

Velvet Elvis: A tribute to my matriarchs

Great-Grandma Irma owned a trailer and the tiny plot it stood on. Over the counter between the kitchen and living room hung a portrait of Elvis Presley painted on black velvet. Elvis took pride of place and my matriarchs cherished him as the ideal man – churlish, highly sexual, wild and dangerous. They looked up to him but he also looked down on them. So did most of the men they loved.



A crooked path forward

By Dustin Dandliker

This series is a first-hand account of the struggles and successes of overcoming trauma, mental illness, addiction, homelessness and more.

When I was 4, Great-Grandma, Grandma and Mom would gather at the kitchen table every morning to chain-smoke, consume five pots of coffee, gossip and plan. As a little boy, I looked up to them. They were strong, resolved, comforting. When they invited me to the table, I felt connected to something important.

There's a legend in my family about Great-Grandma Irma. When she was young she lived on a ranch with her husband. One evening, she came out on the porch and said dinner was going to be

late. Her husband rose from his chair and slapped her. She didn't flinch or cry out. As he stomped and cussed, she quietly went back in the house and returned with an iron skillet. She swung and knocked him over the railing. He got in his truck and drove away. He didn't even pack. Four generations of women after her have withstood the fire with the strength she gave them.

My mother's father, a member of the Oglala Sioux Nation, died when my mom was four, so Grandma Dotty had to raise two kids alone. I don't know much about her second husband, Jim Smith, except that he was certainly a sociopath. He once took Grandma and her children into a field by their house and held a shotgun to her head. Jim once turned my uncle's face into hamburger because he colored in the wrong circle on a kindergarten worksheet. Uncle Darryl hated the color purple after that. Another time, he took Mom into the barn and beat her with a fishing pole until her jeans were soaked with blood and she passed out. All I know about him beyond that is he died in prison serving time for murder. Grandma Dotty and my family survived. Jim was cast into ignominy.

The only man that ever did right by my matriarchs was my father, Rick Dandliker. He never once laid a hand on Mom or got loaded with her. He tried to stay by her side but she was young and fearful of settling down. After they divorced, Dad uprooted and found another job in the state where Mom and I had moved he could be close by and supportive. After Mom decided she couldn't handle being a mother, he unconditionally accepted custody and raised me by himself most of my life.

I was 19 when Mom told me, "My biggest mistake in life was leaving your father. Please tell him I still love him."

Later, Mom became a skilled construction

worker and avid reader. At a male-dominated work site, she was given the least desirable tasks: climbing into the guts of a scraper to knock obstructions loose; standing in pits and guiding the crane operator as he lowered ten-foot-wide concrete culverts within inches of crushing her; and running a closed-cab water truck with no air-conditioning. Evenings and weekends, she'd cook and run errands and

distinguish the difference. It became a way to detach from what I was hearing.

After I escaped to Oregon, Bobby left and took their boy, my younger brother. He won sole custody because the state already knew Mom was beating me. They never knew what Bobby did to Mom.

Mom gave birth to my youngest sibling, Nikki, in 1992. We heard varying stories

game against the Patriots and it was a full moon. Around midnight, she took a lethal cocktail of medications and left a letter saying goodbye. I never read the letter and no one in my family brought up what she said.

Her determination lives on in my sister. Nikki went to live with Uncle Darryl, a late-stage alcoholic who physically assaulted her. She didn't put up with it long and fought back until she ended up in a group foster home. There she learned how to put words to her feelings and take care of herself.

When we reconnected, she was 18 and about to move into her new apartment. She told me, "I can either use what happened to me as an excuse or a strength." She worked every day and moved up to management at a shoe store. She paid her own way for everything.

Then she got involved with Daniel. They had known each other since childhood. However, romance exploded into violence before long. He was smoking pot and letting her pay all the bills. One night they got into an argument and he broke her jaw. He went to jail and she moved out. I helped her move and press charges but we drank and got stoned in the process.

There's rarely been a man in any of my matriarchs' lives that held up, including me. I was the last man to abandon Mom. Five days before she killed herself she left me a voicemail saying the cancer returned. I was too stoned to talk to her and too ashamed to respond. We never got to say goodbye. Nikki needed her brother when Daniel assaulted her; instead, she got a drinking buddy.

Great-Grandma's velvet Elvis was a sweet, soft lie hiding a hard fist. Elvis Presley sang:

"She's wearin' a ring that I bought her on sale and that makes her the property of this U.S. male" and "I'd rather see you dead, little girl, than to be with another man."

So many of the men in my family's life have typified these sentiments. They have acted proud, entitled, and belligerent. They were domineering but that is not true strength. Resilience, like trauma, is generational. Four generations of women in my family have sacrificed, struggled, made mistakes and endured. They possess true, lasting strength; they are tempered by fire like great-grandma's iron skillet. I owe my existence and determination to them.

Their stories – like so many unsung heroines' – deserve to be told and remembered and told again. Irma, Dotty, Lorraine and Nikki are not isolated, unfortunate cases. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Justice, nearly 25 percent of women experience at least one physical assault during adulthood by a partner. Additionally, 60 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native women will be physically assaulted in their lifetime.

I can only hope that Nikki, having finally left her abuser behind, will do what Mom could not; see her daughter, Angel Lily, safely into adulthood. May the cycle end with her and a new way of life begin.



ILLUSTRATION BY KAT DAVIS

still find time to devour 500-page books in two days.

Every afternoon she came in caked with mud and sun-bronzed, all wiry muscles and platinum hair, with a mischievous smile on her face. She'd throw me a candy bar and regale me with little victories over the arrogant men who thought her weak and dumb. In those moments, I forgot the day or week before when she chased me around the house welting my back and legs with a leather strap. I was her confidante, her prize, her eldest.

She was married to Bobby at the time, also a construction worker. He would stay in a trailer in Chicago all week to work various projects and come home on weekends. He always entered the house lanky and stern, rarely acknowledging me. Mom would transform into a meek, quiet housemaid. She'd ask yes-or-no questions and rarely express an opinion. I faded into the wall or became a piece of furniture.

Friday and Saturday nights I frequently woke with a start because the wall above my bed would vibrate with thuds from their bedroom below. I listened as Bobby threw Mom around and tried to guess what she was crashing against: the wall, the dresser, the bed or the floor. After awhile, I could

about Nikki's parentage: he was a Major League Baseball player or a police officer, depending on who she told. She never named him. I think she preferred he not be involved, given the men in her past and their conduct.

Nikki came to represent Mom's last chance. Mom lavished her with every material gift she could afford on a limited income. However, she did not give up dangerous men or booze, and it was their undoing as mother and daughter. Nikki bounced in and out of foster care from age 4 to 14. Nikki told me she learned the hard way how to call 9-1-1 when she was five. Nikki once made Thanksgiving dinner out of bread and butter with black pepper because Mom couldn't get out of bed that week. All they had was each other and they fought as fiercely for their connection as they did with one another. At the end, Mom also fought throat cancer and ALS. Her only wish, repeated over and over to me on the phone, was that she could live to see Nikki reach 18.

When the throat cancer returned after an exhausting year of chemo, radiation and surgery, Mom was a husk and it was all she could do to stay above 90 pounds. After having little or no control her entire life, she took control of her death. On Oct. 16, 2005, Mom got her wish: the Broncos won their

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