



THE NEWSPAPER BOY

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ABSTRACT

The Newspaper Boy is a memoir of growing up as the youngest boy in a large, enormously troubled, poor, alcohol-saturated, contentious, and mental health-challenged Irish household in the Midwest rust belt during the 1960s and 70s. As the child of a suicidal, depressed, regretful, and overwhelmed mother of six boys and two girls, and an emotionally-unavailable, alcoholic gambling addict and sometimes violent father who both suffered personality-altering brain injuries when the author was four years old, the author experienced varieties of intense abuse, neglect, and sexual assault that taxed his psyche and impacted his dreams, behavior, choices, and life path. By presenting details of his dramatically unfortunate, lonely, and unprotected childhood – during which he had no grandparents, aunts, or uncles, and there were no reliable siblings, or others to turn to for desperately needed help – this evocative piece provides a window into what it was like to be subjected to abusive treatment by a variety of the older people around him. As a pillar to telling of his childhood, he includes a riveting account of being violently molested and then stalked by a middle-aged man who was a customer on the author's paper route when he was thirteen years old.

Keywords: boyhood, memoir, male studies, coming of age

As I was working on writing this, a boy knocked on my door. He asked me if I'd like to subscribe to the newspaper. There was an irony to his timing. He looked to be about 14 years old.

As I closed the door, my mind surged with a snake pit maze of unpleasant memories that I was already dealing with, as I had been reading through things I had written as a teenager, including what happened to me as a newspaper boy.

I recently realized that on the Internet I could see photos of the Cleveland neighborhood that I had grown up in. I haven't been there since I left as a teenager.

By looking up the Internet street view of the neighborhood, for the first time since I was a teenager I saw the apartment complex where I had delivered newspapers. Remembering what had happened to me there in the spring of 1975, I cried.

That gave me more motivation to write this to establish a record, and to tell a story that might help others who are dealing with experiences of childhood assault.

I was of one of the last generations to experience the way newspapers were delivered, which has been portrayed as a gleeful boy riding a bike while tossing newspapers to the homes of appreciative customers. In my case, I did my route on foot. I worked every morning in any kind of weather to deliver *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* to customers in apartment buildings and some businesses.

Being alone on the streets delivering newspapers and then having to go alone to collect money from subscribers left the child laborers susceptible to certain risks. Among them: being prey to predatory pedophiles.

In the spring of 1975, weeks before my fourteenth birthday, I was collecting money from my subscribers while thinking that I liked having a paper route. What I didn't know was that I was about to walk into a situation that would transform me.

I didn't tell anyone this story until I was in my forties. Even then, I was vague about it. Recently, I have told a therapist the details of what happened to me. She cried, and encouraged me to write this article.

To prepare to write this, I read through things that I had written as a teenager. And I wrote this article while feeling as if I were purging long-held toxins from deep in my soul.

Out of curiosity, I looked up some stories about newspaper carriers. While reading the stories, it became easy to reason that the publishers knew what could happen to their child laborers.

It was from the backs of child laborers that newspaper publishing became a multi-billion-dollar industry.

Fourteen-year-old Cyrus Everett of Fort Fairfield, Maine, was last seen while collecting money on December 26, 1964. The following May, his decomposing body was found beneath a log.

In October 1970, an 11-year-old Indianapolis paperboy, Jerry Bayles, was stabbed to death. His nude body was found on the side of a country road.

In March 1975, 15-year-old Joey Didier of Rockford, Illinois, was abducted, raped, and strangled by a man who said he couldn't sleep, and decided to "go driving around looking for a paperboy."

In October 1979, 14-year-old Curt Cuzio vanished while delivering the *Detroit Free Press*. His body and bike were found in the attic of a man on his route. He had been sexually violated.

In 1981, 12-year-old Benjamin Lee Brenneman of Anaheim, California, was abducted while delivering the *Orange County Register*. A 42-year-old man had sexually assaulted and strangled him.

On September 5, 1982, 12-year-old Johnny Gosch of Des Moines, Iowa, disappeared while delivering newspapers.

On March 20, 1983, 14-year-old Christopher Gruhn of Rockville Centre, New York, was delivering newspapers when a 17-year-old boy accosted and sodomized him, and then killed him by stabbing him 27 times.

On August 12, 1984, 13-year-old Eugene Martin of Des Moines, Iowa, vanished while delivering newspapers. He had been seen talking to a man appearing to be in his 30s.

On Feb. 15, 1988, in Hagley, Worcestershire, England, a 32-year-old man led police to the body of Stuart Gough, a 14-year-old paperboy the man had abducted and sexually assaulted.

In 1989, a newspaper boy in Cole Spring, Minnesota, was kidnapped and molested.

In 2004, a Nebraska man was convicted of the 2003 rape and murder of 15-year-old female newspaper carrier Heather Guerrero.

In July 2011, a St. Paul, Minnesota, man was sentenced to 33 years in prison for the 2010 kidnapping and assault of a 14-year-old female newspaper carrier.

In 2013, a New Castle, Pennsylvania, man molested two newspaper carriers.

Those are some of the crimes against newspaper carriers that made the news. My situation did not, nor had it been reported. The difference between those stories and this one is that they were written by someone other than the victims.

Children had been used to deliver newspapers as early as the 1700s. Benjamin Franklin wrote of being a newspaper boy. Homeless youth in cities often made money by purchasing bundles of newspapers and selling them on the streets. Legend has it that the first American paperboy was 10-year-old Barney Flaherty who was hired in September 1833 to deliver Benjamin Henry Day's *New York Sun*.

It was 141 years later that I began my paper route.

I don't know how much money I made as a paperboy. I was continually disappointed by how little was left after paying for the papers. In a pinch, my mother dipped into the money to buy groceries, which was okay with me.

Legally, the pay of newspaper carriers could be lower than minimum wage. They were not given Social Security benefits, nor were they covered by workers compensation or unemployment insurance.

How did publishers get away with paying low wages to unsupervised child laborers working in potentially dangerous conditions?

Since the 1930s, newspaper carriers have been left out of the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act

relating to child labor.

On the site of the U.S. Department of Labor, it states, “Newspaper Delivery: Minors employed in the delivery of newspapers to consumers are exempt from Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) child labor provisions, as well as the wage and hours provisions. This exemption applies to carriers engaged in making deliveries to the homes of subscribers or other consumers of newspapers (including shopping news). It also includes employees engaged in the street sale or delivery of newspapers to the consumer. However, employees engaged in hauling newspapers to drop stations, distribution centers, and newsstands are not exempt because they do not deliver to the consumer.”

The newspaper industry successfully pressured the federal government to place newspaper carriers outside of the most basic wage and labor laws.

I was a second-generation paperboy. My father, who grew up in poverty, and had a tough, complicated, and tragic life, was once a newspaper boy.

My job as a newspaper boy began when I was 13, just after entering eighth grade in the autumn of 1974.

I learned that I was going to be a paperboy when my mother, who barely spoke to me, said that I needed to wake up early and follow one of my brothers to learn the paper route.

My training for the job involved tagging along with my brother for two days in the morning and then going collecting with him during one evening.

Going on the route with my brother was awkward. He and I had always avoided each other. I was used to him and his friends belittling, bullying, and brutalizing me. I didn't talk much as a child. I had never had a conversation with him. We said very few words during the training runs.

Each morning, the route manager dropped off bundles of newspapers in front of an apartment complex. I stuffed the papers into canvas shoulder bags, and delivered them to many of the apartments, and to some nearby businesses.

Other than briefly being introduced to him, I never had a conversation with the route manager. I sometimes saw him from a distance when he dropped off the bundles. He stopped by the house once a week to collect the money from a metal box kept in a dining room cabinet. He didn't say much. If nobody was home, he let himself in. That was the arrangement.

I was surprised to get the paper route. I was an underperformer in school, got lousy grades, and was often belittled and ridiculed – especially at home. My parents called me “dummy,” and other names. My brothers took their lead. “That idiot” was practically my nickname, as was “little sissy.”

Throughout my childhood, I never had a conversation with anyone in the family. Only the minimal amount of words were used when communication was needed, or forced – usually in frustration, impatience, or anger. Saying little or nothing was the rule of every day.

Being the youngest of six boys, I felt like an afterthought, or at least one of the final attempts by my parents to have a girl – of which they eventually had two.

The brother a year older than me also seemed to be an afterthought. It wasn't unusual for our parents to refer to us as “the other two.” I never once heard my mother or father have a conversation with that brother. Although we didn't look alike, when we were very young, people sometimes referred to us as “the twins.” We shared a bedroom. After the first four years, we didn't have much to do with each other.

Good relations are not my family heritage. Alcoholism, brain injuries, mental health issues, low self-esteem, and poverty are.

Our parents were only children. We had no aunts, uncles, or close cousins. My grandparents died before I was born. There were no other relatives to consult or reason with, to rely on, or to protect or nurture us.

My father's parents were born in Ireland. My grandfather had forever left Ireland in the early 1920s, after being in a drunken brawl with my great-grandfather. My father's parents met and married in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Days after he was born, my father's mother died as a result of an infection of the birth canal. My father didn't know that his stepmother was not his birth mother until he saw his birth certificate when he entered the army during the Korean War.

I didn't know the details of my father's parents' deaths until after my father died in his late sixties of "bad medical care" for some sort of brain situation. He had been so badly burned by radiation treatments that his scalp and skull died weeks before he did. At the time of his death, I was thirty years old and hadn't seen him for more than a decade.

My grandfather married another Irish girl who had no children. She raised my father as her own, in poverty, in Cleveland. My father's alcoholic father was mostly absent after my father became a teenager.

My father stopped going to school after ninth grade, worked as a bike messenger for Western Union, sold soda at the baseball and football stadium, and got into boxing, and drinking.

My father's father suffered a brain injury during a fight outside an Irish pub. He spent his remaining years in a mental institution, where my father once took my mother to meet him. He died in the 1950s.

My father's stepmother died when I was five years old. I remember her as strict with my brothers, having a strong Irish accent, sometimes babysitting us, and giving me mints when we visited her in her tiny apartment deep in the city.

My mother's parents were Scottish. Her father was born in the U.S. Her mother was born in Scotland. My mother spoke of her father as stinking of cigarettes and being an awful drunk.

In her later years, my mother told me that her father had an affair with his sister-in-law, and the resulting baby was my mother. My grandfather's sister-in-law – possibly my grandmother – did have two other babies, including one by a wealthy, older man whose family she worked for as a maid in their grand mansion.

Maybe because they both were single children, my parents thought that having a bunch of children would be better. Maybe they thought that we would be friends.

Shortly after I turned four, my parents had their eighth child.

It wasn't unusual for Midwestern people to have large families. The Kennedy imagery idealized the situation.

With eight children, our father had a lot of people relying on him.

Our mother was overburdened, and likely suffered multiple layers of postpartum depression.

Similar to the Kennedys, we were Irish-Catholic. Up until I was in fourth grade, we went to Catholic school. Then, everyone stopped going to church, and we switched to public school. By that time, our mother gave up on a lot of things, was ruled by depression, and seemed more focused on political news and hating politicians. Our father wasn't attentive. With no stern nuns to keep us in line, we wore whatever we wanted, our hair grew, and my brothers pretty much became recalcitrant.

When I was four years old, our father crashed while driving drunk. He smashed through the windshield, cracking open his skull on a utility pole. It left a horrible scar on his forehead. The injury altered his intellectual capacity. When he finally returned from the hospital with his head wrapped in bandages, he didn't know who I was.

Before the accident, my father sold residential real estate and insurance. After the accident, there were years of financial issues, food stamps, and welfare. He worked a variety of jobs, including as a milkman, and delivering for an industrial laundry service. While doing one of those jobs, he fell and broke his neck, which took many months of recovery, but left him in permanent pain. By the time I was in junior high, he landed a union job working at a steel mill. The iron worker job was steady – when there weren't layoffs, union strikes, and reduced hours that put us back on food stamps and welfare.

It was an awful thing for a mother of eight young children to experience her husband suffering a personality-changing brain injury. The man she had married was gone. It would be reasonable for a woman in that situation to assume that troubles would be numerous, and common.

Months after my father had suffered the brain injury, late one night our house started on fire. During the confusion and panic, my mother went back into the house. She fell down the

stairs, suffering a brain injury. After being hospitalized for weeks, she was sent home as if all was okay.

From that point forward, my mother was absolutely not okay.

She had made money singing at weddings and funerals. In the fire, in addition to her brain, her lungs and vocal chords were injured. She could no longer sing. Her joy and income vanished.

Even at the age of four, I recognized that my parents' personalities had changed. They were frustrated, stressed, regretful, poor, and had no parents, brothers, sisters, or family to turn to. In their situation, having one child would be a bit much. They had eight.

Being a mother is nonstop work, especially with a flock of children, little money, and endless, terrible problems. Those were years before disposable diapers. That meant she cleaned diapers by hand for many years.

When my father wasn't home, my mother often mentioned that she was not interested in being a mother, wished she hadn't had children, felt trapped, and that men ruin women's lives. She expressed her desire not to be alive. She often looked weary, and stared. Those expressions continued through my childhood.

After briefly living in rental homes, we moved into a modest, three-story house purchased using a down payment from a small inheritance my mother had received from the last uncle she knew of. The house had five small bedrooms, with our parents' room at the back of the first floor, three bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor, and one bedroom in the attic. My mother often said that the house was cursed.

When I was in second grade, my mother got pregnant. She carried the baby to full-term. The baby was a girl, and died.

My mother looked dreadfully gloomy. Her state was likely another layer of postpartum depression mixed with grief, sadness, frustration, and regret stuck in poverty.

I saw her staring at the floor. She asked, "Why can't I die?" I didn't know if I was supposed to answer.

My father was a horse racing and alcohol addict. He often was not around. When he was, he didn't carry on conversations with us. The few times we did things with him, it was more like a dad process. He took us bowling, and to a few baseball and basketball games. He played catch football with my brothers. I was too young to play.

Several times the whole family went on single-day road trips to Niagara Falls, caves in Kentucky, and museums in Michigan. I don't know how my father did all of that driving in a crappy station wagon filled with ten people. My mother brought loads of sandwiches. Those day trips were our vacations.

While I was in grade school, my mother sometimes sent me up the street to find my father in the pubs. Sometimes I found him. Those escapades ended after he took me with him. I sat alone as he spent hours getting drunk at the nearly empty bar.

By the time my brothers were young teenagers, they were drinkers. The attic bedroom was used for listening to rock music, drinking beer, and smoking weed with troubled friends that most parents wouldn't want around. A stack of porn magazines accumulated.

The sister two years younger than I had Down syndrome. She was unable to talk. She was a sweet girl who liked catsup sandwiches. When she reached school age, a bus stopped by to take her to a school for children like her. I didn't like that certain brothers and their friends referred to her as cave girl.

Three times, I saw one of my brother's friends suddenly stop doing I'm-not-sure-what to my sister in her bedroom. He threatened me. I didn't know what to do. He was often around, getting wasted with my brothers in the attic. When he saw me alone, he'd whisper insults, shove or hit me, or try to trip me. He was mannerly to my mother. Several times when she took us to a beach, the boy came with us. After high school, he entered the military. Recently, I found his Facebook page. He posts about loving Jesus.

My other sister was quiet, pretty, and unusually intelligent. In school, she was in the advanced classes. She seemed to be the only light of my parents' eyes. Not that she didn't experience neglect. There were summers when she wasn't cared for, her hair matted, her clothes filthy. Neighbors asked me why my mother let my sister's hair get like that. I tried to teach her how to brush her hair. Our mother saw and angrily told me to leave her alone. When summers

ended, my mother spent hours untangling the mats as my sister cried. She couldn't attend school like that.

My sisters' bedroom was permeated with the smell of urine from my Down syndrome sister's bed wetting. The sheets often didn't get changed for days. Sometimes, I changed the sheets. Sometimes, the bed and floor of the hallway and bathroom were smeared with poo from my sister trying to make her way to the bathroom. As she entered her teenage years, there sometimes also was blood.

My overwhelmed, sad mother didn't care for herself much. She'd go days without cleaning herself. I'd occasionally see her pour a pitcher of water over her head in the kitchen sink. Most mornings, she sat reading the newspaper while scratching dry skin from her scaly feet. She usually stared at the TV for hours every evening. Other family members sometimes did the same. No discussions. Only staring at the TV.

It was clear that four of my brothers were going to struggle through life. The other two of us boys had problems. They were all problems for me.

When I was a baby, my father brought home a miniature collie puppy. She was my best friend, slept on my bed, greeted me when I came home from school, and sat at my feet while I ate. She often tried to protect me.

At the end of third grade, I came home from school one day and my dog didn't greet me.

My mother had a mood swing. She had sent my dog to the pound, telling them that my dog bit people. I begged her to go get my dog back. When my father got home, my mother wanted us to eat dinner. I threw my one and only extreme tantrum that seemed to amaze them. Finally, after dinner, my father drove me and a couple of the brothers to the pound, only to find out that my dog had been killed.

My father was prone to flashes of anger. I was afraid of him. He didn't seem to like the brother who was a year older than me who was quiet, introverted, and rarely spoke. For his first several years, that brother had a bed-wetting problem.

For years after the fire, our parents sometimes yelled at each other. She was tired of slaving away morning to night while he was spending money nights and weekends on booze and horse races. We knew yelling was going to start when she told us to get upstairs as she anticipated our drunk father arriving.

Her life was frustration, headaches, worry, sons she didn't know what to do with and who she said that she didn't want in the first place, nonstop food to shop for and make, endless laundry, nobody helping her, and a drunken, brain-damaged husband. She lividly complained that the alcohol reeking from his pores smelled up the bedroom.

Many times during the yelling, my mother mentioned my brother's bed-wetting. Before my father made it upstairs, my brother cried in fear. It was awful to hear him scream in pain as the belt hit him while my father yelled at him.

I once had my brother get into my bed, and I got into his. Our father burst in and lashed at me with his belt. I screamed in pain. Realizing he was hitting the wrong kid, he went after my brother.

That treatment set the stage for my brother's sad, tragic, short life.

Outside of the yelling that my father did while he was hitting my brother, I never heard my father talk with him. My mother wasn't much better in communicating with him.

Although that brother was the only one who didn't hit me, he also didn't talk to me. By the time I was nine, if I spoke to him, he told me to shut up. I asked him if he wanted me to never speak to him. He told me to shut up. We never spoke again. We shared a bedroom until I was 16. Although he hung out with our brothers and their troubled friends, he barely spoke with them.

Like me, school was likely an escape for him. Like me, his grades weren't good.

I didn't attend kindergarten.

On the first day of first grade, I was surprised that the other kids in class could read and knew math. To me, the alphabet and numbers were a bunch of intimidating pieces of games that I didn't understand. I was behind, and I wasn't good at catching up.

For some reason, the teachers put the misbehaving and allegedly dumber kids in the same part of the room. I was there. One teacher called us “the penal colony.”

My third-grade teacher wrote a letter to my mother complaining that I stared out the window, didn’t pay attention, and got low grades.

The teacher laughed as she read my mother’s response letter out loud in class. My mother wrote that I should be made to sit on a stool in the corner of the classroom with a dunce cap on my head. I felt tremendously betrayed.

I was to sit at the dining room table doing homework. I was not allowed to watch TV. As I did my homework, my father sometimes stood above me. He’d hit me in the head if I had answers wrong, if I misspelled a word, if I was seen counting with my fingers instead of in my brain. Trying not to cry while being hit in the head and called dummy by my father was not easy. Sometimes I cried so hard that I could barely breathe. “Only sissy boys cry,” he said. “Are you a little sissy?” he’d ask. Some brothers found that entertaining.

Was his hitting me in the head and calling me names the type of help my mother wanted in raising the boys? Did her not stopping it mean that she approved of it? Was she afraid of him? I never knew of him to hit her, but people have potential.

There were times that I couldn’t sleep at night. It could be difficult to find a position to put my head on the pillow without feeling the pain of bruises on my skull.

Being bruised, in pain, scared, called names, sleep deprived, and unsafe doesn’t improve grades. It triggers the tissues to produce fear, stress, anxiety, and fatigue chemistry.

As I was trying to figure out how to ride a bike, my father saw me. He began telling me what to do. He walked over and pushed me on the bike down the sidewalk. I lost my footing on the pedals, and they hit my ankles. Irritated, he slowed so that I could put my feet back on the pedals. He pushed the bike and let go. I fell. He picked the bike up, told me to get back on it, and he kept pushing. I kept losing my footing as my ankles painfully got hit by the pedals. After some distance, he picked up the bike, with me on it, and threw the bike, and me, into bushes. A man walking with children across the street said something as my dad stormed off back home.

Even though I was lousy at it, I liked baseball. I joined the school team, as did two of my brothers. My drunk father showed up at the games, angrily yelling insults at me from the sidelines. Other parents tried to calm him down. He ignored them. My brothers appeared to think it was funny. I dropped out of the team. Nobody tried to coax me back.

Months later, I was in the park with some neighborhood kids. In the distance, the baseball team gathered around the coach. He called my name. I nervously approached. He was giving trophies to the team members. He handed a trophy to me and told me that it was for putting up with my father.

The only baseball I played after that was with neighborhood kids, and sometimes in junior high.

My father hitting me ended in May when I was in fourth grade.

That was after two neighborhood boys lied about me starting a small fire in an old hobo fire pit in the woods. Another boy had started some leaves and twigs on fire as I was backing away telling him not to do it. The teenage boys grabbed me. The other boy ran. The police brought me home, where my father was drunk and alone.

The beating started in the living room, continued up the stairs, down the hallway, into my bedroom, and ended when I crawled beneath my bed and held onto the bed springs. He gave up and left the room. There was pain in many places.

I woke up at night as my mother used a washcloth to clean blood from me.

Before I was allowed to go back to school, my mother stood in the dining room and rehearsed with me what I was to say if the teachers asked about the wounds on my face. I was to say that I was in the back seat of the car when she stopped fast to avoid hitting a car that went through a red light, and my face hit the dashboard.

Nobody at school asked me why I had scabs and bruises on my face.

If being bloodied by being whipped with a belt, hit, kicked, and thrown wasn't enough for doing nothing wrong, my mother grounded me for two weeks. At first, I was stuck in my bedroom. Then I was allowed in the living room. After days, she decided that I could be on the

porch. Brothers and their friends pushed me off, then told her that I had left the porch. I was smacked and banned back to the bedroom.

There was an older, strong teenage boy who was often in the house. He did things to me that I didn't like. Things that I didn't understand had already been done to me by another boy. It was painful, frustrating, and embarrassing, and I didn't understand or know what to do about the situation. I now know that it is called rape.

One of my brothers with a condition of being mentally slow, cleverly funny, and socially awkward, told numerous boys that my parents hated me, that people could do anything they wanted to me, and that nobody cared.

Some boys brutalized me as a form of entertainment. My crying, being in pain, humiliated, and unable to defend myself seemed funny to them. There was no escaping. They were older, taller, faster, and stronger.

I hid from humans. Being away from the house was best. But, rain, snow, and cold happened. Sitting in the car with the doors locked, or staying behind the sofas, or in closets, in the basement, or on the top shelf of the upstairs linen closet was common. Sometimes, a brother found me hiding and hit me around, accusing me of spying.

After hearing about a famous person dying from an overdose of pills, I swallowed all of the pills I could find. Some were aspirin, others were vitamins, and some were my mother's prescriptions. As I got sick to my stomach, I vomited into the toilet.

I heard my mother mention something about all the pills being gone.

In school, my grades continued being awful. To keep advancing to the next grade, I spent a few summers in school.

Summer school kept me away from the house, and was almost kind of fun. Except that kids who weren't in summer school considered us dumb.

The summer school kids could be more fun. Except when they weren't.

I went home from school with one of the summer school kids. He had a pet mouse. His mother didn't allow friends in the house. He took the baby mice outside to show them to me. He

laughed as he tossed them high up into the air, letting them land on the street. He laughed when they stopped moving, and called them stupid. He laughed at me for looking freaked out, calling me an idiot. “They’re just stupid mice,” he said. He told me to leave.

I didn’t want to be stupid. People treat things they perceive to be stupid as okay to harm.

I found a book about what students learn during each year of schooling. I could barely understand it. According to the book, I wouldn’t be an adult until I was twice my current age. It sounded like forever.

One gloomy day, my mother, my sister with Down syndrome, and I were the only ones home. My mother had me help her put the living room furniture against the front door, which she locked. She had me help her put the dining room chairs against the side door of the kitchen that she also locked. I asked her why we were doing it. She didn’t answer. I factored that she was going to clean the floors. But that didn’t seem correct. She was determined and eager. She told me to sit in the kitchen with my sister. My mother taped cardboard to cover the doorway of the kitchen to the living room. She opened the oven door.

A noise was at the side door. One of my brothers was trying to get in. My mother started tearing down the cardboard. My brother was then trying to get into the living room door. My mother told me to go move the furniture. I went in there and unlocked the door. As I tried to move the furniture, my brother impatiently pushed his way in, asking me what I was doing, and calling me names. My mother entered and asked what was going on, as if she didn’t know. My brother hit me as my mother yelled at me to put the furniture back, as if I had done it on my own. She didn’t stop him from hitting me, as if I deserved the punishment.

Once, my mother took the Down syndrome sister and me on a long drive. During part of the drive, she drove wildly fast on a road along a canal. I was afraid we were going to end up in the canal, or smashing into oncoming traffic.

Having nobody to talk or relate to, I felt as if I didn’t know how to communicate with humans. I was socially inept. Having a true friend eluded me. When someone spoke to me in a normal way, I was more surprised than anything else. I tensed up and said little to nothing, or something awkward. I must have appeared dumb, or faulty.

Other kids spoke of their families as if they enjoyed them. They had aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. I didn't.

I dreaded my family.

My way was being silent and diverting my eyes from those of family members. My parents didn't seem to care to hear my voice, and quickly became irritated if I spoke. They mocked my voice. It was not uncommon for my parents to refer to me as "dummy" for asking a question, as if curiosity is wrong. My mother warned me to stay away from and to stay quiet around my father.

My brothers copied my parents. The words "shut up," "sissy," and "idiot" were probably the most common words said to me.

My older brothers could have conversations with my mother. Ghosts, UFOs, black magic, witchcraft, and the occult were common topics. They got books about those from the library. Hating Nixon and other politicians was also discussed. Our mother often said that Nixon should be shot for treason. She yelled at him when he was on TV.

I wasn't welcome. If I tried blending in, my mother told me to go to my room, which I did. I listened to them downstairs watching TV and talking. One night, I made the mistake of asking her why I couldn't be there. She got angry, threatening to hit me if I didn't leave, then going after me as I ran up the stairs.

One day while making popcorn, the butter burned as I was melting it. While holding the pan as I removed dirty dishes from the sink, the boiling butter spilled all over my right hand. The pain was intense, and I screamed.

From another room, as if I were nothing but a burden, my mother asked what happened. I could barely talk as I said that I had burned my hand. She told me to put some butter on it. As my hand trembled, I cried.

A variety of large, liquid-filled blisters formed on my hand and fingers. To quell the intense pain, I spent days keeping my hand in ice water. For days, I stayed in my bedroom, in a cardboard box on the porch, or in the backyard shade. The sun made my hand hurt.

A college girl was employed by the city to provide summer game activities for neighborhood children in the park. When she saw my red, blistered hand as I was sitting bent over to shade it, she appeared repulsed. When she found that I hadn't been taken to a doctor, she gathered up a few neighborhood moms. They spoke to my mother.

My mother wasn't happy. I was not to talk with the neighbors. I was to stay in the yard or the house.

She bought me some lotion for my burn. I wasn't taken to a doctor.

I continued going to the park, but was afraid to be seen near the neighbors. The injury seemed to give me a temporary reprieve from being brutalized.

As the blisters eventually burst, I cut off the hanging skin. I was left with raw skin that stank and oozed water and some pus, but little blood. Crusts and scabs formed. Moving my hand or fingers was painful.

My mother took my sisters, the most brutal brother, and me to a beach. There was no conversation. It was awkward. I couldn't swim or let the sun hit my hand. I kept my hand in an empty bread loaf plastic bag.

It took weeks for the scabs and dead skin to fall away. My hand was extremely sensitive, the skin was tight, and I couldn't make a fist for many months.

My hand remained pink for years, but few scars remained.

I stepped on a long nail in the backyard. It nearly pierced my foot, pushing up against the skin on the top of my foot. Crying, I hobbled to the house. "What is it this time?" my mother impatiently asked. She angrily yanked the nail from my foot. I screamed in pain. She said, "Shut up and go outside. I don't want to listen to you."

I sat on the porch. The bleeding stopped. My foot swelled and throbbed in pain.

When I dared to come limping into the house, she told me to hurry up and eat, and that I was going to the movies with my brothers.

Limping the mile to the theater while carrying one shoe, I followed behind a few of my brothers and their friends. During the film, my foot hurt so badly that I could barely pay attention. Afterwards, I was left alone to limp home.

During much of one summer, we didn't have a working refrigerator. It had broken because my oldest brother continually used it as a punching bag, denting the doors. He was brutal, barely spoke, stank, didn't seem to have friends, spent hours lifting weights while blasting rock music, and often paced in the attic. It seemed that my parents were afraid of him. Numerous times, while saying nothing, he grabbed one of my arms and squeezed it hard while he watched my face strain and turn to tears. I once saw him kick the sad dog across the living room. He stomped if the cats came near him. If I walked near him, he shoved, hit, or kicked me. He told another brother that our parents couldn't afford to send them to college because they had too many children. One evening, our father yelled at him like I had never seen him yell at anyone. He became less of a problem, but remained an unpleasant, threatening, quiet loner.

School continued to be an escape. Not that I was doing so well there, either. Teachers seemed perplexed by me. By eighth grade, I could read aloud okay, but I didn't retain what I read. When I was asked what I had just read, I'd be blank.

While doing the paper route, I sometimes carried a little radio. I followed the exploitive news stories of Patty Hearst being held hostage by the Symbionese Liberation Army. The combination of hearing the news and reading the newspaper made my brain click. I could retain what I had read.

Finding an old copy of the novel *Old Yeller*, I read it cover-to-cover.

Showing the book to my mother, I told her that I had read it. I thought she would like to know. She laughed mockingly. My sister asked what our mother was laughing about. She said that I was reading a book for fifth graders.

Later, she told my brothers and father that I was reading children's books.

Being able to understand what I had read was a revelation. I wasn't so stupid after all. My retention, attention, understanding, and writing improved, as did my grades.

While my intellect improved, things were far from ideal. I didn't talk much with anyone at school, and with nobody at home. There were some neighborhood kids I was friendly with, but they didn't seem to like me much, with some calling me names like "weird" and "strange." I'm sure that I was different.

A family down the street took me places with them, to an amusement park, their father's company picnic, and their father's team baseball games. Their son my age didn't seem to like me. The situation was uncomfortable. It seemed as if their mother was the one who included me. The oldest daughter regularly had me play cards on their front porch while she played pop music on vinyl records.

I didn't bring friends to the house. My brothers did, often. Up to the attic they went to listen to rock and roll, smoke weed, and drink into the night. My bedroom was beneath the attic bedroom. Through all of my teenage years, I lost sleep from the noise.

My newspaper route became an escape. It was a few seasons of being occupied with a tight schedule. Although I didn't understand the concept then, having the route gave me a sense of pride and purpose. For the first time, I felt good about myself. Not that they said so, but it was the first time I had felt as if my parents were okay with me. Or, at least, I was out of the way – and I brought some money into the household.

My days involved waking up before sunrise, delivering newspapers, showering, going to school, doing homework, eating, sleeping, and collecting route money during the early evenings on Wednesdays and Saturdays. I was used to people in the house not speaking with me, but it became as if I were practically invisible.

A few times as I returned from delivering papers early on Saturday, my mother said she needed me to go with her in the car. It was odd. I was used to years of being told to shut up, to get away from her, being called names, being mocked, being smacked for minor or assumed reasons, and her not correcting my brothers when they brutalized or bullied me – even laughing when they did. In previous years, she had me go with her in the car with my sisters so that I could sit with them as she went shopping. Then, a few times that spring, I was alone in the car with her. As she saw something left for garbage, she'd stop half a block away, sending me to see if something was worth taking. We got chairs, picture frames, tools, and various other stuff. If I

saw milk or soda bottles, I was to get those as they could be returned to the store for coins. We did that, but we didn't have conversations.

I wasn't surprised to find that she was garbage picking. We weren't the kind of family to have new things. The furniture was used, from thrift stores, given to us by someone, or found. Our clothes were mostly from thrift stores. My clothes were usually hand-me-downs.

With paper route money, I sometimes bought clothing. Simple things like jeans, a shirt, a pair of canvas shoes. I wasn't flashy, and I avoided attention.

At school, I wasn't popular. I was an observer more than a participant. Nobody seemed to seek me out for anything. I was usually among the final picks for the baseball, volleyball, and other teams during gym class. I hated wrestling.

Few of my newspaper customers said much to me, nor I to them. Because I delivered papers early in the morning, I rarely saw anyone. I saw other customers when I collected. Some left the payments beneath their doormats, or in envelopes taped to their doors.

Fall and winter went by as I delivered newspapers in some lousy, and sometimes extremely cold, snowy weather. Then spring arrived, which made things easier.

One early evening in late April, I was in an apartment building collecting money from customers and was thinking about how much I liked having a paper route.

While I was knocking on one door, across the hall a door opened. I turned to see three college-age men walk out as they thanked the apartment complex manager for showing them the place.

That apartment was used as the recreation room for the complex. People could rent it for parties.

After the college boys passed me, I glanced through the doorway. The apartment complex manager was in there. He saw me and did a double take – as if a thought entered his mind.

The man was about 50, tall, strong-looking, and had very short hair. He had recently taken over as manager after the young, friendly married couple who were the managers had moved out.

He asked me if I wanted to see the apartment. I didn't.

He backed into the apartment, as if to invite me in.

I looked in, noticing that it didn't have much furniture. There was a pool table. I stayed in the doorway, and had a feeling that I wanted to bolt.

He went to the other side of the pool table and pointed to that side of it, saying that I should come see something there. I hesitantly stepped in and approached his side of the table. There was nothing there.

The man said it was just under the edge of the table, that I needed to lean down to see it. I did. There was nothing.

He grabbed hold of my hair, forcing my head down near his crotch. I lost my balance and fell to my knees.

Things got frantic with me trying to pull loose from his iron grip of my hair. He was undoing his pants with his other hand as my head, face, and chin banged onto the side of the pool table while I tried to keep my face away from his crotch that he kept forcing toward me.

It was confusing and rough.

He forced my face to his penis.

I kept pushing away. Then my head was stuck between the pool table with his thing on my face.

As if angry, he grabbed me and slammed me face up onto the table.

As I tried to stop him, he yanked my pants halfway down, ripping my underwear.

I heard my collection money scatter.

I kept hold of my collection book, as if that mattered.

He kind of sat on my torso.

I said something about not being able to breathe. He cruelly asked, “Is that better?” as he kneeled on my arms.

Then, my arms were stuck between my torso and his legs.

He was above me as he rubbed himself in his fist. I didn’t know what he was doing. He seemed determined to have it in front of my eyes. He stank. His expression was some sort of strange, angry smile.

I closed my eyes.

He made groaning sounds. My face became wet. It got in my eyes, nose, and mouth. I didn’t understand. I had no knowledge of this sort of thing.

Then, he stopped moving so much.

He said, “Stupid boy.”

He shoved my face back and forth, one way, then the other. Like heavy, slow slaps. He seemed to be smearing that stuff on my face.

I felt like I was going to start crying, or vomiting, or both.

He said something as he got off me.

I thought he was helping me from the table, but he pushed me down again, forcing me on my front with my face and chest against the table. He groped me, roughly grabbing and slapping my behind. It was humiliating, awkward, disturbing, confusing, and made me angry. My heart raced and my brain felt strange.

He stopped.

I got off the table and nearly fell against the wall while trying to pull up my pants. I felt pathetic, foolish, frustrated, embarrassed, and stupid.

He closed the door.

He said something about how I had better hurry and get dressed. I thought that he meant that someone was approaching.

He watched me try to arrange my torn underwear as I pulled up my pants. I gave up on that and simply got my pants pulled up.

He said I'd better not tell anyone, including my parents. He said he knew where I lived, where I went to school, and what my friends looked like.

He told me to pick up my change that was scattered on the floor.

As he remained standing near the door, I collected some of the change while I kept looking over at his feet. My hands were shaking. I kept dropping coins. He said something about it being enough. But I hadn't picked up all of it. I needed that money.

He looked out the door, then held it open and told me to hurry up and run out.

I didn't want to go near him. Instead, I went toward the windows. He raced over and grabbed me. I struggled as he dragged me to the door, and shoved me out.

Still holding my collection book, I ran down the hall and out the door.

I ran to the back parking lot, because I thought he was running after me and went the other way.

I hid behind cars. There were people talking by another building doorway. I thought they noticed me. I crawled to hide behind another car. I peeked up. They were gone.

Panicking, I ran out to the main street. Still thinking he was going to follow me, I went an alternate way.

Someone in a passing car yelled something and seemed to be laughing.

I noticed my torn underwear hanging from the back of my pants. That too was frustrating and embarrassing.

Getting to railroad tracks, I followed them to the woods of the park. In a grassy area, I got on my hands and knees. I stayed like that for a while looking closely at the grass, as if there was some answer there.

I heard voices of older teenagers. A girl said there must be something wrong with me. A boy approached and asked me about being “on something.” I didn’t know what he meant. I didn’t look up at them. I turned and sat down.

They went on their way.

I went to the sports field of the park. In the distance, there were baseball players ending their game. Not wanting them to see me, I lay down face first on the grass.

It started getting dark. I walked home.

Upstairs, I locked myself in the bathroom.

There were red scuff marks, like bruises, on my skin around my privates, hips, and my upper legs. My head hurt.

I took a long shower, as if that would wash it all away.

In bed, I wrote the words “stupid boy” over and over and over on a piece of paper.

The next morning when I delivered papers, I was sure to be quiet while entering the criminal’s building. I wrinkled up and tore a newspaper and left it by his door. Then I urinated on the newspaper, the door, and the rug.

In following days, I damaged his newspaper, or left only part of it.

One morning, the route manager, with whom I had still never had a conversation, sat waiting for me in his truck parked next to the bundles of newspapers. Sounding irritated, he said that one of my customers complained about getting damaged newspapers. The route manager asked me if I knew anything about it. I said I didn’t. He looked at me as if he knew something was up, or that he thought that I was odd.

Regretfully, I left the criminal a newspaper every morning. I had avoided collecting from him. He was getting free newspapers, which I was paying for.

Every morning I became filled with anxiety as I went into his building, but I had to deliver the papers to several apartments in there.

One morning he quickly opened his door. I ran away.

He started showing up places, from around corners, popping out of doorways, or standing in stairways in the other buildings of the complex, blocking me from being able to do my job.

I stopped collecting from the people in his building.

The apartment complex was also along my way as I walked to and from school, so I began taking a different, longer path.

One evening as I was collecting, to avoid the possibility of crossing paths with him, I walked around the far side of one of the buildings. He popped out from behind a corner, and nearly grabbed me as his fingers brushed me. I left the complex, not finishing my collection route that evening.

The money in the collection box kept in my parents' dining room cabinet was dipping below what I owed for the newspapers.

I had been feeling dreadful for weeks. I feared that I would have to explain what had been done and was happening to me.

Nobody had ever spoken with me about private parts or bodily functions. Other than slang or childish words, I didn't know what the body parts or body functions were called – or that certain functions occurred. I only had a vague understanding of how babies happened. I hadn't known the words testicles, penis, erection, masturbation, orgasm, ejaculation, semen, or anything like those. Other than sometimes hearing someone say crude things, I knew nothing about masturbation. Other than what people did to me, I was innocent.

Apparently because the money in the collection box wasn't enough to cover the cost of the papers, the route manager said something to my mother.

When you mess up at a job, does your boss go to your mother? Why couldn't he have asked me about it? He knew where I was every morning.

On a Saturday, my father, who rarely said much of anything to me, and who, because of his history of drunken anger, hitting, and harsh treatment, made me feel uncomfortable, mildly said something to me about going collecting.

Maybe my father thought that my mother had told me that he was going to take me collecting – she hadn't. Maybe he thought that I had asked for help.

The next thing I knew, I was alone in the latest used car driven by my father. He said nothing as he drove. I was panicking, but tried to avoid making motions that could reveal how uncomfortable I was.

As we went door-to-door, using few words, my father explained how I should collect, how I should mark the collection book, how I needed to collect a certain amount of money every week to pay for the newspapers, and how all of the money after that was mine to keep. It was as if he didn't know or somehow forgot that I had been successfully running the route for several months. I wondered if he confused me with another brother.

We got to the building where the criminal lived.

The collection card my father held showed that the next customer hadn't paid in weeks. My dad was extra sure to knock on that door.

The criminal opened his door. I stepped back. He instantly looked agitated. As if he were identifying a suspect, he pointed to me and said loudly in an accusatory tone, "There he is!" He told how his newspaper is always a mess, torn, wrinkled, or wet.

The man didn't seem to know or care that he was talking to my father.

I stood with my heart racing as I thought he was going to charge after me.

I thought that maybe he would do something to my father, who was a strong man, but seemed short compared to the criminal.

As if my father didn't appear to notice how angry the criminal was, my father told the man how much he owed.

The guy was not having it. My father listened while holding the collection book, then looked at me, as if he didn't know what to say to the man, as though I was to be the voice of reason in the situation. I remained silent, and panicking.

My father told the guy that he didn't have to pay for the unpaid weeks, and asked whether he still wanted the newspaper. The man said that he did, as if the question were absurd. My father marked off all of the weeks that were not paid.

I wondered if my father had noticed me being nervous and fidgety.

Even if I had skipped the delivery, or had put damaged newspapers at the guy's door, didn't my father notice that the criminal's anger was far beyond reasonable? Did my father have any concern about his son having to deal with that sort of aggression from a tall, strong, middle-aged man?

Without my father saying anything about what had just happened, we went to the next door. I felt let down, frustrated, confused, and extremely uncomfortable.

Was my father afraid of the guy? Was he not the strong, tough, bullheaded, Irish factory worker he seemed to be? Was he unaware of things? It wasn't until after he died that I understood how deeply the car crash impacted his intellectual capacity.

Going collecting with my father that evening remains the most time I had ever spent with him, and the most he had ever spoken directly to me without anger.

I became another teenage boy silently critical of his father. I avoided him.

After school one day, a loud, husky-voiced girl a year older than me and who lived on my street asked me to walk home with her. I told her that I had been taking a different route home from school, because a man in the apartment building where I delivered newspapers wouldn't leave me alone.

I didn't tell her what happened.

As we approached the apartment complex, I saw the criminal raking the lawn. How convenient for him to be there during the time of day when the schoolchildren passed by.

He saw me and paused. His face contorted into anger.

The loud, husky-voiced girl started shouting things to him like, "Fag!" "Leave my friend alone, you fag!" and, "Stupid ffffag!"

I didn't know what to do, other than to keep walking alongside the girl.

The criminal looked at me as if his blood was boiling over and he could kill me.

I became friends with a boy in school who was tall, strong, popular, adored by girls, and had a paper route. I told him that a man on my route wouldn't leave me alone. I think I gave my friend the impression that the guy was trying to steal my collection money.

My friend came up with a plan that he would collect my route one night to see if the guy tried to do anything to him. My friend seemed to think of it as entertaining. But he didn't know the details, and I didn't know how to tell him.

I met up with my friend and another boy on a Wednesday evening. We were on bikes.

From a distance in the parking lot, I watched with the other boy as my friend went into the building. The criminal exited the building. Cars in the parking lot blocked our view, but we could tell that the criminal was doing something. He then went inside.

My friend exited the building, looked around, and then walked across the parking lot to us.

The criminal had stolen my friend's bike.

I didn't know what to say or do. My friend seemed to brush it off as if it were funny.

My friend couldn't keep collecting for me. I had to do it. And I had to wake up before sunrise every morning to deliver the newspaper.

The criminal continued bothering me, showing up around various places in the apartment complex. Doing my route saturated me with anxiety.

Again, I was falling behind in the collections.

Before the man ruined things, I was feeling the best I had ever felt about myself. I learned how to read, was getting better grades, was doing my job, and making some money – including money that sometimes helped my mother purchase food. I was the boy being responsible, as my brothers were shaggy-haired, beer drinking potheads.

Doing the route continued to be frightening, stressful, frustrating, and dangerous. I didn't want to do it anymore.

One morning when I went to deliver papers, I left the bundles sitting on the sidewalk.

When I arrived home, my mother said something about the paper route. Apparently, the route manager had called. As if my mother were an irritating pest, I said that I wasn't going to do it anymore. That felt awful.

I went up to my room and sat crying on my bed.

Nobody mentioned the paper route to me again. To me, it was stolen – along with so many things that I didn't understand.

That summer of being free of school and the newspaper route became a surreal feeling of being untethered. I went from having a schedule, responsibilities, and discipline, to having none. Nobody seemed to pay attention to or expressed any interest about where I was, what I did, when I woke up or went to bed, what I ate or wore, who I spent time with, or what I thought. It was like being invisible in the house, where I was practically mute.

Inappropriate teenage behavior became my norm. Away from the house, I began swearing. Not that teenage boys don't swear, but my switch to talking that way was sudden, constant, and moronic. I became a disjointed, weird, socially awkward version of a jaded teenager feeling like he was an unwanted mistake, didn't matter, and whose parents seemed to prefer not seeing or hearing him.

Adult males became suspect. I was aware of them like a person would be while in the presence of aggressive, feral dogs. I'd get a sense of panic if I were around men. My thoughts overly analyzed why anyone looked at me in any sort of way that I might perceive as considering. Avoidance strategies became a minor obsession. I crossed streets or switched paths to avoid men. When I saw my friends' fathers, uncles, or older brothers, I said little or nothing.

Sometimes there would be a comment, like, "What's wrong with that boy?" Any kind of recognition or questioning of my behavior induced anxiety. Speaking about myself was uncomfortable, especially if anyone asked me about my family. Questions were more likely if they found out that I lived in the house that looked as if it were haunted. Other than, "I don't

know,” I didn’t have much to say about my family. Without family conversation, there wasn’t a way to understand the reasoning or rationale.

I was overly aware of my movements, expressions, tone of voice, and words. I didn’t want anyone to get any ideas about or to have the option of doing anything wrong to me.

My brothers continued hanging out with other messed-up boys, and not doing much of anything with themselves. The oldest were out of high school, had crappy cars, and worked at low-paying jobs, factories and such, with the money quickly wasted.

My brothers didn’t seem to show any concern for the needs of my poor, troubled, depressed, worn-down parents – who did what was needed for my two sisters.

As in previous years, my mother stared at the TV every evening. Sometimes other family members watched with her. I felt uncomfortable there.

I stayed away from that house as much as possible, even if it was to stay in the backyard tending the small, weedy vegetable garden that I grew there each summer.

I was often alone in the woods, around the railroad tracks, or nearby factories. Sometimes, I sat in the woods or under the railroad bridge with haggard, drunken hoboes barely able to hold conversation. Other times I hung with older teenagers getting high or drunk, sometimes with their younger brothers or sisters sitting with them, listening. Other times, I went for long walks or longer bike rides to a large park that had a river running through it, where I swam on hot days.

I occasionally hung out with neighborhood children whose families warned them to stay away from my brothers and their friends.

A young, married man moved into the neighborhood. His pretty wife loved the Bible. She eventually left him. He let teenagers hang out at his house and in his garage that we helped him build. He overhauled and painted cars. At his house, kids could smoke weed and cigarettes, get drunk, and look at porn magazines. He supplied the porn, and often the cigarettes, and sometimes booze. I didn’t like cigarettes. Weed and booze, I’d have. He and porn gave me the creeps. He taught some of us how to ride a motorcycle. He took a bunch of us camping in the woods on his family farm. He let us shoot his guns. It was fun, but was odd to be around this

man who didn't seem to have friends his age. When he said something he thought was funny, he'd do a high-pitched laugh, as if to prod people into laughing along. He ended up getting a teenage girl pregnant, then marrying her.

I got into hanging out with kids in a different neighborhood who drank, smoked weed, and often stayed up late, or all night. We rode bikes, jumped the fence at the city pool at night, and sometimes went to the movies. I thought that they detected something about me that was off. One of the boys was friendly with me, and sometimes let me sleep in his basement. Their families were a little more functional than mine, and their neighborhood better. But it was still a wasteland of youth lacking healthy communication with their parents.

The most meaningful communication I had with humanity was with myself writing about things that happened to me. I hid that diary in a hole in a wall.

My changing body was mysterious and kind of scary. Especially since nobody talked to me about it, and it seemed unmentionable to the point of shame, disgust, and confusion.

My understanding of the body was the distorted one I got from seeing porn magazines. I wondered if my body were that okay, or not acceptable. I didn't understand how people could allow themselves to be photographed naked for everyone to see. I told one kid who I didn't like much that I was going to pose for porn magazines when I grew up. He quickly told other kids. I thought it was funny.

I had developed a cleanliness obsession. I washed my own clothes, showered two and sometimes three times per day, and washed my comb after showering. I had to have clean sheets on my bed, which also brought me ridicule from my brothers, who usually slept on their filthy mattresses and stained, bare, smelly pillows.

If the brothers' bedrooms got clean, it was because our mother occasionally cleaned them, and put sheets on the beds and cases on the pillows. From the attic, she carried trash bags loaded with beer cans and bottles. She'd neatly stack their porn magazines. Wasn't all that wrong in so many different ways that should have been obvious to her?

I didn't understand why my brothers weren't required to clean their rooms, do laundry, or help around the house. They relied on our parents for every meal, and didn't do dishes.

Apparently, it was also okay for them to drink and smoke weed with their troubled friends in the attic while blasting music. But if I spoke, I was looked at as if I'd better shut up, quickly.

It seemed that my father didn't know what was going on. He worked, slept, and was often gone to the pubs and horse races. My parents' bedroom was at the back of the first floor – away from the attic noise.

Living by what seemed like no rules, I drifted around in tattered, hand-me-down clothes, and my hair grew shaggy. Throughout my childhood, during the summer I often didn't wear shoes. As a teenager, in the summer, I usually wore only cut-off jeans, or those and a T-shirt. I rode around on an old bike. Mosquitos don't bite you and people don't bother you while you ride a bike.

Then summer was over and it was back to school. My grades went down.

Food became an issue. Either I ate too little or I ate too much – then got rid of it by vomiting. I got so skinny that I rolled my pants at the waist. Skinny was good, I thought. Girls liked the skinny boys. Not many seemed to notice me.

I heard a brother say to my mother that he thought he heard someone vomiting in the bathroom. She snickered and said it was probably me. That was the only time I had ever heard anyone mention it. I was surprised that she knew.

With concern in her voice, some girl asked me what happened to me. She said that I seemed like a totally different person, and like something was wrong with me. Trying to diffuse the situation, I kind of nervously laughed. She asked if my parents cared, or if anyone cared about me. I said, "No."

I got into several ridiculous school fights that appeared to explode out of nothing. I wasn't a tough kid. I considered myself weak. But sometimes I got a fierce rush and pounded on some poor kid for the slightest reason that even I didn't understand. I got it back a couple times, but nothing much. When the tougher kids saw me go after one boy and kick him around, I seemed to gain their favor. Not that I was their friend, but they didn't mess with me.

One night out with drunk and stoned kids, I made out with a girl who attended an all-girl Catholic school. My escapade was talked about in school, which I thought was cool. Her mother

heard about it. The girl was forbidden to see me. That bothered me. I was the type that moms didn't want near their daughters.

When another school held a dance social with a DJ, I went to it drunk and stoned. I passed out on the dance floor. When I came to, I was surrounded by kids looking down at me. I popped up and pretended I was okay. At another of those dances, I was so drunk that I began passing out while at the urinal in the bathroom. A strong boy quickly pushed me up against the wall and held me there until I regained my balance.

While walking home drunk and stoned one night in freezing weather, I opened the door of a car in a pub parking lot and urinated all over the inside of it.

For some reason, my mother went into a new level of randomly being nasty to me, telling me that I was ugly, that nobody could stand looking at me or hearing my voice, and that nobody will ever want me. She said those things in front of my sister, especially if my sister had a friend over. I had never heard her say anything like that to my brothers.

I felt lost and had no goals. There was nobody I looked up to. TV was especially opposite my reality, presenting smiley, groomed boys who I couldn't relate to: Donny Osmond, Shawn Cassidy, Michael Jackson, Andy Gibb, and Leif Garret. They were polished. My existence was rotted.

For money, I'd do stuff for neighbors: shoveling snow, raking leaves, cutting lawns, digging gardens, buying groceries, or going to the post office. Sometimes someone made a comment about how they didn't know how I could be from "that family." I considered it a compliment.

At home, I usually was the one who shoveled snow, raked leaves, and mowed the lawn – without being asked. It was one way to stay outside. Once after I shoveled the snow, my mother put two dollars on my lap as I was eating. She didn't say anything, nor did I.

If I wanted new clothes, I'd shoplift. Nobody ever asked me where I got the occasional new jeans, shirts, jackets, or shoes.

If I wanted to get drunk, I snagged a bottle from a liquor store, or hung with the kids who had weed or booze. Sometimes we'd get some random adult going into a liquor store to buy us rum, wine, or beer.

In the spring, a year after I had abandoned my paper route, and weeks from my fifteenth birthday, a friend that my mother had kept in contact with since high school came to visit from Michigan. Seeing me in the kitchen, the woman asked, “Are you ready?” I didn’t know what she meant. She asked, “Are your things packed?”

The woman was there to take me to live with her and her husband. I had no knowledge of the arrangement.

Turning to my mother, I gave her a questioning snarl. She said that it would be better for me to go live in Michigan, since I didn’t get along with my brothers, and I had no friends. Not that she knew how I spent my time.

I was untrusting of adults. I didn’t leave with the woman.

Later that day, my father saw me and asked my mother in a displeased, gruff tone, “What’s he still doing here?”

Not exactly a self-esteem builder.

After ninth grade, the kids who I knew in the other neighborhood moved away.

Other than for food, showering, and to wash and change clothes, I avoided the house, and was continually reminded why.

Sometimes a brother randomly punched, shoved, tripped, choked, or kicked me. Sometimes for stealing money that I knew nothing about. I did steal money a couple of times, the first time, nothing happened. The second time was after my oldest brother once again randomly attacked me when I was 16. He complained to our parents, not mentioning what he had done to me. They were surprised to find that he had saved nothing while working lousy jobs for years after high school and living for free in their house.

On warm nights, I often slept in places like the backyard, an abandoned car, on a neighbor’s back porch, or church steps. Other times, I rode my bike way past midnight before returning to the house to sleep.

At the house, few words were directed toward me. When I was referred to, it would be my mother in her usual displeased tone saying things like, “Is he showering again?” “He’s a clean

freak,” and, “He thinks he’s better than everyone.” When she said “he” or “him” in a disgusted tone, she meant me.

My mother sometimes expressed a concern that I was “talking to the neighbors.” During one of the few times that she instructed me as a teenager, she told me not to talk to the neighbors, and to walk past them if they tried to talk to me.

I continued being friendly with the neighbors, including some Polish kids. I heard my father once grumble to my mother, “Is he still hanging out with those Polacks?”

My father seemed to have no interest in me, not even glancing at me if I passed him. A controlled disconnect. But then, he wasn’t exactly having conversations with any of my brothers, either. At least he worked and kept a roof over our heads and (usually) gave my mother money for food and bills.

It was common for me to go without eating meals. Sometimes, I ate the berries and fruits growing in nearby woods that had once been an orchard. I also had continued to keep the small vegetable garden in the backyard, and ate raw vegetables from that. Sometimes neighbors gave me food.

High school began in tenth grade. There were thousands of students. I felt lost, connected to nobody, and none of the classes interested me. Sometimes, I went alone in the evenings to swim in the school’s indoor pool.

I made friends with a pale boy who sat in the back row in one class. He said that I was the only person who spoke to him. He had a shaved head. He said they did that to him in the hospital where he spent time because he had slit his wrists. He showed me the scars. He stopped coming to class. I don’t know what happened to him.

Two of my brothers attended the same school. We didn’t acknowledge each other. One had friends who sometimes walked past me and called me names, or sniveled – as if I were pathetic.

On my sixteenth birthday, I was doing laundry in the basement when the middle brother handed me a bag of marijuana and said “happy birthday.” I didn’t say anything. It was perplexing. It is the only gift that I had ever received from any of my brothers.

The brother a year older than me continued to rarely speak. He seemed to be invisible to my father, and was barely acknowledged by my mother. For years, he typically went for days or weeks without showering. I was used to our bedroom smelling strongly of body odor.

At night, I had heard my brother whispering in panicky, truly frightened tones. Sometimes, he was telling Satan to stay away from him. Nervously, I told my mother as she was in the kitchen, “He’s talking to Satan at night.” She only nodded, as if it were no surprise.

One morning I walked past him standing in the living room as he drizzled honey over his face. He didn’t seem to notice me. He appeared to be laughing, but with no sound. It was the only time that I had seen him laugh. I had never seen him look so happy.

Then, he was no longer in his bed at night.

I learned where my brother went when I overheard my mother say that he had been put in a hospital. He stayed for months. My mother went nearly every evening to visit him. Sometimes a brother went with her. Surprisingly, sometimes my dad went. I was never asked to go. Nothing was ever said to me about the situation.

He came home from the hospital for a few days during Christmas. Early one morning my mother found him walking barefoot in the neighbor’s backyard. His many hundreds of footprints in the snow formed circles, which resembled two labyrinths. He spent several more weeks in the hospital.

When he got out, a tutor stopped by most days to school him. The little breakfast room in back of the kitchen was set up as his classroom. Eventually, my brother stopped cooperating with that arrangement, and the teacher stopped showing up.

Another time it took me weeks to realize that one of the oldest brothers was gone. Nobody told me. I overheard my mother mention that he was in California.

During the summer after tenth grade, a girl on the next street sold me little black pills. I took them and did things like go biking and walking for many hours. Sometimes I took two or three pills at a time. I got skinnier.

When I couldn't get more pills, I spent three lousy days in bed. Drug withdrawal is not fun – especially when you don't know what is happening and there is nobody to ask or tell.

On the last of those three sunny, humid summer days, I panicked while sleeping, and ended up in my closet in a dream terror. I hit the window in there as if I needed to escape through it. The glass shattered, deeply slitting my palm. Still apparently asleep, I went back to bed.

I woke up with blood all over the place. I could see inside my palm. Not knowing what to do, I went downstairs to show my mother. She giggled dismissively, and said to my sister and her friend as if I were a pathetic fool, "He cut his hand." My sister's friend complained that a drop of my blood landed on her.

I went down the street to the friendly family. The mother said that I needed to get stitches.

I went to tell my mother that I needed stitches. She said we don't have money for that. She told me to put a bandage on it.

I went back to the neighbor's. They said that my father had insurance through his work, and if I get the insurance card they will take me to the hospital.

I went to my mother and told her that I needed the insurance card. She angrily grabbed her purse, removed the insurance card, and threw it at me.

The guy who lived next to the friendly family drove me to the hospital and waited while I got stitches. A week later, he drove me to have the stitches removed.

During the muggy, hot summer, the filth, dreariness, and depression in the mean house brewed. It became so infested with fleas from the filthy, sad dog and two or three cats that I couldn't walk in there without numerous fleas hopping on my legs. With nobody apparently concerned, I spread newspapers on the floors of the main rooms and upstairs bathroom and hallway, then I spread flea powder onto the newspapers. I washed the dog. After a couple of days, I gathered all of the trampled newspapers and tossed them. It ridded the house of fleas.

On the final day before Christmas in eleventh grade, I was taking a nap after school when the three most troubled brothers entered my bedroom. One punched me in the lower back,

picked me up, and tossed me onto the dresser. He and another hit me around as the brother a year older than me blocked the door. At one point, one had my face pressed against the window, threatening to push it through.

My back hurt so badly that I could barely walk. I had bruises on my face and various parts of my body.

One very cold early morning, with sixty-three dollars in my pocket, I grabbed some things, walked to the freeway, and stuck out my thumb. I wanted to see California beaches.

For two weeks, nobody hit me or spoke badly to me. The various drivers who picked me up hitchhiking talked with me for hours. It was the most I had conversed with people. Surprisingly, none of them asked much about my situation. I felt safe.

My back pain caused me to pass out at a gas station in Yuma. The college student giving me a ride helped me to my feet, got me back into the car, and drove to San Diego.

I saw the ocean and people in it surfing. It was like a dream.

Thinking that it was important to graduate high school, after a week I hitchhiked back to the mean house.

The only question I got about my trip was from my mother. Days after I returned, she saw me in the kitchen and sounded disgusted as she asked how I got to California. I stuck up my thumb as my answer. She looked at me as if I were lying and despicable. We were far beyond the point of not liking each other.

I heard her say to my siblings that my father would never talk to me again. Would I notice?

While I was watching TV, a brother who was often drunk and prone to hitting me came in the room and changed the channel, then appeared to fall to sleep on the sofa. When I went to change the channel, he popped up and attacked me. I got away from him and grabbed a knife to protect myself as I tried to get outside. He slammed me against the door, my cheek breaking the glass. I fell. He got on top of my back and repeatedly slammed my face into the floor. I got away.

As I sat with my left eye swelling shut and my right eyelid cut, my mother approached and said disgustedly, "Wait until your father hears about this. Using knives!" I said nothing.

I went to school with a swollen, black and purple eye and cheek. Teachers said nothing to me. Some girls encouraged me to go to the school counselor.

I got to the counselor's office and waited as she spoke on the phone to a friend about redecorating her house. I watched an hour pass. I wondered what I was supposed to say, and what could happen – if anything. While she was still on the phone, and without saying a word to me, she handed me a late slip so I could go to my next class. She waved me out of her office. I left the school, and went walking until after dark. The cold felt good on my bruised, swollen face.

On a chilly day, I sat in the kitchen while listening to music on the radio. My father walked in and mildly said only that after I graduate high school he didn't want to see my face, hear my voice, or know anything about me ever again. I said, "Okay."

I got a Saturday job at a deli downtown, taking the train to get there.

My art teacher got me a summer scholarship to the Cleveland Institute of Art. One day, a teacher there spoke to me when nobody else was around. He was simply asking me about my art project. I got panicky with the thought that he was going to do something bad. Even though he did nothing wrong, I never returned to classes.

A couple kids a year older than me asked if I wanted to go to Florida with them for a week. We went in one of their cars, slept in a tent at a campground, hung out at the beach, smoked weed, ate pizza, tried to meet girls, and barely afforded the gas to drive back to Cleveland.

In twelfth grade, school bored me. I dated Catholic girls, and worked nights and weekends at a burger joint under the cloud of not knowing what I would become.

The cynical schoolkids voted me "most likely to fail." When some kids told me, I pretended that I thought it was funny.

I went to prom with a pretty girl. We were drunk. We made out for several weeks. She drank a lot. Her family didn't like me.

Nobody in my family showed up for my graduation. I was drunk.

After the ceremony, nobody seemed to notice me as I wandered through the crowds of other students with their families.

I worked in factories, gave my mother rent money, bought a used car, spent time with a girl who wanted me to stay in Ohio, and I saved money to leave.

One day I heard my father say loudly to my mother, “What is he still doing living here?” I had never heard him say that about my brothers.

I left Cleveland in the spring. Nobody in the family said goodbye to me. I have never returned. I had no desire to see the people who assaulted, hit, shoved, kicked, choked, bloodied, bruised, ridiculed, and mocked me, but never hugged or complimented me.

I tried talking with my father on the phone from California. He asked who he was talking with. When I said my name, he grumbled something and hung up.

Eleven years later, when doctors told me I was dying from kidney failure, I called the house. I spoke with my father. He sounded much older and relaxed. He had stopped drinking and was retired from the steel mill. My sister with Down syndrome had died of heart/lung issues.

My dad wrote me a letter apologizing for hanging up on me more than ten years prior. He also apologized for not protecting me when I was young. He said that he knew people were not nice to me, and that I hadn’t been treated right since the day I was born. He said I had a good attitude.

He died soon after writing that letter.

My mother visited me when I was in my thirties. I was not in a good place physically, mentally, or financially. It was not easy being around her. I kept conversations light, and showed her around museums, views, and piers. We played Scrabble on a picnic table by the beach, which turned out to be her favorite thing to do during the trip. It was the last I saw her.

I didn’t know until I was in my thirties that the reason she went back into the burning house when I was four years old was because she thought I was in there. That was when she injured her brain, lungs, and vocal chords. That ended her ability to make money by singing at weddings and funerals, and it killed her joy. A brother whom I briefly tried to communicate with told me that. I finally understood why she said to me as a child that she wished I’d never been born, and that things would have been much better if I hadn’t been.

I wrote her once mentioning a little about the paper route situation. She didn't respond to that. We rarely spoke on the phone. We wrote and emailed.

She brought up the time when she was going to kill my sister, herself, and me. She said that she never felt her mind was right after the head injury, and she often wanted to commit suicide.

She said that she understood why I had never returned. She mentioned that the door on my childhood bedroom remained damaged from my brothers breaking it down to beat me up.

She encouraged me to tell my story. I said that if I did that, it would make her look badly. She said she didn't care since she would be dead.

While my mother was living in that house with three of her sons, the brother a year older than me died in his bedroom at age 45. I found this out from a short email that she had sent to me. I called her the next day. She wouldn't tell me much. She said that the police had asked a lot of questions. She said, "Watch them try to charge us with starving him to death." My breath left me, but I stayed calm to see how the conversation would go. I asked if he was skinny. She said he looked like one of those people from a concentration camp. He hadn't seen a doctor. I asked if he had been sick. She said he hurt his legs a couple weeks prior. I asked how. She said he fell on the steps. I asked which steps. She said that she didn't know. She wanted to talk about her car.

I hadn't spoken with my brother since I was nine, and hadn't seen him since I left Cleveland. He had never moved from that house, had briefly held a job at a laundromat, and spent his adult life going for walks. His autopsy lists his weight as 90 pounds.

I have only rarely communicated with a couple of the other brothers. The childhood was more grotesque than what this article covers. I haven't seen them in decades. They are like strangers – which is okay.

I'm friendly with my surviving sister.

Drugs and alcohol have not been problems in my adult life. Unfortunately, low self-esteem has done its dirty deeds. Low self-esteem can potentially be more damaging and debilitating than alcohol or drug addictions.

I've experienced the dreads of doubt, regret, self-repulsion, body dysmorphia, shattered trust, and dysfunctional relationships. I was leery of adults deep into my adulthood. I have lived far below my potential. I have had dysfunctional relationships with those also in need of help. I have connected with others living in the residues of damaged lives.

When I was thirty, I went to therapy. The first therapist fell asleep on the third visit. After several visits, the second therapist said, "I love this stuff, it's the kind of thing we usually only get to read about in textbooks." I stopped going to him.

In the past couple of years, I had been seeing a therapist who I found to be helpful. Because of financial issues, I stopped going to her.

Therapy helped me to consider the gravity of how deeply the criminal undermined my life. His actions were key to propelling an already struggling boy into disturbed behavior and a more troubled existence. It halted improvements in my life, further warped my ability to relate to people, helped to induce a distorted sense of self and sexuality, and left me with ongoing nightmares.

My nocturnal life has been a problem. When I had an apartment on the beach, I once awoke standing on the beach while looking up at the stars. That might not sound so bad. But many times, I've moved furniture, torn apart rooms, and damaged things in my sleep – and injured myself doing so, including cuts, bruises, breaking my nose, chipping my teeth, badly spraining my wrists, suffering various other injuries, and knocking myself out in falls. I remember the incidents as if they are some sort of dreams. But dreams don't result in injuries and stitches. Girlfriends have told me that I'm nearly impossible to sleep next to. Doctors have told me that I have post-traumatic stress disorder.

I understand the issues spoken of by victims of sexual assault. They feel damaged, used, and disposed of, have fractured relationships, and live troubled lives. Certain sounds, lighting, smells, and sights can be triggers. Experiencing bad treatment can send them on a downhill spin into dread, sadness, frustration, fatigue, and depression. Many homeless people and addicts have experienced abuse and sexual assault – especially homeless youth.

My assailant's actions were calculated, deviant, violent, heinous crimes committed against a 13-year-old working for pocket change, and helping to support his family. That man's choices

were paramount in carrying my childhood problems into adulthood.

Like other child newspaper carriers, I helped build the trade into a multi-billion-dollar industry. The newspaper company got its money. And I got violently molested and then stalked by a predatory pedophile. Then, when I abandoned my route, nobody asked me why.

I have lived in the residues of my memories. Random things remind me of unpleasant events. For instance, there were years that I avoided pool tables. The sound of coins falling on a floor could usher in a swirl of unpleasant memories. Those are some of the triggers that I have recognized.

A person in the condition I was in could take years to realize how to deal with what happened to them – if ever. Trying not to think of my childhood doesn't work, as news stories reporting other cases of what adults have done to boys continually remind me.

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