

# YEARS AWAY

by Greg Stolze

Going through the ACAB years has been strange for me. Mama Jo would have agreed, 100%, “all cops are bastards” and wouldn’t have much cared about whether it was the systems that made them power trip, or whether people who want to abuse power see policing as the easiest way to get a *lot* of it.

On the other hand, I watched the beefiest, hulkingest cop with the reddest face you’d ever see sit down and hand a child a teddy bear and let them cry, cry, cry, and then he cried too.

This is a privilege. Most cops would rather eat a handful of bait worms than let anyone see them weep, but hey, I’m a special case. I get backstage access. I’m the social worker who gets called in to talk to kids who’ve been traumatized by crimes.

# # #

“I suppose you’re the head-shrinker, huh?” That’s the opening salvo I get from Brianna who’s 15, gothed-out, and a kidnap victim.

“Hell no,” I say. “I didn’t have the grades.”

“Great.”

“I mean really, look at this purse.” I try to get eye contact. “If I was someone who could write scrips for anti-anxiety meds, don’t you think I’d be wearing something better than the shoes that were on sale at the store for nurse uniforms?”

A little smile, a little chuckle, and I think *first step closer*.

“I don’t know why this has to be such a big deal,” Brianna says.

“Because you got kidnapped. That’s actually a *federal* big deal.”

“It was just my dad.”

“Still counts, I’m afraid.”

I sit a spell, let the quiet work on her. Wait to see if she sticks up for him.

“I woulda answered mom’s calls eventually,” she says instead.

“Did he tell you not to?” I ask. A mistake—I see her withdraw. I gentle my tone.

“Let me guess. He said that if you answered the phone, they could find you, and that you could call her once he got you a burner or something. That about right?”

She nods.

"This kinda thing freaks moms out," I tell her.

"I know," she says. "But... c'mon, everything was so shitty *anyway*."

"I always hated it when mom and dad fought," I reply.

"Your parents get divorced?"

"Stuck it out for the kids. Me, my sister and my three older brothers." A partial truth at best, but it's what I experienced.

"So you don't get it," she says.

"I get what it's like to love people who are bringing a load of chaos into your life," I say. "One day you're the most important person and your brothers are carrying you around on their shoulders, and the next weekend they string your favorite doll up between their bikes and ride hard as they can in three different directions."

She laughs, then apologizes. "That's kinda horrible," but she giggles a little more.

"Mama Jo always used to say 'It's tragedy when it happens to me and comedy when it happens to you'."

# # #

I'm not a psychiatrist but I sure as hell see one. Psychologist too. If you don't know the difference, I... wow, what's it like to even live that life, with no recourse to mental health professionals? You'd have to be either a sane person in reasonable circumstances, or you're thrashing in the cold water of neurosis without even the *idea* of how someone might toss you a life preserver.

Not going to lie, I would find the drowning neurotic a lot easier to understand than this hypothetical "sane" person. Much of that is the job and life I chose, I get that. But a lot of it was, as they say, thrust upon me.

# # #

"What's going to happen to him?" This is Arnoldo, who's cuter and younger than Brianna, and was held a lot longer in circumstances that were a lot worse. The guy who took Arnoldo off his playground... was not his father. So I know this one's going to be slow going, incremental progress and stages, not a big showy cinematic breakthrough.

"He's going to prison," I say. "You won't see him again."

I watch his reaction to that, very closely.

We do play therapy, me and Arnoldo. See what he builds out of LEGO. See what the dolls say to the action figures and what the minifigs do to one another.

Arnoldo's stuffed animals aren't telling a very happy story, but I have hope. Even when I give him a hug goodbye and he immediately sexualizes it in a way no pre-pubescent ever should. I just correct him, put him back on the right track, put a note in the file.

# # #

"I know what you're going through," I say to George, whose kidnapping was motivated by money, only they took the wrong George Rhinemueller. His mom's an ultrasound technician and his dad does IT maintenance for the school district.

Surprisingly, the *right* George Rhinemueller's parents staked the ransom, but insisted that the FBI be involved and it worked out. It all turned out OK! Not knowing that they were doing the right thing, the rich Rhinemuellers did the right thing and got the poor Rhinemuellers' kid back. (In the process, crossing out a threat to their own little George, but hey. Not going to let speculation about motives put stink on a good outcome.)

"How could you possibly?" he says.

I shrug. "When it happened to me, I was only seven."

That gets his attention.

# # #

As you may have gathered, I have a specialty. It's not anything official, though I did take some advanced courses, nuts and bolts best practices for hostage trauma.

It just kinda happened. Maybe I got good results. Maybe word got out—cops gossip in a way that would make the old ladies at any church say "Whoa, that's a little much" even though they (the cops) probably call it "community awareness" or some such. Maybe one of them connected me, Cleo Bowen the social worker, with Cleo Bowen the kidnap victim and long-term captive.

Whatever it is, was... I like to think I'm good at it, that I make a difference. I like to think they keep giving me kidnap kids because I help them. The alternative is, they're just doing it because it's easier, like a habit.

Also plausible.

# # #

"Do you worry that you over-identify with your clients?" Doctor Mallory asks. She's the talking doctor, which is the psychologist. (Doctor Thea, the psychiatrist, is far more curious about how I'm sleeping, whether I have any side effects from the sertraline, whether I need to re-up the ativan.)

"Do you think I should worry about that?" I ask.

Then we both laugh. We both spend so, so much of our professional time asking questions, and answering questions with more questions, that it has accidentally turned into a comedy routine.

“OK, OK,” I say. “Yes but... these are distrustful kids and they’ve been hurt. I have to give them something if I’m ever going to get anything.”

“Is that true?” Doctor Mallory presses, and I give way.

“Fine, no, it’s not *completely* true, I could play the long game, remain stone faced, take what they give in tiny drops and wear them down but... Jesus, it takes forever, doesn’t it?”

“I am... lucky to have a lot of clients who want to get better and who engage the process,” Mallory says. “I’m sure it’s frustrating to be distrusted by children you’re trying to help, even when their doubts make sense in their larger narrative. How do you deal with that frustration?”

I shrug. “The usual. Standing appointment at the spa for a weekly massage, prayer, Taco Tuesdays at the Better Bowl.”

“Oh yeah, you ever get a team together for their league?”

“Hah, we did, the Antisocial Workers. We were trash, we got eliminated in round two.”

“That’s not so bad, is it?”

“It’s a double-elimination tournament.”

I’m stalling, I know it, she knows it, I know she knows and she knows I know. I think about dropping one of Mama Jo’s little chestnuts, but instead I glance at the clock, sigh, and engage the process.

“Well... y’know she’s getting out of jail on the seventeenth,” I say.

“The woman who kidnapped you?” she asks.

I want to correct her, and instead I say, “Yeah,” and examine why it felt wrong to agree.

# # #

I don’t tell mom about it at church. As usual, she gives me a huge hug the first instant she sees me, and Theo rolls his eyes behind her back before giving me a more standard and perfunctory one. Theo’s not a hugger. The middle brother, he’s not terribly reactive at all. His day job is dealing cards in a casino, and he saves up his tips to travel out of state and play in unofficial poker games, where he does pretty well. So his nonresponse is well-practiced, and honestly, I’m here for it. Family is intense. You spend so much time with them, and not by choice, that even the simplest interactions have too many layers, referents, precedents. “You want some toast, honey?” can be a four-dimensional chess game of guilt,

resentment and solicitude. So having someone emotionally neutral as an insulator is a big help, especially when dealing with a live wire like my mom.

We sit towards the front, on purpose. I can feel the space behind us as the back rows fill first. But my mom sings in the choir, and she has the most beautiful voice I have ever heard.

I know how that sounds. A woman who, as a child, was kidnapped, thinks her mother's voice is the most beautiful. Yeah, shocker, what a twist. But it's not just me. I've seen people tear up when she does a solo. She's been asked to sing at the funerals of people where, honestly, we couldn't have told you their last names. Even just hanging around the house singing "Automatic," she sounds like a genuine Pointer Sister.

Afterwards, at coffee, people stop by. Compliment her contralto, make sure we're doing OK.

Dad left her while I was missing, and I'm only now reconnecting with him. He said he couldn't take it with her. "Cleo, I'm sorry but your mama went crazy."

(I told him we're trying to steer away from that word, but he was not deterred.)

"Every weekend, sometimes every day she'd start at that supermarket where you got taken and she'd drive around, staring, sometimes calling your name. She'd pull over whenever she saw a pedestrian, show them your picture, asking... she was desperate and she wasn't making sense. You can see that, right? I'da done anything to get you back, you have to believe me. But would a kidnapper stay near where they did it? I figured you were hundreds of miles away and you were. You were, I was *right* but your mom... she just couldn't give up, like she was going to find you with a mother's love when the FBI task force couldn't do it."

I think about that as mom laughs at a joke from a man old enough to be her father or, at the least, her much-older brother. I wonder if she's going to start dating again, and if she does, how that's going to play out.

We're among the last people having coffee and that's when Theo says, "So, I heard that Briscoe woman's getting out," and mom drops her cup right on the floor. It clunks but doesn't break. The church buys sturdy mugs.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she gasps, staring at me, ignoring him.

I shrug. "Do you think it's going to make a lot of difference?"

"They should have put her away for *life*," she hisses, and her face transforms in an instant. One second, a pleasant church lady who sings in the choir and the next, a madwoman with blazing eyes and bared teeth.

Theo's expression does not change.

"She served a full sentence," I say. "They're not allowed to keep her any longer."

"She should have gone into a madhouse," mother spits. "They can keep crazy people 'til they die."

"Mom, please don't use that word, we've talked about this," I say, and I know it's the wrong move but there aren't any right ones. All the layers and history but no strategy for comforting her. Maybe I missed it in my years away, maybe Theo could soothe her, or dad, or one of the others.

Or maybe not. Theo doesn't say anything, and dad's not here.

"But she *is* crazy, she *is*, you'd have to be to take a child away from her mother." It's strange that when she gets angry and upset, her voice gets lower and lower, closer to silence. I remember with a shudder when she would whisper at me as a little girl, barely comprehensible, her fingers digging into my shoulders when I'd wet the bed or broken one of her figurines. "You'd have to be crazy or evil."

"Mom, I'm so sorry you went through so much," I say, and I take her hand, and I look her in the eye. "It's over now though. I'm OK. We're back together. You can text me any time you see a cute cat video, we're together every Sunday, and that's not going to change. I'm not going anywhere. You know?"

"You don't know how hard it was," she says, but her voice is coming back to normal. "Your father gave up on you and I had to raise three kids with this, this *hole* in the middle of our lives."

(When dad left, our oldest brother Lawrence went with him, which is another complex constellation of issues, resentments, and guilt.)

She's going to cry soon. I look at Theo and make a tiny movement with my head. He hugs her from her left side while I take the right.

I've been back with her for fifteen years and she still cries a lot. But maybe I'm getting better at handling it.

# # #

"Well, the honeymoon's over," Briana says. I'm letting her paint my fingernails black, but like a less glossy black. Like gunmetal or a wrought-iron fence.

"How do you mean?"

"When I first got back, mom was really, like... *cuddly*," she says, and her lip briefly curls.

"Yeah, that'll happen. I mean, if you came back from being snatched and she was distant and mean, that would be weird, right?"

"You ain't wrong," she grumbles, then frowns at a blob that got on my cuticle. She removes it carefully. "It's done with now though. Back to how it was."

"Is that good or bad?"

"We fight. Not, like..." She pantomimes a boxer throwing jabs.

"More like...?" I move my hands like bickering sock puppets, back and forth, jerking indignantly, and she laughs. I'm good at expressive hand stuff. I credit all the play therapy training.

"Yeah, just pissy arguing over nothing."

"Well Brianna, this is a development absolutely unprecedented in the history of moms and teenagers," I say, rolling my eyes. "Is it OK if I write you two up for the *Harvard Journal of Social Working*?"

She makes a sass-face at me, just so I know that I'm not funny and she's tolerating me at best. I don't believe it, though.

"You and your mom fought?"

"Oh, there were arguments when I was your age," I say, leaving out that when I was fifteen and arguing, I could throw "You stole me from my *real* mom!" into the mix. That one was a blockbuster, guaranteed to set her off and get her threatening to send me back. She would really do that. She would threaten to send me back to my biological family.

"These arguments," I say, "They blow over pretty fast and you make up, or is it more like a lingering low intensity thing that never really goes away?"

"I guess they blow over," she says. "I mean, it's mostly like before."

"Is that what you want? For it to be like before? Or did you prefer it when she was a little more...?"

"I dunno," she says, blotting my last pinkie nail. "How do you like 'em?"

"Fierce," I say.

"Nobody says that any more."

"I just did." I look at the clock. "OK, we're just about outta time here, but you get homework."

She groans.

"Next time, have an answer to my last question. Do you want things to go right back to like before, or do you want things to be different after everything that happened?"

She sighs.

"A true and honest answer!" I insist as she leaves.

# # #

"My mom says mean things about him," Arnolito says. He's referring to his kidnapper, a man whose name he will not speak out loud.

"I bet she does," I reply. Then the pause. The hole in the conversation for his little voice to fill.

But instead of words, he starts crying. I give him an appropriate hug and he responds appropriately.

"How do you feel about that?" I ask him in a low little voice.

"He was nice to me," he says.

"Sure."

"Am I supposed to be mad?"

"Your feelings feel how they feel," I say. Another line from Mama Jo. "You can tell me anything, you know that. It's OK."

"I miss him sometimes," he admits.

"Sometimes people treat us well even when they're doing something wrong."

He moves in closer.

"I liked... doing stuff. Some of it."

"Sure," I say, my mouth dry. This isn't rare. Most kids like getting attention from a grown-up, appropriate or not. When it comes to emotional manipulation, expecting a child to resist an amoral adult is like asking a butterfly to fight off a tiger. "It's part of being human," I tell him. "You should wait though. Because it wasn't healthy for you, was it? To be away from your parents and family?"

He shakes his head.

"He knew it was wrong and he did it anyway," I say. "You're going to have big feelings about that for a long time, which isn't fair. You're going to hate him some times—I think you already do?"

He nods.

"That's normal. I get it. Sometimes you won't hate him though, and that's also normal and OK. You might even miss him sometimes, and not many people are going to understand that."

"I don't tell anyone else," he says. "Not even mom." He looks up at me. "This is our secret, right?"

"Don't keep secrets with adults," I tell him. "If you want to tell your mom, I think that would be smart and healthy."

He looks like a deer in headlights and immediately scoots away. I don't chase him.

"You don't have to. You can keep your privacy, which isn't the same as a secret."



“How’s it different?”

“A secret is something you choose to hide from someone. Privacy... well, that’s just something that’s nobody else’s business.”

He frowns like I’m just playing around with words. I’m hoping that some of this helps him somehow, at some point. Do other social workers just throw out stuff wildly, hoping something hits? Probably. Sometimes quantity’s better than quality.

“What about this?” I say, very gently. “I can help you talk it out with her. You know my job is to help people with messy, complicated emotions. I can make sure she knows you’re OK, that you’re not doing anything wrong, and that your feelings are yours. You know?”

He just looks at me, and I’m suddenly, vividly reminded of the few times Doctor Mallory has used the silence trick on me, has left that hole in the talk that gets more and more painful until you just *have* to fill it.

“You don’t have to decide right away,” I tell him. “It’s all right.”

# # #

“I got jealous sometimes,” Theo admits. He came over to help me with my wifi router, because he knows how to do that kind of stuff. I’m better at first aid and home health care, though. I know. Maybe we’re a gendered family. As issues go, that one’s pretty low on the list.

“Jealous of what, hon?” I ask.

“You know. That you got taken away.”

“*What?*” We’re drinking. Gin and tonic for him. Rum and coke for me.

He shrugs. “Mom and dad fought over you so much once you were gone.”

“Yeah, once I wasn’t there and was just an idea, I’m sure they thought of me all the time.”

“They did!”

“I wasn’t being sarcastic!”

He drinks.

“Eventually I figured you’d been killed,” he says, and looks at me. For just a moment, there is this well of pain and guilt and fear in those deep blue eyes, usually so blank. Then they’re blank again. If I wasn’t a professional in the ‘big feelings’ field, I might have thought I imagined it. “When I was older, I figured it was some serial killer thing with the... you know all the perverse stuff.”

“Hah, no.”

"I know that *now* but... you became, I don't know, a symptom of everything that could go wrong with the family. Once you were gone, anyhow. Like... like mom would have been calm and reasonable *if only Cleo was still here*, and dad would keep a job *if only Cleo was still here*, and I'd get along with Lawrence, and Lawrence wouldn't have the night terrors unless he smoked pot, and mom wouldn't be wildly overprotective of Emily and move her from 'baby of the family' to 'really neurotic weird infantilized'..." He trails off.

"You hear from Emily?"

"Instagram stalking only," he says. "Judging by that, South Carolina is just *great*."

"She won't talk to dad either," I say.

"Big surprise there. It's pretty much you and Lawrence."

"I thought you two were OK."

"We don't have much in common."

"Theo, you have half your DNA in common. Plus decades of shared experiences. Plus family trauma."

"Fine. We don't have much we *like* in common."

I almost say "We don't get healthy by only dwelling on the things we like," but fuck it. I'm off the clock.

# # #

If you're wondering how I got kidnapped, here's how it went down. It was a hot summer day and I was crying. No idea why, but I was, apparently, really going at it.

My mom decided to leave me in the car while she grabbed a few staples at the grocery store, which was a bad decision. We can all agree she shouldn't have done that, but Emily was a croupy newborn at the time and sleep deprivation is real. The whole family was on edge, which was maybe why I had a black eye, courtesy of Lawrence, who really should have been old enough to know better. He didn't hit me—it was just dumbshit childish horseplay that a thirteen year old can handle much better than a seven year old.

If she'd rolled down a window, things might have been different. Or maybe not, maybe I just would have been easier to hear.

So there I was, a screaming child with a black eye locked in a sealed car with the windows up. I wasn't targeted for trafficking or because I was vulnerable, I wasn't stalked and taken for profit. Near as I can understand, it was spontaneous. Oh, she watched for around ten minutes, she said, before checking the locks and then opening a window with a tire iron.

Understand, this was decades ago—the twentieth century, before there were cameras absolutely everywhere. She just smashed the window, took me out, and pacified me with Dairy Queen until we crossed the state line.

For the next ten years, I lived with her and her very sick dad, getting homeschooled on a rural property four hundred and fifty miles away.

# # #

“It was just really different,” I tell Doctor Mallory, the day before my kidnapper gets out. “All I’d known for seven years was six people in three bedrooms, bath and a half, living all over one another, loud and energetic all the time. Brothers who’d defend me against anyone and anything except their jealousy that I got a room of my own, and then suddenly I’m in the middle of nowhere that feels like the center of everywhere. Big skies, crops, peace and quiet. A couple horses. What little girl doesn’t want her own pony? Well, it wasn’t a pony, it was actually a pretty old horse. Paint.”

“The horse was named ‘Paint’?”

“Yeah, it’s a common horse name.”

“OK.”

“I cried so hard when ol’ Paint died. Harder than when the old man went, though I was teenaged then.” She knows all about the context, that I lived on a farm with an aged man and his dutiful daughter.

“Why do you think she did it?” Doctor Mallory asks. It’s not the first time.

“I mean, she told me she rescued me. I’m sure that’s how she thought of it. But there were definitely some sublimated maternal urges going on. Obviously. Does it matter much? I can’t change her motivations.”

“Very true. How are you planning to... mm, sculpt the outcomes going forward?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it,” I sigh.

# # #

It’s a long drive to the penitentiary. Lots of time to think about the lessons she taught me. Practical ones—mushrooms and wild plants you can eat, how to give first aid to a hurt piglet, how to gap your spark plugs. (Well, she tried with the engine stuff, but I wasn’t good at it and wasn’t interested, or maybe vice-versa.) Bad lessons too—never ever trust anyone in authority, never bet on a man to do the right thing, it’s fine to steal from people you’re mad at. But mostly, I think of the good ones. Keep your word, no matter what. You see some hurt, give some help. In a hard world, kindness is heroic.

There was a lot of bitterness in her, but what was sweet... it was so pure it would take your breath away.

She served every day of her time because she never expressed regret for taking me, and she insists she deserves at least some of the credit for the prison guards unionizing.

She got caught because I got drunk. I told her I was going to the Hilterbeck farm three roads down to see my friend Beth's new 4-H calf, when I was really going to pick her up for a double-date with Brad and Barney Clemson. They'd mixed Everclear with ginger ale and sure, I'd had a few beers before, but this was different. I wrapped the pickup around a telephone pole and thank God no one was in the passenger seat. Or in the truck bed, Jesus Christ.

I woke up in the hospital, dazed and on painkillers, two days later. I'd never gone to school or been put in the system, so they'd marked me as a Jane Doe. The cops ran my prints because I didn't have a license, and they hit on an FBI database.

(They never charged me for the drunk driving. Can you believe it? They probably felt sorry for me.)

People around knew where I was from, plus who owned the truck, so things unraveled pretty quick. They suspected him, but he'd been medically incapacitated a long time and they settled on her. She clammed up, but the public defender couldn't do much.

She looks so much older when she walks out of the gates. A guard escorts her, says something at the end that makes her laugh. She always had a lot of gray in her hair but now it's pure white. I wonder if those are the same clothes she was wearing when they arrested her. They seem loose on her. The prison diet has to be terrible.

She doesn't even break stride when she identifies the car I'm in, just walks over like I give her a ride every day.

"You think we can make it back to the farm tonight?" she asks.

"I've been driving too much," I tell her. "I can't take another hour of the Jesus radio stations you have around here. I got us hotel rooms. Gonna take you out for a pile of fried chicken."

She laughs. "Sounds like there's no hard feelings."

"There are some, Mama Jo," I say. "But we can work it out."