

Am I Alive?

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Ruth A. Zandstra

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For most of her fifty-odd years, Zandstra chose to think of herself as crazy. Not being crazy meant the hazy memories that continually resurfaced were true. And for Zandstra, that was far worse than being crazy.

Then, while she and her siblings cleaned their mother's house after her death, Zandstra stumbled upon another piece of the puzzle that haunted her for decades. She found a gold chain with a satanic goat's head image—further proof that her memories were accurate.

"So I'm not lying! I'm NOT making it all up! I'm not crazy!" Ruth Zandstra insists to her skeptical brother. But even after decades of therapy, she still occasionally wonders, as she did throughout her childhood, "Am I alive?"

Zandstra was a victim of satanic ritual abuse by some of the men of her church, including her father and grandfather. She later learned by the FBI investigating the cult that members often hide in the shadows of traditional church attendance.

She tells her story through a series of chronologically arranged memories, beginning when she was three and routinely snatched out of bed by her father in the middle of the night and taken to a clearing in the woods. There she became a reluctant observer and victim of a hideous ritual that involved blood sacrifice, sexual abuse, and Satan worship.

Pulled from sleep, then plopped back into bed after the night's horror ended, she woke in the mornings fearful and uneasy—it must have been a bad dream, she'd conclude, despite the blood and scratches she sometimes discovered. Life went on—family times at the beach, picking blueberries, summer vacations, school, and friends—all the while Zandstra fearing she'd die or burst "into a million pieces" at any time.

Describing a scene in the woods where she is called to come forward during the ritual, she writes, "I see the toes of his shoes against my toes, and look up just enough to see both his open hands in front of my face. In one hand there are small, bloody eyes in the palm of his hand. I know that I have to swallow them, so that Satan can see inside me and know what I'm thinking."

The memories are grisly, but Zandstra does a masterful job of painting them through the eyes of a child, her voice maturing as she moves through adolescence and enters high school and finally college. She's also adept at hinting at the multiple inner personalities that developed to handle stresses she was incapable of bearing. She learned to disassociate and detach when reality was more than she could bear. Add to this Zandstra's inevitable alcoholism, and it's a marvel that she emerged from the past to raise four daughters and earn a degree in psychology.

This is not a pleasant subject, but the powerful portrayal of an abused child whose inner strength allows her to emerge from the woods and into the light makes it worth reading.

RUTH DOUILLETTE (February 17, 2011)

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