

Blood

stories

Matthew
Cheney



Black
Lawrence
Press

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*For my mothers,
Elizabeth Cheney & Ann Thurston*

*and in memory of my father,
David D. Cheney
(1943–2007)*

How to Play with Dolls

Jenny's father spent a year making a dollhouse for her, a three-storey mansion with four gables and six chimneys and secret passageways and a dumbwaiter and a tiny television that, thanks to a microchip, actually worked. He gave it to her on her seventh birthday. Jenny thanked him and kissed him and told him she had always wanted an asylum for her dolls.

Though he wanted her to make the house into a pleasant place for tea parties and soirees, Jenny's father stayed silent as he watched his daughter restrain her dolls with straightjackets fashioned from toilet paper. He kept his silence as she built prison bars with toothpicks and secured every door with duck tape. But as she placed the dolls into their cells and set a group of them to stare at the television, he could not observe quietly any longer, and so he went to his workshop and reorganized his impressive collection of antique awls, adzes, augers, and axes.

Jenny continued in his absence. She created schedules for the patients, times when they could wander through the halls or make origami birds or rant and rave without reproach, or sleep in the cots she had built out of matchboxes stolen from her late mother's private stash. She had considered appointing some of the dolls to

be doctors, but she did not trust them, and so retained all supervisory duties for herself. She did not sleep, for fear that were she not to keep a vigilant watch, the dolls would revolt or, worse, harm themselves. She despaired, though, because none of the patients seemed to be making any progress. Instead, they were all becoming recalcitrant, and they did not want to wander or create anything, they stopped ranting, they let the television slip to a channel of grey static, they slept and slept and slept. Jenny tried extreme measures: water dunking, severe lighting, simulated earthquakes, and even, with a contraption made from spoons and Christmas tree lights, electrocution. Nothing got better, and the dolls might as well have been dead.

After a month, Jenny's father returned from his workshop with delicately-detailed miniature hot air balloons, and as Jenny sat beside her asylum and wept over the helpless despair of the dolls, her father orchestrated clever escapes for each of the patients, who proved to be masterful balloonists, each and every one. They flew to the paradise of Jenny's bed, where they waited until she returned one night, the asylum having been abandoned, and they embraced her in their tiny arms and sang ancient songs in lost languages while she slept, her face wet with tears from her dreams.

Blood

The man who (my mother said) cried at my birth was the same man who gave me a rifle for my first birthday, a .22 he had built himself. The man who taught me to shoot that rifle as soon as I was able to walk was also the man who taught me to tell deer tracks from bear tracks and bear tracks from moose tracks, to tell poplar from hemlock and oak from pine. The man who screamed at the television every night, as if the politicians and legislators could hear his rants, was the man who night after night through my childhood, and especially in the long cold of each winter, told me stories of good rabbits and bad foxes in the forests, with the good rabbits outwitting the foxes, and the owls overseeing it all.

During the nights now, I remember his stories. And I remember him sitting in a wooden chair in our front yard, shotgun across his lap, head held in his hands, saying to me as I sat beside him, my arm around his leg and my fingers in love with the roughness of his jeans, "I just want them all to leave me alone. It's the only thing I want in the world." He looked at me, he ran his giant hand through my hair, he kissed my forehead. I remember his lips were dry and sharp, and the long whiskers of his beard tickled my skin.

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I was a homely girl: freckled and scrawny, with thick, stiff hair, sunken eyes, and large front teeth. My father told me I should be glad to be homely, because boys would leave me alone that way, and I could mind my own life. This was certainly true most of the time when I was growing up, when we lived in the big house in the woods on a hill outside of town. My four brothers hardly knew I was there at all, and I usually kept to myself, observing; waiting.

The only one I had ever wanted to notice me was our mother. She went away when I was seven, during the winter, during a storm, when you could hardly see three feet in any direction because snow filled the air. I remember staring out the window, looking at big flakes highlighted by shafts of moonlight, white butterflies in the wind. And then a yellow light, thin and bobbing: my mother, flashlight in one hand and cardboard suitcase in the other, running down the hill. I didn't realize it was her or what had happened until I heard my father's voice, cursing and crying, and my eldest brother Win saying to him, "It doesn't matter." John said, "It's a terrible storm out there." Win said, "She doesn't matter."

My mother returned three (almost four) years later, when she came for us after everything had happened. Her hair was short and dyed dark red; she wore eyeliner and lipstick, but her eyes were hollow and she could not smile. Though I lived with my mother in town until I went to college, there was a distance we couldn't cross, a coldness to us both. She cooked me dinner every night, and no matter how small the portions, every night I left much uneaten. Later, I sent her letters and once or twice each year called her on the phone as I pushed north after college, settling first in Maine, then Montreal, then Halifax, now St. Lunaire, Newfoundland, until today one of my letters was returned, unopened, with stamped in red on the front of the envelope: *Deceased*.

Three of my brothers may still be alive. I talked on the phone with Nathan a few years ago, after he was arrested again.

Death does not horrify me, and dying is not a concept I've had to reconcile with any sort of belief or doubt; I give it as much thought as I give to clouds and rocks. Yet, it is the events around my father's death that I struggle to portray for myself, to wrap a story around and save as something more than fragments of fact, shards of memory, fractured dreams. In college, I studied evolutionary biology, and tried to find in nature analogues to what happened in my life. I moved to Maine to paint pictures and teach high school science, to meld Monet and Darwin, to find myself and to discard myself. I loathed my body (skin, eyes, shape) and I gave it to any man who asked, and each time I hoped with all the hope I had left in me that he would not give it back. I kept moving. In Montreal, I bought a camera and took pictures of objects for commercial catalogs and junk mail. In Halifax, I told stories to tourists. Now I have fallen in love with the ocean. Here, there is an old man with a white beard down to his waist who wears a tattered jacket and skullcap when he sits each dawn on a rock just beyond the reach of the morning waves, and the first time I saw him, and perhaps even after, I was sure it was my father there amidst the rotted threads of fishing nets, listening to the sea and the sky and the clouds.

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My parents met in high school and got married soon after, my father nineteen and my mother eighteen. His parents had died, and he and my mother lived for seven years in the house in town that he had grown up in. She worked at the town library and he worked at the lumber mill. He had collected guns all through high school, learned to fix up the mangled and broken ones and sell them for twice or three times what he paid. After a while, enough people had

heard of him that he was able to cut down on his hours at the mill and spend most of his time gunsmithing. He named his first son Winchester, his second son Colt.

People from around the country, even the world, began to bring their guns to my father to fix, to adjust, to beautify and preserve. He had the luxury of choosing only the guns he most wanted to work on, and the money he made allowed him to build his dreamhouse on a densely-wooded hill ten miles from any neighbors. It was a giant log cabin—six bedrooms, three bathrooms, a living room the size of most other people's whole houses, a dining room, a kitchen with space enough to cook for thirty people, and a basement with two sections: one heated and furnished to serve as a workshop and showroom for my father, another left bare and cold for storage. A dirt driveway snaked up through the woods and ended at the house. The steep embankment around the driveway made it seem like a ramp leading to a castle, and served a similarly protective purpose: it was impossible for anyone to sneak up on the house without being seen. Our father's black pick-up truck sat there like a sentry, and sometimes on dreary nights I would sneak outside and climb into the truck and pretend I was in a spaceship flying away.

There was a spot behind the house for my mother to have a garden, which is all she said she wanted. After we moved to the new house, she stopped working at the library and started tutoring Win, Colt, and eventually the rest of us at home, because our father said it would be a crime if we went to school now. Now, he said, we were all free.

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What happened, happened three years after our mother left. There's no way to tell, though, when it began. It was an accumula-

tion. It was night after night of shouting growing louder, lasting longer. It was weekly target practice turning to twice-weekly, then daily, then twice-daily. It was the pantry filling with canned food and dried milk. It was a generator in the basement and the remnants of a savings account stuffed into a sock hidden in a hollowed-out Bible. It was banks of trees planted in the front yard, a steel gate built at the bottom of the hill; it was rifles in the bedrooms and pistols in the kitchen and a crossbow on the dining room table; it was Army-issue ammo boxes in the corners, black shades on the windows, trap doors cut into the floor of the living room and kitchen, a secret passage in the attic leading to the roof where rope ladders waited; it was barrels to catch rainwater, and my brothers disappearing into the woods for hours every day to set booby traps, and our father standing on the porch of the house, shotgun in hand, revolver in his belt, staring, waiting.

And then the day he said, “We’re ready now,” and he sat us all down around the dining room table, pointed the shotgun at us, and said, “No-one leaves. We’ll wait for them here.”

Despite being an incurable rationalist, I tend to pay attention to numbers and dates, to coincidences and correlations and patterns, and so those words began what I’ve come to think of as Day One. There were six days after it. A week of lifetimes. I was ten years old, a decade completed. Win was seventeen, a year away from being able to buy a rifle legally or to enter the military. Colt had just turned sixteen and wanted to get a driver’s license, but our father told him we would have nothing to do with the government anymore, that licenses and Social Security cards and birth certificates were ways the government numbered you, tracked you, trapped you. John was thirteen; unlucky. Nathan was twelve, a year lived for every month of a year. There were five of us, a prime number, divisible only by one and itself. There were four brothers, an even num-

ber, divisible by two. The word “divisible” contains nine letters; nine is the last single-digit number, a sacred number, lucky to the Chinese, unlucky to the Japanese because, or so I’ve heard, when pronounced, it sounds like the word for pain.

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One fall night, a few months after our mother’s departure, while we were all watching a game show, our father picked the little television up, jerked it away from the wall, and carried it outside. “Come on,” he said to us as we sat still on the couch and chairs, staring at the place where the television had been. He picked up his shotgun and we followed him outside. The television sat on the ground like a lost or chastised animal, I thought, something naked and cowering. Our father shot it three times, its guts flaring on the first shot, its shell collapsing, pulverized on the second and third. “Clean it up,” he said to my brothers. For the next few nights, he insisted on telling us all stories of the rabbits and the fox and the owl, but he gave up when my brothers started whispering during the stories and kicking or elbowing each other. He got distracted, and he couldn’t remember an ending. “Go to bed,” he told us, his eyes fierce and red.

Yet it wasn’t until a few days before Day One that I had any sense something was wrong, any sense of foreboding, of true danger. I doubt if my brothers were more perceptive than I. We were used to our father, his sudden temper, his moods. I remember him in the days leading up to everything that happened saying more than once, “They won’t take me alive, Jill. You neither, I hope.”

They were a constant presence in our lives, because *they* were the persistent enemy and tormentor of our father. Who *they* were shifted, but in general *they* were the government, sometimes the police, occasionally any authority whatsoever, from the anonymous

pests at the post office to a clerk at a store to an airplane flying too low. Always, *they* were a force beyond us and in opposition to us.

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There are things I will never know about what happened, even as I try to filter the voices and images of remembered dreams from the voices and images of more substantial memories. I remember 16mm movies of Win and Colt as toddlers wearing cowboy hats, and I remember the sound of the projector clicking and clicking and the dust motes hovering in the light, and then I remember the film stopping on one frame and the light burning it, an amoebic hole growing massive on the screen, but I cannot imagine when we would have sat down to watch home movies, nor do I ever remember seeing a projector or a camera anywhere around the house.

I hear phrases and sentences in my brothers' voices, but where did they come from, when did I hear them? Win says, "Don't be like the girl, John," and John says, perhaps then or perhaps another time, "Why don't you believe me?" and then I hear the sound of someone sobbing on the other side of a door. I remember playing jacks with Nathan in the driveway and stopping suddenly to watch Win and Colt drag John, naked, howling, through mud and brush, and I hear Nathan's voice whispering to me, "Don't mind them, Jill, it's just a game," but I don't know how to play jacks, I have never seen a set of jacks in my life, and I know our father forbade us from playing any sort of games.

The first memory I have of my father is of him planting a sapling and then standing next to it, watching it. He was tall, and he towered above the little tree. I probably remember this because he seemed so powerful there, and perhaps I was scared, or awed. The memory is a still picture in my mind, and almost colorless: my

father's tallness, his big hands and dark beard, and the tree with only a few small green leaves dangling from its grey branches.

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In the days before everything that happened, my father gave me my own handgun. A Smith & Wesson revolver. I don't know what became of it. (In Maine, I briefly dated a guy who was fairly liberal and always voted for Democrats, but who was, as he described himself, a "firearms enthusiast", and he took me to a shooting range. I only stayed long enough to discover I couldn't shoot with any accuracy and had lost whatever ability I'd once had; every time I squeezed the trigger I closed my eyes and shot into the darkness.) My father handed the revolver to me as if it were a baby bird. "This is yours now," he said. "I don't ever want to hear of it not being with you. Sleep with it underneath your pillow. Loaded. Understand?"

That was the day John said to me, "He heard something on the radio last night. Got him all ready to raise hell. I don't think he slept, just kept cleaning every weapon we got, and loading them all."

Early in my childhood, I thought of my brothers as a team: indistinct, interchangeable, an entity that was not-mother, not-father, not-me. Soon after our mother left, though, I began to notice my brothers' differences, the delineations of their personalities. I paid attention. Nathan and John, the youngest, were playful, and sometimes included me in their games, generally as the Indian they were hunting. (Once, they threw rocks and our father saw them do it and whipped them with his belt) Win and Colt were always distant, always serious, but Colt would sometimes tuck me in at night and smile at me. Win spoke to me only when necessary, and usually to command: *Clear the table— Go inside— Be quiet.* Win taught Nathan and John how to shoot, and took them out to practice shooting at tin cans and logs (only our father would go out with

me), and he took over most of our reading and arithmetic lessons after our mother left. John liked candy; Nathan daydreamed all the time; Colt often woke early and went outside to sketch birds; Win liked to climb trees.

Once, I was wandering through the woods, picking up pine cones and throwing them as far as I could, and when they landed I made a noise I thought sounded like an explosion, though I suppose it was closer to the sound of a toilet flushing. After I'd been doing this for a few minutes, throwing one pine cone after another, my hands sticky with pitch, I heard laughter. I looked around, then up. Win sat on the branch of a tree above me. He stopped laughing when I looked at him, and he turned away.

§

For three hours, we sat at the table. Our father stared at us, and we stared at him. In my memory, not one of us blinks. The shotgun doesn't move.

Finally, he said to Win and Colt, "You two take the others down to the storage cellar. Tie them up."

We didn't fight and we didn't speak. We all walked together down the stairs and into the cold, damp cellar, where John and Nathan and I sat against the cinderblock wall while Colt gently tied our hands and feet together with white cord. Win walked upstairs; Colt nodded at us, then followed.

Nathan began to weep. John hit him in the ribs with his elbow. Nathan whimpered, then was silent.

For two days, we sat down there. Colt brought us food and water when he could, and untied us long enough that we could go to the far opposite corner and release our bowels in the dark, the stench mixing with the thick scents of the concrete walls, dirt floor, wood ceiling.