, nice man doesn't have a bad bone in his whole body. Stop lying, girl."

"All his bones are evil!" I yelled.

"Stop lying."

"But he has evil in him!" I was livid with so much built-up fear and emotion, I must've looked crazy.

My aunt looked at me, furious. I knew that look well. He had it, too. She said, "Don't talk about your father this way. You're alive because of him. He works so hard. He puts food on the table. You have shelter and clothes. What more do you want?"

“Love. I want love,” I whispered, exhausted and by that point not caring if she was angry with me too. “I don’t care if I have to live on the street. I want love.”

“That’s because you’ve never lived on the street, you stupid, stupid girl. You have no idea what diseases and bugs there are. Don’t wish for something like that to be your life?”

“I’ll take real bugs made by God any day.”

“Stop it. You’re hysterical, just like your mother was. There was nothing to her stories. Nothing. And then she died. Like a real coward. Are you a coward, too?”

“No.” I wiped my nose with my sleeve. I knew I had walked into another blind alley. No one wanted to know. My father was too precious a commodity in the neighborhood. He did good work, and no one wanted to jeopardize losing someone with such skills. I had been cornered in ways no one could even fathom, and I could never explain.

“And since I’m not a coward, I will say this: my mother was a saint. I don’t care what you say. She was a saint.”

My great-aunt said nothing. She just looked at me for the rest of the evening with a strange worry. I could’ve interpreted it as some sort of concern for me, but I had been trained to be mistrustful of the world. I figured she was on my father’s side, having defended him with such passion.

Near the end of the evening, when she sat down at the kitchen table, she pointed to a chair across from me. She put two glasses of milk and ginger cookies on the table and a game of Scrabble. She looked at me and said, “Annie, no one is all good or all bad. No one. Your mother was a weak woman. She had a lot of talents and did nothing with them. It was hard for your father to be with her. I think sometimes they’d have been better off divorcing; maybe she’d still be alive. But she didn’t leave. And you have to accept that. She could have, and she didn’t. There was something good about your father for her.”

“Yeah, well, in that case, nobody loved me. Not even her, so pardon me if I don’t believe you. I need to know someone loves me.”

“He loves you. Maybe not perfectly, but in his own way, he does love you.”

I wanted to say, “I don’t really care for his way of loving; I want to be as far away from it as possible.” But fear was in me, and with fear I responded. I said nothing.

My aunt’s words would haunt me for the rest of my life, though. That no one was all bad. I’d never reconcile my experiences with what she said.

One day I was at a hardware store with my father when I was stopped by the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. Later, I'd find out it was "Für Elise" by Beethoven. I stood in the middle of the aisle, mesmerized, unaware of the world except for that heavenly stream of sound, which flooded my sense and awakened a part of my soul I never knew existed. It expressed such softness; softness I longed for and of which my life was completely devoid. I didn't know what to do. Love entered me. That's what I felt while listening to this music: love. I hadn't known love, not like this. Pure and simple. Because even with my mother it had been intertwined with my father's abuse, of her, of me, of my never-born baby brother. This music was something else. It was the language of Heaven, and I wanted to be a part of it. For the first time I wanted; I wanted something, and it felt good to want it, to chase it, to go after these sounds of heaven.

I stood still in the aisle, and my father noticed. Usually, I was restless. He had been trying to choose some materials for his new renovation. He stared at me like he never had before. I had always felt more of a nuisance to him than a precious daughter, although when I was very young and my mother was still alive, I do remember feeling precious, even to him. Now, I was more of an interruption to his otherwise always self-sufficient existence.

But that day he looked at me like he was surprised, and I, too, saw a different face on him. Different than the one I was used to. I saw a face of the long-gone days, before I was born, when he was a young man, full of hope and dreams, and a love for life. Those days I didn't know, and that day I only got a glimpse of a man I had never known.

He didn't suddenly leap to me, or hug me, or tell me I was the best thing that ever happened to him in his life, or the best thing he had ever made, or that I was precious or loved. He walked by me and as he passed me he said, "You look like your mother when I first met her." He then proceeded to go to the cash register to pay for his rope, drape sheets, brushes, and paint.

Later in the car, he kept looking at me, but when I looked he'd look back on the road. Finally, he asked, "You liked that song that played on the speaker in the store?"

"Very much," I said.

"Good, it's settled then."

What was settled, how, or why I didn't know, and I knew better than to ask. I'd get clues soon enough, so I just waited. That day he took out all of my mother's things out of her dressing room — a room he hadn't touched since she died two years before. He put the things in boxes, donated them to our church (where it was decided they'd be auctioned at a fashion show because my father liked to dress my mother up to show her off). He then proceeded to clean the room thoroughly and paint it. He knew I liked blue, so he painted it an azure blue, close to the color of my mother's eyes. I'd always liked people with azure eyes. It was subconscious. The room seemed and felt different, yet I could still feel my mother's love in it.

A few days later, a large fortepiano showed up at our house.

"I signed you up for lessons. You'll practice the piano as much as you can so you can play that song you liked all by yourself and not have to depend on anyone else. Maybe even...some part of your mother will grow inside you, too."

It was the first time I had heard even a mention of my mother liking music. It'd be years before I'd find out she actually played the piano and was quite good. No one ever talked about it; no one in my father's family ever talked about her, and when they did, it was always that she was weak and hysterical. No one acknowledged her talents. I wondered sometimes what would've become of her if she'd never met him. Would she have died anyway or shined like a star in the music world? She had a nervous breakdown. Everyone thought it had been the music world, but I knew the source of her stress better than anyone. It had nothing to do with the world of music.

Slowly, I learned the notes, the chords. Slowly, I learned how to play simple songs like "Chopsticks" or "The Entertainer." It wouldn't matter how many times I played "Für Elise"; I never tired of it, and it never failed to touch my soul. All of the music touched me on some subconscious level, as if I had heard it long ago, in another lifetime, before my mother died. It was a part of me I never visited consciously, yet simultaneously, it was the part through which all of the music I played travelled. Some love channel deep inside me used for purifying whatever I created. Eventually, due to this amazing arrangement of events plus my self-discipline that I became one of the most sought-after players in the music industry. I was a star on stage, yet I remained a victim of torture even long after my father died.

When the fortepiano arrived, I learned to practice day after day. Buying me a piano didn't suddenly change my father; it didn't stop him from sitting me down each evening and whispering into my ear all the ways in which he was capable of killing me. If he only wanted to. Which he didn't. But he could, if he chose. The testaments to his imagination lay on the table in front of us. He'd point to an object and describe in gruesome detail how he'd peel off my skin with boiling hot water, skin me alive, and I could become the second Saint Bartholomew. As the whiskey in the bottle disappeared, always, his courage and imagination grew. I was nine, too young to know that this was no way of life. It was *my* way of life; the only way I had ever known. To sit there and to listen. I couldn't even imagine leaving. He was my father. The only person I knew. I belonged to him, and I had to be there.

These talks had not changed. However, the fear preceding them — the anticipation of the tortuous evenings — had been interrupted by the sudden arrival of music in my life. I had a tool now to manage my life; a gift to fill all those hours with music. I learned to put another layer onto the fear. It was still there. I didn't suddenly unlearn the patterns of fear I had been trained to fear. I reacted with the same jerky motions to everything same way I had always done, as if he was coming, as if he was right behind me, ready to pull my hair out with pieces of skin still attached. What I learned to do was top that layer of terror with layers of music. For the first time in my life, I felt like I could not just survive, but maybe also *thrive* in this in-between land. To consider that I could thrive was so new to me, I had to pinch myself sometimes that this new possibility could be mine. It was an exhilarating feeling. For the first time in my life, I believed I could maybe become something, someone in the world, someone other than the gutter for my father's sociopathic tendencies. "Für Elise," a three-minute piece written two hundred years ago by a man growing increasingly deaf, changed my entire life.

It was no accident that it should've been Beethoven. It was precisely because of his deafness that I connected with him. I had felt so hesitant about my life, so many pieces never coming together; the lack of my period, the little faith I had managed to gather being regularly broken by daily abuse that I doubted constantly I should ever bear any fruit. And here came Beethoven, a deaf musician. How incredibly wonderful that was to me!

Another miracle happened that reinstated my faith. My father and I lived in a small house, for which he had overpaid a ridiculous \$70,000. The house was worth only \$30,000 the year after he bought it. Add all of the renovations, and it seemed worthless. It had been like a

pigsty when he first bought it and smelled like it, too. He was good at remaking, remodeling, renovating things, so soon it looked nice and livable. Most people really admired him for what he could do, how he could change a ruin of a house into a little palace. Most people didn't know him, or at least not the side I knew. Still, we had a place to live because of him. There was a small backyard, and he even managed to save the few trees that were growing there. They had been unpruned and uncared for. There was one tree in particular, which seemed especially poorly. Initially, we had thought it had been planted recently, but soon we knew by the roots that it had been there a while. We did our best to save it, and the next fall, we saw the result. While, like Beethoven's deafness, one part of the tree was dead, the branches leafless, dry, and sterile, the other part bore the most delicious apples we had ever eaten. I couldn't get enough. The tree became a symbol to me always to keep hope and try. While I may be looking at all the deadness, another part of me might just be able to give the world the most flavorsome of fruits. And so I tried hard with my music; I tried to make it as enchanting as possible.

Only once in my life did I talk back to my father. He had been especially irritated with me because I had practiced my piano so much, I had let some of my chores go.

"You're useless," he said. "You're completely useless, just like your mother."

Maybe it was my strained nerves from him yelling at me all the time, from all of those evenings of listening to him, from the fact that I had a music exam the next day, on which I wanted to do well, on which my future depended. Maybe some part of me had had enough; I had reached some sort of a limit. Maybe the music awakened a desire for life in me beyond the expectation that I was my father's slave upon whom he depended for his own mental well-being and ability to go to work after he purged his frustrations onto me. Maybe the music opened me up to receiving some beauty. Whatever it was, I looked him straight in the eye and said, "My mother wasn't useless. You're so busy wailing in your precious misery, you missed all of her music. Maybe if you'd taken the time to listen, you'd have two kids instead of one and a happy wife instead of a dead one."

I thought he'd hit me, and I kind of didn't care. I had wanted to say those words to him for so long. That my mother was a beautiful soul and that he knew this and ignored it. If he had hit me, at least I'd finally have proof of what a miserable man he was. But he didn't hit me. For a

sociopath, he had incredible self-control. I was actually surprised there was hardly any reaction at all. He lowered his eyes and said, “I know. That’s the cross I must bear. I’m stuck with a ghost now. A beautiful ghost who tortures me.” He went to the TV set and put on mass, which he always recorded the same way my mother had.

“I don’t want to be alone, but your mother was the only one for me.”

I wanted to ask him why he treated her the way he did, but I knew he didn’t know. Also, I was a teenager by then, and my music exam was more important to me than my father and my relationship with him, which was no relationship at all. I wanted to get out of that house as fast as I could. Doing well on that exam meant getting a scholarship at a prestigious music school and a chance to become either a performer, if I was good enough, or a teacher, which was better than remaining at that house.

It was ironic that fear was what made me the best performer. What pushed me into becoming the best piano player I could be was actually the fear of my father, the fear of being stuck in that house with him until the end of his days, or my days, if he lost control one day for whatever reason. That possibility was always there; it’s how being trained by fear works: the possibility of death, a cruel death, remains alive.

Out of that fear, I practiced all night in a room I had soundproofed myself. I didn’t sleep, and I knew I wouldn’t, so I practiced. I aced that exam and got into that music school, not only with a scholarship for the actual music education, but also a small stipend for living expenses so that I could spend all of my time on music. The judges were very impressed. If they only knew what it took to get to that point in my life. No one would ever believe it.

I will skip ahead to an incident that happened many years later, only to show you how, despite becoming all that I dreamt of becoming, the abuse, pushed into the bottom of my soul, didn’t leave me. I was in Europe, in Switzerland, on a musical tour with a group of other musicians, and we went hiking in the mountains. There was a man there I fancied; not that I’d ever tell him or reveal any sign of any affection. I had been trained too well. I liked to look at him, though; he inspired me. He was an excellent musician, and I loved listening to his voice. It was one of the few things I had found which calmed me, the real me, the me I hid deep inside, the me which had been tortured. Almost nothing got to that part — not even my own music. His voice was another

sign of how we are social creatures and need one another in ways we don't even realize. I didn't know I needed him. I didn't know. Until, one day, the most gentle, sweet voice sang a single song, and that restless, fearful part of me was so comforted, I didn't think that was possible. And I surprised at the peace that spread in a place of my psyche, that spot which never got rest. He surprised me the same way "Für Elise" surprised me when I was nine. These beautiful sounds held nothing but love.

Now, up on the hill, we were all walking and reached a fork in the road. Suddenly, I remembered that I had been there before with my father. He was German, but my mother was from Switzerland. My father had taken me there, after her death, to honor her life. He had some surprisingly high principles considering other activities he found amusing. And I got more than one hint that he had actually sincerely loved my mother, some time before life got the better of him, when he was a better man, before paying the bills became the point of his whole existence. We had approached that fork in the road, and as I, excited, chose the high road into the mountains, my father said, "Annie, that's not the path for you. I promise you, it's too high."

So, we went the other way.

Now, as the group approached that same fork in the road, my stomach tightened in a way I had forgotten, because my father had died by then. I was not a little girl. I was a grown woman with a successful career, my own apartment, renting our old house to students. I had many friends, and a rather good life. Yet at that moment I was nine years old again and scared of my father. Terrified. I couldn't even control it if I wanted to. It was a pattern so carved into my psyche that it'd take years to undo and only in careful, measured, conscious steps. At that moment, I had done no such work, so I was terrified. Of what he'd do. Of what he never did, but held over my head, night after night, what he *could* do. What he was capable of doing; whiskey in his one hand, belt in his other, screwdriver, hammer, and other tools nearby.

When we approached the fork, the group chose the path I had instinctively chosen all those years ago, too. The path opposite to the one my father chose all those years before.

"Come on," Slava said. "Annie, let's go."

I looked into his eyes, which were sparkling with joy, looked at his hand extended towards me for me to take. I wanted to take it more than anything else in the world, but I stood there, unable to move. Instead, I shook my head and said, "I can't."

"Annie, what's the big deal?"

“I just can’t.”

I stood at the line — the limit — my father had set out for me all those years later. Despite all of the success I had experienced, it was still there. It was just not a path for me.

I shook my head. “I’m tired; you go on,” I said. I wasn’t tired. I wanted to go with him, but I couldn’t.

“Come on,” Slava urged. “It won’t be the same without you. I thought we’d get a drink at the mountain shelter together.”

I had been waiting for him to ask me to go somewhere, and here it was. And here I was. And here was a limit from so many years ago. And I remained behind like a well-trained little monkey.

That night, fueled yet again by fear of my father, I gave the best performance of my entire career. People came up to me and told me how inspired they were by my playing. I got about five job offers, which surpassed my current income by a lot. After the performance, at the after-party, I listened to the compliments as if there was fog around my ears. All I could hear was, “Annie it won’t be the same without you... We can get a drink together... together... together... TOGETHER.”

I watched him, my heart filled with love but unable to express it in any way. He came up to me, but I was still in such a state of fear, I couldn’t even hear him. He must’ve concluded I didn’t care. It was that night that I lost the love of my life, because I’d love him for years to come, the way I knew I would. I went to all his concerts to hear his voice; the lovely voice that reached a part of me nothing else did. Sometimes he didn’t even know I was there. There was no one like him; not to me. I’d never talk about it, never display any sign of affection and never, absolutely never, show any sign of emotion. If I did, I might have my head cracked open with a hammer.