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26 Months: Notes On a Friend in Prison

1.

I have only one photograph of M. It's from my 2002 Toronto wedding. In it, M., my newly minted husband, and Z. all stand together under the reception tent. To the right of Z. sits the tiered wedding cake that my aunt adorned with flowers at the last minute ("It looks too sad, all naked like that," she said). My husband holds out his hand. His wedding ring is plain and industrial looking, as if sliced off a pipe. At the time of the photograph, M. and Z. had been married five years. They lived in a weird slice of a Toronto apartment located more or less under an overpass. In the image, M. wears a dove grey sleeveless dress and blue brimmed hat against the hot August sun. No doubt Z. is sweating in his dark suit. She has a dancer's body. He, with his goatee and glasses, looks the part of the professor he will become.

We were all friends back in 2002, but truth be told, my husband and I always felt closer to Z. We seemed to have more in common with him than with M.

At that point, the Internet was still new. If you'd looked me up online back then, you'd have found very little. If you'd searched for M., you'd have found even less.

2.

A year before our wedding my (not yet) husband and I took M. and Z. camping over a long weekend. We packed up my father's

old canvas kayak, strapped a borrowed canoe to the roof of the car for our friends, and headed north to a park on Georgian Bay named the Massasauga. We called it "The Mass."

M. and Z. bickered as they paddled the two hours out to our site. She hung her feet over the edge of the canoe and cooed to the sweet-faced dog between them. Z. glowered in the stern. My (not yet) husband and I watched, amused from our kayak.

3.

We spent the night on a small island in two separate tents. Before turning in, the four of us sat around the fire talking about books, ideas, and our dreams for the future. Z. grumbled that we hadn't brought enough booze.

On the way back Z. and M. chose separate vessels. He paddled the kayak with me and complained even more bitterly about discomforts and difficulties than he had with his wife. My (not yet) husband laughed about it all at home. He called M. a lily-dipper and vowed never to take those two camping again.

Would it be too easy to say that the trip was a warning?

4.

Academic couples move great distances and often. Especially when they're just starting out. M. and Z. were an academic couple, just like us. The path I shared with my husband took us overseas before we returned to Canada, specifically to Montreal. M. and Z.'s took them south, over the US border.

Too many moves.
Too much work.

We lost touch.

Until one day, almost a decade on, M. found me.

5.

March 25, 2011

Subject: Hello!

J.,

I just found your lovely blog, and am hoping we could re-connect at some point...

I am in Montreal at the moment, actually, on an extended visit with my family here (my mother has cancer). Our little daughter (2 1/2) is with me...and I see (well, read) that you two have a little one as well. Congrats!

*With fondness,
M.*

I don't remember how I responded. I have no record of it. I must have, though, since M. and I made plans to get together. Soon enough I learned that all was not well with M.

May 5, 2011

Dear J.

I'm so looking forward to seeing you again, and to catching up with you and your other half, although—pity party alert—my own story has recently become very sad. At the moment, I'm basically struggling to get through each day. That looks horrifying (to stoic old me, anyway) written there, in black and white...but I'm at a point where I can't keep pretending that I'm fine, and super

strong...etc. So, I do apologize in advance, and I WISH things were happier so we could have an upbeat get-together and catch-up...but this is not the case.

What happened? I asked in my reply

6.

Dear J.,

*In spite of how things may appear on Facebook (i.e., bunko-dory?)... It's really difficult to talk about... But: it's even harder not to, if that makes any sense. The truth is that Z. has kicked me—and our daughter—out of our lives (though part of the nightmare is that if you asked him, he would deny it utterly & convincingly—I assure you, you WOULD be convinced.)
M.*

"M." and "Z." are not their true initials.

7.

And so it was that one Montreal afternoon in 2011, M. and her daughter arrived at my house by taxi for our not-so-upbeat reunion. The little girl stood at the door and cried, refusing to budge. M. explained that her daughter was "on the spectrum," and gave the child her breast to calm her.

Together, we ate a simple dinner of pasta and salad. Cucumbers for the kids. After putting the toddlers to bed, M. and I sat up late drinking wine while M. took me through the demise of her marriage to Z. He was a psychopath, she told me, and then went on at great length about signs and symptoms of the condition.

8. I remember feeling skeptical about that diagnosis.

I remember thinking that she didn't seem altogether rational to me.

I remember how anguished and emphatic she was.

9.

Dear J.,
I did the old-fashioned thing and mailed you (today) a thank you note...but meanwhile, I am feeling excruciatingly uncomfortable—in this age of instant contact—at making you wait so long for my thank you, so I will thank you here, too, for a splendid visit. In fact, I cannot thank you enough for reaching out as you did.
M.

Shortly after our sleepover, M., her daughter, and our family had a picnic on Mount Royal before we three (my son, husband, and I) went overseas on sabbatical. Once we left, M. and I lost touch again. The picnic was the last time I saw her.

I've pieced together the rest of M.'s story through Internet searches. The fact that I can do this makes me uneasy. The details of her divorce, custody battle, and the final act – M.'s imprisonment – have been troublingly easy to find. I have questions about (and am perhaps even "excruciatingly uncomfortable" with) the lack of privacy in our age of instant contact.

10.

But here are the facts nonetheless. In 2012, M. and Z. divorced. A custody battle ensued. The fight, it seems, migrated back and

forth across the Canada-US border, as M. tried her luck with one set of courts and then the other, testing out which would be more sympathetic to her cause. She wanted full custody of her little girl and she was prepared to fight like a lion for it.

From my vantage point now, I see that moment marked the beginning of the end. The moment the tragedy began to gain momentum. The juncture at which the marital conflict took on a life of its own.

Yes, she should have accepted shared custody. Yes, she should have been more flexible. But there were reasons she could not bend, or so she believed.

11.

After lengthy hearings on the custody question, a judge granted sole custody to Z. and ordered that M. have no contact with the child except for one recorded Skype or telephone call per week for two months. The judge found limiting M.'s contact was necessary to protect the child's emotional and physical health. (From a 2016 newspaper article about M. and Z.)

I know it sounds pretty bad, but things soon got even worse.

The 2015 day before M. was to hand over her daughter to Z., she fled. Canadian authorities found her hiding with her child in a farmhouse north of the border. They also recovered her abandoned car a short distance away. The RCMP took the daughter and returned her to Z. in the United States. They did not arrest M. I don't know why she was allowed to retain her freedom at that point. The legal documents do not offer any explanation.

12.

Every morning I wake up anew to the horror of what the Family Court has done: taken a girl from her Mommy and made her live with her father who abuses her in retaliation for being a brave child. And I am being punished and tortured for believing my child and reporting her disclosures?

This was M.'s last email to me, sent in 2015, after she and her daughter had been found hiding. She sent it to a wide group of friends. In the opening paragraph of that group email, M. had included a request that addressees destroy it after reading. Although I thought I had, I did not in fact comply. A quick search of my files has proven my memory of trashing the letter to be false. In truth, my archivist's instincts had kicked in and I'd saved the document instead.

13.

Included at the bottom is a note from M.'s lawyer. "I have not yet received the \$1,000 check you mailed me," he wrote. There is no way that M., unemployed at the time and a lapsed PhD student, had the cash to pay attorneys a thousand dollars at a time.

14.

So many pieces of this story make so little sense.

How did it come to this?

What would I do if the courts denied me custody of my child? Would I take him and run? Perhaps. My husband sat up in bed as I told him all this. "That's insane," he said with a heavy sigh.

15.

Three months in, after they'd found her, and authorities had taken the daughter by force, M. tried to cross into the US once more. She wanted to attend the appeal hearing that would settle the custody issue once and for all. She must have been wild with worry and rage. She was certainly in denial of what awaited her.

Of course, there was a warrant out for M.'s arrest. American police seized her at the border.

In the end she got to attend the hearing but as a prisoner, traveling to court from county jail.

16.

Online you can find a record of her tenure in the jail. Close to two years awaiting trial for international kidnapping. I never wrote her a letter during those two years, though I suppose I could have.

I wonder what her life in county jail was like. I imagine it's gender than federal prison, but perhaps I'm wrong.

I wonder about questions like sexual assault. Like mental fragility. Like dying from grief.

17.

As for the appeal, its results are freely available to anyone with an Internet connection (instant contact). The document outlines accusations that M. made against Z., namely, that he had physically and sexually abused their daughter.

Over the months preceding their custody hearing, M. had recorded conversations with the child on her phone. She

interrogated her daughter, asking her over and over again to describe how Z. had violated her.

I read in those same documents that years earlier M. had called the police after finding her husband standing over their sleeping child with a pillow in hand, as if to smother her. That time, authorities believed M. They took Z. into custody and put him under psychiatric observation.

18.

I also read this: As he played the conversations recorded on the phone, a police officer says he witnessed M. mouthing along to the words. It seemed as if it had all been "rehearsed several times," he said. Two asterisks highlighted the phrase "rehearsed several times."

Or perhaps, I thought to myself, she'd listened to the recording so many times that it had become a kind of mantra or prayer.

19.

The document continues.

A medical doctor suggests that M. did not coach her daughter in her testimony or in these interviews.

A psychologist isn't so sure. M. and her daughter "shared a remarkably close relationship," she notes. The girl "was willing to say whatever her mother wanted to hear." It's called "*folie à deux*," the psychologist explained. The abuse, goes the suggestion, is a delusion shared by mother and daughter.

Where does the truth lie? I wonder.

How can we discern it?

20.

"I am your protector," said M. to her daughter in the phone recording.

21.

Borderline personality. Asperger's Syndrome. Depression. Suicidal thoughts. A victim of childhood abuse himself. This is what M. says of Z.

But the court refuses to consider the 25-year-old sexual content of his journal entries as evidence. Or the fact that he has sought counseling in the past. Or his possible victimization as a child.

22.

In 2016, the court rejects M.'s appeal.

Z. retains full custody.

M. awaits the next ordeal, her kidnapping trial, in county jail.

23.

"It was my obligation to protect my child from harm," M. says to the court a few months later. "I took her to Canada to protect her."

What is more important, I wonder: the truth of the abuse or the deep and sincere belief on the part of a mother that her daughter is in danger? In other words, is a deep enough delusion somehow exonerating?

This is what the defense tries to argue.

24.

And what of the father in this tale who the courts say has been falsely accused? How does ostensible innocence stack up against a sincere if potentially deluded belief?

25.

A few weeks ago, in the spring of 2017, a final electronic search delivered up the last episode of this long tragedy.

M. has been found guilty of parental abduction. Her sentence: 26 months in federal prison. I have not been able to determine where exactly she is now, neither state nor penitentiary. On that front, my searches resist me.

Perhaps, if I keep looking, I will find her. If so, I will write.

26.

M. was "angry at Daddy," the girl said at her mother's trial.

M. is now 48 years old.

Her daughter is 9.

Z. continues to teach and publish. He's remarried and has fathered a new baby. A half-sister to M.'s now motherless child.