

**WAS THE WESTERN WORLD'S MOST PROLIFIC
SERIAL KILLER A WOMAN?**

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I'm old. Not *really* old but old enough that young people look through me – as if I were empty space. I don't like it but I know why, it's because if they really did *see* me they'd see another human being really looking back at them and it might then occur to them that they are looking at themselves forty or fifty years down the road. More terrifying is that if they truly did look closely they'd see how time is eating my skin.

The rumor that we are all going to die has been going around for awhile now. Everyone has heard it. It's just that, despite all the graveyards in all the towns that are, no one believes it; everyone thinks an exception will be made in their case. I know that one; One Upon A Time I believed it, too.

Still, I'm old enough to have been part of the 60s. I remember the day JFK was shot and unlike those in their twenties, for me John Lennon has not always been dead. I remember hearing Martin Luther King, Jr speak (on television) and how much I believed in Bobby Kennedy after the poem he read the day he heard that King had been killed. Those of us who are old are a kind of time machine. We carry inside us fragments of the past, still living, still real. But we are also your future, in us you see what you will become.

I remember, too, the memories of my great-grandparents who had been born in the 1870s and 1880s. I remember their memories of people (and their stories) who'd been born in the 1830s. Their relatives had lived through, and still remembered, the Civil War. Some of them had

been abolitionists, some had not. And some of *their* relatives had died in that conflict. My great-grandparents grew up with kerosene lamps and horses and buggies. They remembered when the railroad first came to town, the first telegraph, the first phone, the first automobiles, the first world war, the depression, the second world war, nuclear bombs, the first televisions, and men on the moon. Those memories lived inside them and expressed themselves in their stories, even in the way they moved their bodies. Some remnant of nineteenth-century life filled the air around them. As they held me, as I breathed, some of those remnants came to live inside me as well. It's a natural thing, this passing down through generations memories of what life was like Once Upon A Time. And as was true of my great-grandparents, I carry inside me memories of what to this era is old time and old way.

I was born in Kentucky in 1952, then a legally segregated state. I remember the civil rights marches, the outrageousness of our home town Cassius Clay, his brilliant language, his refusal to shut up, his startling transformation into who he was meant to be, into Mohammed Ali.

I remember Harry Truman and President Eisenhower. I remember the earliest televisions and the hours sitting in front of the test pattern on the screen, waiting until Howdy Doody came on. I remember telephone party lines, a time when there were so few telephone numbers that two or four or even eight neighbors had to share one. I remember the first computers, the first video games, the first portable phones and how big they were. And I remember, too, the last time the ideological left got out of hand. The 60s were not all peace, love, rock and roll, sexual freedom, and mind-expanding drugs. I remember the bombs and the kidnappings, the bank robberies and the Manson family. And I remember the first time I heard the term patriarchy, was told that men were inherently violent, that every man was at core, a rapist, that there was something inherently

wrong with me because I was male. I remember the earnest, fanatical look on that woman's face as she drove home the foundational truth which she believed to be true, that all the troubles in the world were because of men. And I remember the article I read not long ago that insisted that all serial killers were and always would be men, for that kind of violence was inherent in their genome, the desire to kill and kill and kill.

Despite a multitude of experiences in early life, some of this I came to believe. I began to think that perhaps some of the activists were right, that if women were in charge the world would be a kinder place, that they really were inherently more nurturing, less inclined to violence. But that was before life had its way with me, before decades of experience made plain that people are much more complex than those simple beliefs recognize.

I've seen a lot of things. Because of that it's been a long time since I believed that all women were angels and all men were not. It's been a long time since I believed that good people never go off the rails from time to time. A long time since I believed that being victimized conveyed any kind of moral superiority on anyone. But that recent article really bothered me. So I just sat down and wrote this.

Just to let you know, it's kind of freaky.

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It was in late December of 1610, that three Hungarian nobles, a squire, and a party of armed men entered the manor house of Csejthe Castle where they interrupted Countess Erzsebet Bathory at dinner. While a few of the guards

detained the Countess, the prime minister of Hungary Gyorgy Thurzo, the countess's sons-in-law Miklos Zrinyi and Gyorgy Drugeth de Homonnay, the squire Imre Megyeri, and the remaining guards began to search the castle. What they found shocked the men hardened as they were by decades of war: scores of young women, many dead, some still undergoing torture, a few still alive but most horribly damaged. The investigation and trial that followed found that perhaps as many as 650 young girls had been killed, most by torture so brutal it was considered barbaric even by the standards of the time.

Despite my later beliefs about women, my early experiences were mixed. My mother was tremendously unkind but my paternal grandmother wasn't so I thought perhaps my mother was an exception. In grade school though the girls were sometimes just as vicious as the boys, they were just cleverer about it. In high school however their brutality became more pronounced: I saw shy girls terribly shamed (the ketchup-stained kotex on the desk is a classic), clique sniping reduced others to tears, and there was once a terrific hair-pulling fight over a boyfriend in the hall. (I, meanwhile, was learning the manly art of self-taught fisticuffs during PE and generally coming off the worse for it.)

Like many of the wealthy nobles of the time Erzsebet Bathory took pre-adolescent girls into her service from the villages on her family estates, promising their parents they would be trained as cooks or chambermaids perhaps. In Hungary, as was true until 1848, peasants and their children were legally chattel and

possessed no civil rights, were not considered to be human in any meaningful sense. The first sealed coffins began to dribble out of the castle in 1585. By 1600 they were a daily sight. The countess's insistence on cholera as a cause was no longer believed by the clergy. Rumors, increasing in number and scope as the years passed, told of secret torture chambers within the castle. It was said that the screams sometimes lasted for days.

Later in life I entered group psychotherapy and began to notice that a substantial number of the people in my group had been abused by their mothers. There was the woman who as a child had been thrown off a second floor balcony by her mother because she wouldn't stop crying. The man whose mother had regularly beaten him as a child for "playing with himself." The woman who, as a teenager, had been given by her mother to a series of boyfriends for "casual sex." The man who'd been forced every day after school to cover his obese mother in saran wrap then roll her body with a rolling pin to "make the fat go away." The woman who as a young adolescent was beaten when she first began to menstruate for "being dirty." There were reports by others of course about abusive fathers, stories often as terrible as these. But there weren't nearly so many. And maybe this is only representative of my experience, perhaps in other groups it's mostly men who do these things, I don't know. But sometimes I wonder if maybe the tendency for uncontrolled violent rage is just a part of the complex fabric of what human beings are.

By 1609 the rumors of torture, the numbers of disappeared girls, some of them by now the children of nobles, had reached the ears of Gyorgy Thurzo the newly

appointed Palatine (prime minister) of Hungary. They were heard as well as Matyas II (1557-1619), King of Hungary and Croatia (and soon to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor). The reports were so disturbing, especially the acts against daughters of the nobility, that Matyas demanded a formal investigation; it began in February of 1610. One of those questioned told how the wide fire iron was heated and the girls arms were “burned to smoke and ash. The smaller, round fire iron was also heated until very hot and – on my Honor! – shoved into their vaginas.”

Another told of seeing two girls shackled by a creek “who were cruelly shattered and covered with bleeding wounds.” Townspeople told of one girl who escaped with a knife still piercing her foot. Another witness reported seeing up to 175 coffins leaving the castle, another that two or three hundred girls had been killed. The breaking point for the villagers seemed to come when lazy servants dumped four bodies over the castle wall, assuming perhaps that wildlife would dispose of them. Instead the villagers reported it to the investigators. The investigation went on, and the evidence, as did the bodies, continued to mount. Three hundred and six depositions were ultimately taken over the years 1610-11, all contained similar testimony. The countess and four of her accomplices were arrested (the fifth had died the year before). And the questioning began in earnest.

It seems to me now that too much of our current conversation about women and men assumes that there are two species of *Homo sapiens*, not just one. Forgotten is the understanding that split-

gender physiology, something intended to stimulate healthy genome blending, is an evolutionary innovation of extremely long standing. The important recognition that we receive half our genome from our mothers and half from our fathers appears to have been lost. Nowhere is it acknowledged that the female *and* the male live within each of us. The genome of the father and his father before him and so on to the beginning live in every woman as does the genome of the mother in every man. And it seems to me that the elevation of the female to angelic heights and the lowering of the male to toxic depths indicates not only a self-hatred of one half of ourselves but a denial of the complexity of the other, something which is itself a brutality.

During questioning, Erzsebet's four servant-accomplices, three women and one man (the deceased accomplice, reportedly the most extreme, was also a woman), described in detail how they obtained the young girls, why, and how they were tortured and killed. The servants traveled widely, as far as Vienna on occasion, and returned with girls who were promised employment in the castle. Local women, often in exchange for "finder's fees," helped procure the girls, sometimes surrendering their own daughters. The original court documents reveal that during torture "their arms were bound with Viennese cord. Anna Darvolia tied their hands backwards. The hands turned deathly pale and they were whipped until their bodies burst. They were beaten on the flat of the hands and the soles of the feet, as many as 500 strikes in a row. . . . Dorka [then] cut off their hands with scissors [lopping shears]. . . . She herself [the Countess] stabbed them with needles if their needlework wasn't done well. If they didn't take off their hair

covering, if they did not start the fire, if they did not lay the apron straight: they were immediately taken to the torture chamber . . . and tortured to death. The old women burned them with the fire iron and she herself stuck pins into the mouth, the nose, and the chin of the girls. She stuck her fingers in the mouth and tore it apart. . . . They were taken to be tortured even ten times in a day like sheep.”

That we are one species is a factual, not culturally-determined, truth. Each of us has within us the attributes of both male and female. Men are often kind, nurturing, caretakers who bring out the best in others, in their children, and in themselves. In age they may take on the best attributes of those who are our elders, becoming beloved patriarchs, just as women often do, becoming beloved matriarchs. And just as men can become brutal, so also can women. For all of us are members of a species which is not only many times cooperative but is at the same time one of the most successful predators on this planet. There is a reason why *Homo sapiens* is not (yet) an endangered species; it's not just men who eat meat or drive SUVs or use computers . . . or turn on their own kind.

“Screaming now the girl huddled on her knees, begging and crying, while the Countess retrieved a dagger. ‘She is so clumsy with her hands,’ the Countess went on, ‘she can’t do anything right at all.’ The lady grabbed first the right hand of the girl and stuck the blade into each of her fingers, one at a time. ‘She can’t seem – to – use – her – fingers – properly!’ [With another girl] The Countess held either an iron bar or a heavy cudgel in her hands . . . ‘Hold out your hands,’ she

commanded. Wincing the girl obeyed, only to have the hand struck hard. . . . Eventually the hands and fingernails would be smashed and beaten repeatedly until they became swollen, infected, and broken". The servants also told how they either helped or themselves committed acts which involved: forcing the girls to roll naked in nettles, sticking pins under fingernails, repeatedly flogging their breasts, chaining them in various positions for extended periods, burning their bodies with hot irons, ripping chunks of skin from their backs and arms with tongs, clamping their mouths shut, cutting flesh from thicker parts of their bodies, then cooking and forcing them to eat it, crushing their hands, maiming their feet, cutting or ripping off their fingers, whipping them until the flesh fell from their bones, and even times when the Countess attacked the children in a rage, biting the flesh from their faces and arms.

As I have read more extensively during my life, I've continued to stumble on accounts similar to that of Countess Bathory. They are not widely known. I first heard of her in one of the mystery writer Thomas Cook's lyric novels. It has remained indelibly in my mind and emerges over the years, often at the most inopportune times.

The Countess's servants were executed, most in a manner similar to the girls they killed. Estimates of the numbers of children killed run from a low of 200 to as many as 650. The king himself, in a letter from January 14, 1611, wrote that the investigation indicated that "more than 300 innocent virgins and women, of both noble and lower levels," had been tortured to death. The actual count may never be known. Still, testimony at the time, indicated that a full list of the

victims, numbering 650 in all and signed by Countess's own hand existed. It is reported to still exist somewhere in the Hungarian national archives.

The Countess, for political reasons, was not executed but rather walled up in a tower in her castle with only a small aperture remaining unsealed. Through this she was fed and from it handed out her wastes. She died not many years afterwards.

As seems often true with this kind of thing, it was determined that what had happened must remain secret to protect the reputations of the powerful. The trial transcripts were sealed, her name, by royal proclamation not to be spoken. And over time, as generations died, her crimes were forgotten. It was only when the records were discovered by a researcher in the early 1800s, and a book published (1817), that the story once more came to light.

I have often wondered how Erzsebet was able to get away with her killings for so long. The reasons, it turns out, are instructive for our time: the common tendency for people to turn a blind eye to evil, her enormous power and political connections (her extended family were either married to or were themselves politically powerful; including a king and ambassador to the Pope), she controlled one of the largest fortunes and estate holdings of the time (rivaling, by some accounts, those of the royal families of Europe); she was (for any time) extraordinarily intelligent, socially and politically shrewd, and well educated; she was socially adept, to the outside world she seemed kind and empathically present; and the poor, as mentioned, were considered to be chattel without any vestige of civil rights (this because of a historically recent peasant uprising that nearly unseated the nobility). Finally, no one at the time believed a woman could, or would, engage in such behavior.

On Erzsebet's wedding day her husband Count Ferenc Nadasdy gifted her with Castle

Csejthe, one of the many castles he owned, as well as the 17 villages it controlled. Their combined estate extended over thousands of hectares, included 20 castles, and as many as forty villages. In 1604, on a single shopping spree Erzsebet spent 2942 Venetian ducats, a sum worth approximately \$530,000 in today's money simply from the gold they contained, their actual spending power has been estimated to be several millions. In comparison, a senior government official generally had an income of 150 silver at the time, around 50 ducats.

Erzsebet's education was as formidable as her wealth. Progressively for the time, she was educated similarly to many male children of the nobility. Not only did she achieve mastery of fencing and horsemanship, she became fluent in Hungarian, Greek, Latin, German, and Slovakian, and studied as well the ancient Greek and Roman classics, including logic, mathematics, history, astronomy, botany, biology, and anatomy. Her library was extensive and contained works by all the leading thinkers of the day, from Galileo to Shakespeare. Unlike most nobles of the time she also learned to write fluently as her extensive correspondence, much of which remains, attests. She used this vast education, her extensive contacts, and intelligence to mislead early investigators and to convince the powerful of her innocence, to convince them to, as well, put forward their efforts on her behalf. No member of the nobility, especially not a woman, could, she insisted, be guilty of such heinous crimes.

The Countess's time was also one of frequent military invasions from the Ottoman empire, one of them reaching as far as the city of Vienna. The religious wars between Protestant and Catholic were about to begin, social divisions were extreme, neither side able to see the humanity in their opponents. This precarious political climate engendered a tremendous fear of the *other* and normal rules of conduct were abandoned, as they often are, when it occurs.

History is clear on this. When extreme wealth disparity is the norm, elite education combines with political power, the poor are considered of less value, social divisions are extreme, and fear of violence from an outside other reduces civil rights beyond a certain point, the worst in us emerges unrestrained. And it happens not only among the rich but among everyone. Mobs form, social order begins to break down, violence escalates, the most brutal of human tendencies gain dominance. And gender has nothing at all to do with it.

(The information in this article has been taken almost exclusively from the extensive work of attorney Kimberly Craft who, over a number of years, has unearthed and transcribed the written records from Hungarian, explored in her book *the Infamous Lady: The True Story of Countess Erzsebet Bathory*, 2014.)