

The background of the cover is a landscape. The top half shows a bright, hazy sky with rays of light breaking through clouds. The bottom half shows a rocky, uneven terrain with some sparse vegetation. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and yellows.

“OH, BOB!
I THOUGHT IT WAS
CURTAINS!”

SURVIVAL AND TRANSCENDENCE IN A
HOMOPHOBIC WORLD

ROB LAWRENCE RUSSO

Copyright © 2017 Rob Lawrence Russo

ISBN: 978-1-63492-327-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

Table of Contents

Foreword	v
The Die Is Cast.....	1
Next Stop: The Willard Hotel	20
If I Ever Had A Son Like Harry Post...I Would Kill Him!	27
The Virgin Almost Got Me Killed!.....	110
St. Lidwina of Schiedam	130
Nat's Story	135
Reflections of a Son	154
Why Is That Door A Lighter Color Than The Other Three? ..	156
Helen's Story	158
My Two Aunts.....	174
A Family of Horrible Drivers.....	195
High School Pros and Cons	203
Ho-Jo's, Maryann and I	216
The Beard.....	224
The Decade of the Priests	234
Deaths: Real and Symbolic No. 1.....	242
What It Was Like Being Gay in the Workplace	249
Hear Ye; Hair Ye	267
Mutton Pies and Mooing Cows.....	309
Rowdy the Horse and Rob the Hoarse	314
Deaths Real and Symbolic (Revisited)	319

The Die Is Cast

Vague images remain of my father pushing me in a stroller through the maze of animal exhibits at The Bronx Zoo circa 1951, and there's an even earlier recollection of my mother bathing me in the white porcelain kitchen sink of our home at 828 Madison Avenue, in Paterson, New Jersey. My calculations suggest that I was likely three years old during the zoo visit and perhaps two when the bath in the sink occurred. These are two neutral to somewhat pleasurable early memories.

Then there are, of course, the unpleasant recollections—which include my father having me, aged four, lie face down on a towel in our bathroom, my pants and underpants removed, while he proceeded to give me an enema as my mother and sister stood by, bearing witness from the sidelines. While inserting the petroleum-jellied nozzle into my unyielding rectum, my father brusquely instructed me to hold the introduced water inside as me as long as I could, and then (and only then) should I maneuver over to the toilet to evacuate my bowels. Crying throughout, I eventually screamed for my father and the female gawkers to leave the room, so that I'd at least have privacy during the explosive release that was painfully imminent.

I'm told that back in the early fifties, giving a child an enema was thought to be a good thing under certain circumstances—such as when a child was chronically constipated, but my suspicions are that my parents, my father in particular, enjoyed the drama of my being anally penetrated by the cold plastic enema nozzle. There was, I thought, an uncharacteristic tinge of animation in my father's voice as he went about barking orders: "Don't move! Hold it in! Take deep breaths!"

It's interesting that my father could lay his hands on me to administer an enema or to spank me viciously, but never to hold my hand, to ruffle my hair, or to pat my back. There were never any physical displays of affection from him toward me, only acts of rage when he felt I'd done something wrong...like the Christmastime I noted that the multi-colored lights on our tree had too many red bulbs clumped in one area.

I, aged five or six, set about correcting the problem, unscrewing bulbs and repositioning them until I was satisfied there was a pleasing and balanced mix of colors. When I was almost finished with my task, my father walked into the room, saw what I was doing, and without so much as a word to indicate what had set him off, he violently yanked me away from the tree. He then spanked me so hard, with such a look of malevolence on his face, that I became hysterical. To me, it seemed possible my father would kill me. After depositing me, sobbing, in my bedroom, my father walked out and slammed the door behind him. Even though I stayed in my room for hours, no one came to explain what was so wrong with my actions. I surmised, in retrospect, that my father was concerned I might electrocute myself or start a fire, but he never said that. Despite my young age, I was very much aware of electricity and its dangers. There was no way I would have put my finger or anything else in an open light bulb socket, but my father saw in my actions an opportunity to throttle me soundly, instead of seeing an opportunity to impart some valuable information. I would have thought better of him if, instead of walloping me senseless, he had said, "Bobby, hold on a minute. What are you trying to do? You know, son, you could really hurt yourself, or even start a fire, if you're not careful. Tell me what it is you want to do, and then I'll help you do it safely. I don't want you to get hurt." What a difference my fantasy version of events would have made in my young life. Instead, this incident became just another in a catalogue of experiences that made me fear and hate my father and that formed the basis for my growing perception that the world was a very hostile, dangerous place.

It very well may have been during the same holiday season as the light bulb debacle that I awoke on Christmas morning to find several large presents under the tree. What intrigued me most, however, was a little inexpensive toy I found inside my Christmas stocking. It was a miniature parachute made of flimsy parchment, complete with a balsa wood parachutist dangling by four delicate strings beneath. I had been playing contentedly with this toy for quite some time, climbing up on chairs in an effort to make the chute's descent as long as possible, when my disagreeable father made his entrance. He

watched me playing for a moment, and then said, “Let me see that.” Half expecting he wanted to play with the toy parachute himself, I handed it over to him. He appeared to be searching for something on the toy, and when he found it, he abruptly announced, “You can’t play with this anymore.” Again, no explanation, just “You can’t play with this anymore.” Not understanding what was going on, I started to cry and wound up, heartbroken, alone once again in my room. Later that day, I overheard my mother asking my father why he’d taken the toy away from me. His answer, the significance of which I didn’t comprehend, was “It was made in Japan.” Evidently, my mother didn’t think my dad’s reasoning too sound, so she tried to convince him to return the toy, but he said that he’d destroyed it and thrown it in the trash.

Once more, when later considered, I felt that my father should have tried to explain the rationale behind his prohibiting my use of that coveted toy. I, at age five or six, had no familiarity with the world war that had ended less than a decade before, nor did I yet understand that humans had a penchant for branding entire ethnicities as enemies. In my innocence, all I was aware of was the abject cruelty inherent in my father’s taking away a harmless plaything that I was enjoying so much. My impression was that my father hated to see me animated and happy. It appeared that every occasion he could find to cut me down, to shame me, to make me unhappy, or to hit me was seized upon and relished.

You can imagine my terror, then, when—at age four—I learned that my mother (the one buffer between me and a seemingly murderous father) had to go into the hospital to have surgery. Mom explained to me that she was having an operation called a hysterectomy, and that she’d be away from home for about a week. During her absence, I’d be looked after by my grandmothers Nugent and Russo during the day and by my father at night. Grandma Nugent, widowed since before my birth, lived with us in our flat, and my Grandma and Grandpa Russo—as well as my yet unmarried Aunt Marge—lived in the upstairs dwelling. I loved both my grandmothers, so I had no qualms whatsoever about being left in their care; however, the

idea of being looked after by my father, without my mother there to run interference, shook me to the core.

As the time for my mother to enter the hospital drew closer, my anxiety grew, and I silently vowed I'd do my damndest to be the best behaved little boy possible so as not to risk triggering my father's fury. I don't recall the actual day that my mother left for the hospital, and most of my memories of what went on at home during my mother's stay there are muddled and sketchy. There was one night, however, that was so traumatic that it haunts me—in the form of recurring nightmares—to this day.

I don't know what it was that set my father off, but true to form, I wound up sobbing in my room, but this time there was no mother who might look in on me to sooth me and to reassure me that I was not a despicable little boy. On this occasion, in response to having been roundly spanked, I sought solace in my fledgling religious training. I have a particularly vivid memory of kneeling on my bedroom floor in front of a crucifix, crying inconsolably, and pleading with the bronze-colored metal Jesus to bring my mother back home. As luck would have it, however, the apparent answer to my desperate child's prayer was that my mother failed to return for an entire month!

When a four year old is without his mother for a month while in the care of a hateful and hated father, the boy's soul is irrevocably injured. I grew to fear the evenings when I'd have to tip-toe around in largely vain attempts to avoid my father's wrath, and I eventually lost all hope that I would ever see my mother again. After all, a month in a four-year-old's life, even under the best of circumstances, is virtually indistinguishable from an eternity.

What made matters worse was that my mother was in a hospital more than an hour's drive from our home. Evidently, my father and mother had chosen a surgeon who was a friend of my Aunt Marge's. Under this physician's care, my aunt had previously undergone a successful hysterectomy, and I came to learn that Aunt Marge also knew this doctor socially and was, in fact, smitten with him. So, upon hearing that my mother needed the same procedure, Aunt Marge highly recommended her

gentleman friend's professional services. The only trouble was that the doctor's practice was in Brooklyn, New York, and he only had admitting privileges at St. Peter's Hospital, an ancient, dark and dreary Catholic facility in the Cobble Hill section of the borough. Maybe my parents got a deal on the surgery, given my aunt's relationship with the physician, but it seems to me now that—even if that were the case—it was a bizarre arrangement. We lived in New Jersey, and my father worked at the AT&T building in lower Manhattan—a good distance from Cobble Hill, so my mother would be isolated from her family for most of her stay at St. Peter's. As far as I know, the only time the family visited Mom at the hospital was on Sunday afternoons. We'd all pile into my father's car and drive into Manhattan, motor down the pot-holed West Side Highway and then across the Brooklyn Bridge. I have vivid recollections of these drives because, at the time, the West Side Highway was the address of all the piers where the world's ocean liners docked when in port. On a good day, you'd see a veritable fleet of ocean-going ships moored along the Hudson River. Those Sunday excursions to Brooklyn allowed me, at various times, to see the *Queen Mary*, the *Queen Elizabeth*, the *RMS Mauretania*, the *SS Ile de France*, the *SS United States*, and the beautiful Italian liner *Andria Doria*—which in 1956 was fated to capsize and sink after a catastrophic collision with the Swedish vessel, *Stockholm*, in the fog-shrouded waters of the North Atlantic. Because of the family's Sunday expeditions to visit my mother, I became fascinated by all aspects of ocean liners, an interest I retain to this day.

Those Sunday jaunts to Brooklyn were remarkable for another reason. St. Peter's did not allow children to visit patients, so one adult would wait in the car with me while the others took turns checking in on my mother. Once, when Mom had at last become ambulatory, someone helped her make her way to the window of her room and wave to me as I stood several stories below, outside our car. I could barely see the tiny figure so far above me, and the experience wasn't in the least reassuring. In fact, it made the loss of my mother all the more hurtful and frightening. Seeing the miniature, ghostly woman in the window convinced me that I'd never hear or

touch my mother again, and I was beside myself with grief and longing. No one seemed concerned about my state of mind, and I was left on my own—at age four—to suffer the excruciating emotional pain caused by the prolonged separation.

I was to learn that my mother's hysterectomy was performed vaginally, ostensibly to avoid the doctor's having to make a large incision in her abdomen and thus, theoretically, shortening the time of the healing process. After the operation, however, Mom's recuperation did not go well, and her deteriorating condition soon necessitated that my father hire a private duty nurse.

Having lost a lot of blood during the surgery, my mother—in the days following her operation—received numerous transfusions, one of which was administered by the elderly head of nursing at St. Peter's, who was a nun. This particular nun had taken an instant disliking to my mother, whom she berated for, among other things, having beautiful legs—a physical attribute this nurse somehow equated with my mother's being, in the nun's words, "a pampered woman". She actually had the audacity to apprise my mother of her thoughts on the matter, and further stated that it looked to her as if my mother "had never done a day's work in her life."

All the patients on the hospital floor lived in abject fear of this "holy woman" who—at one time or another—had succeeded in verbally or physically abusing every one of the patients in her care. My mother, who was in a semi-private room, had a roommate who suffered through one too many unnecessarily painful injections administered by this nun. One morning, as the dreaded sister approached, glass and steel-tipped hypodermic syringe raised in readiness, the roommate put her hand up for her to stop, and then loudly ordered sister out of the room. To prevent any further ministrations by this sadistic nun, the roommate followed up by petitioning her private physician to ban the nun from having any further dealings with her case.

My mother, on the other hand, tended to be less assertive, and she persisted in putting up with the nun's verbal and physical mistreatment for days on end. When my mother found

it impossible to urinate after the surgery, the nun viciously scolded her for being “spoiled” and for “not trying hard enough” even though at least one of my mother’s Herculean efforts had caused blood to trickle from her vagina.

One calamitous afternoon, the nun marched in to say that my mother needed a transfusion, and without further preamble, she proceeded to transfuse blood—still ice cold from the storage refrigerator—into my mother’s weakened, vulnerable body. Not surprisingly, my mother promptly went into shock. Her private duty nurse, who luckily showed up a short time later at the beginning of her shift, found my mother alone, unable to speak, shivering violently, with her skin tinted a deathly shade of blue. With the help of a handful of doctors whom she hurriedly rounded up, the nurse covered her unresponsive patient with layers of blankets and then strategically placed several hot water bottles under the covers. In time, the group’s intervention succeeded in restoring my mother’s core temperature to normal, and as she regained her voice, mom finally got angry enough to reveal to everyone assembled just how cruel and abusive the nun had been that day and previously.

Still unable to urinate, my mother was in tremendous pain and her abdomen had become grotesquely distended. Alarmed, the kindly and attentive private duty nurse asked if my mother minded if she “had a look down there”. Mom readily agreed, and when the nurse finished her examination, she quickly covered my mother back up, ran out of the room, and returned with a resident physician in tow. When the doctor confirmed what the private duty nurse had discovered, the nurse asked him to wait right there while she went to fetch the elderly nun. Half dragging the nun into the room, the nurse snarled, “Sister, you’ve been torturing my patient for days—accusing her of being a spoiled woman. You’ve managed to get Mrs. Russo to try so hard to urinate that she’s been bleeding from the effort. Now, Sister, I want you to witness the reality of the situation!”

With that introduction, the private duty nurse told the doctor to proceed, but instructed him to make sure the old nun saw everything he was about to do. The doctor then got to work

removing yard upon yard of gauze packing material that the surgeon had somehow neglected to remove from my mother's vagina. As the last remnants of the offending material were extracted, days of urine that had been held back—due to the packing's pressure on the urethra—burst through and saturated the surroundings. When the deluge ended, the private duty nurse looked at the nun and said, "I ought to rip that damn veil right off your evil face! You're a disgrace to your order and also to the nursing profession! Now, get out of this room, and don't you ever set foot in here again." The nun, seemingly unfazed by being thusly and thoroughly verbally rebuked, took her leave without uttering a defensive word, without expressing a hint of remorse, and without offering even a cursory apology.

Sister did, however, reappear on the day of my mother's eventual discharge from St. Peter's. Citing her age and the fact that she was overworked as mitigating factors for her reprehensible behavior, the nun made what my mother later characterized as a half-hearted attempt at saying she was sorry. Having been pushed to her limits by this witch, however, my mother told her that there were no circumstances that could excuse such conduct and that she was not fit to be working with patients. The nun said nothing, but then nodded her head in seeming assent and hobbled out of the room. I can only hope that as news of this bitter nun's cruel and disrespectful behavior spread, she was finally relieved of her nursing duties and allowed to retire.

Upon Mom's return home, she was initially confined to bed. By now thoroughly traumatized, I had become convinced that my mother would never return, and when she did, I went deep into a protective shell and refused to enter her room. I found out later that my father, upon observing my stand-offish behavior, wanted to try to force me to speak to my mother, but my mother wisely divined what was happening and told my father to leave me be and that I'd come to her when I was ready.

Soon, I inched toward her open door and ventured a peek around the frame. My mother, upon seeing me, broke into a wide smile and just said a simple, "Hello." After a few minutes, I cautiously walked toward Mom's bed and, as she much later

related, I timidly held out my hand saying feebly, “I hurt my finger.”

“You did?” my mother questioned. “Do you want me to have a look at it?” When I got up to her bed, mom took my hand, lifted it to her face and gently kissed my “injury”.

“There, is that better?” she gently asked.

With that question, I finally broke down. A month of rage, anguish, terror and grief surged out of me as I wept in her embrace and, in between sobs, I said, “I thought you were never coming back!” And then I said something that, to this day, gives me chills. I said, “Mommy, he was so mean to me...he was so mean to me. I was a good boy, Mommy. I really was.”

I’m sure my mother understood to whom I was referring and its significance, but all she said was, “Well, I’m home now. I’m not going to leave again. It’s going to be okay.”

When I learned, decades later, of this exchange with my mother, I was saddened at first and then somewhat disappointed that Mom hadn’t given me validation that my father was surely out of line in his treatment of me. All I ever got from my mother when I raised questions concerning my father’s negative behavior toward me was, “Oh, he really loves you. He just has difficulty showing it.” While she may have been accurate in her assessment, for me it wasn’t a healing explanation. Mom’s habitual covering for him only made me persist in the belief there was something inherently bad or wrong with me—some loathsome flaw that caused my father to act so hatefully.

Perhaps my mother did have a private talk with my father about how he’d behaved during her hospitalization, because in the aftermath of mom’s illness, my father suddenly became uncharacteristically warmer, even going so far as to start buying me presents—something he’d certainly never done before. Maybe he was assuaging guilt he truly felt, or perhaps he was attempting to make peace with his understandably peeved wife, but whatever the reason or reasons, I actually started to think my father might care about me. Gifts he bought me during this brief, golden interlude included a gyroscope, a set of magnets, a Slinky, and a battery operated antique car. I now realize that gifts don’t necessarily indicate the presence of

love, but back then, I desperately clung to the hope that the change in my father's conduct signaled better times were ahead.

However, when I was still only four years old, I began kindergarten at Public School Number Four in Paterson. At that time, Paterson's children only attended kindergarten for half a year and I, having just made the age cutoff for entrance, started school when I was way too young. Given the recent emotional upheaval of having been separated from my mother for the harrowing month she'd been hospitalized, my then having to leave her to attend school was too much for my damaged psyche to bear.

My bizarre behavior once in kindergarten should have alerted even moderately mindful adults that I was a child in deep trouble. At first, I wouldn't leave the classroom to go to assemblies held in the school's auditorium. My refusals were so adamant, that my frustrated kindergarten teacher, Miss Nichols, began leaving me in the classroom, unattended, while the rest of the class happily marched down the hallway. Then somewhat later on, the school nurse—garbed in the then de rigueur starched white uniform (complete with a large winged headpiece)—entered our classroom. Seeing her for the first time, I became petrified, started to cry and kept backing away from her. I suppose having a nurse enter the classroom evoked memories of my mother's having been in the hospital, or it may have been that I irrationally supposed that she was there to give me an injection—something I'd learned to fear from my pediatrician who had once used a markedly blunt needle while giving me a shot in my tender backside. Disposable needles and syringes were not yet standard medical fixtures; as a result, injections with old, reusable devices could be quite painful. In any case, I had the first of what would become a series of major melt downs in school, and my teacher did her best to calm me. By the time of this particular episode, Miss Nichols must have been wondering just what kind of disturbed child she was dealing with.

Eventually, just as I was starting to acclimate to being in kindergarten, an unfortunate incident interrupted my adjustment.