

I was born into a divided household. My mother told me when I was an adult that my father sent her flowers on the day I was born, and, as she looked at them, she realized that she no longer loved him. She was 35. She had given birth to three other children, the last of whom named Alec was 9 1/2 years older than me; he wrote in a card for my 50th birthday that it was hard to believe that 50 years had passed since he was leaving for school on the side porch sometime between 8 and 9 in the morning when he heard my cries from mother's room. It was the sunny day of May 4, 1931. My father's birthday was May 5.

As a teen-ager, engrossed in Charles Dickens' novels, I spoke with my mother about David Copperfield having been born with a caul over his face. It was supposed to bring luck. She said that she thought I had a caul, but, on closer questioning, she was not sure which child had a caul but left the impression it was me. This was her gentle way of encouraging me to make my own luck. My paternal grandmother, a rich lady, Annie Rice Davis Beasley, tested newborns for luck. She gave me a dollar gold coin to see whether I would hold it or throw it away. I threw it away—destined not to be rich.

Fed up with the Beasley dominance, mother refused to give me family names, which my siblings were loaded with, and christened me David Richard, not knowing that they were Beasley names from some generations back—Richard Beasley being the first settler at the Head of the Lake, which became Hamilton, Ontario, at the head of Lake Ontario in Canada, and David one of his sons prominent in the beginnings of Hamilton. She worried that my father was a bad influence, and possibly worried that he might be nasty to me because I am sure he was not delighted when I came along in the midst of his financial and scandalous problems. She gave me carte blanche, as it were, to talk, act and express my feelings without fear of being silenced as were my older siblings, so much so, that my sister Ann and brother Alec criticized her for allowing me so much freedom.

The division between my parents stayed like a barely discernible presence in the background of my consciousness. I saw my father rarely. He appeared like an unpredictable menace for moments at a time—possibly less than a half-dozen times in my first eight years when we lived in our big house on Main St. East in Hamilton. An early memory of him was when I was about age three in the dining room at breakfast when I burnt toast in the toaster, and he in his dressing gown chased me under the table. My mother rushed from the kitchen to rescue me. I later realized how fortuitous this rescue was; my mother told me that when her first child Jim was a baby and they were visiting my father's mother in her large stone house across Main Street, my father began spanking the baby to stop him from crying, which had the opposite effect. Mother and grandmother stood paralyzed as my infuriated father kept on spanking poor Jim. My grandmother's housekeeper, Elizabeth, an Irish lady, crying that he would kill it, seized the child from him. My father demanded that his mother fire her, of course, in vain.

I remember him again, suddenly appearing like a bear in the front bathroom where I was sitting on the throne and calling for my mother to wipe me. He calmly took one square of toilet paper and handing it to me said that I was to take no more than the one square to wipe myself. In awe I did what I was told. He had come from the back of the house where he had a bedroom overlooking the backyard. I did not see the room until I was much older. In better times it had been the maid's room. My brother Alec had a small bedroom or anteroom before entering my father's room. Alec got along best with my father; he was dependable and clever. Jim suffered from my father's anger and took the beatings. My sister Ann, born after Jim, was quick and earned my father's respect and possible love. He taught her Latin; she as a schoolgirl would visit him in his law office after school; there was a bond between them despite his strict deportment at home when children could not speak unless asked.

Ann slept in the front bedroom, painted in light blue with all the frills that a girl liked. Jim slept in a long room back of it, in which there were two beds, the other taken by my maternal grandfather, who came to live with us some time after I was born in order, I suspect, to prevent my father from abusing my mother. Before my grandfather my Uncle Edward Zealand, my mother's only brother, slept there, possibly for the same reason.

My mother was everything. My crib was in the front of her long bedroom placed to let me watch neighboring children playing on our front lawn. I could watch the traffic go by on Main Street, a busy thoroughfare because it traversed the city, like King Street that ran a block parallel north of it, from east to west, connecting travelers coming from the south, that is from Niagara and New York State, to Ancaster, Dundas and the west country. Across the street were large grassy lawns belonging to my grandmother. To the right was her stone house and behind it a great flower and vegetable garden stretching to King Street and at one time an attraction for visitors from around the province. Her house stood opposite to the end of Erie

Avenue, which ran south from Stinson St to end at Main. Erie Avenue became my favourite haunt when I was old enough to walk; I called it Weary Avenue to my mother's amusement. To the left of grandmother's home stood another large stone house on the corner of Tisdale Street. My grandmother rented it to Dr. Bennetto, who had a number of children, two of the boys I knew, although they were my brothers' ages. Being so much younger than my siblings, I was merely acquainted with their friends, some of whom I became attached to, although they must have regarded me with indulgence.

My early childhood friends came from the neighborhood—one older girl in particular from the house next to us on the corner of Erie and Main Streets. Our backyard was separated from its yard by a high board fence, which was just as well because its yard housed Doberman Pinschers, known as fierce dogs who would attack children. Possibly for this reason the children played on the front lawns. The girl next door, Isabelle, must have been given the responsibility of keeping an eye on me for she was a constant companion. At one time, I bolted across the street to hail a tall muscular man wearing a shirt without sleeves and rough trousers. His attraction was a long white beard, which to me proclaimed his identity as Santa Claus. He raised me onto his shoulders and all the children ran along behind for a couple of blocks, all the while Isabelle exclaiming, "He's not Santa Claus!"

One instance with Isabelle stayed in my memory. In my backyard we had a dog kennel into which I would crawl in playing hide and seek. Isabelle took me into it and taking down my trousers pressed her vagina against my penis, which, needless to say, did not respond. I sensed the act was taboo, however, because through a slit in the boards I saw Alec come onto the back porch and gaze in thought over the yard as Isabelle warned me to be silent. In these years I called him Audie, being unable to pronounce stark names, and regarded him as a brother-in-authority, his character being conservative and conscientious on one hand and lighthearted and inquisitive on the other.

My play on the front lawn brought me a memorable moment with my father. He was wearing a dark suit and a dark hat and carrying a cane. He was in a good mood, having had just enough alcohol to be merry, and he called me to him as he walked along the front walk. I ran to him knowing that this strange amorphous presence always at the back of my consciousness had again taken shape and that I belonged to it. Smiling, he reached into his pocket and producing a nickel gave it to me. I, in wonder, ran back to my friends. I believe that was the last time I saw him for some years although he continued to inhabit the house.

At this point I owe the reader a better description of my father. In my early years I knew nothing about him. Much later, after we moved from Main St. East to the west of Hamilton and he had not lived with us for several years, I learned that he had been a lawyer, one of the best in the city. He had gone to Ridley College in St Catharines, Victoria College at the University of Toronto and Osgoode Hall law school. He was tall and handsome and a sportsman. Many years later after my mother died, I saw scores of silver prize cups for tennis and squash belonging to him brought up from the cellar. Apparently he was very good at the net. He loved books. My mother, who blamed herself for not being quick-minded like him and therefore not able to keep up with him [he was nine years older], complained that he would buy sets of the works of authors and not read them. I saw a set of novels by an obscure novelist that looked unread and among my many books I found a John Buchan novel addressed to him from William Southam of the newspaper family, the poems of Horace in Latin, the short stories of Bret Harte and a novel written in underworld slang. [I was told that he liked to mingle in the nether world and would use colorful language on occasion.] He and my mother made a dashing, handsome couple in Hamilton society in the 1920s. They were married during World War I. My father avoided military service; but his younger brother Thomas went to European battlefields with his artillery regiment from Hamilton. A life of partying, betting at the races, vacationing at summer resorts in Muskoka when one had money, good looks and an upper class background must have been the high point of their lives. My mother fell ill early in their marriage; she had a cancerous kidney removed; she blamed herself for not being well enough to accompany him in his amusements and thereby keep him from temptations.

It was the time of prohibition. My father told me when I saw him before he died that he would keep a bottle of whisky in his office desk and bring it out for favored clients, which, he seemed to say, led to his alcoholism. That he was an incurable alcoholic was the family's shame. That he spent money on drink recklessly and helped himself to his clients' money entrusted to him were tragedies. My sister told me that she disliked his bookkeeper, whom she saw when visiting his office after school; she did not trust the woman and blamed her for either keeping the books poorly or fiddling them. Father paid no attention to details. When the 1929 crash came, his clients wanted their money. His mother, who had her own wealth, had to pay many of his obligations but not all. People lost their savings. My sister said that the Gage family,

whose wealth was invested with him, was the most aggrieved and aggressive in court. Worst of all, my father had destroyed the reputation of his dead father's law firm, known for its integrity. When I was in my twenties and vacationing in Muskoka, I encountered an older man from Hamilton at a party who told me that my father was disbarred and added, with a note of sympathy, that he could have been reinstated if he had tried. Disbarred! Small wonder he lost his bearings.

In those days, reputation was extremely important, especially when one was a leading member of society; to avoid notice in the newspapers was paramount. I can see how my father must have suffered, why he turned even more to alcohol and why he mostly used the back door to our house and why I rarely saw him. The Gage family by the way was related to him by way of his maternal grandfather, James Gage Davis, who made a fortune in real estate and built many of the great houses in the east part of Hamilton. The Davis family settled in Hamilton in the 1790s, then called the Head-of-the-Lake, and built the Albion Mills. In the Revolutionary War, when John Graves Simcoe was Colonel of his Loyalist regiment, the Queens, the Davises gave him refuge on their plantation. Mrs. Davis was from the very rich Philippe family who were all loyalists. When the Davis family came to Canada, Simcoe, then Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, sent a gunboat to pick up the family with its servants, slaves and furnishings from Fort Oswego on Lake Ontario and bring them to Niagara. The family intermarried with the Gages, their neighbors in Stoney Creek, and their farmhouse was used as a hospital during the Battle of Stoney Creek in the War of 1812.

My father's relationship with my mother deteriorated. She told me that he had a mistress and once he made her accompany him in her dressing gown in his car at night and dropped her off in a street distant from their house to make her walk home. She was a beautiful, dark haired, soft spoken, gentle lady but strong-minded and insistent that the right thing be done, which may have begun to irritate him, whose character was sinking or rather reverting to an until then genetic trait of insouciance and cruelty. I was told that his grandfather Davis's brothers were gamblers and wastrels, whose predispositions may have been ingrained in him. But there was an even stronger influence of rectitude that he may have been rebelling against—and that was his mother.

Annie Beasley brought the wealth to the family via her father, whose fortune, as I said, was made in real estate when Hamilton grew rapidly in the late 1800s. The Beasley family was well-off in any case. My great-grandfather Thomas Beasley had been city clerk and secretary of the Board of Education for fifty-two years. As Canada's foremost authority on municipal law, he directed much of the city's business and his salary exceeded other positions, including the mayor, by a good deal. He garnered payments not only as city clerk and secretary of the Education Board but as high bailiff, clerk of the court, clerk of police commissioners, registrar of births and deaths and marriages, auditor of criminal justice courts and selector of juries. When his son Alexander married Annie, he and his artistic wife Charlotte moved to the stone house on the corner of Tisdale and Main and relinquished the great stone house and gardens to them. Annie had three sons—my father James Davis Beasley [note the acknowledgement of him who brought in the wealth], Thomas [after the other grandfather] and George [after the brother of Alexander—a promising civil engineer who died in his twenties from typhoid fever which he caught from Alexander]. My father's brother George was very brilliant and expected to make a name for himself, but he drowned at age 14 in the Lake of Bays trying to retrieve a paddle. He was a strong swimmer and must have caught a cramp. [I inherited his stamp collection with some very rare issues]. The tragedy made Annie more protective of her sons. She watched my father from her front window across the street to check on his comings and goings. She suffered strokes from worry and was bedridden when I knew her. My father's disgrace must have devastated her, and, as much as she loved him, she must have been trying to decipher his real character. My father, a self-opinionated and willful fellow, naturally resented her surveillance.

I was taken to the big house across the street and recall the great living room with its Victorian furnishings, the curious room on the second floor with Chinese decor and dark tiles on the walls but the most interesting was the windowed cupola on the roof from which one could see over the city to Burlington Bay and beyond to Lake Ontario. There were telescopes through which one could watch the sailing ships and commercial traffic bringing oil and machinery to the steel companies on the waterfront and nautical charts spread out over tables attached to the walls under the windows. I recall little about the great garden behind the house, but I once crawled into the coach house amidst piles of papers and documents and looked down at a shiny black electric automobile that had stood there unused for decades.

I knew my grandmother's housekeeper Elizabeth, with the soft throaty voice that only the Irish seem to have, and her daughter Margaret who did the cooking. I knew, too, Thomas, the gardener, a lean, muscular man of few words and quick movements. My older siblings must have enjoyed that household before the

troubles landed on the family about the time I was born. My brother Jim was spoiled, fussed over by the household of my grandmother's house but treated badly by my father when he returned to our home across the street, which, my mother said, confused him. She was too timid in the early days of her marriage to save Jim from punishment. Jim, who was 15 years my senior, featured less in my young life than Ann and Alec. He boarded at the private school Ridley, where my father had been a pupil, but did not do well at school, which irritated my father; Ann went to Strathallen, a private girls' school and Alec to Hillfield, a private boys' school, until the sudden fall in finances when Ann and Alec transferred to public schools.

Jim's school friends used to visit our home and they fraternized with me. His best friend, Bob Edgar, I considered close like another brother. He rough-housed with me and told me stories and gave me a gun holster with the bottom shot out, which happened, he said, when his uncle had to defend himself quickly in a barroom showdown. Bob had a beautiful tenor voice, and I once heard a record of him singing Stephen Foster's "Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair" with such emotion that it stayed with me all my life. At the age of three or so when I was still moving about on a little three-wheeled scooter, I set off to see my maternal grandmother, who was bedridden with Parkinson's disease in St. Peter's Infirmary, several blocks away on Main Street. A hue and cry was raised when I was discovered to be missing. I was within a block of my goal when I saw Bob Edgar standing on the running board of a car speeding toward me and waving.

One summer when we were living in our summer home in Burlington, Jim and his girlfriend Jean, who lived in Burlington, took me to an itinerant circus tented on grounds near the waterfront. I was about six years old and fascinated by the lions in cages, the majestic elephants and the clowns, who raced about in little cars. Jean held me on her lap and I sensed the attractive warmth of a young woman.

My sister Ann's friends I knew as teen-age girls rushing about or playing bridge in our house. Ann seemed to be on the telephone, a wall phone in those days, or rushing to keep an appointment as one of her friends honked a car horn for her to hurry up. When Ann rushed back in the house to pick up what she had forgotten, my mother made her sit and count to ten for good luck. She was the hardest hit by my father's fall from grace and had nothing to do with him thereafter; she was socially conscious and correct as was my brother Alec to a lesser extent. Ann took some care of me when I was a toddler as my mother was too busy doing household chores. She liked to slick my hair back and make me look clean and tidy.

Mother suffered most from my father's downfall. Former friends cut her in the street. Gossip criticized her; many blamed her for separating from my father because he seemed such a genial fellow with immense charm and sophistication; she lacked the money to circulate in her old society in any case; so for a long time she saw just a few old faithful friends.

I had the habit of banging my back rhythmically against a chair back for fifty or more times. I recall being at the home of Jessie Clarke, one of mother's friends [she had the distinction of having Cole Porter as a school mate] whose daughters looking after me panicked and hurried to find mother, who calmed them by explaining I did that often. I suppose today a psychiatrist would say it was a symptom of suffering from inattention. Also, I stuttered sometimes, not always, but usually when I was thrust into everyone's attention; later, when I answered questions in a classroom or spoke over the telephone to someone I did not know, I suffered from the embarrassment of a stammer. I suppose when I was in the womb I picked up some of my mother's fear and anxiety.