

# The Accuser and Us

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**FOR FIVE YEARS, WE ARE HAULED THROUGH THE “SYSTEM.” MY HUSBAND SAYS: BE NICE. IT HAS OUR LIVES IN ITS HANDS.**

**I.**

So the cops come to my house.

God, I think my husband has been killed in a car wreck when I see them outside with their flashlights.

The black hair on the back of my dog stands straight up. I hold the leather collar around his neck tightly in my fist – his rumbling growl shakes beneath my skin.

“We’re here to check on the safety of Ellie\*,” one of the large, solid-looking officers says. He seems deeply concerned, and so does his partner.

Me – well, now my heart is slowing to a somewhat less-hysterical pace. My husband is not dead. There is no tragedy.

I know entirely what this is all about.

My stepdaughter’s grandmother has a mental illness that twists her mind with paranoia. She often involves the law – mostly the family-court with various orders.

But this is the first time the cops have come to me.

“Can we take a look at her?” the taller one asks – he must have noticed my sudden ease because he seems a lot less stern.

“Of course – she’s actually sleeping,” I say as the three of us walk down the hall of our tiny home. I see the glare of their flashlights dart into my kitchen and my bedroom checking for the markings of an unfit parent, I guess.

But they find nothing.

My six year old is fast asleep in her little bed, our black cat curled in the nook of her legs. She starts to rub her eyes as the flashlight crosses over her face.

“Hi, sweetheart,” the cop says very gently.

And that is that. We all walk back to the door. They ask me if I might know in general about what this is all about.

I know they don’t have time for the ins-and-outs of the last five years. The months of calm followed by out-of-the-blue packages summoning my husband to court. The horrific and often bizarre accusations of abuse and neglect coupled with a plea to have full custody of our child.

I know these men are too weary for the drama of it all. They’ve seen real children in real danger.

“Her grandmother has bi-polar disorder,” I say. “She does this kind of thing quite a lot. I can’t really tell you why.”

**II.**

I close the door and lock the handle behind them – crouch on the sofa by the window and watch the officers sit in their car outside. I think about how my house is that house right now. Maybe the neighbours are watching and wondering.

I feel a strange mix of shame and contentment.

I’m that neighbour on the street with the cops at their door, but I also might be the one call those guys get tonight that brings them relief.

I walk back to bed, and hope that this never happens again. Hope there is some way to ease the woman’s broken mind. To help her see that the only abuse Ellie is getting comes from moments like this – police, social workers, and worn out judges – each of them obligated to search, and each of them finding nothing but parents doing the best they can with a child who is turning out pretty damn great.

Just pray, I guess, for a miracle or something. Or for a judge that will finally say, ‘enough is enough, you can’t do this anymore.’

**III.**

The Bowness location sits above a neighbourhood pub and a high school for ‘troubled teens.’

A group of 10 or so adolescents are huddled outside of the doors to the office, smoking cigarettes. They look like the kind of kids that had parents called to this very office at one point – they seem to wear all the markings of poverty on their bodies.

Dull skin from years of poor-family dinners: macaroni with tomato soup for sauce, or no name peanut butter sandwiches on white bread.

They all wear faded, ragged looking clothes, two sizes too big or too tight. The girls’ faces are heavily made up. The skinny ones seem to buzz with sex and trouble. The chubby girls reek with self-revulsion.



Photo by Ross Tucknott / flickr

\*Name has been changed to protect identity

One boy leans against a rusted bike rack with large headphones pressed over his stringy, long hair. His pockmarked face bobs methodically, and his eyes seem to rest on something that no one else can see. He looks like the kind of kid that will never fit anywhere.

I feel their bleak pasts colliding with my confused present.

I feel the tug of that invisible web that strings us all along, and ties us all irrevocably together – the way the world keeps precariously spinning on a handful of belief systems – most of them lies, but the kind of lies that can deprive a child from ever having a fair shot.

Everything inside of me swells with despair.

#### IV.

We sit in a long room, with a long table. Twenty or so chairs, only three of us. A crooked pile of worn children's books lay in the centre of the bleached oak.

Something about the social worker's tone rattles me. Irks me. I feel as though she wants me to shrink into something beneath her and somehow justify her being there.

One should never talk back to government workers.

"She holds our life in her hands," my husband tells me afterwards.

I can't do it. I sit, fuming. Why am I even here? She asks me to stop cutting her off when she speaks, and from the corner of my eye, I can see my husband's head shaking, his lips pursed – his eyes full of shame and shouting, shut up!

So I do.

I shrink into a long silence. My body curves like those disillusioned adolescents and I dish out a silent protest.

I play with the wooden elephant hanging from the keychain around my neck. I scrape leftover polish from my nails. I listen to the social worker and my husband dish out the drama. Talk about our daughter's 'crazy' grandmother and all the things she's done in great detail.

So sick of hearing about this.

I can tell the worker loves my husband. I can tell by the way she's glued to the bizarre tale that brought us here in the first place.

He cuts her off, but she does not reprimand him.

Inside, I'm sinking further beneath something heavy. Maybe I am going crazy. Maybe I should keep my mouth shut.

The social worker wants to pull me back in – makes comments about the room being cold – laughs awkwardly about the bar filled with creepy middle aged drunk men beneath her office.

I try to resurface. Try to smile, fake it even for a second, but nothing comes. My eyes won't even move – they are resting firmly downward. She has lost me. And I have lost control of that part that can play pretend.

I don't know how, or when – but that switch is gone, or buried, or broken somewhere. And the world seems to have no room for people who ask why?

#### V.

Calgary Court

The building is one million square feet of bullet, bomb proof glass and concrete. The largest court facility in all of Canada, the architects used primarily triple glazed windows to build the two towers, representing a very literal transparency. A sense of 'open democracy'.

I'm in the lobby, just one more head in slow shuffling line towards solid looking security guards. There seems to be only two types of people here in this heavy march: poor folks and lawyers.

We all trudge toward the metal detectors to have our bodies scanned and our belongings x-rayed.

I suppose it is past these heavy gates that one gets to find their democracy.

#### VI.

The open concept building cannot snuff out the suffocating energy that wafts through the family court floor.



Photo by Taber Andrew Bain/ flickr

As soon as I step out of the glass elevator, I see a man with a large group of onlookers.

"This is bullshit!" he yells out while another man holds him back from the crowd.

I send him a silent wish for peace. It is bullshit, I think.

Around the hall I wait in a line to have my husband's files stamped.

One cannot avoid overhearing others speak openly and angrily about their current problems. The clerks at each kiosk give off the impression of having heard everything before – and I'm sure they have.

I need him to understand that he can't just come see her whenever he wants, a young mom tells the tired looking lady behind the glass.

Does he pose any threat? How long were you cohabitating? Does he use drugs? We need to figure out what kind of order you are looking for.

It's been over three years and he has never paid for child support, another young mom tells the clerk in the kiosk next to them.

Papers are signed and stamped. Lives and futures are altered.

#### VII.

A courtroom is like a church. But not like the churches I went to as a kid – a courtroom is like one of those evangelical churches – thick pews with a modern dark-cherry stain. The rows of them facing the pulpit of court clerks typing away beneath a very tall desk that seats the judge.

Everything here is costumed in the history of men.

In the pew in front of me sits our accuser. She has brought a friend, and from the back their frazzled pony tails look strange paired with their fitted dress suits and silk scarves.

Looks like two flew over the cuckoo's nest, my husband leans over and whispers in my ear.

I giggle, but a sense of guilt stunts any further laughter. This entire spectacle is due to mental illness – manic thoughts of grandiosity coupled by paranoid images of her granddaughter in danger have brought us here, and while even yesterday my veins pulsed with self-righteous resentment, today I am humbled by the realness of her psychosis.

I know that this middle-aged woman in front of me, diligently penning notes and observations for her allotted time before the judge, loves her grandchild – but she has lost a grasp on the material world somehow and believes in every nightmarish thought that makes it into her mind.

#### VIII.

After an hour or so of hearing other cases, my husband's name is called to stand before the court.

As the step-mother, I'm asked to sit in the front row of the pews, but clearly separated from the actual hearing. My husband's side is backed with a social worker and the estranged biological mother of our daughter.

Ellie's grandmother carries a thick binder, strewn with papers and covered in cursive notes, to the lectern. Before speaking she carefully places round reading glasses over her nose.

As she begins to speak a strange energy sets itself inside the courtroom.

Everything about her is over-pronounced and animated. Her pointer finger flares up over her head with every point she makes before the judge, while another hand rests arrogantly on her hip. She moves and speaks like we are all in a movie – and from the corner of my eye I can see the other folks still waiting in the pews watching with stunned, bemused faces.

"She showed up at my house with red and black nail polish, covered in tattoos," she tells the judge. "And we all know what those colours mean."

The judge makes a request to hear from the Child Family Services representative, who briefly tells the court that she has assessed our daughter and sees no red flags, no trauma, no evidence of abuse.

I do, however, feel that the child is at risk while in the care of her grandmother, she says as she concludes her statement.

It takes another twenty minutes or so of bizarre rants and mentions of a strangely absent lawyer before the judge makes her final ruling.

I'm removing all contact between the grandmother and the child, the judge states, and there will be no further court dates allowed for a period of two years.

#### IX.

Something lifts.

Our accuser stands, livid and still fighting as we are shuffled out of the courtroom.

The social worker pushes open the heavy doors before my husband and I.

Do you want security to escort you out?

Oh no, we should be okay I think, my husband says – I noticed his face has finally regained its colour.

We walk away – from the judge, from the gated entrance, from the glass towers.

Hoping this is all over.