

FIRST PERSON

Running away is a theme in my family – and it started with my father

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ILLUSTRATION BY SANDI FALCONER

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers. Have a story to tell? See our guidelines at tgam.ca/essayguide.

This week, First Person explores how fathers change our lives.

My brother ran away from kindergarten on his very first day of school. He arrived home breathless on the doorstep, declaring triumphantly: “Mom! I escaped!”

When my daughter, Ruby, was about the same age, she started running away from home on a fairly regular basis. Furious about some injustice or another – perhaps I had told her to shut off the TV or pick up her toys – she would get mad and threaten to leave home.

“I hope you won’t be gone too long,” I’d say.

She would methodically pack her Barney the dinosaur knapsack in the most adult fashion. For comfort she took her tattered pink blankie, for intellectual stimulation, a couple of storybooks, and she always packed a nutritious snack, usually an apple and milk she poured herself in a sippy cup with a tight-fitting lid. She would leave matter-of-factly without saying goodbye and with a determined stride that indicated she had a specific destination in mind.

Inevitably, that destination was the sidewalk curb less than a block from our house. I’d watch her from the living room window as she

made her way down the street, sat down, opened up her knapsack, and started in on her snack. She'd balance a book on her knees and then stare up at the sky, as if considering her options. Within about 15 minutes, she'd come back in the door, bouncing and happy. Running away was her way to blow off steam.

I can't remember why I ran away from home when I was 15, except that I was angry at my parents for some injustice or another. I left a goodbye note on my pillow, outlining my grievances and crawled out the window of my second-storey bedroom, hopping onto the roof of the porch and speeding off on my powder-blue 10-speed. I'll show them, I thought. I biked for what felt like hours with nowhere to go. I had no money and hadn't the foresight to pack any snacks the way my young daughter would some 25 years later. I was hungry and tired and, just as my resolve was weakening and I considered heading home, I heard a car come up from behind. It slowed to a crawl. I looked back and there was my mom and stepfather in their big-as-a-boat Buick, sort of smiling, sort of smirking. I smile-smirked back as they slowly drove by. My mom rolled down the window and said, "See you at home." They took off and I pedalled hard, eager to get home. I was glad they had come looking for me.

When I was age 3, my biological father left our family. "He ran away," is what my mother said, and I pictured him wrestling into his coat as he took off on foot down the driveway of our rented yellow clapboard house, away from our small town and out of our lives forever. They had married young, on my mother's 17th birthday, and had me a year later. It was too much responsibility for my father. He wanted out.

This was not the first time my father took off unexpectedly. Once, a couple of years before, he and my mother were staying at a motel while on holiday. My father said he'd be right back; he just had to get some smokes. Hours passed. Then the entire night. He didn't come back. In the morning, my mother wandered the streets of a strange town, holding me by the hand and pushing my brother in a baby carriage, searching for my father. She found him that afternoon back at the motel, passed out drunk on the bed.

It seems many people get the urge to run at some point. We pack a bag, buy a ticket, jump in a getaway car, leave a note, sneak out the door. There's this idea that it's cowardly to escape, but sometimes you have to run for your life, just make a mad dash for it. People have lots of good reasons for running – they're on the lam, or escaping a bad marriage, a bad boss, abusive parents or maybe just themselves.

On his first day in kindergarten, my kid brother knew something was terribly wrong if he was expected to spend the next dozen years locked up in a classroom. He never ran away from school again, but he would come home with ripped shirts, bruises from schoolyard fights and, once, wearing only one shoe.

My daughter, who is still prone to occasional fits of temper that pass quickly, stopped running away when she was about 7. We laugh about it now. "It was a self-imposed time-out," she says with the wise perspective of her 21-year-old self.

I never went through the bedroom window again, but I did leave home, in a physical sense, when I turned 19 and got my first job out of

town. I ran away from my family, emotionally, when I was 45. Years of fighting about religion had taken their toll and my becoming a “non-believer” was the last straw for my fundamentalist parents. This time, they did not come looking for me.

As for my biological father, he ran and ran his whole life, from job to job, woman to woman and, eventually, from motel to rooming house to the Sally Ann. He never found a place to land. I never knew why he left, but later in life I learned he was bipolar. And there was the drinking. I longed for him, always. Or, at least I longed for the idea I had of him as a potentially doting dad. Of course, he never could have been that.

It took me a long while to figure out that the day he escaped down that gravel drive of our yellow house, he was actually doing us a favour. He was hoping to save himself. But it was really us he rescued.

Anne Bokma lives in Hamilton.

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