

## **Is there life beyond patriarchy?**

Today, I betrayed you, my brother. On a surprisingly sunny day in England I stood in a courtroom dock and spoke my truth, not yours, not our fathers, and not our grandfathers either. It only took fifteen minutes. You asked me six questions. Your voice was wobbly and uncertain. After the last one, neither of us looked at one another. Yet in that breathless silence I could feel the bonds between us dissolve. Charged with adrenaline I thought I would feel regret. Instead I only feel bereft.

Mourning for the brother I adored and have lost. Not you. Not you, who slept with a gun beneath your bed, and terrorised your wife and children. Not you who wields a knife and needs to be removed from your family by the police. Not you who drinks six bottles of wine. Not you who lies to me, to everyone and to yourself. Not you who manipulates for power. But the trembling essence within. The impulse that is musical and compassionate. That you. The you I protected, laughed and played with. The you with whom I wrote songs. The you who allowed me to sing out of tune with your perfectly pitched voice and never judged. The you that I am unable to ascertain is still alive. That you. You were not always this person. As I walked away from the court in the warmth of a summer's day, I asked myself how you got here.

Our grandfather. A man of largesse, who took his role as head of the family seriously. Generous and loving, he was sometimes critical of his wife's cooking (he could not boil an egg) but grateful she served his food and organised his company. A lover of tradition, a practiced hand at good manners and a patron of the arts. He loved both his wives, but I suspect his devotion to his second was more steadfast. Our grandfather was an honourable man. Letters from his youth indicate an adventurer, a man who took the steamer from Southampton to Africa. He fought in North Africa during the war and sailed the East Coast of Africa. His anecdotes hint at a restlessness which he referred to as his 'misspent youth.' His first wife's diaries allude to a self-centred man. Yet I only ever knew him as the benevolent patriarch.

Our father. He was born a geek before the word was invented. Black framed glasses with thick lenses, perched on protruding ears hid an adroit and agile mind. A gap-toothed smile indicated charm and a maverick nature akin to his father. I imagine him as a child displaying a similar restlessness. He was sent to boarding school in England from Kenya after the war. He was not only bullied by peers but tortured by hunger and isolation. His oblique mind, adept at proofs, electrical designs and inventions was like a nuclear torpedo without a silver haired strategist at the helm.

A successful engineer, charmingly erudite and low on compassion he was the most brutal of fathers. Being loved by him was an emotional and physical laceration. His verbal insults left us gasping and his hugs were as punishing as his belt. Yet he adored me. You were beaten, shouted at and denied a lot of what I was freely given. Our childhood was a continual cautiousness, cultivated to sidestep sudden, volcanic outbursts. Our grandfather regularly took to intervening on our behalf. He lectured our father on the quintessential qualities of being a man, 'A man does not beat his

wife, his children or his dogs. Your tantrums are indulgent, a sign of weakness. I did not raise a weak son.'

After we had lived through two decades of varying levels of despair our father disappeared with his mistress. You were Hollywood handsome, astonishingly musically talented and had just turned twenty-one. Already, you were walking wounded. Conscripted to the South African army at the tender age of eighteen, you worked as a medic during the covert 'border wars.' PTSD was not yet a recognised disorder, people like you were still waiting for the first Iraq war to yield the diagnosis that explained mood swings, outbursts of rage and substance abuse. You left home when you were twenty-three without so much as a backward glance. I saw you intermittently for the next twenty years.

By the time I was thirty-nine our father was verging on homelessness. Luckily (depending on how one sees these things) he contracted cancer of the spinal cord and raged on a Salvation Army hospice bed for six weeks in the most unimaginable pain. At least he never suffered the terrible fate of death on the street. You didn't want to see him, even though he asked for you constantly. 'I'll come when he's dead,' you said. Sunken cheeked and wild eyed he clung to me. The once frighteningly bearlike hands now shrivelled claws. His cheekbones like misshapen hunting knives through the grey translucence of his skin. 'I was a stupid bugger. I wasted so much time on things that didn't matter. I was a terrible father. God knows how you coped.'

Sometimes I didn't.

I like to think his last days were accompanied by compassionate insight and sober self-reflection. But I will never know. How can toxicity be charismatic? I guess when you've grown up with the most powerful person in your life also being the most threatening, you feel at home in a dangerous space. The experts call it trauma bonding. It is why people like you and me gravitate towards unhealthy experiences.

I adored our Grandfather, but he had the wrong idea of what it means to be a man. I loved our father, but he terrified me. And after twenty years of time and distance you terrified me too. Your all-consuming pain from destructive wounds which you projected onto everyone around you. When your frightened wife called me and your desolate son asked me why you hate him, I stood up and spoke out against you. To the police, to the court, and finally to you. Yes, I wanted to protect your children and your wife. But I betrayed our sibling bond, and likewise the connection I had with our father too. Because I am tired of being terrified.

Certainly, in our family patriarchy feels like a continuum. It begins like a benign Father Christmas. I am an all knowing, all seeing, all responsible man. I provide, I protect, I guide and nurture. But patriarchy does not allow the spirit to be. It does not encourage debate. It does not say, 'I think this ... what do you think?' Patriarchy does not listen. Patriarchy does not witness without judgement. Patriarchy does not forgive. Patriarchy says; think what I think and be how I am, because I am the most powerful entity in your universe. And the far end of it is a chaotic, violent mess. An insidious darkness that gives rise to more of the same.

Is there life beyond patriarchy? Brother, I believe the answer starts with us. Think of our pain as a puzzle. Imagine if we could deconstruct and then rebuild it piece by piece. In doing so we could understand what creates the cohesive picture of our suffering. Then we would be able to pack it away because our anguish would have transformed into compassion. When we said, 'be a man' we would mean; practice humility, equality, brevity. Practice listening, resolute self-reflection and kindness. If we could grow men like that, imagine what they could give to the world. Imagine.