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‘My dad, the drug king’

Tyler Wetherall had no idea her father was a drug-smuggling kingpin until the police eventually tracked him down. She speaks to others who share her experience of a childhood spent on the run

I was nine years old when I first discovered my father was a fugitive. Instead of taking us to school one morning, Mum called my sister and me into her room, gathering us together in her king-sized bed with cups of tea. She told us our surname was not our own but an alias, and that our family had been on the run from the FBI for the past seven years. That was my entire remembering life.

It was several years later that I learnt what he'd done. My dad's organisation smuggled nearly half a billion dollars' worth of marijuana into America in the late 1970s and early '80s. By the time I was born, in 1983, the Feds were watching our home. Within two years the investigation had closed in on him, and my parents decided that rather than break up our family through his incarceration, we should leave the country. They hoped it would blow over.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was clearly ill advised. But at the time we weren't the only family doing it, and for good reason: Ronald Reagan's 1980s crackdown on drugs saw some sentences more than double, with mandatory minimums and no parole. The liberal approach of former president Jimmy Carter meant the weed-smuggling community had been relatively benign – hippies with a modicum of business nous and the connections to cash in on the times. But with the full might of Reagan's newly formed Drug Task Force mobilised against them, many went on the run – and took their families along for the ride.

When we first arrived in Europe from California in 1985, we became part of a network of fugitives stretching across the whole continent. These fugitives exchanged information and contacts with each other: tips on how to get children into school under fake names, who had been arrested and how long they got, and where to hide illegal money.

And then there were us kids, who grew up collecting postal addresses and names like other children collect Barbies. Who grew up keeping secrets that could land our parents in prison. ▶

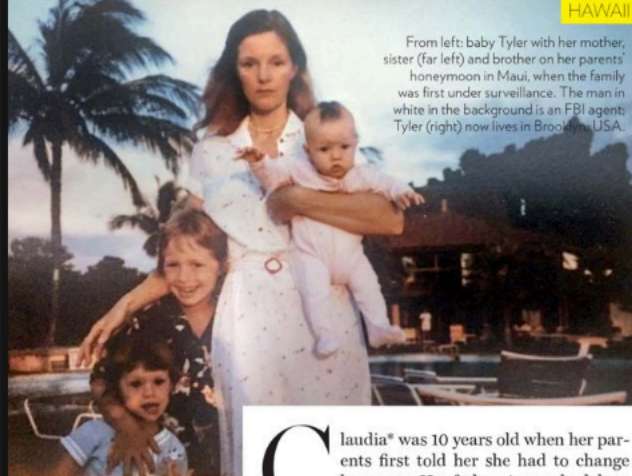


SAINT LUCIA

Tyler (left) and her sister Caitlin pictured with their fugitive father off the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia. The family were celebrating Tyler's 12th birthday.

HAWAII

From left: baby Tyler with her mother, sister (far left) and brother on her parents' honeymoon in Maui, when the family was first under surveillance. The man in white in the background is an FBI agent; Tyler (right) now lives in Brooklyn, USA.



Claudia* was 10 years old when her parents first told her she had to change her name. Her father, Aaron, had done some smuggles with my father back in California, and both were later charged with running a continuing criminal enterprise under the so-called Kingpin Statute; under new laws this carried a minimum 20-year sentence. Aaron was a kind, laid-back man who went on the run with his wife and two daughters shortly before we did. Claudia remembers sitting in a restaurant in the south of France hoping for ice cream, when her dad told her that from now on, she must use the surname Sewell. For the first six months, Claudia spelt her new name wrong. He hadn't thought to show her how to spell it. Her dad said he was in trouble for tax evasion. That's what we were told too, our parents relying on our ignorance.

Claudia's sister, Anna, was 18 months old when she left the States. She grew up believing everyone was given a different name when living in Europe, a child's explanation for the inexplicable. We never questioned what we were told, at least not at first. It was all we had ever known. Instead, we filled in the gaps without realising.

My family moved from Italy to Portugal to the south of France to join the other fugitives we knew who had settled there successfully. At our house in Mougins, "Baby Doc" – the Haitian dictator – lived next door to us, and Saudi Arabian arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi lived on the other side. It was a place the dubiously wealthy could reside without raising eyebrows. Even once we



relocated to the UK and my parents separated, we spent summers in France with the other fugitive families. The children never spoke with one another about our situation. We were all brought up with one rule: don't tell! Claudia has still told only two or three people in her life.

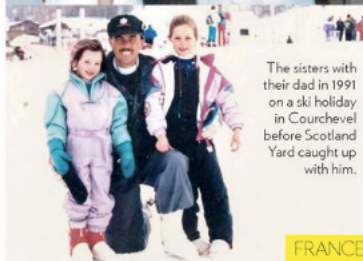
Alexander spent the first nine years of his life moving; he lost count of the many houses and schools he passed through. He changed name three times and, each time, his father would have him write it out repeatedly to make sure he got it right. Alexander remembers, when he was eight, having a sleepover at a friend's house and telling her that he had two different names. His friend said that was weird, so in the car on the way home Alexander asked his dad about it. That was the first time he learnt his real surname. He felt like there was an adventure going on and he was now in on the secret. "We were definitely a team," he says, speaking of his tight-knit family.

When the world around you is in flux, you close ranks. Us versus them. We became master liars, master secret keepers. If anyone questioned an aspect of my childhood that didn't make sense – the frequent moves or the dubious nature of my father's employment – I made something up. I said we'd left America because Mum wanted to be closer to her English family, or that my dad was a venture capitalist. Both of these things are also true. Alexander described this as doublethink: believing both your cover story and the truth.

The arrest of another set of fugitives compromised the security of the safe hold in the south of France, and many of our band of outliers moved on. Alexander remembers being frightened as his dad fled for a hide-out in Paris, saying to him, "If anything happens, take care of your mum and brother." Claudia came home from school at the

PORTUGAL

Tyler, 18 months, and Caitlin, 3, with their parents while on the run in 1985.



The sisters with their dad in 1991 on a ski holiday in Courchevel before Scotland Yard caught up with him.

FRANCE

end of summer term to be told she was never going back. Her family was moving to Florence next, and she wasn't to contact her friends or tell anyone where they were going. "That was when I knew it was more serious than tax evasion," she says. Soon after, she was watching the news with her mother when a segment on drug traffickers came on and Claudia asked, "Is that like Daddy?"

Claudia, now a 42-year-old mother living in New York, said she wasn't sure how she knew. "He never had a job, but I didn't question it. We referred to the payphone as his office." Her father had always been open about his weed smoking. "It still smells like home," she says. "You know how other people think of apple pie? It's like that." Later, when they moved to Paris, Claudia, then 16, would score pot for him. "I had more hook-ups than he did. And he was afraid of getting caught."

Anna's moment of epiphany came when she watched the River Phoenix movie *Running on Empty* – about a counterculture family on the run from the FBI – and recognised her own life in theirs. We all have these anecdotes in droves – our clumsy confrontations with the stuff of Hollywood movies while trying to lead normal family lives. Our parents had the fake identities, close calls with federal agents and secret stashes of cash in bank vaults. But we were just fumbling through, much like navigating puberty, which unhelpfully came in tandem.

As other teenagers shared secrets during sessions of truth or dare, we stayed silent. The first time Alexander told a friend, he was 14. "I felt terrible after, like I had gone against everything," he says, his intonation now distinctly French. "When I noticed my friend didn't believe me, I said it was a joke. I didn't tell anyone else until I was 21."

For me, the secrets were easy to keep until I was high, and then I wanted to talk. I always regretted it, waking up the next day in a pit of



a comedown, terrified something was going to happen because of what I had said.

We all got fed up in the end. For Anna, it was when she was 12; Claudia had already left home and her parents sprung it on her that they were moving from Paris to Amsterdam. "I had friends, I had a life," Anna says. "It was this whole other language to learn. I was pissed and over it."

Anna's parents sat her down to tell her that her dad was a weed smuggler. He said everyone was doing it in the '80s and it wasn't a big deal, but she didn't see it that way. "I felt like it was irresponsible," she said, now a single mother in New York. "Damn, he already had money, two kids; it wasn't the time to be selling drugs."

I used to imagine what my life might have been like if my dad never got in trouble. If I grew up in the house in California where I was born, with the private lake, flock of peacocks, a row of Warhols on the wall and a couple Corvettes in the garage. I probably would have been a brat. But, yeah, it would have been nice to find out.

Our fathers fell one by one. In 1996, my dad was sentenced to 10 years, serving six in California, where he now lives. There were ups and downs, but we remained close through it all. Claudia and Anna's dad turned himself in once the girls left home in 2004. They all met for a week in Vancouver and cried when they said goodbye. He smoked a cigarette, burnt his fake identities, walked up to the immigration official at the Canadian border and said, "You'll want to call your boss on this one." The FBI finally located Alexander's dad in 2016. Now a 33-year-old video artist living just outside Paris, Alexander described the arrest as his world crumbling. His dad had been a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen in France for 30 years and was now a septuagenarian. The charges were eventually dropped.

And us kids – well, the cash has long since run dry, but we have the stories.

"There was a time when it pissed me off to hear about Dad smoking joints with Bob Marley, or whatever. I'd say, 'It's thanks to all that we lived the life we did,'" Alexander said, laughing. "But I also feel admiration. He did everything in his power to give us a normal life. My way of looking at it? It made me stronger."

I didn't learn about the others' experiences until it was all over and we reconnected as adults, bandying about these tales like private jokes, laughing at the absurdity of it all. I wouldn't change it now. Apart from a little less heartache, perhaps, and keeping one single hidden Warhol.



From top: Tyler's father was jailed at Lompoc Federal Correctional Complex in California; the girls and their mother in California, 1984; Tyler in Bath, 1996. Growing up, Tyler and Caitlin were banned from watching the film *The Fugitive*.



Tyler Wetherall is the author of *No Way Home: A Memoir of Life on the Run* (St. Martin's Press, \$34.99).

"... us kids grew up collecting postal addresses and names like other children collect Barbies"

– Tyler Wetherall



In 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared illicit drugs to be a threat to US national security, giving rise to the "war on drugs" crackdown.

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