

Burn victim chases ghost of her past

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Mary Clark heard voices and drumming the night she threw her baby on a campfire. The voices were from God, the drumming from somewhere deep in the woods.

Startled by a sickening scream, the baby's father came bursting out of the family camper to find his 9-month-old daughter in flames. He raced her to the hospital while the baby's mother tried to drown herself in Peters Creek.

So begins Gwen Bradshaw's life story, with the rawest of pain and a mother who ceased to exist.

The headlines were haunting:

Local mother indicted in baby burning

Insanity clears baby burner

Burned baby's mother sentenced to institution for 20 years

Gwen had second- and third-degree burns over 65 percent of her body. Doctors gave her a 50-50 chance of living. By that they meant her heart continuing to beat.

Nearly 30 years later, Gwen is still working on the "living" part. Although she's tried everything from drugs to religion, she can't escape her mother's story. It's always there, etched into her skin. She can't comb her hair without being reminded -- the melted ear, the bald spot on her scalp. She can't play her guitar or violin without her gnarled hand reminding her that her mother tried to kill her. It's written all over her back, arms, legs, the right side of her face.

Gwen doesn't remember asking why she looked this way until she was in school. "Your mother threw you in a fire," her father said. And that, she says, was all he would tell her.

Although Mary Clark was found to be insane, Joe Bradshaw could never forgive her. She was dead to him, a forbidden topic of discussion. The only picture Gwen ever saw of her mother was a snapshot with her head torn off.

So she grew up drowning in silence, carrying unknowns within her like dead weight.

The rage didn't kick in until she started college. At some point drinking herself stupid wasn't enough. So she added needle tracks to the scars on her arms.

When Gwen was 24, she crawled beneath a therapist's desk and wouldn't come out. She wanted to die. That landed her at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute, where she was diagnosed with a serious mental illness. She was about the same age her mother was when she heard the voices and drumming in the woods.

By the time Gwen was released, she was convinced the only way to save herself was to track down this ghost who'd set her body and soul on fire.

In order to be free, she needed to do what her father never could: forgive.

That's when Gwen called the woman who'd been the closest she'd ever had to a mom, local filmmaker Mary Katzke, who lived next door when she was little. Gwen told her she was ready to tell her story.

And she has. Five years in the making, Gwen's story -- her search for her homeless, mentally ill mother who'd long since left the state -- is now a documentary about to premiere at a film festival in Toronto. But first, a hometown sneak preview of "About Face" is set for Monday, April 27, at 5:30 p.m. at the Bear Tooth Theatre, with Gwen, Katzke and others involved in the making of this Affinityfilms documentary talking about the journey they took together.

"This is going to be Gwen's night," Katzke said. "She's going to be sharing her story with a community she's moved through her entire life."

A coming out, of sorts. Katzke wonders if there might be people in the audience who remember throwing rocks at Gwen as a child.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE

Gwen spent four years in and out of the burn unit at Providence hospital, her life

filled with paralyzing pain and a perpetual parade of drugs.

Katzke lived next door to Gwen and her father back then, in a little house on 13th and A, with a goat and a lamb in her backyard. She was doing dishes one day when she heard a commotion and went to investigate. Kids were throwing rocks at this little 3-year-old girl. She ran them off. And that's her first memory of Gwen.

Gwen didn't talk much that first year. She would sit quietly and watch Katzke work in her garden. And she liked being around the animals.

"Little by little, she'd come in the house. We'd make cookies. I had long hair then, and she loved to brush it."

Eventually, Katzke figured out who she was. The story had been all over the news:

Woman burns child, attempts suicide

Mother ruled insane in baby burning

Supreme Court upholds commitment of mother

As they got closer, Katzke would take her shopping, to the movies, then, when Gwen was old enough, on various film shoots and to meet her family in Minnesota. When Gwen was 14, Katzke lined up a plastic surgeon to work on her for free. He was going to make her a new ear, fix her hand and rearrange her scalp so more hair could grow. But her father wouldn't sign off on it, according to Katzke.

"He just said it was too much paperwork."

"I was like, 'Please, please, please,' " Gwen said.

But the opportunity slipped away.

DARKNESS DESCENDS

Although Gwen has had spells of being so depressed she couldn't get out of bed, let alone pick up her guitar or violin, music has been the one constant that's reminded her to breathe. It's given her community.

Through the years, she's performed as the singer-songwriter Gwendellin, as well as with several notable local bands -- Mallaka, Captain Darby O'Bill and his Matees 3 and The Smile Ease. One reviewer described her as a female Tom Waits.

She and local poet Brian Hutton often perform as a duo, her violin providing

rhythm and mood for his spoken word performances. One of their best known is "20th Century Man," which played at Out North Contemporary Art House in Anchorage and did some traveling around Alaska.

On the flip side is self-destructive Gwen, the one who cut herself, the one once addicted to coke, the one whose fights with her father could get raucous enough to bring police to the door, she says.

For a while, it seemed anything good that came at her she'd wad up and throw away. Like the music scholarship she got to the University of Alaska that Katzke pushed her to apply for. She drank that opportunity away.

Like the fancy violin she got with a state rehab grant. She pawned it for drug money.

Up, down, up, down -- times 10, like body surfing tsunamis. She didn't know yet she was bipolar. No one did. There were times Katzke wanted to throttle her.

"Every time she'd relapse, after we'd tried so hard to help her, I'd be so ticked off," she said. "I'd say, 'This is IT. I've had it. She's had every chance.' "

In January 2004 came Gwen's call from API. She was tired of just being a survivor; she wanted to live.

The cameras started rolling.

Things went well for Gwen after that. And then they didn't.

In the spring of 2005, during a cocaine bender, she shot an "air ball" into her veins hoping to stop her heart. She ended up back on a psych ward, where the man who took her vitals remembered her mother. She threw you into a fire, she remembers him saying.

"I thought I was going to tell the story in a year and be done," Katzke said. "I didn't understand mental illness at all at that point. What I've learned is it's so much more complicated, there are so many layers."

AN ELUSIVE END

"About Face," a documentary ultimately about the need for compassion and understanding of mental illness, had several potential endings.

One was Gwen attending a gathering of burn survivors in North Carolina the summer of 2005, where the idea of "being comfortable in your own skin" wasn't

metaphorical.

Or the film could have ended with Gwen finding her half-sister, Dinah Clark, also abandoned by the same mother, and being embraced by her big, happy Midwestern family.

Gwen getting clean and sober would have worked, too. Or finding peace through the Mormon church.

But the power that drove Gwen's story from beginning to end was shadowy and elusive. To understand herself, Gwen needed to understand her mother. She needed to look her in the eyes and ask why. That meant finding her.

This was a woman who did not want to be found.

Gwen's search began with a call to a private investigator. After a series of dead ends, she finally got her hands on her mother's last-known address and mailed off a letter. It was a loving letter, one carefully crafted not to scare her away.

After what her mother did to her, the least she could do was agree to meet, is how Gwen really felt about it.

Her mother did not respond.

A year passed. Gwen heard from Emmett Glover of Argos, Ind., a boyfriend her mother had lived with for seven years. He sent Gwen the first photo she'd ever seen of her mother.

As the film tells it, Mary Clark, now going by Mary Razo-Smith, had received Gwen's letter and fallen apart. That's when she told Glover she'd set one of her children on fire. Soon after, while he was at the courthouse getting a marriage license, Mary walked out of his life, leaving everything behind. He hadn't seen or heard from her since.

Gwen and the film crew flew to Indiana, but by then her mother's trail was cold. Still, Gwen sat on a couch her mother had sat on and learned things about her that transformed her from shadow figure to human. She did crafts. She loved antiques and Chinese food. Her favorite color was red. She'd survived cancer.

"I just wanted to smell and touch everything," Gwen said.

Her mother was nowhere to be found in Indiana. She was on the run.

Finally, a private investigator tracked her to Vermont.

"She ran all the way to the farthest corner of the country," Gwen says.

Gwen and the film crew flew to that corner in December 2006. It would be the end of two-and-a-half years of frustration, of chasing leads and hunches, of searching through public records, homeless shelters, mental hospitals and social service agencies. Of walking up and down city streets, showing her mother's picture, asking, "Have you seen this woman?"

During a four-hour window between her mother being released from a mental hospital and climbing aboard a bus for parts unknown, Gwen finally caught up with her -- a big woman with long black hair, wearing a green coat and white hat, carrying a brown paper bag full of her things.

The cameras were rolling when Gwen, so nervous she could hardly speak, walked up to her and asked, "Is your name Mary?"

HARDLY A CURE

The day and a half Gwen and her mother spent together gave Gwen all the answers she needed.

Her mother, distrusting at first, and in denial, slowly warmed up. But she remained detached as she inspected the scars on her daughter's body. She told Gwen she couldn't live in the past. By the next morning, she was descending into mental disarray.

At the end of their visit, on a snowy evening in the back seat of a car, Mary came unglued over something minor as the windshield wipers went whap, whap, whap -- like a drumbeat.

Gwen could no longer see any point in asking why.

A few weeks later, Christmas 2006, Gwen got drunk and attacked a statue of the Virgin Mother at Holy Family Cathedral with such rage it took two cops to pull her off. The booze-bipolar-post-traumatic-stress cocktail got her a stretch in jail. And it wasn't her first.

These days, Gwen says she's more stable than she's ever been, and stable is huge. She's back at UAA pursuing a degree in music education. She got her precious violin out of hock. And she has a steady boyfriend, Bob Karabelnikoff, who understands her like no other. He's also bipolar and has his own physical disability -- slowly losing his eyesight to diabetes.

Finishing the documentary doesn't mean Gwen has stopped learning new things about her past. Like discovering recently that the guy who lives in the apartment next door has a cousin who was at the Peters Creek campground that summer night in 1980, the night her mother heard voices and drumming and threw her in the fire.

His cousin, Skip Oliver, had just graduated from high school. He and his buddies were partying. Their boombox was blaring -- boom, boom, boom. But not loud enough to drown out the screams they heard coming from the woods.

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