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Memories of a Father's Rage

editor [LISA BELKIN](#)

[Corbyn Hightower](#) also remembers her father, and her memories are also mixed. We talk often about anger from a parent's point of view here on Motherlode. In a guest post today, Ms. Hightower crawls back into how it felt to be the child who feared her father's loss of control.

A THROAT-CLEARING NIGHT

By Corbyn [Hightower](#)

I was 5, I was small, with hair as pale as milk, and I was about to become a graffiti artist. I was in Oklahoma, playing in our tidy, treeless front yard in a bare suburban neighborhood. I could come and go like that, there wasn't any need for supervision in this place.

I was avoiding the grass on that particular day, because though it was always mowed and edged, it was angry grass, bristly and spiky but nobly drought-resistant, standing stock upright without the courtesy to bend or fold much as you walked on it. It was one of those days that's so sunny that everything looks as bleached as chalk. I was near the neighbors' yard, where they had a hedge that formed a small, cool dome that was the perfect size for me to crouch inside. Without much considering, I snapped a piece of a young green branch from that hedge. It hung on with the thin brown skin of itself until my small hands could work it back and forth enough to break it free.

The long walkway to the arched porch entry of our house was as bare as bone, perfect for rubbing wet green designs onto the concrete with the jagged edge of the small broken branch. Spirals, smiling faces, the word "Love," the only word I could write. There was a bright sharp smell as I kneeled low, the sticky feeling on my fingers, and I remember noticing all of this as I regarded my work with satisfaction. I drew small pointed hearts all around. I did this by carefully making a narrow letter V and then topping it with the outline of a person's bottom, that's how I remembered how to do it. But I made capital E's wrong for the longest time. I gave them so many horizontal lines in the middle they resembled a comb or, at the least, a many-tined fork.

There was a throat-clearing my father would make when he got home from work that meant he was going to have a Bad Night. It was almost imperceptible, but to my ears it was as insistent as that monotonous hoot the television would make when practicing for an emergency, and when he walked from the driveway it was there, and his eyes saw me but didn't see me. I'm not sure if it was the writing on the front walkway or the frantic scramble I did, saying what I needed to say to try to scamper from his sight and his anger.

My vulnerability and fear brought a kind of red-faced rage forth from him, or maybe I was just the unwitting recipient and had no part in causing it, it was hard to tell. I was as still as a rabbit when it first senses it's being watched. It didn't matter that I didn't know why he was angry, but just that I knew that he was, and that I was first in line, and that the next set of events was as sure and reliable as the heavy roll of a pinball sliding back into its ready spot. It was too late to either mend or escape, and as always I knew that if it had maybe been a non-throat-clearing night, things would have gone much differently. When he came home in a good mood, it was like freedom. Sometimes there would be a trip to 7-11 to get Marathon bars for everyone, or he'd put on the Cream record, or the Janis Joplin one my mom loved so much. He played the stereo loud enough that it shook the walls. When he was cheerful, he wanted all the neighbors to feel his loud, infectious joy. He was grudgingly adored. The type of person people called a "character."

But this was not a stereo night, and there was nowhere for me to go.

I stayed as still as possible. My father's face was purple-red, and it vibrated. You could smell this kind of anger he had. He stuttered when he screamed, and repeated words. I felt far away from this place and submitted; I would always submit. When he would spank me, it was a full-body spanking done in rage, and it was full of other things, pulling me to a place and holding my arms back. There was only this strange satisfaction that it had started and, having started, would end.

My mother could be nearby at these times, but would not hold or protect, or even provide comfort later. I remember the thin straight-across of her mouth, and the way her gray eyes seemed colorless to me. The feeling of having no one in your corner, when you are small and the person who holds such terror for you, who throws you and silences you so completely with fury, should be contrasted by one that will see your side and take it sometimes. If your mother, perhaps, would look at you with the soft eyes of an ally, and maybe back up your explanation for things, just sometimes — just once! Just once, to look into that enraged face and say "stop." Stop.

I didn't know things were different in our family, but what I did know was to fear evening time and weekends. Turning on the lights made it feel a little better, but the arrival of dusk would often find me skittering under the bed. No matter what other kids said, that wasn't where the monster was. The monster smells like Coors, and sambuca, and cigarettes. The monster is big and furious and loves you sometimes, holds you in his lap sometimes, teaches you to ride your two-wheeler on those wide treeless streets.

"O.K., now quickly look down, go ahead. Do you see that shadow? That's the shadow of a big girl riding her bike." I risked it, for just a moment, darting my eyes to the left and down. There were no training wheels on my purple big-kid's bike anymore, I could see that in the shadow. I could even see the vinyl streamers hanging limply festive from the handlebars, they were there in the shadow, too. This bike, these wide quiet streets, this sliver of father I could cling to, when it wasn't a Bad Time.

A dad's job is to teach you how swim a few strokes in the overly chlorinated neighborhood swimming pool, while your jolly baby brother crawls and bloodies his knees on the surrounding concrete, oblivious, drool and snot from nose to chest. My father's handlebar mustache would turn up at each end, you could barely see the twinkling smile under the broom of it. Sweetly: "That was all the way to the edge without any help, that was just like a fish, Corbyn Lee."

But on this day, all I wanted was to escape his view. I felt raw and unpeeled on the front walk, and kept picturing the jagged stick crayon that had started this mess — where was it now? In the after-hurting, I was almost calmed by the lingering hitching sounds that signaled the real crying was over. There's a relief in the after-hurting, and I already knew about that at the age of 5.

I had a bucket and a scrubber just the way anyone would imagine it, and I remember scrubbing the green markings off the concrete that seemed like hieroglyphs from a happier part of the afternoon. And for every day that there isn't the throat-clearing, there's a feeling of ecstatic relief that's almost like love.