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## MY AFFLICTION

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*A small mole in South-east Asia  
is the only known rodent  
that mates for life. Scientists tested that mole and  
discovered a chemical in its brain  
that when blocked, caused said mole  
to cheat on its mate,  
which set me to wondering:  
What if some day a scientist  
running my DNA on a gel  
discovers a pattern across five loci  
that matched when compared  
to the DNA of my female ancestors  
for who knows how many  
generations back  
and they discovered that this pattern  
pre-determined a propensity for physical violence  
by women in my family. And not knowing  
whether environment caused the pattern  
or the pattern was caused by environment  
would I have the right to have a child  
until someone found a cure for my affliction?*

**MOST PEOPLE WILL** never go to the South Bronx. There is no reason to go there except to catch a Yankee's game and some aren't even brave enough to go for that. If you do go to a Yankee's game, you are unlikely to venture further than a three-block radius from the stadium because it is the South Bronx and to the outsider, it is dangerous. Once you've left, you will not say that you have been to The Bronx. You won't make that association. You will say that you went to a Yankee's game. And you will be right. You will not have been to The Bronx.

The radius around the stadium is a confusing knot of roads and elevated subway tracks. The surrounding streets are a dangerous maze that you would be afraid to get lost in. There are reasons that the mayor wants to move Yankee Stadium to Manhattan. Because for most people, more than any other borough in New York, The Bronx is synonymous with danger. You live there or you work there, but you don't just go there. And when you leave there, if you are a prosecutor, you shed it like a snake's skin.

Maybe it tells you something about the promise that The Bronx once held that only four places on earth get an article before their name: The Hague, The Vatican, The Netherlands, and The Bronx. And someone who lives in The Bronx may know that other side. The side with the Botanic Gardens and the quiet and safe streets of Riverdale. Or Pelham Bay with its hundreds of acres of woodlands.

My paternal great-grandfather moved to the United States in the early 1920s and first lived in the South Bronx on the Grand Concourse. He would have described the Grand Concourse as truly grand and the Loew's Paradise Theatre as the ultimate destination for high society. Until this year, the Paradise was a lonely shell of a building sitting on the Grand Concourse like an aged debutante wondering where all of her suitors went. She was just reopened in 2005. A first step toward the dream of restoring the grandeur of The Bronx, but her tarnished image will be hard to overcome.

For the prosecutor, The Bronx is the nightmare that everyone thinks it is, even in the nicer neighborhoods that make sure not to call themselves The Bronx, like Riverdale or Pelham Bay. Death and danger are everywhere. When you are a prosecutor, you don't visit the place unless something bad happened there and then, well, it may as well all be The

Bronx that the rest of the world thinks of. And for that matter, especially for a prosecutor who deals with something as dark as child abuse and sex crimes, the whole world is a Bronx and danger is everywhere.

IF YOU DID venture just three blocks east of Yankee Stadium, you would pass the regal old Supreme Court building with its neoclassical design and perhaps think, "That's quite lovely." But if you keep going another block or so, you'd find yourself right in front of the Criminal Court Building. The Criminal Court is in keeping with what one might expect when one thinks of a place where a prosecutor works. It was designed to be locked down in the case of a felon trying to escape from the building—as one did at a late-night arraignment. In the middle of a bail application, the defendant stabbed his own attorney in the hand with a pencil that was resting on the table. He vaulted the first row of benches and sprinted down the aisle and past the audience, mostly family members awaiting the fate of a loved-or a not-so-loved-one. He shoved aside a court officer and ran out the swinging doors. The facility went into lockdown. With the press of an alarm button the whole building snapped shut like a mousetrap. Every door. Every elevator. No one could go anywhere. The man was stopped cold when he bounced off the sealed glass entrance to the building, as an army of court officers holding onto their gunbelts fell upon him.

There are almost no windows in the Criminal Court Building, certainly none in the courtrooms. A narrow, secret passageway behind the courtrooms has the only windows on the second floor of the building. It was there that we would scuttle behind the scenes from room to room or hide our coffee so that we could grab quick slugs between cases. Looking at the building, it's hard to imagine that this squat, bland tank was built by Harrison and Abramowitz, the same architectural firm who built the soaring Time and Life and the Exxon Buildings. The outside of the building is almost entirely cement while the inside is mostly composed of asbestos sheets. Any construction in the building meant sheets of plastic sealing off the work area. The workers all wore masks, but we were unprotected and signs everywhere warned of my impending doom from asbestos. The dust seeped out from around the flimsy plastic and tape and I thought of OSHA and my father treating people for lung cancer. I spent

my first two years as a prosecutor in that depressing gray box deprived of sunshine and wilting like so many other flowers in The Bronx.

In my third year, I moved across the street to the Domestic Violence and Sex Crimes Bureau, or DVS, and to a brand new building that was all white and glass. Here, I sat in relative peace in contrast to the chaos across the street where the line of defendants waiting to clear security often stretched up the street and around the corner. “Across the Street” as we called it, was worse than “The Other Side of the Tracks,” and, for the female prosecutor, going to work there every morning meant running a gauntlet of hoots and whistles from the dregs of society. On “This Side of the Street,” the lobby was virtually free of civilians other than victims coming in for interviews. I had my own office with a window which, granted, overlooked a parking lot. But a window nonetheless, and it ran the whole length of my office. I had a built-in desk and carpeting. My office had only one previous occupant and the only sign of her occupation was the one blemish on my floor, in the form of a piece of gum. The carpet was otherwise clean enough to curl up on and take a nap. And I did. I would leave my door unlocked and a cup of hot coffee on the desk as a decoy while I slept. I was always exhausted, going from working an early morning shift to a late night shift to being awake for 24 hours or more when I was on beeper duty to preparing day and night for trial.

But worse than the physical exhaustion was the emotional exhaustion. The relative quiet of the building was a direct contrast to my growing inner turmoil. “Across the Street” was noisy and bleak and dirty. The hours and pay were worse and the caseload was heavier. But I could stomach the crimes. I could handle the petit larcenies, minor drug busts, and turnstile jumpers. But on “This Side of the Street,” with the promotions and the growing confidence in my skills came the growing severity of the crimes that I was trusted to prosecute. With each promotion came greater horrors. Progress was moving from wife beater to child beater to child molester to murderer. And I knew I had reached the top echelons of the bureau when I was entrusted with my first murdered baby. So, I would curl up under my desk in a fetal position with my head on a backpack and sleep.

Why would someone do this job? Why would I spend almost a hundred grand on a legal education just to work at a job where my starting salary was \$35,000, which is barely enough to live on in New York? You

could not pay most people enough to do what I did or to see what I saw, so why did I want to do it so badly? I could have gone to work at a law firm in midtown Manhattan with a starting salary of at least three times that much. I would have had a window office with a real view and maybe a secretary or even, dare I dream, a computer! And I would not have had cases, I would have had clients. And it would not be about life or death, it would just be about money.

There are a lot of reasons to do this job. People do it because it is exciting. Because it is an experience that you cannot get being a drone at a law firm. Because they want to run for office or be a judge or just love being in a courtroom. Because it's certainly not boring, or because the job is way cool. I mean, who says, "Oh my gosh, that's so exciting! Tell me about it!" when you say you're a lawyer. But when you tell them you are a prosecutor in The Bronx. . . .

But I did the job for a different reason. I did the job because I believed in it. I believed that I could do justice. I did it because I thought that if I could make a difference in the life of even one child, if I could stop the cycle of violence for one small soul, the suffering in my own family would not be in vain.

BELLE HARBOR, QUEENS is nothing like the South Bronx. It is a quiet, private beachfront neighborhood with small, tidy green lawns and children playing in the street. Before people recently started building McMansions on the tiny acreage, the neighborhood seemed a throwback to the 1950s—safe, quiet, and secure, with white clapboard houses. A place where the Good Humor man still came and rang his bell at the end of the block and all the children would scamper up the hot sand to get Rocket Pops. My Grandma's home was here and although it was not where my father grew up, it is where I always pictured him, with his fiery red hair, riding his tricycle up and down the boardwalk.

It was 1989 when I arrived by cab to visit my Grandma for a few days at the end of summer and before starting my sophomore year of college. The fear I had of my grandmother when I was a child had been replaced over the years with tremendous love, respect, and genuine enjoyment of her company. Time and the loss of my Grandpa have softened her hard edges and although she's no pushover, she's far less exacting than she had

been when I was younger. I enjoy talking to her. She isn't judgmental and she's always in tune with the times.

My grandmother loves to reminisce and tell stories and on that day, she was talking about her mother—my great-Grandma Katie. I barely remember Grandma Katie other than a foggy recollection of visiting her once when I was a small child. She was in a nursing home and I don't think she really knew who I was. All of my impressions of Grandma Katie—her strength, her generosity to others, especially during the Depression—are based on what I've been told by my grandmother. When my grandmother describes Grandma Katie's relationship with others, she describes with great pride her mother's generosity. She told me how my Grandma Katie used to have people lined up down the block for bowls of soup during the Depression and how her mother could turn a marrow bone and a carrot into a stew that was "pure ambrosia."

That day, however, my grandmother told me stories about another side of my Grandma Katie. These were not stories about the strong, straight-backed woman in the photos that kept an entire neighborhood alive when it was starving. For the first time, my Grandma started telling me about her own relationship with her mother. It seems that my Grandma Katie saved her kindness for strangers. It became clear from what she told me that my grandmother had suffered severe emotional, if not physical, abuse.

I'm not quite sure at what point my grandmother began talking to me about her own parenting rather than her mother's. Specifically, she started talking to me about my father. I suddenly heard my Grandma say, "I will never forgive myself for what I did to him." At first, I didn't understand what my grandmother was saying. I know that she was an exacting parent, but mine is a good and loving family. My Dad is inseparable from his siblings. He adored his father and although his relationship with his mother was not always warm, he loves her and their relationship has improved over the years. But, as I processed what my grandmother was telling me, I realized that she was talking about abuse and she was talking about abusing my father.

Once, in my entire childhood, my Mom spanked me. I'm quite sure I deserved it, whatever it was, but she didn't spank me hard and it hurt

my ego more than my bottom. I didn't cry, but my Mom did, and she never spanked me again. My father was more of a disciplinarian than my mother and, while I lived in utter fear that he would hit me, punishment did not take that form for my brother and me. Instead, punishment was no television or telephone privileges. Maybe we would be grounded. Never did my father lay a hand on us. Once, after I found out that my father had been abused, I asked him if he had ever had to suppress the urge to hit us. He said, "No. Not ever. Not once."

My mother was raised in a home full of unconditional love. Her father died when she was a child and her mother and her maternal grandparents raised her and her brother in a place where there was never hitting or yelling. She is a clear product of this unconditional love. She is kind and smart but, nonetheless, incredibly strong. You can't go on a walk with my Mom without her pointing out something pretty in a window or stopping to smell a flower or just commenting on the general beauty of a place. When my Mom laughs, her nose wrinkles up and her eyes disappear and her joy is contagious. But my Mom is also fiercely protective, especially of my Dad, who seems tough and sometimes unfriendly to the outside world, but who is really quite fragile and gentle-hearted.

Although my father was also fiercely loved by his parents, that ferocity was sometimes just that. There were no mistakes allowed where he grew up. As my brother and I grew up, my father struggled against my mother's lax attitude toward our antics. No matter what we spilled, broke, or colored on with crayons, my Mom thought it was great. It must have been difficult for my father to balance his desire for structure and discipline against his desire to protect us from the kind of upbringing he had.

When I began to understand my father's childhood, it was hard for me to deal with. It still is. I love my grandmother deeply and admire her strength in the difficulties she overcame. My grandmother was stifled. She is a painfully intelligent woman who was forced to drop out of high school right before graduating to support her family during the Depression by working as a waitress. She was raised in the shadows of her four brothers, who were considered more important by her mother because they were male. She went straight from living for them to living for her children and for her husband. It was not until recently that she could be herself, which meant graduating college Phi Beta Kappa



in her late seventies. She's in her eighties now and walks six miles a day when she feels up to it, teaches classes, and writes down her stories.

IF SOMEONE COULD have gone back and stopped the cycle of violence, if they could have helped my grandmother fight her own demons, my father's life would have been very different. And my Grandma would have peace now instead of regret. In that moment of my grandmother's confession, everything crystallized. It suddenly seemed that my entire life was headed in the direction of fighting crimes against children. It made more sense than anything in my life ever had before. Somehow, my subconscious seemed to know that my father's childhood was not quite like my mother's or mine, but something altogether different, conflicted and painful. All these chips fell into place. When I walked through the doors of Fordham Law School, I knew exactly where to head when I walked back out.

I did it because even though it was too late for me to help my father and my grandmother, it was not too late to help another child.

