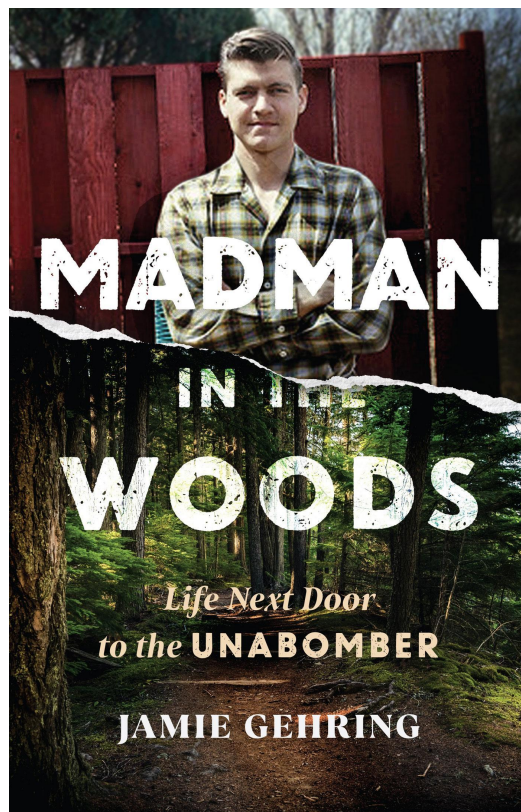


Madman in the Woods (Preview)

Life Next Door to the Unabomber

Jamie Gehring



19 April 2022

Got up at dawn. Heard coyotes howling in the distance.
The woods seemed so entrancing in the early grey light.

—Kaczynski Journal, FBI Public Documents

Nature encourages us to be exactly as we are. Bring your darkness or your light, you have a place under the tall pines. The skills we learn in the wild can promote resilience, purpose, character, and appreciation for self and for the natural system as a whole. In my innocence, I was nurtured and inspired by lessons from the natural world.

At no time during my childhood did I lack adventure. There was always a towering pile of sawdust from the mill to climb, a trail to explore, a horse to ride, or time to sit and marvel at the cooperation of ants. I was able to turn a puddle into a mysterious swamp or a fallen tree into a mossy, yet magical, kingdom. My father embraced the art of “free-range parenting” before it became a hashtag. I would be set free with a raft and an oar, to lose myself in the wonder of a beaver dam or an isolated mountain lake. The inherent comfort of solitude in nature was in my culture, my blood, and my family history.

What I didn’t realize as I grew up in the woods surrounding our home was that we shared them with the longest-running domestic terrorist in United States history.

* * *

In the fifth grade, Ted was given a Stanford-Binet IQ test. According to Ted, he scored above the maximum on the scale at 167 (scores of 145–160 qualify as very gifted or highly advanced). These results led his parents and guidance counselor to consider advancing him in school. It was decided that Ted would skip the sixth grade. His parents couldn’t have been prouder of their gifted son. On the other hand, the young boy had a different perception of this change. He never struggled academically—it was the social aspect of the change that proved scarring.

“Skipping a grade was a disaster for me,” he wrote.¹

I was not accepted by the seventh-graders with whom I was put. I quickly slid down to near the bottom of the pecking-order, and I stayed there until I graduated from high school. I was often subjected to insults or other indignities by the dominant boys. My attempts to make advances to girls had such humiliating results that for many years afterward, even until after the age of thirty, I found it excruciatingly difficult—almost impossible—to make advances to women.²

Ted felt disconnected from his peers and claims that at the same time in his life he experienced “psychological abuse” from his parents. He states that his mother changed

¹ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

² Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

after the birth of David. Ted maintains that she was “much more irritable and would scold or make vicious remarks at the slightest provocation.”³ This, in turn, affected his father. “He became more unavailable and angry,” according to Ted.

But my father’s moroseness was not exclusively an outcome of the family situation. I believe that he had deep-lying negative feelings about himself, about people, and about life in general. When he was in his mid-sixties and more ready to express his feelings than he’d been when he was younger, he took a car-camping trip by himself. On returning he said, “I can’t be alone, because I don’t like myself.”⁴

After dissecting Ted’s autobiography and reading multiple points of view on his childhood, I penned in my writing journal:

Trauma in infancy
Difficulty forming bonds and connecting emotionally
Potential mental illness
Highly intelligent
Isolation from peers

I went on to learn of his later years. I found that in Ted’s late teens, the discord in the family escalated. Ted claims that he was the victim of verbal assaults, and the words cut him deeply. In regard to his father, he states,

He began calling me “sick” whenever he was annoyed with me. My mother imitated him in this respect, and from then on until I was about 21 years old, both my parents would apply to me such epithets as “sick,” “immature,” “emotionally disturbed,” “creep,” “mind of a two-year-old,” or “another Walter T.” (Walter T. was a man we knew who ended up in a mental institution). It was always in an outburst of anger that my mother called me these things, but my father sometimes did so in a tone of cold contempt that cut worse than my mother’s angry shouting.⁵

Still, Ted maintains,

My mother never actually thought that there was anything wrong with me mentally, and I doubt that my father saw me as any sicker than he saw many other people. In saying cruel things to me my parents were only using me as a butt on which to take out their own frustrations.⁶

³ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

⁴ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

⁵ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

⁶ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

In addition to the use of words in punishment, there were a few isolated instances in which according to Ted, his father would scare him with the words, “I will smash your face,” or by throwing him to the ground in the midst of a family squabble.⁷

I scribbled,

Toxic Masculinity or merely the era?

Abuse

Then,

Abuse

It was time to go home, to return to my own family and halt my focus on Ted’s. I knew that this was only a pause. I still had much to glean.

Several days later, I gathered my courage and emailed David.

David shared with me some of his memories and the love and admiration he held for his father “Turk.” He also sent me some additional interviews to review.

I devoured the interviews and then emailed David again, asking if he would read this exact chapter, a chapter that shines a light on intimate details of Ted’s upbringing. I knew that if I was in the same position with my family in the spotlight, I would love the opportunity to offer input.

“Please let me know your thoughts,” as I attached the Word file to the email.

I waited in anticipation, reflecting on my findings thus far.

I had seen David on a 60 Minutes interview many years prior to writing this. I knew that the resentment Ted internalized toward his parents for their academic expectations and childhood events were the bomber’s alone. As David had professed in the interview, “This is not the fam—same family that I grew up in, that he grew up in. This is not the same mother that he’s describing here. This is—this is a fiction or a fantasy.”⁸

In an FBI interview, David did recall some memories of Ted Sr. being cold to Ted as a child. There was one instance in particular where, as a small child, Ted was asking his father for a kiss. Ted Sr. reportedly pushed the boy away, saying, “You’re just like a little girl, always wanting to kiss.”⁹ Ted also mentions this in his autobiography, stating that after this incident, he became much more closed off to emotion with his father.¹⁰ This rebuttal of a plea for affection seems to have been, for Ted, a turning point in their relationship.

It didn’t take David long to comment on my findings, but the days I waited felt heavy. Mostly, I didn’t want David to relive this again—Ted’s angry words and the emotion tied to the brother that even now, will not respond to letters.

David sent me an incredibly thoughtful and concise email in response to my research and writing. I hung on his words, as I still do when I see an email from him.

⁷ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

⁸ “A Most Extraordinary Interview With an Exemplary Family.” 1996. *60 Minutes*. CBS. Released September 15.

⁹ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

¹⁰ Kaczynski, Theodore J. *Truth Versus Lies: An Autobiography*. Kaczynski, 1998.

As humans we tend to focus on conflict and strife. Once the cycle of negative thoughts begins it can be difficult to stop focusing on all the “wrongs” and unravel our psyche. Ted tends to forget the intimacy, trust, affection, and our parents’ overriding kind intentions.

He also made sure not to discredit Ted’s own experiences or the trauma in his infancy, citing several studies, one of which found that childhood trauma can shorten a lifespan by an average of twenty years.

It seems that this killer was well-loved, supported, and challenged intellectually by his parents.

The anger at Wanda and Turk seemed to be quite disproportionate to the childhood experienced. David remembers his own father as layered and kind, his mother a guiding force who would have done anything for their family.

* * *

After the date at the French restaurant and a couple of kisses, which Kaczynski describes as “open-mouth kiss with tongues rubbing,” Ted asked Ellen to join him for a day of apple-picking and baking.

But the feelings of adoration didn’t last long, as Ellen made it clear after their second date that the feelings weren’t mutual, and she didn’t think they had enough in common. The kisses they had shared meant nothing. When he asked why she had wanted to date him in the first place, she responded, “To satisfy my curiosity about you, because I have never met anyone like you.”

Kaczynski pushed for details from Ellen. As he recalls the incident in his autobiography, when he asked her what some of his unusual characteristics were, she responded with, “You are so lacking in confidence socially,” which, as Kaczynski laments in his autobiography, was “true enough, but not nice to say.”

Ted was devastated by the breakup. He later wrote that Ellen hurt him, humiliated him, and that he only remained infatuated with her because he was “sex-starved” and didn’t know how to look elsewhere for a woman.

Ted’s family remembers him completely shutting down after Ellen ended things, and his hurt quickly turned to anger. The jilted man felt the need to inflict harm on the woman.

It started with words; he wrote insulting limericks about Ellen, made copies of the works, and then posted them in the bathrooms of Foam Cutting Engineers, where he and his brother David worked. The posters read:

There’s a certain young lady named Ellen,
Whose fanny is very repelling,
For the overgrown mass
Of fat on her ass
Makes a gross, disproportionate swelling.

Her girdle's a tight one, of course—
It's nylon and steel-reinforced.
But no matter how hard
She squeezes her lard,
She still has an ass like a horse.

David was disappointed in his brother's behavior and demanded that the limericks be taken down. The insulting words were removed, but the following day, Ted placed another copy of the limericks directly above the machine David was working on. David, who worked as foreman, confronted his brother.

"Okay, are you going to fire me?" Ted asked.

David did exactly that, and his brother left.

Ted was enraged. The next day, he waited in the parking lot of Foam Cutting Engineers. Cloaked in a paper sack was a knife. As Kaczynski writes later of the interaction, "When she arrived I confronted her, talked with her briefly, and then left without laying a finger on her. After that my anger was burned out."

But Ted abbreviates this interaction in his autobiography. The detail he leaves out is critical to his true objective and was very important to the FBI years later.

As the FBI would share with me during my investigative research, Ted had planned to disfigure Ellen with the knife he had hidden.

Thankfully for Ellen, Ted's anger was resolved, and he would eventually return to Montana—leaving his family, Ellen, and Foam Cutting Engineers behind.

* * *

The following story is as difficult to tell as it was to hear—a family secret so terrifying that it had been buried for years, told only in whispered hushes by my stepmother long after Ted's arrest.

Wendy packed up her two-year-old in the truck. It was time to repair the destruction that was caused by a new logging technique they had recently embarked upon involving two draft horses, twenty hands tall, pulling freshly cut logs behind them. It was effective, environmentally friendly, and definitely could harken the onlooker back to days gone by. But the act of drawing the logs through the tall grass disrupted the vegetation below. It was time for Wendy to re-seed that path.

She spread the grass seed on the skid road behind the mill as her daughter played in the adjacent trees. The perfect playground.

Then she felt it—the presence of a predator. Wendy sprinted to grab her daughter from the trees. They both loaded up in the truck and cut their seeding endeavor short. She didn't see a mountain lion, but that's what it felt like. Something stealthy, ominous, and ready to pounce.

Wendy didn't think anything of this day until a year later. In 1996, after the arrest of her longtime neighbor, she was invited to read his journals. She saw many things

that shocked her to her core, but nothing as harrowing as the unveiling of the truth about that day in the woods.

As she read his words, her heart sank. Anger permeated her entire body as Ted painted the scene.

Ted staring at the two of them through his rifle scope.

Alternating between mother and daughter.

He wrote that he could have killed them that day, without question.

As my stepmother remembers reading in Ted's journals, It would be easy to take the little bitch out. But then the big bitch could get away. Or if I shoot the big bitch, then the little bitch would be left on the hill.

He now knew he could kill at close range, but it wouldn't be today.

As documented in Ted's personal writings, I think that perhaps I could now kill someone (and I don't mean just set a booby trap having only a fractional success), under circumstances where there was very little chance of getting caught.

My sister wouldn't lose her life that day. Instead, she passed away years later, still before her time—only twenty-four. A loss harrowing in its own right, so tragic, a life unlived.

Discovering that Ted considered killing Tessa and Wendy that day was pivotal in my quest for answers about my neighbor. It wasn't me in the scope of Ted's rifle, it was my little sister and stepmother. Ted was a killer, poised and ready to murder, in the backyard we shared. We were all in danger. Even the youngest among us, those innocent and unfettered by society.

* * *

During their time in Lincoln, Chris and his wife always had dogs. One thing remained consistent through the years: every single one of them hated Ted. Anytime the hermit came around, their hackles rose, and they would become incredibly protective. They all barked at the wild man, a behavior that Chris described as being out of character.

Now he knows that nothing was amiss with either his wife's or his dogs' intuition.

"Betty, was there ever a time you felt comfortable around Ted?" I asked.

"No. I would see him lurking around here. He tried to use the shop if he thought we were gone. I'd see his face outside the window at night. It made me uneasy, made the animals uneasy. I never really felt he liked me."

"I know the dogs barked at Ted. Were there any other signs?"

Chris began to explain, "More than just signs. Our dog of fourteen years, Jigger, was stabbed repeatedly by someone. I presume it was Ted. Betty found the poor old dog in the yard, bleeding from knife wounds and groaning and crying in misery. It was a guttural noise, something you never forget. We said our parting words and I ended his misery with my pistol."

"Heart wrenching."

“Years later, our pack of dogs was attacked, but in a strange manner. Someone smeared human excrement all over them. Then two years after that, I found my malamute lying in the front yard, paralyzed. He was poisoned and died before I could get to the vet. Four more dogs mysteriously died of poisoning before Ted’s arrest.”

“Chris, I am so sorry,” I offered.

“But as horrible as these were, that wasn’t the worst of it. The death that tore me apart was my dear Tasha. She was an older malamute and we loved her dearly. One day I noticed her lying on the porch, labored breath and lethargic. She kept trying to clean the fur on her hind end. But wasn’t moving other than that. Once I was able to inspect her, I found something that made my stomach turn and my chest ache.”

“Poor Tasha! What was it?”

“A bullet wound right in her rectum. A horrible way to kill an animal. So painful. A slow death caused by internal bleeding.”

“Awful,” I said through tears, picturing a younger Chris Waits cradling his struggling dogs, ending their suffering with a pistol at close range, and watching as the light drained from their eyes.

“There were more after Tasha. But the violence against my dogs came to a stop in 1996.”

* * *

Jamie Gehring spent her Montana childhood in endless exploration of a backyard held in common with the Unabomber—a serial killer obsessed with dismantling technological society. Gehring has spent five years crafting, *Madman in the Woods* and still maintains that we never truly know our neighbors. She lives in Denver and can be found writing, hiking, or enjoying her family. You can connect with her online at www.jamiegehring.com or on Instagram (@JamieGehringAuthor).

(End of Preview)

The Ted K Archive

Jamie Gehring
Madman in the Woods (Preview)
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