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My Stepdad Was a Bank Robber

Billy Wilson

I remember standing on the back porch of our rental in Meadow Vista, California—the steady gurgles of a running creek in the backyard, the faint smell of dry firewood in the cardboard box behind me. Dad (the contract killer, not the bank robber) wore a tank top and jeans with the pant legs cut into very short shorts. He was six foot two, an anomaly in our lineage of shorter men. I don't recall him ever yelling at me, and he was naturally amicable, but he did raise his voice on occasion and could crack granite with his eyes. On cold days, the white scars on his face became noticeable, like a black light revealing pale incantations in secret ink. But today was a hot day. Today, he was handsome.

We were likely having a spat about an unscheduled visit with Mom. I suspect that having chores at Dad's house and no chores at Mom's house played into the tension, but I can't remember the details anymore. Voice elevated, he declared, "You know how Joseph committed suicide? He killed himself while trying to rob a bank."

I was momentarily stunned by the revelation. My stepdad was a bank robber.

Dad ended up driving me to Mom's house for the weekend. We followed the freeway as it weaved through the forested foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. The truck changed lanes into the first off-ramp of Auburn, a town cleverly situated below the snow line and above the fog line. Today, though, everything was just hot. The flesh behind my knees stuck to the cracked leather seat of Dad's Datsun pickup. I worked the crank handle with both hands to open the window and watched the brownish evergreens blur past with the warm wind.

The tires crackled over the long gravel driveway as we pulled up to Mom's ranch house. Its exterior paint was as red as a fire truck. The pottery and flowers lining the perimeter of the ranch house bore witness that the queen of horticulture lived there. Across from the white front porch, on the other side of the green lawn, was the familiar rose tree. It came to exist when a nearby rosebush wrapped its branches around the base of an oak tree and climbed up slowly, year over year, until the rosebush stood seventy feet tall. Its dense constellations of pink blossoms grew in brilliance against the firmament of wood and leaves, and its fragrance filled the yard.

I can't remember who Mom's partner was at the time. She went through a flurry of romances after Joseph died.

Mom may have been with Rick, a shirtless, long-haired, bearded, hairy man whom Mom married during a fling in Reno. She kicked him out within months, partially because of the way his eyes would settle on my older sister, but mostly because he tried to tell Mom who she could and could not see.

She may have been with Curtis, whom Dad suspected was a crank addict because of the way he wrapped his arm behind his head to scratch the other side of his neck. Dad dropped his suspicions a few notches when he learned that Curtis had a pacemaker.

It may have been Richard, whom the locals at Sportsman's Bar called the Kid from Hell. He was apparently an altar boy in his youth, but by the time I knew him, he had to cuss to think and always smelled very drunk in the evenings. Mom ended up marrying him later, but that was a fluke. She needed to either kick Richard out or marry him to attend my temple sealing, and she couldn't kick someone out who was fighting cancer.

Anyway. Mom was probably with someone at the time because she stays up to date with Gaia portals and their fifth-dimensional transformative love energies.

The inside of the ranch house was covered in pictures, paintings, and poems from my sister and me. My kindergarten drawing of a triangular lion was prominently displayed with its county-fair blue ribbon. There were also rain drums, crystals, and a dark blanket hanging on the wall with a deer embroidered onto it. Eagle feathers lay on the coffee table. Her bed was in the living room in front of the TV. Above it was a poster of Native American men with long black hair and shirts made of bones and leather, each chief with a wise saying beneath his portrait. "All things are connected." "Man belongs to the earth. Earth does not

belong to man." "We do not borrow the earth from our ancestors; we take it from our children."

During my visit, Mom praised me with compliments, calling me the smartest, most handsome, most talented son. She nourished me with cream of wheat, fried potatoes, salmon patties, canned spinach with lemon squirted on top, and other homemade delights. She let me watch TV and play video games for hours.

At some point, I asked Mom about Joseph committing suicide. She paused. After some thought, she clarified that Joseph had not killed himself, but that he was shot down by cops in the parking lot. He bled out on the asphalt, ambulance en route. "They didn't even try to save him," she lamented contemptuously.



A decade and a half passed. I lived in Orem, Utah, with my wife and five children. Our hard church shoes scraped across the ice-encrusted sidewalk, shuffling double-time to the meetinghouse before all body warmth dissipated through our thin shirts and dresses.

I was the elders quorum instructor that day. We met in the soft chairs behind the chapel podium. During the lesson, I absentmindedly referred to my crazy family, which invited looks from the quorum. They scrutinized my ecclesiastically parted hair, my slight slouch, and my recessed chin. I recognized the direction we were going and unconsciously pursed my lips. Any explanation would swell over the embankment of gospel learning into forbidden paths.

I had an unusual number of cards in my hand for proving how pagan my family was, and there were new revelations each year, but as a personal rule, I did not play those cards until the implicated family members were long dead. I didn't want any relatives to crumple over from a 300-milligram injection of searing public shame. That might show up in the toxicology report.

My two stories that met the date-of-decease requirement belonged to my father and my stepfather, may they rest in peace. My dad was a contract killer, and my stepfather was a bank robber.

Also, my mother has a very strange taste in men. This is not one of the cards.

I apologetically smiled and delivered the line, "My stepdad was a bank robber who got shot to death in Riverside."

John, the miles-tall police officer in the front row, leaned forward and exclaimed, "Whoa!" with fascination, and from then on, I wore my

bank-robber stepdad like a badge of honor. I came from a tough family, and that meant I was extra special for living the gospel.

My mind began to rummage through other family stories that I could leverage for personal aggrandizement. As I considered which family skeletons were old enough to pull down from the attic for display, it occurred to me—no one had done Joseph’s temple work. I was not sure which housing project in the spirit world contained the bank robbers, but maybe this would be Joseph’s ticket into a better neighborhood.



Descending down the atrium stairs of the Harold B. Lee Library into its underground floors made my task feel official. The footsteps in the Family History Library were dampened by tiled carpet, and the silence made every key press feel like I was throwing a typewriter striker. Finding Joseph online was easy. I opened up the Social Security Death Index, and soon Joseph’s place and date of death were displayed on the screen. Riverside, California. August 21.

The date seemed peculiar. I linked the source to Joseph’s FamilySearch record, then looked at his date of death again. What was with that date? I peered at the numbers on the monitor until the seed of realization sprouted. That date was four days before my birthday. I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my temples.

Did Joseph rob a bank *for my birthday*?

I recalled a VHS home video I had recently watched of my eighth birthday, a pool party. I had an incalculable number of wrapped presents, spoils of war from my competing parents and the litany of kids Mom had invited. My adult self grimaced as I watched my young self become primal over the stack of presents. I screamed with frenetic childhood delight with each present ripped open, raising the gift in triumph, shaking the Super Soaker or the Nerf Gun or the thing-that-you-pull-the-zip-cord-and-the-helicopter-flies-up or the birthday-Ninja-Turtle-that-blew-like-a-kazoo or the goggles or the rubber-ball-strung-to-a-paddle. Immediately I would throw the plastic toy to the grass so I could skin the next present.

But that wasn’t the right birthday.

The seventh birthday, yes, that was memorialized by another mental snippet of roughly ten seconds. I was particularly confused that morning because my sister and mother showed up crying. We were in an amber-stained log cabin Dad had rented from my future stepmother. As morning rays poured through the open front door, Mom pronounced with water-stained eyes, “Joseph is dead!”

I don't remember what presents I got that year. I can't remember those things anymore.



Rectangular paper slip in breast pocket, I entered the Provo Temple to perform vicarious saving ordinances for my bank-robber stepdad. I went through the baptism, confirmation, washing, anointing, and clothing ordinances. My service culminated in the endowment session and admission into the celestial room. Sitting down on a celestial chair, I picked up a Book of Mormon.

Letting books of scripture fall open was a little ritual of mine, inspired by the story of President Monson flipping open a Book of Mormon next to someone's deathbed and happening upon Alma 40:11. I often attempted these fall-on-your-lap revelations, although it usually amounted to me fishing for God.

I let the Book of Mormon fall open, looked down, and read these words: "Condemn me not because of mine imperfection."

This was not from God; this was from Joseph. He knew I had introduced him as a bank robber at church.

Continuing down the verse, I read, "But rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been."

I looked away from the page and took a deep breath, shifting in my chair. As my eyes explored the room, they fell on the mural of Jesus Christ and rested there for a long time.

God identifies the mistakes of His children. The antagonists of the Book of Mormon—Sherem, Korihor, Kishkumen, Amalickiah, Ammoron, Tubaloth—are probably mortified to have their acts codified into the scriptures as sin for the world to see, but there they are, the Surgeon General's warning against the plague of sin.

Yet, God may have another reason for exposing the spiritual maladies of villains. Perhaps God wants to heal them. Perhaps those villains have salvageable sparks of divinity that He can fan back to health in the next life. Some repentance is possible in the spirit world. A crown of glory is still available for those wayward spirits who finally come unto Him with fear and trembling.

I could examine Joseph's imperfections and learn wisdom. I had no Urim and Thummim, so I began to search for Joseph with my hands out, fingers spread, feeling through the haze of my memories and the mystery of Mom's stories.

I knew from Mom that Joseph's family hated him.

I also knew that Joseph served in the Vietnam War. His tour was interrupted by a barrel mine. The explosion threw him fifty feet, blowing his clothes off. It killed the rest of his platoon, and he received a Purple Heart. I first heard this story as a kid, at which time I was concerned about how Joseph must have felt being naked in a jungle.

I remembered the sound of his voice, a gravelly tenor that matched the dark eyes, messy black hair, and perpetual stubble. It seemed he had always shaved three days ago. He was a bit short and pudgy like a teddy bear, enough to be a choice snuggler with Mom on the waterbed in the living room.

Two photographs of him were fresh in my mind. In one, he was holding a beer at Sportsman's Bar alongside other patrons, flipping off the person behind the camera. In the other, he was crouching next to me in a hollowed-out, horizontal redwood tree, both of us grinning, my feet dangling over the barky edge.

I remembered the time Joseph made me eat a botched dinner. I kept giggling in the middle of drinks until my plate was a swimming pool of apple juice, mashed potatoes, and meat. He wouldn't let me crawl away from the TV tray until I ate every soggy morsel. This punishment seemed villainous to me.

I don't recall any words he said to me, though. I can't remember those things anymore.



Last year, my oldest child was getting baptized, so we bought a plane ticket for Mom to come to Utah. She found our home barely habitable due to there being only one TV with nothing but over-the-air channels. To fill the time, my wife began asking her questions about her childhood, and soon, sitting together on a white couch with pictures of temples above us, Mom opened chapters from her book of life that were previously sealed shut.

"Your dad and me, the first seven years, we were happy," she started. "We built a house together from the ground up. It was just that last year things got bad. See, Dad was trying to find work when he ran into his old friends—bad ones. They called themselves the Dirty Dozen. And he got back into drugs.

"Joseph, he was so sweet. He met me, okay, when I was working a job that I wasn't proud of. But he didn't know that I was *married* to your dad. He thought your dad was my brother. When he found out the truth,

he flipped. He took his rifle, and when your dad came to the house, Joseph pointed it at his chest and said, 'You cross that line, you are in the red zone.' He took us and we drove all night straight to California. He always had a gun on him after that."

There was more, but the rule, you see. Mom is still alive.

Today, I still don't know how I feel about Joseph. On one hand, he split Mom and Dad apart like an iron wedge. On the other hand, that marriage had already reached bizarre levels of depravity that are too embarrassing to describe—not just for my parents, but also for me. Maybe it was time for Joseph to shake things up with an assault rifle aimed at Dad's chest. Maybe it was time for our sudden getaway out of Arizona to that red ranch on the Sierra Nevadas.

Dad soon followed us to California, finally leaving behind the band of mercenaries he had gotten mixed up with during the Arizona drug wars. Once out of the darkness, he came to himself. Soon he was attending church and dragging me along. He could not baptize me, so my bishop did. He eventually regained Church fellowship.

When I moved to the ranch as a teenager, Dad regularly fasted and prayed for me, a confused kid grappling with the dissonance of mortality. One day I came across Mom's dusty old Bible, opened up Genesis and began reading. A week later, I called Dad and told him I wanted to come back to church.

Dad died a Melchizedek priesthood holder in good standing with God. I think. He often remarked that he was aiming for the lowest tier of the celestial kingdom.

So thanks, Joseph, for saving my family in your roundabout, destructive way. And please forgive me for how spoiled I was.

Perhaps resurrected beings need escorts just like first-time temple patrons. If things work out for me, I could be an escort for Joseph on the day he rises. I could guide him to his rendezvous with God.

If there are vestiges of the world clinging to him, I could help a little. I could examine his forearms and pluck out the rock chips of the asphalt he collapsed on. If he needed to be washed, I could take a sponge and rub out the traces of dried blood from his matted hair and even apply some oil to the bullet prints on his back. I could give him a square pile of garments made white with the blood of the Lamb. When he returned from his changing room, we could link arms and walk up a flight of fiery glass stairs together.

Reaching the top, I could point him to the final veil and the hand of his Redeemer. He would see the nail print in the palm and grasp it, then

be pulled through to embrace the Lord. His memories would flood back, again knowing, and never forgetting again, that he was a son of the Most High God in the premortal realms. Any sense of worthlessness would flee him. Weeping, his head would be anointed with oil and a crown of glory placed thereon.

Angels would rejoice over Joseph, pull out his book of life, and redact his misdeeds with the pen of forgiveness. At that point, I could brandish this essay and, borrowing that pen, scribble out its title to write the words, “My Stepdad Is a Good Man.”

Then I wouldn’t have to remember these things anymore.

This personal essay by Billy Wilson received honorable mention in the 2020 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.