

Dreams From Childhood

Editor's note: This manuscript was submitted signed. We have decided to withhold the author's identity to preserve the anonymity of any involved persons.

A year and a half ago, fantasy and reality collided like an asteroid hitting the earth's surface and exploding into microscopic pieces. My life disintegrated, leaving me doubting my very existence. This was worse than my turbulent divorce from my high school sweetheart.

Shortly before my 37th birthday, I began having a recurrent nightmare: I felt a strong presence at the foot of my bed. I knew I was alone in the house but felt compelled to reassure myself by turning on a light in every room. Only then did I feel safe enough to climb back into bed. This became my ritual. In time, my nightgown made me feel vulnerable, like a child.

Then the real nightmare began. I would see myself lying on my left side and feel the pressure of someone pinning me down, pushing on my shoulder. I could feel warm, beer-scented breath along my neck. I could see only my torso; the lower half of my body did not exist. I knew that disassociating the lower half of my body was not a good thing. My medical background led me to suspect that I might have been sexually abused as a child. My grandfather, recently deceased, became my prime suspect. He always had alcohol on his breath.

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I was starting to get angry. I prayed to have confirmation of my suspicions revealed to me. I would trigger the nightmare by lying on my left side. Each time I turned to see the face in my dream, I woke up, hyperventilating and overwhelmed with fear. I was confused. With my grandfather dead, why was my subconscious protecting me? Why wasn't his face revealed? For months I battled these dreams until insomnia began to compromise my work. I then realized I would not be able to face this alone.

I sought the help of a therapist. When I summoned the courage to reveal the nightmare, I could see he shared my suspicions. We planned to work on this when I returned from a trip to the East Coast to meet my fiancé's family, but after two sleepless nights, I was back in his office. My body defenseless from fatigue, I was eager to end the drama.

Overcoming my fear of being hypnotized by a man with a series of controls, I allowed myself to sink into a relaxed state. My first words were panicked, "The door is opening again!" "Where are you?" asked the therapist. "I don't know." "Look closer," he said. Silence for a moment until I realized I was in my bedroom. "Someone is in my room," I said. "Who?" "I don't know. It's dark and I can't see his face." I lay in silence,

searching my subconscious. I began a strange posturing, fists clenched and held against my thighs, knees slightly bent as I tried to hold them together. I began to sob and toss my head from side to side. In a begging tone of voice, I said, "Daddy, please stop; you're hurting me." The shock of my statement bolted through my body, overloading my circuitry. I lay there sobbing, every muscle clenched tightly. I could not respond to any more questions. I was shocked; it was my father, my own father.

Suddenly, I screamed out in a loud, commanding voice, "You leave her alone!" The therapist asked to whom I was referring. "My sister, Beth. We share the same bedroom." I did not speak another word for the next hour and a half. I sobbed in the same posture for the entire time. Slowly, the tears abated.

I was gently brought back to reality. I wanted to get out of there and be alone. I have never felt so dead in my life. I could barely take a breath. Everything hurt. My life was based on lies. The tumbleweed had more established roots than I did. I knew I would see my sisters on my trip to the East Coast; I did not know what I would say to them.

When my fiancé, Steve, and I arrived at my brother's house, my sister Kathryn was there. She and I took a walk and I revealed what I had recently discovered. "Was it Dad?" she asked before I finished the story. As I said yes, her face flooded with tears and she said she couldn't handle this right now. I told her that was fine and that we could talk when she was ready. We hugged and sobbed briefly, then returned to my brother's house.

Next was my sister Beth. I was not prepared for her initial response. Her face and body language walling me out, she said, "Just because family members have the same nightmares doesn't mean they went through the same thing." I told Steve we needed to go. As we prepared to leave, Beth stopped me and said, "We need to talk." I followed her into the library. For an hour and a half, Beth repeated the words, "Why am I not surprised?" I told her I was still getting used to it myself. We hugged and cried.

After I returned home, I saw the therapist every three weeks. While I was under hypnosis, we pieced together the story of my abuse. It began when I was four and continued twice weekly until my mother caught my father in bed with me when I was six. I could see her comforting Beth and me that night. I wondered how my mother could not have known about this before then. Weren't there any signs? My father was a violent man. He punched my mother in the stomach when she was five months pregnant with my sister Christina. Christina was born with a lump on her head, and her EEG was never normal. At the age of 14, she had brain surgery for a suspected aneurysm. Given this and what I had learned, I understood that my mother lived paralyzed in fear for her life.

I was taken by surprise one Thursday night when an urge to leave my house and be in my car overwhelmed me. I felt safe



and in control behind the wheel with the doors locked. The first Thursday this happened, I drove to the beach, parked, and began screaming, "How could you do this to me?" Over and over, the words poured out until I was hoarse and the energy dissipated. Only then could I return home. This recurred until my therapist and I decided we must examine these Thursday night rages.

Again I searched my subconscious. I could see my father standing at the end of my bed. The man who was supposed to love and protect me had hurt me in ways that were unspeakable. What I thought was molestation turned out to be the ultimate violent act of betrayal of a father, rape. I felt like a truck had hit me. How was I going to heal this? How was I ever going to be able to face my father again, let alone forgive him?

The following week, my sister Kathryn called to tell me she had just attended a conference entitled "Reuniting Incest Perpetrators with the Families." Hearing this crashed through any denial I had left. I called my father and told him I needed to speak with him for an hour of uninterrupted time. When we spoke, he listened for 15 minutes as I told him the saga of my nightmares and therapy sessions. When I finished, he calmly said, "Are you accusing me of sexual abuse?" I said, "Yes." He responded that no such thing had happened and that he was the adult and I was the child. Had I not known that perpetrators frequently deny their behaviors, I would have been even more devastated. I decided it was not safe to be in contact with my father for awhile.

As part of my healing process, I attended a three-day workshop, The Shadow Process. The exercises were earth shattering. I sobbed during the mirroring exercise as I said, "I am an incest survivor," and the three women across from me repeated my statement back to me. My chest swelled with sorrow, and gut-wrenching sobbing ensued. I felt as if an alien was bursting from my chest. A therapist came to help, having me repeat the statement. Between sobbing and the statement, I kept gasping, "Jesus, this hurts." It was 20 minutes before I could say, without sobbing, "I am an incest survivor." I felt as if I had given birth. In another exercise, I pounded my fists into pillows, screaming "You should die for what you did!" I visualized stabbing my father in the chest. The rage made me realize I was capable of homicide.

On my birthday, I received a card from my father. It had been a year and a half since I had confronted him, and I had not heard from him since then. I wondered if he missed having a daughter as much as I missed having a father. I called him, and he was happy to hear from me, asking when I would visit him. We talked for 15 minutes, all superficial talk. I felt good about the conversation. Maybe now I could let go and move on with my life.

In the end, my relationship with my siblings has suffered as a result of my discovery. My father continues to deny any wrongdoing. My siblings are torn between having a relationship with him and believing what I have discovered. There is a part of me that feels I have lost my family over this. The sadness is

overwhelming at times. My brothers think I am crazy and have not had any contact with me for over two years. My sisters keep in touch and keep the conversation superficially safe. I have learned to go on with my life without them for now.

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My isolation extends beyond my family. My closest friends, not knowing what to say, said nothing. Three or four weeks would go by without a call from friends who normally called regularly. Even though, as medical professionals they had jobs that exposed them to survivors of childhood molestation, dealing with the issue on a personal level was too hard for them. All I wanted from my friends was to tell them what happened to me and still feel accepted by them despite it. I felt bewildered by their response. This is not an easy topic to discuss—for anyone.

I came very close to leaving my profession of 15 years as a PA. I see that this experience has provided me with insight and compassion in my work. Statistically, one in three women have been molested as children.¹ How many more like me simply do not remember until late in their fourth decade of life?

This was about a little girl who was not safe in her own home, in her own bed, from her own father. My nightmares were literally created at night during my childhood between the ages of four and six. I had trouble understanding what happened to me. I have five younger sisters, and the thought that they might have been subjected to the same reality made the pit of my stomach turn with nausea. My father was a nocturnal pedophile, claiming his prey while our mother was sleeping in the next room. A few beers would make the memory a blur and allow him to deny his actions. The fact that we were so young would help keep his secret encrypted in our bodies for over 30 years. There were times when I could relate to a statement made by a Holocaust survivor, "Better I should have died than to live with the memory of this." There were times when death looked easier to face than the truth of my childhood.

I would not have chosen this as my truth. I share this in the hope that I will take back my life and create the possibility that others may benefit from my story. I have a new dream now. I dream that someday the pain in my family will be healed. I dream that someday I will be able to face my father and say, "Dad, I forgive you." ❖

Reference

1. Borysenko, J. A woman's book of life. New York: Riverhead Books; 1996.