

THE ANATOMY OF A TRUE TRAGEDY BY
DENNIS MCDUGAL

Author of Angel of Darkness

IN THE BEST OF FAMILIES

*The perfect parents.
Two beautiful sons.
One fatal flaw.*

MARGARET WHITE BRUYER MILLER

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Angel of Darkness
Fatal Subtraction

*For Carl and Lola,
the best of parents.*

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INTRODUCTION

On most Sunday mornings, Roy Miller can be found in one of the forward pews of the United Methodist Church on Colorado Boulevard in downtown Pasadena. He prays silently and listens attentively to the sermon and sings along with the choir when the time comes to stand and join in the hymns. Sometimes he'll share a word or two after the service with other church members or with his pastor. But he rarely displays emotion, and some mistakenly describe him as cold, numb, or mechanical. He is not.

Roy Miller has always placed his faith in logic and God, though not necessarily in that order. He is a lawyer and not one for small talk. A man of reason, he cloaks his private pain in perfunctory remarks about the news or the weather. Casual conversation is as foreign to his nature as blunt passion. It is reason that keeps his heart well hidden. It is reason that has made him a survivor.

A decade has gone by since his tragedy. With each passage of another year, fewer and fewer of his acquaintances recall the dim details of his nightmare. His is the story of the American dream, fallen, twisted and baptized in blood. As a father, son and husband, he did everything right, yet still his life and family were torn apart.

As a father, son and husband, I empathize with Roy Miller. I marvel at his will. Most of all, I am touched to the quick by his

tragedy—a tragedy so profound that it defies comprehension and lingers somewhere just beyond the emotional grasp of most human hearts. One must return to ancient mythology or the Old Testament Book of Job to find analogies.

Roy Miller is Job, circa 1994. His heart must brim, though few have glimpsed its overflow. He has been to hell and back.

Most parents maintain that there is no task more demanding, more draining or more rewarding, than raising a child. And doubtless there is no grief more wrenching than bearing witness to that child, at the very threshold of his or her adult life, cut down and destroyed.

But few parents must live with the knowledge that their child can succumb utterly to evil; that they can kill as well as be killed—and make their victim their own mother or father.

Roy Miller lives with such knowledge.

When my own children were in their early adolescence, their mother and I were divorced. It was wrenching and it was painful for all of us. My eldest daughter once remarked that it was the worst tragedy that had ever befallen her, or that she could imagine would ever befall her.

I disagreed.

We parents who grapple with garden-variety disappointments and uneasy truces with our children cannot know Roy Miller's private hell. We spouses who have flirted with lust, despair, rage and jealousy will never fully understand. We sons and daughters who have quarreled bitterly with our parents and sworn never to see or speak to them again have no frame of reference.

Our hearts have been broken and scarred. Those we have held dear may have drifted past our dreams, beyond our love and sometimes out of our reach forever. Our sons and daughters may have left us hurt, humiliated and disillusioned, and our elders may have disowned us. But we get past it. Hopefully, we learn something from our private pain and we move on.

How Roy Miller has been able to move on and keep his faith is nothing short of a miracle.

Before I ever started researching this book, I knew the story of

the Miller family. I had written about the bare-bone details of the tragedy when I was a daily newspaper reporter, and I covered the court hearings that followed. From a distance, I followed Roy Miller's career, watching as he helped President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan through the decade that will forever be synonymous with their names.

In the aftermath of his own anguish, Miller became a quiet force for good. Working for environmental causes, hospitals, the Los Angeles Music Center, higher education and, of course, his church, Roy Miller has grown to become an even more staunch pillar of his community in the decade since his family self-destructed. But the wound to his heart will never heal.

He is just a few years younger than my own father. They share a common heritage in modest Southern California beginnings. They both survived the Great Depression, a World War and a Cold War, and went on to excel and make a real contribution to their respective professions. They both were, and are, conservative to a fault. They were family men. They remained wed most of their adult lives to the same women.

Our family has had its trials and troubles, but it has not been cursed with insanity. My parents have witnessed their share of human misery, but rarely within the confines of their own family and certainly not to a degree approaching the immensity of Roy Miller's torment.

Shamans and physicians dating back to the time of the Greeks have warned us that we are the authors of our own destinies. Beware of hubris, they said: excessive pride.

Yet, how is excessive pride the key to the story of the Millers? How could hubris dismantle a family that had everything, gave generously to peers and poor alike, and still bent down to worship their God with Biblical regularity on the seventh day of every week?

How, indeed.

Perhaps the real answer to the riddle of the perfect family rent asunder remains locked inside the mind of Roy Miller—the stoic, stony man of reason.

But it is more likely that he is still searching for that answer himself, every Sunday morning, when he sits in a forward pew at the United Methodist Church on Colorado Boulevard in downtown Pasadena, and prays silently from the unfathomable depths of a broken heart.

He could not sleep. He had been up most of the night, arranging and rearranging the collection of knives and swords that his grandparents had given him. He was haunted by thoughts of power and sex and blood and weapons.

He was tall and dagger-thin, like his parents and their parents before them. His fingers were musician's fingers: long, slender and delicate, but extremely strong. His hair was brown and wavy. His teeth glinted in orthodontically precise rows when he smiled in the bathroom mirror. He had filed them down smooth and even over the years. They were perfect teeth.

His eyes gleamed in a tortured radiance, like a gloomy portrait by El Greco. They were eyes that masked a deep anguish that he carried within the very core of his being. Sometimes his eyes would go blank and he would stare into the distance at nothing at all for long, uncomfortable moments. Then, without any cue, he would click back into present tense, turning those doleful eyes into alert eyes, and his perfect teeth would curve into a smile.

His mother was still in bed when he entered her room. He sat on the edge of the bed and told her he was feeling dizzy. He asked her if he could crawl into bed with her. She told him to go back to his room and get into his own bed.

He couldn't, he told her. He had wet his bed. He opened his mouth and pointed to the back of his jaw, where he could feel his wisdom teeth crowding in on his perfect smile. He asked his mother to look at them. She ignored him. She got up and went to the next room to use the phone. After chatting with someone animatedly, she giggled a high-pitched girlish giggle, said good-bye and hung up. Then she went to the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

He removed his clothes. He left them in a pile next to the lamp in the living room. Then he strode naked through the house.

"It would be convenient to do what I wanted to do," he said later. "I could make love to her. I was dark under the eyes."

He had found an Alaskan fishing club in the family room. Like the knives, it had been a gift from his grandparents. He hefted it in one hand. He thought that he could use the club to coerce her. He would go into her bathroom and threaten her, right then. If she failed to submit to his desires, he could hover over her until she did. No. No, he would wait until she came out of the bathroom. Then he would surprise her.

He hid in a closet in her bedroom and waited.

"I had animal, primitive, physical, demonic feelings," he recalled. Crouched inside the closet, he decided that he would not chicken out. He would actually do it. This would be no dress rehearsal. She would not stop him.

When she emerged from the bathroom, she saw his reflection in her mirror. He stood naked with his club half-hidden beside him, peering out from behind the closet door.

She had seen this before. She was not going to put up with his foolishness. She told him that she was not going to look at his vulgar nakedness. She told him that he should be discussing his problem with his therapist. She refused to acknowledge this absurd behavior. Then she marched out of the bedroom.

He followed her to the living room. When she turned and faced him, hands on hips in mild annoyance, he started to pull her down to the carpet.

"What are you doing?" she screamed.

He raised his club and hit her on the head. She cried out. He hit her again. He hit her again. And again. It might have been five times. It might have been a dozen times. He couldn't remember exactly. In the

tangle of fury and adrenaline and terror that followed, he remembered her well-reasoned admonitions about discussing his feelings with his therapist. He remembered those admonitions giving way to a more primal objection. What he was doing was “not right,” she shrieked while he pounded her into submission. He remembered her hands pushing him away and flailing at his chest.

“What are you trying to do?” she howled.

Those had been her last words.

After the final blow, she lay still. Then he was upon her.

— FATHERS

Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath.

EPHESIANS 6:4