

THEN

You need a haircut, boy!”

My father had only glanced at me across the kitchen table as he spoke but I had already seen in his eyes the coming storm.

I tried to speak but the fear that now engulfed me made it hard to swallow, and all that came out was a little gasping sound that hurt my throat even more. And I knew speaking would only make things worse, make him despise me more, make him pounce sooner. That was the worst bit, the waiting. I never knew exactly when it would come, and that, I know, was his favorite part.

As usual we had eaten our evening meal in near silence until my father had spoken. Until recently my older brother, Tom, would have been seated where I was now, helping to deflect the gaze of impending rage that was now focused entirely upon me. But Tom had a job now. He left every morning in a shirt and tie and our father hated him for it. Tom was no longer in his thrall. Tom had escaped. I hadn't been so lucky yet.

My mother tried to intervene. "I'll take him to the barber's on Saturday morning, Ali," she said.

"He'll be working on Saturday. He's not getting away with slouching off his work again. There's too much of that going on in this house, do you hear me?"

"Yes," I managed.

But now I knew it was a lost cause. It wasn't just a haircut, it was now my physical shortcomings as a laborer, my inability to perform the tasks he gave me every weekend and many evenings, tasks I was unable to perform because I was twelve, but mostly because he wanted me to fail at them so he could hit me.

You see, I understood my father. I had learned from a very young age to interpret the tone of every word he uttered, his body language, the energy he brought into a room. It has not been pleasant as an adult to realize that dealing with my father's violence was the beginning of my studies of acting.

"I can get one tomorrow at school lunchtime." My voice trailed off in that way I knew sounded too pleading, too weak, but I couldn't help it.

"Yes, do that, pet," my mum said, kindly.

I could sense the optimism in her tone and I loved her for it. But I knew it was false optimism, denial. This was going to end badly, and there was no way to prevent it.

Every night getting off the school bus, walking through the gates of the estate where we lived, past the sawmill yard where my father reigned, and towards our house was like a lottery. Would he be home yet? What mood would he be in? As soon as I entered the house and changed out of my school uniform and began my chores—bringing wood and coal in for the fire, starting the fire, setting the table, warming the plates, putting the potatoes on to boil—I felt a bit safer. You see, by then I was on his territory,

under his command, I worked for him, and that seemed to calm my father, as though my utter servitude was necessary to his well-being. I still wasn't completely safe of course—I was never safe—but those chores were so ingrained in me and I felt I did them well enough that even if he did inspect them I would pass muster, so I could breathe a little easier until we sat down to eat.

My father was the head forester of Panmure Estate, a country estate near Carnoustie, on the east coast of Scotland. The estate was vast, with fifty farms and thousands of acres of woodland covering over twenty-one square miles of land. We lived on what was known as the estate "premises," the grounds of Panmure House, though by the time we lived there the big house was long gone. In 1955, as one of many such austerity measures forced upon the landed aristocracy, its treasures were dismantled and then explosives razed it to the ground. All that remained were the stables, where on chilly Saturday mornings during hunting season I'd report, banging my wellies together to keep the feeling in my toes, to work as a beater, hitting trees with a stick in a line of other country boys, scaring the birds up into the air so that drunk rich men could shoot at them.

Attached still to the stables was the building that had been the house's chapel. Now it was used for the annual estate Christmas party and occasional dances or card game evenings for the workers. We lived in Nursery House, so called because it looked out on a tree nursery where seedlings were hatched and nurtured to replace the trees that were constantly felled and sent back to the sawmill that lay up the yard behind us. My father was in charge of the whole process, from the seeds all the way to the cut lumber and everything in between, as well as the general upkeep of the grounds.

It was all very feudal and a bit *Downton Abbey*, minus the abbey

and fifty years later. I answered the door to men who referred to my father as “The Maister.” There were gamekeepers and big gates and sweeping drives and follies but no lord of the manor, as during the time we lived there the place was owned by, respectively, a family shipping company, a racehorse owner’s charitable trust, and then a huge insurance company.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was living through the end of an era of grand Scottish estates, as now, like Panmure, they have been mostly all dismantled and sold off. Looking back on it, it was a beautiful place to grow up, but at the time all I wanted was to get as far away as possible.

I had seen my father’s van parked by the tractor shed as I walked by. So he was home. But maybe he wasn’t actually in the house, maybe he was talking to one of his men in the sawmill or in one of the storehouses or sheds. It was the time of day when they were coming back from the woods and cleaning their tools before going home. I couldn’t see my dad, although I didn’t want to be seen to be looking for him in case he spotted me and he’d know that my fear was guiding my search. That would be his opening. Maybe there would be someone in the yard who’d come to see him, a farmer or even his boss, the estate factor (or manager), who would allow me to get by him without inspection.

I turned round the corner into the driveway of our house at the bottom of the sawmill yard, and I could see there was a light on in his office. My heart sank. He was sitting at his desk in the window and he looked up when he saw me. Immediately I straightened, tried to remember all the things he’d told me were wrong about me recently. I prayed my hair was combed the way he liked it, my school bag was hanging on my shoulder at the right angle, and my shoes were shiny enough. It probably took only ten seconds before I reached the front door and was out of his sight, but in

that flash a myriad of anxieties about my flaws and failures had whirred across my mind.

He was on the phone, thankfully. He didn't come out of his office even until after my mum came home from work, and I always felt a little lighter having her in the house. She finished making our tea while we chatted. Then we heard the noise of him approaching through the house towards us and we were quiet. We both knew it was not a good idea to speak until we had appraised him, and tonight apparently it was not a good idea to speak at all.

My father sat into his chair at the kitchen table and immediately my mother set down his plate of food in front of him. This is how it always happened. Any deviation, let alone any complaint about the food, could start him off. Without acknowledging her or me he lifted his cutlery and began to eat. He ate like an animal, not because he was messy or noisy, but because he *tore* at his food, with strength and stealth and efficiency. It was terrifying to watch.

My father was silent for a while after my mum spoke, and I hoped that my going to the barber's during school lunch break the next day would appease him. All I could think of was getting to the end of this meal and upstairs to my homework, or better yet far into the woods with my dog to hide. But my mouth was so dry, and there was a lump of fear stuck at the top of my chest that made it hard to swallow. I had to get some water or I was going to choke, or worse, cry. I got up from the table and moved towards the sink. I picked up a glass off the draining board and began to fill it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he said, not quite shouting yet, but still too loud, as though he had been waiting to say it, eager to make the next move, and now here it was.

"Eh? Did you hear me?"

"I need to drink some water," I gasped.

“Put that glass down!” Now he was shouting.

My mother said very quietly, “Ali, leave him.”

My father rose from his chair and everything went red. At the same time as he began shouting at me he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and I was being dragged across the kitchen, through the living room, through the hallway, out through the porch and the front door and across the yard to the shed where we kept our bikes. He threw me up on top of a workbench. He was *baying* now, not just shouting. You couldn't understand what he was saying but I know it had to do with my hair and my water drinking and how fucking useless and insolent and pathetic I was, but it wasn't coherent. It was just pure violent rage, and it was directed at me.

There was a lone bare lightbulb hanging from the shed ceiling. I remember looking up at it as he scrambled in a drawer behind me. Soon my head was propelled forward by his hand, the other one wielding a rusty pair of clippers that he used on the sheep we had in the field in front of our house. They were blunt and dirty and they cut my skin, but my father shaved my head with them, holding me down like an animal.

I was hysterical now, as hysterical as he was, but I knew he enjoyed hearing me scream and it would be over quicker if I was quiet and limp. But that was so hard. I was in pain and shock and I still hadn't had a drink of water and I felt I was going to pass out with trying to catch my breath. All I could do was wait for the end. Eventually it was over. He pushed my head one way, then the other in order to inspect his work, then threw the clippers back in the drawer.

“You get your hair cut properly! Do you hear me?” he said, rage abating, coming down, spent.

“Yes,” I tried not to whimper.

He whacked me across the back of my head and was gone. The shed door banged, and I was left to climb down from the bench. I made sure to clean up the mess. I gathered in my hands the clumps of my hair that had fallen to the floor and took them to the trash can outside. I returned to the shed once more to make sure everything was back to normal, and then switched off that lone lightbulb and headed back into the house. I heard the sound of my dad's van heading up the sawmill yard and I stopped for a moment, filled with shock and relief that he was gone.

In the bathroom I drank some water from the tap. Bits of hair fell into the sink as I drank and I could feel droplets of blood on my neck. Finally I stood up and stared at my reflection.

I looked like a concentration camp inmate, and I wanted to die. Really, in that moment I wanted to die. My mum tried to tidy up the mess with scissors, to make it look less uneven, but there were patches that actually had no hair left at all, that couldn't be disguised. I would have to go to school looking like this. I cried all through the night. The next morning my eyes were so red and puffy they were almost closed, but I was glad because they detracted from my head. I told my teachers I had reached up to a high shelf and knocked over a jar of creosote (a wood preservative made from tar) and some had gone in my eyes. When asked about my hair, I said I had tried to cut it myself.

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I have had more hairstyles than most men of my age have had hot dinners.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that part of the reason I have so enjoyed changing the color, length, and look of my follicles over the years is something to do with reclaiming the power my father took from me in this regard (as well as many others) as a child. My hair has been blond several times, it has been short and spiky, long and floppy, sleek, shaggy, and everything in between. I've even faced the clipper demons and shaved my own head more than once.

It took a while to get to this place, though. In my late teens, there were several occasions when I was in a hair salon and would suddenly feel nauseated, and twice I actually vomited, not realizing till many years (and quite a lot of therapy) later that my body was manifesting physically what I could not yet cope with emotionally. I clearly had some deeply suppressed and deeply painful coiffure memory. But after I had left home, and was free

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from my father's grip, I began to make my hair a symbol of my own freedom. One time at drama school, in a particularly semi-otic act of self-assertion, I actually agreed to my youthful locks being dyed purple by an overzealous hairdressing student and went back to the parental home for the weekend with my head held high and nothing, not a word, was said about it. (I did wear a purple sweater as well, in an attempt to divert all the attention, but still, it was ballsy, don't you think?!)

I suppose what I am saying is . . . I am okay. I survived my father. We all did—my mother, my brother, and me—literally as well as figuratively. But as with all difficult things, it was a process. But more of that later.

THURSDAY 20TH MAY 2010

I am standing on the stage of a huge marquee that houses the Cinema Against AIDS Gala in the gardens of the Hôtel du Cap, just outside Cannes. I am looking out at a sea of rich, tanned, chatty French people, all sipping champagne and gossiping to each other and ignoring me and smoking, smoking, smoking.

I should point out that I am not alone on this stage. I am flanked by Patti Smith and Marion Cotillard, and the three of us are just standing there, and absolutely nothing is happening. Luckily, nobody in the audience is paying any of us any attention at all, and it feels like we are trapped in celebrity aspic.

Suddenly the reverie is broken by a sheepish voice that turns out to be my own, saying into the microphone, “Um, sorry about this delay, ladies and gentlemen, we’re, eh, just waiting for Mary J. Blige to return to the stage so we can auction off a duet with her and Patti.”

Patti Smith’s head whipped round towards me so fast I actually

felt a draft. Panic made her eyes seem even more otherworldly than I'd remembered when she'd passed me on her way to the stage earlier in the evening. Right now she was the spitting image of one of those girls in *"The Crucible,"* fresh from a hellish vision.



"What?" she spat. "What would we even sing together? No one told me about this!"

You may not know it but Patti Smith is prone to spitting. I first met her at a party in a New York City clothing store a couple of years earlier. She sang a few songs as cute young people in black milled around serving canapés and champagne to less cute older people in black. It wasn't very rock and roll, but then Patti changed all that. In between two of her songs, she spat. Not an "Oops I've got a little something stuck on my tongue" kind of spit, but a great big throat-curdling gob of a spit. A *loogie* as they say in the Americas. And she spat *on the carpet*. Several times.

No mention was made of Patti's spitting by anyone in the store, least of all me, when I was taken to meet her after the performance. As we were introduced I could see Patti sizing me up rather suspiciously with her Dickensian eyes.

“You’re the mystery guy, aren’t you?” she said, pupils widening in recognition.

“What?” I said, a little overwhelmed.

“You’re the guy who hosts *Masterpiece* on PBS, aren’t you?” she said, as though she herself were one of the TV detectives I did indeed introduce as *Masterpiece Mystery* host. I was just processing the fact that Patti Smith was an avid viewer of Miss Marple and Co. when she dealt me another body blow:

“I’ve always wanted that job,” she muttered wistfully.

I made a pact with myself right there and then never to tell the *Masterpiece* people this information, as they would surely bump me and make Patti’s wish come true.

Can you imagine Patti Smith coming out of the shadows in a black suit, spouting forth about Inspector Linley or some malfeasance on the Orient Express and ending each introduction with a resounding gob into a specially designed PBS spittoon? I can. It would be a lot more entertaining than that bloke in a suit with the funny accent they have on now.

Meanwhile, Marion had walked to the side of the stage and was shouting to anyone who would listen, “Do something! Do something!!”

I admired her Gallic sense of injustice, but I knew her cries would be in vain. These kinds of events, though seemingly glamorous and sophisticated from the outside, are often organized with the finesse of a kindergarten nativity play, and one whose teachers are all lapsed members of Narcotics Anonymous.

Patti and I were left center stage, both numb. She was presumably running through the list of songs she and Mary J. Blige might both know, which *can’t* have taken long.

I was thinking back to earlier in the evening. I had started the show with a song (“That’s Life,”—how sadly apposite it now seemed) and a monologue in which I was purporting to channel

the spirit of Sharon Stone, the event's usual host and whose shoes I was filling, as it were. Alas, the crowd was underwhelmed. The only time the drone of chat slightly faltered was when I briefly made them think Sharon was watching the proceedings via a webcam from the film set that forbade her presence. "So make sure you bid high," I had warned. "Cos that bitch will cut you."

A small crowd had gathered at the side of the stage, some offering advice, others offering their services to fill the embarrassing gap. Suddenly Harvey Weinstein, the movie mogul and the man whose genius idea it had been to auction off the duet between Patti and Mary J. in the first place, came rushing in from a side door and blurted out that he had just been ripped a new one by Ms. Blige. A visible and voluble tremor rippled throughout the gaggle of glitterati. Harvey does not get dressed down by anyone, ever, let alone a ferocious R & B legend who was on her way home when she heard her name being announced for a duet she also knew nothing about. Harvey had that detached air of someone who had just been mugged. I had a sudden thought that witnessing his encounter with Mary J. would have made a much better auction item than a duet between the two ladies, but I used my inside voice and kept that to myself. Harvey mopped the sweat from his brow and said that Mary had finally acquiesced and would be out in a moment, presumably when she had finished wiping his blood off her Louboutins.

As Mary, Harvey, and Patti returned to the stage, smiling as though they had planned all this years before, I fled the tent and snuck off to the hotel bar to drown my sorrows. I realized I had never actually liked Cannes. Well, I like *Cannes*, the actual town. What I'm not so keen on are those few weeks every May when the town is marauded by movie folk.

My first ever Cannes was in 1992, when my debut feature film,

Prague, premiered there. Looking back, it was all a giddy blur. The only film festival I had ever been to before then was back home in Scotland, when a film I had made in my last term of drama school, Gillies McKinnon's *Passing Glory*, had its premiere at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1986. I remember that experience very vividly because it was the first time I had ever seen myself on the big screen and I was horrified by how my nose seemed to appear at least fifteen seconds before the rest of my face. A less confident man might have avoided the camera for life.

But I soldiered on, and here I was, not strolling up the Lothian Road and popping into the Edinburgh Film House, but cruising the Croisette and *monter l'escalier* of the Palais des Congrès! That week I realized for the first time that glamour actually had a *smell*. But also I was reminded that the industry I was in was show *business*.

Film festivals are really just business conventions, you see. It could be photocopiers, it could be shower curtains, Cannes just happens to be movies. And I think any business convention, even such a glamorous one as the Cannes Film Festival, can only be interesting for so long because too many people are talking too much about the *same thing*: their jobs or *product*—as not just photocopiers and shower curtains but also films are referred to nowadays. Now don't get me wrong, I love my job, I love talking about films, but if that's the only topic of conversation available for days at a time, I get a serious bout of ennui.

That night, in my beautiful room in the Hôtel du Cap that looked out onto the stunning terrace that sloped down to the twinkling Mediterranean where the little dinghies of paparazzi bobbed in the wake, I had funny dreams. I dreamed I was back onstage in the tent and Harvey was auctioning off a kiss with me starting at thirty thousand dollars, and nobody was bidding! The

fact that this had actually happened to Ryan Gosling earlier that evening only further fueled the nightmare.

“No, Harvey,” I kept saying. “Be more realistic. Start at a hundred pounds!”

I also dreamed of my mum, feverishly knitting lots and lots of pairs of socks to give as Christmas presents to all the new Asian relations she was about to acquire.

Yes, I’ll run that by you again. You see, the very next day, I was to fly to London to prepare for the filming of an episode of the BBC TV show *Who Do You Think You Are?*, a very popular program in which celebrities have their genealogy investigated, and studious, balding men in tweed jackets with leather patches on the elbows help the celebs pore over ancient parchments wherein family secrets are hidden. But not for long of course, as a hitherto unpredictable secret is revealed, and then the celeb cries.

I had been asked at the end of the previous year if I would be interested in taking part in the show, and had immediately said yes. Then came the rather unnerving few months when the production company people went off and did some initial research to see whether or not my past was worthy of a full hour-long probe. In other words, they needed to determine whether my ancestors were interesting enough. Being an actor, I am very used to the notion of waiting for people to pass judgment on me—audiences, critics, awards juries, fashion police—all do it with such alarming regularity that it has *almost* ceased to be alarming. But this was different. This time the judgment was not about me, and yet it reflected on me.

And I wanted very dearly to do this show because it would give me the opportunity to get to the bottom of a mystery in my mum’s side of the family, a mystery whose received explanation I had never fully bought and knew would be resolved by the program once and for all. And hence the dream about my mum

knitting socks for all those new family members I imagined I was going to unearth.

Well, actually, there were two family mysteries. The other one involved my dad's side, the Cumming clan of Cawdor. Yes, *that* Cawdor, "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be what thou art promised" and so on. Cawdor is a little village surrounded by forest and farmland in the north of Scotland, and Shakespeare had set *Macbeth* there without bothering to research the fact that the real Macbeths never set foot in the place because they died three hundred years or so before Cawdor Castle was even built. (This lack of attention to historical detail is more grist to the mill for my theory that Shakespeare, if he were alive today, would be writing for TV. But somewhere classy, though.)

My dad's family had been Cawdor estate farmworkers for as far back as anyone could remember. Cut to the 1980s. Like many privately owned Scottish castles, Cawdor's lairds were feeling the pinch and so opened their home to the public, thus commencing a stream of postcards, sent to me by various friends who had toured the castle, of *this* portrait . . .



Do you think there might have been a dalliance belowstairs at some point? Perhaps the help gave a little extra? Hello?!

I am startled by the resemblance of this man, John Campbell, the First Lord of Cawdor (painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1778 and hanging in the castle's drawing room to this day) to myself. I have a postcard of it in my study, and several friends have mistaken it for a still from some period movie I've done.

My imagination is pretty vivid and knows no bounds at the best of times, but now it went into overdrive, and I dreamt of future episodes of *Who Do You Think You Are?* revealing that I was in fact the rightful Earl of Cawdor, and then a special follow-up show detailing the difficulties of trading in my jet-setting Hollywood life for one of a Scottish laird dealing with grumpy American tourists and damp banquet halls.

Of course I knew that aside from going to Cawdor and wrenching a chunk of hair off the present earl's head for a DNA test—something which was *not* in the remit of the rather 'scholarly' methods of *Who Do You Think You Are?*—there would be no way of proving the veracity of my potential claim to minor aristocracy. If some randy laird long ago got a chambermaid up the duff, thereby infusing the Cumming lineage with bluish blood, he would hardly be rushing to the village clerk to have it written in the annals for TV researchers to chance upon centuries later, would he?

No, the real mystery, and the one I was happy to learn that the show was going to focus on, concerned my maternal grandfather, Thomas Darling.

Although my mum, Mary, kept the surname Cumming after her divorce from my father, she is known to me, my brother Tom, and all our friends by her maiden name, Mary Darling. She isn't Mary, she is Mary Darling. This is mostly because her name so suits her. She *is* a darling.

I had spoken to her several times that week before I arrived in Cannes, as she had been getting more and more excited about the start of filming. It was her father that the show was going to discuss, after all, a man she last saw when she was eight years old, although he hadn't died until she was thirteen, five years later, in 1951.

This is what I knew: Tommy Darling was from the north of England, an area known as the Borders for its proximity to Scotland, and was orphaned at age two. He had married my granny and had four children—Mary Darling and her three younger brothers: Tommy, Don, and the now deceased Raymond. He was a decorated soldier in the Second World War. But after the war ended Tommy Darling never came home, ever. He joined the Malayan police force and died there in a shooting accident, and was buried in neighboring Singapore.

But *why* had he never returned to his family? And what exactly were the circumstances of this “shooting accident”?

In the run-up to the beginning of filming, my mind raced about the possible outcomes of Tommy Darling's story, but also about the way a family can have so little knowledge of a relation only one generation away. When little is known and less is spoken about, it's so easy for glaring inaccuracies to be smoothed over by surmise and assumption. I realized that I had no idea who my granddad was, and neither did my mum or my brother. Mary Darling's mum, my beloved Granny, had died a few years before, but I never remembered her speaking of him. She had actually remarried after his death, and when her second husband died there was yet more baggage heaped on top of Tommy Darling's faint shadow.

If Mary Darling was excited, I was agog. I love a surprise, you see. I loved the fact that I would not be told by the production

staff where I would be going on this odyssey until the day it actually began, and each day could mean a different country, a different continent even! I had been told only that the first week of the shoot would take place in Europe (pretty vague!) and that I would start in London but would need my passport at some point. I felt like a little boy again, that feeling that I would burst with the waiting and the suspense. And worse, although the show was normally shot in two consecutive weeks, because of my filming schedule the second week and conclusion of the story would not happen for another month. I didn't know how I was going to manage to contain myself for a whole four weeks! I did know, however, that in two days' time, on Saturday morning in London, I had an appointment with a doctor to get some required jabs for the second part of the shoot, and after a quick search on the Internet I'd discovered that the countries these inoculations were required for included Singapore, so hey ho, call me Sherlock, I was pretty sure I knew where I was going to end up.

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Memory is so subjective. We all remember in a visceral, emotional way, and so even if we agree on the facts—what was said, what happened where and when—what we take away and store from a moment, what we *feel* about it, can vary radically.

I really wanted to show that it wasn't all bad in my family. I tried so hard to think of happy times we all had together, times when we had fun, when we laughed. In the interests of balance, I even wanted to be able to describe some instances of kindness and tenderness involving us all. But I just couldn't.

I spoke to my brother about this. He drew a blank too.

We remember happy times with our mum. Safe, quiet times. But as a whole family? Honestly there is not one memory from our childhoods that is not clouded by fear or humiliation or pain. And that's not to say that moments of happiness did not exist, it's just that cumulatively they have been erased by the dominant feelings that color all of our childhood recollections.

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I can remember us all in a Chinese restaurant in a nearby town. We hardly ever ate out together so when we did it was a memorable occasion. But there is something nagging too, about my memories of that place, something that jabs at my heart when I think of it. I know that at least once in the few times we went there as a family I must have been hit for some flaw my father perceived, must have tried to hide my tears and humiliation from other diners. We surely had some meals there that were free of his mood swings and his tongue and the back of his hand, but they don't stand out for me.

I can remember when I was very little in the living room at Panmure, at least four or five years old, playing horsey with my father. I see him balancing me on the foot of his crossed leg as he watched TV, and him bouncing me up and down to my squeals of delight. I remember being genuinely filled with joy in those moments. But as soon as a memory like that settles for too long in my mind, another, darker one forces it to slide to the side.

I see a freezing wintry afternoon in the sawmill yard. I am on the red bike I was given for Christmas and my father has decided that today is the day that I must ride it without training wheels. To this moment, I have never once tried to ride without them. There is ice and snow on the ground and I see my father taking off the training wheels off and pushing me down the driveway, too fast. Every time he does so I panic and fall off, and soon he gets frustrated with my failure and pulls my trousers down and slaps me really hard on my bare bum. It is so cold I have no feeling in my toes, and barely in my fingers; it is sore for me to sit down on the seat, I am scared, I am crying, and yet somehow my father thinks I am going to be able to achieve what he has decided I must do. Each time I fall, despite my pleas and promises that I will practice and be able to ride without the

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training wheels soon, I am bent over his knee, feel the blast of freezing air around my genitals, and then severe, painful slaps to my behind.

I don't remember how it ended. What I do remember is my mum washing me and getting me ready for bed in front of the living room fire later that night, and her gasping as she saw the ring of blue, black, and purple bruises that had appeared. My father came in to say good-bye before he went out for the night, and my mother admonished him for his handiwork.

"He's all right," he said, running a comb through his hair as he looked in the mirror.

"You've gone too far, Ali," my mum replied as he disappeared out the door.

Aside from visits to family, our holidays together were mostly to caravan (or RV) parks in seaside towns in other parts of Scotland. I remember when I was about seven we went to Dunbar on the southeast coast and I got to play on the go-carts.



This is a photo of me, beaming in my shorts and crew cut, looking towards my mother and my father, who most likely took the picture. So it's not that every second of my childhood was filled with doom. But every second *was* filled with the possibility that in an instant my father's mood would plunge into irrationality, rage, and ultimately violence. This very feeling, this possibility, is what darkens the part of my mind where my childhood stories live.

It's hard to explain how much that feeling of the bottom potentially falling out at any moment takes its toll. It makes you anxious, of course, and constant anxiety is impossible for the body to handle. So you develop a coping mechanism, and for us that meant shutting down.

Everything we liked or wanted or felt joy in had to be hidden or suppressed. I'm sad to say that this method works. If you don't give as much credence or value to whatever it is that you love, it hurts less when it is inevitably taken from you.

I had to pretend I had no joy. It will come as a shock to people who know me now, but being able to express joy was something it took me a long time to be confident enough to do. I've certainly made up for it since, and for this, I am proud and grateful.

Like any tyrant, my father was an expert at knowing how to hurt you most effectively and quickly. If Tom or I became too keen on any hobby or person, our father would ensure that they were removed from our lives instantly. Tom was a great soccer player, and played for a local boys' club. Eventually he began to receive interest from a professional team's scouts. Immediately our father banned him from attending the soccer club altogether. I had a friend from school who lived in a local village, an arty girl who played the harp and whose parents were doctors. My father became convinced, based upon nothing more than a look in her

eyes, that she was a drug addict, and I was never allowed to see her again. Both instances, I realize now, screamed of my father's insecurities—of me mixing with educated people whom he felt he could not relate to, and of Tom succeeding in a field in which our father himself once had aspirations.

His actual violence towards us rarely lasted beyond one or two really hard whacks, the odd kick. I actually think the prolonged period of tension before landing his blows, as we were systematically inspected, chided, and humiliated, had a far worse effect than the actual hits. This certainly contributed more to our need to shut down, as we all learned early that the best way to cope in that time when his ire was building and his cruelty unfurling was to give nothing away, to try and *become* nothing, the nothing he both thought of us and wanted us to remain.

But looking back from the vantage point of adulthood, I see that there was a definite sea change in my father's behavior.

I think I was about eight or nine. Something transformed in him. He had always been prone to outbursts of rage, but now a darkness descended upon him that meant the glimmers of light between the outbursts disappeared. It was as though my father was deeply depressed, and now I think perhaps he was. He obviously did not want to be in his marriage, he seemed to be perpetually irritated by the existence of his children, and nothing ever seemed to please him. Indeed, the only signal we got that something did not displease him was his silence, his inertia.

Now began what I remember as a time of constant darkness, silence, and fear. Being around him was like navigating a minefield. We could never relax. We were never safe. He began to go out every night. I remember sitting in the living room with my mum, hearing him getting ready upstairs. Eventually the door would open and his head would appear.

“That’s me away!”

But he would be gone before the words had left his mouth, his eyes not even seeing us. It was like he was saying good night to a pet, and eventually he stopped saying it altogether.

I didn’t understand what had happened, but of course I assumed it must have been something I had done. I was always being told by him how much of a disappointment I was, both in my appearance—my hair, of course, but also my posture, my weight, my nose, my moles—as well as my inability to perform the simplest of tasks, though his lack of detail in explaining what he wanted me to do or the physical enormity of what was entailed guaranteed I would fail. Once he actually demanded I drive a tractor, though I had never done so before nor had any coaching on how to do so by him or anyone else. I tried to reason with him. Often he gave me tasks that were huge and would take till nightfall and beyond, but this was another level. Now he was asking me to actually endanger my life by operating heavy machinery and I became very, very scared. My father began to shout at me and I knew I had to meet his demand. I clambered up on the high seat. My feet didn’t even reach the pedals. Of course I made a mess of it and the tractor lurched into a hedge and stalled. I was hit, and perhaps that was the first time I was relieved by the violence, because it meant the conclusion of an impossibly difficult and stressful experience.

One night, as he popped his head round the door and lobbed his customary “That’s me away,” I asked him, “Where are you going?”

My mum looked up from her knitting; my father stopped in his tracks. There was no malice in what I had asked. I was genuinely curious. But nobody ever questioned my father, and I could see I was on stony ground.

“D’you want to come with me?” my father replied, defensively.

“But where are you going?” I asked again.

“You tell me if you want to come and I’ll tell you where I’m going.”

I considered this for a moment. I knew my father was going *out*. He was dressed up a bit and he smelled of Old Spice and his hair was Brylcreemed. If he was going to the pub I wouldn’t be allowed in and would have to spend the evening in his van, something I did not want. But I sensed that perhaps there was more to it than that, and I think my parents could tell.

My mum said nothing.

“So are you coming or not?” my father said after a few moments, knowing he had won.

“No,” I replied, meekly.

I can’t remember how I came to know, whether it was kids gossiping at school or something I overheard at home, but soon I understood that the change in my father’s behavior was because he was seeing another woman, and that Tom and I were a constant reminder of the life that trapped him.

Soon after, one sunny Sunday afternoon, we all went to the beach at Carnoustie. As I’ve said, it was rare we did anything together, let alone anything as carefree and exciting as a trip to the seaside. Summers are short in Scotland and we tend to take advantage of the slightest hint of sun, and that day was no exception. Every time the sun peeped out from behind the clouds we raced over the sand into the freezing North Sea, ducking under the waves for a few moments before rushing back up the beach again to the shelter of our striped windbreak, an essential component of any Scottish beach excursion.

My mum opened the Tupperware box of sandwiches she’d made and we tucked in. Just then, a woman and her son ap-

NOT MY FATHER'S SON

peared. We knew them locally and they greeted my father very cordially, but I could see that the woman avoided my mother's eyes. They were invited to sit down and eat with us and they did so. Conversation was stilted, and I did my boyish best to smooth things along. But I knew. This woman was having an affair with my father. That's why we had taken this rare family outing to the beach. And not only did he have the audacity to arrange this encounter and walk them to their car, leaving Mum and me to finish our sandwiches in shameful silence, but when he came back he pretended that their appearance was a total coincidence. Even worse, he actually documented that sad day, that day when he stepped over the line of respect and made us complicit witnesses to his transgression, by taking this photograph.

