

I Couldn't Fix Them

It was the fall of 1962, and while I was watching my favorite TV show, *Lassie*, my mother climbed on top of the dining room table with a loaded rifle. By the time I noticed, she had perched cross-legged with a clear shot at the front door. This was the fallout from an argument the night before; my dad was having an affair.

Something had to be done, or I would be witnessing the cold-blooded murder of my father. The utter destruction of my family was at the door. I wish I could say she was blind drunk carrying out a rash plan, but she was sober.

Screaming and pleading did nothing to stop the madness, so I reached to grab the weapon of dad's destruction out of her hands. In the struggle, it landed on her foot—the one that had been crushed in a motorcycle accident years before. Now she

was the one screaming. My new baby-doll pajamas were soaked with tears, but I was okay with that; it was better than blood.

She hopped to the couch begging for forgiveness and told me to get a package of peas from the freezer. Strange request, but not the time to discuss vegetables and their uses. She then asked for the rifle, and since she wasn't going to shoot *me*, I obliged. After removing the bullets and pressing them into my hands, she gave me the weapon and said, "Hide these where no one can find them, especially me." Nice task for a ten-year-old in her pajamas.

Through the years I watched my brother Jim shoot tin cans off a rickety fence with that rifle. Our uncle's Indiana farm was the perfect setting. I was not allowed to handle rifles, but this day I was firmly in possession as I made my way up the back stairs to the attic, my hideout. I must have looked like a child soldier, weary, disheveled, ready to lay down her arms. Pulling up the corner of an old oriental rug, I hid everything under the floorboards and hurried back to my wounded mother.

The frozen peas sitting on her foot did little to reduce the swelling. Considering the amount of bruising she probably rebroke a bone or two, so

we had to come up with a plausible explanation. Telling my father the truth was not an option, so this was the tale: the pressure cooker filled with split pea soup she made earlier in the day, slipped out of her hands.

The reality of what my mother was planning overwhelmed her. She didn't want to kill her husband, she just wanted him to stop *killing* her. Dear old Dad never knew he was given a new lease on life that day.

Countless times our parents were emotionally unavailable while my brother and I stood empty. Drinking at Richie's Tavern, followed by explosive arguing at home, was too often the norm. While there is no excuse for their behavior, they were stumbling through life the only way they knew how; using alcohol to ease the pain. They didn't realize until much later the devastating impact all the chaos had on their children. We absorbed the fallout.

To be fair, life wasn't all warts and woes. Spending time with relatives and friends were happy occasions. My mom and dad were relaxed in these settings and seemed to enjoy being around each other. I enjoyed the Irish humor. I don't know if a sense of humor is learned or inherited, but ours

was dry and often sarcastic. In my case it became a coping mechanism, a relief valve. We came by it honestly as both sets of grandparents came to the United States from County Mayo and County Roscommon, Ireland, during the influx of immigrants in the late 1800s.



Maggie and Jim