

# SEX, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE

Kristin Battista-Fraze was unfazed by her father's involvement in '70s porn classic *Deep Throat*... until the need to understand took hold

What's your bestselling product?" I asked my father, perusing the shelves of his adult store. "That's easy," he said. "It's the Pocket Rocket." "What's that?" "It's a miniature vibrator. Women love it because it's small enough to fit into any handbag." He lifted the box from its shelf and handed it to me. I took it awkwardly, unable to look him in the eyes. "Clever," I said, realising that I was perhaps having the strangest conversation any daughter has ever had with her father. Then again, no-one else I know is fathered by a man partly responsible for a sexual revolution by distributing the most infamous porn film in history.

Dad never planned on becoming a purveyor of pornography. In 1973 – the year after *Deep Throat* was released, stirring up unrivalled controversy – he was a stockbroker in Philadelphia, where I grew up. A family friend contacted him about a "business opportunity" that turned out to be distributing the film in America's north-east. "All you'd have to do is call theatres and pitch them the movie," said Uncle Tony, who had also convinced Dad to invest in an adult-movie theatre – the only place in central Florida where you could watch porn on the big screen. "You get five per cent of the distributor's cut of the gross from whatever theatres you sign." My father knew he was suited to the job; making phone calls and booking sales was all in a day's work. Not to mention *Deep Throat* would basically sell itself, its popularity still

off the charts despite having been in select theatres for more than a year. If I don't cash in on the opportunity, Dad thought, someone else will. My mother gave him her permission, trusting his judgement, so he took up the offer.

Distributing the film was supposed to be a part-time job but, before he knew it, he'd become the primary point of contact for theatre owners desperate to gain access to *Deep Throat*. That year, he made around \$30,000 from distributing, landing all the big movie houses in Philadelphia. But everything changed the following year, when Dad was indicted by the federal government for distributing a film said to be obscene. He lost his job in stockbroking after the arrest made national headlines. Struggling to make a living, Dad used his newly acquired business contacts to open a strip club. Just four at the time, I was too young to understand the full impact of my father's transformation from stockbroker to porn broker on our family's stability. But I could feel it.

Mum reluctantly supported Dad's new career, knowing he needed to support our family somehow, but it never sat well. We saw less and less

of him as he rushed out the door after dinner each evening and slept during the day. She was plagued by gnawing suspicions of infidelity, never quite sure of how he spent his nights, unnerved by girls from the club calling the house at all hours to speak to him. It wasn't long before their relationship started to unravel. She cried, a lot, which only resulted in more fighting. I spent my time playing with dolls at our neighbours' house, desperate to escape the noise. The stress was too much for my mother's mental health; thoughts like "I must be unworthy of love" eventually drove her to down 30 pills with a bottle of bourbon.

After the suicide attempt, Dad relocated us to Florida in the hope of a fresh start. We moved past the trials (appeals helped whittle his sentence down to a \$2,000 fine and two months served in a halfway house) but the 10 years the *Deep Throat* saga dragged on for had caused irreparable damage. My parents divorced when I was 15.

In spite of all the fighting, all the legal drama, all the business deals brokered over the bouncing chests of female strippers, my love for my father never wavered. I was the quintessential



Daddy's girl, always jumping up to greet him when he got home from work. "How's my little girl?" he'd boom, lifting me off the floor and into a bear hug even when I was far too old. I always knew his "adults only" business was taboo but in all the ways that mattered, he was your average dad. He didn't come to Careers Day at school to talk about his job (only a few trusted school friends knew about my father's business), but he did cheer me on at soccer games. He also encouraged my higher education, not just by writing the cheques, but by helping me move boxes into various apartments. For most of my life, ignorance was bliss. But reconciling the other side to my dad – notorious porn broker – with the one I knew became more important as I grew older. I'd come of age against the backdrop of the pornography industry, yet it remained a mystery.

The urge to understand my past came to a head one night in 1993. My cousin Christopher and I were drinking Jack Daniel's and Coke on the back deck of my uncle's house in Washington DC, where I was staying while completing an internship. In the midst of us catching up, I offhandedly mentioned my father's flourishing pornography business in Florida, where he'd expanded his adult-theatre business and opened a chain of adult stores.

Christopher interrupted me, choking on his drink. "Huh?" he said, gathering himself. "Say that again?" "Say what again?" I countered, puzzled. I was 23 years old, he was 20 – in all those years, the topic of my father's career, or past distributing *Deep Throat*, never came up. It turned out my aunt and uncle had been so embarrassed by my father that they decided not to share the details with their son, passing him off as an "entrepreneur". I realised then how hard it must have been for them to have their last name broadcast on the news in association with a porn film and a major federal case in the wake of

his arrest. I wondered if they felt sorry for me. Should I feel sorry for myself? I wasn't sure. Dad was like a jigsaw puzzle with a million pieces, and I was yet to see the full picture.

Three years after Christopher's discovery, I finally travelled to Florida to tour my father's stores. By then I was a social worker living in New York. Even though my life was far from anything associated with the pornography industry, I was ready to learn more. I stepped off the plane and into the humid air a bundle of nerves. Dad stood at the arrivals gate smiling and waving, wearing his work uniform: a collared polo shirt with a pen stuck in the pocket and tailored pants. No-one would ever guess what he does for a living, I thought. Not one to mess around, Dad drove me straight to one of his stores. As we pulled into the parking lot, I could tell he was nervous but excited; he'd always kept the details of his thriving business from me, but now I was mature enough to see what he did for myself.

Opening the door, the bell tinkling as I stepped inside, I realised I was holding my breath. The first thing I noticed were purple neon signs pointing to the different types of erotic merchandise sitting on the shelves. It felt like Blockbuster, except that the DVDs stacked floor-to-ceiling

help but smile; he sounded just like a walking adult product encyclopedia. It struck me that any retail store – mainstream or on the fringe – would benefit from my father's business know-how. I felt strangely proud.

When it was time to go home, we made small talk about his next visit to New York, my mind recalling vibrators all the while. No mention was made of my decision to visit, or the fact his brother hadn't told Christopher the truth about our family history, but I no longer cared. I'd seen enough of Dad's world to feel comfortable with it. We all carry our family's history with us but, over the years, I've come to the conclusion that how my father made a living isn't what's shaped me – it's how my parents handled him being in the pornography business while raising a daughter. I've learned from their mistakes. I now have a daughter of my own, with a wonderful husband who's from a more conventional background, and how she chooses to use our family's history to address decisions in life will be up to her.

For me, I imagine life will always be a bit of a balancing act, deciding if and when to tell people about my connection to pornography. When I've opened up in the past, the most common response has been: "You

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were categorised by fetishes for feet, anal sex and everything in between. And then there were the toys – penis pumps, vibrators and dildos in different shapes, sizes and colours, bondage packs complete with whips and chains, all displayed neatly on wall racks. My father rattled off the brands he stocked, preaching the importance of offering customers quality products, while I wandered through the aisles feeling fascinated and embarrassed. Watching him pontificate with passion, I couldn't

don't look like your family would be in porn." I suppose they expect the daughter of a pornographer to be a stripper or porn star rather than a social worker and marketing professional. They might also imagine Dad as a sleazy guy with slicked-back hair and a big gold chain. But that's okay: I know the truth. □

*Kristin Battista-Fraze's memoir The Pornographer's Daughter: Growing Up In The Shadow Of Deep Throat (\$29.99, Nero) is out now. kristinbattistafraze.com*