Blood and Beams

From Armadillo’s Crossing: A Memoir

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When I was dropped off at home that evening, my father was sitting on the front steps, his head hung low looking horribly sad, with blood dripping slowly from his left hand. My first and only thought was that this was it: he had finally killed my mom.

That night had been gymnastics night, and I had gone with my best friend Charlotte and her younger brother Ian. Gymnastics nights could either be the most fun nights of the week, or another rotten chapter in my sixth grade life. Which it would be generally depended upon one (or both) of two things: the mood my best friend Charlotte was in, and what was going on at home.

That night my parents were arguing about something or other as I was getting ready to go. Mom was probably happy to have the excuse that it was her night to drive Charlotte and me to the gym, and I was glad she and my father would have a break in their argument. After we left, he would probably head off to some bar or woman (or bar and woman), and things would once again settle down to simmering discomfort.

We stopped by Charlotte’s house where she and Ian climbed into the car. Charlotte was annoyed with me for some reason – or no reason. I believe that night she was angered by the fact that God had gifted me with a short stature, which was perfect for gymnasts but wasted on someone who would never be great at it. She, on the other hand, had been cursed with a tall, slender figure, which hindered her natural talent.

I was glad that Ian had decided to come along that night. At eleven, he was a year younger than us, and going through a strange period where he actually got along with Charlotte and her friends. I think he had finally gotten old enough that to realize he could have more fun hanging out with us than teasing us. Plus he was just a really nice kid.

He couldn’t care less that I was short or not great at gymnastics or even that I had red hair. I was just a buddy for the night. And I would probably hang out with him more than Charlotte for the evening since she was giving me the silent treatment.

Our gym was like a gymnastics theme park. It was part of a private girl’s school that opened up to the public certain nights of the week. Permanently set up for gymnastics, the gym had every type of equipment you could think of. There were several balance beams of different heights, three trampolines (most people’s favorite), a couple sets of uneven parallel bars, parallel bars, a vaulting box that converted to a pommel horse, men’s hoops, and a tumbling floor. Just for fun, there was a single hoop set up as a rope swing (Ian’s favorite activity) you could use to swing out over a set of extra thick landing mats.

You could do your own thing or get some serious practice in with the coach. Charlotte rarely played around and went right to the coach. I, on the other hand, liked to practice on my own. Plus, I also liked to have some fun. I knew I wasn’t headed for any competition past city meets, so I might as well enjoy myself. I couldn’t resist a go at the rope swing, and then I’d spend a lot of time on the trampolines. They were fun, but I also practiced routines on them as I planned on entering an upcoming competition and that was my strong area. Or, I should say, my least weak area.

Charlotte and I were also on the gym’s team. Charlotte really was quite good and planned on pursuing her talents as far as possible, perhaps even the Olympics. I, on the other hand, knew I would never be great, but it was my sport at the time and I was having fun with it. I felt it was the only good thing about me that stood out. It allowed me to be “Kathy who’s on the gymnastics team” instead of “Kathy the short red-headed girl.”

Charlotte continued not speaking to me. Not officially, of course. If I asked her what was wrong, she’d bark, “Nothing!” If I asked if she was mad at me, she’d sigh heavily and say, “No! Gawd, why do you *ask* that?”

So I’d usually just compliment her on her latest routine and then head off to hang out with Ian. Ian was also a decent gymnast, but he mostly came to the gym to play. He didn’t have a male friend with him that night, so I stood in. With him I could let my inner tomboy come out. We would sneak out of the gym and run around the empty school halls playing commando or having races. Charlotte considered this behavior immature, which it probably was, so I had to do it on the sly. Not to mention that hanging out with her younger brother was uncool.

Eventually it was time for us to go home, and it was my parents’ turn to pick us up. I was always nervous when it was their turn. My father was incapable of showing up anywhere on time. My mother was pretty good at being places punctually – unless she had been drinking. Considering I left the two of them fighting, one or both would certainly be hitting the bottle while I was gone. I could only hope for the best.

Now, I shouldn’t give the impression I lived in a slum with two wino parents. We were a typical middle-class white-picket-fence family. Wait, I should say we *looked* like that. Okay, we didn’t even always look like it. But technically we were. My parents weren’t raging drunks either. My dad did his hard drinking at his favorite bar when he wasn’t working, as most men did. My mom took care of me and had a day job, so she generally drank only in the evening or when my father was being a jerk. Of course, he was usually being a jerk, and the evening came around every night, so she was probably pretty buzzed on a nightly basis.

That night my usual underlying anxiety was ramped up as I waited to see which parent would pick me up and in what shape they would be. I was pretty sure it wouldn’t be my dad. He found a way to get out of most every parental duty except punishment. So it figured it would be my mom. I pictured her red-eyed and buzzed.

Then, unexpectedly, Charlotte’s father showed up. At first I was happy because my parents had been taken out of the equation. But then I wondered why it wasn’t Mom or Dad. Or maybe I had misunderstood the driving schedule. In any case, I was relieved.

Charlotte’s dad explained that my mom was sick and that was why he had come to get us. Mom hadn’t been sick earlier, so on the drive home, I ran through all the scenarios that might have occurred while I was gone. Did my father storm out after their argument? Would he come home? Did mom leave or stay and drink? What would the rest of the evening involve? Usually, nights like that ended with my father going off to a bar. Mom would end up crying a bit and then cheering up with some vodka. Later she might hang out with me, reading *Lord of the Rings* before going to bed.

I was betting on that scenario when instead I was met with the bloody hand scene.

“Where’s mom?” I asked, having noted her car was gone. Finding Dad home and not Mom was extremely unusual.

“She went to get cigarettes,” Dad said.

Dad, like Mom, was in his late thirties. He had neatly-cut dark hair and always seemed a little rumpled in the way he dressed. I didn’t think he was that handsome, and even remember having asked Mom what she saw in him, yet looking back at him as an adult, I think he was perfectly handsome. Mom, on the other hand, struck me as being quite pretty and young-looking for her age. She had thick, long red hair and blue eyes. She was barely 5’2” and slender. Everyone said I would look like her when I grew up, particularly since I looked just like she did as a child. I figured that remained to be seen.

I was afraid to ask what happened, but it couldn’t really be avoided, not with the obvious blood all over my dad’s hand and shirt. “Are you okay?” I asked, feeling that my stomach had risen into my throat.

“I hit my hand working on your beam,” he explained.

He had been building me a balance beam that year. It was a present for my birthday. Well, my birthday that had long passed. My dad didn’t really do anything on time. He was very good at starting things, but he almost never finished anything. He dropped out of college despite a high-level I.Q. and love of learning (it was too boring), still hadn’t fixed the rusting lime-green Suburban in the back yard (it needed “a part”), and most notably, he was far from completing his enclosure of the screened-in porch (called “the addition,” this was a very large project and couldn’t be expected to go quickly). The addition had been the worst of many blemishes on what could have been a pretty nice-looking house, and it served as a capstone on all his unfinished projects. So it was no wonder my balance beam was taking longer than expected.

I never expected to get the beam, or at least not while I was still involved in gymnastics. I had long ago learned not to get excited about something cool my dad said he was going to do. Not that there was much to get excited about where my beam was concerned. In fact, I had grown to regret that he was even building it, as it had become a weapon in the cold war that passed for my parents’ marriage. When my mother claimed he never did anything for me, my father would have the beam as an example of his parental involvement. The longer he worked on it, the more mileage he could get out of it. I doubt he did this consciously; it was simply a convenient result of his normal procrastination.

 When Dad told me what happened to his hand, I at first cringed with guilt that he had hurt himself while doing something for me. But then, I didn’t think that was what really happened. I was quite sure that this time he had actually killed my mother and was just making up the beam story.

 He never laid a hand on her, as far as I knew. He was a horribly angry person, and our house had holes in the walls and broken windows to prove it. But he wasn’t usually violent towards people. However, I was always ready to jump to the worst possible conclusion, and in this case it was that he’d killed my mom. Fear of my mom dying weighed on me constantly anyway. And sadly, it made more sense to me that Dad had bloodied himself killing my mom than from working on my beam.

 So I went into the house and ended up in the kitchen. I just stood there, shaking. *This is it*, I told myself. *Mom is actually dead, and Dad did it*. I figured they had continued their fight after Mom got home from the gym and he had lost control and killed her. It was probably an accident, but the result was the same. He then called Charlotte’s dad to pick us up while he prepared to deal with the consequences.

I didn’t think he’d hurt me in any way. And I didn’t think he’d do anything to hurt himself, although he had threatened it in the past. He thought too much of himself to do that. His occasional suicidal threats were simply ways to make other people feel bad for him or about themselves. No, he’d allow himself to be taken to jail, where he would either be acquitted, or languish as a martyr, since nothing he did was ever actually *his* fault. He wouldn’t have to worry about my welfare, since both his parents and my mother’s lived in town. I was an only child and always would be, so my grandparents would love to have me around full time.

So I just waited. Had he called the police? Would I hear sirens soon? What had he done with Mom’s body? How was I going to live in the wake of this? Even though I had always feared something like this would happen, I wasn’t sure what to do.

I don’t know how long I stood there, frozen in fear clutching my gymnastics bag and standing dumbly in the kitchen. My mind continued to swirl with all kinds of crazy scenarios. I decided Mom’s body was probably in the garage, along with all dad’s other junk and sundries he didn’t know what to do with. If he were crafty, like a character in a movie, he could hide her underneath one of his many construction projects-in-progress. She could be the foundation of the almost-finished backyard patio. Or she could be behind the drywall in the “shed” (an un-finished cinderblock structure that stood by the dead green Suburban in the back yard). And then there were all kinds of possibilities with the addition.

But no, he hadn’t had enough time for hiding her body, nor would he have the patience. Even if he had tried hiding it, it would eventually be found since whatever he had done with it wouldn’t last. His attempts at the burial would be rushed and therefore “half-assed” (one of his favorite words) or never quite finished. The rain, a stray dog, or the passage of time would uncover his deed.

My life was looking bleaker than ever when I heard the front door open. My mind snapped back into the moment as I waited to see what my father would do next. I figured he’d tell me about Mom, and I tried to steel myself against the anticipated revelation. I had a death grip on my gymnastics bag, causing what little fingernails I had to gouge into my athletic-chalked palms. I clenched my teeth and literally held my breath, since that seemed to help keep me from crying.

I don’t know if I was more relieved or shocked to see my mom walk in. The sight made my knees began to weaken.

“What are you *doing* here?” I asked.

“I went out for cigarettes,” she said casually. “Didn’t your father tell you?”

Mom was in a surprisingly good mood. And sober. Apparently the fight hadn’t been among their worst and had ended without the normal dad-storming-out scenario. He had simply gone out to the garage where he had, in fact, actually hit himself with a hammer while working on my beam (although I’m sure it was a result of either anger or a ploy to make my mother feel guilty for causing him to hurt himself).

I honestly don’t remember what happened next. According to my mother, I projectile vomited as I stood there, and was promptly put to bed with what she figured was the flu. I’m sure I eventually confided in her about what was really going on in my head, since it wouldn’t be the last time I was racked with such fears.

The balance beam, by the way, eventually did get finished. It took a while, but I managed to get some use out of it in the summer before my parents split up. It came complete with a blood stain on it as a reminder of that night.

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