

A Child Called It: One Child's Courage to Survive by Dave Pelzer

Chapter 6: While Father Is Away

After the knife incident, Father spent less and less time at home and more at work. He made excuses to the family, but I didn't believe him. I often shivered with fear as I sat in the garage, hoping for some reason he might not leave. In spite of all that had happened, I still felt Father was my protector. When he was home, Mother only did about half the things to me that she did when he was gone.

When Father was home, it became his habit to help me with the evening dishes. Father washed and I dried. While we worked, we talked softly so neither Mother nor the other boys could hear us. Sometimes, several minutes would pass without us talking. We wanted to make sure the coast was clear.

Father always broke the ice. "How ya doing, Tiger?" he would say. Hearing the old name that Father used when I was a little boy always brought a smile to my face. "I'm OK," I would answer. "Did you have anything to eat today?" he often asked. I usually shook my head in a negative gesture. "Don't worry," he'd say. "Some day you and I will both get out of this madhouse."

I knew father hated living at home and I felt that it was all my fault. I told him that I would be good and that I wouldn't steal food anymore. I told Father I would try harder and do a better job on my chores. When I said these things, he always smiled and assured me that it wasn't my fault. Sometimes as I dried the dishes, I felt a new ray of hope. I knew Father probably wouldn't do anything against Mother, but when I stood beside him I felt safe.

Like all good things that happened to me, Mother put an end to Father helping me with the dishes. She insisted that The Boy needed no help. She said that Father paid too much attention to me and not enough to others in the family. Without a fight, Father gave up. Mother now had complete control over everybody in the household.

After awhile, Father didn't even stay home on his days off. He would come in for only a few minutes. After seeing my brothers, he would find me wherever I was doing my chores and say a few sentences, then leave. It took Father no more than 10 minutes to get in and out of the house, and be on his way back to his solitude, which he usually found in a bar. When Father talked to me, he'd tell me that he was making plans for the two of us to leave. This always made me smile, but deep inside I knew it was a fantasy.

One day, he knelt down to tell me how sorry he was. I looked into his face. The change in Father frightened me. He had dark black circles around his eyes, and his face and neck were beet-red. Father's once rigid shoulders were now slumped over. Gray had begun to take over his jet-black hair. Before he left that day, I threw my arms around his waist. I didn't know when I would see him again.

After finishing my chores that day, I rushed downstairs. I had been ordered to wash my ragged clothes and another heap of smelly rags. But that day, Father's leaving had left me so sad that I buried myself in the pile of rags and cried. I cried for him to come back and take me away. After a few minutes of self-comfort, I settled down and began scrubbing my "Swiss cheese" clothes. I scrubbed until my knuckles bled. I no longer cared about my existence. Mother's house had become unbearable. I wished I could somehow manage to escape the place I now called the "Madhouse."

During one period of time when Father was away, Mother starved me for about ten consecutive days. No matter how hard I tried to meet her time limits, I couldn't make it.

And the consequence was no food. Mother was completely thorough in making sure I was unable to steal any food. She cleared the dinner table herself, putting the food down the garbage disposal. She rummaged through the garbage can every day before I emptied it downstairs. She locked the freezer in the garage with her key and kept it. I was used to going without food for periods up to three days, but this extended time was unbearable. Water was my only means of survival. When I filled the metal ice cube tray from the refrigerator, I would tip the corner of the tray to my mouth. Downstairs I would creep to the wash basin and crack the faucet tap open. Praying that the pipe would not vibrate and alert Mother, I would carefully suck on the cold metal until my stomach was so full I thought it would burst.

By the sixth day I was so weak when I woke up on my army cot, I could hardly get up. I worked on my chores at a snail's pace. I felt so numb. My thought responses became unclear. It seemed to take minutes for me to understand each sentence Mother yelled to me. As I slowly strained my head up to look at Mother, I could tell that to her it was a game -- a game which she thoroughly enjoyed.

"Oh, poor little baby," Mother sarcastically cooed. Then she asked me how I felt, and laughed when I begged for food. At the end of the sixth day, and those that followed, I hoped with all my heart that Mother would feed me something, anything. I was at a point that I didn't care what it was.

One evening, towards the end of her "game," after I had finished my chores, Mother slammed a plate of food in front of me. The cold leftovers were a feast to my eyes. But I was wary; it seemed too good to be true. "Two minutes!" Mother barked. "You have two minutes to eat. That's all." Like lightning I picked up the fork, but the moment before the food touched my mouth, Mother snatched the plate away from me and emptied the food down the garbage disposal. "Too late!" she sneered. I stood before her dumbstruck. I didn't know what to do or say. All I could think of was "Why?" I couldn't understand why she treated me the way she did. I was so close that I could smell every morsel. I knew she wanted me to cave in, but I stood fast and held back the tears.

Mother had another favorite game for me while Father was away. She sent me to clean the bathroom with her usual time limits. But this time, she put a bucket, filled with a mixture of ammonia and Clorox, in the room with me and closed the door. The first time she did this, Mother informed me she had read about it in a newspaper and wanted to try it. Even though I acted as if I were frightened, I really wasn't. I was ignorant about what was going to happen. Only when Mother closed the door and ordered me not to open it, did I begin to worry. With the room sealed, the air began to quickly change. In the corner of the bathroom I dropped to my hands and knees and stared at the bucket. A fine gray mist swirled towards the ceiling. As I breathed in the fumes, I collapsed and began spitting up. My throat felt like it was on fire. Within minutes it was raw. The gas from the reaction of the ammonia and Clorox mixture made my eyes water. I was frantic about not being able to meet Mother's time limits for cleaning the bathroom.

After a few more minutes, I thought I would cough up my insides. I knew that Mother wasn't going to give in and open the door. To survive her new game, I had to use my head. Laying on the tiled floor I stretched my body, and using my foot, I slide the bucket to the door. I did this for two reasons: I wanted the bucket as far away from me as possible, and in case Mother opened the door, I wanted her to get a snoot full of her own medicine. I curled up in the opposite corner of the bathroom, with my cleaning rag over my mouth, nose and eyes. Before covering my face, I wet the rag in the toilet. I didn't dare turn on the water in the sink for fear of Mother hearing it. Breathing through the cloth, I watched the mist inch its way closer and closer to the floor. I felt as if I were locked in a gas chamber. Then I thought about the small heating vent on the floor by my feet. I knew it turned on and off every few minutes. I put my face next to the vent and sucked in all the air my lungs would hold. In about half an hour, Mother opened the door and told me to empty the bucket into

hour. In about half an hour, Mother opened the door and told me to empty the bucket into the drain in the garage before I smelled up her house. Downstairs I coughed up blood for over an hour. Of all Mother's punishments, I hated the gas chamber game the most.

I wondered what Mother had planned for me next. I prayed it was not another gas chamber session. She yelled from the garage for me to follow her upstairs. She led me to the bathroom. My heart sank. I felt doomed. I began taking huge breaths of fresh air, knowing that soon I would need it.

To my surprise there wasn't any bucket or bottles in the bathroom. "Am I off the hook?" I asked myself. This looked too easy. I timidly watched Mother as she turned the cold water tap in the bathtub fully open. I thought it was odd that she forgot to turn on the hot water as well. As the tub began to fill with cold water, Mother tore off my clothes and ordered me to get into the tub. I got into the tub and laid down. A cold fear raced throughout my body. "Lower!" Mother yelled. "Put your face in the water like this!" She then bent over, grabbed my neck with both hands and shoved my head under the water. Instinctively, I thrashed and kicked, trying desperately to force my head above the water so I could breathe. Her grip was too strong. Under the water I opened my eyes. I could see bubbles escape from my mouth and float to the surface as I tried to shout. I tried to thrust my head from side to side as I saw the bubbles becoming smaller and smaller. I began to feel weak. In a frantic effort I reached up and grabbed her shoulders. My fingers must have dug into her because Mother let go. She looked down on me, trying to get her breath. "Now keep your head below the water, or next time it will be longer!"

I submerged my head, keeping my nostrils barely above the surface of the water. I felt like an alligator in a swamp. When Mother left the bathroom, her plan became more clear to me. As I laid stretched out in the tub, the water became unbearably cold. It was as though I was in a refrigerator. I was too frightened of Mother to move, so I kept my head under the surface as ordered. Hours passed and my skin began to wrinkle. I didn't dare touch any part of my body to try to warm it. I did raise my head out of the water, far enough to hear better. Whenever I heard somebody walk down the hall outside the bathroom, I quietly slid my head back into the coldness.

With the start of school in the fall, came the hope of a temporary escape from my dreary life. Our fourth-grade homeroom class had a substitute teacher for the first two weeks. They told us that our regular teacher was ill. The substitute teacher was younger than most of the other staff, and she seemed more lenient. At the end of the first week, she passed out ice cream to those students whose behavior had been good. I didn't get any the first week, but I tried harder and received my reward at the end of the second week. The new teacher played "pop hits" on 45-rpm records, and sang to the class. We really liked her. When Friday afternoon came, I didn't want to leave. After all the other students had gone, she bent close to me and told me I would have to go home. She knew I was a problem child. I told her that I wanted to stay with her. She held me for a moment then got up and played the song I liked best. After that I left. Since I was late, I ran to the house as fast as I could and raced through my chores. When I was finished, Mother sent me to the backyard to sit on the cold cement deck.

That Friday, I looked up at the thick blanket of fog covering the sun, and cried inside. The substitute teacher had been so nice to me. She treated me like a real person, not like some piece of filth lying in the gutter. As I sat outside feeling sorry for myself, I wondered where she was and what she was doing. I didn't understand it at the time, but I had a crush on her. I knew that I wasn't going to be fed that night, or the next. Since Father wasn't home, I would have a bad weekend. Sitting in the cool air in the backyard, on the steps, I could hear the sounds of Mother feeding my brothers. I didn't care. Closing my eyes, I could see the smiling face of my new teacher. That night as I sat outside shivering, her beauty and kindness kept me warm...

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