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Marion Duckworth

A Memoir



NAKED
ON GOD'S
DOORSTEP



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To the reader:

I've revealed the facts of my life
as accurately as my memory allows.

But I have changed others' names
and situations to maintain their privacy.

INTRODUCTION

When I played house with my friend Alice, I always insisted on being the mommy. I knew that mothers cleaned house, cooked, and made their kids go to bed on time. They washed clothes and drank tea. But the daddy page in my storybook was missing.

My father hadn't run off with a sweetie from the office or hit the road to find glitz or glitter. Not every abandoned child is discarded with a shrug. Some mothers and fathers die or stop reading bedtime stories because they're chronically ill. Other parents divorce, and Mommy or Daddy becomes a voice on the telephone and a sometime weekend parent.

The person who was to protect you may have shrugged off his parental role and committed unspeakable acts, or may have wielded a fist instead of a caress. She may have been too busy, too broken, too stoned, or too drunk to cheer you at ball games. Or perhaps your most sickening memory is of a scene at the kitchen table on a school-day afternoon. Instead of milk and cookies, you were served up a plate of horror. "Mama's gone away."

As a result of our society's escalating divorce rate, cohabitation, poor parenting, substance abuse, and a "me first" mentality, the abandoned stand toe to toe and shoulder to shoulder. So it's likely that most of us, at least once, have felt abandoned. A family member or friend promised to always be there, then vanished like a member of the Star Trek crew. So we

clung to anyone who offered an embrace. Or we hid inside ourselves so we wouldn't be rejected again.

For some the memories are vivid. Others may not remember the painful moment. Maybe all you know is how you feel—desperately insecure and anxious, as though wearing a yellow star like the Jews in the Führer's Germany. For a long time, you ignored the debilitating symptoms in hopes they'd go away. But they made themselves leaden, like demonstrators at a sit-in.

One thing is true for all who were abandoned: we were hit by a blow from which we do not easily recover. Instinctively, our shrunken souls found ways to survive. We became eager to please, entertaining clowns, or overly responsible miniature adults. The continuing strain of living half-formed lives leaves us exhausted.

Finally, the time comes when we can't play "Let's Pretend" any longer. Our confidence is paper thin, our emotions threadbare, our hope a feather in the wind.

If you've suffered the pain of abandonment, stop now and ask God to take you farther down the pathway to healing as you read this book. If you have not experienced abandonment, ask God to give you compassion for those who have.

I am not presumptuous enough to insist, like an actor on an infomercial, that I have all the answers. But God did provide insights that made me gasp. And those insights, when I chose to do hard things, changed me forever.

Begin with me a journey into the love of God.

ONE



Punch him in the belly!”

That morning in the late 1920s, our New York City apartment was like a Three Bears scene in my fairy-tale book. Mama stood at the sink washing dishes; Papa sat on a kitchen chair against the wall. I was on his lap, listening while he told me a delicious story. Suddenly, his eyes closed, his head slumped, chin against chest, and the words stopped.

Eager for him to continue, I punched him in his softness with all the zap this twig of a girl could muster. That’s what Mama had told me to do.

His head snapped up. “Huh? Oh yeah. Where was I?” He picked up the story line but soon slumped again. Shrugging, I slid off his lap, disappointed that Daddy wouldn’t play.

What was wrong with my father, I didn’t understand. Those days I’d stare at him slumped in one of the heavy, ornately carved dining room chairs. Or I’d stop and examine him, slouched, eyes closed, in his favorite Morris chair in the living room. Each time I could sense that while his round body was with us, Daddy was gone.

One day I looked in his favorite chairs but couldn’t find him. I asked my mother where Daddy was, and she took a deep breath. “In bed,” she said, and exhaled slowly, as though she had a pain. I didn’t dare ask any

more questions about why my father had become a life-size floppy doll and was in bed in the daytime.

Later I followed my mother into their bedroom and stood shielded behind the skirt of her housedress. Daddy was lying under the covers in their double bed. Light streamed in through a window dressed in a white curtain that looked like a party dress. I hoped he was playing hide-and-seek with me.

“Get up, Joe.” Mama’s voice was as sharp as a pointed stick.

He didn’t answer.

I knew then that he wasn’t playing hide-and-seek. Hope, along with my smile, sank into my shoes.

As Mother and I left the room, the day seemed to grow dark, as though thick, black clouds had gathered—the kind that came just before a thunderstorm. I hated thunderstorms.

Not long after, my father disappeared completely. I looked for him on all the chairs in our apartment—even in bed. Daddy, who used to tell me funny stories, sing funny songs, and bring candy in his pockets when he came home from his print shop, was gone. I felt as though a giant scoop had hollowed out the place where Daddy had been and left a big hole.

When my mother explained, she wore the painted expression of a wooden marionette. “Daddy is sick and had to go to the hospital.”

She seemed to be speaking to me from another room. I was desperate to reach out and pull her back with silliness and hugs.

My father didn’t *seem* sick, just sleepy. Only he was sleepy most of the time. I couldn’t understand why he had to go to the hospital. He didn’t have broken bones or a bad cough. Being sleepy wasn’t the same as being sick.

All I wanted was for life to be nice again.

I'd never seen the hospital, so I couldn't picture him there. "Can I visit him? Will he come home soon?"

My mother slowly shook her head. "It's far away. You can't go see him. They don't let children in the hospital." She sighed. "He won't be home soon."

My mother's smile seemed mostly to have disappeared. Daddy was the one who made her laugh with his funny stories and the way he teased her. He joked that he was fat and she was skinny, that he was balding and she had lots of long, brown hair. That he was Jewish and she was a goy.

It wasn't until many apartments later that my mother explained. "Your father wanted everyone to be happy. He was always joking, trying to cheer people up. But no matter how he tried, he couldn't solve the problems between his parents and me."

She said it was because my father's family was Orthodox Jews, while she was a Gentile Christian. My father's parents kept a kosher house and celebrated *Shabbat*, and my grandparents wanted her to convert to Judaism and to keeping kosher—whatever that was.

Mama shook her head slowly. "Your father didn't insist. I was a Christian when we married, and he knew it." They were both satisfied to go to a church in Manhattan where a rabbi spoke one week and a minister the next.

As she spoke, I said nothing. Not once did she cry or look mad, just hopeless. I wanted to back away and slip out the door. Instead I sat staring at her as she went on. "He couldn't stand the fact that his parents wouldn't accept us."

"Some people were mean to your father because he was a Jew, especially in business. He tried to disguise his identity by changing his name from Isadore to Joe." Mama always called him Joe.

“All that trouble was too much for him. Finally he said he couldn’t fight any longer. He said he was going to bed and stay there, and he did.”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t take care of him and you too.” My mother had a heart ailment, was chronically anemic, and had thyroid and intestinal problems. “I chose you. You have your life ahead of you. So I had him committed to a mental hospital.”

You chose me? For seconds, the idea made me feel proud. As though I was important. As though she liked me best. Soon, though, the words turned sour. *She had to choose me because I was a kid. If it weren’t for me, she and Daddy could still be together.*

The sound of my mother’s words called me back. “His family blamed me for putting him away. They said I should have kept him home.”

My paternal grandparents were a blank page in our photo album. Other grandmas and grandpas came to visit kids I knew and said, “Oh, look how she’s grown! See how smart she is.”

Once we did meet my father’s parents in a subway station, and they gave me a nickel that I carried like a treasure. Afterward, Mama made sure I wouldn’t expect things to change between my grandparents and us. The empty years that followed proved she was right.

In spite of my mother’s explanation, I knew something must be wrong with me. If I were a nicer, better girl, my grandparents would have liked me.

One of my father’s brothers, who was a barber, did sympathize. He came to our house, set a chair in the middle of the kitchen, and cut my hair. As he combed and snipped, he talked with Mama.

“They don’t need to know I was here,” he told her, referring to my grandparents. “It’s between us.” Although I loved secrets, I hated this one.

We moved to Shelter Island, New York, close to my cousins—children of one of my mother’s sisters. When Mama was sick and I stayed at their

house, we laughed and sang as we did the dishes and chased one another in the cow pasture. Janet, who was a few years older than I, brushed my hair at bedtime. For those weeks, I felt like part of a real family.

One day when Mama was with us, I begged to watch my cousins play a game called mumbly-peg. She relented, but ordered: "Don't you let Marion hold the jackknife."

"We won't," they promised solemnly. After she was gone, I begged them. They handed the pocketknife to me reluctantly, watching closely to make sure I didn't cut off my finger. As I awkwardly flipped the knife into the dirt, I shivered with delight that they dared to disobey Mama.

I walked the back roads with them to school the first day. Although I was never sent to the principal's office as I feared, my teacher did have health inspections. So I cleaned my fingernails until they bled. One terrible Friday, the blood looked like dirt to the teacher, and I got a dreaded demerit. That single black mark signified failure to me. Because Mama chose me over Daddy, I mustn't fail.

Daddy ran away from the hospital once, and the police couldn't find him. When my mother received the news, she paced the floor, drank tea, and paced some more. "He can't take care of himself!" she worried out loud. "He has no money. How will he get food and a place to sleep?" Terrified, I bent lower over my coloring book, pressing so hard I broke crayons.

Daddy was lost and couldn't take care of himself.

The Salvation Army located him in a place she called a "flophouse." She stopped pacing; peace rested on her face. The Salvation Army clerk said he thought Daddy was using drugs because he slept most of the time.

Christmases after that, no matter how poor she was, Mother dropped coins in the Salvation Army kettle the first time she saw one. I looked forward to that moment and felt proud as the coins clinked against the metal, and the bell ringer smiled and said "Thank you."

We moved to more country and city apartments before I finally understood what was wrong with my father. He was mentally ill with a condition called schizophrenia with catatonia—incurable in the 1930s. That's why he slumped as though asleep.

The thought that thumped like a heartbeat, however, was that my mother had traded me for him. So I bit my fingernails, picked at my cuticles, and jumped to obey her.

Since Mama's heart was sick, I had to be quiet and good or maybe she'd have an attack. She might even die, and it would be my fault. Then I'd be all alone.

No matter how good and how quiet I was, she still had heart attacks that put her in bed for weeks. The doctor came and examined her soberly, left medicine, and told her to stay in bed. Sometimes I sat alongside her, afraid that any minute she might die. Eventually I learned to take her pulse, empty the bedpan, and make simple meals and bring them to her in bed.

The year she worked as housekeeper for a man with two children whose wife was in the state hospital, I almost felt like a normal kid. She received a small salary plus a room that she and I shared. At night we went to that room and listened to the radio before we fell asleep. I liked lying next to her in bed; she said I twisted and turned and stole the covers.

Someone warned Mama that people might talk and say it wasn't right for her to live in that man's house.

Mama set her lips in a line. "I don't care what people think. I won't quit because of gossip. This man's wife is sick, just like Joe. How can they expect him to take care of his children?" After a year or so, the man's wife got well and came home from the mental hospital. Mama's job was over.

I'd taken comfort in the fact that their mother was sick and in the hospital just like my father. But now she was home—and my father was not. He was still sick, even though every night I wished on the first star that

Daddy would get well. Even though at bedtime I prayed that God would make Daddy better so he could come home.

Mama and I moved to Coney Island. When friends asked why, she answered, "This place is full of strange people. No one would think Joe is weird if I brought him home."

Coney Island's strangeness fascinated me. Sometimes I felt as though we were living in a storybook about the other side of the world. One of our neighbors was a magician and a ventriloquist. He worked in a sideshow all summer and toured with a carnival during the winter. His red-headed wife hired me briefly that summer to help make gadgets for him to sell after his sideshow act. When the job was done, she handed me coins to jingle in my pocket as payment.

A man down the street ran a fake electric chair act; his young wife "died" at every show. Mama felt sorry for her and wished out loud that she'd take their baby and go back down south where she came from.

Once in those Coney Island days, cars containing members of two rival gangs sped by our house, shooting out of their car windows at one another. I was in school, but Mother, who was watching a friend's baby in front of the house, barely escaped, along with her charge. When she told me what happened, I shivered and wished she'd hold me tight.

Daddy remained in the hospital.