

Cry Me A River: A Personal Essay

by [Scot Walker](#) (August 2019)



Sit, Paula Rego, 1994

World War II officially ended on August 15, 1945 at 9:00 in the morning and by 9:01, my mother dragged my little boy ass down East Capitol Street toward the Mall in Washington DC, looking for revelers. The war for her, however, had just begun. It was *the moment*, that one precise moment immediately after WWII, that Mother officially separated from Daddy and, since I was a grown man of three, she foisted her myriad traumas on me and my little boy ass. Mother had run away from my daddy for good this time and she picked me up and waved me in the downtown streets as if I were her son, Ajax, not the Greek hero, but rather, her own personal can of foaming cleanser, ready to cleanse the crowd of their excitement, and by holding me up like her aegis, she was able to avoid looking at any distant blur on the landscape that might have reminded her of my father, that handsome, blue eyed, brown-haired, hirsute man she left sleeping on the sofa as soon as the news came over the radio that the fricking Japs had kamikazed themselves to death.

Daddy saw Mother for what she was: a three-fingered, one-thumbed, cartoon character who knew how to claw daddy's chest hairs with her left hand and fondle his short hairs with her right, simultaneously jangling me like a boy on fringe of a yoyo string, as she danced to the sweet soft sounds of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, or the Dorsey Brothers. Today, however, as Mother Madame Defarged her way through the crowd of screaming revelers, politicians and 4F shopkeepers, she announced she was done with Daddy forever. "Neither one of us will have to look at Daddy's ugly puss for as long as we live or forever, whichever happens first," she said as she vomited out her reeking diatribe, "Daddy won't ever put his fat paws on us again. If he wants to treat me like a dog, he can go out

and buy a collie." Mother paused, wiping her pug nose against a tissue before continuing, "His baby blues are all his now. Like Alexander and the Queen of Sheba, our love is severed." Then, like a manatee helplessly adrift in the Potomac, Mother took a gulp of air and propelled herself forward. "Severed and split" she spit out, as she led me away from the ever engorging joyous crowds, away from the victory, away from the celebration of the century, into a furnished room in the basement of an 1880's townhouse on North Capitol Street that reeked of raw sewage, crab cakes, apple pie, fried chicken, Cajun shrimp, and grits.

I was trapped in an oubliette deeper than the Washington Monument is tall. My only solace was that Mother was hovering at the top of the pit, staring wide-eyed at me, doe-eyed actually, thinking not of rescuing me, or even of talking to me, but only of Daddy, disgusting despicable Daddy, who had tossed her onto the streets, into the trashcan of marital disgrace . . . thinking of the fact that she would have to find a full time job—and work like Rosie the riveter, welding columns for the nearly finished Pentagon or the War Department Building or perhaps even climbing up the top of the Washington Cathedral and banging out gargoyles in the new tower.

Instead, she threw down her silky web, noosed me, dragged me out of the pit and tossed me back into that basement apartment on North Capitol, that maelstrom, unaware of the brewing cesspool underneath the building, unaware of the victory celebration rocketing and rolling around us, unaware that my father was just as lonely, unaware her sweet little baby boy was living in fear and angst and agony. But just before she set me down, she clawed me to her breasts and cried as if the Atlantic had dried up and Mother's tears were the only way to placate the river gods for her loss. Then, as if she were

Penelope pulling out the last strand of wool from her suitor's sweet sweat-scented sweater, she dumped me into the arms of an obese one-eyed, henna-dyed dwarf, and headed toward the door.

I reached for my tinker toys as Mother headed toward the door. As far as I was concerned, everything was one hundred per cent pippity-poo, but thirty seconds later, Mother turned around, raced toward me, snatched me from the dwarf babysitter's arms and hoisted me like a de-caramelized Kunte Kinte into what I thought was the bright azure sky, but what she knew as a twenty-five watt incandescent light bulb, fawning over me, rubbing my sinuous brown baby hair, weeping and crying until it seemed as if all the faucets in all the kitchens of all the cities of America were running uncontrollably, nonstop, forever.

That was the earliest recollection I have of Mother's crying eyes, of her body cavity oozing with water, of her eyes drooping heavily with Caspian-Mediterranean-Dead Sea salinity, sogging so superfluously on my tiny baby shoulders, moistening my neck, smearing my face. It was the first time I realized all the misfortunes in the world existed not because of Prometheus or Tantalus or even for pomegranate-eating Proserpine . . . but because of me. Just me! Up until that moment, Mother and Daddy had belonged to me, but our love knot of love was broken—just as Alexander the Great sworded the Gordian knot—my parents' love and adoration were hacked off from me forever—Marie Antoinetted, decapitated . . . gone, caput, like Hitler and Tojo and Mussolini, relegated to the nethermost pits of hell. And even though I knew my folks no longer loved one another, never could love each other again, I couldn't figure out what I had done to ruin their lives, unless I, like Hercules, had severed their hopeless helpless Hydra heads and washed out their Augean stables with my Type A

plus blood.

In the past, when they shouted and screamed at each other, I would cower in my crib, covering my face with my arms, too afraid to cry, knowing I must have done something too horrible to fix. And all night long, I'd watch the tears in Mother's eyes rush down her face, dribbling a miniature waterfall until it cascaded from her emerald green emotionless New English eyes to her cheeks to the cracks in the linoleum floor. Mother's eyes gushed with more water than had ever flowed down the Nile. The Amazon Basin could not have held her tears. The polar ice caps were only a tablespoon of rime in comparison to the endless well inside my Mother's soul. Mother's tears could have filled the Sahara and, if transportable, would have irrigated the moon.

I looked up at the picture of our brown-haired, brown-eyed, brown nosed Savior, Jesus Christ, and wondered if He invented tears just for my mother, just so she could take me cruising down her miasmatic river of tears, wishing I, like Langston Hughes, had a soul that would grow as deep as the river.

It took me years to realize that Mother's crying was really just one symptom of her brag-whining, just one more facet of her incessant habit of whining about everything she saw, touched-tasted-looked at-and heard.

Afterwards, she would brag about how sick it made her to touch, feel, see, taste, look at, or hear the things she examined so thoroughly: then she'd wait for commiseration. And wait and wait and wait . . . like Rick and Ilsa in Casablanca

. . . she'd wait.

Long-faced, sorry-eyed, she'd wait for hours if need be, because Mother, like Achilles, needed an audience to rage her on, to stroke her ego, to let her know how much suffering she had endured, to make her scream her aches and tears across the battlefield that had become my life. I was nothing more to her than Patroclus—even though I had no Chiron to shelter me from her storm.

Yet Mother bragged-whined to her dying day; her last words were so twisted and whined that even I was unable to comprehend them all. *Caron, be advised, when my mother reaches the River Styx, take her nickel and ferry her across the river, but don't try to understand her brag-whining. And for Zeus's sakes, don't listen to her cries. If you do, she'll flood the gates of hell, put out Hades damnable fires, and rescue the lost before you have time to tether your Argosian steed.*



Two days after my fifth birthday, as a belated present, Mother announced that Daddy wasn't able to cry. "Everyone should cry now and then," Mother counseled me, "crying is good for our soul. It cleans you out." (In retrospect, I wonder if Mother thought tears worked like enemas.) "Crying makes you feel good, but your father doesn't have any tear ducts—none at all," Mother said. To this day, I believe she believed this was one of God's countless curses on my family, and I grew up believing my daddy couldn't cry. Years later, upon asking him,

he confirmed the legend, "Son," he said, (Dad always called me Son, whereas Mother always used my given name, even though she *thought* she was the closer of the two.) "Son," my Dad said, "I don't have any tear ducts."

God sure picked a perfect couple when He united Mother and Dad in holy wedlock: wet and dry, like a prepackaged Handy Wipe: she inside him, wet, he hovering alone outside, dry; both as different as Oliver and Stan or Lou and Bud or Trump and Obama. He: dry-eyed, obese, cavalier, out-going. She: oceanic, tight-assed, thin like Jiminy the cricket, a born-again Bible-thumping Christian. He: a hedonistic amoral heathen man without a plan, whose only fear was being served turkey soup because his mother had been reduced to dipping the same turkey leg in and out of boiling hot steaming water every night of the entire Great Depression. In sum: Mother exuded tears, but Dad encompassed the dry-eyed compassion that ultimately found its way inside my soul.

Yet on that one-war-ending, another war beginning-day, as mother floated from the door to the babysitter to me in a perpetual wash-rinse cycle like our Jiffy Wash-O-Matic, daddy was still a hundred and eighty degrees off Mother's horizon—a vertical line several parsecs off her horizon. And . . . since she had cast him out of her life, it was time for her to inundate mine with her tears. It was time for her to open the floodgates of her Indus green eyes and drown me with her incomprehensible understanding of love.

I prayed to Almighty Jesus that Mother would just float away, wondering why the Son of God allowed her to take such an arduous oozing walk, floating back and forth along the canal that led from my crib to the door, leaving me more and more

alone—more and more desperate—more and more terrified by this tormenting Mother whose tears never ceased to drizzle down her face.

But that August day when World War II ended was Mother's *show day*, a day in which she produced a large enough tidal flow to fill the streets of Washington and trickle down the coast to Savannah . . . that "august" August day, Mother was Garbo's Camille, reenacting her death-by-tears in her annual summer showcase, foreshadowing Your Cavalcade of Stars, preempting Queen for a Day, as the teariest-eyed woman who had ever lived.

Mother was crying as if water had nothing else to do but evaporate from her eyes. She was crying and I felt compelled to cry, as well. "I have to leave you, my dear sweet little boy, but I'll be back. Your father has abandoned you, a-band-doned-you," she repeated, as if she were a predecessor of Blanche DuBois, and even though those slurred words as "Your father has a band of Jews," I knew, by her soggy face and dripping eyes, that something horrible had happened in my life—something I would never be able to fully comprehend, had taken my father and the band of Jews away from me—along with the scintilla of sanity I had once possessed. "Little man, I have to go away for a little while, but I'll be right back, my baby, my sweet, sweet baby, my love." Mother squeezed me so hard my skin felt as if it had been forced into an orange squeezer; I could feel the pips oozing out of viscera, my blood and flesh co-mingling with my morning apple juice, wishing Mother would just walk the hell out the door and leave me alone.

"Just as soon as I earn enough money to pay our rent and buy

us a little food, I'll come back—but in the meantime, my darling little baby boy, I have to go to work. Don't try to stop me," she said as she hugged me so hard I could hear my heart rattle inside hers, inside the dwarf attending me, inside the universe, inside the body, blood and soul of Jesus Christ, "I shall return," she said and had I had been older, I would have imagined Mother smoking a corncob pipe, wearing a flak jacket and marching, like Douglas McArthur himself, out our tiny basement room to attack the now bombed and defeated Japs.

Mother handed me to my sitter, an obese, mustached hermaphrodite dwarf, who cried herself to sleep each night because she was too big to serve in the WAC, the woman who would be my ersatz mother, with or without my permission, until my mother, AKA General McArthur, returned from her self-proclaimed war against my dad. So, again, Mother headed for the door as her tears morphed into estuarine puddles and before freezing into Stygian black crystals, leaving nothing but miniature effervescent Arctic icebergs saturating the icy concrete floor.

Then, as suddenly as she had disappeared and just as I had started to readjust to live my life without her, Mother reappeared, *deus ex machina*, in the same cart drawn by dragons . . . even today, I wonder, if only my great-grandfather had been Helios, if I too, might have been saved. Thank you Euripides for screwing me as soundly as Archimedes! Because, now, suddenly Mother was there to take care of me again, to find a place for me to sleep, to hand-sew my clothes, to drop a trail of breadcrumbs from my basement Corregidor to the safety of the Battleship Missouri and back into Daddy's happy home.

"Baby, you don't know how much I love, love, love, love, love you," Mother sobbed, as her teary-eyed voice cracked under the strain of her ever-diminishing bodily fluids now that she had become a Polar Spring water machine—filled to overflowing, abundantly cascading her hollowed-out love via a Niagara of tears, saturating me, staining me, soiling my hair, my T, my tiny baby shoes, but then as abruptly as Mother had returned to save me, she began to float out the doorway toward the oasis known as 'It's Far Away Beyond the Basement Door' job.

I cried for several minutes and the tears were just beginning to un-well themselves from my sand-encrusted eyes when, God, you are gracious, merciful and forgiving, Mother returned, radiant and alive. She needed to hug me one more time.

My tears began again as soon as I saw her, Venus-like, rising out of the sea. She, the woman who had left never to return, the wandering star who had left in a blazing trail of starlight, had returned to me. Mother had come home to hug, love, and protect me while showering me with her toilet-water-scented kisses and manikin-like hugs.

By the time the clock on the bridge that crossed the ever-rising river known as our basement apartment, struck again, Mother, dependable to a fault, knowing she had to be at work precisely at 9 AM, turned once more and faced that dreadful door. The Yangtze coursed through her face, the floodgates spewed from her lips, nose and eyes, as water oozed through her open-toed sandals, inundating the doormat on the cold concrete floor .

I, who had lost all hope for love and stability, lost my four-year-old mind as I climbed the dwarf's stomach, screaming and kicking, digging my tiny toenails into her navel, pulling on her hair, demanding to go with my Mother, demanding to be with the woman I loved even though she was the Atlantic and I was still unable to tread water.

But Mother refused to take me with her. "I love you, my dear Billy boy," she said, "but I have to report to my new job. I'll be back for you and I'll take you to the moving pictures this evening, just you and me, my little man, just us . . . and Walt Disney, but right now, I have to—" the words trailed off as her tears filled the basement and began emptying into the streets and our now-flooding basement cistern became a river that enveloped the small yard in front of our boarding house, washing away the day lilies as if they were mere dots on a typewritten page, bleeding, blending, oozing into their new aquatic world.

Then Mother was gone, out the door, gone and poof! Floating out of sight, barely glancing back at me, her beloved son, her baby, her boy child, her darling—the apple of her water sogged eye. Helplessly, I screamed as my body wretched in agony, an agony watermarked into my soul, and as I screamed, my soul shrieked out in emptiness and dread, "Come back! I love you! I love you! I love you! I'm worth loving! Don't leave me. Don't ever, ever leave me." And as she waded through the streets, I whispered, "Why can't you love me as much as I love you? Why can't you, why, why, why?"

Then like the tides that had brought her grandfather's

schooner from the shoals of Nova Scotia to those fish-selling shores of Gloucester, Massachusetts, my Mother sailed back home into our own private little bay, dressed in Rhett Butler's blockade runner's regalia and, even though her hair was matted now and flattened against her skull, she glowed like Aphrodite, and Mother's hair was suddenly coiffed regally, her Max Factor pancake makeup applied perfectly, her clothing chic, her bearing joyous, as she hug-held me, clasping me to her soggy bosom, holding me, her baby child, her firstborn, safely in her friendly, frothing, flapping, undulating arms.

By now, I was in such anguish that Mother's last minute outpouring of love was no longer acceptable. Watered down or not, even a four-year-old knows the smell of snake oil.

And then, almost miraculously, just as suddenly as the wellsprings had opened, her spigots dried up. Crying was my Mother's weapon, but she could turn it off quicker than a Californian could siphon water from the Colorado. (As an adult I once watched an alley cat training her kittens in the ways of the world. What a savvy little beast she was, I thought, as I watched that cat teach her babies how to cross the alley and when to jump into the garbage dumpster for safety to hide from the terrorists children. Such a mother was that cat, such a mother with just one R, a real mother with no time for a river of tears.)

Finally, the door closed and Mother was on the other side, the Stygian side. I heard her footsteps ascend the wooden stairs from our basement landing as she headed toward the street, one soggy step at a time, and I knew I had to look again. I had to see Mother one more time. At funerals, my Mother's mother,

always took a final look at the body just before they sealed the casket—and gave it one last kiss goodbye. Similarly, I sensed I must get one last peek at the only person who ever attempted to love me. So I mounted my sitter's obese body, climbing it like I was Gulliver in the land of the Brobdingnags, standing on her bloated stomach and screamed for my Mother.

I was a boy, screaming my guts out on a mountain of a nation of a woman, stomping and flinging my arms at the island-nation's face, as she forced me backwards and I watched my upside down Mother sobbingly float away. Gone, and away—forever and away as the alley cat mouthed her kitten and jumped into the trash can, and both woman and animal left me alone, alone with the dwarf, utterly alone.

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Scot Walker has been a writer and poet for many years and is a member of the Dramatists Guild. His work includes *These Forty Years Have Flown So Fast*, *Poetry by Scot Walker*, *Winston Churchill's American Cousin and Other Tales* and over 30 published plays, as many short stories, and several novels. He is a retired English teacher. He gave a dramatic reading of *The Last Dragon Dance* in 2007 in Lhasa, Tibet.

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