

Loss of Innocence

Ron and Carren Clem

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Extract

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1. THE PREAMBLE TO PARENTING

The worst horror a mom or dad can experience is the death of their child. It's impossible to comprehend the pain and horrible sense of loss, the forever emptiness. Maybe that's why so many of us pull away from grieving parents: we just don't know what to do or say. The thought it could happen to one of our children is too unbearable. Yet when I think back, I often welcomed death for my little girl and at times I actually prayed for it; I just couldn't stand the thought of her going through another minute, another day, pursuing her only love in life – meth.

Ron Clem

Never in my wildest dreams did I plan on being called Daddy by my three children. My father left home when I was six or seven years old and Mom was left with the responsibility of raising my sister and me. She worked nights as a waitress, yet there never seemed to be enough money to make ends meet.

Being young at the time, I didn't understand all that was going on, but within a few months of Dad's leaving, one of the so-called proper women caught me taking an extra cookie from the welcome table after the Sunday morning service. She grabbed me by the back of my shirt, crushed the cookie in my hand and told me, 'You know the rules, one cookie only.' As she was walking away she commented to one of her other decent ladies, 'Those little Clem bastards

don't even belong here anyway.' I didn't know what a bastard was. But knew if this lady was saying it, it couldn't be good. In the early Fifties being a divorced family was frowned upon and soon we were shamed into leaving our church. Church life had been the primary focus of my dad's life, and thus had become ours. And now we were without Dad and our church family.

Several months after Dad left, Mom started nursing college and any hope my sister and I had of ever having our mom home again vanished. We always were short of money, which meant food on the table. Mom was a 'good looker' and utilized her talents in dating to feed us kids. More often than not, if some guy wanted to take Mom out it required feeding us kids first. Eventually we qualified for welfare, but until that time Mom did whatever was necessary to survive. At times my sister and I heard some of the adults in the neighborhood use words like 'whore' when talking about Mom, but it was always in a hush and we weren't supposed to hear.

The only real family I remember was Morris's, my best friend: his mom and dad would feed me occasionally and didn't mind dolling out a little discipline when needed. I started running the streets when I was eight or nine. Early on we formed our own little Rollingwood gang to protect ourselves from the black kids from Parchester Village. When we would walk to school, older blacks – drop outs and the like – would wait for us, beat the crap out of us and take our lunch money. More often than not they terrorized us just for fun.

Our little group never got into any real trouble, mostly annoying pranks and petty vandalism. I must have been about twelve when I had my first encounter with the police. One of our favorite pastimes was 'the blackout raid' this involved shutting off the master electrical power on a 30 unit apartment complex near the main highway. We would listen to the tenants' disgruntled complaints and then take off running. The managers and residents must have gotten

pretty tired of our repeated forays, but we always thought if it really bothered them they would put a lock on the panel or something.

One night we made our typical 'blackout raid' and took off running. Before we knew it 15 to 20 residents were chasing us, as well as several police cars. We couldn't believe it; we were just shutting off the lights for crying out loud. The police finally caught us and started shaking us down pretty good. One cop finally revealed why there had been such an intense effort to stop our little prank. It seems that one of the residents in the apartment was suffering from the after effects of polio. He required an iron lung (a cylinder to assist his breathing) and, as it turned out, we almost killed him twice. The police took us down to the station after roughing us up again and then called our parents.

Mom must have told them she was a single mom and could use some help with me. This resulted in another series of shakedowns and threats from the arresting officers. After I had sat in a cell for about four hours Mom showed up to take me home. I was ready: I just knew those officers would have killed me if they kept me any longer.

I attended Richmond High School, in beautiful downtown Richmond, California. This was the high school made famous by the recent movie *Coach Carter*. It was a tough school, packed with way too many kids, overwhelmed by racial tension, and all too often days were highlighted by violence. I did OK in school: I was enrolled in college prep courses and all that kind of stuff, but boredom and too many John Wayne movies finally took its toll. I dropped out of school in my senior year and joined the US Navy. I went to boot camp the day after my seventeenth birthday and ended up celebrating my next birthday in Viet Nam.

Before leaving on my first tour to Viet Nam, I was granted a much-needed seven-day pass. I headed home, arriving at Mom's in time for a high-school friend's wedding the next day. Mike was a year older than me and had joined the

Navy a little over a year earlier. He had just returned from his first tour to Viet Nam that week. His wedding on Saturday was to be a big event and everyone was planning on celebrating his transition into bondage. Mike's mom lived in the same apartment complex with Mom and as soon as I got home we made plans for his bachelor's party that evening. I needed transportation and decided to take my motorcycle out of storage. It needed a little cleaning and tender loving care, and while washing it off outside, Mike came over and asked if he could take my motorcycle for a ride. I hadn't even ridden it myself yet, but what the heck – it was his last day of freedom. Mike zoomed out of the parking lot, a big smile on his face, yelling as he looked back at me, 'I shall return.'

I walked up the stairs to put away the cleaning gear and Mom asked where Mike was going. Just for a ride around the block, I replied. Mike said it was his last chance of freedom before the big day and we both laughed. His soon to be wife forbade him from riding motorcycles, said they were too dangerous. I taunted Mike by asking, 'What does she know?' Ten to fifteen minutes passed and Mike hadn't returned. I was getting a little upset: I had to run a few errands before our party that night. I walked outside to see if he might have returned and I just missed him. Mike's mom called a few minutes later and asked if I knew where Mike was and I replied riding my motorcycle. She said his fiancée was coming over soon; they had an appointment at the church and he had better get back quick.

After an hour I became concerned and started calling the fire departments and police stations. When I told the police why I had called, I was immediately transferred to the patrol sergeant. He asked me for some information about Mike: What was he wearing, his age, and general description. He then asked for the make and license plate number of my motorcycle. As soon I told him the license number, he asked if I could come to the police station. I borrowed Mom's car keys and told her I needed to go to the police

station. There had just been an accident between a truck and a motorcycle near my mom's house; they wanted to see if I could identify the driver of the motorcycle.

Mike died instantly in the head on collision with the semi truck. I identified my motorcycle and Mike. Rather than have the police call Mike's mom, I decided to go and tell her in person. I stopped by my house and told Mom what had happened and she came with me to break the horrible news.

Mike's fiancée never forgave me, and to be honest I have never really forgiven myself. I left home early to return back to base and left for Viet Nam a few days later. I had lost a friend and learned a valuable lesson: Life was a precious gift and it can be taken away in an instant.

I met my wife-to-be, Karyl, in southern California during a short stint living with Dad. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever met and although I had no plans on marrying anyone soon, I knew she was the person I was going to live with for the rest of my life. We became engaged just before I left for my second tour of Viet Nam. I wanted my proposal to Karyl to be romantic and, with that in mind, I proposed by playing Jim Reeves's top single hit 'Distant Drums' on the record player. I handed Karyl a stuffed dog with an engagement ring tied around its neck. Karyl started crying and I couldn't figure it out. My sister later told me, 'You dummy, that song is about a young man going off to war. He wanted to get married and in the event he was killed!' What was I thinking?

As I look back to those times, I can't fathom what we were thinking. We were both very young; Karyl was seventeen and I was nineteen years of age. I was a high school dropout and heading back to Viet Nam. After Karyl accepted my proposal, we drove over to tell her mother. Karyl's mom was recently divorced and Karyl knew her mom wasn't going to take the news well. We walked in the door and her mom sensed something was up. We told her

we had something important to tell her and wanted her to sit down. I stood proudly and told her I wanted to marry her daughter. I explained to her excitedly that I had proposed to her only daughter, actually her only child, just a few minutes before and Karyl had accepted. Her mom looked up at us, tears filled her eyes and she jumped up and ran from the room crying.

I hadn't quite expected that kind of response. Karyl and I both just stood there staring at each other. After several minutes, actually it seemed like hours, listening to Karyl's mom crying in the next room, Karyl suggested I leave and she would take care of her mom. We weren't planning on getting married until I returned from Viet Nam, which would be in a year's time and Karyl was convinced she could win her mom over by then. The year I spent overseas I received constant letters from Karyl's family, friends, and acquaintances suggesting we wait to get married until I finished high school, had a job, and could adequately provide for her. We were told over and over that we were too young and our marriage would never last, but we were young and in love and unwilling to be dissuaded. Karyl continued to plan the wedding as we both anticipated starting a new life together as soon as I returned.

Karyl and I did marry four days after I returned from Viet Nam. It has been 37 years and she is and has been my best friend and lover ever since. Fortunately for me she was a hard worker as well and willing to support me in my educational endeavors. After my discharge from the Navy, I attended night school at Fullerton Community College and received my high school diploma. Immediately after being honorably discharged from the Navy I pursued a course of study in Biology and received my BS degree from Cal State University, Fullerton in 1973. We never planned to have a family; kids just didn't seem to fit into our – or maybe I should say my – plans.

We were both from divorced families and were constantly haunted by the experiences of our parents' failed marriages.

I felt I had something to prove to myself and to Karyl's family: I wasn't just your typical kid from a poor family whose mom had been called a whore for trying to take care of us when we were young. I wasn't stupid just because I was a high school dropout; I wanted to prove I was worthy of being Karyl's husband. Karyl was an only child and had fears of having and raising children as well. We were both committed to being financially successful before having children and to the principle of not allowing our children to experience a broken home. As it turned out, we ended up waiting twelve years before having children and in retrospect that may have been too soon.

After securing my bachelors degree in 1973, I was accepted into a Masters program for Microbiology and was living the not so exciting life of a grad student. I really wasn't enjoying the effort and fortunately happened upon a job fair on campus attended by officers from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), before I knew it I found myself working as a cop in Los Angeles, California.

Being a cop in the early Seventies and Eighties was the experience of a lifetime. There were more urban terror groups running amok than at any time in our history: the Black Liberation Army (BLA), People's Liberation Party (PLP), Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), Black Panthers, and many others were all active at this time. My first division was Newton Street, located in south-central Los Angeles.

Radio calls came fast and furious and I can remember one of the first: '13A43, 13A43 Officer needs help, shooting in progress, 54th and Compton, shots still being fired, 13A43 handle the call Code 3.' Little did I know, as we roared down the street in our 1967 turbo-charged Plymouth, red lights flashing, siren screaming, and shotguns at the ready, that I would be participating in one of the historic shootouts of the century.

The SLA, led by the infamous Cinque, known for their bank robberies, police car bombings, and the kidnapping of

heiress Patricia Hearst, were now barricaded in a shabby, one-story house on the south side of 54th Street. The urban terrorists were armed with automatic weapons, shotguns and numerous handguns. It was a fierce firefight and only ended when fire erupted inside the structure and all the occupants, the self-proclaimed liberators of the oppressed, chose to die in the intense fire, rather than surrender. I guess I never thought that it might have been easier to surrender if they hadn't been shot at every time they stuck their heads out the doors or windows.

One of my first partners was the legendary, and on occasion notorious, Barry Levin. He was known as one of the best narcotics officers working the streets of Los Angeles. Barry was a golden gloves pugilist and, more often than not, could terminate a street fight with a single blow delivered at lightning speed. Barry was my training officer and after mentoring me through hundreds of arrests and never-ending court appearances, I was recognized as a narcotics expert by the courts for identification, under the influence, packaging for sales, and sales of: heroin, cocaine, marijuana, hashish, LSD, and PCP.

Being a drug cop was the highlight of my days working the streets and I never thought for one minute illicit drugs would eventually tear my family apart. After working several other high-intensity geographic areas, Central and Hollenbeck Divisions, I finally made the grade as a tough, hardened, street cop. I never considered that what served me well in surviving the streets in Los Angeles would be my downfall as a dad in later years. I seemed to have lost my sense of compassion and the ability to love or care for anything or anyone.

Working Central Division was an experience of a lifetime, or should I say many lifetimes. Central Division was located in the downtown section of the city and housed most of the indigents, excons, and winos blessing the City of Angels. Fifth Street between Los Angeles Street and Alameda was known as the shit-hole hotel section. Most of the excons

that claimed Los Angeles as their home-away-from-home lived in the hundred or so dilapidated hotels, motels and boarding houses stacked side by side, street after street. Los Angeles Street was the center of the low-life gay district containing prostitutes, porno theaters, and sex shops. If you weren't breaking up fights between jealous drag queens, you were peeling drunks off sidewalks for their weekly checkup at the city jail.

I remember the first night we received the call for 'theater check' at one of the porno theaters.

'What is a theater check?' I asked my partner.

'Come with me, boy, and you will soon be enlightened,' he replied.

As we entered one of the many porno theaters, it was obvious they had a premier smut movie in progress. Although visibility was limited due to the dim lighting, you could tell the place was packed. We started walking down the aisles and I could hear empty popcorn bags rattling. My partner took out his nightstick and reached out and whacked one of the bags sitting on a guy's lap. The guy moaned briefly and we moved on. I soon realized that most of the perverts had the popcorn bags over their manhood and were masturbating while watching the movie. I immediately thought, 'God, what am I doing here?'

My partner explained it was our job to encourage each of the over-zealous bag rattlers to wait until they left the theatre for their love experience. One night of patrol in this cesspool left you trying to disinfect everything you wore. More often than not it would have been better to just burn your uniform, because you never got rid of the smell of putrifying urine, ejaculation, feces, or weeks of built-up body odor. The thought that never seemed to leave you after working the downtown ghetto streets of Los Angeles was the overwhelming sense of hopelessness due to the perversion, decadence, and lack of value for human life.

I had performed well as a new officer in Central Division and was rewarded by being offered the opportunity to work

a plain-clothes Special Problems Unit (SPU). I was working one of the last days of uniformed patrol: My partner and I had just finished our routine check of the shit-hole district and were heading to Code 7 – dinnertime in police talk.

It was just after 8:00 pm and we were heading to the upscale district for a little peace and relaxation. We turned south on Hill Street from 7th and observed a large gathering of Mexican Americans actively kicking and beating a black cab driver who was lying on the ground. He appeared to be severely injured due to the continuous beating by his assailants. From the earnest efforts of his attackers it was obvious the cabbie didn't have long to live if we didn't intercede. I was passenger officer and bailed out of the car just after requesting 'Officer needs assistance, major 415 7th and Hill Streets.'

At first my partner and I thought it was a dispute due to a traffic accident and the altercation started when the parties attempted to establish who was to blame. As I approached the group who were hitting and kicking the cabbie, I couldn't believe what I saw. The assailants were way overdressed for a street fight: There was a young woman dressed in a wedding dress and several young men in suits. I called out, telling them to back off, obviously misjudging the intentions of the now obvious wedding party.

Just as I got close to the group one of the male Latinos hit me in the face, knocking me down. Before I knew it they had surrounded me and started kicking me in the head, face, torso and anywhere else their shoes could reach. I yelled for my partner to get help and fought off the blows as best I could. I felt someone trying to pull my revolver from my holster and thought, 'These assholes want to kill me.'

I looked over and saw one of the suspects hit my partner in the face with a whiskey bottle. Blood exploded from his face and he went down. Suddenly I felt a crushing blow on my head and I started to lose consciousness. There must have been at least ten or twelve members of the wedding

party taking turns kicking and hitting me and, for the first time since working the streets, I felt I might not make it through this attack.

I was drifting in and out of consciousness and was amazed at not feeling any pain from the repeated blows. Thoughts briefly came to me: Would my wife miss me and what would I look like after they finished kicking my face in? It was a surreal feeling, yet I didn't have an ounce of fear or regret. I kept hearing this distant crushing sound and thought it must be my attackers kicking me in the head. Over and over again this sound kept repeating.

Suddenly I opened my eyes and there was this guy standing over me beating off members of the Mexican wedding party with his ghetto blaster. I could hear the roar of police cars and sirens coming closer and knew help was on the way. I couldn't move and realized if help didn't get here soon my sole rescuer, my knight in shining armor, would not be able to continue beating off my attackers with his rapidly disintegrating prize sound system.

Help finally arrived; my partner and I were transported to the hospital. The Mexican Wedding Party went to jail, and my rescuer eventually received a city award for saving one of the City of LA's finest. I got to visit with the guy who saved my life a few weeks later. He was an ex-con who'd just got out of jail for armed robbery and was currently on parole.

'It just didn't seem right all those bangers beating you like they were,' he said. 'When the police arrested me, they treated me like a man. Those wedding guys weren't treating you like a man, so I thought I would just help out.'

'I'm damn glad you did, James,' I replied and thanked him for helping me. I never saw him again. My injuries at the time didn't seem significant: The most obvious were multiple contusions, abrasions, but I had also sustained a concussion. After several weeks the pain in my stomach and chest area failed to subside and after several tests my doctor and other specialists determined I had a ruptured diaphragm

and groin rupture. Over the course of two years I had to be hospitalized four times and ended up having surgery to repair the ruptures and severe stomach and esophageal ulcers.

I eventually transferred out of Central Division and after a brief stint in an administrative unit transferred to Hollenbeck Division in 1982. Hollenbeck was located east of Los Angeles and was predominantly populated by Mexican Americans and illegal Mexican aliens. It was a welcome change from the decadence of Central Division. The majority of the residents in Hollenbeck were families; religious in nature, and for the most part law-abiding citizens. On the flip side there were the Mexican gangs that terrorized the local community, constantly reasserting their control of their turf through murder, assaults, and intimidation. The Mexican gangs – Whitefence, El Sereno, La Familia, Pico Aliso – generated their names based on their specific geographical location where they lived and typically financed their existence through extortion, drug dealing, burglaries and thefts.

It was our job to destabilize whatever gang lived in our patrol area and provide protection for the decent families of East Los Angeles. I loved my job in Hollenbeck and developed strong ties with local residents. I learned to admire their tenacious efforts to support their families and communities. To my partner's and my credit we also became the worst enemy of the local El Sereno Gang. We felt it our duty to make their criminal activity a constant invitation to the city and county jails. Granted they often didn't spend a lengthy time behind bars but we were content to provide them a life sentence via the installment plan.

Our efforts worked and we were rewarded with Officer of the Year by the local community. I would have been content to spend the rest of my career in Hollenbeck but my past injuries took their toll. Although I felt my efforts never diminished as street cop, in reality I started to lose my edge. In the fall of 1982 I was working patrol assignment 4A9, the El Sereno area, with my partner Mike G. We both were

experienced street cops and our tenacity had made significant negative impact on the local gang. They repeatedly threatened us but to be honest gangbangers' courage usually generated out of a high on drugs or alcohol and we never felt any real fear or intimidation. We were on patrol just making rounds when we observed two obvious gangbangers walking southbound in a residential community, for the most part established as off limits for gangbangers.

In the rear pocket of one of the suspects there appeared to be the impression of a small handgun. We stopped our vehicle 15 to 20 feet behind the suspects and approached on foot. Mike walked towards the two suspects to conduct the search and I took the observation position. Just as Mike started to check the rear pocket area of the suspect with the possible weapon, he broke away and ran between the two closest houses adjacent to our location. We had been trained never to be out of eye contact with our partners or to conduct foot pursuit alone, but I felt I could catch him before he got around the back of the house and still be in line of sight of my partner. I gave chase and was closing in on the runner when he ran around the back of the house. I yelled at Mike to put out a description and I went to look around the corner to see which direction the suspect headed.

Just as I cautiously peered around the corner I observed the young gang member was standing there waiting for me. He immediately placed the barrel of a small caliber handgun on my forehead and pulled the trigger. I felt the hard metal hit me in the head and the click of the trigger. It sounded like the crash of two large metal objects slamming together: Misfire! I was still alive but I was not going to give him a second chance. I immediately dove to my left and brought my weapon up to fire but he was gone.

I went back to my partner's location where he had the other suspect handcuffed and in custody. I relayed what had happened and we put out a broadcast for the suspect:

'All units wanted for attempted murder of a police officer, male juvenile, Latin descent, large angular scar on right

cheek, known El Sereno gang member, in possession of a small caliber handgun, considered armed and dangerous. All units be advised the suspect was last seen running eastbound through the houses; he was wearing black baggy slacks, a white short-sleeved shirt worn outside of his pants . . . etc.'

After units arrived to continue the search, we went to the station to further the investigation. The other suspect readily shared he and his friend had been walking the streets for several days hoping to have us stop them. They had planned to take revenge for our zealous crime suppression efforts and 'harassment' of the El Sereno Gang.

I realized I had made a significant error that put both my partner's and my life in danger and I needed to take a serious look at my effectiveness in the field. The next morning, due to the stress of the previous night's events coupled with my past injuries, I started bleeding internally. I went to my doctor's the following day and was immediately sent to hospital. I was advised I would need surgery and I wouldn't be able to return to full duty as a police officer for some time. While in hospital my partner Mike called and told me they had caught the suspect that had tried to shoot me and he still had possession of the weapon.

It had been a few years since the notorious wedding party assault, but the injuries finally degraded my health to the point where I required additional surgery to repair damaged and worn parts. The abdominal surgeries and repairs evidently were deemed successful by the surgery staff; however, complications soon developed limiting my ability to eat and digest food. The doctors also advised my groin injuries were going to require additional surgeries. I had had enough of hospitals and surgeries and wanted it to all be over. I began losing drastic amounts of weight and became severely depressed and some of the misdirected medical staff suggested I may be suicidal. My doctor came into the hospital room during one of my recovery episodes and advised me that if I was ever planning on having children I

should start soon. He couldn't guarantee after many more stints on the operating table Karyl and I would be able to have children. Karyl wanted children and a family, so we made a valiant effort at conception. I always felt that women minimized the man's importance in this endeavor and have a tendency to take our efforts for granted. Most of my buddies at the time agreed that the conception effort should be held in high esteem and be considered at least equal to the birthing process.

After much practice we had our first little girl and named her Alicia. Consistent with her predestined personality, Alicia decided to enter this world a month and a half early whether we were ready or not. Carren followed two and a half years later. In late 1983 I had surgery that would end my career as a Los Angeles Police Officer. I was retired a short time later and to our surprise we were blessed with the news of the expected arrival of our third child: Scott was born on Halloween Day, 1984. We were now a family: a mom, dad, three children, and a family dog named Nishi.