

Pink Faux-Leather Journal (With a Magnet Clasp)

I was born into a home where I was meant to be scared and my parents, for the most part, did not love me. These were just the things that I knew. I liked to read, I wrote poems when I felt like it, my older sister would always be smarter than me, and I was perpetually afraid. My father was a menace, and I swear I could pinpoint the sounds of his joints clicking as he pulled himself off of the tattered living room couch and shifted his body in the direction of my room. It typically took him ten steps from the far end of the living room to the entrance of my door. Ten steps to sit and worry and wonder: why is he coming this way, what will he do, what have I done wrong, do I need to be worried, is he just going to hit me, or something worse? Where is my mom, and why does she never protect me? Only for him to pass the room without even glancing in my direction and turn into the hall bathroom and shut the door and lock it. Sigh. Being scared of my dad was central to my entire being. It never occurred to me that I could have something that he was scared of, too.

I thought that my mom probably didn't love me because she was never home and she never found the time to tell me so, and I knew that my dad definitely did not because of the things he did. Which was okay, I knew how to make myself quiet to these people who did not want me around and how to not draw attention, and how to escape into the pink faux-leather journal with a magnet clasp that I had gotten for Christmas. I wrote little stories about the world, making rhymes about the moon and bees and the different seasons. I showed my friends at school who told me that I had a gift for rhyming, which I believe to be true. I was a little girl whose parents did not love her and who knew how to write well.

When I was eleven years old my older sister and I were boarding the bus when she uttered a message most ominous. *Don't lie*, she told me. I wouldn't understand what she meant until later that day, but at the time I was confused and, consequently, angry. *I never lied! What is she talking about? She is always so mean to me!* and all of that sort of thing. It's true, my sister was often mean to me, but I did not blame her. Where I learned to be quiet and stay out of the way and do not think of things and write about all of the world's pretty stuff, she learned to be bitter and hateful and angry. We lived in the same house, in the same room, in the same bed, but we were always at least one world apart.

After school, I arrived at my home to find it buzzing with people that I did not know, who were wearing uniforms and walkie-talkies and asking my mom and my dad questions. *Don't lie*. I looked to Kelsey, and her eyes burned into mine. So this is what she had meant. My mother was nervous and angry. My father was charismatic and gentle, the way that he got whenever there were people around who did not know his secrets. These people belonged to the Department of Family Services. I will not tell so much about them other than they were meaner than I would have expected them to be, and do not really care about children, I think. When they left for the night, I saw my dad angrier than he had ever been. My mother went to her room and shut the door and left us alone with him.

The week that followed the initial visit was the most tumultuous and horrifying of my entire life. My sister had unleashed this hell upon me by being loose-lipped with her teacher. These people who wanted to take me away from my mom and my siblings were showing up at my school and taking me out of class and asking me questions and making me cry. My dad turned into the devil himself, keeping us up into obscene hours of the night. He kept asking us what we had told and what we didn't and hurting us whether we gave him an answer or not. My

mom would not look me in the eyes. My parents hated me and so did these people whose job was to get information from me, because I would only sniffle and look at the floor any time they asked me a question. My sister did too, because I could not stand up next to her. I was not strong. My grandpa, who had a soft spot for his son-in-law, called us liars and brandished us as attention-seeking brats. I wanted to grab his face and scream that I hadn't done this, that Kelsey hadn't done this, I wanted to show him the bruises that his favorite son had put on my chest and my arms and my legs. But I could not. Instead, I turned to my little pink book and I wrote poems about what I knew, and about the sad things that were happening to me, and about my mother and my father and all the things that I would never be able to say out loud. They couldn't do anything here. Stuck between the pages of that journal, they could not hurt anybody or make anybody angry with me or take my mother's children away from her. I did not speak anymore, I only wrote my poems. I was amassing quite the collection, and they were lovely too. Heartbreaking and beautiful, each with a clever rhyme scheme. If I had anything anymore, it was my ability to write, and do it well.

Until one day when I came home to my journal sitting out on my desk with half of the pages ripped from the spine. My heart nearly stopped. I hurried over and flipped through the book frantically, though through my fear I could barely see what I was looking at. Nearly everything was gone. The only things left were meaningless blurbs and a single doodle my friend had made on one of the pages during our lunch period. I wanted to vomit. I curdled onto the floor and scooted under my desk and did not say anything or move. I waited for my father to come into my room and kill me. It must have been him, who else? He would be in a rage, he would strangle me and make my siblings watch (he had done it before). He would have me read the pages out loud and force me to say they were lies, though they were not, and then hurt me

accordingly for each one. He would run his lighter over each of my fingers. My mind was in a scramble but I knew one thing: I would not live to see tomorrow.

But, astonishingly, I did live to see the next day. That night I had my dinner in silence and my family did not speak to each other and my dad did not look at me or hit me the entire night. I woke up in the morning and went to school, and when I got home my journal had not moved from its corner of the desk. My father did not speak to me and I lived in utter fear of what he was planning. He was not planning anything.

I found the pages a few weeks later, tucked in the corner of the closet in my dad's bathroom. They were held together by a paperclip and the pages were feltish and soft, how paper gets when it is handled too often. I re-read them and cried a little and put them back in their place and left the bathroom. In the weeks that had passed nothing had happened. Whatever case the state had against my dad had been dropped due to insufficient evidence, or something of that nature. My sister had resumed her quiet hateful state, I my quiet anxious one, and my father his loud and scary one. This was my normal home where I was meant to be scared and my parents did not love me. But something changed on that day that I found my poems.

It was strange to see my words hidden away in a closet. It was strange to know that my father had put them there, kept them in the dark and away from any eyes but his own. It made me feel a little silly, to think of him bent on the floor reading them. I got a little thrill now anytime that he turned into his bathroom instead of my doorway, of nerves and something else that I couldn't place. Eventually, I learned that my dad was scared of me. You do not hide things unless you are scared of them, like I had hid the journal in the first place, deep under my bed. He was scared of my words and what they could do to him, scared enough that he never even brought up the poems to me, and never hurt me and anyone else for them. Eventually, it made

me too sick to think of him reading them anymore, so I snuck into his bathroom to rip them up. He had beaten me to it. Where he had once kept them tucked away now sat a small hill of paper shreds. I flushed them down the toilet. He would not say anything, he couldn't because he was scared. I knew this because he had taught me what it was to feel that way.

Life never improved for me after my sister's attempt with the law. If anything, it got worse. Kelsey and I spoke less than we had before, and my dad was meaner than he had ever been. My mom was just as absent. But, I had something special and new. I could feel it on me always, like I had been branded that day in the closet, like it was this puckered scar that had been left on my chest that still burned whenever I thought of it. I was just a little girl, weighing in at 61 pounds, who never really had much to say and didn't know how to say things well, but I had a talent for putting my feelings down on paper. A talent that scared grown men and left them cowering in dusty bathroom closets. A talent that no one could hurt me for, because I could hurt them worse. It is mad to learn that the man you have been scared of all of your life could be scared of you too, and you never even had to lay a finger on him. All you had to do was write a few lines of prose. I never had a lot in that house, but I did have this secret thing, and it was so powerful that I never needed much else.

The world is big, and mean, and scary. Sometimes your dad is your first lesson in that, sometimes you learn in other ways. It was a hard thing to learn, but I have grown with it, and I am bigger than I was. I am still shy, and mostly reserved, my sister still knows more than me and I am still scared of my dad when I visit for Christmas. But, I have a power in me that spreads all over. I feel it in my toes when I write of the way wet grass feels, and I feel it running down my cheeks when I write of the way people have hurt me. It is a scar burning on my chest. The world is cruel, but I can face it now. The world roars at me, and I write.