

CHAPTER TWO

Seen and Not Heard

Some rules create closeness, and some enforce distance. As a young, twinkly-eyed bride, my mom signed a marriage license that bound her to my father. After decades of living in a home of exhausted love and twisted blackness, she scrawled her name across the bottom of a restraining order, and sealed off our past. Between the Texas coast and our hometown, my father became a ghost to be resurrected only by forbidden memories I'd scrawl in the tiny journal I'd lock away in secret. It was the only place he could be good.

Public shame followed him everywhere. Mom's lawyer and his pals put the fear of God into Dad, and in going through his papers, I saw that they made life a living hell for him. No bank would give him a loan. No employer in the city would hire or contract him. His gravel mill sunk into oblivion. While Dad became the humiliated, abandoned pariah he feared he'd always been, I yearned for the comfort of his love. When I asked about him, Mom gave me one of two answers:

He's busy.

He's working.

Eventually I stopped asking. My first family fell silent, save the somber strings of loneliness that pulled at us in different ways. I was five years old in 1977 with one fuzzy friend who I could clutch when I ached for the wholeness of home. I'd clutch my stuffed Grover as hard as I could, and weep softly into his head, until I matted his fur with snot and tears. Aside from Grover, sometimes I had Mom, when she'd return from dissociating from her pain to be present with me. In those moments, we were a powerful pair, two heroines against the stark loneliness of our lives. Then she'd drift away again, and I'd wonder why she didn't have many friends outside of the people she played cards with. Even at a young age, I could recognize that Mom had a tendency to draw in poor company. She'd spend her free time playing cards with her landlords, a crowd that eventually included the infamous Robert.

Robert's poison pooled right below his ominous eyes. Children see everything adults seem to hide from themselves. Mom's gnawing loneliness quickly eroded the line between fear and instinct — until her partially sober discernment became a disillusioned haze. Mom claimed she found Robert gross. She didn't like his macho attitude. Naturally, she did what women in her position always do — *she started dating him*. Over hearts, clubs, diamonds, and spades, Mom allowed Robert into her life, and therefore, mine. If she'd paid attention to her initial impression, my life would not have unraveled in the way it did; until every frayed fiber came undone through events I neither designed nor desired.

Robert's son, Bobby, was 17 years old the first night they left him to babysit me and his youngest brother, David. Just as Mom never told me what they had for dinner that night, I never told her what Bobby did to me after David fell asleep. And so it was that within six months of leaving my father, Mom and I were moving our meagre belongings into Robert's trailer. I gained four new older siblings: Thomas, Bobby, Teresa, and David. We crowded into the small rooms of the trailer together, one extensive family, save Thomas as he had already moved out on his own.

Ripped from my safe existence and my hope for reunification with Dad and Yogi, Mom tossed me into a swiftly moving current where everything happened so fast. I fought to keep my head above water and

paddle like hell as the massive changes threatened to overwhelm me. The turbulence of my new reality swept me far away from Dad's love, those long rides in his old truck, and Yogi. I was drowning. And for a long time, I felt like my toes would never hit solid ground again.

Gone was my handsome father with his flannel shirts and nervous disposition, replaced by a burly not-my-father man. Robert wore an ill-fitting jean jacket vest with sheepskin inside, pulled tight across his massive chest. On his right breast was a patch that said Aries with a little bull on it. I used to stare at that stupid little bull, trying to make sense of the replacement in fathers.

Robert's kids lost their mother to a brain aneurysm. A prostitute moved in to do a short stint as a fill-in mother figure, bringing with her the thick energy of sex that permeated Robert, his kids, the household, and never went away. There was sexual abuse that rooted back to Robert's parents, so the prostitute just normalized it for them all. And when Mom became Robert's wife, I lost her, too. The loving parent I once knew — that stronghold of safety — drifted downstream to a place always just out of my reach. The defenses breached, I suffocated in the disorder of the other children. In this unknown world without Dad nobody adored me anymore. At least not in the right way.

In my other life, our home was open, light, and free flowing because we were a family unit. Even the layout of Robert's trailer defined my new existence. Mom and Robert shared a bedroom in the front, while us four kids shared two dark bedrooms in the back — hidden away in the cold quiet, out of sight, out of mind, and out of reach. Once our parents' bedroom door closed at night, it physically separated us no matter what went on in the back of the trailer. They did not permit us to go into their room without asking; I only had to open that door one time to learn to never, ever do that again.

Before my mom combined families with Robert and his ragtag children, I had a place at the front of the room; a voice at the center of my parents' household. As the only child, my dad adored me and I adored him. In the confusion of my new life, I shrunk, and learned to stay in the background; it estranged me from the only person I had left to love me, and even when Mom was physically present, she was emotionally out of reach. I no longer wanted to be front and center as Robert severely disciplined the other kids. If they were cocky or showy, he would have smacked them down with his fat-fingered hands. I wanted to be small, so I hid myself away in the shadows. It was the safest course of action.

But while I retreated, I watched. I was still too young to understand much about sex, but I certainly saw the power that held over others. The prostitute had irrevocably tainted Robert's family with the sickness of sex. It wasn't the kind of sex that was consensual or giving, but a forced heaviness that lingered in every corner of the trailer. There was the sex between Mom and Robert, something I imagined at night as I endured my own horror. Even at a young age, I sensed it was a sad act weighted with an unspoken power dynamic; hardly consensual, even in the confines of marriage.

Despite our increasing distance, Mom and I together operated as cogs in a grind for survival. I'd remind myself she loved me, even if her expression of it in our new life felt ambiguous and exhausted. Her previous life with Dad evaporated as she embraced a very challenging situation, dragging me along by the neck. I imagine it was hard to be alone, and even harder to stay with Robert and his kids. I watched my mother become a load-bearing wall to ensure she sheltered us. She determined that if our future was going to be insufferable regardless, we might as well have financial security with Robert. Thinking of all the books on the shelf of our old life, I imagined a sense of stability took precedence over everything else. Money. But even in my youth, I recognized there were more important ways to be stable.

When I look at pictures of Robert kissing Mom, it's clear that she found his touch just short of nauseating. Yet she puckered up and put on a brave face because she determined we were going to survive. She accepted she was going to raise Robert's kids.

Why him?

Why them?

Lacking exposure to other men, Mom saw our small town comprising people she'd known her entire life. Better to take a risk on a stranger. And so Mom withdrew into the machinations of this life; becoming absent from every level; abandoning herself and me in every sense. While she may have been physically around as much as she always had been, when I needed it most, Mom stopped hugging me. She stopped kissing me on the lips. Her affection for me turned from spontaneous to perfunctory as she became my parent and my guardian in name only.

Once, when we were sitting in the car, I reached for her hand to hold it. She pulled her arm away saying, "This makes me feel weird," after which I stared straight ahead, and coiled my tiny little fingers into a fist, determining I would hold myself as best I could from then on. It wasn't just me, Mom was not affectionate with Robert's kids either. It was very much a *stepmother-meets-stepchildren* relationship. Somehow I too fell under that umbrella of no touching, and physical affection between Mom and me faded to not much more than a memory.

But it wasn't like the other kids in the household received more care than I did. Mostly, we each fended for our individual emotional health; out of sight, out of mind — a byproduct of living with two parents who could not meet their own emotional needs. I wondered if Mom ever missed when our original quartet was her primary concern. I wondered about a lot of things. I said very little. Each blow to my safety flattened me down further to a squishy ball of unprocessed emotion. Like Dad, I pushed it all down, down, down, and down. And like Dad, I too would erupt one day.

Mom shut down her feminine side and gone were the fun costumes and the sketching and the handmade birthday cards. It was as if we stepped from one life into another and could bring only one thing from our previous existence along. I brought Grover; she brought her quirky reading glasses. She ruled the roost, and ran the budget, while Robert brought in the money which was an inadequate contribution.

Mom ate little. When I wrapped my arms around her legs, I could feel her bones through her nylons. She was growing frailer by the day. Even her skin and hair looked different. Dried out. Faded. I assumed her withering away was because there was never enough for her. Not enough food. Not enough space. Not enough love. There was only the stench of sex, the bondage that kept us tied together. At a young age, I watched. And vowed I would never fall under the thumb of another.

Rules eclipsed the reality of my mother. Robert was the dictator of the household, with a strict regimen for everything that we were to follow from the moment we awoke until the moment we went to sleep. A detailed schedule dictated everything. Having served in the Navy, Robert had relentless methods of asserting himself over others to control the ranks. Our assignment:

6:30 a.m. – wake up for school, get dressed, brush teeth, and eat off-brand cereal.

7:30 a.m. – leave for school.

3:30 p.m. – return from school and do assigned chores.

6:00 p.m. – sit down at dinner, at your designated place; always pass your dishes to the left; take only one serving from each plate before passing it along; do NOT reach for anything without asking first.

Shortly after we moved in, I witnessed Robert jam a fork in the back of David's hand when he reached for a second pork chop without asking. Robert was particularly rough with David, routinely whacking his youngest son in the back of the head with his hairbrush. Robert stood 6' 2" with a tight, frizzy perm he wore long in the back and added a few inches to his height. He probably weighed about 260 pounds, and those fingers that grasped that hairbrush were long and fat. He terrified me because he was *so much*.

And Robert had complete control of my mother; he'd taken her away and made all these rules and punishments for disobedience that I didn't understand. Even though Dad had been scary in his drunken stupors, I could find relief when he was sober. With Robert, there was neither safety nor stability at any time. The days at home were shadows, and the nights were complete darkness.

After I absorbed the shock of Robert replacing my father, my entire life became a gaping void: I felt only hard swallows, and feelings of paralysis in a silent tomb. That oppressive stillness was not solely the absence of noise. It was the absence of circulation. Understanding. Connection. Touch. Love. It felt like being locked in a soundproof room, alone save being trapped with the haunting loss of my previous life. I knew good things existed. I had memories of better days, but sometimes it seemed as if I'd never had them at all.

Robert claimed the adage, *Kids are meant to be seen and not heard*, which meant I could never express myself, as school was a controlled environment as well. I stuffed down each new experience, each new rule, each additional punishment. I wrestled my insides down into that dark, vulnerable place inside me I no longer dared access.

At night, I would ask question after question of my sister, Teresa, who slept in the bunk bed above me. I couldn't grasp the reasoning behind the new rules, and she helped me with another perspective that I could feel about things. She sighed in a way that told me she had given up a long time ago. "Just do as they say and don't mouth back."

"But what if I don't understand the rules?"

"Watch us. We already know the rules."

"What if I get in trouble?" Even *trouble* was new to me. It hadn't been a part of life before.

"You'll be okay."

But would I? Despite wanting to believe her, I wasn't so sure. This new life felt like anything but okay. Why was there not more food? Why did Mom have to live behind that closed bedroom door? Why could we not have soda? Instead, Robert rinsed out a plastic gallon milk jug, added one Kool-Aid packet and half a cup of sugar, but there was no separating the sour taste of the milk from the semi-sweet, watery Kool-Aid. Robert denied us treats like chips and sweets. Only on Friday nights were we able to indulge in popcorn, and sharing it with a tribe of other kids with nasty hands, just took something out of it.

My thoughts consumed me with questions Teresa could not answer for me. I was so overwhelmed by what was taking place, I couldn't properly absorb school as it'd all just become a haze. I don't remember celebrating birthdays, or even the slightest moments of reprieve. I only remember abuse. And moving.

We were constantly transplanting across the country as Robert continually sought work in his field. No matter where we set up shop, the household remained just as bleak, whether we were in Small Town One or Small Town Two. Mom made the menu for the week after her Sunday night grocery trips according to what was on sale. I knew on Wednesdays if we were having meatballs, and if on Fridays we were having fish. We typically ate TV dinners on Tuesdays on those old metal top meal trays. We ate a lot of pasta and rice because it was a filling, cheap, quick fix for hungry kids.

We didn't get candies outside of Halloween, and even then Robert permitted us to have just one piece of candy per day. We had a trio of wooden canisters that lived on the kitchen counter. One had sugar and one had flour. Mom loved Hershey's Kisses, so she kept a canister to herself, and we could never eat her candy. One time, Robert broke tradition and permitted one canister to house miniature Tootsie Rolls, which we could not eat either. Robert took to counting the rolls when he was feeling especially cruel. During one count, two Tootsie Rolls were missing, and we all paid for it.

Like food, they similarly parsed items of clothing. We went to JC Penney's to purchase 14 shirts that were all the same style with varying-colored stripes. They allotted me seven shirts for one week and David would get the other seven, then we would swap our sets for the next week. Those shirts were a real treat, as we wore a lot of hand-me-downs. We didn't go out and do the big school clothes shopping thing. We didn't buy summer clothes, either. Summer clothes were winter clothes that were cut off at the shoulders and the knees.

Before the days of remote controls, all the kids sat on the floor of that trailer, acting as the channel changer for Robert. He would choose one of us to get up and press the buttons on his big old 1970's console television that dominated the room. I can still see him peering over the sea of children's heads from that velvet, burnt orange couch with the black pillows. That couch — along with its place in my memory — remained in the family for decades.

You, David. Change it to NBC.

Stand right there until the commercials are over, so I see what's on next.

Bobby, get up and find which channel Sanford and Son is on.

Find the news, Teresa. No, not that channel. Switch it. No, go back to the other one.

Jewels...

How I loathed the sound of my name when it rolled forth from Robert's mouth.

Although the house was stagnant, and we had no freedom to talk, move, think, or act without permission, Robert pampered Mom, which made us all feel resentful. Fridays — popcorn night — Robert popped a big batch on the stove. Mom would curl up in the corner of that orange couch with her own bowl with extra butter and a special little towel. All while the mess of us kids had to share one big bowl, feeling envious of how Mom perched like the queen of the orange couch.

Mom and Robert dictated every aspect of who we were and what we did. Our home life became exclusive; they permitted no outsiders inside. David and I always had to be together as they did not allow us to go out on our own. We could only occasionally ride our bikes around the block, delighting

in that *ratatatatat* from the playing cards we inserted in the spokes. In more fortunate seasons, we set up lemonade stands to make pocket money.

We were just normal 1970's kids. If we went out at 10 a.m., we'd have to return by noon for lunch. We had that kind of freedom, but we didn't venture out much, because most of the people on the other side of our trailer park were a party group of adults. I never was comfortable being over there because they were loud and drinking. David always wanted to go here because he used his mouth to get attention. Even if someone called him an idiot, he knew how to respond to get the attention of that cooler, older uncle figure. David was so hungry for love and attention, something I learned to recognize at my young age.

Robert physically abused David, but although David frustrated my mom, she would not hit him. I recall a time when she slammed the frying pan on the counter. But she would not touch him. Mom never used physical violence, outside of irrationally backhanding me once in anger. I forget what I'd said, but when those bony little fingers clad in rings clunked up against my mouth, I learned to keep my mouth closed. We were just good kids caught up in a confusingly aggressive household.

As a two-income family, both Mom and Robert left for work early in the morning. They left the eldest kids to help the rest get ready for school, leaving Bobby in charge — a mistake. Bobby had to have known that his actions toward me were wrong. I wasn't even seven years old, and I sensed something was off. I wondered if people feel so stuck in the soupy mud of their own sickness that they feel incapable of making better choices. Bobby could have thrown off the mantle of incest and abuse he'd inherited. But he didn't. So, mornings before school became a rinse-and-repeat horror for me.

In the midst of always losing, I got comfort from Grover — who still lives with me today. He's quite matted now, yet like me, he is intact with all his parts in the right places. As a little person, I pressed my lips into his soft head as I rocked him, with tears running down my face, as I twisted his blue fur into tiny little dreadlocks. Eventually, I rubbed the color from Grover's plastic eyes because I didn't want him to see. I filled his eyes in with a black marker. It was the least I could do.

David was only one month older than me, so he was old enough to grow suspicious when Bobby and I disappeared behind a closed door each morning before school. I protected David when he asked by telling him that everything was *fine*. *Bobby was fine*. *I was fine*. I became an adult for David, because I didn't want him to see what I endured. I couldn't rub out his eyes like I had done to Grover's. So I lied.

In keeping with the awful silence of my new family, I said nothing about the abuse. Going back to that space now and examining my innocence, I see the resilience of Little Me. I felt an inner expectation that I was going to adapt to the challenges in my life. I would prevail. It was my duty to help Mom, and the abuse came along with being a part of our new family. It was my cross to bear.

Innately, I knew that what was happening to me was wrong but I didn't have the words to express it. It felt like that terrible silence in the house; dark, cold, dirty. It was a *you have to go into the scary basement by yourself* type of feeling. I couldn't understand this shift in circumstances, because I didn't have that abuse dynamic with Dad. I was confused and sad. And no one noticed.

I went through the movements, but I was in my brain. Eventually, I learned to float out of my body and live above my consciousness. In the mornings, I would rise to the ceiling and watch the abuse. I didn't believe it was good or bad; it just was. When I grew older, I learned that dissociation is one symptom that abuse victims often experience. I didn't want to be in my body. I didn't want to look through my

eyes and see Bobby's dark, greasy hair, green eyes, and crooked teeth, nor smell his rotting breath. It was easier to disconnect, so I wouldn't experience it happening.

I met a whole new side of me, a whole new existence. I thought these acts were a part of growing up. I knew that sexual energy felt bad, but I wondered if it was part of becoming human? Trauma is hard to make sense of. I did not ask questions of Teresa about my mornings with Bobby. She did not ask any of me either, even though she had to have known what he was doing to me.

Since I knew my mom was already going through enough as it was, I saw the abuse as part of our survival. I was determined to not bring my troubles to her. Instead, I used my courage to protect myself, Mom, and David from the truth. It was a lot to endure and process; as a byproduct, I became a runner, in more ways than one. During mornings before school with Bobby, I trained myself to believe if I could hurry and suffer through it, I could get on with my day; which paved the pattern for pacing myself through pain for many years to come.

Those years were when I learned to manipulate to get my needs met. Of course, I didn't want to go into that space with Bobby. When he would oversleep, I sure as heck would not be the kid that woke him up. Instead, I busied myself with combing my hair and making crooked pigtails in front of the bathroom mirror. It was a small choice I could make to empower myself as I learned to move the pieces in my favor. I may not have had a lot of control over my environment, but I could hold what was mine whenever I found the opportunity. My strength reared its head when I realized that if I had to play by a certain set of rules, then I could choose not to be a dormant player. I would protect myself: a strength that would serve me well.

What happened inside the house and what happened outside the house were markedly different. The person Robert was inside the house — the cold and domineering King of The Orange Couch — was vastly different to how he presented himself at parties and gatherings. At home we were whipping boys, but to outsiders we were his beloved kids. Robert never touched me at home, and if his fat fingers accidentally brushed against me, I felt repulsion. We didn't go out very often — hardly ever, really — but when we were in social settings, Robert was full of affection for us. I wondered if anyone ever noticed how quiet we were: voiceless and propped up in the moment, like fragile, hollow dolls.

One time we took a family road trip vacation, piling into Robert's decked-out 1970's red van to tour around the Midwest. Mount Rushmore. Wall Drug. Mom gave spiral notebooks to David and me to paste our trinkets and miniature license plates emblazoned with our names. It was one of the few bonding experiences of my childhood. The moment felt surreal in some ways. I soaked it up like a sponge; in other ways, I was too skeptical to believe it was actually happening and too scared to absorb it. Despite being near my mom, I was keenly aware of the vast separation between us. No craft, nor decorated reality could glue us back together again, nor make the torn pieces fit. No snapshot in front of a historical landmark could rewrite our story, nor encapsulate a strained love.

I tucked my image of my mother away like a collector's item I could never unbox. She slept and spent her time in the front room of the trailer, while they confined me to my private hell at the opposite end of the hallway. If I cried out, no one heard other than Grover, and possibly the god I always hoped existed, but was too afraid to put confidence in. In the mornings, we would come back out of our rooms and pretend everything was normal. But then when we had to go to bed, it again thrust me into a dark abyss where Mom would and could not be.

We only had one bathroom in the trailer. Mom stacked her small vials and bottles of Mary Kay makeup

on the tiny shelves in the bathroom. One morning, I walked out of my bedroom to see her standing before the mirror in a slip, but she hadn't yet put on her skirt. I was utterly distraught. "What did he do to you?" I cried.

"What do you mean? What did who do to me?" Mom turned around, her mascara wand held high.

"What are you talking about?"

In my experience, if a person was in their underwear, then somebody had done something to them. But despite looking quizzically at me, she didn't ask questions. She just shooed me away after glancing at her watch. "It's almost seven." And in Robert's household, 7:00 a.m. meant time to leave for school.

Despite my quiet acceptance of my new lot in life, I burned inside with an orange fire in the spot beneath my bellybutton. At the dinner table, over plates of meatloaf covered in ketchup or boxed macaroni and cheese, instead of hunger, I felt a boiling heat in my belly at the surrounding women. How did Mom not see what was happening to me? Why didn't Teresa ask why Bobby and I were alone each morning behind that closed door? How come my teachers didn't notice that discontent and restlessness that I wanted them to see?

I was livid. Or at least I thought I was. Like many other things in my life, I disguised my rage. It wasn't exactly anger, but more of a deep pit of stormy sadness; a dark, chaotic well of emotions that drained my energy. The angry me was simultaneously the sad me, and the scared me. She was that little blonde girl with knobby knees, who desperately wanted her mother to wake her in the night and whisper, "We're going for a ride," to rescue her from reality. Just like she had before. Even then, I marveled at Mom's ability to be the hero and the villain of my life all at once.

She no longer whisked me away; she could hardly survive, nevermind saving herself and her child. We didn't talk anymore. There was no space for my feelings. And if I talked about things, she hurriedly shut me down, and I could not conclude. While conversations were not ongoing, that awful silence was. I felt myself blinded by the wrong reactivity, choking on begrudging agreements, and painful, covert contracts.

As I've grown into adulthood, I've wondered how I would react if I had been in my mother's shoes. I'd made an early choice that I would not have children. But I know in my heart that I can't imagine what I would have done to any man that threatened my daughter's mental or emotional safety. Granted, I'm a product of my generation, and my mother was a product of hers. I have to believe she made the best choice she could; and I grieve the loss of everything she could not see.

CHAPTER THREE

Town Day

As a child, I loved Town Days. I snagged my spot in the front to watch the Queen and the Little Miss Coronations. I stood tall as the parade passed me by. The sound of the drums grew, matching the rhythm and beat of my little heart. There were races just for kids, and I learned that I could run. There were family comedy acts, music, and dancing. That year we were watching my uncle's demolition derby when Dad sidled up, a nervous smile sliding across his face. He took a knee before me and asked if I wanted to see his new truck, I nodded in that silent way that had become the new me. I was so excited to see him again and grasped his proffered hand as he led me to his truck. In a faster voice, he opened the door and asked me to get inside, then sprinted to the driver's side, jumped in, closed the door, and started the engine.

It was good; it was familiar, and it thrilled me to be sitting on that big bench seat with the aftermarket seat covers, just like in his old truck. I scooted over to Dad, just like I used to, with the stick shift on the floor in front of my knees. That's where I knew I sat. I could feel the heat of him next to me and smell that familiar cologne, and I relaxed into that childhood love space: *this is my dad*. But something was different.

Even for him, he was very uneasy. I sensed a frailty — a desperation — about him, not the bark of dominance I knew from before. I recognized a similar fragility in myself; I wondered if I could champion us both by channeling the new bravery they had forced me to muster under extreme circumstances. I beamed quietly as far as my brightness would go, hoping it would cover him like the warm sun.

I am free.

Dad is free.

We are going for a ride to freedom.

I took a breath and let my back relax into a wonderland of safety. The soft space of my father's love, where I could be free of Robert's house; free from being just one in a clan of kids; free of Bobby and our mornings together before school. To my dismay, the passenger door swung open before we backed out and I heard Mom's voice say, "Jewels, come with me. Get out of the truck. Right now. That's right. Take my hand. Here, Jewels. Take my hand and step down. You saw your dad's truck and now it's time to get out." The pair had surrounded us. Robert pulled open Dad's door, as my mom began physically yanking on me while the men exchanged low, rumbling words.

As Mom pulled me away from the truck that smelled of my dad, he cried, "Please, don't take her from me again. Don't take her from me! All I want to do is see my daughter!" But Mom pulled me out of our sacred moment together just as quickly as she pulled me out of his life. My voice stuck inside of me in the dark part where I stuffed everything else. Mom and Robert led me away with my hand in each of theirs, appearing as though they were guardians, when they were only jailers.

I twisted my neck around in desperation, just to see him one last time. Dad bowed his head over his steering wheel as he cried. I saw one of his fists clench and rise before he punched the seat where I should have been sitting and where I wanted to be sitting. Thoughts of the festival faded. The race, the

queens, the parade, and the demolition derby were all forgotten. I tasted my rage at the unfairness in the blood pooling in my mouth. I bit my bottom lip too hard. No one noticed. I wiped away the blood with my sleeve, knowing it would leave a stain that wouldn't wash out for at least a month, and possibly a lifetime.

I didn't see my dad again until I was 18 years old. As I walked down the tiled hallway of the nursing home where I worked, I approached the solitary man waiting on a bench and wondered, *Is that my dad?* By then, years of Mom's statements crowded out my own in my head. Her vision of my father eclipsed my ability to see him as a person. Like an angry robot, I repeated what my mom had said to me over the years; I vilified him on behalf of someone who had single-handedly eroded the most precious years of my life. He was the only person who might have advocated for me, if only we had allowed him to do so.

"You're not my dad after what you did to my mom. I never want to see you again!" I said in her voice, not mine. I even stood like her, mimicking her body language that was far more expressive with him than with Robert. While I was no longer silent, I had not yet found my voice. I wouldn't for many years.

Shoulders hunched, as if expecting my rejection, my dad nodded quietly and prepared to take his leave. Sadness welled in his eyes as he held back tears; he kept his gaze to the floor. For a moment, I hesitated. I imagined calling him back to me. Telling him I didn't mean what I said. I was wrong, and I wanted to hear what he had to say. But I didn't do any of those things. My mother's narrative was still too strong.

I later learned that after Mom took me away from him, Dad's drinking grew worse. He later told me that he'd sat in his reclining chair and drank for four days without relent. When he finally came to, he'd realized that he was a mess, both literally and figuratively. He knew he had to stop drinking and so he did so, cold turkey. We definitely have willpower in our family once we make up our minds to take action. Dad remained sober for the last 22 years of his life. At least, he had that.

I can only imagine the patience it took to wait until I turned 18 so he could approach me. He had to play by the rules dictated by my mom, her mafioso lawyer, and Robert. He weathered eleven years without his only child. Perhaps he counted down each holiday.

Christmas.

Jewels' birthday.

Summer break.

Ten more years until I can see Jewels.

Nine more.

Eight more.

If his body language was any sign of how he felt hearing my mom's words parroted from my mouth, my rejection must have been crushing. That was the last I saw or heard from him until I reached out later in my life when I was two years from getting sober. It delighted him to hear from me and he pressed me to come home. I was so consumed by my disease by then that I told him that his small town was not my home, and I wouldn't be returning.

When we resumed our relationship, my sponsor advised me to take things at surface value, to see him for exactly who he was. I was told to treat him like the older man he was, which proved to be my

coping tool. I could not mentally rationalize his existence, let alone connect with him as my biological father. I was in too much conflict about the ping pong years of my youth.

I'm grateful that we could reconnect when we were both in our sobriety. I saw a lot of myself in him, and I considered the notion that our addiction, like our trauma, was generational; maybe I could heal the generational pain in our family for good. Several years afterward, I set a reminder on my calendar for every Sunday to call Dad. As the phone would ring, I would feel butterflies of elation in my stomach, like I had when I was a little kid, the same way I had during our last pickup ride together.

I'm so grateful for the years when I suited up, showed up, and made that phone call. When the first Sunday reminder popped up after his death, noting to call him, I felt such gratitude that in sobriety we had healed individually, and in unison. It felt providential somehow.

I was fortunate to have been able to see the completion of a lot of full circles. With some people, you plant seeds and hope to God that something sprouts. During the years and the drinking, my father kept a light on in his heart for me. I got to know that; some people do not. When I went back home after he passed, I listened to his friends tell me how proud he was of me. I got to experience our relationship come full circle. My father fought with clenched fists in the pickup truck that day for me; knowing I would grow up far from him. He waited every day to show up for me, and he never stopped loving me.

We come into our lives with everything we need, but rarely realize it until we are on our healing paths. Our gifts can lie dormant for years, silent until we stir them awake; provoked to roar. Like too many, I had all the tools I needed as a little person but a sour cloak of other people's words, ignorance and willpower wrestled down my strength. My courage became an internal driving force, only rarely appearing; still driving my story but mute, even to me, most of the time.

I have a voice. I can speak for my father and me. I am certain my father loved me the way I loved him. I can pay tribute to the strength of a man whose life dealt him a rough deck of cards, but he found his way home. My father maintained sobriety for the last 22 years of his life. Now he will forever exist in these pages as a man who did his best.