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# The Joints That Hold Us Together

MY OLDEST HALF SISTER was first, not long after I was born. Eleven years old and an early developer, she already had the beginnings of breasts, hips, thighs. In the log house kitchen, she had taken a bath in the claw-foot tub and was standing, still naked and steaming in the kitchen, when my father—her stepfather—went to her and asked if he could touch her breasts, fondle her.

We lived in a century-old log house on Idaho's Fraser Prairie—my two maternal half sisters, mother, father, and me—surrounded by nothing but sky and fields of camas. With no running water other than what was collected from the roof into the cistern, our bathroom was an outhouse a hundred yards out back and a salvaged claw-foot bathtub in the kitchen next to the wood cookstove where we heated water to bucket-fill the tub. My sisters wore calico dresses and bonnets and tended the garden. My mother baked pies and bread in the wood cookstove. My father made cedar products: shakes and shingles, posts and beams. And as a toddler on stubby legs, I chased our free-ranging chickens across the open fields. We were a part of the back-to-the-earth movement. *Movin' to the country, gonna eat me a lot of peaches.* A real *Little House on the Prairie* life—the three of us girls and a foster daughter all calling my father “Pa”—only in this case the life on the prairie themes included incest.

A SELF-TAUGHT CARPENTER, my father was gifted in woodworking. He possessed both the practical skills of joinery and construction as well as an artistic vision. When I was born, he carved my cradle out of a cat-faced cedar log he found in the woods and hauled home. It took him months to finish it, hollowing out the interior, enhancing the natural heart-shaped headboard and footboard, fashioning the rockers, sanding it all smooth, and varnishing it to a high shine.

Because we were so poor in those early years, creative inventiveness was a necessity. When I was four months old, with no money for my middle sister's upcoming seventh birthday, my father spent weeks making

her a dollhouse that was an exact replica of our log house. Out of wood, on a one-inch to one-foot scale, he painstakingly wrought every detail of the house: the kitchen with all its appliances—kitchen sink, stovetop with tiny curved-wire burners, old-fashioned refrigerator, claw-foot bathtub next to the wood cookstove with its stovepipe curving into a chimney; the red kitchen floor painted with the same pattern of gray, white, and black spots as the real linoleum floor; a five-paneled entry door with tiny working hinges and door handle; tall, paned windows; the front porch with its miniature stacks of wood and kindling—even a chopping block with slivers of chopped wood on the porch floor. Everything arranged and painted exactly the same as the real house. When you lifted off the sharp-peaked shingled roof, the stairs and upstairs bedrooms—including my nursery—were exposed, everything there other than the furniture and the miniature-sized family representing us, living this new life together.

WHEN I WAS TWO AND A HALF years old we moved to a small logging-company town in the backwoods where my father had been hired as the town carpenter with a steady paycheck. The new house had four small bedrooms and two bathrooms no bigger than closets. The main bathroom was barely big enough for a tub, toilet, and sink crammed together. I remember my father complaining that he could hardly turn around, that getting dressed was nearly impossible. The downstairs bathroom was even smaller, with a shower stall hardly big enough to fit in and mice always trapped in the walls, scuffling and scratching, trying to escape the reek of their own death. Everyone had become accustomed to a bathtub in the kitchen—all that space. In the new tight quarters, my parents left the door open when they bathed, my father shaving in the tub with bar soap and a disposable razor, coming out in white cotton underwear and white cotton T-shirt, long white legs, and newly smooth face. My sisters kept the door closed, came out wrapped tightly in their towels, steamed air following them. They already knew the things a girl had to guard against. Things involving a girl's body that were so risky and tempting, even a father couldn't be trusted.

My mother often “gave me” her water when she was done with a bath. I would fish out pubic hairs, wiping their springiness off my finger onto the tub edge's cold ceramic, conditioned to this sort of family intimacy. I would trace worlds out in the marbled Formica installed above the tub sides—a swirling blue-gray that turned into wild oceanic currents, astral

breezes suspending ships borne aloft, or father wind, blowing furiously from the north, attempting to capsize my crew. When the water got cold, my fingers pruned into deep whitened grooves, I would drain it and re-run the water straight hot, skinny five-year-old butt planted on cold tub side, feet propped against the soap alcove built into the opposite wall, rubber toys buoyed under legs arched like a bridge. But no matter how hot I made the water—immersed skin turning angry shades of red—it would again grow cold before I'd completed my high-seas adventures. My collection of beloved rubber bath-toy animals eventually rotted from overuse, their undersides growing mealy until in a last gutting, they disintegrated altogether, spewing slimy gray water in a heartbreaking demise.

There was only one year around the age of seven when I refused to bathe, when the tub became something I avoided at all costs. This was my age of awareness. The age I realized there was a danger to my femaleness, my body. The age I first understood the risk of familial intimacy.

I don't remember how exactly my mother told me, just that I was seven years old and she and I sat in the sloping front yard, grass deep under our hands, a fringe of snowberry brush and maple trees blocking the view, my father working in his carpenter shop down below the house. My mother carefully told me that my father had "touched" my sisters. My oldest sister's soon-to-be husband had found out and was threatening to tell the authorities. My sister was seventeen, pregnant and engaged, and relationships were strained. My mother wanted me to know what had happened with my father and sisters ahead of time, if it came to that.

With my middle sister, my father's touching had been even worse. When she was around eleven or twelve, while I played with my rubber bath toys in tepid shared bathwater, my father had "tucked her in," going to her upstairs bedroom and touching her in all the ways a father never should. While my mother and older sister and I took turns in the bathroom readying for church, he touched her right in the living room.

At seven, I didn't have lot of emotions like one might imagine, just a feeling of sordid adultlike awareness. I was possessor of weighty knowledge: my father had touched my sisters. He might try to touch me too. I absorbed it as a fact of life. My mother admonished me to be careful. Be aware. So I was. When my father "tickled" my back—a thing I loved dearly as a child—I kept my arms tucked tight against my sides as barrier in case his hands wandered too far toward my nonexistent breasts. I made sure to keep the bathroom door locked. I was careful with how I hugged my father, careful with my body, careful not to present any temptation.

But more than anything, I was careful not to love him too much—not to love him more than I should.

AS A CHILD, I often visited my father in his carpenter shop, playing in the sawdust or with pieces of scrap wood while he completed his projects. He taught me the types and qualities of wood, the strength of various joints—dovetail, mortise and tenon, miter, tongue and groove. I learned that different wood has different tensile strengths—the degree to which you can bend it without breaking, without splintering, without damaging its integrity. I learned that glue is stronger than grain, holding pieces of different wood spliced together even when the wood itself cracks under pressure. I learned that the right joint will stay joined forever, no matter the type of wood that was used, no matter if there aren't any fasteners used to hold it. I learned how to distinguish tight-grained heart-cut beams cut from virgin timber. I learned knots and warps and curing, stains, cuts, and ripping. I learned to sand until wood was transformed from splintery to silky smooth. I became a connoisseur of fine lumber and quality carpentry work, critically examining boards and joints and finishes for any flaw.

I remember helping my father salvage thick red-fir boards from the town's old water tower that was being torn down and replaced. The boards looked too weathered to be any good, but once he cut off their grayed and splintered damage, their deep red interior revealed their hidden integrity, their strength.

The first project he made out of the salvaged water-tower boards was a magnificent bed for my mother. I'm not sure how long it took him to shape the lumber into all the various sizes and thicknesses he needed. To glue and bend the wood into deep curves in his own handmade steamer box. To create the deeply arched headboard and footboard—wood-working pieces of art: six feet tall and made of solid red-fir-board inlay, cut to show off the grain and color, with four magnificent and massive bedposts, each made out of one-piece beams, carved wide at the foot, then narrowing and flaring into a rounded flame shape at the top. The whole thing gave an impression of thickness and solidity and beautiful craftsmanship, although red fir is a soft wood and damages easily.

YEARS LATER, at thirty-five years old and just finished with graduate school in creative writing, I attended a small summer writing workshop where the writer/teacher pushed all of us to answer the question of why

we wrote—*really*, why we wrote. At first, I replied with a carefully thought-out academic answer I was sure was the truth, but the teacher kept pressing the question, kept calling me out on my answers until finally in tearful frustration I cried out that I wrote because in the woods there was so much beauty and so much darkness.

“What kind of darkness?” the teacher probed.

When I said the word *incest* I wasn’t even thinking of my sisters—I was thinking of all the people and friends I’d known, all the squalid small-town backwoods stories I’d heard over the years, but there it was: my own family, my own father. The other students looked at me with frank sympathy, thinking it was my story too, but I escaped childhood untouched. It was my sisters who had been hurt, and it was my father who’d hurt them. It hit me and shook me to my core, a sudden mental picture I couldn’t erase: my father, face contorted, touching them—young girls. I cried and raged for hours afterward, all of it finally coming to the surface, all those suppressed emotions, all that anger and guilt.

When I was young, and even into my teens, my then charismatic-Christian mother told me I was the reason she and my father had been brought together. Despite their troubled marriage, despite everything bad that had happened, there was a divine plan in place, uniting them so that I might be born. She said I was the missing link, the chosen one. *Set aside. Pure.* That I was the end of generations of dysfunction. I was too young to understand the dynamic this created, too young to know much of anything but my own heavy feelings of guilt and confusion.

My father’s father—my grandfather—sexually molested his daughter. My father sexually abused my sisters. A neighbor man—stepfather of my friend—sexually abused my middle sister when she was twelve, after my father had molested her. My paternal half sister’s stepfather sexually molested her when she was seven years old and continued to do so for years. My brother’s uncle took him to hunting camp when he was ten years old, tied him up, and raped him for three days. The foster daughter who lived with us briefly out on the prairie accused my father of sexual misconduct and ran away. Nobody believed her.

The National Center for Victims of Crimes reports that, “1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse.” But even as terrible as those numbers are, my family’s statistics are worse: only one out of my parents’ five children *wasn’t* the victim of child sexual abuse. Everywhere, everyone around me was touched and hurt and broken and I stood whirling around in the darkness.

But what is to stop them—these men, our fathers? My father was not held accountable, nor my sister's or friend's stepfathers. Nobody alerted the authorities. Neither my mother nor my sister's mother left their husbands—their daughters' sexual abusers—too afraid to disrupt things, too afraid of the consequences, too afraid of what they would do with themselves afterward. So life went on as usual. And it shouldn't have. *It shouldn't have.* It shouldn't have happened at all.

My father, my mother, my brother, my sisters, me. Bathwater reflecting our wavering images. Water gone cold in the tub, dirty rings of DNA left behind—a soiled landscape of intimacy and betrayal we swam our way through, searching for the other side.

UNSURPRISINGLY, ALL OF MY SIBLINGS suffered serious life struggles. My maternal sisters both got pregnant in their teens—my middle sister at fifteen, my oldest sister at seventeen—got married, had two children, suffered abuse, got divorced, and spent years battling to escape the dysfunction of their lives. My brother became a heroin addict, committed murder, and went to prison for life. My paternal sister underwent decades of intense counseling trying to mitigate her PTSD, anxiety, and severe, debilitating depression that landed her on several suicide watches and all but destroyed her life. But they all worked hard to re-create their lives as best they could. They moved on, started over, forgave the men who hurt them.

Despite being left “untouched,” I struggle to make sense of it, to understand: as children we are taught to guard ourselves, but how can we when we don't recognize our own adversaries? When we can't even fathom who the devil is or how complicated our lives become when we finally do know?

When my husband and I had three sons, we tried to teach them early on never to entrust their well-being with even those they loved the most—the ones meant to take care of them, the ones meant to protect them. We tried to teach them to protect themselves. We made sure they weren't left alone too long with their grandfather even though he was wonderful with them, building wooden sailboats and rubber-band guns and keepsake boxes for their treasures, explaining patiently to them as he did with me the way of wood and joints and finishing.

OVER THE YEARS my father built desks, bookshelves, dressers, cabinets, chairs, tables, and spiral staircases. Mahogany handles for the pantry doors, oak trim for our 1970 truck's interior, birch for cabinet doors, red fir for

picture frames, cedar for boxes filled with old family pictures. A huge oak dresser for my middle sister's wedding present. But he made beds the most: my cradle; his marriage bed; a twin bed for my oldest sister with a butterfly, the symbol of transformation, in the grain of the headboard; a water-tower-board bed for my middle sister's son who as a teen moved in with my parents to escape his own father's abuse; and finally, a water-tower bed and nightstand for my oldest son. He planned to make two more water-tower beds for my other sons, but now it's too late. At seventy-two years old, he has suffered a stroke, debilitating cataracts, and shakes so badly he can hardly sip coffee without spilling it. The water-tower boards I helped him salvage three decades ago are still stacked and sound, but there will be no more beds, no more desks or bookshelves made by him, so we call ourselves lucky to have what we do.

When my mother finally divorced my father after thirty-five years of marital troubles, my husband and I inherited the marriage bed my father made. It worried me at first, bringing my parents' bed into our bedroom—the fear of their bad mojo infecting our marriage. Only when my mother threatened to give the bed away to someone else or burn it in order to get it out of her house did I finally give in. We cleaned and polished the wood thoroughly, bought new mattresses, added more brace boards, and finally my husband, who trusts the strength of metal more than wood, welded two long pieces of angle-iron together and installed them like a backbone down the middle of the bed, adding support and solidity. I didn't argue the addition.

The bed is a showstopper in our house. It's on display—not intentionally, but because our downstairs bedroom's French doors are only a few feet from the front door entrance and right off the living room, so the bed is the first thing people see as they come in. Everyone always stops in awe and exclaims, “Is that your bed? It's beautiful! It's so tall! How do you get in it?” I've recited the answers to these questions dozens of times, even given demonstrations of the foot-propped one-legged hop I do to launch myself onto the top mattress four and a half feet off the ground. But it is a good fit in our bedroom—the tall ceilings accommodating its mass and the French doors and windows highlighting the deep hue of aged red fir. We have grown accustomed to sleeping so high off the ground. We have grown accustomed to all that has been left behind.

I've come to realize that there are no answers, no ways to make sense of it, to understand the horrible things even an otherwise good person is capable of. So we piece things together, constructing the best joints we

can, and we go on living, or we don't. If we're lucky, we learn to guard ourselves, to hold our arms tight. We suffer and heal. We try to protect our own children. We bear witness in the ways we can. And at some point, if we're really lucky, we become whole and realize who we are and how strong we've become.