False Memory Syndrome

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

You have to understand why I did it. I had suffered more than anybody I know. Even if I had not been convicted, the shame of it would have been enough to ruin my life. It did ruin my life. I was accused of molesting my own daughter. Who could imagine such a thing.

All of the accusations were based on “recovered memory”. Have you heard of that?

It works like this: My daughter lies on a couch and some shrink he puts her into a kind of trance, and then he has her spout forth the most disgusting lies. Lies about me. About me and her.

I read all about it in prison. I joined the “False Memory Syndrome Foundation” (FMSF). They say: “*Some of our memories are true, some are a mixture of fact and fantasy, and some are false -- whether those memories seem to be continuous or seem to be recalled after a time of being forgotten or not thought about*”. The guys at FMSF talk about “memory illusions”. These are crazy ideas that can be inserted into the minds of troubled people. That is what happened with my daughter, but nobody was prepared to believe me, not even my wife. She divorced me the day I went to prison.

I find it hard to blame her. She felt that she had to believe our daughter. Parents are supposed to support their children. And if you were to accept that there was any truth to these allegations, you would be horrified. There was a whole system telling my wife that these lies were true. She treated me like a monster. All our years of marriage counted for nothing.

It seemed as if these false memories were behind everything bad that had happened to me. These false memories had destroyed my life.

My ex-wife and my daughter seemed lost to me, but I still had my son Alan. He visited me and did his best to support me emotionally. He never said whether he believed the allegations or not, he was just there for me because nobody else was. Nobody, because that is who stands beside an alleged paedophile. That was who I was said to be.

How could I ever consider doing any harm to my son Alan? That was not my intention. It was just that I needed to prove that false memories can be created from nothing, and he was willing to help me with that. His own mother would believe it if she saw somebody close to her recover memories that were clearly false.

As I said, it did not matter whether Alan believed what I was telling him about “memory illusions”. He wanted to help as his support for me.

We needed to come up with memories that were so far from reality that we could prove how powerful they could be – we could prove that they could dominate logic. Maybe it was Alan who came up with the idea? Anyway, it was the fabrication of a memory of being transgender from a young age. It seemed a serious but a harmless thing. FMSF had somebody who could show how it was done.

To anybody who knew Alan, the idea that he would suddenly remember that he was not really the handsome virile young freshman that he appeared to be, would be ridiculous. If these memories could be successfully fabricated and inserted, then we might be able to use this to get me a retrial with the recovered memory evidence excluded.

He had to go out of state to meet the guy, so I knew that it would be some time before he could come in to see me, but we stayed in touch through emails. I had limited and monitored access to emails – the prison authorities said that they were concerned I might be accessing child porn. That was my life, you see.

The guy he visited was a Dr. Herenton. He has written about false memories and withstood some criticism in the psychologist community for doing so. He was available to FMSF to give evidence for their members, but that was too late for me.

Alan went to visit him as arranged, and I paid for three consultations. The idea was that Alan would go his see his mother and explain to her how memories had been fabricated in his mind. We would then get her on side and even without my daughter recanting we could have my whole case reviewed with expert evidence now called.

When Alan emailed me that he was coming to visit me with some startling news, I was excited. I hurried down to the gallery, but even though he had been to see me only a few weeks before, at first, I did not recognize the person on the other side of the glass.

It was the face of my son, but with painted eyes and lips and with his fair hair all styled as a woman would. The face was smiling at me. I was not.

“Daddy, I can see you are upset, but you need to understand that this is the real me.”

Daddy? Alan would never call me Daddy. Who was this person speaking with that effected squeaky voice?

“Alan, no,” I said. “This is not you. This is an idea planted in your head. You are not transgendered. This is a memory illusion, just like we talked about.”

“I know what you think, Daddy, but all those memories were real,” he said to me with an imploring look. “When he talked about it with me, I realized that it was true. I really had spent my childhood dreaming of being a girl.”

“It is not true, Alan,” I said, becoming increasingly exasperated. “Just as everything your sister said about me is not true. These are ideas put into your head. God knows I am grateful for you offering to help, but the idea was just to show how easily it could be done. How easy it was to create false memories. But they are false. You need to go back to the guy who did this and get him to undo it. Maybe we just need to show what he has been able to do, but then we need to get you back.”

“I have been to see Dr. Herenton, Daddy,” Alan said. “He insisted that I do. He is on your side. But you can’t take away memories if they are real. My memories are. Dreaming of being a princess and walking down the aisle in a wedding dress. That is how my childhood was. I was a girl in the body of a boy. I understand that now.”

I was horrified. This was a nightmare. After that, it seemed like the happy words coming out of the mouth of this creature were meaningless. I needed it to end so that I could call this guy – this so-called specialist.

“What have you done”” I shouted down the phone.

“Yes, I introduced the idea to him, as we agreed,” Herenton said. “It took hold, and … well, you have to prepare yourself for the possibility that these memories might in fact be real. In the past, suggestions can be undone, but that is not the case here. Perhaps these memories are real, and just repressed?”

“You’re crazy,” I snapped at him. “Do you think I don’t know my own son?”

“Do you know your own daughter?” That was what he said. What the hell did he mean by that? Did I know my daughter? Not in the biblical way, you prick! I hung up on him.

The guard warned me about abusing the phone. I had to beg to be allowed to make another call. I called FMSF.

“Herenton is our best man,” the guy said. “He is a trained psychologist and a victim himself. He has done this before once or twice, and my understanding is that he has always been able to undo it.”

“He is now telling me that these memories might be real,” I said. “Can this guy tell the difference between what is a real memory and what is not?”

“That is the problem we deal with every day,” he said.

No satisfaction there either. I spent a week with my mind on fire. Prison makes every problem much bigger. If something in on your mind, without anything else to think about, it is all that is on your mind. It eats you up.

In prison your life is shit. Can in get any worse? Yes, it can.

Alan reappeared for his scheduled visit. He was wearing a dress! The dress was short enough to reveal quite shapely shaved legs and painted toenails poking through wedge-heeled sandals.

“You need to call me Alana,” he said. “That is who I am now.”

I was done. I just sat there looking at him. But he was here. My only visitor. The only person in the world who cared about me. The only person who loved me.

“I am on hormones now,” he said. “I will see a specialist therapist next week to arrange for my orchidectomy. I am so excited. At last I am going to be the woman I dreamed that I would be, all those years ago.”

“We need to get you help,” I said. I was getting desperate. I knew what an orchidectomy was. After that it would be too late. The walls of a prison become all the more real when you understand that there is nothing you can do except watch the world crash and burn.

“That is the help I need,” he said. “I need to get rid of my male bits. I hate them. I want to have a vagina just like my sister.

His sister. I had forgotten about her with all that had happened. I suddenly found myself looking at “Alana” in a very different way. I was imagining how her body might look with a little vagina nestled between her thighs. I suddenly realized that she was going to be a very pretty. Prettier than her sister. Suddenly I was excited by the thought.

The End

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Author’s Note: I know, an unsettling story. But FYI: The False Memory Syndrome Foundation is a real thing! The quote is straight out of their stuff!