

Picking up the pieces of my father's rage

Arthur Boers

Sorting through baby photos, I came across one that most would regard as happy. My grandmother apparently did. I am not as sure. At around age sixty, I decided to interrogate my life and began investigating the violence and abuse of my childhood, breaking family rules about things we knew were not supposed to be mentioned.

In the early years of my parents' marriage there was little work most winters. A few times water and phone services were disconnected because my parents could not keep up with the bills. When I was born, they could not afford the doctor, a fellow church member. He badgered them for payment until my father blew up.

The year I was born my father's house painting business failed. He settled debts and worked part-time driving a van on slushy St. Catharines streets, delivering newspaper bundles to corner stores and paperboys. This did not pay well. Papa borrowed money to send my mother and me by ship to stay with his parents in their Netherlands row house until finances improved.

My parents planned a six-month separation, but my mother lasted two. Relatives report I had a glorious time abroad. But my mother, homesick for her husband and Canada, persuaded my father to let her return home early. He borrowed money for those tickets too.

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Since I cannot recall that infant odyssey, my first memory of the Netherlands is as an eleven-year-old visiting my by-then-widowed grandmother for a month. During that later visit, relatives and friends told me how as a baby I joyfully rattled my playpen bars, bouncing on my toes whenever anyone approached. I stretched my arms high for someone to scoop me up. I liked the comfort of being held.

As the first and until-then-only grandchild—and named after Opa Arie to boot—I garnered a lot of attention. My grandparents had seen little of my father, their only child, for years. After emigrating he had never been back to the Netherlands, and might never return, not even to

visit. They seldom heard his voice. Transatlantic phone calls—expensive, inconvenient, echoes reverberating and colliding with each other down long tunnels—happened once or twice a year. I can only imagine what the arrival of daughter-in-law and grandson meant to them. They lobbied my

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mother to stay permanently and asked my father to come back, offering to buy us a house. My parents declined.

My grandfather, father, and I were seldom together on the same continent, much less the same room. But one photograph snapped in my grandparents' living room is a kind of group shot. In

this triptych, three of us—grandfather, father, son—ascend diagonally in black and white. Arie, my paternal grandfather, stands in his row house living room, in front of the rippled glass of a door, holding his infant grandson Arthur up to a photo of my father on the wall. We measure a direct line. Arie, the man holding me, was his father's oldest son. Arie's oldest son (and only child) was my father, whom he named Pleun. And I, the baby in the middle, was Pleun's first, and at that point only, child. I would always be his only—I resist the adjective “begotten”—son. Pleun named me after his father.

I remember that room well. I visited it several times over three decades. Mottled wallpaper and lingering fragrances of bitter coffee, over-boiled tea, hazelnuts, milk chocolate—a combination of scents that I would always recognize even though years separated my stays there.

My grandfather wears a darkly sober suit as he normally did in photos. As men did in 1957. His silvery tie slightly loosened, almost informal. Maybe it's Sunday afternoon, church obligations fulfilled. A plain wedding band, one that eventually migrated to my finger, glints from his hand. He's fifty-four. I am over a decade older than that now, but to my eye today he could be seventy-something. I wonder whether I'll ever look his age.

Arie's short dark hair is plastered into a sparse comb-over, a large mole looming from his tonsure. His chin juts in concentration. His mouth slightly open, not quite smiling. Lifting me, his only grandchild so far, his hands cradle my rump. Arie's eyes, level with my little shoulders, gaze at my back.

My grandfather, like Abraham, offering me up as a sacrifice—not to God but to my dad. Isaac seemed uneasy during that journey with his

father. Read between the Genesis lines and it looks like he was damaged for life. I can relate.


Nine-month-old me has more hair than Arie. I wear a T-shirt; chubby legs dangle beneath Opa's hands. I intently reach for something; my left hand grips the framed photo hanging on the wall. My fingers disappear behind it, thumb pressing the glass.

I surely cannot recognize my father's image and am just curiously grabbing; maybe Opa directed my attention. But the viewer wants the scene sentimental: baby reaching for father, the far away man, on the other side of the Atlantic. The baby appears determined. No one seems worried I might tug the picture from the wall, knock it to the ground, shatter its glass. But I look like I would not hesitate.

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My grandmother, Oma, wrote on the back of the small black-and-white of this scene: *Zie zijn kleine duimpje op de foto van jouw.* "See his little thumb on the picture of you."

The *you*, almost under my thumb, is her son, my father Pleun. Behind glass, dark hair slicked back, sheening from the photographer's flash. A formal head and chest shot: mid-twenties, in black suit and knotted tie, taken prior to his emigration. He kept trying to get away. Oddly, ever-green sprig antlers jut from the top of the frame.

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His wire rimmed glasses and angular face incline seemingly at the baby who may be trying to tug him from the wall, to take down his father. I face my dad's

image, reach toward him—as I often did in life, seldom succeeding. Opa looks at me from behind. I am the center of attention in this potentially happy domestic scene.

The top of my head is a few inches above Opa's, a couple of inches below my dad's crown. In this staircase of skulls, Opa's head is the largest, mine smaller, and my father's the smallest—like helium balloons diminishing in size as they drift up and into the distance.

How can one tell that all three of us knew, or would know, what it means to be beaten, battered by fathers? That two abused their sons? I say this reluctantly—we never named these realities, and somehow I knew we were not supposed to talk about such things.

How can one tell from this cheery living room snapshot that for us home could be a place of terror at the hands of someone we might expect to protect us? How does one photo contain so many contradictions of love and loss, affection and resentment, fondness and danger?

What do I do with the deep sorrow I feel when I think of this photo?

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My father's portrait hung in my grandparents' living room for forty years, until my widowed grandmother's advanced dementia forced her into a locked nursing home ward. In a narrow silver frame and wide white matting, the picture's prominence on the wall demonstrated how families once honored deceased loved ones.

Pleun worked hard at leaving, crossing the Mediterranean and Red and Arabian seas, the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, first volunteering as a soldier in Indonesia and then moving to Canada. He had reasons: fight for his country, search for a better life—and he wanted to get away. Each time he departed—first perilous overseas battles and then emigrating—parents and son never knew whether they would see each other again. Did my father, their only child, regret these separations? I suspect not. But his parents kept wanting him back, wanting him safe, wanting him near.

I imagine them worrying about their only child fighting in jungles and rice paddies. When he returned, relief did not offer long-term consolation. He went to Canada a few years later. I do not know whether he tried staying in touch. I never saw him write a letter. After my folks married (only Oma could afford to attend the wedding), my mom took responsibility for correspondence, saving postage by cramming weekly news on flimsy blue airmail forms.

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When my mother and I visited, Opa and Oma made the best of their chance to celebrate St. Nicholas with a descendant. They never before had a Christmas tree, whether from Dutch frugality or strict Calvinism I am unsure, but they acquired one during our stay and decorated it, borrowing sparkling ornaments and purchasing colored light bulbs. Hence the pine sprig antlers adorning the living room photo.

People say that my grandfather, once so stern with my dad, doted on me. And here's how I know. Audiophile Opa splurged on a Dutch-manufactured Philips radio. He enshrined the monolith, an elaborate affair with multiple dials and polished wood, on its own shelf. Opa precisely

adjusted dials, poised to capture elusive radio waves of classical music on hard-to-tune stations. He forbade anyone from touching his venerated object. Even my finicky housekeeper grandmother did not dare dust it. Company avoided it too. Opa's rowdy brothers had to keep *pooten* ("paws") off, especially when drinking.

But he welcomed my curiosity. Baby Arthur could play with the device, not just admire it from afar. Opa allowed my sticky fingers on its shiny surface, messing with painstakingly positioned knobs. So people tell me. A nice enough story, a little hard to believe, possibly apocryphal, if not for black-and-white proof. Still another photo. There I am, round-headed and beaming, my right index finger stretched, like Michelangelo's Adam toward God, straining straight at dials.

Did my own father have comparable fun with that man, his dad? I doubt it.

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I cannot ask. Direct witnesses gone, I puzzle things out by inference.

I, the oldest son in a line of oldest sons, examine our family tree and know this: Boers men beat Boers sons. Great-grandfather Pleun beat his eldest, Arie, my grandfather, who abused his son Pleun, my father. I was only seven and blacked out the first time Papa beat me, and I was always vigilant, always fearful, with him. I heard that my grandfather resented my father for not being a girl and that this ramped his rage. How can this be? Grieving Oma's stillbirths and miscarriages I understand, but punishing the only living child for such sorrows or blaming his gender?

Perhaps my grandparents still felt shamed by his untimely arrival a few weeks short of nine months after their wedding. That timing triggered a visit from church elders who wanted to know whether the relationship had been consummated before the ceremony. If so, the young parents would endure public shaming on Sunday before the congregation; their Calvinism was stern. My grandparents, though, convinced the authorities of good behavior and escaped church discipline. But still. I only speculate.

Here is something I know. Pa could not wait to leave.

Some parents divide labor and chores. His allocated discipline. Oma punished little things, however defined. Trying to protect my father, she



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explained, seemed safer than letting Opa discipline. She seldom threatened, "Wait until your father gets home." Oma frequently slapped my father, and wielded wooden spoon, wicked wicker *mattenklopper* ("rug beater"), or some other household device against his posterior, hands, head, or back. She worried that their only child might grow up "spoiled." Their family, like mine, like most Dutch families I knew, was preoccupied with "spoiling" children. This was not only about wrecking a child but also worrying about how *others* might view their child-raising. Yet how to

define "spoiled"? My firm disciplinarian parents did not spare the rod, did not spare me. I may not be spoiled, but at times I feel ruined.

The things we do from fear.

Worried about Opa's rampages, Oma frequently punished and fed and put my father to bed *before* his dad returned from work. But Opa dealt with "bigger things." Character issues or flaws? Sneakiness? Lying? Defiance? I'm

unsure. More than once at the end of a day, Opa, still wearing heavy work boots, kicked his boy—one of the few things my father told me about his upbringing. Maybe it's not strange that Papa would also eventually boot me with systematic fury.

Oma said Opa didn't know how to stop. My mother said the same thing about my father: he did not know how to stop. My dad, once on the receiving end, ultimately delivered too.

In spite of beatings, my father enjoyed misbehaving. He often told me that threats never deterred him. "I knew I was going to be punished, knew that would hurt, but did it anyway. I couldn't stop myself." That out-of-control theme again. He disliked rules. Playing Monopoly with friends, he smuggled in his own play money for an advantage. Later, as a businessman, he was sued for stealing a patent and, based on what he told me, I know he was guilty.

I wonder how I turned out to be such a goody-goody, cautious about rules and obsessed with avoiding parental disapproval. Afraid of being hit and hopeful that perfection would keep me safe? Trying to ingratiate myself?

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Now at an age that neither my father nor my grandfather ever reached, I have questions. About their relationship to each other and to me. About anger and violence, hydraulic fury, pulsating from generation to generation. The sins of the fathers, you might say. Sounds biblical. Mysteries to me, to each other, to themselves. But then perhaps not such a mystery after all. Angry abusive men appear throughout my family tree.

Such were the fathers I knew best.

About the author

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