

MURDER AND THE FAMILY BED

by Sandra A. Miller

MY 10-YEAR-OLD SON HAS NEVER SPENT an entire night in his own room. My brave idea for a family bed was, in retrospect, probably an uninspired one. An already horrendous sleeper before having kids, suddenly I was supposed to get my restorative shut-eye next to an all-night nursing infant. But it wasn't a choice, really. It was a reaction and a promise, one that had everything to do with a long-ago autumn night when I was a child.

Saturday, October 21, 1974, one week before my 10th birthday, two armed men entered the Donna Lee Bakery in New Britain, Connecticut just a mile from my grandmother's house where I was staying. Like many Saturdays, my grandmother and I spent the evening on her beige brocade sofa in front of the TV. During the commercials, I'd scoot into the walk-in pantry and graze on homemade pastries always tucked under Tupperware that cloudy green color of sea glass. That night she had hard Italian spice cookies meant for dipping in coffee or tea. Whenever I ate them, she warned to be careful of my teeth.

I stood in my grandmother's pantry that night sucking on a cookie, worried for my teeth.

Across town, Helen Giansanti, a woman in her 60s who'd been working at the bakery for only six months, was alone in the shop when the two men entered. They merely intended to rob the place, but found little money in the till. They waited for the owner who Helen said was due back soon from another bakery run. As they waited, four more customers arrived. Within minutes, the owner returned.

They say it happened sometime between 8:15 and 8:45. It would have been over as I lay in my Grandmother's attic bedroom, willing myself to sleep. Sleep that finally came and then ended a short time later when I woke in

the spare, dark room, with the ghostly scent of mothballs drifting from the closet like the smell of memory itself. Had I heard something? Gun shots? Screams? Doubtful. More likely I'd been awakened by my grandmother's silver radiators that hissed and spit like predators.

Whatever I heard, I suddenly needed to not be alone with that darkness and fled downstairs. I crawled in next to my grandmother who smelled of perspiration and baking. Her big bed dipped in the middle where she settled each night like a heavy log, and I had to grip the edge to keep from rolling into her. I barely slept, but that didn't matter. She allowed me in and kept me safe.

That feeling of safety in my grandmother's bed was a feeling I wanted for my own child, but maybe I did the family bed all wrong. Maybe I ruined my child's chances of ever getting himself to sleep. Alone. Without someone holding his hand, massaging his back, thrusting boob or bottle or humming a song with gestures, encores and, eventually, frustration. And somehow that was OK with me.

From the night that plus sign appeared in the pregnancy test window, I vowed emotional security for my child. By day we would keep him close. By night, he would never go to sleep in fear. The problem is I didn't anticipate that he wouldn't really go to sleep. Oh, of course he slept, but never easily or deeply. Rather, we would lie there together each night like two recumbent superheroes -Awake Woman and Jolt Baby - ready to take on the darkness where Slumber Dad had failed.

Over the years, when nighttime martyrdom had shattered my wellbeing, I tried to get my baby boy down in his own room. But a normal transfer never took. He was too adamant, and I was just too frayed, too apologetic and, I guess, too haunted. I could never distill his fear from my own. Finally, after I'd been

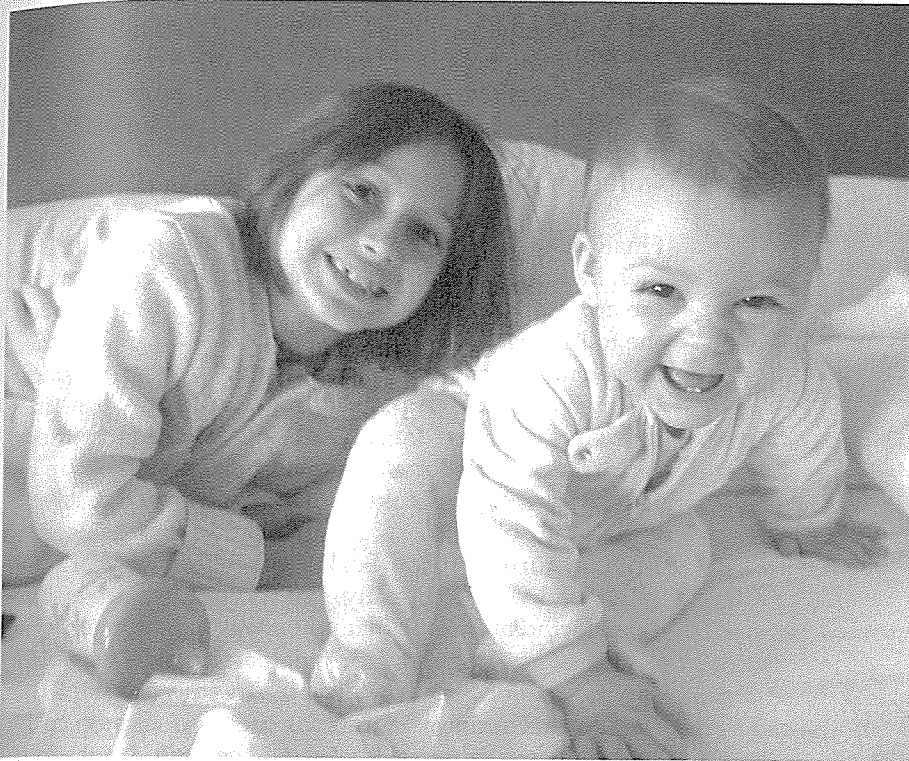


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all anyone spoke of in a flurry of phone calls. At the end of that long day, night drifted over us like a pall. My father rechecked the doors, the windows, and yet nothing about those locks felt safe enough. I spent the night crouched on a stool outside of my parents' room, aching to go in, but knowing better. While my grandmother welcomed me into her bed, my parents punished my fear. If I wasn't spanked on the spot for senselessly waking them, it would have been my fate in the morning. So, instead, I listened, imagining every car that drove down our hushed suburban street was carrying those men. When it stopped, I'd be ready. I would rouse my parents and lead them out my bedroom window onto the second-floor roof. We'd hurl ourselves into the branches of the enormous blue spruce just a reach from the house then run for our lives. We would

brutally sleep deprived for about four years, it had to end. Connection be damned, this was survival.

not be shot in the head.

Five years later the training continues. My husband and I still take turns falling asleep with our son in his room. Then I steal some unbroken hours of rest before the first visit at midnight or 2:00 or 4:00 in the morning when my boy stumbles in from across the hall. Unable to turn him away, I lift the cover next to me. He burrows in and I pull his thin, warm body close. I feel his breath slow and deepen and the scared drain from his bones. Then as a pebble of relief settles inside me, even when sleep won't, I realize that in holding my son, I am really sheltering myself.

In the days following the murders, I staggered about in a haze of sleep deprivation and panic. My mother drove me to school and back. I could not play outside in the afternoon. Sometimes we would hear search helicopters, or worse, utter silence in the sky. The nights that chased those long days were amorphous as I drifted in and out of sleep, often jerked from my bed by the sound of a screeching car. I spent hours on the step stool, envying, perhaps for the first time ever, that my unhappy parents at least had each other to sleep next to. I never desperately wanted into their bed before, but now, without it, I thought my terror could kill me.

I am sheltering myself, or perhaps the memory, of how I felt the morning after the murders, when we awoke to a picture of a blood-splattered refrigerator on the front page of the Sunday paper. The newspaper told how the gunmen lined up the four men in the dough room and the two women in the back office, promising not to harm anyone. It was later suspected that one of the customers recognized one of the armed men, a nephew by marriage, scaring him into shooting all six people in the head.

I study my sleeping son, who my friends say is so like me. He is willful and tender. He loves people loudly with sticky hands and a huge, open heart. Then there is the worst of what I have bequeathed him. Allergies. Fear. This insomnia. The boy has refused sleep from his first night at the birth center when he lay in my arms, pummeling his fists at the air and screeching as though the darkness was stabbing him. It went beyond colic and comprehension. The night was his first enemy and he resolutely refused surrender until, eventually, it felled him with exhaustion.

At my home that Sunday afternoon, the murders were

His fear of the night reads differently now, but it remains the one thing he can't get over or outgrow. He dreads bedtime when he revisits horrors he discovered that day.

For years I could hide the worst of the world from him, but now older, he finds it. He finds war and suicide bombers. He finds dead soldiers, bloodied Iraqi children and mothers' faces contorted in grief. I'll catch him hunched in front of a newsstand, his lips moving as he silently reads a story from the headlines. His understanding is so deep I can't reach it. But the veil over his fear is so thin as to be transparent. At night the veil disappears.

"Will you ever die, Mommy?" He murmurs in that half-conscious moment before drifting off.

"No. Honey," I say. "I will never die."

"Promise?"

"Promise," I answer, shutting my eyes on the lie that he must believe in order to sleep. My promise does for him what the box of rejected stuffed animals never could. He tucks into my words and drops off.

My boy will press me with questions. How many wars are there in the world? Will there ever be a war in Boston? Are there murderers living around here? I temper every answer with reassurance, trying, like a novice wizard, to cast a protective spell with words. The therapist called him wise beyond his years. The energy worker said he was an old soul who could see into another realm. He described the night to her as a dark spirit. Me? I just want my son to sleep, unafraid. I am that intimate with his kind of fear. Like something visceral that, to the uninitiated, can't be named or explained.

Sometimes, in desperation, I try to talk him out of it. "There's nothing to be afraid of," I say. But I may as well try and convince him that candy tastes bad and summer vacation is a waste of time. Fear is simply part of his belief system.

"Were you afraid to go to sleep when you were little?" he'll sometimes ask. And I'll shake my head and wonder at how my child knows these things about my child-self.

October 29, 1974. I recall one photo of me on my 10th birthday. I am an awkward girl in profile blowing

out the candles on a frosted birthday cake that my grandmother made from scratch in her pantry. I don't remember anything else about that birthday. There would have been presents, perhaps a little party, but any festivities must have disappeared into exhaustion, worry, and a single wish.

Finally, on November 21st, that wish was granted. The men had been caught and were officially charged with the crime. The stories and evidence that emerged over the following months, then at the trials, captivated me, indeed much of the state. Immediately after the murders, the men arrived at a party drunk and happy, boasting to friends that they'd just killed six people. One witness would testify that one of the murderers showed up at that party with pink cake frosting on his leather jacket.

My son turned 10 on September 12th this year. We celebrated well. But, really, I'm sorry to say, it was his third birthday in 2001 that will always stand apart: the almost silent skies and that palpable ache of despair for the world. Fear. We ate pizza with friends in the backyard. There was a Thomas the Tank Engine cake, and when my birthday boy asked if he could eat the cow catcher, everyone laughed. Then we caught ourselves, surprised to be laughing.

In the weeks that followed, I thought I'd never sleep again. I didn't even try to put my son to bed in his own room, expecting I might wake up and much of the world would be gone. If that was the case, I wanted us together. But the world stayed. And while a muted version of the fear still lingers, we are here. We are here and every night, at some point, my son is beside me seeking the safety that must have stopped the night I pushed him out of my body.

But, oh, how elusive that safety can be for a mother who, unable to find her own way out of darkness, can't possibly lead her child from it. So, instead, she does what she can. She sits with her boy inside his fear and guards him the night through. She does it because she understands. She does it to keep a promise of protection she made years ago, when she was just his age, before she knew that he, or any child, would ever be hers.

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