

How I Forgave the Man Who Killed My Mother

A parishioner's obsession with controlling a small-town church became a living nightmare for a new pastor's family. Here's one woman's remarkable story of pain and forgiveness.

I ran.

My bare feet pounding the pavement were burning from the sun-baked asphalt. Each contact between flesh and blacktop provoked bursts of pain as if I were stepping on broken glass. The deserted country road, stretching into the horizon, felt as if it were conspiring against me. No matter how hard I pushed myself, the safe place I was desperate to reach eluded me.

Still, I ran.

Had a thousand angry hornets been in pursuit, I couldn't have run any faster. Daddy's instructions had been simple: I had to be a big girl, run down the street as fast as my legs could carry me and get help.

There was nothing complicated about his request. Except for the fact that I'd have to abandon my hiding place under the kitchen table, risk being discovered by the madman down the hall and, in turn, provoke another confrontation. I knew, however, that ignoring Daddy's plea was out of the question.

And so I ran.

Even though Daddy struggled to appear brave, the anguish in his eyes spoke volumes. Splotches of blood stained his shirt just below his right shoulder. The inky-redness was as real as the fear gnawing at the edges of my heart.

I wanted to be a big girl for the sake of my daddy. I really

did. But the fear and chaos now clouding the air squeezed my lungs until my breathing burned within my chest.

My best intentions to get help were neutralized, at least at first. I remained hunkered down, unable to move, surrounded by the wooden legs of six kitchen chairs. I had no illusions that a flimsy 6-by-4 table would keep me safe, yet I was reluctant to leave what little protection it afforded me.

In that space of indecision, I wondered how I might open the storm door without drawing attention to myself. One squeak from those crusty hinges was sure to announce my departure plans. Closing the door without a bang against the frame was equally important. The stealth of a burglar was needed, only I wasn't the bad guy.

Making no more sound than a leaf falling from a tree, I inched my way out from under the table. I stood and then scanned the room, left to right. I felt watched, although I had no way of knowing for sure whether or not hostile eyes were studying my movements. I inhaled the distinct yet unfamiliar smell of sulfur lingering in the air, a calling card left behind from the repeated blasts of a gun.

I willed myself to move.

My bare feet padded across the linoleum floor. I was our family's lifeline; our only connection to the outside world. While I didn't ask to be put in that position, I could see that my daddy, an ex-Navy man, was incapable of the simplest movement. The man whom I loved more than life itself, whose massive arms daily swept me off my feet while swallowing me with an unmatched tenderness, couldn't raise an arm to shoo a fly.

To see him so helpless frightened me. Yes, Daddy was depending on me.

I had to run.

I shot out from under the carport, down the driveway, and turned right where concrete and asphalt met. The unthinkable events of the last five minutes replayed themselves like an endless-loop video in my mind.

My eyes stung, painted with hot tears at the memory. The fresh images of what had transpired moments ago mocked me with the fact that my worst fears had just come true.

I had to keep running.

To get help for my momma and daddy. To escape the gunman. To get away from all the threatening letters, the sniper gunshots, the menacing midnight phone calls, the home invasions—and the devil who seemed to be behind so many of them. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

Five Years of Terror

Mr. Horry James Watts lived across the street from us. By all outward appearances, the 65-year-old was an upstanding citizen and a happily married, devout family businessman with nine children. But many of the locals in Sellerstown, N.C., and the longtime neighbors who knew him well testified that, in addition to his respectable public facade, he had a sinister side. Mr. Watts had a reputation as a womanizer, a control freak and a kingpin of sorts—a narcissist who didn't hesitate to leverage both his influence and affluence to his advantage.

Mr. Watts seemed to own or control everybody and everything within his power—he even managed to control the church affairs at Free Welcome Holiness Church, which he attended religiously.

His favorite pew was pew seven. From that comfortable perch, he had the perfect vantage point to mind everyone's business. What's more, even though Mr. Watts was neither a professed

believer nor a church member, the church followed his wishes without opposition.

That is, until Daddy arrived on the scene. Daddy was a quick study. Witnessing Mr. Watts' stranglehold on the church, Daddy made changes to end his dominance.

Making the case that church business should be conducted by the church brethren as a whole—not by one or two outspoken individuals—the church family voted to turn the business of the church over to members only. From then on, stripped of his power, Mr. Watts had no say in church matters.

This came as a blow to Mr. Watts, who had been serving on the building committee. Mr. Watts became so angry that he sent us an unsigned threatening letter, which arrived at our house on Dec. 23, 1972.

The note, which promised that our family would leave Sellerstown "crawling or walking ... dead or alive," followed a series of late-night menacing phone calls that marked the beginning of more than five years of terror against our family—during which time our car tires were slashed, our mailbox was pelted with bullets, and 10 bombings were directed at our house and eventually the church. One bombing blew out our bedroom windows and left shattered glass around my baby brother, Daniel, while he was sleeping in his crib. By God's grace he was unharmed.

We lived with the dark reality that something awful could strike us at any moment. After several months of being the target of Mr. Watts' campaign of terror, I never felt safe. I doubt my parents did either.

For me, this tension was greatest as the sun melted into the horizon. Without its warm glow outside my window, I dreaded going to sleep. My mind was tormented by questions that no child should have to entertain.

Why did Mr. Watts hate us? Why did we have to always live in fear? Why didn't God stop these bad things from happening? Would God really allow one of us to get hurt?

Aware that I, at times, dreaded going to sleep, Momma would kneel down by my bed and recite with me the classic children's prayer from the 18th century: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." I meant every word of that prayer.

I remember that Momma, much to my surprise, began praying for Mr. Watts. When I asked her about that, she recited Matthew 5:44 (KJV), saying, "Becky, Jesus said, 'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'"

Part of loving our enemies, she explained, included forgiving them when they wronged us—even if they hadn't asked for forgiveness. Even if they weren't sorry. Momma explained that we had been forgiven by Jesus for all our sins, which is why He expected us, in turn, to forgive others. Forgiveness should be a way of life—even when it was humanly inconceivable to do so.

These lessons on forgiveness would be tested to the end of human understanding by the time I was 7 years old. After more than five years of terrorism at the hands of Mr. Watts, he entered our home on Easter weekend 1978. We were sitting down to supper when, armed with three guns, he barged in. He fired two shots at my daddy and one at my momma. The house was in total chaos.

That day our lives were shattered forever. Momma didn't make it out of that house alive. And Daddy's spirit was crushed that horrible evening. Several years later after suffering a severe nervous breakdown, Daddy died without warning while I

was at school. I knew when Momma was killed that a man took her life, but when Daddy died, I felt like God took him from me. I wrestled with this pain for more than two years.

Finally, I had a revelation. I found the verse that says God is a Father to the fatherless (see Ps. 68:5). I hung on to those words with everything I had. I also realized that I needed God more than I needed to blame Him. He was there with me through everything we suffered at the hands of a calculating madman. God was the one who brought us through the pain to the purpose as He promises in Romans 8:28.

But the story doesn't end there.

Loving the Enemy

Eight years after my mother was killed, the phone rang. It was Mr. Watts with a question for me. As I talked with this man, a man who had taken so much from my family and me, I noticed a different tone in his voice, not the one filled with dripping hatred that I remembered as a child. Mr. Watts apologized for all he had done to my family. In prison, he entered into a relationship with God, which is why he called to ask if I would forgive him.

I told him my brother and I did forgive him and, in fact, we had forgiven him long before he had asked for forgiveness. I explained that our parents had modeled for us the words of Jesus in Luke 6:27-28 (NIV), "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

I'm most often asked, "Becky, how in the world could you possibly forgive Mr. Watts for all the horrible things he did to you and your family?"

Humanly speaking, it's natural to think that anyone in my shoes should have the right to seek revenge. This side of

heaven, it's easy to be preoccupied with settling the score, of hurting those who have hurt us or withholding forgiveness out of spitefulness to those who have wronged us.

However, if I allow myself to go down the pathway of rage and retaliation, several things happen, and none of them are good. What's more, you and I have an obligation to forgive because we've been so richly forgiven. In that respect, forgiveness is the language of heaven. That's the message in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35. As you read it, don't overlook the powerful warning at the end: "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

As crazy as it sounds, we're commanded to speak the language of heaven, to forgive with no strings attached; and that may require us to forgive repeatedly. When we do, we shock the world with God's power at work within us.

When they shake their heads in wonderment, when they struggle to understand how anyone could forgive like that, we have the opportunity to point them to the cross—the ultimate act of forgiveness. Not only that, as I open the door of my heart to Jesus and in His strength forgive others, that's when I'm set free.

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