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A Bouquet of Purple Carnations for My Birthday

At the suggestion of my partner, I started therapy last week. I've suffered from severe clinical depression through my pre-adolescence, adolescence and all of my adult life. I've been on and off of antidepressants, attempted suicide, have severe body image issues, I was a cutter as an adolescent but now bite and/or hit myself when I become angry or overly upset, I overeat for comfort and am virtually incapable of having even a friendship with a man that does not become inappropriately sexualized—not physically, but definitely psychologically. Luckily, I met someone who didn't run away after the glow of a new relationship wore off and who doesn't enable or allow me to collapse into my depression but supports me as I work through it.

I had gotten much better, my personal physical abuse of myself was under control, I was working out, feeling healthy, managing to maintain appropriate verbal and emotional boundaries with my male friends and then *wham*, shortly after Christmas and a rejection from a graduate program I started to spiral and fall into old patterns. I take anti-depressants, but my partner suggested that I talk to somebody as well.

During that first session, we did a lot of talking about my father—he was alternately affectionate and physically abusive. He is schizophrenic, my parents divorced when I was 14. I was also molested by a family friend when I was eight. After talking at length about my father, the therapist asked me if he touched me as well and I said no, but the question made me so uncomfortable that I wanted to crawl out of my own skin.

That night I had a meltdown and unburdened all this crap that I have been carrying around in me for my entire life. I never thought that it counted, but after doing some research and seeing that same *Law & Order: SVU*, I'm coming to realize that his sexual abuse was as damaging as the physical.

When I was little under ten, I was my daddy's girl, we'd take baths together, he thought nothing about being naked in front of me, we'd go fishing together, take naps together—I remember that we'd play sleeping beauty together and that we would take turns being the princess. All this would alternate with his rages, I remember sitting in my room and being terrified because my door frame would be splintering or as early as five hiding under my bed to escape a beating or a rampage.

My parents separated for a while and when I'd stay with my father we'd sleep in the same bed, he never touched me but it always made me feel uncomfortable. Once I found a Playboy in his dresser and I was so revolted that I didn't speak to him for weeks and refused to go back over there.

One thing in particular that has always made me so sick and that I hadn't voiced to another soul until last week during my meltdown when I told my partner of seven years was that one night when I was nine or ten he came to tuck me in and I was masturbating, he didn't say a word and just smiled at me and watched me. I couldn't stop, I was sickened and scared, but I kept touching myself. This became a regular occurrence for a while, I don't remember how long, all I know is that he would come

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in to tuck me in, tuck in the sheets, kiss my forehead and then I would begin touching myself and he would stay seated on the bed.

As I got older and began acting out against my father's rages and my own emotional/sexual issues, my father's attentions became more and more bizarre. He would stand in doorways for long periods of time and just stare at me and touch or "adjust" himself. Whenever he did that I wanted to scream it made me so sick. He'd alternately rage at me and hit or throw things at me and then cry, be affectionate and contrite.

He always told me how pretty I was but that would be tempered by him either being pleased at my appearance, making me miniskirts and allowing me to dress provocatively (I actually got sent home from school for wearing a skirt he'd made me) or berating me for being vain and too concerned with what other people, namely other kids, thought of me.

At even 12 and 13, I was acting out in inappropriate sexual ways with peers and other adults. I would pretend I was a prostitute and walk around in short skirts. I would be sexual with any boy who smiled at me and even ended up in an emotional/sexual relationship with the A/V director at my middle school. I actually thought I loved this 30 year old man because he was "kind" to me, although he, too, would become furious if he found out I'd been sexual with another boy.

Once my father found a letter that a boy had written me that talked about us kissing and maybe doing more than kiss and he was furious and kept asking me if I liked it when "boys groped my crotch."

My mother was in a pretty bleak place as well and mediated my father's and my fights when they got physical. When I started menstruating, his attentions turned less sexually charged and more violent. At 13, I attempted suicide, my father was distraught, and my mother just looked at me and said, "You really hate me don't you?"

My mother snapped out of her depression after a particularly bad fight between my father and I, and they divorced. My mom and I fought pretty brutally for years, but she has been appropriately open about where she was emotionally with my dad and the abuse she suffered as a child. We've both discussed how ugly it was living with my father and she is now a source of comfort and support, even after these latest revelations.

After the divorce, my father remarried. My stepmother hated me and definitely saw me as "competition." I didn't see my father much during high school. I was too busy trying to self-destruct by having sex with every boy I could, doing drugs, hurting myself and generally trying to stay as far away from reality as possible.

As I got older, my father and I spoke over the phone more and more. The last time I actually saw him was in 1994, we live in different states and I maintain a safe physical distance from him for obvious reasons.

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However, even with that distance he would call to tell me about his sexual/relationship problems with his wife, demand that I send him money to help him out of his financial difficulties (he's a gambling addict as well) and bemoan his life. All this time, I felt more like a confidant or a girlfriend than a daughter. Then when I turned 29 his behavior started to disintegrate.

For my birthday, he sent me a bouquet of purple carnations and a note that told me of a character from one of his favorite novels, a prostitute, who used to keep purple carnations in her parlor and carry them on the street when she was open to receiving clients. He went on about her beauty and her intelligence and told me that I reminded him of her. He began sending me poetry he had written about visits he'd made to prostitutes and what he had done with them and then called to ask me what I'd think. He'd also talk about the "friends" he'd make at the strip clubs he goes to.

Through all this, I only told him once that I didn't want to hear about it. It disgusted me, but as with most of the male relationships I've ever had, I can't tell him to stop.

Now he'll call me and leave hysterical or drunk messages about how sorry he is for being such a bad father and then when I try to call him back he doesn't pick up his phone for days and I'm left trying to figure out if he's dead until he calls back to say he was just in a dark place and that his meds need adjusting.

I know he's sick, but I never realized until I saw that *SVU* episode and my therapist asked me that question that his sexual behavior toward me had affected me as deeply as it had. I had thought it didn't count because he never actually touched me.

I never thought that all those times I let men abuse my body as an adult was connected to my father's abuse. I am slowly beginning to understand that my body image and self-punishment are all tied to not only the overt sexual abuse I survived as a small child but also the covert incest and physical violence that my father subjected me to as a child.

I have so much healing to do, but just being able to voice this is like lancing an infected wound.

RiotGrrl