

Tainted

nonfiction by JULIE ROBISON

It was a typical morning. I was 15 years old, getting ready for school, when I heard a knock at the door.

I heard my mama scream, "No, not my child!"

A voice at the door said, "Ms. Ruth, we found your daughter's body this morning."

What does that mean, they found her body? I wondered.

"Linda's dead!" my older sister screamed.

Then, I heard the voice saying, "Her body was found in a wooded area. She was beaten, raped, and strangled."

I didn't hear anything else. I went into shock, and my mind flashed back to the times Linda had begged me to tell Mama. If I had, maybe Linda would not be dead.

I had little or no interest in church, but to my mother, church was her life. Mama was heavy-set, well dressed and beautiful. She was strong, had no education, but could read the Bible, and Mama could sing! While she was cooking, she sang, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, and help me stand." She was always so excited about church, yet the only thing that excited me was knowing my daddy was going to give me \$2.00 for the church offering, and the church was only going to get \$.50 cents because I was going to spend the rest at the candy lady. Oh, yes, I had it all figured out. I told Mama I was going to Sunday school. Instead, I asked my Sunday school teacher if I could go to the bathroom. When she said yes, I ran to Ray's Sweet Shop for two packs of grape and apple Now & Later's, a hot sausage, and 10 coconut cookies. Then, I ran back to Sunday school. When my mother arrived to pick me up, I was where I was supposed to be.

I was raised down the street from the church. We lived in a beautiful lime green house trimmed in white. We had a well-manicured lawn, concrete planters of flowers, orchid-filled baskets hanging from the top of the porch, and a brand new yellow and brown Grand Torino station wagon in the driveway. Although my mother loved the church, it was quite different for my daddy. He was a drinker who believed in hanging out with a different group of brothers, Christian Brothers, the makers of brandy. No matter how much he drank, Daddy was a hard-working man. Bills were paid. He took us on vacations and made holidays special for us, especially Christmas.

With all the wonder and joy of these memories, it is mind boggling, how life can change so quickly, so drastically, and

so permanently without warning, as it did for me one sunny afternoon in 1976.

That day I just didn't want to be in class. I had skipped class before and didn't get in trouble because I was the best female athlete in the school. The school needed me, so the teachers would not report me, and even if they did, I was sure the principal wouldn't suspend me. So I got on the city bus and went home. As the bus got closer to my stop, I could see my house from the street. My daddy appeared to be at home. My heart began to pound, and I wondered what he was doing home in the middle of the day. Although Daddy's truck was there, the car was gone, which meant that Mama and Daddy had gone out together, and more than likely, to the dog track, where they would be all day. To be safe, I had my story together.

I walked to the front door to enter, but it was locked, (good sign). I knocked on the door, no one answered, (another good sign). I turned the knob. It was locked, and fear gripped my heart. Daddy could be in there. I ran back to the front door, trying to remember the story I would tell about why I was out of school early. I knocked again, harder this time. No one answered. Breathing a sigh of relief, I remembered the jammed window and knew I could squeeze through it, as I had done many times before. I got my head halfway through the window, and I could see into my Mama and Daddy's room, but it wasn't Mama and Daddy. It was Linda and Daddy. Linda, my sister and my Daddy!

Linda was only 16 years old. She was naked, lying back on the rolled back into her head and her body was limp. I saw Daddy lick all over her. I saw him pull down his pants and go into her. I saw him, and it was my Daddy. I tried to move quietly, yet I was so disturbed that I began to shake so much so that I hit my head on the top of the window. Daddy looked up, directly into my face, and I into his. He quickly began to put on his clothes. I, traumatized, attempted to free myself from the window and fell to the ground, in fear and disbelief. I wanted to run, but my legs and mind were not communicating. I looked around, aware of the wind visible in the movement of the trees, but I couldn't breathe. I thought I would suffocate! Everything turned dark. I touched my neck to feel for a pulse because time had stopped, and I thought that just maybe, my heart stopped too. All the rumors of my older siblings were founded. Daddy was the horrible man they said he was.

He was suddenly before me, his face right up to mine. "If you tell anybody," he growled, "I will kill your mama." Like an iceman, he turned and walked away.

Nothing was real — the father I respected, the values I had been taught, my dreams, my life, and my love. Everything was gone. There I sat, on cold ground, in the darkness of my tragedy, devastated, abandoned, feeling lifeless, lost, and with a stream of tears running down my face. Then I, too, began to sing what my mama sang, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, and help me stand..."

I was dead, hardly feeling, paralyzed by anger and fear. In the weeks following that horrible sight, I frequently started fights, and though I was able to achieve A's and B's academically, I was always cursing someone out or disrespecting my teachers and receiving F's in conduct. I walked through life numb, frozen, with a vengeful and cold heart, seeking another opportunity to strike out. I excelled in sports. I was awarded the "Most Athletic Girl of the Year," but to do anything else, I wasn't interested. I was a grasshopper in my own eyes, and I viewed the world as a great giant I was not able to conquer.

Someone told me that if cigarette ashes were put into alcohol, it would kill a person, so one day I secretly gathered ashes from all the trays in the house, pouring them into his brandy bottle. I shook them up, and with a wet rag, cleaned around the top outside of the bottle, took a Q-Tip to remove the excess ashes from the inside of the top, making sure nothing would prevent him from drinking his brandy. Following his routine, he walked in from work and poured his drink. I was in another room waiting for him to fall dead, but instead he yelled, "Which one of you bastards is trying to hurt me?" Of course, he never thought it was me, his "baby."

Daddy wanted me with him everywhere he went. He tormented me every day, but never did I say a word, remembering his threat, "I'll kill your mama." Even when Linda told my older siblings that I saw what Daddy had done, I lied and said she was a liar. Then Linda was murdered and the worst time of

my life began.

Daddy marked me as his favorite, and my siblings despised me for it. My daddy always bragged about how smart I was, and how he was saving money to send me to college. I had many thoughts about killing him. I often dreamed of stabbing him a hundred times and would wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat, crying for Linda. I was sure he had killed Linda, and many times, I walked in the rain and asked God to kill my daddy.

One night, I felt a tug on my leg while I slept. At first, I thought I was dreaming, until I heard his voice. Daddy woke me up whispering, "Come with me." I got up, wondering what he wanted. I followed him to his and Mama's room. Mama no longer slept in there with him. He closed the door, and then

locked it. In amazement and fear, I said, "Daddy what is it?"

"I want to show you how much I love you," he said. "You can't tell anybody because it will cause problems for your mama, and I will have to do something bad to her." Tears began to fall from my eyes as Daddy pushed me down on the bed. He raised my pajama top, and removed my bottom. He tried to kiss me on my mouth, but I turned my head. I remember how filthy I

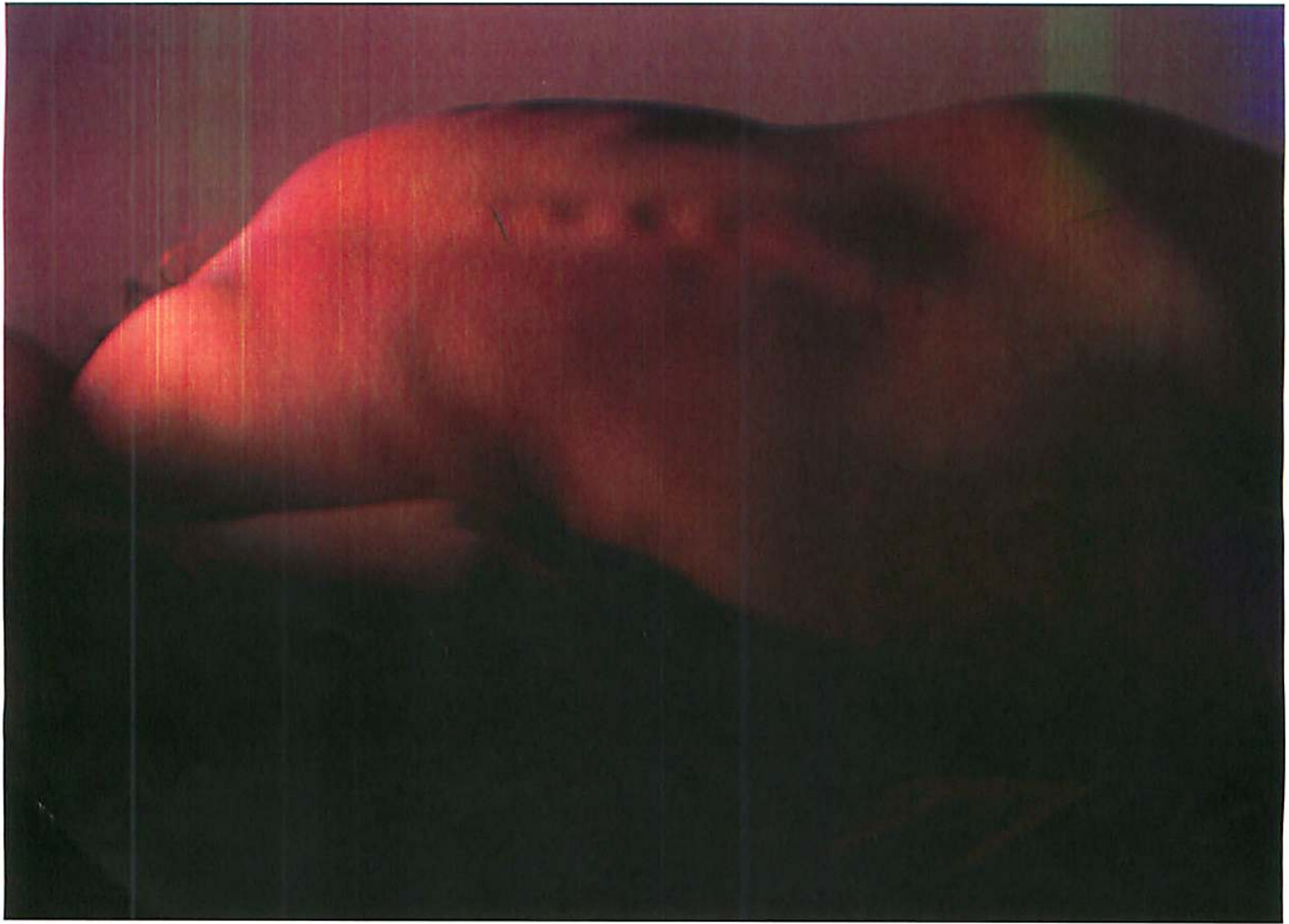
felt, how sick to my stomach I was, how I screamed inside as his hands crawled up and down my body. I never could have imagined this. I had fantasized about my first time, only it was just not at the hands of my own despicable father. I really don't know how long it lasted; it seemed to have been forever. When it was over, and I had my pajamas back on, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill.

"For what?" I asked.

"Because I love you," he answered.

Years later, I struggled through teenage pregnancy. After my daughter was born, I placed her in the care of my parents in spite of fearing she too would be molested. I went from one broken relationship to another in the downward spiral of my life. I attempted suicide by taking prescription drugs then moved on to cocaine and crack. I sold dope and I sold my

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Claudia Morales
Bare
C-Print
8" x 10"

body. I stole everything I could, and money flowed through my hands as fast as water through a strainer. My addiction took its toll on me, and I began to experience periods of extreme paranoia and psychotic episodes, which landed me in a mental health facility. I found myself in and out of jails, soon graduating to the state prisons. It took three state prison sentences for me to conclude, "This is not the way."

Life had done me wrong, and I was tired of living. I walked the streets in a fog. This was no life. My soul ached and my heart was always breaking. From a distance, I could hear a very familiar sound; it was a song, and the sound of it became stronger, closer, and clearer... "For every mountain, You brought me over, for every trial You've seen me through, for every blessing, hallelujah, for this, I give You praise..." Then I heard, a voice saying, "Sister Julie, Sister Julie." My eyes focused, and there stood one of the women of the church. I was in a worship service where everyone looked just like they did

all those years ago. I then realized my broken spirit had taken me to the past. I returned to the world of reality at that moment, smiling in adoration and thanksgiving. I knew then what I had to do: I joined the church choir and began to offer praise as my mother had done before.

Today, I am the Founder and Executive Director of an Ex-Offender and At-Risk Youth Program. I am blessed with wisdom that classroom lectures do not offer. I am empowered with empathy and mercy, which are tools that do not come from textbooks or teaching manuals. They come from grace and love that was freely given to me that I now freely give to others. I have coping skills that come from trusting in God. I always have in my faith file the victory of former trials, struggles, pains and tears, being assured, that no matter what the tide, He will see me through. This is my testament, my history book written from the ledgers of my past, the chronicles of my heartaches, and the voyages of my many tears. 🍷