



Daddy Dearest

By Farah Damji

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It was a smoky New York evening; autumn was busy conjuring her spells of winter and heaps of leaves appeared from nowhere to gather at the feet of streetlamps. I tried to commit to AA, to do the 90 meetings in 90 days ideal, I did more than that. I lived in dull, smoke-filled basements. I was in shock from the end of the affair, I knew that it was over but still we kept stopping and starting in fits. He called me, his voice as thin as a reed in the middle of the night, he asked to see me and he sounded so hollow and fragile, I'd agree to meet. He said we could get through this, that he, we, could change but we were two overloaded dumpsters backing into each other. Every time it was a crash of emotions and raw pain, every time failure and disappointment.

That church on Park Avenue had solid beginner's meetings, where old AA lags said you'd meet "a better class of drunk." AA felt welcoming and safe and there was a hint of a brighter future, one in which sobriety was a cornerstone, a day at a time. I could see it becoming a part of the rest of my life, but at twentyfour, the rest of my life was a long time.

My father's drinking had cast long shadows in my life; it was why I had left home. I hated the person he became when he was drunk. The echoes of my mother's voice still rattled around in my head, and it took me straight back to being a confused and crying child, thwarted by her own power. She would tell me that it was all my fault that he drank, that if I would behave better, if I studied harder, if I stopped fighting my siblings, he'd stop. Now, I drank to stop feeling that guilt. I didn't want to own anyone's pain, I didn't want to confront my own.

My drinking started once we were safely separated by an ocean, and a few years when his drunks could no longer affect me. I drank for oblivion, not to feel. I swallowed

whole bottles of gin, as I had done on the night before my 21st birthday. Nothing changed. I still felt sick. Drinking induced the same anaesthetic state that men and shopping did. I felt as if I didn't exist and when I was drunk, that the pain was rubbed out. These intakes of excess further blurred the frayed edges of me. I tried so hard to fit into my reflected self, like Narcissus but my mirror was dirty and cracked.

The ends of my nerves stopped transmitting any sensation. I could have been living between giant sheets of blotting paper. The hangovers were awe-inspiring, I felt as if an acetylene torch was burning holes in the frontal lobes of my brain. It hurt when I tried to think and I couldn't make the simplest connections. I could feel the physical deterioration. I was tired.

I acquired an AA sponsor who was an enthusiastic friend. She listened without laughing as I detoxed and the muck filtered out of my brain and my body. AA precluded having any outside life. It felt a little cultish. I quickstepped through its program of Twelve Steps which marshalled every aspect of my life: past, present and future. I tried to conform but it meant surrendering to a power greater than me and I wasn't ready to accept that anything could be greater than my imagined omnipotence. I preferred to hang onto the craggy precipice than to let go, for fear of what I might fall into. It was Wagnerian, my addiction, like a ring story, I always came back to the threshold of what I knew. I wasn't ready to quit and I easily surrendered to more ugly adventures.

Fluorescent lights in old church basements do little for the chiselled features of the actors, celebrities and journalists that eventually find their way to the rooms. I drank strong filtered coffee in Styrofoam cups, laden with heaped teaspoons of sugar, as it softens the effects of withdrawal which accompany not drinking. Hearing other people's stories of drugs, dependency and degradation made me feel less like a sorry failure. I settled into this world of aggregate freakishness and my story fell somewhere in the middle of the catalogue of horrors which we alcoholics compiled. AA inductees, when they have reached the 90 days milestone have a freshly exfoliated look. We venture forth, detoxed and replenished, with our shiny (plastic) 90 days medals, which we carry like St. Christopher's coins, to guide us through the Mephistophelian maze which is life without substances.

It was taking longer than a little while to clear the fog in my own head. I was oblivious to the posse of undercover detectives who had been following me around, who probably wouldn't have permeated the permanent state of short-sightedness

my vanity inflicts on me, in any event. I refused to don whatever designer glasses and un-muddle the blur which surrounded me, didn't want to see angles and sharp edges and I'll take curves and soft focus, even if means knowing loose bits of sidewalk up close from time to time when I tripped. I had ascended from the pit back into the choking car fumes and boisterous noises of my city's Grand Avenue. I stood by the curb and watched the swarm of taxis, they were lit up, like locusts as they glided on a swarming carpet in a choreographed formation up the wide avenue. I always looked for the taxi number 9E16, which was my street address.

There were two behind me, climbing the old, narrow cement staircase gingerly and two more greeted me as I reached the top of the stairs.

“Farah Damji?”

My mind was still elsewhere, as it tried to weave together the incongruent strands of my separate lives, to form a new shape into which I could fit.

“Yes?” I thought they were AA folk but something pricked in the back of my mind when I realized they were using both my names. That's a big AA no-no, you are only known by your first name and the first initial of your last name. Anonymity is the cornerstone on which AA is founded.

“Farah Damji, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Larry Gertz.” More detectives came from out of the shadows and I was soon surrounded by eight or ten of them. They handcuffed me and read me my Miranda Rights.

Larry's murder had been front page news on New York's daily toilet paper, The Post. The unspoken conclusion was that it had been an ordered mafia hit. Larry was mixed up with the wrong crowd and had embezzled from people he shouldn't have. The smart money said he got what he deserved. I hadn't stopped to ponder on it since my outburst that day. The devil deals the cards in the world I had been a part of; murder was part of the pact if you were caught lying, stealing or cheating from one of the Grand Masters of the game.

The ride to Central Booking underneath 1 Police Plaza was long and quiet. They must have been expecting a gangster's moll, judging from their excessive number. A detective sat either side of me. They were relieved I had volunteered to go with them demurely, but there was no rush. They were on overtime, it was 7.45 on a Tuesday evening, they could have sprung on me anytime prior to that.

One Police Plaza is an ugly grey municipal building, which was having a bad Bauhaus day. We passed in a procession, through the regulation wooden panelling in the

lobby; we went into an elevator up to the floor where the DA and his assistants lived. I was shown into a board room and the handcuffs were taken off me. They didn't fear an arachnid escape from the eighteenth floor.

They left me on my own.

This felt insane. I was barely twenty-five and though I had done a lot of impulsive things in my short life, murder, even the thought of it, hadn't been one of them.

Larry had been another person at the periphery of my life; he hadn't been more than a casual acquaintance. The amount he had stolen from me was paltry compared to what he had taken from others. I'd asked Charlie what had happened to Larry and I had been summoned to a “meet” in the middle of the night at his flat. I had started to receive strange phone calls, consisting of vague threats and unspecific demands. I put them down to M's paranoia. People said he had learned that Olga and I had tampered with his precious cargo and this was him, trying to reign me in. Michael did things in metaphors; he couldn't confront me directly so he'd mind-fuck me with the paranoia that he projected from his own fear. I'd seen him do it to other people. His skin was so dry it was flaking off and he hardly left his darkened flat on Sutton Place. He had aged fifteen years in six short months. The purple blotches had spread and where he picked at them, ugly scabs formed on his face. He looked crusty.

The door opened and a young man with a springy step bounced into the room. He introduced himself as Dan M Rather Jr., Assistant District Attorney. He looked like a young Kennedy; he had the same rich, suntanned look of the privileged scions of America's first families.

Dan M Rather Jr., less than thirty, was going through a rough patch. He didn't have the same assured good-looks his father did, he was a little fish-eyed and rumped. His father, CBS's long-standing news anchorman had recently had an episode in which muggers had attached him and kept asking,

“What's the frequency Kenneth?”

He was walking up Park Avenue on his way home and although his doorman had corroborated the story, there was a lot of New York snickety-snickering about the incident. Some versions of the story claimed he thought he had been privy to alien cross talk on the airwaves. Others were less kind. I tried not to smirk as I said:

“Oh, like the newsreader?”

“That's my father.” He wasn't smiling; we all have our paternal crosses to bear. He could think of better places to be than here, during prime drinking time on a weekday

evening in the Irish pubs a few stories below. Tonight was his father’s birthday, maybe he would rather have been there than intimidating me. He rummaged his hand through his thick blond hair.

“Look at these.” He slammed an A4 manila envelope down in front of me so it landed millimeters from my hand, which was resting on the cherry conference table.

It looked innocuous; I tipped its contents out on the table. Immediately, I recoiled.

The glossy 10 x 12 inch colour photographs depicted the crime scene at Larry’s death and there they were, Weegee style, spread out in front of me.

There were close ups of his neck which had been slit from ear to ear, it was known as a Mars bar, in gang slang. He lay slumped on his desk, with his head lolling too far forward. I retched loudly and Dan Rather moved his precious photos away before I could throw up all over them. I didn’t, I tried to remain stoic.

He could see that I was shaken but he didn’t stop, he picked up the half dozen pictures in his hand and fanned them out, like a tarot card reading, in front of me.

“What do you know about this? Did you have Larry Gertz killed?”

Had this not been happening to me, it might have been funny,

“What are you talking about?” Indignation rose in me and I could feel the fear which I had managed to keep suppressed, quickening in my veins. My hands started to shake and I couldn’t stop them. This wasn’t happening.

“We just found a cashier’s check for Connie le May for \$1000 in your purse. How do you explain that?”

Connie was a professional dominatrix we sometimes employed when the need arose. She was a one-stop bondage shop and charged upwards of \$500 an hour. I couldn’t explain that.

The client she had been with was a leading fashion designer. His silk swathes enveloped starlets and socialites from Metropolitan Museum of Art charity balls to the Oscars. He paid by credit card which would go through one of Michael’s companies and we’d pay her by cashier’s cheque. She had spent two hours with this hard core sex freak. She, cold and hard as cash, could bear the level of degradation the oily Levantine immigrant wanted to have inflicted on him. She made thousands of dollars a week on the administration of pain, she had made it into an art form but how was I going to explain this to Dan M Rather Jr.?

I stayed silent and as I did I wondered how he would interpret that. Silence can be seen as a way of holding onto truth, or in the words of Thomas Moore it could

be seen as an admission of guilt, a tacit collusion to the facts presented. He pushed the chair he was sitting in back noisily and slammed the door as he went out of the room.

For the first time in my life, I got on my knees and I prayed. I hung onto the leg of the table for a little physical stability during my devotion, I felt as if I might melt away.

I was put through the system, in the subterranean sewers of the building. My fingerprints had to be taken twice as the first detective hadn't taken them accurately “accidentally.” It took another 24 hours for my prints to come back as clean from Albany and I began the endless circuit on the fairground Ferris wheel which is America's court system.

That night I had a dream which seemed to prophesise what would become of me, down the line. My bones were ground to a fine powder as I was crushed between stones. But I still believed that I could get myself through this. I was arraigned the next morning and went home, back to bed to try and forget. I woke up flailing in the sheets. The sky was a shroud the colour and grain of a pumice stone dawn, as the horizon was being bruised with brutal punches of purple.

I called the number which hadn't changed in all the years we had lived in that house in Nicholas Way. I can never forget that first phone number; it's been digitized into my memory. I held my breath and whispered a prayer as the phone rang, thousands of miles away. I could imagine its sound scoring through the silence of the early morning, resounding off the parquet flooring and climbing the stairs.

“Mum?” She had been fast asleep.

“Hmm?” I heard the sheets rustle as she sat up in her bed, in my mind's eye, I could see her pink silk nightie sloping off her shoulders.

“Farah? Is everything all right?”

My phone calls home were sporadic at best. Sometimes, when I was feeling nostalgic, over the holiday season I would phone, pretending to look for a recipe for Yorkshire Puddings or to ask her how to cook a turkey. Whatever time it was, my mother would gather her wits about her and explain over the phone. She must have known it wasn't the recipe I wanted. I sought the reassurance of knowing where I came from, of hearing her voice but the link had been broken long ago. These cold midnight calls couldn't defrost the tundra that lay between us.

I'd asked to speak to my father; he was still the distribution system through which everything had to go. I told him briefly what had happened, without embellishment

and I felt so small when he comforted me and told me he would be on the first plane the next morning.

“I’ll call Lou Rivlin, he’ll know what to do.”

Lou was the DC based ex-Judge who had invested in my father’s business. Lou had become a larger-than-life Father Christmas figure in our lives, he brought toys and sweets for us, and wisdom for my father whenever he came to visit, about twice a year. I had telephoned him when I first arrived in New York, to lay out the markers for a friendship away from home, he’d call me sometimes when he was in town and once, we had dinner together. He was a wily, world-weary character, going on seventy but he didn’t look a day over fifty. He had recently married a much younger woman who had made him a father again. He was always slightly grumpy, he had forgotten that young babies cry a lot and wake up in the night. His first brood was all grown up and had left home decades ago.

Lou didn’t let us down, The next morning I was at the offices of the attorneys he had recommended. My dad came straight to the sky scraping office in midtown Manhattan from the airport. The panoramic view was sucked up by the large wall-to-wall window. The sky was stooping weary and low, heavy with the burden of proof and the weight of low grey clouds.

This is the image of my father which has frozen in my mind. He was in his midforties, he wore a camel-coloured cashmere coat and an immaculate fine wool suit underneath it. His hair was thinning but it was slicked back and wavy and he wore a beard. He looked like a rainmaker, a high-flying executive, one of those men who occupied the executive floor in the stratosphere of power, in any metropolis. But now he looked small with the big city crowding behind him, he must have been tired, he had taken an early flight and although he had traveled extensively, by First Class for as long as I could remember (I had the doll collection of National Costumes from far-flung places to show for it) he was worn out and grey. His voice faltered as he tried to greet me when he entered the room.

It was a lot to take in, much more than the extravagant breadth of the window, in the expensively appointed partner’s office in a midtown building. Robert Kasanof was our man. Lou Rivlin had known him from his old judicial days, he was part of the Washington circuit, Kasanof had been a prosecutor. Armed with his loaded Rolodex, he had siphoned off a young bloodthirsty ADA from the Manhattan DA’s office, Mary Shannon. They had thoughtfully left us together in Robert’s vast partner’s

office so we could come to terms with the seriousness of what lay ahead of me. He held his arms out and I stumbled into them. The daddy-scent of Benson and Hedges and Simple soap filled my senses. I was taken back to a less complicated place in my life, when I was younger and he could still fix everything. His warm overcoat felt as soft as a blanket and I thought if I buried myself in it for long enough, I might wake up out of this nightmare.

“Are you all right?” He sounded gruffer than I had expected and when I pulled away I saw tears rolling down his cheeks.

I didn’t answer, my mouth refused to form coherent words and my mind had stalled. I looked down at the antique Persian rug, sprinkled with colours that looked like crushed spices. There they were. All the answers that never came to the stillborn questions of my youth, they hung onto us, like shackles. The distance grabbed both of our elbows and it rooted us to where we were standing. We could no longer reach each other. That moment had passed.

“We should have – I should have explained it to you when you were much younger, then you wouldn’t get into these messes.” I winced a little, whatever childhood scrapes I had manage to entangle myself in, they didn’t come close to being up on a murder charge. My back stiffened.

“Told me what?” I needed advice, not moral lectures.

I retreated a step. He half-turned away from me, as if he wanted to step out into the forest of buildings behind him. Now was not the time for confessions but the words had already slipped away from him and they’d formed boulders between us, it was too late to put the secret back into the drawer. He let out a sigh and slumped into the sofa. His body collapsed, in one swift movement. He looked small in the chrome and leather bucket seat. He sat completely still and only his mouth moved.

In flat tones he told me a story I already knew, about being kidnapped when I was three, about how we had left Kampala, complete lives and our dreams behind.

“Oh that. I know all that.” What it had to do with now was beside me. I wondered if this was going to turn into an analogy, like the President and his suitcase bomb.

“But it was an important... if you had dealt with it when you were younger...we should have...” His voice broke off because he didn’t know what he should have done. He dealt with it in the best way he knew.

It was too late for recriminations. This navel-gazing rumination, so unlike my father, left me cold. How odd, I thought, as I tried to take the first faltering footsteps into

adulthood, that I should fall and there were no hands to catch me. I felt uprooted and my centre couldn't find a place to balance. All I could see was fear in the eyes of my father.

Mary knocked on the door and the light tapping brought us back. She entered and was followed by Robert and Lou, who had flown down from DC for the day. They asked for a \$50 000 retainer to take the case. Salvation came in the form of a torn leaf from my chequebook; I paid half, and my dad paid the other half.

Through Mary's erstwhile connections she gleaned that the DA's office had hit a brick wall with the investigation into Gertz's murder. They knew that he'd been involved in cleaning money, they knew about his underworld connections and the affair with Connie. They had been deliberately drip-feeding misinformation to the media, who sucked it up. They recast Larry as just another innocent New Yorker who got caught in the mad, bad mafia wars that peppered pockets of the city. He had been sliced and diced to create fear in the hearts of New York's denizens, it was all part of a larger plot to destabilize the city.

The reality was that it was part of a political agenda that had stagnated and was meeting some difficulty in the city's administration. They played on and exaggerated his cerebral palsy, how he had overcome his affliction to become a successful accountant. He was recast to become a local super-hero in their aggrandizing urban legend. No mention was made of his cocaine addiction or that he was stealing money from his clients.

The murder took place in broad daylight, in mid-town Manhattan. The police had found a carving knife at the scene but it had been wiped clean. There were no traces of DNA or fingerprints. This was a professional, ordered, contract hit.

Rudolph Giuliani had recently taken the helm at the Mayors office. New York had dumped Ed Koch, the old, flamboyant homosexual. Ruddy was the new chairman of the city, with about as much charm as a cold pizza. He had declared outright war with his corrupt compatriots, the Italian mafia. He was going to give the mean streets which had long been divided up between the ruling families, back to the people who lived in them. He started the neo-con dogma of “Three Strikes and You're Out,” and with it, he succeeded in warehousing vast sections of undesirable New York stock, the white politician's favorite folk demon, the gun-toting, gangbanging young black male.

We learned that they had decided to lean on me, as I was the youngest in the crowd

and given my newly found sobriety, they were aware of how fragile I was feeling. I had been fascinated by the clutch of power which held the writhing city. I'd been seduced a long time ago by Charlie's mobster friends. They would sit around in his apartment for hours, shootin' the shit, he called it, these streetwise, outwardly normal people whose beliefs were reinforced with the clang of gunmetal and the flash of knife blades. They had New York sewn up, in an all encompassing protection racket. Business people knew they had to pay, in the same way they paid their rates, to have someone watch over them. If they didn't, they lived in fear of what might happen. New York is not a good place to live whilst holding your breath.

I had met John Gotti, when he was il capo di tutti cappi. He was charming. I was introduced by Tony Hevia, a man I was seeing for a short while who was also connected. Tony used to take me along to some of his meetings. The photograph the DA's office produced of me, taking Gotti's extended hand as he plants a kiss on my cheek could have meant anything; it looked like a familiar embrace, between two old friends, but it was the first and only time I met him. He is of that old European ilk that welcomes you warmly; it's a double Italian kiss-on-each-cheek greeting. I wasn't being singled out for particular affection. Those were the grainy pixels with which the DA's office could link me to the mafia hit on Larry's life. Gotti spent an hour telling us about his plans to go to Florida for the winter and all about his family. When he spoke about his children, his suntanned face simultaneously crinkled, around his eyes and a smile opened like a leather billfold. In the mind of Mad Dog Dan Rather, if I had nothing to do with it, I must surely know someone who did and he was determined to lean on me hard enough so that I would break.

I wondered, as I looked at the incriminating evidence, what a bored Grand Jury had made of it. What would they think when they saw the evidence of a self-destructive woman stupid enough to put herself in the hands of men like Tony, who were criminal and dangerous. Charlie, as much as I loved him was crazy, unpredictable. I was a neophyte in a new city, running with a motley crew, I didn't know well.

It was Shiva, the god of destruction that wreaked havoc in my days, in the way a child draws patterns in the sand and waits for the sea to come and wash them away. Everyday there was a clean slate and everyday I manifested more drama and destruction. I stepped closer to the brink of my capacity for danger and then Nataraj, snake-hipped and sibilant drew me in even further with his seductive movements. He tempted me to come a little closer to the edge. He was leading me

into the ultimate dance, towards self annihilation. Already, Kali was waiting, she beat a rhythm on the ground beside my grave. It was already dug and open, waiting for me to simply step in.