

Confessions without Culpa

My interest in interrogation began the evening the police came for Daddy. Like most children in the fifties, I had only one working parent. Daddy's work required him to spend days, even weeks away from home. From these labors he returned either so exhausted he did not leave his bed for days, or so exhilarated he could not sleep. On those exciting nights, he would sweep Mommy and me into the Kaiser and off we'd go to dinner, to the movies, to late night department stores, trailing twenty dollar bills all the way. When I asked Mommy what he did, she said he was a speculator. When other kids asked me, I said: "He has fun."

The night the police arrived, he had just returned from a long absence. His speculations must have been very profitable, because he gave Mommy a suitcase to drop off at Grandma's while he cleaned up. She took me with her to Grandma's basement, where she told me to cover my eyes while she hid "Daddy's Christmas presents." Daddy really thought ahead; it was early June. Peeking through my fingers, I watched her stuff

stack after stack of twenty dollar bills under the Christmas tree ornaments.

When we returned the house was full of police, and Daddy was gone. It was one of the few times Mommy kept her composure. A big detective in a double-breasted suit asked all sorts of questions, but all she would say was: "He is not at home."

That made the big detective very angry. Then he looked at me and smirked.

"Where's your dad, kid?" he asked, squatting down beside me and placing a big, beefy hand on my shoulder.

All the policemen were listening, even the one slitting open the living room sofa. This was the first time I felt the stomach chilling challenge of the interrogation. Lips quivering, Mommy watched her prodigy step onto the brightly lit stage.

"Daddy!" I wailed, burying my face in Mommy's dress.

So ended my first interrogation. Connoisseurs will note that I did not lie; I responded in a way that made further questioning impossible. This faculty would serve me well in later life, especially dealing with news media. A few hours later the police departed, leaving the house a shambles and Mommy and me to celebrate Christmas until I entered the fifth grade.

Daddy, however, never returned. We did not have any pictures of him, and his features were so ordinary he gradually faded from my memory. Only his odd inability to look anyone in the eye kept me from forgetting him altogether. Sometimes I wondered if mother remembered him either, or whether it was the twenty dollar bills that had attracted her all along. To provide a visible means of support, she baked wedding cookies for a local bakery. Years later, I

learned her secret ingredient was sherry or whatever other beverage appealed to the mother of the bride.

Our holiday season came to an end when Grandma sold the old house and moved in with us. Like most grandmothers, she had unrealistic expectations for her grandson, enforced by a Victorian attitude and a Nineteenth century concept of discipline. Worst of all she loved opera, filling the house with head splitting arias during the endless Texaco Saturday afternoon broadcasts. Mother could escape by driving off to deliver cookies, but I could no more escape my destiny than Siegfried.

Grandma's dream for me was to stump the panel on the Texaco Opera Quiz and win two free seats to the Metropolitan. When I finally took her to the local opera, it was a life fulfilling experience for her. But I get ahead of myself.

My next formative experience occurred when I was ten. How few young people today experience an old fashioned Fourth of July with parades, swimming races, backyard barbecues and fireworks at the stadium. Because Grandma disapproved of explosives in the home, I would spend the morning along the parade route picking up discarded pop bottles to trade with the Hooker boys across the street for firecrackers. The Hookers were distinguished by flat foreheads, an endless supply of firecrackers from their Georgia cousins, and a manhole behind their garage.

Pop bottles were worth a penny each, and I had enough to get two strings of Chinese firecrackers and a skyrocket, when I became overconfident. Thinking I had distracted them by a story about looking up the majorettes' skirts during the parade, I was palming a cherry bomb, when an iron talon clamped my wrist.

"You cheated!" Denny Hooker cried.

His older brother Paul, who had me by three years and fifty pounds, held my wrist in one hand and pried open my fingers with the other. Denny took the cherry bomb and all my pop bottles.

"Cheater!" Paul said, giving my arm a final twist before strutting triumphantly home.

Their moral superiority pained me more than my hand.

Like most amateur investigators, however, they thought they had detected the crime on the first attempt. Rubbing my arm to restore circulation, I went inside to listen to Grandma complain about the decline of the neighborhood until barbecue time.

Early that evening, when movements were slowed by too much food and soda pop, I strolled down the driveway, as if I were heading for the fireworks. Across the street sat the whole Hooker clan on aluminum lawn chairs, watching my every move. As I approached their curb, Paul and Denny bounded toward me.

"What are you doing over here?" Paul demanded.

"Nothing," I replied. "My mother won't let me near your manhole."

"Our manhole?" Denny exclaimed. "Why not?"

"Because there's snakes down there."

I had never seen the Hooker boys so excited. They ran to the manhole, pried off the cover and knelt at the edge, peering down into the blackness.

"I can't see anything," Paul complained. "It's too dark."

"See if this will help," I said, taking out my remaining cherry bomb and striking one of mother's kitchen matches.

Wick sputtering, the cherry bomb dropped into the darkness.

"Where did you get that?" Denny demanded, but he never heard the answer.

I was halfway up our drive when the explosion set off fifty years of sewer gas and three generations of Hookers in the best pyrotechnics I would see for years. The display drew fire trucks, ambulances and so many police cars I didn't go to the fireworks after all. I even emerged as a hero.

"What happened to your eyebrows?" cried a young woman from the newspaper.

"I saw Paul about to drop a firecracker into the sewer and tried to stop him."

By the time the police questioned survivors, I was posing for pictures under my mother's proud eyes.

"Is this the kid who tried to save them?" the Detective from so many years earlier asked.

"I guess I just wasn't fast enough," I replied, looking at the ground.

It is best not to redirect an investigator gone astray.

"Don't blame yourself, kid," he said, clapping my shoulder.

The rest of the summer, I went around the state giving speeches about the dangers of fireworks. It was my first paying job. Years later, mother used the insurance money from the cracked foundation to send me

to college. First, however, I had to relieve her of the unpleasant duty of choosing between her son's education and her mother's old age.

Did I say that Grandma was on her way to the bathroom when the Hooker's sins caught up with them, tumbling her down the stairs and into a wheelchair? This did not improve her temperament, or mine. Before hip replacement surgery, a broken hip practically guaranteed pneumonia and a quick departure for the aged and infirm, but not for her. Instead she became even more demanding, insisting that I spend every free moment listening to her scratchy, one sided opera records in anticipation of that glorious day when I would roll her down the aisle of the Metropolitan and into opera quiz history. The summer I graduated from high school, mother confided that she didn't have enough money to send me to college and maintain grandmother. The alternatives were simple: join the Army or ease Grandma's pain. As they say today, it was a no brainer.

Personal liberation, like a revolution, requires careful planning. Armed with a moving story about an impoverished grandmother, I obtained a job as an usher at the local summer opera. They stationed me in the second balcony, the vertiginous haunt of spinsters, retired schoolteachers and pensioners who did not mind being separated by two floors from the bar and functioning restrooms. While other ushers vied for positions at the door handing out programs, I scampered up and down the steep steps, guiding patrons to their seats and urging them to hang on to the banister for dear life. The rail at the bottom of the steps was barely knee high, and I often cautioned the infirm not to lean too far forward during the National Anthem. When the lights went down, I collapsed into the nearest empty seat and distracted myself from the head splitting braying below by studying my septuagenarian colleagues. At such a moment inspiration struck.

Twicky Bentham, dowager empress of a decayed dynasty, appeared perfect for my purposes. Large, officious, her blue-gray hair shellacked into typhoon like waves, she was barely contained by a pale green gown with a long flowing train. She stationed herself by the door with her train coiled at her feet, like an unbalanced cobra waiting to strike. Between acts I confided I was doing it all to take poor sick grandmother to Tosca, the season finale. Mrs. Bentham clasped her hands and gushed her delight. When the great day arrived, I was assured she would receive me as a hero.

I had never seen grandmother so excited. Thinking it a dress rehearsal for our coming triumph at the Met, she spent days trying on remnants of the twenties, searching for something that would still fit. On the evening that would secure my education and launch my career, I put on my graduation suit, hot-wired a neighbor's car and drove the grand old lady to her house of dreams. Imagine her excitement as we rose to the first, then the second balcony in the creaking old elevator.

Twicky greeted us effusively, bubbling about how fortunate she was to have a grandson like me. That was the only time I feared for success. But Grandma was beyond suspicion. Handing us each a program, Mrs. Bentham swept before us into the aisle. Our seats were in the very first row, down twenty-six carefully counted steps.

"Oh, you mustn't tire yourself," I protested gallantly. "I know the way."

Tittering happily, Twicky stepped aside. At precisely the moment, my foot caught in her train and I tripped, letting go of the wheelchair. Like a monster in a dream, the wheelchair slid slowly to the edge of the landing and bounced down onto the first step. We had arrived early enough that there was no danger anyone would leap into the aisle to stop it. Then down

to the second step, then the third and the fourth. Faster and faster Grandma went, until the chair struck the rail at the bottom and stopped, sending her soaring toward the huge crystal chandelier suspended above the auditorium.

That is the way I choose to remember her, but I cannot speak for those on the first floor. Nevertheless, they were able to begin the first act with only a fifteen minute delay. My memory of the rest of the evening is blurred. Twicky Bentham was so upset at her part in the accident that she hardly let me say a word to the police. Toward the end of the interview, when she became hysterical, I slipped out in time to have a drink between acts before witnessing the wonderful climax, where Tosca escapes dishonor by hurling herself from the battlements of the Castello San Angelo.

Sensitive to the effect the loss of a mother can have, I did not awaken my own mother on my return and let her learn the sorry news from the obituaries the next day. Her only comment was: "Oh dear. If only I had known this was coming, I would not have let the insurance lapse." That was the closest she ever came to criticizing my career path.

My higher education assured, I enrolled in the city university, where I majored in criminal justice. I learned not to embezzle, because it always leaves a paper trail, and to avoid prisons, because graduates from the lower third of the criminal justice program staff them. This is undesirable from both the graduates' and the inmates' points of view, since the graduates earn less than their charges. On a field trip to the state penitentiary, we wept to see guards begging cigarettes from convicts and competing to sell them beer and other contraband when the commissary was closed.

Redemption often comes from unexpected sources. Decided my senior year, Miranda v. Arizona replaced

station house torture with psychological terror to compel confessions. After a dazzling tour d'horizon of American criminology, Chief Justice Warren introduced lawyers as intermediaries between police and suspects in the most striking non sequitur in constitutional history. The Court did not condemn coerced confessions; it approved them so long as counsel was present, presumably to collect a fee and deflect professional criticism of the Chief Justice's reasoning. After Miranda there would be at least two lawyers in every criminal case, the prosecutor and defense attorney, much as there are lawyers on both sides of every other business transaction.

Most Americans, however, would rather fall into the hands of the Inquisition or the KGB than into the clutches of a lawyer. The exponential increase in our prison population following Miranda is not from an increase in crime, but from those who prefer prison to the almost certain ruin that follows employment of a lawyer. In a legalistic society, the guilty are safer than the innocent. I decided to become a lawyer.

Mother, however, was close to despair. What would her father say, what would my father say, if they could see the family reduced to such an extreme? I did not take time to argue with her, because I was planning a series of bank robberies to pay for law school. Mother's business could not support us both, after the market for wedding pastries moved from sherry soaked cookies to marijuana brownies.

Our community enjoyed many small savings and loans, open only in the evening and staffed by retirees who had real difficulty giving a coherent description of a suspect. If I had not become overconfident, my collection of ski caps and Halloween masks would have kept me safe until I passed the bar and was settled into my practice.

Twicky Bentham spotted me taking off my Blackbeard the Pirate mask in the parking lot of the Mount Athens

Savings and Loan just a week before law school graduation and ran up to embrace me.

"What a funny face!" she exclaimed, taking my mask. "Are you going to a costume party?"

I barely had time to stuff the money and my revolver into her purse before a car careened to a stop beside us, and a man in a Brooks Brothers suit and fedora leapt out. In his hand he displayed the most feared logo in the country, the blue eagled badge of the FBI.

"You're a hero lady," he said to Mrs. Bentham, as he shoved me into the back seat. "We've been looking for this one for years."

"So have I," Twicky gushed.

"You're under arrest," the agent gloated, climbing in beside me and closing the door. "How's it feel to be caught by a woman?"

The question was entirely out of place to a suspect who had just received an A+ in advanced criminal law. I looked at him more closely, but he did not meet my eyes.

"Aren't you supposed to give a Miranda warning before you question the suspect?" I countered.

"What are you, kid? A smart ass?" he demanded.

"You can get in real trouble not following agency procedure, Daddy," I replied.

Frederick J. McGavran

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