

Family Prayer

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For many years my dad drove an orange juice tanker from Florida to Ohio and back, and that's how he met Colleen, my mother. She worked at a chicken plant in Ohio that shared a huge parking lot with the bottle factory on my dad's route. He found her there twisted halfway into her red Nissan Sentra as if she had been wrestling with the metal machine and defeated, frozen into that grotesque frame I hold in my memory. Her chin and elbows wrapped around the seat's edge. Her fingers clawed the steering wheel. She tried, but her arms could not pull her body into the car. One knee was beneath her stomach on the side of the seat and her other leg stretched straight out onto the graveled ground. Her uniform was torn and she wore no shoes. She raised her head, turned her blank face to him. It was depleted even of fright and agony. I often think of this image when I see large coiled roadkill in New Jersey ditches.

Dad rescued her, let her ride with him in the tanker. Her ideals had been trampled on and she was broken, but he was kind and his world was a place she could slip into with ease. When they weren't on the road they lived in a mobile home in Florida, and I imagine they were happy in the beginning. But then I came along.

Colleen hated the heat down south and she got depressed as hell, so we moved up to the outskirts of Cayesville, New Jersey where my paternal grandfather had a big old farmhouse with a huge kitchen and lots of little rooms. Grandpa was a generous and indulgent African American. His wife, my dad's mother, was

German and died when my dad was a boy. Grandpa said she loved apples, but other than that no one said much about her.

Grandpa was a retired Army Captain, but nothing like you would expect a military man to be. Maybe it was because I'm a girl, but he wasn't harsh or strict. He listened to me, and even when I asked dumb questions he made me feel like I was smart. He'd say, "You know, Taylor, I never thought about that." My dad was away a lot driving and Colleen often travelled to Ohio for court or spent days at a time in mental hospitals in New Jersey, so Grandpa was the one who was with me most of the time. He tutored me at home because he said school wasn't a good idea for girls with my background. He taught me to read and do number puzzles. Sometimes Colleen went with us when we did things outdoors, like fish or swim. Grandpa always made it seem like everything was going to be alright. I loved him as much as or more than I loved my dad, if that's possible.

When I was seven Grandpa died suddenly while raking leaves. That was a sad and crazy time for all of us. Colleen took it the worst. She said she couldn't stand being inside all day, that she had to get a job. She went on tons of interviews but I don't recall she ever got a job. After Grandpa died my dad stepped it up with the prayers. Morning, noon, and night.

I had to go to a real school after Grandpa died and I hated it. They put me in third grade because I was ahead of the kids my age who were in second grade. Grandpa was right about how I wasn't going to fit in. It was the first time I heard the N word, and it was the first time I heard *fuck*, but they pronounced it *fock*. They sang my name in a snarky lilt: *Taylor Cruz, The Mestizo Girl*. It got so I didn't care anymore. After a while they called me *Whitey* and got friendly with me. Right around that time Colleen got some psychotic notion my dad's skin was going to turn white. "After all, Sammy, you're fifty percent there already," she kept saying. I didn't want him to be white and it scared me when my mother talked crazy. I can't believe how confused and ignorant I was. Dad prayed every morning. It sounded like mumbling unless you got close to him, and then you could hear what he was saying. Colleen didn't like that he prayed so much. "It's over-the-top, Sammy. You could be talking to me some of that time." She said that often, but he kept praying. I know how annoying it must have been for him because until recently I too couldn't stop myself from praying. The only one I ever told about it was my shrink.

I was in fourth grade when Colleen told us she didn't have to go back to Ohio anymore. She also stopped looking for a job. I suppose she figured she needed to be home to take care of me, but that was not great for her mental state, nor for mine. At my dad's request she reluctantly went to see his shrink, Dr. Kehoe. She went once and that was it. "She can't get you to stop praying, Sammy, so how do you think she's going to help me with anything? And how am I supposed to talk to some white chick about my problems?" This confused me because Colleen is as chalky white Caucasian as they come.

As far as I know, Colleen did little all day but sit outside on a beige plastic lawn chair in our backyard. Grandpa had always done our yard work, and after he died the place looked awful. In the summer Colleen looked as dreary as the tawny weeds and drooping dandelions around her. She sat out there even in winter, in her old navy blue pea coat with her legs wrapped in blankets and scarves.

Cayesville Elementary School was a mind-numbing hellhole for me. My most hated class was fifth grade Social Studies with Mr. Palochik. I have no idea why, but everyone called him Chicken Penis. He had gray skin and gray hair and all he did was tell us to copy stuff from old textbooks he handed out at the start of class. There was gray dust on the computers stacked on a table in the back of his classroom. I often cut Social Studies. I could walk into town and be back in time for the next class.

One winter day I cut classes early. Cayesville's streets were lined with dirty plowed snow and the sidewalks were icy. It was too cold to be outside so I went home and chanced it that Colleen wouldn't get upset with me. I let myself in the front door and went straight to the kitchen table where Grandpa used to sit, by the window but close to the radiator where it was nice and warm. Colleen was out back, slowly swaying from side to side on her beige plastic chair. I lifted the sash just long enough to yell out: "Hey Colleen, it's only me in here. Everything is OK." I think she heard me because her head bobbed a few times. I made myself hot tea and looked through our *National Geographic* magazines. Eventually Colleen got up and walked around to the side of the house. It took her forever to get to the garage. I heard her kick snow off her boots. She slowly opened the kitchen door and shuffled over to the table. She looked like a zombie with all her head gear.

"You want some tea, Colleen?"

“No, thank you, baby.”

She sat down across from me and took off her ear muffs and hat and scarves. Her eyes looked glassy from the cold, or maybe she had been crying. She rested her gloved hands crosswise on her shoulders as if she were hugging herself. Colleen was too despondent ever to be nasty, and that day she was even pleasant. She didn't question me about being home from school. Instead, she told me to sit down so we could talk.

“I'm already sitting, Colleen.”

“Taylor, I wish I could love you like a mother should love her daughter, like your daddy loves you.”

Colleen's smile always confused me because on her face it looked like a mistake. She told me what happened at the chicken plant in Ohio. She shivered, even with her coat on. She told me how much she missed her job there. Seriously? I forgot everything she said that day, until it came back to me in therapy.

About a year later Colleen left us. That's when my dad had to quit his dream job and take care of me. He loved driving the tanker, but what could we do? Grandpa was gone and I was just a kid, so Dad got a 9-to-5 job in the tool section at Lowe's Home Improvement selling drill bits and screw drivers. Dad and I had the next fifteen years together. I learned to compulsively pray thanks to that.

Every few years I would hear my parents talk on the phone. Dad told Colleen she was welcome to come back home anytime, and I was always relieved when that never happened. He handed the phone over to me once, and I had no idea what I was supposed to say. I was in high school at the time, so I told her I wanted to go to Rutgers and major in Sociology. She cried. That was the last time I spoke with her.

Dad died of a heart attack three years ago, same as Grandpa, raking leaves out in the back yard. It could have been worse. Colleen could have stayed with us all those years. Sometimes I'm sad for her. How could she not be messed up after what happened?

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I've had bouts of depression and lots of OCD for as long as I can remember. Some days I've felt so weighted down with hopelessness that I can't get out of bed in the morning. My OCD is the same for me as it was for my dad. I can't leave the house if I don't recite a long prayer each morning. I can also get obsessed with counting things, like license plates, or windows on buildings, but that doesn't bother me much.

I see the same shrink my dad went to for years and Colleen went to for one session. The therapy is called ACT, which stands for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. ACT is supposed to get you focused on what you value in life so you can move toward what you want instead of getting fused with weird-ass thoughts and feelings that hold you back. The idea is that you can't push those thoughts and feelings away, so you may as well accept them, like rapsallions on the bus that you're driving through life. Eventually they get off your bus. If you haven't crashed into a building or driven off a bridge. ACT is a talk therapy. Dr. Kehoe mixes in her own interpersonal style, and sometimes we veer way off the topic.

I always sit on the wing chair near the heating and A/C unit in Dr. Kehoe's office. I imagine the ergonomic honey-colored leather chair she sits on all day is the same one she sat on 20 years ago, struggling to help my dad with his scrupulosity problem. She rotates a few inches slowly right and left. For someone as dowdy as Dr. Kehoe, she has some nice things in her office, like devices that work as humidifiers and dehumidifiers, several air purifiers, a weather station, a solar-operated generator, a Purell hand-washing dispenser, and a battery-operated waste basket that snaps up and scares people the first time they get near it.

Dr. Kehoe has big dark eyes and glasses with round red frames that maybe she wore when she was my dad's shrink. The rest of her is pretty non-descript, kind of a generic 60-something health care professional look. I don't know everything, but I think there are two types of shrinks: the narcissistic know-it-alls and the ones who try to pretend they don't think they know it all. Dr. Kehoe is the latter type, so she doesn't have to worry about how she dresses or how she looks, as long as she comes across as humble.

What happens in talk therapy? We talk. We reminisce.

God the Father with gratitude I walk on your Earth. I beseech you to pardon my sins and wake in me the good. Protect my family, my baby girl Taylor, my wife Colleen, and my father here on Earth. Protect me from any spirit that would annihilate them or cause Satan to enter our beings. Oh Lord bless our bodies and keep them clean. Protect us, Holy Father, in travel, and in daily discourse that we may hear and speak your truth.

Dr. Kehoe smiles. I tell her more of what I remember:

He put the cup to his lips. But only after he said the prayer, when he was free of contamination.

He was called *Daddy*. But the first word I learned was *cup*. Then *Daddy*. Then *Mommy*. New words poured in like a flood, even though I didn't know back then what a flood was. But I had the idea of what a flood was. I said the words with my own mouth and thought they were me. I thought I was a cup. My right ear against his smooth warm brown chest, I was a cup. Where had that memory gone? Where did it come from? When did she tell me to call her Colleen instead of that word that means she is my mother?

* * *

The following Saturday morning I sit for three hours on my living room couch. My thoughts race. Dr. Kehoe says to focus on the present, where I am, what's around me. Focus on sensations. What do I see? What do I hear? Wooden spool coffee table. Book cases. Rug with wine stain I should have cleaned. A dog barks. I push air from my lungs. And wouldn't you know it, it comes right back in through my nose. The rhythm keeps me safe.

I go to my afternoon appointment with Dr. Kehoe.

"So what's been happening with you this week, Taylor? Oh, before we start, how's the temperature in here?"

"I'm good," I say, annoyed at her obsession with room temperature. Doesn't she know that once we start talking I probably won't notice if the earth's crust breaks along some fault line right outside the window? She looks at me a few seconds to see if I might change my mind, and when it is obvious that I have said all I want on the subject she opens the blinds with the small remote control that seems to appear magically in the palm of her left hand. The view beyond the ground floor

office is a small asphalt lot full of potholes and a few cars. Dr. Kehoe sits down and does her slow swivel and fools with the armrests on her fancy chair.

“Everything is about the same,” I say, ignoring the most important piece of information I could possibly provide. Maybe I’ll keep it to myself to avoid the possibility of her taking credit. But I cave.

“Well, actually I need to tell you something. I haven’t been sleeping well since I saw you last week. Too many images run through my head. The praying’s been the same, except for this morning. I sat on the couch to pray, but instead I heard Colleen’s voice. I closed my eyes and it was like a dream, and it stayed up there in my head. It was what she told me that day I came home early from school, and it made me want to tear my skin off. All I can remember is that I breathed. I didn’t pray.”

“You accepted the anxiety and chose to let it go,” Dr. Kehoe says.

“Oh, yes, I have that privilege.” I am barely able to talk. “Do you know what he did to her, Doc?” Dr. Kehoe nods right before I put my face in my hands.

“Put it into words, Taylor. What’s going on now?” Whenever I cry uncontrollably Dr. Kehoe tells me to find words for what I’m feeling.

“Now I know why she hates me. No way *she* could accept and choose.”
“I see,” Dr. Kehoe says.

“And no way praying can undo that. Such a waste of words. Over and over, talking. All that repetition. You can’t change the past.” I wrap my fingers around my upper arms and squeeze. I think my teeth are going to crush inside my mouth.

Dr. Kehoe says something about dropping an anchor to ground myself, to be aware of my breathing and of her voice. I breathe, and I hear her describe religious scrupulosity to me once again.

“Taylor, it’s a form of OCD. A person can be overly concerned that something he or she might say or do would be considered a sin or a violation of some moral code. People with this disorder have excessive concerns with morality, blasphemy, sin. The obsessiveness becomes so painful that sometimes the only way to relieve it is through ritualized prayer, or trips to confession. Or repetitive cleaning. It’s a way of undoing what one perceives to be evil.”

I recite to her a new prayer:

God the Father, with gratitude I walk on your Earth. I beseech you to pardon my sins and wake in me the good. Protect my family as they collect the chickens for execution. They stun them, hang them, stab them.

I think Dr. Kehoe looks uncomfortable so I want to interject something sweet. “My dad looked like Al Jarreau. He had that voice too. Don’t you think so?”

Her face changes. She looks younger. “Yes, Taylor. He was handsome. His voice was distinct.”

She should say he sounded like Al Jarreau. I get annoyed.

I tell her about the people at the chicken plant. The workers were mostly from Central America. The bosses were white people. They liked Colleen and made her a boss.

And god bless the boss of Colleen. Lord, I admit with sin in my heart I wanted to kill him but instead I took her away. Protect the bosses from any spirit in me that would annihilate them to keep them from the path of Satan. Protect the Guatemalans. Oh Lord bless their bodies and keep them clean.

I’m a little shaky, but I have to say it.

Headless, they are shackled to the line that runs them to the chute where they are scalded and metal fingers pluck the feathers from their skin. Hooks puncture and rip out the gizzards and hearts and livers to spin madly and then twirl in a freezing bath. A machine will soon replace the immigrants, but for now, Almighty God, bless those who saw the birds in half and remove their bones, for their flesh too is soft. Protect the people and the chickens, Holy Father, those who eat and the eaten. And in daily discourse help them that they may hear and speak your truth.

I remember what Colleen told me about Cruz, how the boss was going to have him deported. The gangs apparently found out Cruz was in Ohio and the boss was afraid of trouble. He would surely get killed if they sent him back, and that broke Colleen's heart. She never spent much time with the man, but she spent hours on the phone with his girlfriend in Guatemala to find out everything she had to know to marry him. It was the least she could do. What the boss did to Colleen was unspeakable, and yet she told it to me, and I can see how my mother got sick, why she didn't want to be my mother.

"Colleen watched them slit the throats one last time," I tell Dr. Kehoe. "She told me about it. She wouldn't look at me. She stared out the kitchen window at the snow. The bird comes toward the stunner and is so calm, she said, she who had been a virgin until the boss raped her. He took her shoes when he was done."

I look down at my hands that are as light as the teeth of my brown father. We are light bright white, she says. I hear Colleen tell me we will never look like Sam, that Sam is too good for us, that we are Irish. I tell Dr. Kehoe how it happened:

"Don't tell me that's human cruelty, the boss told her. *Because they are not human.* You are like me. You, for God's sake, are Irish. You called OSHA on us for giving those filthy undocumented animals a nice place to live? He shook his head and laughed at her. You don't think we know you married that fucking dirty wetback so he could get his green card? You want a visit from the police?" I grab tissues, but I don't feel like crying anymore.

"What I hate is myself because I am from that boss. Sam loved me like crazy so he could undo that act. Isn't that right, Dr. Kehoe?"

"Taylor, Sam loved you more than anything, as much as he loved Colleen. There's no need to reduce love to a compulsive act. That's not why he loved you."

"But that's why she hated me, isn't it? I've been coming to see you for two years. You never told me what she must have told you. My dad must have told you."

Dr. Kehoe says nothing.

“The floor was slick with water and wet bird parts. He pushed her down and pinned her there and threatened to kill her family if she told anyone. She felt bloody chicken bones beneath her as he pressed her into the floor. He ripped the clothes from her body like he was defeathering a bird, and he plunged himself into her. That is how I was conceived. That’s what she wanted me to know.”

“Keep talking, Taylor.”

“You knew this. Why didn’t you tell me?” I feel desperate. Something this horrible I must have made up. “Tell me this didn’t happen, Dr. Kehoe.”

“It’s your story, Taylor. Your mother told you her story and now it’s your story. I couldn’t have told you that. It wasn’t for me to tell. Sam certainly wanted you to know, but he must have thought the time was never right. You know more about your story now, Taylor.”

“Is OCD genetic?” I ask Dr. Kehoe.

She goes on talking. Something about how genetics isn’t always a basis for connection, about how Colleen used the Cruz name to make the marriage look real, about how much it cost Sam in legal fees when Colleen sued the boss for rape, and about how the judge let the boss win in exchange for ignoring the marriage fraud. I hear words, from somewhere. Can one act erase another? The judge’s power to make crimes fungible was a travesty of justice, even more unworthy than the hours my father and I prayed to foil a future injustice. Our lame apotropaic rituals could never make up for what went on in that chicken plant, nor prevent it from happening again.

“Some of this you’ll never know for sure, Taylor. Remember what you can. And know what’s most important is to hear and accept the stories you tell yourself, but don’t let them rule you,” Dr. Kehoe says.

I leave there that day, aware of the venom I think I inherited from the white boss. For months I would direct that confused loathing toward Dr. Kehoe. Looking back on it, her acceptance of that hatred is the same thing I do when I am at my best. Accept it for what it is, a thought, or conversation, or story, or feeling. That’s when I get relief from the depression and the mad acts and habits that try to rob

me from having a decent life. Sometimes it works. And sometimes I think one day I'll find Colleen and tell her everything will be alright.

About the author:

Laura Tahir lives in Mercer County and practices as a psychologist in Allentown, NJ. She has published articles and chapters in academic books and magazines.