

MY DAUGHTER, THE SURVIVOR

by

Kenneth E. Hartman

Her life began on the grounds of a maximum-security prison nestled in a mountain range at the junction between southern and central California. She is the product of an unlikely pairing of a thug and an outsider girl who met in the wake of a violent attack. She is, no less, the product of a titanic love affair conducted in the most unwelcoming of places.

By the time she entered middle-school she'd lived in too many different places, endured too many rugs pulled out from under her feet, and suffered more than her fair share of the unfairnesses of life.

Early in her journey, living across from a man-made lake filled with legions of ducks, she was forced to weather the horror of watching her mother decline into a madwoman assuring her that the Virgin Mary was in the television and hostile entities lurked outside.

I remember speaking to her on the phone just before her disappearance into the foster care system. She lied to me and assured me that her mother was okay, even as I heard a slight

tremulous tone in her voice betraying her terror. When, finally, she reappeared at an uncle's house, and I spoke with her she asked me, "Daddy, why do you sound so sad?" My heart was broken for her; it still is.

My own mother was unhinged, had lost her grip on things, too. In those days, before the advent of the confessional society, we didn't talk about it as directly. Walking up to the house my brothers and sister would ask, "How's mom?" That meant which mom was she today. Was she the cool, funny, loud mom who liked to laugh and couldn't help but tousle your hair when you walked by, or was she the violent, accusatory mom who always knew exactly what to say to leave as deep a mark as possible on your psyche while she chased you around the house raining blows down on your head?

The last time I saw my mother we got into an argument over something, the specifics of which elude me or perhaps they've just melded into the overstuffed filing cabinet in my memory labeled "Arguments With Mom." Regardless, I was 18 years old, fresh out of jail, again, and I was determined not to have it out with her any more. All of my possessions were thrown into a couple of green trash bags. She was firing shots at me as I walked toward the front door, trying to get around her, when something she said stuck and hurt.

Somewhere from deep inside of me, from within the years of rage and love, because I so desperately loved my mother, and I desperately wanted her to love me in spite of the fact that my conception ruined her life and forced her to marry my father, I made the switch into the fury that my experiences in the streets and the juvenile jails had taught me in order to survive.

While what she said I don't remember, I do remember what I did next. And I remember how frightened she looked, and how much I enjoyed seeing her terrified for a change. "Fuck you and fuck your house, too!" I then tore the front door off the hinges in one enraged tug and threw it down onto the carpet in front of my father's plaques and U.S. Navy symbols, and I stomped that door into a pile of splinters. When I was done, I bellowed out a roar of triumph colored with primal pain that pushed her backwards.

A couple of months later, I killed a man in a brutal beating over some misspoken words; it was this terrible act of savagery that led to my daughter's life. And while the burden of her mother's madness must surely be hard to carry, the existential burden of her life arising from the loss of another's life has to be orders of magnitude heavier.

The love I still feel for my daughter's mother rescued me from a lonely and heartless existence. Even though I resent

much of what came later, particularly the events that hurt my daughter, I prefer to remember the early days when I felt freed from my pain inside of her love. But, sadly, the storms of her life left her mother broken and less than a shadow of her former self.

What will become of this young woman created out of so much turmoil and loss is a question that weighs on me. I cannot but feel the lash of culpability for bringing her into this life of mine.

Years ago, in a conversation with a deeply spiritual woman, I voiced this sense of guilty responsibility for the act of creation. This woman who radiated holiness hard won out of a life of both privation and service pulled her chair close to me and looked deep into my eyes. "You gave her the gift of life," she said with compassion. I felt the weight of those words settle down on my heart like a warm blanket.

Many times when my daughter and I talk on the phone, the music of my youth plays in the background - Pink Floyd, Hendrix, the more psychedelic stuff. We've talked when she was tripping in the forest with her friends, when she was at concerts, what I also did at her age. Thankfully, no one ever lies bleeding at her feet, and her dreams are filled with more peaceful vistas

than the tortured nightmares of the days when "The Dark Side of the Moon" played in my backgrounds.

I believe that the gift of life really is a two-way street. She brought life to me, too. The scales of eternity aren't balanced out; it's not that straightforward. But out of the cacophony and dissonance of my life, a sense of harmony slipped in, a sense of unity in the field of being we all float upon.

That's enough for me. I hope it's enough for her.

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Kenneth E. Hartman has served 37 years of a life without the possibility of parole sentence. He is the author of the award-winning memoir "Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars" (The Steering Committee Press.) Ken can be contacted, indirectly, at kennethehartan@hotmail.com.