

---

---

# PART I

---

---

## Finding and Losing Cordelia

Telling stories is our way of coping, a way of creating shape out of a mess. It binds everyone together.

—Sarah Polley, Interview with Kate Kellaway,  
the London *Guardian*, regarding  
*Stories we tell*, June 22, 2013

Your tale, sir, would cure deafness.

—William Shakespeare, *The tempest*, act I, sc. ii

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.

—Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (1997)

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

—E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910)

All true histories contain instruction, though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shriveled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut.

—Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (1847)

I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures . . . Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim, and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense.

—Anne Brontë, Preface to the Second Edition,  
*The tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848)

Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,  
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

—William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 35*

Everything stays down where it's wounded  
And comes to a permanent stop  
Wasn't thinking of anything specific  
Like in a dream, when someone wakes up and screams.

—Bob Dylan, "Series of dreams"

All these people that you mention  
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame  
I had to rearrange their faces  
And give them all another name.

—Bob Dylan, "Desolation row"

---

---

## PROLOGUE: A SERIES OF NIGHTMARES

---

---

AIDED LARGELY BY memory and the occasional use of a detailed journal of the unfolding events of my daughter, Cordelia's, life, and with a purpose fueled by an urgent therapeutic need to write after having been burnt, or wounded, by a trauma akin to dry wood tossed with negligence and irresponsibility into a forest fire, I originally wanted to publish this story in one complete volume. A sad story may best be heard as the fireplace crackles and hisses, and the snow lingers in winter, but is best told by the person or persons who have lived through it and survived just enough to still be able to narrate the tale.

However, after writing nearly 265,000 words across one thousand burning or ashen pages, I decided that a work of such a length would be stretching the patience and attention of my readers too far. Therefore, with the additional advice of others urging for more conciseness, and a shorter approach that would hopefully leave my audience looking out for more, I elected to break this narrative into three much more digestible volumes.

Unfortunately, this will mean that for some readers, the "core message" of my account will be delivered less in this introductory volume and more in the next two volumes. This is not to say, though, that significant themes are ignored or deferred in the present volume. In order to assist parents in parenting their own children more therapeutically and my readers to understand better the struggles of my own life as a parent, I am including an extensive Bibliographical Guide with this volume. The included material will cover the many themes touched upon in all three of the volumes I intend to publish. The same bibliographical information will likely be part of the last volume but probably added to as I further edit that volume for future publication and continue to study the issues. Parenting is, after all, an ongoing process of continual development as a parent and of understanding one's child's changing motivations as he or she pushes into adulthood.

## What's in a Name? That which we call a "Title" by Any Other Set of Words . . .

Choosing a meaningful title for the series as a whole would also prove to be difficult since so many equally valid themes would become integral to this narrative as I was writing it and what would work for one volume could seem incongruous to another.

My mother felt that *A Father's Nightmare* would be a suitable title, whilst my therapist suggested that *A Father's Loss of Constitutional Rights* should be included somewhere either as a main heading phrase or as a subtitle. At one point, I thought that *Going to Hell and . . . With the Los Angeles DCFS* sounded perfect because it would suggest an open-ended Los Angeles-centered nightmare that would never be resolved for this parent.<sup>5</sup> Then my uncle in England wrote in his annual Christmas card that *Adoption Trauma* would be appropriate. Though it was succinct, and a good summarization of what is only one of a thousand threads to an elaborate skein of wool, I felt it would be too pessimistic for anyone looking to adopt a child and unfair to other children wanting or waiting to be adopted. That Cordelia would become my adopted daughter in the course of the present volume is not the reason why the last four of seven

---

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Children and Family Services or DCFS is the agency entrusted by California to oversee child-welfare issues across the state at large. I will expand on this later. Had I chosen *this* title, there would have been the issue of most readers not knowing what the DCFS is or does. I would have had the added problem of having a title that would leave out two-thirds of the perceived "villains" and "knaves" of the story—namely, my wife, Esther's, parental alienation, and the sorry role of the Los Angeles Dependency Court. A cynic might note that my own daughter's issues could have divided this narrative into a problem of quarters. Someone unkind could have added in my own misunderstood role and thereby turned the resultant trauma into an issue of fifths. The challenge would be to decide on a title that could capture as many of these issues as clearly as possible. As we shall see, I would end up with one that divides the trauma into thirds, leaving out my contribution and my daughter's in order to focus on the responsibility, as I have always seen it, of the main protagonists—my wife, the DCFS, and the court. Explaining why is why I have written this volume and the two to follow.

years have been so traumatic for her and for me and it would have been unfair to her to have so personalized the struggle in this way. I did not want to ignore the happier moments of having adopted her.

One of the better thoughts that kept recurring, would have been *Waiting to be Heard*, but Amanda Knox chose this as the appropriate title of her own recent memoir.

Whilst all these possible or suggested titles are reflective of valid themes that I have tried to capture throughout this narrative, I felt I had to choose something personal to my struggle and reflective of how Cordelia has suffered whatever the attempt of others to make it seem otherwise.

*Denied!* as a bold opening title statement, seemed to reflect the traumatic experience of never having had my arguments heard, considered, or validated by an intransigent court and the emotional toil of having had my motions for redress constantly repudiated. The endlessness of the “denials” prompted me to change the name of the presiding judicial officer of what would become my dependency case in Los Angeles to “Commissioner No.” Though she receives many mentions as Future’s shadow in the present volume, she will become much more vivid and substantial in my next work, which deals more thoroughly with the nightmare in Los Angeles. *Denied* does not really apply to the present volume—which is more about trying to build an adoptive family and “acceptance”—but is rather an apropos antonym and, besides which, as a “mood” it still very much creeps into what I have to write here, foreshadowing the disasters and trauma to come in the next two volumes.

*Failing Cordelia*—which echoes a theme of the *Reviving Ophelia* books already published of teenage girls lost to a world of angst and insecurities—captures how my young daughter was ultimately failed by a “child-welfare legal complex” designed to protect her, but again this aspect is only foreshadowed in the present volume. Compounding the tragedy is that nobody that is part of that “complex”—the social workers, court commissioners, and attorneys—has yet recognized this fact. Unfortunately, neither has my daughter nor, to a lesser extent, my wife, Esther. Unlike *Ophelia*, who was *Hamlet’s* discarded girlfriend, *King Lear’s* daughter, *Cordelia*, was a strong, but flawed character for one of William Shakespeare’s supreme tragedies, but she “concealed” her love for her father and, in the process, her father, was persuaded that his daughter did not love him in contrast to the more demonstrative, but false, “love” shown by his other two daughters, *Goneril* and *Regan*.

Laurie Maguire, in her book, *Where there's a will there's a way*, compares Cordelia's prosaic responses to her anxious and vulnerable father as akin to the flat responses we often give to the optometrist regarding the focal power of particular lenses!<sup>6</sup> Esther always wanted me to use the name of one of her incorrigible sisters instead of "*Cordelia*," but *Lear's* other daughters were so venomous and awful compared to the one daughter he truly loved that it would not have been fair to my child to stigmatize her in this way.

Shakespeare's play also conveys how a dysfunctional family situation can disintegrate into a vacuuming chaos that involves war and destruction with entire armies standing behind the collapse of family unity. An appropriate play that would resonate with my own family's real-life social and legal drama. But just as *Cordelia* and her father later reach an emotional and loving reconciliation for all their prosaic flaws at the beginning of the play, so too do I feel the need to convey a hope that my daughter will ultimately find her way home to this parent's steadfast love for her. As I edit this, there are some tender, but fragile, signs of this—but, as with the reviving natural life in the volcanic blast zone of Mt. St. Helens, I fear a full restoration could ultimately take decades and may never be quite the same.

Lots of parents get to feel quite strongly that their children have been stolen from them by social workers and by the attorneys assigned to help their children. This element needed to be captured in the title. As will become apparent, but my wife, Esther, has also been a key player in much of this subsequent *parental/state theft*. My wife's alienation of me in front of our daughter, her driving of wedges between Cordelia and me by always referring to me as "Simon" instead of "Dad," and her general humiliation of my better qualities, have all been huge stumbling blocks to any meaningful healing and progress between father and daughter. Our daughter would develop severe parental alienation syndrome as a result. Therefore, I have linked my wife to the Los Angeles Dependency Court and made her and the court co-conspirators in this "*parental-state theft*" of our daughter—contrasting this, of course, with what I would like to see as my own better-informed "*parental love*." Whether I have

---

<sup>6</sup> Maguire, Laurie E. *Where there's a will there's a way: or, all I really need to know I learned from Shakespeare*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2006.

always appropriately shown this unconditional love for my daughter will be for my readers to judge as they progress further, although full judgment should perhaps be postponed until after my next two books.

By *theft*, I am also referencing the somewhat cruel and heartless way in which the dependency court in Los Angeles would systematically come to remove so many of my parenting rights and so often humiliate me in front of my own child.

That children who have been abused, experience a violent and confusing “robbery of their childhood” is a given by way of understanding their status in the child-welfare legal complex. What is not nearly as often acknowledged, however, is that parents caught up in dependency court, experience an equally traumatizing and confusing “robbery of their parenthood.”<sup>7</sup> The best that is offered them is an unconvincing lip service.

What is likewise little understood is that a system designed to revolve around “rescuing” possibly-abused children and “punishing” or humiliating their parents—my daughter tells her husband and friends that her dad feels “victimized” by this story—too often ends up by abusing or re-abusing the children it purports to exist to protect. This is part of the irony of the system. Hopefully we will come closer at the end of this story to being able to answer two important questions of this

---

<sup>7</sup> The “robbery of childhood” is a phrase that is often mentioned in works on child abuse. I subscribe readily to this concept but would like to add my support to the corollary idea of a “robbery of parenthood” for the parents caught up in dependency cases where the evidence for their supposed infractions is unclear, has been tampered with or misinterpreted, and where exculpatory evidence is pointedly ignored. This is unlikely to be the situation with *all* dependency cases, but when it happens, then yes, it is a “robbery” and a clear violation of a parent’s “parental rights” as much as real, obvious, and clear cases of child abuse result in a “robbery” of any given child’s childhood. In the latter instance, a parent’s rights will probably need to be “removed” or “terminated” for the future welfare and safety of the child. In the former set of unclear or ambiguous instances, where a parent has either *not* abused their child or made suitable amends, a parent’s rights can be robbed needlessly by a court determined to proceed regardless of all attempts to stop it or slow it down. This results in a *doubling* of the trauma for *both* parent *and* child.