

## Jeff

Anonymous Author

I was working a typical evening shift with the usual collection of sore throats, headaches and belly pains. I came upon a 19-year-old young man, "Jeff." He had a minor hand laceration. Nothing out of the ordinary; the mundane. I did my usual and made small talk while prepping the suture tray. Jeff was clean-cut and very likable. Friendly.

I set the tray up and drew up the freezing. I took a seat and casually uncapped the needle in order to do the freezing. There was a sudden silence. I looked up to see his face was now ashen, his skin clammy. As a doctor one, of course, recognizes the fear of needles. Jeff, however, seemed panic-stricken. I asked if he was afraid of needles, knowing the obvious answer and ready for my usual stab at humour to help calm him. He replied, "I kind of hate to say this, but I had a very abusive father and he would stick needles in me when I was a kid. It just makes me think of that. I've always been so afraid of needles." His voice was breaking. I put the syringe down and asked where his dad was now. "In jail," came the short answer.

"And your mom?"

"She's dead."

"When did she die?"

"When I was 8."

"So you lived with just your Dad?"

SILENCE

"No, he killed her. He's been in jail ever since."

SILENCE

"I'm sorry to hear that."

As I sat looking at him, I was struck by the realization that those eyes had hidden a great deal of sorrow. I was admiring what a fine young man he was, and thinking how polite and accomplished he seemed. I had developed a greater respect for him now that I knew of his background.

"We were in a small town," he continued. "My brother and I were adopted by a cop and his wife. They raised us."

SILENCE

"But. . . we're both good people. I'm in university, in my second year."

His voice was pleading. Now that he felt my opinion could be jaded by the knowledge of his past, he felt obliged to offer "proof" that he was a good person. I was taken aback as I witnessed his need to prove himself to me when I was paradoxically in awe at his "come back." I sat before him in admiration, not judgment.

"Of course you're good," I answered in surprise. "Of course you're a good person. Your parents must be very proud of you."

I finished suturing him. We changed the subject and I wished him good luck. Afterward, I realized I had forgotten any mention of suture removal.

I left the chaos of the department for a moment and sat alone in our call room to gather my thoughts. Or, more truthfully, to gather myself. I needed time to recover from a realization that had just struck me. I am in my 40s. My childhood story is remarkably similar to Jeff's, though my mother is still alive. Her life was repeatedly threatened, not taken. I left home when I was 14, convinced even in the hindsight of adulthood, that I might not be alive today had I stayed. The violence was profound and escalating and I had finally abandoned the child-like hope that I would somehow be rescued by a loving but enabling mother. I have not seen my father since the day I left. There was no going back.

As for now, I am a confident and happy person. I have rarely spoken of my childhood, and for almost 30 years I have convinced myself that my silence is a marker of a tough and stoic disposition and a resolve to always look forward, not back.

In meeting Jeff, I faced the truth as I listened to him trying to convince me that he was not a bad person. I realized in that moment that my own silence is not a marker of a stoic nature but, rather, a silence born of shame and guilt.

Received: Mar. 25, 2007; accepted: Mar. 27, 2007

*This article has not been peer reviewed.*

*Can J Emerg Med 2007;9(5):387-8*

It is simply easier to hold your chin up if no one knows. With silence we can avoid judgment. Even in my 40s the guilt is profound and the shame still lingers. There is a legacy that follows abuse and we carry it with us forever. It took me all these years to recognize how much of it I carry within myself, and, to this day, if I hadn't met Jeff, I don't know that I would quite see it.

My father died today. It seems inappropriate to mourn someone you've wished dead for so long. This is grief of a different kind: grief for a childhood that could have been; grief for a lack of "closure"; grief for my disbelief that someone would hurt his or her own child so deeply, so willingly. I have sought answers in my own mind, but find that I understand less and less as I watch my own children grow and I relish in their innocence. Finally, there is grief for my sister whose silent struggles I have witnessed — a kind and wounded heart that remains quietly and silently ravaged by the betrayal of innocence and the memories that just won't go away. It is a profound betrayal that haunts her into adulthood.

In some ways I feel we never really had a childhood because the abuse we suffered was perverse and severe. It forced us to grow up too quickly and to know things we wished we didn't. Home was always the most terrifying place to be, while the rest of the world was welcome respite. I still remember the sweaty palms and the daily feeling of dread as I turned the doorknob and entered our house, far removed from anyone that could "save me." It was a helpless feeling. Out in the world, even if a stranger did you harm, you were, at least, not supposed to love them. The duality of love and hate is impossible to reconcile, though as a child you try.

Today, I mourn his death in silence because my response is not the expected. Telling anyone "my father died today" would evoke the need for an explanation of my own ambivalent feelings. Silence is easier. Still, a father's death is a significant event and I have an urge to share it with my friends simply because it's part of my life. Yet, I'm not ready to explain a grief of a different kind. Besides, where do you start? Where do you start?

Perhaps, after all, it is best left behind, along with the haunting memories that hopefully will someday be buried. Sometimes, in life, there simply is no resolution and you reach a point where you stop looking for it. Perhaps that, in itself, is closure.

I regret my on-going silence in many ways. I feel an onus to use my own experience to help others. As a doctor, I could be in a position to do so. To this day, however, discussing it on a personal level evokes a deep emotion and I'm not convinced that airing it is always helpful. I've used my doctor persona on occasion to discuss issues of abuse, hidden by the implication that my knowledge and feelings stem from clinical experience alone.

I have come to believe that sometimes a little denial can be a good thing. So far, it has stood me well. I'm basically happy. I'm grateful for the good fortune of an adult life that is happy and filled with love and "normalcy." For my children, home is their safe place and always will be. It is something I hope they will always have the naivety to take for granted.

As for Jeff, I hope he continues to do well. I am grateful that, in a vulnerable moment, he shared his story with me. No amount of introspection had given me the insight into myself that he gave to me on that day. There is also a strange comfort in knowing you're not alone. The statistics tell us we're not alone, but there are many who walk in shared silence.

That day, I left the call room, took a deep breath and finished my shift with the usual small talk. I'm sure Jeff went on his own way and did the same.

I think of him often, grateful for the unknowing gift of insight he gave to me on that day. And yes, Jeff, you are a good person. Though you carry the shame of your past, it belongs to someone else.

**Competing interests:** None declared.

---

**Correspondence to the author may be sent care of:** Dr. Marco Sivilotti, Associate Professor, Departments of Emergency Medicine and Pharmacology and Toxicology, Queen's University, 76 Stuart St., Kingston ON K7L 2V7; sivilotm@meds.queensu.ca