

The Cardboard Crutch – (published in *Bear River Review*, 2013)

Excerpt from *Hot Dog Between Fear and Desire*, a memoir by Debbie Merion



Tightly gripping my brown leatherette book bag’s plastic handle, I flip the bag up onto the kitchen table after I return home from second grade. It’s May, 1964, and the sun is poking through the flowered curtains into our little Philadelphia kitchen, a room so small I can touch the stove with one hand and the refrigerator with the other. I hear the toilet flush, then my mother appears before me, and I get the hug. The extent of her love is never in doubt, but I feel something sharp dig into my shoulder as she hugs me — Mom’s nails. I squirm for a quick release, but not too quick. I want to smell her ivory soap. I want to be hugged, too. I just don’t want the sharpness. But they are inseparable.

Does this sharpness have anything to do with why I have been going to see Dr. K., my childhood psychiatrist, twice a week for three years? None of my friends know. It's a secret. Little did I realize as a child that they likely had their own secrets—peeing in bed, thumb-sucking while doing homework, an addiction to fondling their blankie, maybe even a fear of a sibling or parent or uncle or cousin. With me, it's all about food.

I don't know how to eat hot dogs.

I can't eat hamburgers.

I've never taken a bite out of a chicken leg, corn on the cob, or a banana.

I don't eat meat, I don't eat fish, I don't eat chicken, I don't eat vegetables, and I don't eat fruit.

I open the two mini-belts that keep my bag's big flap closed, and hand over my schoolwork to Mom.

"Look Mom, I got an A on my book report about *Being an American Can be Fun*."

"That's great, Debbie," says my mom, "Good girl, good girl." She glances at the paper long enough to register the angular letter "A" that Mrs. Miller has written in red at the top of the blue-lined paper.

"Here's your snack," says Mom, putting a glass of milk, a plate, and an orange box of Nabisco Ginger Snap cookies on the Formica table in front of me.

I'm sure that any similarity of my mother's rewarding me with food immediately following good behavior to the way I would later train my dog Chester to sit and stay was totally, absolutely, definitely coincidental.

“Sit, Debbie. Sit. Good girl. Sit down at the table. Pull yourself in.”

I pull myself against the table as far as I can. My auburn mop of curly hair wiggles; I have a striking resemblance to the Little Debbie on the label of the cakes.

“Can you pull yourself in any more?” asks Mom. “You don’t want to get your clothes dirty.”

I pull with all my might against the metal lip around our table, so that my breath feels shallow, my breathing labored, and I am gasping, “OK Mom, how’s that?”

“Here’s a napkin,” said Mom. “Eat over the plate.”

She then turns away, cutting up carrots for dinner at the sink, her back to me.

When Mom hears the scraping of my chair, as I push myself away from the table after my snack, the questions begin again.

“Are you going to start on your math?” she asks.

“I’m going to lie down and finish reading my book of three-minute mysteries.”

“But don’t you think you should do your math first?”

“I have all afternoon, Mom. I’ll do it.”

“You might forget about it.”

“How can I forget? It’s the only homework I have. Besides, I JUST SAID I’D DO IT.”

“I’m not going to stand over you, you know.”

“I know.”

“Can you please just do it now? Then I won’t have to ask you again?”

“Mom, can you *please* leave me alone a little bit. I said I’d do it.”

She stops and sighs. The clock ticks on the flowered wallpaper that matches the curtains.

There is something welling up in me. I can feel it in my chest. It's getting bigger and hotter, caged hot molecules bouncing faster and faster as they get ready to blow. My ears feel warm. I feel a package of Jiffy Pop popcorn within me, heating up, releasing a ping of annoyance here, a pop of anger there. My hands curl into fists, my own nails dig into my palms, a scream grows in my throat, It escapes in a shrill, keening alarm as my throat burns. Do I see the curtains start to sway?

"Alright alright," I say. "I'll do it now, I'll do it, are you happy?" I stamp up the stairs with my homework, grab my door with one hand, pull it back so I can slam it with all my might. It is a sound I will hear many times as I am growing up. I'm helpless against that explosion of emotion. My own and others.

Then, I am alone in my room, my palace, my prison. I am starving for intimacy but feasting on guilt.

Until I open my palace door, when mom calls. No ignoring the summoning. It's 2:00; time to go downtown to see Dr. K. Sometimes I sit on his orange shag rug and draw, sometimes we sit at the play-doh table. During my Dr. K. visits, I never eat, but he has his Pall Malls. Today, as I color, he is reaching for his cigarette pack, the cellophane crinkles as he pulls one out. Ugh. I turn my back to him. Wait a minute. The metal double doors on his closet are open! They're folded like a paper airplane. If my brother was here, he'd say "Let's explore." I move closer to take a look.

Dr. K.'s closet isn't like my mom's closet — with all her shoes in shoeboxes and her shirts and pants and skirts jammed on hangers so tight you can't even hide in the back of them. Dr. K.'s closet is nearly empty. On the left, a flat, empty box leans against the wall. On the right hangs a blue cardigan.

The closet lures me, like my closet in my room at home. There I pretend my closet has a door in the back that exits into a secret room, like Batman has. An escape. Dr. K. calls to me. “Debbie, don't go in the closet. Let's play here.”

He won't yell, that I know. I snuggle into the corner on the floor, eyeing the brown cardboard, and push one of doors closed. Now I can't see him. A sliver of light slides in through the crack. Dr. K. sighs on the other side of the door. He is a dragon taking a drag, breathing smoke. The light coming in through the crack is now tinged with grey. Dr. Puff! Dr. Puff!

The acrid smell pings a wrinkle in my frontal lobe. An idea grows. I open the door to emerge. I stand in front of Dr. K., as still as a toy soldier. I stand like I do when I'm about to say something important, like the Pledge of Allegiance.

“I want to make a crutch. Joey has one up the street.”

“What?” asks Dr. K.

“With that cardboard.” I point inside the door, and he peers inside the closet.

“Oh, that. It's dirty,” and he starts to slide closed the door on the cardboard and my great idea.

Dirty doesn't faze me a bit. Doesn't he remember when I washed the doll in the ashy water? How could he not? I'm sure it wasn't easy to wash those ashes off of the

doll and out of that blue plastic bin after I left. Could it be he is simply blocking out that perplexing therapy session? Am I bringing up some of his unexplored painful memories?

This day I just want to play with that empty box.

“Can we make a crutch with the cardboard?” I ask Dr. K.

He shrugs and smiles a bit, “OK, I guess,” and then rummages around in his desk for some masking tape. The cardboard is down on the carpet now, and he is saying, “What do we do?”

I say, “Bend it up” and he is on his knees as a weight on the cardboard, his tie flopping away from his body like an elephant’s trunk. He bends up the brown waffled edges, holds up the cardboard, and I take the tape and go around and around with it, like a ribbon around a maypole.

He cuts out a little handle on the side with a scissors. His slick hair is all messy now and he says, “There, try it,” and I stand up. I put the crutch under my right armpit, lift up my right leg, and walk with it. Perfect. I love that crutch.

With no obvious bones or fat, I have an average build and height for an eight year old. I probably weigh all of sixty pounds. So the crutch holds me. I walk around his office with my right knee bent, the cardboard feels bulky on my underarm.

“You made a crutch, “ says Dr. K.

Step, clunk. Step, clunk. Step, clunk. The play has limited appeal, even if I am pretending to be like Joey, who I’m not allowed to play with. He’s a “bad boy,” says Mom, which seems exotic and exciting to me. He gets to disobey *and* have a crutch. Some kids have all the luck.

"What should we do with it?" he asks. Dr. K. touches the tips of his pointing fingers.

"There are two choices that I see. First, you can take it home." Then he touches his middle finger. "Second, it can stay here."

Taking the crutch home feels wrong. Dr. K.'s office has become my private place, my little kid's Las Vegas. What happens at Dr. K's, stays at Dr. K's.

"I'd like to leave it here."

"You want to leave it here."

"Yes," I say, and pick up the crutch and put it back in his closet. "See you next week, crutch."

Can my crutch help me escape what is hobbling me? Can it take me to a place where I can be more whole?

In subsequent Dr. K. visits the first thing I will do is to visit my secret closet and my crutch. Dr. K. and I never discuss the crutch, the elephant-sized toy in the middle of the closet, although I'm sure he has opinions about it. Maybe he's even talked about my homemade toy with his Freudian psychiatric supervisor.

The crutch is always there, a symbol of my "problem." The cardboard cone stands in the corner, pointy side touching the closet floor's shag carpet, bound in brown cardboard tape, always in the same place. It stands tall, at attention, waiting for me, supporting me, as I wait for Dr. K. to help me learn how to eat fish, chicken, meat, fruits and vegetables.

I like knowing the crutch is there, my own private toy in my own special place. Something to lean on. Leaning on Dr. K. isn't working out so far. No answers from him.

No one ever explained to me that Freudian psychiatrists don't give answers. They watch. They listen. They ask questions. But they never answer them.

I understand that now. Dr. K. didn't help me learn how to eat those problem foods—that I needed to do on my own. Did his reflections strengthen me, like my mother believes? I'll never know, but I'll always remember Dr. K, my cardboard crutch, and the slow exhale of his Pall Malls through a sliver of his closet door.