

Chapter Title: Diaspora

This is a tricky memory. Who and what *is* responsible for our quick and compelled departure from 1604 Dayton Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55104 when I was twelve? First, I'll share what I "remember" (what my brain now tells me happened, whether I actually remember it or not and whether this is really the way things happened at all). Then, I'll speculate about my actual lack of memory. I can't say I recall much of any of what you are about to read. It comes to me more like a story I've rehearsed so many times, no other story rings true. Besides, it's the only story I know about, so by a fake process of elimination, it must be true.

I'm 12. My mom has just left a note on the buffet that my dad read to several of us. Mom's note says, "I've taken the three youngest kids and Jeff. We've left. We are not coming back."

That's it. I don't remember an explanation or any inkling of what her real plan was. I can't remember if the note said anything about where they had gone. Maybe. There were tears. I am pretty sure my dad cried. I cried. Others may have cried. It was a big deal. I was sad, sure, but I was mostly afraid—of how my Dad was going to deal with this, with me, after mom left.

Things got ugly fast after that. All that time before my mom left, I suppose I reminded him that she had been unfaithful to him, but at least she was still around. As long as she was around, he had to limit what he did to us, and to me. Although she seemed to be willing to tolerate a lot of pretty bad crap and still stick around. Now, though, Mom gone, the overseer missing, there was no limit to what he might do. Having left without warning, just a cryptic note found after the fact, he had no one to blame, no one but me. Sound familiar? Can you see where I am going with this?

So, no limits on what he might do, and lots of reasons to be upset—let's just say my dad was a bit like a pressure cooker, steaming away, ready to explode. When my mom had been around, with the possible exception of the whole sewer "incident," my dad simply beat me. He never did anything that would cause severe permanent damage, like dismemberment or disfigurement. He never used weapons other than his belt, his fists, or his feet, sometimes including his work shoes. Limits cast aside now with mom gone, belts and shoes were replaced with kitchen knives in hands

wanting to cut the skin of a boy, holding back only just barely. A baseball bat swung at my head, I dodged it, Dad throws it after the boy (me) as he (I) scurried out the front door, caught by neighbor Leroy, a savior, but only for that moment, that time, without whom, next time a skull fracture, concussion, blood, more blood than ever, or a slit throat. Next time the boy might not be so fast. Dad was losing it, fast, gone from just mean, to mean and crazy. I'd be dead in a month or two, that's for sure.

Things change. Sometimes they get better. Sometimes they get worse. Sometimes it's a little of both. Sometimes they just happen, Sometimes someone needs to make change happen. Agency, that's what they call it in social worker circles.

Who was the agent? I tell myself it was me. Paul says it was he. Ramsey County says it was a health inspection: conclusion: 1604 Dayton Avenue was "unfit for human habitation." Not because of child abuse, but negligence, negligence of the worst kind, the kind that shows itself to the world, the kind that fills half a bucket of cockroaches and their larvae, a bucket held by the inspector who just pounded a random hole in the plaster wall in the dining room, with Dad's consent of course.

My older brother Paul says he instigated an investigation, made the call to Ramsey County, the result of which meant that just a month or so later, we were told we had to go, separate, leave this house. Okay, so Paul made a phone call. So did I. Maybe I got the number from Paul, or from someone who came over after Paul made his call. Either way, I remember a call I made to some woman at the County welfare office, told her over the phone that my dad was going to kill me, that I needed to get out. She asked me where I lived. I didn't tell her, not over the phone. I asked her to meet me, just her, at a restaurant, the St. Clair Broiler, about a mile from my house, the kind of place with just enough catholic in its name to warrant plenty o' customers after mass at the several local catholic churches nearby. Meeting her there, it might have been Lorene. Or maybe not. I can't remember who I met. A social worker, nice, comforting, reassuring, with lots of questions, and not many answers. I had learned the hard way what would happen if I told too much. A few months before this, Dad took us to a therapist at Catholic Charities. He told me to trust him, that what I said would be "confidential." I liked that idea, and needed to tell someone. I told him everything I could in the span of half an hour. Then he talked to Dad. Told Dad everything I told him. I know this because Dad told me everything the therapist had told him about what I'd said. Dad told me this as he beat the hell out of my that night for saying anything.

You can imagine my fear in talking to this social worker. But to my knowledge, even now, she kept her word, didn't tell Dad or anyone else what I'd told her. She told me to be patient, that she would help me, but it would take a little time. I didn't buy it, figured she was just trying to make me feel better. I left, thinking nothing was going to change. I was wrong. About a month later, or maybe just a week or two, I was in a foster home. Was it Paul's call, or mine, or the health inspector, or all three? I don't really know. Not that it matters much. Not now anyway. My dad never did find out I made that call. The woman was obviously more keen to the cause than the Catholic Therapist, her secular response better equipped than St. Paul's tradition of patriarchy at dealing with death and bruises at the hand of the father, my father.

It didn't take long once in a foster home to enjoy the peace of existence without having to be so watchful for him, to flinch every time he comes around, to tighten a stomach at the sound of his entrance into the front door. My first foster-home. My first home without a prick around hassling me all the time. My first home where no one except my brother Kevin who moved there with me had any real reason, any real probability, of kicking the shit out of me. Better already.

Kevin and I made a simple, innocent mistake our first night there, when we got ready for bed. We found out the next morning why there were two sheets on the queen-sized bed we shared. We hadn't ever had two sheets before, didn't know that one was for putting on top of us, in between us and the blanket. So, we had left it tucked in. Our new foster-mother smiled a kind of a sad smile when we told her why we hadn't used that sheet.

So, what happened to the rest of the kids, those that didn't move out to the suburbs with me and Kevin? Well, Mom still had the three "little kids" with her, and Jeff too, to help care for them when she didn't have the time or the inclination. She was gone, incommunicado. We suspected, but didn't know for sure, that she ran off to her parents' farm in Minot, ND. Ramsey County Human Services told those over 18 they had to move out, find a place of their own. That would have included Philip and Brian. Brian joined the Air Force pretty quickly. What's a boy without a home or a direction to do? Philip found a roommate and an apartment. He had money, always had money, really the only one of us that did. Jeff was with Mom. Gloria, she was 15, eligible for foster care, but the would-be father of her little fetus was still around, so she moved in with him, whatever that might have meant—he didn't have a "place" to live so much as "places to stay." Gloria stayed with him at those places. Paul moved into a foster home by himself. Tom and Darin moved into a foster home right up the street from Kevin and I, about a mile. That left the little kids, who were with Mom,

until she returned about six months later, to go to treatment for Alcoholics. When she returned, Jeff joined the Army. What's a boy to do without a home or a direction. Later, both Jeff and Brian would be kicked out of the service, so to speak. Jeff deserted. Brian walked up to an M.P. and asked for a light, to light not a cigarette, but a joint. The first time it was the brig, a demotion, a talking to by his C.O. The second time it was a discharge. The little kids each moved into their own foster homes, separate now from everyone.

The diaspora came, came fast and furious, spreading us out all over the place, some to fend for themselves, some given to homes by the kind and generous liberal welfare state that was Minnesota back in the 1970's. From twelve kids all living together, along with their parents, living in a two-plus bedroom house, to everyone living on their own, with the exception of me and Kevin, Tom and Darin, who had one sibling with them to share their first taste of our welfare system.

Tom and Darin learned pretty quickly that folks who took strange, and often "bad" kids into their home didn't necessarily or exclusively harbor saintly or even just mildly altruistic motives. No, to my knowledge neither were raped or otherwise abused by their foster parents, but they were put to work, quickly and regularly—working for their new father at his office on the weekends, helping him complete janitorial duties for which he, but not they, earned a small but tidy sum. My turn to go to work for the benefit of foster parents already paid to take care of me would come a little later. My first foster mother didn't put me to work, she had other motives.

Kevin didn't last long in that first foster home. Looking a lot like Peter Frampton from the cover of "Frampton comes alive," didn't help matters for Kevin when dealing with Marge, a late middle-aged widow whose two daughters had grown into adulthood, leaving her with an empty nest and curiosity about what it might have been like to have a son, or two. She found out pretty quickly that rosy-cheeked boys from the city come with thorns. Police stations are like that, like thorns in the side of do-gooder parents. Marge was very nice, I'll give her that. She opened her home and her life to us, and for that I am grateful. Tolerance was not Marge's forte; tolerance for the mistakes of ill-guided teenage boys. I am not sure what exactly she expected from us, but whatever it was, she was seriously disappointed with what we were, the choices we made, in spite of her generosity.

Halloween night, about three or four months after moving in, Kevin and I were on our way home from a gathering of new friends at the local arcade-slash-funhouse, a kind of institution in the suburbs back then, the kind that had small used cheap and probably fairly dangerous carnival rides, a go-cart track, a small building with lots of sugar available, in

the form of pop and candy. A convenient little woods lie undeveloped right behind the arcade, convenient for sharing a joint or a bowl, or some pills to go with the pop. Halloween night for us that year didn't involve knocking on doors. Not anymore. Our candy had become something you buy from a dealer, or your older brother's friends in our case. Kevin had spent the previous weekend back at Dad's, run into an older friend from the old neighborhood, bought a dime bag, and rolled enough joints to halfway fill an empty pack of Marlboro cigarettes.

On the way home, some kids were blowing off fireworks in the woods we were walking through. Coming out of the woods at the end nearest our new home, a police car rounded the corner, abruptly pulling our way. Kevin instinctively discarded his pack of "Marlboro" joints. Too late. The cops saw him through the cigarette pack onto the ground. We were made to stand facing the squad car, hands on the roof, while one of the patrolmen fetched the Marlboro pack, thinking we were worried about getting caught smoking cigs by our parents. Wrong. Opening the pack, realizing he'd hit a little jackpot with us, we were summarily handcuffed and placed in the backseat.

Kevin was wily, creative, smart, and a little devious. In the backseat of the cop car he predicted what so many criminals seem so incredibly to fail to predict on the nightly cop shows on TV. Kevin whispered to me on the way to the police station, "they are going to tell you I caved and told them where I got the pot. They will be lying. I won't tell them. You better not either. Tell them I got the pot and you didn't know where. I will tell them something. Don't tell them anything, no matter what, or I'll beat the fuck out of you." Good call, Kevin. They did exactly what you said they did, they told me you caved, and wanted me to cave with Kevin, or I'd be in a lot of trouble. I didn't cave, following Kevin's script to a tea. Later, Kevin told me he'd given them an vague reference to some older guy at a bus station downtown. They had nothing. We were brought home with a stern warning. Marge kicked Kevin out, blaming him entirely, even though it could just as well have been me who had bought the weed if I had been the one to go home the previous weekend. Just as often as not, if we smoked weed out in the garage there right with us was Marge's own twenty-something daughter, who realized quickly that city kids had access to better pot than she could get in her suburban world. Of course, I was younger than Kevin, had an innocent look to me, like a kid off the farm, wispy blonde hair, a bright smile, eyes that didn't look high even when they were. It helped a lot I think that I looked nothing like Peter Frampton from the cover of "Frampton comes alive."

There I was then, living with Marge, separated from everyone else in my family for the first time in my life, except for the hospital stay one summer while in traction after falling off a cliff at the age of 6. I managed it pretty well, having had practice during my stays with Delores and her strange and crippled friends. In fact, I thrived a little, taking school more seriously than ever before, trying to be some kind of a good son to Marge, wanting her respect, being afraid of where I'd end up if I too were kicked out. I still smoked pot every day, but tried to be more careful about it.

My charms worked too well, as it turned out. After Kevin left, and trouble subsided, no more cops, no more fights between these two new boys from the city, Marge and I got along very well. I even spent most Friday nights that winter going with her to her bowling league, where we drove there chatting nicely, and drove him in silence, Marge needing all her concentration to stay within the lanes on the road already distracted by the 6 to 8 beers she had while throwing her ball. On one of those drives out to the bowling alley, while chatting away about who knows what, school, her work tending the vending machines at office buildings around town, whatever, Marge raised the spectre of my identity, probably without realizing what she was about, to me anyway.

Marge told me she had always wanted a son, that her dead husband had wanted a son. Now, she said, she'd found one, in me. Sounds good so far, I thought, not knowing where this was leading. Marge asked me to let her adopt me as her son, telling me she'd already looked into it, that it didn't seem like my parents would object. Marge's offer surprised me, but the bit about my parents consent didn't surprise me, except I wondered how she knew what my mom thought when I didn't exactly even know where my mom was just then.

I said, "thank you for offering. I'll think about it." I had been through this once before, with Delores, who asked me the same kind of question, but with different reasons, just a few months before we were carted off into our new foster homes. Delores had sons, two of them, and she was not a widow. Her husband was alive, but not in any way familiar to the most of humanity. Delores' husband, Jack, had gone some kind of crazy, was living under a bridge, just one bridge, a known bridge, like a troll, living there in southern Minnesota at the underside of a concrete slab stretched over a country road, had been living there for something like nine years. Delores wanted to adopt me I think only because she saw my need, my need to escape the hell that was my father's dominion over me. Delores knew the place from whence I came when I came to her house. Marge knew things had been unpleasant for me, but had no direct knowledge of it, had never met my parents, or any of my siblings other than Kevin. Unlike Delores, who's reasons had more to do with me, my need,

than anything about her, Marge's reasons were entirely her own, which would explain why Delores didn't give up on me, continued to treat me like a son, even after I told her I couldn't accept her offer of adoption. I was not so sure I'd get the same treatment from Marge if I opted to continue calling myself Kinzer, Michael Kinzer.

I was right. A few days after Marge offered to make me her son, legally, officially, permanently, I told her "thank you for offering to adopt me. I can't. I want to, in a way, but I can't. I have 11 brothers and sisters, they are all Kinzers, just like me, and even though my parents are messed up, they are my parents, and that isn't really going to change." Marge didn't say a word. Tears welled up in her eyes, she walked away.

That next Friday, I was not invited to go with Marge to her bowling alley. Within a week, Lorene, my social worker, picked me up from school, in the middle of the day. She told me in the car that Marge wanted me out of her house, but hadn't said why. I told Lorene what I suspected must have been the reason, turning down the offer of adoption. I didn't have to explain anything to Lorene. She said she was sorry Marge had reacted the way she did. We were on our way to a new foster home, to take a look at it.

This was a group home, she said, which meant they had several foster kids from different homes. Fine, I thought, then at least they might have an idea about what I wanted, and what I didn't want. I wanted a place to live, with adults that didn't beat me, but didn't expect me to be their son. I got just what I wanted, and several foster brothers who had pot, speed, or booze when I didn't. And it was back in the city. Who could ask for more. Not me.

I spent two years there, at that group home. Every other weekend, during the fall and winter, we were taken to their cabin, where we spent one full day helping our group home father cut and stack wood, which he brought back to the city, selling most of it, and keeping enough to stoke the fire downstairs, which heated them comfortably, and kept their utility bills down. I didn't mind, though I knew it was wrong, that giving us nothing for our efforts probably violated some kind of child labor law or at least the terms of their agreement to take us in. We were told that the work was intended to help us learn responsibility. Yeah, right, whatever. As long as they stayed clueless about our drug use right upstairs every single night (which they did until the very end), and as long as they didn't beat me (which they did not until the last night I stayed there), I didn't mind working for nothing.

I have a temper, a bad temper. Surprised? Well, I had a particularly hard time losing to someone at a board game. Who knows why. Its lame, I know. But, there it is. My last night at my second foster home began by losing after a long

game of Monopoly with Marty, one of the other kids there, younger, dumber, less deserving to win than I thought was my right. Before paying Marty the money I owed him on my last turn of the game, too much to pay for my properties already in hock, I flipped the board over onto his bed, which is where we were playing. Marty yelled, “you fucking baby, Jesus, you’re such a fucking baby.” True, I was a fucking baby about it. I punched Marty in the face. I made his nose bleed. Oh oh.

Marty ran downstairs, blood dripping onto the carpet along the way. Up the stairs came Ken, our group home father, furious, either at the rude interruption to his quiet evening with his wife and two sons who were not to be interrupted in their little family evenings together, or because I had caused blood to be dripped all over the carpet, or because I had been not just a little fucking baby, but a violent little fucking baby. Fighting fire with fire, Ken ran straight to Marty’s bed, where I sat waiting for whatever the consequence would be, hoping that by picking up the game, I might reduce my punishment. Ken lifted me right off the bed, much to my surprise. Ken was smaller than I was. He seemed to have garnered superhuman strength, the kind you’d suppose an ant might have if it were suddenly the size of a middle-aged 5’8” construction worker. I considered fighting back, kicking the crap out him, but he was too quick about it, maybe knowing what I might do if I had a chance to fight back, or probably not thinking at all, just acting, acting too quickly to realize his sudden violence could land him in jail, and remove his little worker bees from the wood pile, ending the checks from the county every month. Nope, he didn’t think at all. He simply spun me around and threw me, hard, at the wall, where I smashed my full back, falling onto a desk below me, cut up by its corners, bruised by the fall onto the chair at its front, windless as I lay on the floor in front of him. I considered jumping to my feet, throwing this guy down the stairs right behind him. I couldn’t move. I had no breath. Nice going Ken. Lucky thing, that. Throwing me so hard I almost lost consciousness. Ken walked down the stairs, saying nothing, probably only then realizing what might befall him when he told Marlene, his wife, my friend, what he had done.

When I could finally get up a couple of minutes after Ken left, I grabbed my smokes, my weed, and my wallet, walked out the door, got on a bus, went to my dad’s house, never to return, not even to get my clothes and other stuff. I called Lorene the next day, told her I’d been in a fight with my foster brother, then with Ken. I didn’t tell her what Ken did. I figured I deserved it, and didn’t want to get him into trouble. After all, I had lived there for two years and he had never before hit me, but I also knew I couldn’t go back, not to that. So, I stayed at Dad’s, smoked tons of weed, drank

beers and whiskey, dropped out of high school a couple of months later, until Lorene picked up the pieces for me, and gave me the choice of boys town or drug treatment. I chose the least worst option, treatment. So ended my first foray into the foster care system, as it turned out, not so different in some ways than living with dear old dad. But this time I had Lorene, and that meant a lot. Still does.