

We Pursue Catharsis Like a Dog Chases His Tail
A Memoir

When I was sixteen, my father hit me in the face. If I told you why, you wouldn't believe me. That's the way it is. In our memories, the justification for violence has to be as bold as the act. To see the truth, you have to be there when things happen.

In my parents' wedding portrait, my father is dressed like a cowboy and my mother is dressed like a woman pioneer. It was a wild west wedding. That is to say, the theme of the wedding was the wild west. In the portrait, my parents are standing still and stiff, but smiling. The wedding portrait, although it is not a window into anything that might have been a wild west, is a portrait into my father's mind.

In the portrait, he wears a pistol on his belt, in the fashion of television cowboys from sixties shows such as *Bonanza*. I remember he spent many evenings watching these shows, by himself, in various living rooms of various houses around Denver. In the portrait, he is like the marshal at the wedding, keeping the peace. Was this the role he envisioned for himself in the marriage, and in his subsequent fatherhood?

In some ways, the figure fits. To me, my father's power was both great and terrible.

Through the fog of years, I see myself in gym class, in kindergarten. I try to do a cartwheel, and somehow it goes wrong. There is great pain. Although I will not know it until later, my collarbone is broken. I cry. I am sent to the nurse, but there is a miscommunication. I find myself back in class, crying again, still in pain. Then my father is on the scene, taking charge. He yells at the nurse and takes me out of school and to the hospital. Having him on my side, I feel proud, close, loved.

The good moments never last very long.

Perhaps a month later, my collarbone is still healing, and for some reason my father is yelling at me, and he spans me. I will occasionally remember some spanking, out of the many all run together, and I will try to recall the reason for it. This is hopeless. Over the years, the concept of a reason becomes meaningless. All that I can do is resign myself to the way things were, and to the way they are.

But I have my own role in these histories. I am the son of my father.

The first day of fifth grade as my class lined up on the blacktop at Birch Elementary, the boys complained to each other that our class had the two biggest nerds in it. Joe and I were the nerds. Joe looked a bit scrubby, had a rat tail, and his clothes weren't new or fashionable. As for myself, I wore ugly glasses and had a nest of uncombed hair. We were at the age when we became easy prey for kids who needed an Other, someone to pick on. A few months into the school year, however, I found a drawing of a skeleton with a 'boner' while sharing a biology textbook with a popular classmate. As we laughed at it together, I realized that I was no longer a nerd.

This was around the time when it became fashionable to have one's underwear showing above the waistline of one's pants. The underwear was supposed to be trendy boxers, but the elastic bands of many of our classmates' tightie whities made naive appearances. It also became de rigueur for the boys to say they beat Joe up after class. Nobody ever got suspended, and Joe never had any bruises, scrapes, or broken legs, but I believed them. Perhaps I was sensitive to the fragility of my quickly won popularity. The schools I'd gone to before had been mostly in poor neighborhoods, but nobody had ever fought each other there. When I began attending Birch Elementary, in the more affluent neighborhood of Broomfield, I found that the boys would

often fight each other. Since I had not fought anyone, perhaps I felt that my popularity was uncemented. Perhaps this was why I decided that I would beat Joe up.

The day came that I decided would be the day to beat him up. As the last bell rang, signaling the end of the school day, I hurried to shove my books into my bag as everyone filed out of the class. I was too slow, though, and Joe began to leave his seat while I was still crouched on the ground messing around with my bag. I grabbed the leg of his pants as he tried to walk away. He looked back.

“Wait. I’m going to beat you up.” I said.

Without saying anything, he tried to pull away.

“I’m going to beat you up,” I repeated, pulling on his pants leg again and trying to get up.

Joe turned part of the way toward me and kicked me in the face. In shock, I let go of him, and he hurried out of the room. My nose was bleeding. My glasses were broken. I began to cry.

This was before my parents divorced, that same year. With the divorce, my father moved out of the house, and my brother went to live with him. I stayed with my mother. We adopted a dog from the Denver Dumb Friend’s league and named her Shadow. She was a German Shepherd mix with a boundless enthusiasm for hiking. My mom, Shadow, and I would hike trails together all over the front range. The bright moments.

One day, I was wrestling too hard with the dog, and she bit my ear so that I would eventually have to get five stitches. I jumped back, astonished. Then I began hitting her. I could write a story about that, dramatize it perhaps, but the truth is that I used to hit that dog quite a bit. I couldn’t tell you the reason. Like I said, the reason fades into insignificance. Only the violence remains in the psyche.

In the old Westerns made under the studio system and the production code, like John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, the hero never has difficulty determining what wrongs need to be punished. Wyatt Earp knows he's right when he throws the drunken Indian out of the tavern for disturbing public order. He knows he's right when he knocks Doc Holiday unconscious for being belligerent. I never watched *Bonanza*, but I imagine it was pretty similar. The hero knows he's right when he punishes evil, and he knows when to punish and when to rest.

That was the problem, I think, for me. I realized this much later, when I would babysit a friend's three-year-old boy. This was sometime during the six years I spent in the Navy. My friend didn't mind if I corrected the kid physically. That was part of my friend's way of parenting, to give the boy a quick spank or squeeze his hand hard enough for it to hurt. It made sense, but I could never figure out when I should punish and when I should rest. I could never relax. I needed the boy to be just so; I couldn't take it if he wandered around, if he acted like a child. One time, I smacked his butt for knocking over a mop that was resting on the wall outside the bathroom. This isn't fair, I realized, as he began crying. It doesn't make any sense.

That was the beginning of finding out who I was, but it wasn't all of it.

My freshman year of college at the University of Colorado at Boulder, I was still my father's child. It's was lonely year. I was twenty four years old, living in the basement of the Luther House run by the Lutheran campus ministry. Winter came. In the long nights, I pondered what it meant to be a man.

This is around the time I decided to adopt a dog in the summer. I spent some nights crying, thinking how undeserved was all the violence that has coursed through me and around me. I thought about Shadow, such an obedient dog, so loving and in every way everything my mother

needed after the divorce. I thought about how I must have made her life harder than it should have been. I knew it wouldn't matter to her. Dogs don't hold grudges. They wake up every morning, and they hope for the best.

Still, there I was trying to find or create a model for manhood. I began to reestablish communication with my father, which I had purposely allowed to lapse. He was living in a motel in Commerce City that rented by the week. It was a dreary place. To me, the drive to the motel from the highway felt like forfeit, and the place was an almost deepest desolation.

I spent a few nights there over the course of the winter. The buildings were squat, neglected blocks strung together and painted white long enough ago that they began to look like natural features of the barren landscape. The motel, apparently, did not furnish anything, not even curtains. My father's apartment had a Denver Broncos beach towel in the window, hung from a curtain rod. Because my father had moved there from a house, the apartment was like an entire house compressed into one small motel room. A wooden stack of shelves separated the main room from a tiled kitchenette and a bathroom in the back. Three corners of the room were cluttered with stacked furniture, on top of which jackets, pants, and shirts were thrown or hung. In the corner on the left by the kitchen, there was a small dinner table; my father's two dogs used the space underneath it as a den. In the middle of the room was a clearing bordered on the left by a tan sofa with sunken cushions and on the right by a TV on top of an entertainment center. Between the TV and the couch were a couple of hard-back metal chairs and a dingy, yellow office chair of the type that rolls. If you sat down too hard on the sofa, a board would ram your back.

One night late in the winter, I came over with a bottle of potato vodka to spend the night. I

came in and settled my things, and then we went to the grocery store to get some soda to mix the vodka with. Back at my father's apartment, we began pouring drinks. I started my drink as my father turned on the TV and started loading up a bong. My father's advice to me before my first day of school in Kindergarten had been, "'Bong' is a bad word, son. Don't say 'Bong' in school." He'd been in narcotics anonymous for about ten years after the divorce, but one year while I was in the Navy he started smoking again around Christmas, when I was home on leave. I remember feeling guilty about that, like I caused him to start smoking again from the stress of me being back. Who knows, though, about things like that?

Before I had finished my first drink, one of his neighbors came by to tell him about their kitten who was ready for adoption. They had a litter of calicos. He'd been planning to adopt the kitten; he just hadn't known when it would be ready. As the neighbor went to get the cat, we arranged the apartment, setting up a makeshift litter box.

When the neighbor came back, my father took the kitten from her and brought it inside. A big spot of white on one side of the kitten's face made a neat line down the center of her head where it bordered darker spots of black and brown. She sat briefly in the palm of my hand, vibrating, but she was impatient with quiescence and set to wandering. We watched her as she sniffed around, wary that she might go into the bathroom where there was still some roach poison on the tile. We had, also, to watch my father's two dogs as they inspected the kitten.

I don't remember how long he'd had the dogs for. They were both mutts. Thunder was shorter and colored something like a Doberman. Sugar was taller and more filled out, and she looked a bit like a Black-Mouthed Cur. I think he had one of them, maybe both of them, when he was still married. That was a few years before. He'd lived in a house in unincorporated

Adams County with his wife. His wife slept upstairs, and he slept downstairs with the dogs. That was how it was since she'd moved to Colorado from Massachusetts to marry him after they met on the internet. It had seemed like a rebirth when he'd met her, so why it should be that they slept separately for so much of their time together, I do not know.

As we watched the kitten and the two dogs, taking turns petting the kitten's fragile little head, my father admired how mellow and sweet she was. This made him recall the dog we had when I was a kid, Scamp, and how great a dog she was. He thought back, also, to the calico that my parents got not long after they met in the air force, while they were stationed in Korea. She lived to be something like 20. That cat, my father revered, was an excellent cat. As we marvelled at the wondrous future that we and this fresh kitten had together, past and future twined together incidentally like smoke wisps.

At the time that my father moved into the house he'd had with his last wife, he'd still had Scamp. One of her more distinguishing characteristics was that she would eat the hottest Mexican food that we could bring home for her. My brother and I used to ride her like a horse, but one time, when I was maybe four, the woman with whom my father was having an affair came by the house with her daughter, and the daughter insisted on pulling Scamp's tail. That was the only time I saw Scamp lose her cool. She barked at the girl with righteous anger. I remember being very upset with this little girl. Although I cannot recall anything in particular myself, I am told that when Scamp was a puppy my father once hit her in the head with a frying pan and threw her down the stairs. The calico cat from Korea fared similarly.

I finished my drink and took the cat. An old movie was on the TV; heroes were making things right. I made myself another drink, and my father started to load his bong again. When I

finished making the drink, I scooped the cat up into my lap and began petting her. The larger dog, Sugar, came over and started sniffing the cat. Suddenly, Sugar lunged and bit the kitten's head.

My father erupted out of his chair, five foot ten, two hundred twenty pounds of fat, muscle and bone, "Oh my god! She bit her head!"

I watched without feeling. I've resigned myself to the way things are.

My father pushed the dogs back and inspected the cat. "Oh. Oh my god. She's okay. She's okay." He turned back towards the dogs. "You're lucky you didn't kill her!"

I took a sip of my drink.

He bent over Sugar, pushing a rigid finger into her face. "Bad dog! You were trying to kill her, weren't you?!" He slapped her across the muzzle, advancing as she retreated from the assault. "You want to kill her, huh? You want to kill her?" He slapped the dog again.

I've resigned myself to the way things are.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size, huh?" He punctuated his rhetorical questions with blows to the muzzle or wherever he could get them to land. "You want to pick on me? Come on! Come on! Pick on me!" His bald head flushed scarlet to match his strained face.

This went on for a minute or two, perhaps, before I said something to distract him. My father used to say the same things to my older brother whenever he found out my brother was torturing me in that way brothers have of doing. He would tell my brother to pick on someone his own size while lashing him across the buttocks with his leather belt.

Things calmed down for the rest of the night. We kept an eye on the kitten and made sure

that the dogs didn't overwhelm her. Eventually, I went to sleep carefully on the rickety couch, and my father made up a bed on the floor. In the morning, we decided to go to a diner a few blocks away for breakfast. I drove us there, and we ate while exchanging pleasantries.

Afterwards, we went to a Walmart to pick up some cat food, cat litter, cat toys, and all the other things one buys to make a cat feel at home.

After that, I drove us back to his apartment. I stretched out my arms and looked up at the overcast sky as my father unlocked the door to his apartment. He opened the door. Through the open door, I could see the kitten lying inert in a wet spot on the carpet.

My father took a couple of steps into the apartment. "Oh my god," he cried softly, but with great emotion in his voice, "they killed her. They killed her."

Personally, I felt nothing. The years have hardened me against investing so quickly in a new presence in my life.

My father went further into the apartment, into the dark beyond the sunlight outside. He scooped the kitten's body up tenderly. He stroked its broken neck with one hand, its slightly flattened head stiffly flopping in his palm. "I can't believe they killed her. Oh my god." My father was crying. He petted the kitten's dead body for a while, then he carried it out to the dumpster. He said he didn't want the woman who'd given him the kitten to know what happened to it. Maybe if she didn't know its fate, she would give him the kitten's brother.

Coming back to the apartment, my father stood stiff just within the doorway. "Which one of you did it? Which one of you killed her, huh? Was it you, Sugar?" My father loomed over the dog, who cowered back. "Oh. It *was* you, huh? You think you can just kill her? Huh?"

He punched the dog as though he were fighting a cattle rustler and trying to knock him out.

The dog ran under the table to her den in the corner. My father followed her and flailed at her beneath the table. He landed blows all over her body as the other dog, Thunder, barked from across the room by the door to the outside world. Sugar, cornered in her sanctuary, tried to protect herself as she could, snapping her jaws and barking. My father drew back, raising a hand to his head, above his brow.

“She bit me.” He seemed astounded, hurt, at first. Then he became angry, “She bit me! You’re going to bite me? Come on! I’ll kill you!”

He hit the dog underneath the table some more until he calmed down. When the atmosphere seemed stable, I went to the bathroom. Before I finished in the bathroom, I heard a loud crash and a commotion. When I came out, I saw the yellow office chair upturned and broken in the kitchen just outside the bathroom and a trail of blood on the tile there leading away from it. My father mumbled something about the dog biting him and then he asked me to put a bandaid on the dog or something, as she wasn’t letting him near her. She was trembling in the corner by the front door, and I went over to her with the Band-aid. She had shit there, so it smelled like coppery blood, feces, and that indescribable yet tangible smell of fear.

I bandaged up the dog and gathered up my things to go back home. Perhaps because I didn’t really say anything, my father asked me if I was mad at him for hitting the dog. That, of course, was preposterous. How could I be mad at the man who gave life to me for the way in which he lived his life? In truth, all I felt was detachment and a sense of drifting away. Underneath that was a horrible sense of connection that ate at me.

The self-contained world, in which I had been building my own sense of manhood, began to collapse. I saw myself beating the dog underneath the table. Could I control my rage? Could

I discern right from wrong? Would I know when to punish and when to rest? Or, if not, must I live a life of solitude out of a sense of responsibility to the world not to spread fear and misery and self-doubt?

I forgot about getting a dog. I languished in the quandary. When the summer came, I volunteered with the Boulder Humane Society as a kennel assistant, walking dogs and cleaning their kennels. There were wonderful trails behind the building, weaving in and out of trees and grasses, passing by a fast-running creek. The trail even followed some train tracks near the outer edges, opening up into a view of the foothills. When the grass grew tall with the summer heat, some of the dogs would be afraid to follow the trail, but I patiently coaxed them along, showed them there was nothing to be afraid of.

Carrying on with my plans, still convincing myself that I had changed them, I moved into a house where I could have a dog. I was afraid. In early August, when I drove to the shelter to look at dogs to adopt, I was shaking and trembling. I was facing the future.

I had no idea what I was doing when I signed the adoption papers for the dog. I was supposed to live the rest of my life alone, so I couldn't hurt anyone.

But, my god, he was beautiful. Just six-months-old, he was small and vulnerable, with a head too small and paws too big for his body. On the way back from his first trip to the veterinarian, I turned and looked into the backseat where he was lying curled up. He was so small, curled in a corner, his head tucked onto his haunches. It was almost a loathing in the pit of my stomach that I felt for his vulnerability. I itched to do something, to force him to look into my eyes and acknowledge my strength. But I looked forward. Master yourself, that was my own vision of manhood.

For months I struggled. I was so afraid. To live in this new way. Advice from dog training books filled my mind, and I was afraid at every step that I had ruined my dog's chance for happiness forever.

Then one day around Halloween I came home to find wrappers from a large bag of candy I'd bought strewn all over the house. The dog sat by a couch, looking guilty. I stood by the door. My hands hung by my sides. Anger filled my mind. I closed the door and stepped into the living room. The dog slinked up to me and pressed his nose against my hand. I pushed him away and went into the kitchen, where the bag had been. I picked up all the pieces and threw them away. Then I let the dog out. When he came back in, I gave him a treat and ran my hand over his soft fur. I don't hold grudges. I am the son of my father, but I am my own man.