Age of Anxiety

by Maria SchamisTurner

When I was around 11 years old, I used to think: "If I die now, I'll never see another Humphrey Bogart movie." The death I imagined was caused by a tragic accident or by my own hand. I was not suicidal, just exploring the various possibilities of death in my mind, as if trying them on for size. Trying to judge the weight I had in the world. I pictured my devastated parents, my shocked sister, my weeping classmates and teachers, gathered at the funeral expressing regret that they had not treated me better in life.

It was Bogart who brought me back from the brink of death. Like the sugar cookies that Mr. and Mrs. Ernie from Ernie's Austrian Bakery gave my sister and me when we went to buy bread, Bogart had become a kind of comfort food. *Casablanca*, which I had already seen a few times by this tender age (my choices for entertainment influenced by the absence of a television in the house), took on mythic proportions in my mind. Sitting with my family in the dark of a Vancouver repertory cinema, I watched teary-eyed as Rick spots Ilsa for the first time, as Sam hits the notes of "As time goes by" and, if I hadn't yet cried, the singing of "*La Marseillaise"* in defiance of Major Strasse of the Third Reich was sure to do the trick. Even then I felt an affinity with the stragglers and misfits who sought safe haven at Rick's Café Americain, under Rick's cynical but sympathetic eye.

My sister and I bought a life-size poster of Bogart when my father moved out. We placed it, with my mother's blessing, at the top of the stairs that led to the second floor of our house. Bogart, posed in full suit, trench coat and hat, made an unlikely heartthrob for a pre-teenage girl in 1978, but I slept more soundly knowing that the guy who had taken on Eddy Mars in *The Big Sleep* was there to protect me. My sister and I were not the only Bogart fans in the house. In my mother's sewing room (and refuge), alongside the red-tomato pincushion, the ironing board, and a medicine cabinet stocked with valium, was a smaller picture of my idol, from some lesser known film or publicity stunt, sitting in a chair with a bib around his neck, an older woman coaxing him to eat.

My father's sanctuary, before the dissolution of my parents' marriage, was his study, which to my recollection was not decorated with any corresponding pinups. Instead my father marked it as his territory by painting (or having my mother paint) the natural hardwood floor a glossy black. When my father was in his study he was not to be disturbed. Likewise he claimed a regular afternoon nap as sacred. Don't wake your father, we were told.

We lived on a hill on a respectable street in a two-story wooden house with a wide front porch, and a big backyard with trees to climb, a prickly holly standing sentinel at the back gate. Our front garden was lush with rhododendrons and azaleas. At the bottom of the hill lay Alma, a wide road that curved out of sight, a blind spot for drivers, and a bad place for kids to cross. On the other side of the street was a small neighborhood park that should have been a welcome place for us to play, but somehow wasn't. My memories of park outings are of empty swing sets and older kids smoking cigarettes.

On our side of Alma was the number seven bus stop, a lone post planted in the sidewalk before the street gave way to the Dunbar traffic. This is where I went one afternoon, book bag in hand, to catch the bus to the public library.

At age ten I was deemed old enough to go on my own, and I was proud of my initiative. (It was before my parents had separated, before my mother started to accompany me on all my library outings, more for her distraction than for my safety.) At the bus stop was a red-haired man in a blue tracksuit who flashed a big smile at me when I arrived. I turned to face the street, but I could picture him and his smile behind me. I don't remember how long we were both there, waiting at the bus stop, before I heard a jingling sound, the sound of keys being shaken. The sound persisted and despite myself, I turned to look. I must have seen his penis in his hand, but even if I hadn't, I knew it was there, as was the smile still stuck on his face as he moved his hand up and down inadvertently jingling the keys in his track pants pocket. Holding my bag close to my chest I ran up the path that led to our back alley, through the back gate, past the scratchy branches of the holly bush, pushing through the spider webs, running to the safety of the house and my parents.

"There was a man at the bus stop… he was jingling his keys." It was all I could say. Crying at this point, in my mother's arms, snot coming out of my nose, *jingling his keys*, *he was jingling his keys*. My mother eventually caught on and having reassured herself that I had not been hurt or touched in any way, spelled it out for my father.

I was already somewhat fearful as a child but now I had proof that the world was a dangerous place. If the flasher alone hadn't convinced me, my run-in with the vacuum cleaner salesman confirmed it. In my memory he is young with dirty blonde hair, dressed in jeans. I was home by myself when he rang the doorbell and gave his pitch. When he asked if he could come in and use the bathroom, I saw no alternative but to let him in and up the stairs that led the way not just to the bathroom, but also to our bedrooms, my mother's sewing room, my father's study. I knew I wasn't supposed to let a stranger in the house, but I didn't know how to discourage him. I had not been coached in the details of the story. I stayed downstairs, in the front hall, and picked up the phone. I don't remember if I called someone or just held the telephone receiver in my hand, a link to the outside world and a possible savior should one be needed. I do remember being relieved when I heard the tinkle of his urine hitting the toilet bowl, the flush that followed. If he really had to pee, then perhaps he wasn't an axe murderer or serial rapist. When he left, he leaned towards me and put his hand on my thigh, and then gave me his business card. I told my parents when they came home. My father was angry and talked about how the man should be fired. He called the company. I don't know what he said, but for weeks I was terrified the salesman would come back to the house to exact his revenge for having lost his job. What had he done after all? He had used the toilet and touched my thigh.

After these incidents, I was too frightened to walk to school alone. My sister had started high school, which involved a bus ride, so my father would walk with me in the mornings, taking me to within sight of the school until I weaned myself, week by week, block by block, from his company. I began to forget the flasher and my fears that the vacuum cleaner salesman would come back to get me, and became more worried about my classmates seeing me holding my father's hand.

Even before the separation, I had accepted that I was an outsider at my elementary school. Are those your parents? I remember some kid saying when my mother and father showed up at school. There was no additional comment, but I understood all too well the tone behind the question. My

parents weren't like other people's parents. They were older, they were foreigners (my mother is Argentine and my father is British), and they did not understand the importance of having a new ski jacket in the fall, a fact that my friends' parents seemed to have intuitively figured out. Divorce, as yet unpopular on Vancouver's west side, was just another oddity to add to my mother's diminutive size and strong accent, and my father's professorial dishevelment.

The summer I turned 14 was the summer of serial killer Clifford Olson. It was hot in Vancouver, hotter than normal and I hung out with my best friend Coral, who was tall and pretty and who, unlike me, already had breasts. People talked about missing children. Newspaper headlines read: "Cunning Killer With Blazing Eyes" and "Hot Summer Helps Slayer Elude Police." Our parents must have been worried, but it didn't occur to them to keep us home. Vancouver in the early 1980s had a small town feel to it, the kind of place where everyone knew the resident oddballs. There was mold man, so called for the green tinge of his hair and skin from too many days and nights outside, a regular on city buses. There was the Jesus-truck guy, who drove around in his pickup that he had turned into a billboard for God with wooden hand-painted signs saying *Jesus saves, Jesus is now*. And rosary-guy, skinny and silent, who stood on the corner of Georgia and Granville, day after day, a rosary dangling from his hands. They were after our souls perhaps, but not our lives.

Coral and I rode the buses between our respective houses, unintentionally traveling through Olson's stomping grounds, but we weren't worried. We already knew to be wary of strange men. The University Endowment Lands that surrounded our high school were beautiful, but held certain dangers. Our gym teachers occasionally took us for a run through the woods with a warning never to leave anyone behind. Rumor had it that one of our classmates had been raped there and her cousin had been forced to watch. On the windows of the principal's office, the secretary posted notices. *Watch out for the horse-faced rapist*, accompanied by an artist's sketch of a man with stringy hair and a long face. *Horse-faced!* My friends and I laughed at the description, but we didn't walk alone. As I was completing my first year of high school, Clifford Olson killed 11 children, boys and girls, between the ages of 9 and 18.

Having two family homes did not offer double the comfort. Instead, there were new dangers to avoid: my father's early attempts at cooking, my mother's emotional outbursts, my father's girlfriends, who flirted with playing the "woman" of the house, and my mother's frustration at trying to reenter the job market after more than a decade of being a housewife. I kept my fears to myself. Unlike I had with the flasher at the bus stop and the vacuum cleaner salesman, I didn't share the rapist-at-large stories or the latest talk about Olson with my parents. I was at the age where keeping secrets from my family had become second nature. I no longer trusted my parents to protect me and I treated them with adolescent scorn. What did they know of the dangers of this world? My father still didn't own a television.

In Grade 9, I was suddenly not the only kid with divorced parents. I made new friends after I hennaed my dull brown hair and got contact lenses. "Hey red,"

called out a girl one day on the steps of the school. Louize was cooler and tougher than I was, but we bonded over dysfunctional families and the general restlessness of being teenagers.

I stopped turning to Bogart in moments of crisis. I had found my own Café Americain amongst the stragglers and misfits at University Hill Secondary School and sought consolation in our shared angst. My older sister had turned into a role model of rebellion, skipping classes and smoking cigarettes, and I started following in her footsteps. I wore makeup and listened to punk rock and hardened myself to the tears of nostalgia. The movie stills of Bogart and Bergman that had once lined my walls came down and in their place I put up posters of DOA, the Subhumans, and other local bands. *Casablanca* and the singing of "*La Marseillaise"* had no place in my new world. Bogart may have been a match for Eddy Mars, and Major Strasse of the Third Reich, but for me, he was no longer enough.

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