

Stalking the Bogeyman

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This time last year I was plotting to kill a man. This time last year I had a gun, and a silencer, and a plan. I had staked out the man's tract home in Broomfield — the gray, two-story one with the maroon trim and the American flag hanging above the doorstep. I had followed him to and from his job as an electrical engineer. I was confident I would get away with murder, because there was nothing in recent history to connect me to him. Homicide investigators look for motive, and mine was buried 25 years in the past.

The man I was going to kill was the one who raped me in 1978, when I was seven years old.



When I was seven, I had a crush on Princess Leia and wanted to be a member of the rock band Kiss when I grew up. I was in the second grade, and a cop dressed up like a bloodhound wearing a trench coat and calling himself McGruff came to my school and warned us all to watch out for strange men in cars offering candy.

But McGruff didn't say anything about watching out for the son of my mom and dad's best friends. Our families had both moved to Alaska that year. His dad and my dad worked together. He was ten years older than me, and a star athlete at Chugiak High School. He wrestled and played quarterback. *The Anchorage Daily News* ran a profile of him in the sports section, and my mom cut it out and stuck it on our refrigerator. I looked up to him. I thought he was super-cool.

One night his parents had my parents over for dinner, and he asked me if I wanted to go to his bedroom in the basement and play with his karate stuff. We snuck off together, and once he had me alone, inside his room, the door closed, he got out his karate stuff, throwing stars and nunchuks and a curved sword, and we started playing. He did not play nice. He spun the nunchuks inches from my face and hurled the throwing stars into the wall next to me. I didn't know what was going on, but I knew it was bad, so I started crying, and he told me to shut up and then started chasing me around the room, waving the sword. He put the blade to my throat and backed me into a corner, where I dropped into a crouch and cowered. Then he told me to take off my pants.

The term "child molestation" doesn't begin to describe what happened next. When I think "child molestation," I think inappropriate touching. I think fondling. What happened next wasn't fondling. It wasn't Michael Jackson gently introducing my hand to his magical giraffe, and it wasn't anything like a Catholic priest masturbating an altar boy. I was seven, and it was violent, sick, pedophilic rape.

He started off by unzipping the fly of his jeans and telling me he'd cut my face with the sword if I didn't do what he wanted, but not to worry, he wouldn't pee in my mouth. He finished with me face down on the bare black-plastic mattress of his waterbed, covering my head with a pillow to muffle my squealing. I had no words for what was happening, no concept of "rape" or "sex." I just knew that I was terrified and in pain.

When he was done with me, when I was pulling up my pants, he said that if I told my parents or his parents or anyone else, that my mom and dad would be very angry with me because I'd done a bad thing. He said they would spank me. He said if I told on him he'd come to my house in the middle of the night and gut me like a salmon.

Then he opened his door. He told me not to go back upstairs right away, and sat me down in front of a TV in the downstairs family room and had me play Atari until my tears dried and I was more presentable.

When I was seven, I no longer believed in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy, but from that night on, I had no such doubts about the Bogeyman.



He only got me that once — or, at least, only once when I was conscious. There was one night, two or three months later, when my parents were hosting a holiday party, and they took me to his house so he could babysit me and his little sister while his parents were at the party. He put on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack and we "played disco," which consisted of all of us getting drunk on straight, warm hard booze while he watched his little sister and me gyrate to "Stayin' Alive," thereby securing my lifelong hatred of the Bee Gees. I don't remember the rest of that night, just waking up the next morning with my first hangover. Six months later, I nearly died after guzzling most of a bottle of peach brandy that I found in my dad's bar.

I made sure he never got me alone again for more than a few minutes, which wasn't easy, because our parents socialized almost every weekend at either their house or ours, and he didn't move out or go to college after high school. He turned into one of those guys who still dates high school chicks and lives with his parents well into his twenties.

My memories of him in those years are scattershot. One Fourth of July he told me how much fun he'd just had sticking an M-80 up a cat's ass and lighting the fuse, how the cat had hopped around frantically trying to squeeze out the quarter-stick of dynamite before it blew in half. I remember that he was handy with tools, and when I was in Cub Scouts, my parents paid him a few bucks to help me build one of those miniature pinewood-derby cars. I made sure the door between his house and the garage workshop stayed open. He didn't help me build the car so much as just build it while I watched. He put a ball of lead in the front and painted it red and wrote "David's Delight" on the side in a handsome script. I won the whole derby, and I remember calling him right afterward, stupidly thinking for a couple of minutes that he and I were some sort of team, that we had something other than a predator-prey relationship. And I remember that for years after the rape, whenever he and I were in the same room and no one was looking, he would cup both his hands in a circle around his crotch and give me a Bogeyman smile, a smile that said, "I got some more of this for your punk little eight-, nine-, ten-year-old ass."

He stopped leering at me around the time I turned eleven, probably because I was getting to be a pretty big kid. Out of fear and shame and not wanting to make a fuss, I kept our little secret, but one night when I was almost twelve, I got my first sweet taste of payback.

It was New Year's Eve 1982. He was drinking heavily that night. His dad made a potent punch, and he guzzled one ornate crystal mug of it after another while his mom begged him to stop. The stroke of midnight found him passed out in a sleeping bag on the floor of the bathroom next to the bedroom where he'd raped me four years before. I snuck downstairs to where he lay and said his name a few times, louder and louder, to see if he'd wake up. When he didn't, I ran up and soccer-kicked him in the head, then turned and sprinted back upstairs, feeling quite satisfied with myself.

Until a few days ago, the last time I was face to face with him was twelve years ago, when I was 21. I was back home from college between my sophomore and junior years, and I needed a cheap suit for a job interview, so I went to Harry's of Hong Kong. And there he was, a 31-year-old cheap-suit salesman and rapist of children. I hadn't seen him in six or seven years, and I immediately realized two things. The first was that he was no longer bigger than me. I had six inches and at least fifty pounds on him. But in a street fight, what matters more than size is motivation, and the second thing I realized was that I wanted to kill him. I wanted to grab a coatrack and bash in his head, carve out his heart with a shoehorn, snatch that metal ballpoint pen out of his cheap-suit jacket and stab him in the eye, over and over again, and everyone in the store would hear him screaming because he wouldn't have a pillow over his head.

But I did nothing. My mother was with me, and even more than I wanted revenge, I wanted to protect her and my father from the terrible knowing that he had raped me when I was seven years old, while they were upstairs with his parents, drinking wine and playing board games. I didn't want their memories of my childhood tarnished with his scum.

The memory of being raped when I was seven was never repressed. It was not recovered under hypnosis. It has always been with me, festering. When I was a teenager, I began researching how being raped as a child might affect the development of my personality, and I recoiled in horror. Every study I read supported the "vicious cycle" theory that victims of pedophilia are more likely to become pedophiles themselves. I felt like a werewolf had bitten me and it was only a matter of time before the full moon rose. Throughout my early adolescence, I was constantly, torturously checking myself for evil impulses. I made a blood oath with myself that if I started feeling the desire to rape children, I would kill myself and make it look like a mountaineering accident. I was already in the habit of solo climbing in Alaska — no partners, no ropes — despite my parents' repeated warnings against such a dangerous activity. Had I thrown myself down a mountain, they would have believed it, and better a son who died climbing than one who lived and raped kids.

The next death I plotted was the Bogeyman's.

Soon after I moved to Denver three years ago, I learned from my parents that the son of their good friends now also lived in the area. I became fixated on the idea that he was raping children nearby and that it was up to me to stop him by any means necessary. According to a 1998 Colorado Bureau of Investigation polygraph study of convicted child molesters, the mean number of victims per molester, at least in this state, is 184, and that's only for the molesters who've been arrested and stopped, at least for a little while. My guy has never been caught. Eighty percent of convicted child molesters in Colorado keep a clean criminal record right up until they're caught for molesting kids, and his is spotless.

The science has gotten a lot better since I read those studies twenty years ago. Now authorities agree that most pedophiles begin molesting children when the perpetrators are in their middle teens, and most of them never stop, not even after they're caught — if they're caught — and my Bogeyman has never been caught. All my adult life, I'd been aware that he was, in all likelihood, still raping children, but as long as he was doing it far away, I'd felt no compulsion to do anything about it. Once I found out he was here, though, I began to agonize over my failure to stop him. I considered going to the police, but I had no evidence except my memories. I thought about placing subtle advertisements in Alaskan newspapers; I thought about sending letters to everyone he knows, his ex-wives and everyone in his new neighborhood in Colorado, warning them and begging them to please come forward if they knew anything or suspected anything. But I was afraid such measures would somehow lead to my parents' finding out, and the cold, hard truth is that I wanted to protect them more than I wanted to protect children I'd never met.

The more I obsessed on it, the more I came to the seemingly inescapable conclusion that the best way to make sure he never raped another child, to make sure I had my revenge, was to kill him, to just walk right up to him in a secluded place and scrape him from this world like a piece of dog shit off my shoe.

I bought the gun last April. I had a few firearms in my closet already, but they'd all been purchased legally, in my name, from a licensed firearms dealer. So I flew to Phoenix and went to a gang barrio, where I bought a Beretta 9mm with a homemade silencer and the serial number removed. I took this gun to the local garage gunsmith and had him put dozens of deep nicks and grooves in the Beretta's barrel to corrupt ballistics tests. The gunsmith warned me that this would ruin the gun's accuracy beyond a few feet, but I didn't care. I intended to get up-close and personal.

After testing the gun and silencer in the desert, I stored them in Phoenix and flew home to keep scheming. It seems a little insane to me now that I was actually going to kill a man instead of just bringing what he had done to me out in the open. But that's how kiddie rapers get away with it. They depend upon shame and fear and embarrassment to keep their victims quiet. And there are so many victims. The commonly accepted estimate among law enforcement and sexual-abuse treatment specialists in Colorado is that one in four women and one in six men who live in this state were either molested or raped before the age of eighteen, most of them by a man or teenage boy they knew.

According to the U.S. Justice Department, fewer than one in ten sexual assaults on children in this country are committed by a stranger. About a third of the perpetrators are family members, including stepfathers. The rest — 60 percent — are acquaintances of the child. They are coaches, scoutmasters, priests, family friends, sons of family friends. The Bogeyman walks among us, masked with charm, tricking us into liking him because he's so good with children.

The summer when I was eleven, Jim, my Little League coach, told my parents that the whole team was getting together at a batting cage for practice and that he would come by to pick me up. He came and got me, all right, but there was no team trip to the batting cage. He took me out for pizza and gave me money to play video games. He didn't try anything, but he was working up to it. A few days later, he called and asked if I wanted to go see the movie *Annie* with him — a grown man, asking a boy out on a date. I recognized the Bogeyman, and I made sure I was never alone with Jim, either.

Two years later, Billy, my youth-league basketball coach, held a team sleepover after the last game of the season. He ordered pizzas and put a gay-porn video in his VCR, inviting us to watch it while he took the two shyest boys on our team into his bedroom and locked the door. So I took a case of soda out on his balcony and launched a pop-can artillery barrage on the cars in the parking lot of his condo complex. I shattered windshields and dented hoods until the neighbors poured outside, screaming bloody murder, and Billy had to go down to pacify them by agreeing to pay the damages. After that, he turned off the porn and stayed in his bedroom, the door open, for the rest of the slumber party. I sat up with my back against a wall all night long. He didn't tell my parents about the pop cans.

This time last year I was plotting to kill a man, and I was telling myself that like with Billy, I was doing it to protect the children. But really, more than anything else, I think I just wanted to shoot the son of a bitch. And I believe I would have, taking a second deep and dirty secret with me to the grave. I was going to kill a man rather than simply tell what he'd done — because I was still ashamed, and because I didn't want my parents to know, even 25 years later. But then they found out, just in time to prevent me from committing first-degree murder.



If you have a secret you want to keep, never write it down. I know that now, but I didn't when I was ten, the summer between fourth and fifth grade, when I sat down with a pen and my Garfield the Cat diary. The entry is dated June 1981, and while I have no memory of writing it, the penmanship is unmistakably my own. There, between accounts of my grandfather dying and a game-winning double I hit in Little League, is an account of my being raped three years before. I concluded the entry by wondering what I would do if I ever met the man who'd raped me on the street once I myself was a grown man. "Will I smile and shake his hand and pretend nothing happened?" I wrote. "Or will I punch him in the face?"

Last September, my mom and dad decided to spend part of Labor Day weekend going through the cabinets in my old bedroom and box up all of my childhood stuff for attic storage. My mom found the diary and read it. I received a frantic message from her on my voice mail, saying I needed to call home right away. I called back immediately, my first thought that my dad was seriously ill. No, she said, it was nothing like that, but we needed to talk as a family. She got my dad on the phone and they told me about finding the diary, and my mom asked me in a shaking voice if it was true.

Had I had any warning, I would have lied, told my parents no, that the diary entry was just some twisted childhood musing I put down on paper for reasons long forgotten. My parents are both retired and in their sixties, and they didn't need this. But I was not prepared, and so I told the truth. My mom started crying, and I said I'd fly home as soon as I could.

I'd scheduled the murder by then, giving myself a 72-hour window immediately before I was to leave on a two-week trip to Mexico in late December. My plan was to shoot him, ditch the gun, then fly out of the country and keep my ear to the ground from afar, just in case. There's an ill-kept baseball field near his house where I was going to stalk him on a late-night walk. It's a good place for a killing in the suburbs, quiet, usually empty, and hundreds of yards from the closest house on its far side.

But by the time I met with my parents, I'd called off my plan. The truth was now out. It was my mother who'd pulled the trigger: She'd already sent an anonymous letter to his parents, informing them that their son was a child molester and imploring them to do everything in their power to prevent him from being alone with children.

In March my mom called his parents, who now live in Michigan. She'd written down exactly what she wanted to say on a sheet of yellow note paper, used it as a script and then mailed it to me. She started off by saying that what she was about to tell them would be difficult for them to hear, but for the sake of their grandchildren, they should listen. (He has children of his own now, as well as stepchildren.) She told them that their son had violently raped me in the fall of 1978. She told them that he had used a knife. She told them that the typical number of victims for a pedophile his age is well over a hundred. She told them that she regretted finding out what their son had done to me, but now that she had, she felt that they had to know as well. She told them she wished them to have good lives, but to never contact her or my father again — no Christmas cards, nothing. She told them she hoped their son eventually got caught and spent the rest of his life getting raped in prison. Then she hung up.

By then, I'd begun writing about how I was sexually assaulted as a child, all the while knowing that my story would be incomplete, a failure, if I did not at least try to confront the Bogeyman. Strangely, I was a lot more comfortable with the concept of shooting him in the head than I was with talking to him on the phone, let alone in person.

On May 5, I finally sent two copies of the same letter to his house in Broomfield, one by overnight Airborne Express, one by registered mail.

Remember me? Our parents were good friends in Alaska. I was seven the first year we all moved there. I remember my childhood years in Alaska very, very well, especially a certain night that first year in Alaska, when I was seven — seven years old, think about it — when your parents had my family over for dinner, and you and I went down to your bedroom to play with your karate stuff.

I kept what you did to me a secret for 25 years, until my mom found a diary I kept when I was a kid, and in that diary I wrote it all down. It's time for you and I to talk this over. I suggest a meeting, in public, anywhere in the Denver metro, as soon as possible. If seeing me face to face is too uncomfortable for you, then at least call me.

Simply ignoring this letter is not going to work. If I don't hear from you by Friday late afternoon, I'll start calling your house, and then knocking on your front door.

I want to be perfectly clear here: I am not threatening you with any physical harm, and I am not hinting at blackmail. I don't want your blood or your money, just one uncomfortable conversation.

He received the letters with my contact information the next day, and without even taking a night to think it over, called my voice mail and left a message stating that he was willing to meet with me and giving his mobile phone number. I called the next day, got him on the phone, and told him that I appreciated his calling me — and that I was surprised he had. "Well," he said, "it's a call I should have made a long time ago."

I was stunned, because from his words and tone of voice, it sounded like he was going to actually admit what he'd done, when I knew that almost all pedophiles deny, deny, deny until the day they die.

We arranged to meet at 2 p.m. the following afternoon at a Cracker Barrel near his house. "Is there anything you want to say to me now?" I asked.

"Just that I'm deeply sorry," he said. "I've thought a hundred times about contacting you in the last twenty years to tell you that, and I just never had the courage to pick up the phone. I'm sorry for the pain I've caused you and my parents and your parents."

He sounded sincere, well-rehearsed. The next day, an hour before we were supposed to meet, I changed the location from a chain restaurant in suburbia to the intersection of the 16th Street Mall and Market Street in downtown Denver. He showed up wearing jeans, a gray T-shirt and a Colorado Avalanche cap. When I saw him standing on the corner, anxiously trying to pick me out of the crowd, I realized the moment I had written about in my diary in 1981 had arrived: We were both grown men, and I was meeting him on the street.

I didn't punch him in the face. I did shake his hand. But neither of us pretended that nothing had happened. We were afraid of one another. I was so jacked up on adrenaline, I was shaking. He was sweating like he'd just run a mile.

"Nervous?" he said. I nodded. "Me too," he said.

We walked around the block, and he started by telling me that he'd been waiting for me to contact him for several weeks. Soon after my mom had called his parents in March, he said, his parents had flown to Colorado and confronted him with her accusations. He told me that he'd admitted he had raped me to both his parents and his wife.

"My mom got extremely emotional and didn't handle it well at all, and my dad just went quiet and became very stoic," he said. "They've sort of written me off since then. They used to call me every week, but they don't call me anymore, even though I told them it had only happened with you that once."

He repeated this claim over and over during our conversation, working it into his response to nearly every question I asked. He only had one victim, me. He had not sexually assaulted any other child before or since.

We sat on the mall's stone stools and kept talking, our voices low, both of us looking around to make sure no one was in earshot. I asked him how his wife had reacted. "She was concerned, obviously," he said. "She wanted to know right away if our son was safe, and I told her yes, he is."

Then I hit him with the question I'd always wanted to ask: "Why did you do it?"

He shook his head, and tears welled in his eyes.

"I've asked myself that question over and over and over again, David, and I just don't have a good answer for you. I wish I did, but I just don't know. I know that until I was in my thirties, I didn't really believe other people's feelings were real. I didn't think anyone really mattered but me. Maybe that was it. Maybe if I'd gone into therapy, I could have come up with the answer. All I can say is I'd never done it before and I never did it again, and if there was one thing I could go back in my life and change, that would be it."

I asked if his attack on me was spontaneous or planned. "It wasn't planned," he said. "I just acted on this one weird impulse. As soon as it was over, I was thinking, 'Oh, my God, that's my little sister's friend. How could I have just done that?'"

He said he'd wanted to apologize to me for many years but hadn't sought me out because he didn't want to "reopen old wounds" and because he hoped I had forgotten it ever happened.

"My biggest fear was that I'd ruined your life," he said. "I was afraid that you would turn out to be a homeless drug addict or something and it would all be my fault."

I told him that while I wasn't a street junkie, I did have a tremendous fear of becoming a father, because I didn't believe I'd be able to protect my child from people like him.

Becoming a father had changed his life, he told me. "I've found what love really means," he said. "I used to think that love meant you just really like somebody a whole lot, but when you become a father, you really understand what love is."

I asked him what he would do if he found out that someone had raped his son.

He said, "I'd probably rip their head off."

There's a scene in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* where the gunfighter played by Eli Wallach righteously blows away a guy and then drops this pearl of murderous wisdom: "If you're going to shoot, shoot. Don't talk."

Because if you let them talk, they may beg, and if they beg, you may not shoot. When I was still planning to kill the man I was now sitting beside on the 16th Street Mall, my plan was to walk up, say, "David Holthouse. You raped me when I was seven," and then pop, one slug to the crotch, let him writhe, kick him over, hold him down with my foot and then pop, pop, pop, three to the back of the head, lights out.

I knew that if I gave him time to talk, I might not pull the trigger — and sure enough, as soon as I exchanged a few sentences with him, I didn't want to shoot him at all, because I saw him as a frightened, damaged man. He wasn't the Bogeyman anymore. He was real. He begged my forgiveness. He swore I was the only one.

All the experts say he was almost certainly lying. But then, all the experts say it was extremely unusual for him to admit his crime to me, let alone his wife and parents, and he did at least make the admission to his parents. I checked.

I did not grow up in a religious household. But he did. I have been to church three times in my life, and the first was with him and his mom, an evening mass just before Christmas, shortly after he raped me. I remember kneeling beside him in front of red-cushioned pews, feeling afraid. I don't remember the sermon, but talking to him on the mall, I thought of this passage from Romans: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written 'It is mine to avenge. I will repay.'"

When I had nothing else to say to the man who'd raped me when I was seven, we parted ways. He blended into the crowd.