

Carnage

SOMETHING HAPPENED IN THE SPRING OF 1983 THAT threw me into complete inner turmoil. I was thirty and had been married to my husband Howard for five years. I had just given birth to our highly anticipated first child, Ilea. I was at home asleep on a late night in State College, Pennsylvania, home of Pennsylvania State University, where my husband and I were faculty members. Howard was an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and I was an instructor in the Communication Disorders Department.

This was a night like any other until the phone rang and Mommom, my Daddy's older sister—who was also known by her other nieces and nephews as Aunt Lib—called from Dover. She always called me from time to time, but this time her voice sounded strained and trailed up at the end as if she were checking to see if it was really me on the other end of the line.

“Jeanie?”

“Oh, hi Mommom. How are you?”

There was silence; she didn't answer the question.

Then after what seemed an eternity, she blurted out, “Your daddy has been attacked in his own home and he looks bad, real bad!” She seemed to struggle to keep from going into complete hysteria.

Mommom was the matriarch of our family. She always reminded me of Queen Elizabeth II. They shared the same name. Physically they looked alike in body type and facial features, although Mommom's skin was more of an olive complexion. She even wore her hair in a similar style . . . without the hats. When she dressed up to go to Whatcoat Methodist Church, her shoes and pocketbook always matched.

She was always the strong one that everyone else looked to in times of trouble, but the quiver in her voice let me know that she was having a



My Uncle Pick, Mommom, Charles, Dad, Aunt Grace, and my grandfather Wingate leaning on my dad's car.

tough time holding it all together. I sat up straight. "What do you mean, what happened?!" I screamed back at the receiver.

My heart sank as my stomach churned. I thought I knew Dover. I had grown up in Dover, after all. I had wandered the streets by myself and with other friends at all hours of the day and night and had never come to any harm. Dover wasn't without its issues, but people generally felt safe there.

I never liked the idea of leaving Daddy alone, but my reasons were mostly personal. His safety was always a concern, but it didn't really occur to me that somebody in Dover would do what they did to him. It's a perspective-changing event.

After this, it was impossible for me to see Dover with the same innocence. I had no idea that kind of evil worked under the surface and that was an uncomfortable thought.

Whoever had attacked him must have been watching the house. Our house in Dover was a very small bungalow that my dad and his father built together by hand. It had a living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, a bathroom located between the two bedrooms, and a front and back porch. The very thought of someone spying on our home sends chills up

my spine. It was like something out of a Hollywood thriller, part of the paranoia of American life. But that buffer that separates us from the hapless victim in the film, that safe feeling of being able to walk away from the movie theater and say “That could never be me,” had been dissolved.

I grew up in the era of *the neighborhood*. Eyes were always watching, but instead of meaning harm, they were there making sure you were doing what you were supposed to be doing, not watching and waiting to steal from or harm you. The one thing I thought anybody in Dover should be paranoid about was getting caught doing the *wrong* thing.

Dover’s a smaller town. Whoever it was that attacked him probably knew Daddy was deaf, alone, and vulnerable. Lately, he had been having balance issues, not uncommon among deaf people. He would walk in a pattern that resembled a person who had too much to drink. It is estimated that as many as 30 percent of deaf people have difficulty with balance because the systems of balance and hearing are both located inside the inner ear. If something goes haywire with one of those systems, it can cause problems with the other. In particular, but not exclusively, it affects those who became deaf from Type 1 Usher’s Syndrome, which includes both hearing and vision loss, as well as those who became deaf from meningitis. Daddy’s deafness stemmed from scarlet fever.

Daddy’s assailants probably sat waiting to take advantage of a man who could not help himself. Sometimes the things people are capable of unnerves me.

As far as we could tell, someone broke into the house, entered the living room from the front porch, and beat him—a sixty-eight-year-old man of medium build with just a touch of gray in his black hair—to a pulp. Daddy was probably sitting in his favorite chair, a metal lawn chair with green and white plastic woven strips, in front of the TV. Blood was spewed and spackled all over the living room sofa, the off-pink wall, and everything on it. I used to sit on that old sofa to watch my favorite TV shows like *I Dream of Jeannie*. After the assailant(s) left, Daddy, beaten, bloody, and bruised, crawled inch by inch a half a mile on his hands and knees to his sister’s—Mommom’s—house. To get there, he had to crawl across a very busy street, cross an expansive lawn that always had a huge growling dog chained up to a tree with a very long leash ready to attack any trespassers, and then go down another side street until he reached the end of the block where his sister lived. Only God knows how many hours

it must have taken him to complete that lengthy trek in his condition. After all of that, he had just enough strength left to climb up her front steps and bang on the aluminum part of her storm door, which must have sounded like hailstones hitting a tin roof. He couldn't hear the sound he was making, but he certainly understood the power that sound had on people who could hear.

When Mommom and her husband Norman Manuel Durham—affectionately known by many as Pick, perhaps because he was very slim like a toothpick in his younger days—came to the door to see what the commotion was all about, they found Daddy collapsed on their front lawn.

Later, when I first saw the living room where Daddy had been beaten, it pained me to think of how much he must have suffered. Daddy was never able to identify who did it. We always assumed they were looking for money or things they could sell, perhaps for drugs. Maybe they just wanted to beat up an elderly deaf man. Daddy could never discern a motive and neither could the police. As far as we could tell, nothing was missing from the home. They probably thought since Daddy was deaf, he wouldn't be able to tell anyone what happened.

I now have come to grips with this event and see the perpetrator(s) also as a victim—a victim of their environment. They were a part of an ever-growing reality in our society of violence that we have yet to solve.