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WAP

After

dad

Shot

mom

THE LEGACY OF A VIOLENT NIGHT

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The Vessels on Easter
1964: Ken and Fran,
in back; sons, from left,
Ken, Joseph and Kris;
and daughters, from left,
Mary, Judy and Linnie.



*46 YEARS
LATER, A
SHOTGUN
BLAST
STILL
ECHOES
IN A FAMILY*

BY NEELY TUCKER



LEdward Kenneth Vessels married his bride, Fran, in the stone-and-stained-glass embrace of St. Dominic's Church in Southwest Washington in the summer of 1952. They were a handsome couple in their mid-20s, and in many ways were the embodiment of the postwar middle-class American dream. ¶ Ken, the son of a railroad man, was a former Marine who became an insurance agent in his native Louisville. The family owned some 200 acres outside town. He had prospects. ¶ Frannie, the only child of German and Lithuanian immigrants, was raised in the District and Northern Virginia. She was a registered nurse.

They met as students in a biology class at Catholic University and eventually settled in a little house on the outskirts of Louisville. They had three boys and three girls.

In 1960s family photographs, the eight of them — Dad in narrow tie, Mom in cat-eye glasses, the boys in buzz cuts, the girls in hats and summer dresses — appear as if lifted from a Norman Rockwell painting: *The Family After Church*.

Behind closed doors, they lived the American Nightmare.

Ken Vessels, a pleasant man at the office, was a raging alcoholic at home.

He beat their children, particularly the boys, with little provocation and less mercy. "Pops" was a man of modest physical proportions — about 5-foot-9 and 165 pounds — but, his children say, was possessed of a monstrous gift for cruelty.

He lined them up single file and lashed them with switches or a belt. He once knocked out Joseph, the youngest boy, with the butt of a gun. To this day, neighbors remember being kept awake after midnight by the boys' plaintive

cries when Ken forced them to sit on a wooded hill behind the house: "Sir, may I come in?"

He did not hit his wife, but then she finally demanded a divorce.

On Friday night, Jan. 20, 1967, he asked Frannie and the boys to have a seat at the dining-room table. He went to the bedroom, got a 12-gauge shotgun, came back and, in a matter-of-fact way, told them he was about to go to jail and the kids were going to an orphanage.

He then shot his wife across the table at a range of three feet.

"My little sister and I came out of the

bath tub to all this screaming, and we stepped in my mother's blood," remembers Lynn Vessels, then 7. Now 53 and a middle school teacher in Fairfax, she worked for years on "To Soften the Blow," a memoir she published last year that details her struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Families are the wellspring of our lives, and what follows is a story about the aftershocks of what is now called domestic violence in one remarkable family over 46 years. It is a love story, but it is important to remember that love can be both redemptive and destructive, and sometimes both at once.

So let's look at that Vessels family photograph one more time, but with the long-range lens of the intervening decades. What happened *after* Pops shot Mom? After all, if the Vessels family in that photograph is not the model image of the American family in the late mid-20th century, then who was?

Well, first, let's tick off the only fatality of the night: Pops.

While Fran Vessels survived — though badly maimed — Ken

Vessels did not, not really.

He scarcely saw the inside of a jail cell, but regressed into drinking grain alcohol out of the bottle and was dead in less than a decade.

He was a shriveled husk of a man in a hospital bed by late summer 1976, when most of his children were in their teens. His pancreas and liver had been eaten alive by alcohol and cancer. He was as helpless before his children as they had once been before him.

He was 48 years old.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

Walking down the aisle on their wedding day, Ken and Fran saw a gleaming future. Ken was smart, wrote well and spoke comfortably to a crowd. When he was accepted to law school at Catholic University, Fran says, their dreams soared.

But in three months, she became pregnant with twins. The expenses of Kris and Ken scuttled the idea of a law degree. The young couple wound up back in Louisville, where Ken's family lived. Joseph, their third son, was born soon thereafter.

Racheting their dreams down a notch, they settled in a new neighborhood of one-story ranchers, taking a three-bedroom, two-bath model (for just under \$10,000) in the 4700 block of Granada Drive.

The kids kept coming — Mary, Lynn, Judy — but big families were not unusual for the time and place. The family next door, the Thrashers, had eight children, and other neighbors had even more, sending kids streaming out into streets and yards after school, sledding down hills in winter, staying out till streetlights came on in summer, the family and neighbors remember.

But there were fault lines running through both families, cracks that time and children's laughter could not heal.

Ken and Fran had both grown up in difficult circumstances. Ken was beaten by his father; Fran saw her mother, who was mentally ill, dragged out of the house to an asylum when Fran was about 5. Now, as young parents themselves, they began to wilt under the constraints of time, money and so many people living in a confined space — there were two adults and six children in a house of 1,250 square feet.

Ken drank, and he drank hard. Beer, then whiskey. He beat his children for leaving too much dust on the floor, for getting the jelly in the peanut butter. If he got angry while driving, he would stop, make the boys drop their trousers by the side of the road, and whip them in front of passing drivers.

Fran desperately tried to keep up appearances, hosting children after school and making friends with neighbors. "They were all aboveboard, good neighbors and good people," remembers Richard Scott, who still lives two houses down. "Except for the daddy."

In her memoir, Lynn remembers witnessing a beating that her father gave Joseph: 100 lashes with a willow. The boy was "running around the room like a squealing pig, jumping up and over the top of the bunk bed and sliding down the wall behind it ... while my father caught him with his whip on all sides of his body."

Says Joseph: "He liked to use me as his punching bag." He says he would have out-of-body experiences during

many of the beatings and "float 30 or 40 feet above" the scene.

Mary remembers once, at 6, writing her ABCs on her bedroom wall. Her father came in, and "I just don't remember what happened next — that or a lot of other times. We were all just so terrified of him."

Bob Thrasher, who still lives next door, thought his neighbor was a loner and a drunk. "Who in the hell would stick their kids on a hill in the dark, whether it was raining or cold, and just leave them there?"

In 1967, after 15 years of marriage, Fran finally demanded a divorce. Ken moved out and was very depressed, Fran remembers. The couple attended an emergency psychiatric counseling session for him on Wednesday, Jan. 18.

Two days later, they had a scheduled "date" to go to dinner and discuss things. Fran told him she had a surprise. He came by to find ... she meant a new bouffant hairdo. He had been expecting a reconciliation.

He went to get the gun.

Below: Fran and Ken Vessels on their wedding day in 1952. Left: A news clipping about the shooting in 1967.



PHOTOGRAPHS ON PAGE 10 AND THESE PAGES COURTESY OF LYNNIE VESSELS



Ken occasionally stopped by the house in Louisville after the shooting. A 1975 photo shows him with, from left, Judy, Mary and Lynn a year before he died.

THAT NIGHT

When Ken lowered the barrel, the boys scrambled from the house or hid — Joseph hid in a closet in the girls’ room. Fran tried to duck behind the dining-room table, but the blast ate up her right side and nearly tore off her right arm.

“Go get the Bolts! Go get the Bolts!” Fran screamed, naming neighbors.

Mary, in her brothers’ bedroom watching television, heard the gun go off. Then one of her brothers rushed past her, leaping out the window.

A second later, her father kicked open the door, holding the gun, her mother behind him. “Don’t hurt the children!” Fran was shouting.

The confrontation returned to the dining room, Mary following. Judy and Lynn came out of the bath and saw their mother bleeding profusely, squatting by the fireplace.

The tableau: Lynn sees her father hunched over with the shotgun aimed at her mother. Between them, and directly at the end of the barrel, stands 9-year-old Mary.

“Get out of the way!” he bellows. “I’m going to kill your mother, you kids are going to an orphanage and I’m going to jail for 10 years!”

“No!” Mary screams back.

A few feet away, Judy and Lynn turn to one another, clutching their bath towels, and scream.

Ken and Mary yell at each other until Mary finally says something like, “Look what you’ve done to my Mommy! Daddy, I used to love you!”

It breaks the trance. Ken drops the gun. He tenderly reaches down for his wife, half-carrying her to the kitchen. He calls his father and the police, saying, as Lynn recalls: “I just shot my wife. Come get me.”

Lynn sees her mother slipping down, blood pouring, her hand trailing her like a dead thing on a rope of skin.

“They are half lying, half sitting on the floor now, his arms around her,” she writes in the memoir. “My dad is calmer. My mother is breathing in short crying huffs, trying to sit up, but her head slumps and she is swaying backwards as if she will fall. He holds her, rocks her.”

Police and paramedics arrive. Ken is taken to jail; Fran, to the hospital. Ken’s parents take the girls. The boys go to other relatives’ houses.

Later that night, the girls are in bed at the grandparents’ house. The door opens, a shaft of light. The silhouette of their father. Released on bond, he comes in and lies down between his

girls, who are too petrified to move.

The night is not over, no one is asleep, and the divide among the children is already taking seed. It will grow over time. The gunshot, the blood, the screaming and ... did you notice?

When Ken shot Fran, the boys ran from their father. The girls ran to their mother.

NOT UNUSUAL

It is tempting to view the Vessels at this juncture as a garish example of dysfunction, the neighborhood losers, obvious to all.

This is not so.

The kids were popular. Fran was well liked. Ken was seen as cruel to his children, but no one thought it was bad enough to call the police. Indeed, family violence wasn’t something the nation wanted to know too much about.

The phrase “domestic violence” was not in use. There were no shelters for abused women.

The FBI’s 1967 Uniform Crime Report counted 253,300 aggravated assaults. It noted that most “occur with the family unit or among neighbors or acquaintances” but did not break out how many were intimate-partner violence — another term that had yet to enter the national vocabulary.

Police were loath to get involved, for a number of reasons.

Culturally, a man roughing up his wife tended to be viewed as a family dispute, not a criminal matter. Practically, victims tended to not testify for the prosecution once it got to trial, which undermined the case.

A notorious 1972 case in San Jose illustrated the mind-set of the era.

Ruth Bunnell filed more than 20 reports saying her estranged husband had beaten her, but police took no action. One day he called to say he was coming to kill her. She called police, who said to call back if he came. He stabbed her to death 45 minutes later.

The dawn of the women’s movement in the 1970s triggered vast changes. Activist groups such as the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence began lobbying, and states passed laws against spousal abuse.

In the ensuing two decades, violence of

all types against women — rape, stalking, spousal abuse — began to be recognized as a vastly underreported social problem. In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act, landmark legislation that began to combat the problem.

Current statistics show domestic violence is still common but greatly reduced from previous decades, as least as can be determined in federal reports. The overall rate of intimate-partner violence dropped more than 60 percent between 1994 and 2010, a U.S. Department of Justice study found.

Still, a different DOJ study of all homicides between 1980 and 2008 found that 41.5 percent of female murder victims were killed by an intimate partner — an average of more than 1,100 per year. Strangers, by contrast, killed 11.9 percent of all women victims.

(Men were killed by their current or former wives or girlfriends at one-sixth the female rate.)

But in other ways, the zeitgeist has changed.

Domestic violence is part of common discourse. There are about 1,200 shelters for abused women, says Rita Smith, executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. State and federal laws specifically target familial violence. The U.S. Office on Violence Against Women, established in 1995, has distrib-

KEN AND MARY YELL AT EACH OTHER UNTIL MARY FINALLY SAYS, “LOOK WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO MY MOMMY! DADDY, I USED TO LOVE YOU!”

uted \$4 billion in grants, and works with both local governments and nonprofit groups to stem the tide.

So. Back to the Vessels.

SURVIVAL

In the days after the shooting, Fran was in and out of surgery. And she decided not to press charges. She wanted Ken to get a job and pay child support, she says

now, because that would most help the children. “I had six children. I couldn’t work.”

For the attempted murder of his wife, Ken Vessels spent a couple of hours in jail.

He checked into a psychiatric hospital the morning after the shooting, stayed for a month, received electroshock therapy, then left for California. He sent money for the mortgage for a few months — \$72 — then quit, Fran says.

The children, scattered among relatives after the shooting, returned home to find a new terror: There was no one in charge. “We weren’t a real cohesive group,” Ken says.

“The shooting, it drove the family a little bit apart,” says Jim Huggins, then an assistant principal for Stuart High School, where the children attended.

The oldest boys asserted dominance over the rest, the other siblings now recall. For discipline, the girls were forced to crawl under beds and stay, sometimes for hours, Lynn and Mary say.

Joseph, the youngest brother, remembers his elder siblings fighting each other and “beating the f--- out of me.”

“We did have the twins issue of ‘who was in charge,’” Ken says. “This was not a group — we didn’t have a model of how to run a household.”

A family therapist told Fran to make Mary, the eldest daughter, an aide-de-camp, and she did. The chores were daily and endless. Mary began a slow burn of resentment and anger — not just at her father, but at her always-demanding mother.

“I made my mother’s bed, helped her with the book work, I’d write all the checks, I’d take care of Lynn and Judy,” Mary says. “I’d get home from school and wait for her to tell me what to do. I was 9, 10, 11. By time I was 13, I was cooking dinner for the entire family. I’d get in bed and think, ‘Lord, just let her die tonight.’”

The family went on public assistance, food stamps and blocks of yellow cheese.

After dozens of surgeries, Fran was eventually able to return to work. Ken got a job at 15, sacking groceries. Joseph washed dishes at a restaurant.

Their father would call every now

Lynn Vessels, right, with mother Fran in Paris in 1986. Fran did not press charges against Ken in the shooting.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF LYNNIE VESSELS

and then, repentant and sweet to the girls, a monster to the boys.

"If I answered [the phone]," Joseph says, "he would make the most threatening comments about coming back and shooting me. When I was 14 or 15, there was probably a year and a half I slept under my bed and peed in my pants each night."

Lynnne channeled her rage into activities: She was a cheerleader, and would become "Miss Spartan" at Stuart High. She relied on Huggins, the assistant principal, for help. When she was sent to his office one day, he asked what was wrong. "My dad shot my mom — and I'm mad," she said, then collapsed into sobs.

It was seven years after the shooting.

In 1974, Pops moved back to town, taking an apartment with a cousin.

Fran, the children recall, encouraged them to have a relationship with him. He dropped by the house. He drove a cab. He drank.

"Every time he called, I'd say, 'Daddy, are you sorry you shot Mommy?' And he'd say, 'Oh, yes, sweetheart, I am so sorry,'" Lynnne remembers. "Judy and I would go over and see him."

Kris, one of the twins, had a job at a bakery near his father's apartment and would often drop in. "We got along pretty good," he says, "but I never saw him sober."

Joseph also tried mending bridges in the days before his father died. More than four decades later, when asked if the reconciliation worked, he pauses.

"No," he says finally. "No, it did not."

SCATTERED

For all of their lives, the children lived on top of one another. Then they blew out of the house after high school, all six headed for college and the wider world.

Today, they are over 50 and have settled into their middle and later years.

Five of the six married, four divorced, and Mary divorced and remarried. Four never had

children. Only two live within 600 miles of each other.

Two are seventh-grade teachers; Ken teaches science, and Lynnne teaches English. Nobody is rich and nobody is destitute. Mary and Lynnne are the closest emotionally. They visit one another when they can.

"We've gone off in six different directions to the end of the earth and sought our own peace with the past," Ken says. "It's amazing what these things will do to you."

He joined the Navy at 18, married in his mid-20s, and settled down, now teaching on Florida's east coast. He has been married 34 years and has two adult children. While he says he has avoided introspection about his youth, the night of the shooting — the boys fleeing, the girls staying — has troubled him.

"There was a little guilt," he says, mentioning different scenarios he has played out in his mind. "I might have

Below: Fran, 84, lives in a nursing home in Louisville. Bottom: Her son Ken, who now lives in Port St. Lucie, Fla., says he has avoided introspection about his youth and the night of the shooting.



taken [the gun] away from him. He might have blown my head off."

Joseph evolved into the family's free spirit. Living in Florida, he and a girlfriend fixed up a 19-foot sailboat and spent two years sailing "as far away as I could get." He says they eventually made it to New Zealand.

"I was going through a lot. I was still quite troubled about my family upbringing; I was going through a lot of self-help, and God, and trying to clear the emotional baggage on my plate."

He lived in New Zealand for a couple of years, bounced back and forth to Maui, married, had two sons, divorced. He studied rapid eye therapy, became a psychotherapist, bought and managed rental property. He became intrigued by astral projection, a theory of out-of-body experiences.

"The trauma in reshaping my life was having my first son and seeing the patterns of my father come through me," he says, "and how I responded to his crying, his needs. It shook the ground underneath me how hobbled I was, the upbringing."

Today, he and a girlfriend live on a couple of rented acres in a southeastern corner of Maui so remote they have to supply their own electricity and running water.

"I can't say that I'm gainfully employed, but I can say I do what I have to do to stay together," he says. "Girlfriends tell me I'm not very available emotionally. It's all flee and flight and leaving. I'm 57 years old and still have trouble being intimate."

Kris, now 59, is a mechanical engineer near Louisville. Divorced, with no children, he appears to be the most reluctant to discuss the family's history. "I think a lot of people have had traumatic experiences that are much worse than what we did," he says.

Mary went the farthest away — 11,000 miles — and not by accident. Settling in Western Australia after college, she made good money acid-washing bricks on construction sites in rough-hewn



Lynnne Vessels, who was 7 when her mother was shot, is now a teacher at Robinson Secondary School in Fairfax.

boomtowns. When a visa violation sent her back to the States for a few months, she found that she fell back into her teenage self, "trying to fix everything for everybody in the family."

She returned to Australia, marrying a "raging alcoholic" to gain citizenship, she says. She says she dumped him as soon as she got it.

Like Joseph, she found she could not outrun her childhood. Even on the far side of the world, her past so bedeviled her that she sometimes sought out a therapist, though it was a two-hour drive.

"Most women didn't like me," she says in a phone interview. "I had a pretty lonely 10 years up there."

Now 55, she has been married to her second husband for 21 years. They live in Perth and renovate houses.

"I've got the best life, the best husband, the best little poodle," she says, her voice breaking. "I love my brothers. They're great guys. I love my mom, my sisters ... but the best thing is that I live here."

Fran Vessels, 84, lives in a nursing home in Louisville. Her right arm is shortened from numerous surgeries. She said the interviews for this story were the first time she has discussed the shooting since it happened.

"My head is pounding," she said,

ending one interview, tears coming to her eyes. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

Lynnne moved around, traveled widely, and now teaches at Robinson Secondary School in Fairfax.

She is talking, on a recent afternoon, in her small house. She is 53 and single. She is proud of her siblings — "I think we'd describe ourselves as functioning adults" — and says her close bond with Mary helps keep her balanced.

She spent years in intensive therapy,

I'D SAY, 'DADDY, ARE YOU SORRY YOU SHOT MOMMY?' AND HE'D SAY, 'OH, YES, SWEETHEART, I AM SO SORRY.'

for some of those years spilling out her feelings onto reams of butcher paper, pounding out the anger, bolstering herself with affirmations. In the wake of the O.J. Simpson murder case, she was a guest on the "Oprah Winfrey Show" to talk about the effects of witnessing domestic violence as a child.

"I hate myself right now," begins one of the entries on butcher paper. "I hate my life ... I hate Mom I hate Pops I hate my whole family."

A more peaceful entry: "I forgive you, Daddy."

THE SHOOTING REDUX

The night of the shooting is still the pivotal moment of Lynnne's life, but not for the reasons you might think.

When her mother was quivering by the fireplace and her father was threatening to shoot her again, you'll remember, she and Judy looked at one another and screamed.

But as the confrontation went on, the blood and violence a few feet away seemed to fade into blackness. Magically, there was only her and her little sister, inches apart, staring into one another's eyes.

"There was all this light and peace," she says. "I felt tremendous love. ... I was able to look in Judy's eyes and felt the most peace I've ever had in life, and constantly want again."

It would be lovely if she and Judy could talk about that night, but they can't, not really.

A dozen years after the shooting, Judy Vessels's hold on sanity collapsed.

Whether it was from genetics, the trauma of the shooting or a boyfriend's suicide, no one knows. But she fell into the clutches of paranoid schizophrenia and never really got much better.

Today, the last of the Vessels children lives in an assisted-care home in rural Kentucky, loved from a distance by her siblings, whom she once slept next to, and, in the long nights of terror with their father, perhaps dreamed of a better world than the one God granted them all. 

Neely Tucker is a Washington Post staff writer. To comment on this story, e-mail wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.