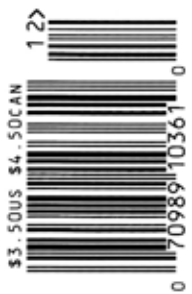


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WINTER
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MOTHERS HOODS



Robbie Dillon's mother did pretty much everything right and his brother did pretty much everything wrong

A Memoir By Robbie Dillon

One night when I was in my early teens, my best friend, Hank, and I spent several hours trying to hammer open a large, antique safe in the manager's office of the local Woolworths. I did most of the actual hammering while my so-called accomplice covered the walls in magic-marked obscenities and thought up other innovative ways to vandalize the modest workspace. He had just finished urinating into the drawer of a filing cabinet when the first rays of dawn broke through the window, sending a chill of apprehension up my back. I grabbed my smokes and scanned the calendar inside the pack, my discomfort growing as I came to a disturbing realization. I turned to Hank, who was now place-kicking the manager's potted plants through an open doorway, and asked him if he knew what day it was. "Don't worry," he said, deftly missing my point and then, as a begonia shattered on the door frame, his own. "It's Sunday. We can stay here all day if we have to. Hey, check out these fuckin' cactuses!"

"It's cacti, you moron. And today is Mother's Day."

"So this lousy box is locked up tighter than a nun's ass, and to tell you the truth, I'd rather eat broken glass than get busted today. I'm going home."

I threw my tools into a gym bag and prepared to squeeze back into the air vent through which we had entered. Hank scrambled to catch up, his scurrilous protests echoing off the tin walls as we climbed toward the roof. The twisted roots of my relationship with Mother's Day, not to mention my mother, can be traced back to the earliest days of my childhood in Montreal. As a young boy, I once launched the old girl into hysterics with what I considered to be a rather astute philosophical observation.

"Why is it," I asked, embracing the egalitarian spirit of the times, "that there's a Mother's Day and a Father's Day, but there's no Kids' Day?"

My mother, who had been picking my dirty clothes off the floor while I lay on my bed reading comics, weighed this query with all the thoughtful contemplation of Socrates removing a red-hot lump of coal from his toga. "Kids' Day?" she shrieked. "You want to know when Kids' Day is? Kid's Day is every goddamn day that I work my ass off to put food in your ungrateful mouth. Now, what I want to know is who signed me up for this mother crap, because I don't remember filling out the application.

"In fact," she said, while hurling an armful of my socks and underwear out the window of our third-floor apartment, "I just quit. Do your own goddamn laundry."

Things did not improve the night my mother received the first of many phone calls from the police. I was under arrest, at the age of 11, for spitting on a policeman who had ordered me out of a tree that I'd been climbing. It was a typical first-time bust: a burly cop shooting me ominous, you're-in-big-trouble-now looks as we rode to the station, and a couple of hours in a grimy cell where I tried to scrape my initials into the wall with the tips of my shoelaces.

After that, it was upstairs for a lecture that I had been hearing in one form or another since the second grade. None of it really bothered me. The cells, the handcuffs – they were all part of growing up, a neat adventure that I would brag to my friends about the next day.

Until my mother came to pick me up. I had been expecting the look of shattered disappointment that crossed her face as I was escorted into the lobby of the station. But as I prepared to spiel into a well-rehearsed defence of my behaviour, my mother, never one to let the calendar get in the way of a good guilt trip, caught me with an unexpected low blow. "Well, isn't this a lovely present," she said, her lower lip beginning to tremble. "Thirteen days before Mother's Day and where am I? Picking up my eldest son in a goddamn police station. Thank you very, very much."

"Don't blame me," I mumbled. "I didn't tell you to have kids."

The Cells, the Handcuffs – They were all part of growing up, a neat adventure that I would brag to my friends about the next day

"No," she admitted. "That's one thing your asshole father and I managed to screw up all by ourselves."

My mother was 16 the night my father walked into the local blind pig and saw her sitting alone at a table. It was 1960. She had her hair cut long and straight, and her jeans were so tight that her girlfriend had to help her zip them up. He asked if he could buy her a drink, and she said sure. They talked until 6:30 in the morning, the old man paying for round after round, and then when he tried to coax her into leaving with him, my mother confided that, actually, she was waiting for her boyfriend – the waiter who had been serving them all night.

A few days later, my father was walking through the park, eating an ice cream cone, when he spotted my mother sitting with a group of friends on a nearby bench. He walked over and told her that, in his opinion, what she had done was "not very nice."

My mother, not unaware that she was the centre of attention, snapped her gum and cracked, "Well, them's the breaks, babe." My father dumped his ice cream cone on her head.

My mother always smiles nostalgically as she tells this story. When she gets to the punchline, she raises her eyebrows and twists her mouth into an ironic "what can you do?" type of grin. "I watched him walking away," she says, "with all these goddamn tears and ice cream streaming down my face. And that's when I knew I was in love."

Six months later, she was knocked up. My parents were married, at my grandmother's insistence, a week before I was born because "it was the right thing to do." They moved into a small apartment in Notre-Dame-de-Grace, a neighbourhood in Montreal's west end. My parents had both grown up in NDG, and the predominantly Scots-Irish enclave was a desirable location for young, working-class families. The area's tree-lined streets and single-family homes were considered a step above the red-brick tenements of Point St-Charles and Verdun, if still a far cry from the affluence of nearby Westmount.

The French "fact" was little more than a rumour at the time. It was still common for people like my parents to live and work all over the western half of the city without ever learning a word of French. English Montrealers – not yet known as Anglos – stuck to their neighborhoods and rarely ventured east of the downtown Hudson's Bay department store.

My father went to work in a garage. He hated the place but told himself he wouldn't be there for very long. My mother soon gave birth to my sister, Cassie, and within a few months was pregnant with my younger brother, Ricky. My father, who had just turned 24, felt the walls closing in and took off on a cross-country bank-robbing spree. He filed for divorce while serving a five-year bit in Kingston pen. It probably wasn't the first time that someone had escaped into jail.

My mother was barely out of her teens and raising three kids at a time when it was tough for a single woman to rent an apartment without a man's signature to guarantee the lease. The best job she could find was waiting tables in a deli. She hustled tips six nights a week and served us leftover blintzes and latkes for breakfast.

My mother pleaded, threatened, cajoled, punished & even resorted to bribes in her attempts to guide us back to the straight and narrow. NOTHING WORKED

In the late '70s and early '80s, Montreal was the bank robbery capital of North America, thanks in no small part to the tireless efforts of my brother and his friends. They were a loosely knit gang of about 20 kids, and it was not unusual for them to hit as many as four banks in one day. This isn't as dramatic as it sounds. It was well known on the street that the banks' policy was to offer no resistance to any robber, armed or otherwise. In some cases, getting the cash was simply a matter of walking up to the teller and handing her a note. Most of the time, a team of three or four kids, armed with handguns or realistic-looking replicas, would work together on a score. One would stand inside the door blocking the exit and yell "This is a holdup!" while one or two others jumped the tills and scooped up as much cash as possible in the allotted two minutes. A final accomplice either drove or, more often, kept a taxi waiting around the corner.

The banks weren't stupid. They began keeping less and less cash in the drawers and started locking the hundreds and fifties in time-delayed safes under the counters. Still, a well-turned score could pull in anywhere from \$2,000 to \$3,000, not bad for kids whose major expense was slabs of Nepalese hashish. The money went up in smoke as quickly as they stole it.

My mother pleaded, threatened, cajoled, punished and even resorted to bribes in her attempts to guide us back to the straight and narrow. Nothing worked. In desperation, she began to offer nuggets of street-smart advice gleaned from prime-time TV. "Don't do the crime," she would scold, citing the theme of a popular detective show, "if you can't do the time." But time wasn't really a factor. The juvenile justice system, staggered by revelations of negligence and abuse, did pirouettes to ensure that we were treated humanely. A typical "sentence" for multiple counts of armed robbery amounted to three weeks of playing basketball in a newly constructed youth centre. When longer terms were handed down, escape was usually a question of climbing a fence and outrunning a couple of earnest but unarmed social worker types.

It wasn't all fun and games. My brother and I were regularly beaten by policemen who were more than twice our size. The strain of being repeatedly embarrassed – not to mention scared shitless – by a handful of teenage punks pushed more than a few of them over the edge. Once, only a few weeks after a friend had been shot and killed during a robbery, I was arrested and taken down to the station. On my way to the cells, I caught a glimpse of the squad room chalkboard: someone had drawn a cartoon image of a grave with my name and the inscription RIP on the tombstone.

My mother describes her life during this time as "pretty close to hell." My brother and I were blamed – sometimes mistakenly – for every break-in, robbery and mysterious explosion in the neighbourhood. Our housing

Hoping to improve her prospects, she went back to school part time and, course by painstaking course, scraped her way through her high school diploma and finished a degree in accounting. She believed that by setting the right example she could teach her children the value of education.

It was a lesson that didn't take. I was as stubborn as my mother, but pointed in the wrong direction. High school was a dreary hellhole that I endured by getting wasted at every opportunity and counting the check-board tiles that covered the floors of my classrooms. I hung around until Grade 10, but my recollections are a nauseating swirl of detentions, visits to the nurse and bemused shop teachers refusing to let me anywhere near the band saw.

Within a few years of that first arrest, I had run up a sheet that was a mish-mash of vandalism, burglary, assault, extortion and armed robbery. I skipped school, took all kinds of drugs and made regular appearances in juvenile court. I wasn't the kid who fell in with the wrong crowd; I was the bad influence that parents ordered their children to avoid.

My younger brother turned out even worse than I did, though mentioning this was not the best way to get on my mother's good side. By the time he hit puberty, the baby of our family was an accomplished stick-up artist.

project neighbours hated or feared us; some of them started petitions to have us evicted. The drunks and welfare cases were among the first to sign, eagerly agreeing that "those Dillon kids" were the reason the area was rapidly going downhill.

Home provided little refuge. The cops tramped in and out of our apartment as if it were the local doughnut shop. On more than one occasion, my mother came home to find detectives digging through her underwear in a fruitless – and warrantless – search for weapons and stolen goods.

And then there were the sleepless nights, the pre-dawn phone calls from the police. Anger and frustration at the news of our arrests quickly dissolved into relief that we weren't lying in a drawer.

"I don't know what I did to deserve kids like you," my mother would say, ignoring the accomplishments of our sister, a straight-A student and Girl Guide leader, "but whatever it was, it must have been very, very bad."

What was I supposed to say? My brother and I had raised so much hell that people thought there were five of us. Our mother seemed to believe that we were a pair of rotten eggs delivered by a vengeful karmic Easter Bunny, and I wasn't going to argue. It was as useful as any other theory I'd heard.

"It hasn't been easy," I'd moan, reciting my well-worn mantra to a string of court-appointed do-gooders. "You know, my parents are divorced." They nodded sympathetically as I fed them bullshit straight from the textbooks we had both been reading.

Our neighbourhood was a social worker's wet dream: tragic stereotypes on every corner, and oodles of broken homes just aching to be fixed, all of them headed by single mothers – desperate, helpless women who had been beaten down by social and economic stigma.

The caricatures had a tinge of truth. Some of my friends' mothers were pale, listless figures who spent days cooped up in their bedrooms, nursing hangovers or battling depression. Others were skanky bottle blondes who shooed their kids from the house whenever one of their "uncles" dropped by for a visit. The only problem was that, in many cases, these women's kids were sweeter than cotton candy. They weren't, as we were frequently reminded, driving their mother to a goddamn nervous breakdown.

Our mother, on the other hand, rarely dated and never allowed any man to sleep in our house. Concerned by what she had read about the effects of single parenthood, she overcompensated, volunteering at our schools and taking time off work to chaperone class field trips. She signed us up for Cubs, coached the girls' softball team and organized raffles and rummage sales. She borrowed money to buy us hockey equipment and cheered so loudly and persistently at our games that we were embarrassed and asked her to stop. She even dragged us to church on Sundays for religious education, an inadvertent source of amusement. Arrest reports at the time included a space for the religion of the offender. I always insisted on recording my affiliation and watched the cops struggle to spell Presbyterian.

The only thing she couldn't do was cook. Our tortured palates welcomed the chance to share her latest concoction with our friends. "Here ya go," one of us would say, scooping a mound of greasy hamburger and macaroni onto an unsuspecting plate. "Try some of this Dillon's Special Goulash. Good, eh? There's lots more if you want."

When I started to write this piece, I thought that the process would lead me to some answers. I was hoping to find a moment or series of events that I could point to and say: "There. That was the turning point. If such-and-such had never happened, my brother and I would not have turned out the way we did. If we had only had a little more of this, or somewhat less of that, we might have become bankers or lawyers. We might have even taken up respectable professions."

Anger and frustration at the news of our arrests quickly dissolved into relief that we weren't lying in a drawer

My mother continues to torment herself with the same type of question. She plays scenarios over in her mind, wondering what would have happened if she had been nicer, or tougher or spent more time at home baking cookies. I have very few regrets, but some of the bleakest involve this ugly sack of doubt and guilt my mother has been forced to lug around. I would have liked to lighten the load, but in the end, I'll have to settle for a deeper understanding of her burden.

My family doesn't sit around and chat about the old days – too many painful pauses in the conversation. On rare occasions, though, my brother and I will crack each other up remembering some bungled caper from the past. If our mother is in the room, she'll sit quietly, biting her lip until she just can't take it any more. "You think this is funny?" she'll ask. "You little bastards nearly killed me with your crap."

"Just wait," she says, "until you have kids of your own."

That isn't likely to happen. I suspect that my brother and I, now heading into mid-life, have failed to procreate because at a very deep level we understand the hell our mother went through. We fear the very thought of raising children who, if there's any justice, would be as selfish and thoughtless as we were.

The truth is, we were never as tough as our mother. No matter how she was tested, she always retained her unflinching faith in the power of patience and love. And despite her assertions to the contrary, she was not a fatalist. Long after we had been written off as lost causes, she insisted that we would go on to lead productive, useful lives.

CONNECTING FAMILIES

FOSTER POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
TEENS, PARENTS & THE COMMUNITY

Fourteen-year-old Sammy's options were limited. He was either going to end up on the streets or in jail. After three trips to juvenile hall, he was referred to the "Connecting Families" program.

It's an intense foster care program that involves daily contact, staff support 24 hours per day, seven days a week. Weekly support meetings for foster parents are also part of the program designed to help troubled teens become successful and re-unite with their families.

The Connecting Families Program uses the multidimensional treatment foster care model, according to a news release. The idea is that positive change is achieved if there is a unified approach. The goal of the program is to alter the youth's environment to control anti-social behavior and encourage appropriate social skills.

Staff is used to make up the support team. There is a skills trainer, social worker, a counselor for the youth and a counselor for the family. The team works to treat the youth and the family at the same time. The foster parents use the same model. All receive daily support.

The program is an alternative to group or residential treatment, incarceration and hospitalization for youth who have problems with anti-social behavior, emotional disturbances and delinquency. Susie Williams is a social worker, recruiter and trainer for the program. "In addition to meeting a crucial need and helping some of the county's most vulnerable children, it will save the county thousands of dollars every month," she said. To send a child to a group home in another county costs between \$4,000 and \$6,000 per month. Foster parents in "Connecting Families" will be reimbursed \$1,840 per month.

Youth ages 12 to 18 typically participate for six to nine months. "Connecting Families" promises better results with less expense," said Phillip Crandall, director of Department of Health and Human Services.

Part of the program uses a reward system based on points. Points earned one day are traded for privileges the next day. Points are taken away for misbehavior and earned for initiating positive actions. Williams said most every parent of teens could use the point system. "It's simple and proven effective," she said.

Connecting Families' participants will have daily support and consultation with a social worker and mental health staff will be available 24 hours per day, seven days a week. The foster parents must meet once a week with their peers to discuss common problems and solutions. A treatment "team" will also work with the child's family with the goal of reuniting the family.

Initially, Sammy had a tough time in the program. After about six months, Sammy's mother was able to provide a stable home environment and re-gained his respect. Sammy's school grades went from F's to B's and his teachers are confident his marks will continue to improve. He still has his "teenage moments" but he has figured out how to cope with his problems and his mother is practicing parenting skills learned in the program.



Sorry for turning motherhood
into a terrifying ordeal!

It may have taken a couple of decades longer than she'd planned, but she eventually got her way. Somewhere along the line, the principles and values that she'd tried so hard to hammer into our skulls began to take effect. I figured out, after a couple of stints in jail, that writing about criminals was almost as easy as being one. My brother, after his own encounters with the justice system, runs an ice cream stand and uses yoga to deal with the frustrations of life in the slow lane.

Many of the kids we ran with are dead – a few years after the Woolworths job, my good friend Hank was shot in the head and left to rot in a ditch. Others have wasted their lives in prison, or scorched their promise into the bottom of a crack pipe. That my brother and I have evaded similar fates is a credit to our mother's rock-headed persistence and determination.

Still, I tend to feel a little disconnected on the second Sunday in May. Like a homeless kid at Christmas, or a single girl on Valentine's, I resent all the pressure to reshape my world, to bury my family's story under a pile of Hallmark moments that have nothing to do with our lives. I wander into gift stores, hoping to find a card that reads, "Thank you, Mother, for not refusing to bail us out the night we set the neighbour's car on fire" or "Sorry for turning motherhood into a terrifying ordeal."

One of these years, I'm going to have to sit my ass down and write the thing myself. Or maybe I'll just call my mother up and let her know exactly how I feel. I'll tell her that I'm sorry I was such a screw-up and thank her for believing in me when even I had given up on myself. Maybe this year I'll try to express the profound dimensions of my gratitude and love.

Or then again, I could just give her the usual box of stolen chocolates.

After more than two decades of stealing, dealing, and dodging nasties, Robbie Dillon took up writing in the hope of meeting intelligent crazy women. He is a former editor of Vice Magazine. ✽