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Surviving Sexual Assault in the Time of Trump

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Collage of a Predator

On May 4, I received an email from the Indiana Department of Corrections informing me that my uncle, Arthur Thomas, was freed from prison after serving nearly thirty years of a sixty-year sentence. This man sexually abused me from the time I was in pre-school



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He was charged with second degree murder even though this was not a crime of passion. He did not lose his mind in an argument during which he picked up a gun and shot her. Instead, he parked his car behind the train tracks at the rear-end of the largish property on which their house-trailer was situated. He beat her with a broomstick repeatedly, bashing in her skull, mixing in hay with her pulverized flesh. Since that November 1987 day, I seethe with anger. Had anyone cared about what he did to me or my cousins, he would have been in jail long before he picked up that broomstick.

Instead, I am alive. Sometimes I am barely alive. Often I wish I were I dead. I have struggled with eating disorders since I was 10. I nurse wounds that never really heal because they cannot truly heal. My brain was literally altered by those childhood experiences. The fear and stress hormones that these assaults produced shaped my developing brain in ways that cannot be reversed: my brain can only be medicated and rehabilitated with frequent, expensive and long-term therapy. The secondary trauma induced by the failure of my mother and other family members to protect me contributed to this discomposed brain. I know I am lucky: I am a successful, tenured professor while many children who emerge from these nightmares are dysfunctional, even dissociative. However, survival has come at a price: life has made war on me and I wage a ferocious war back.

His crimes' tentacles have left few in his reach untouched. His children, Jasper and Sarah (I have changed their names to protect their identities and their stories) never had a chance. My mother, who passed away when I was twenty-three, attempted to raise them. The state never provided the adequate resources that these children needed to escape their past. Jasper, who endured years of sexual abuse by his own father, was erratic and sociopathic. My mother and I feared him. He fathered a child with a drug-addicted, young woman. The two were toxic. According to my brother, they fought often during which he reportedly would threaten to kill himself and she would deride him for lacking the manliness to do so. During one of those fights, he proved her wrong by blowing his brains out in his truck while in it with his wife and son, splattering them both with his flesh and blood. She took his insurance payment from the Indiana National Guard and squandered it while neglecting their son, who was raised by a man who tried to help his father in a state far away from Indiana. I only hope that he escaped his pedigree, knows nothing of his birth parents or the hell that his father could not escape or survive. I hope that he has a chance to be happy, functional, cherished and capable of giving love and being loved.

Sarah, to the best of my knowledge, is alive. She is what my latest therapist calls "dissociated." After years of being in a marriage she made violent, her husband left her and prosecuted her for domestic abuse. They had several children who were for too-long exposed to her crazy-making behavior which, much like me, is the result of the deforming biologies those childhood horrors induced. The last I heard, she was homeless and living in a truck. She is beyond help. When I think of her, I am seized by the guilt that survivors harbor. When I was about seven years of age, I saw him digitally penetrate her when she was an infant while he changed her diaper. I know rationally I couldn't protect her as I couldn't protect myself. But the questions nag and sting nonetheless. Could've I done something to stop this madness?

My own first childhood memory is not of a first dog or cat or the feel of my grandmother's cotton dress against my face as I nestled my teary face into her lap. Those are later memories. Instead, my first anamnesis is that of his stained hands pulling back my baby flesh, his trigger finger plunging deep and plucking out my innocence while I was bent over a basement couch, paralyzed by a torrent of feelings for which I still have no words while my mother napped upstairs. He and my aunt lived in our basement after they declared bankruptcy. My mother slept a lot in those days when she was not working because my infant brother had died from Down's Syndrome. Rather than supporting my mother in her time of profound loss, our family was relieved baby Johnny died because they believed this "mongoloid" was a blight on our family. Her husband accused her of infidelity: this deformed baby could not be his. She grieved alone and in the numerous times that I was alone with Art, he would do his deeds. He did so during holidays when he would enthusiastically offer to babysit the children at my grandmother's home. He did in that trailer so when my mother would park me at my aunt's over school breaks. My cries. My adamant, furious refusals to go. The literal open sores on my prepubescent labia did not stop her from dumping me with him. And he continued these crimes until I was 13, during Christmas break in my 7th grade.

THE MORNING EMAIL

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Childhood sexual abuse is hard to explain to someone who has never experienced it. When you are young child as I was, you do not know this contact is wrong. Physically, it feels pleasant and you respond like a dog getting its stomach rubbed for the first time by a stranger. At first you are hesitant, vulnerable and afraid. And then you feel pleased, then loved and special. And in that house I rarely felt loved or special. It was easy for Art to wrench silence from me. As I grew older and aware that this was wrong, it became harder for him to coerce cooperation. He had to threaten me. He explained that he would tell the other abusive men in my family about what we were doing with the implication that they would want to do the same. And those threats worked as long as those men whom I feared were in my life. His coercive powers over me ended when my mother chose to leave my stepfather.

My mother feared being on her own and worried that she would have to go on welfare if she were. So she lined up a replacement husband first. In the fall of 1981, she had hooked up with a man named Rick who would become my second stepfather. By the end of October, she was pregnant with that man's child and began divorce proceedings. My mother wanted to spend that Christmas her newly-acquired husband-to-be. And I was sent to stay with Carol and Art. I refused to go. I offered to stay at home by myself. We fought but mom prevailed. That first night, Art came into my room. I now had the features of a young woman. I feared that he would want more than what he had done in the past. I slept in the same twin-bed as my younger cousin, Sarah, as I always did. I laid awake unable to sleep and anticipating the worst. We slept with a nightlight on. I had also made up my mind that this would end. I observed the steal firetruck by the side of the bed. I slept on the outside of the small bed and I waited. When Art came in, I bashed his head with that truck and screamed. He fled. I still savor the look on his twisted face in that dim light. I would not be a victim again.

My aunt did not come in to investigate the fiasco.

The next morning at breakfast, my aunt made oatmeal and toast, as she often did. I felt my face turning red with angered shame when Art joined us for breakfast. My aunt asked what had happened last night. I looked up fiercely and stared him down, looking that son of a bitch in his eyes. The tables had turned. I was not afraid of him now. And I never would be again. He offered up the pathetic canard that I had a nightmare and was screaming so he ran in to check on me and then stumbled and hit his head on the truck. She asked no follow up question as I glowered at him and then her in disbelief.

Six years later she would be dead. Looking back, I cannot understand how my family let this go on. I will never know if they knew but ignored it or were genuinely unwitting. Were they complicit or incompetent?

Recovering from this kind of perduring, chronic trauma is a life-time's work. You are never "okay." We now have words for the illness this criminal abuse produces: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It takes resources, medications and specialized therapy. As an adult, I am lucky to afford these luxuries. I know others cannot.

Surviving these traumas in the time of Trump is particularly difficult. Therapists across the country have noted that their patients with PTSD were physically made ill by this "president" and his boasting of sexually assaulting women and his subsequent bullying and threatening his victims into silence. We were equally made ill by those who insisted he was joking or otherwise innocent. That he assaulted women did not change the minds of men and women who voted him to power. The feelings we experienced watching this farce play out were not new: survivors like me have endured that betrayal many times before. Trump's behavior has mainstreamed sexual assault and he has emboldened misogynists across the country just as he has re-empowered bigots of every hue. His attack on health care threatens to take away the benefits that many of us need to survive, remain functional, and in recovery.

Art's release was always going to make me ill and rekindle the embers of anger that this homicidal sociopath will never have to register as a sex offender. I fear that he will abuse again. His future victims are out there. This I know. While the severity of Art's actions and the actions of men like him are real and horrifying, the Trump administration had done everything it can to minimize protections for American women in this country.

I am not alone in this struggle to survive. I hope that my willingness to discuss these private horrors will embolden women everywhere to do the same. Our voices must be raised and heard. Our faces must be seen. Our needs must be understood and

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