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I Didn't Know You Had a Daughter

By Sadie Gardiner

(Jennifer L Nickle)

Thank you

I want to thank Dr. Kinsey for helping me to rediscover a splintered piece of myself that I had lost a long time ago. The encouragement and support are greatly appreciated. It is wonderful to have a professor who actively encourages individual gifts. Thank you again for all your support.

I also want to thank my champion, my safe place, my unconditional supporter and my hero, my beloved husband Michael. You showed me what love and strength look like and you have always stood beside me when I needed an ally, behind me cheering when I needed to champion myself, and in front of me when my strength failed, and I needed a hero. Thank you for all your love and for showing our children an amazing example of a father and husband.

Last but in no way least, I want to thank my children. Matthew and Kathleen, you have been my gifts from God and my constant treasures. (Even if sometimes I may have wanted to bury those treasures, just for safe keeping of course.) You have grown into amazing examples of a Godly man and woman and no mother could be prouder of the people you have chosen to become. As much as it is amazing to be loved by your young children, to have your adult children love you and say they are proud of you is a gift beyond compare. Thank you both and all my love.

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Introduction

I have heard it said that one of the hardest genres to write is the memoir. It is definitely the most emotionally and physically draining writing I have ever done. Reliving traumatic events and finding the right balance between accuracy and forgiveness is an exercise in mental contortions. There have been many days where I felt like the world's most impossible necklace knot by the end of writing a single page.

Writing was a secret need in me from the time I learned what words were. It was more than a desire; the written word was as necessary to me as breathing. I not only read everything, but I wrote every chance I could. I wrote about what I was continuously told I was wrong or selfish to feel. I wrote about what I was told was wrong to think. I wrote about what I could never say because I would have been even more brutally belittled and ridiculed. I wrote about what was breaking not only my heart but my very spirit.

Unfortunately, a broken spirit was never a good excuse for wasting time on something as unimportant and frivolous as writing. So, I wrote in secret and when I was caught, I would apologize for writing anything, but especially for what I had written about my feelings. I would then dutifully go practice soccer or go for a run. I hate running, and I was not overly fond of soccer, but I made all-conference and lettered as a freshman, as was expected. I would then write more and apologize, and then I would study to get straight A's in subjects I hated.

I would write, apologize, and write secretly some more. Only one teacher caught on, and she asked me if I was suicidal. I lied and went home to continue my cycle of writing and apologizing.

Eventually, apologizing was not enough, and I walked away from writing all together. I even began to hide my reading for fun and kept books that would be approved as cover for my secret written friends. This led to my grief and anger to become trapped within and for constant guilt for feeling what I was told was selfish and wrong. I learned to hide within myself and suppress everything. I became a mistress of illusion and hid my true self.

Following the pattern of youth, I protected the illusion, the image demanded of me and I apologized. I apologized for being a disappointment and for causing them harm with my actions. I agreed that I was overreacting for being upset, and I was, as always too emotional for crying. I then hung up the phone and sat down to work on my assignment, that would eventually become this memoir. What came out in that assignment, was forty-seven years of stories and pain. I finished the paper, threw up, turned it in, threw up again, and drank a bottle of wine (the wine was a new addition to my early writing patterns).

Now, by completing this memoir, I am freeing my true self and sharing my story. It is not a story of trauma and child abuse, even though those things did occur, it is a story of redemption and forgiveness. It is a story of understanding. Not just of those who caused the abuse, but of myself and the journey that made me and became my story.

It is my most sincere hope and prayer that my story can help someone else who is enduring the devastating effects of emotional, spiritual, and manipulative abuse. These forms of abuse are often overlooked and discounted. But they are devastating and can become crippling. They pass from generation to generation and destroy a person's sense of self-worth. They lead to depression, anxiety, self-destructive behavior, and in many cases suicide. It is through Divine intervention that I am here today to write my story. I never succeeded in my

desire to disappear and sometimes to die. Help arrived when I least expected it and often didn't want it. I hope this can be a form of help to someone else in need.

The Value of a Daughter...

“If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t have the boys” my father spoke these words in another attempt to boost my puzzling (to him) lack of confidence. These words battered my already fragile heart as I walked with my parents and younger brothers, on a brisk fall evening, through the stores on main street of our small western town, while I once again shrank into the limited role of my life’s purpose. I just looked at my parents trying to hide the new piercing ache of heartbreak and feelings of invisibility.

Finally, I understood my purpose for being. The purpose of my existence was already fulfilled. I could feel the pressure building in my chest and the air becoming trapped in my lungs. I existed as the lemon from God so the precious boys would be born and gift my parents with lemonade. What young girl would not want to have such a lofty reason to exist? This would be my good reason to go on. Oh, wait, I had already done my duty. Now I just needed to make sure nothing I did embarrassed or negatively affected the family. I had to continue to perfect the illusion of me. The insubstantial empty shell of their desired cardboard doll.

Shortly before my father’s statement of my reason for existing, we had met some good friends of my parents. The couple had known them for several years. They would get together and play cards or go to movies and dinner once a month, and they had heard all about my brothers. When introduced to my eighteen-year-old self they looked confused. Quickly trying to cover up any faux pas they said, “We didn’t know you had a daughter?” This was not the first time I had heard this. I had come to expect it. I had even heard a variation of this in my college classes. Of course, in those cases it was “I didn’t know Brandon and Justin had a sister!” Sometimes I wondered if my parents even knew, they had a daughter.

I remember my parents telling their favorite story about my birth. In those days the dads were in a waiting room with a phone on the wall. Once the baby was born, the phone would ring, and the mother would tell the dad what they had had.

When I was born. The nurse handed the phone to my Mom and she told my dad, “we have the twin boys I promised you” The nurse hastily grabbed the phone from Mom and told Dad that he actually had a beautiful daughter. My parents love to tell that story. Dad usually laughs and looks to me, “See, you’re my twin professional athletes” I would then have to go to the bathroom.

I would look in the mirror for several minutes “Don’t cry. You’re not worth a single tear. You know it will only be worse if you cry. You’ll embarrass Dad and Mom and they will get angry with you. You’ll get the lecture from Mom on being selfish and trying to hurt Dad. Dad will lecture you on being too sensitive and emotional. They’ll tell you; you have no right to feel hurt. You’re overreacting. Get it together and DON’T CRY! Then I would flush the toilet and return to the room.

I guess I would have made a good poker player because they never seemed to notice how much pain that story caused me. Every time I heard it, a part of me curled up and wept because I knew I represented my Mom’s one failure to give my dad what he wanted. Luckily the next two pregnancies ended with better results, boys were born.

I was the first born of three, and the only girl. Unfortunately for me this mirrored my Dad’s family. He had an older sister who was, to put it mildly, a selfish, manipulative screw-up. The next was his older brother who was the golden child. A card-carrying member of Mensa and a super athlete. Then there was my dad. The beloved baby boy.

So, when I was born followed by my brother Brandon who was a super athlete and my baby brother Justin, the beloved baby, it was inevitable that they would decide to spend the rest of my life making sure I was not my aunt. It never seemed to matter that my aunt and I had nothing in common except our gender and birth order. All that mattered was that I was a girl and the first born. All hopes and pride were to go to the beloved heir and of course the spare. I was destined to be a disappointment like my aunt.

I think for a time I hated my aunt. If she had been a better person, or never born, I would not have been crammed into the box of failure at birth or had the lid taped down at four. Of course, I also was angry at God for ever creating me. My pre-teen and teen years were spent trying to perfectly plan my death.

You would think it would be easy to die, but I had to pick a date that would not interfere with Brandon's busy life and leaving a mess of any kind would be incredibly selfish. Plus, my aunt's children kept causing problems for the family and it was my job to clean up after them, and to help my grandparents.

My grandmother was a bitter mean woman and I was expected to handle her. By the time I was sixteen I had been loaned out to two different families to live with them and run their homes. Was it any wonder I questioned my value? Being the best at sports and getting straight A's in every advanced class, especially math, was all that was important, so I tried to focus on playing something I hated, while spending most of my time cleaning up other's messes.

I obligingly took every math class offered and stressed for constant A's. I vomited before every math test and craved every writing and literature class. Unfortunately, writing was a waste of time and just a form of spiteful venting. So, I try to write in secret and when I was ratted out to my parents, *I* would endure stoically what would follow.

One night, Brandon had said he couldn't do the dishes even though it was his turn because he needed to go practice soccer with his friends. And since I didn't really have any friends, I should take his turn. I protested. I was the oldest and therefore, I should set a good example and help my Mom who cooked an amazing meal. Guess who did the dishes? After I fled to my room to release my emotions in secret.

Sitting on my bed under the covers, I would write in my journal or a notebook. I knew I had to be careful. Getting caught meant the loss of my book and another lecture. But my cat and my writing were the only friends I could express myself to. I was so involved; I didn't hear my door open. It wasn't until the covers were yanked off that I knew I was busted.

"Give it me." I reluctantly handed it over and Mom looked at what I had written

"Do you really believe this crap?"

The correct answer Sadie, "No Ma'am."

"Then why did you write something so offensive? Don't you realize how this would look if someone else read it? Are you so jealous of Brandon and Justin that you would try to hurt our family's reputation by saying we don't care about you?"

The correct answer Sadie, "I'm sorry ma'am. I wasn't thinking."

"How do you think Jesus feels about your selfish lies? How do you think it hurts Him to say we hurt your feelings?"

Since my feelings were only ever acknowledged to point out how wrong they were, I'm sure Jesus knew and saw the truth. However, I knew better than to say that. I also knew, when I looked over Mom's shoulder that it was Brandon who ratted me out. It wasn't enough that he got out of chores, or that he belittled me, he had to destroy my one moment of worth and peace. The air once again became trapped in my lungs and the pressure built in my chest. I fought to

maintain the proper facial expression and I wondered, what had I ever done to Brandon to make him despise me so?

I knew to stop looking at him because it would only make me want to smack him one and if I struck that gloating smirk off Brandon's face I would hear the lecture on being the oldest and since I was already enduring the writing is a waste of time and my feelings are wrong lecture, the correct answer was the only option.

"I am sorry Jesus that I embarrassed Dad and I'm sorry for being jealous of my brothers. It's not their fault I waste my time and don't try hard enough. They can't be blamed for what Jesus blessed them with. They are good brothers who overlook my shortcomings and bring joy and recognition to our family. I'm sorry for writing what I did and for wasting time writing. I won't do it again." The last was a lie, but I had become rather good at all parts of illusion, even lying.

"Your Mom and I forgive you, but you need to find some confidence. When I was your age, I ran for class office. You should do that."

"Jack, do you think she can? She's not as popular as Brandon. He could win but she's too emotional and standoffish." Mom looked at dad with doubt and concern. She crossed her arms and leaned against the post of my canopy headboard. Dad left the doorway of my room and moved towards us and smiled with supreme confidence. I knew this would be another "fix Sadie's puzzling lack of confidence by forcing her to be us" campaign. The breath backed up in my lungs and pressure built in my chest. I couldn't breathe and I wondered absently, could a fourteen-year-old girl die of a heart-attack? Please God.

"It will be good for her. It'll force her to meet people and stop being so shy."

Well that went even worse than normal. Now I had to run for office and winning was the only acceptable option. I needed to hurry up and find a date to die and a way that would not inconvenience anyone with a mess. At least they were no longer standing over me making me feel small and weak.

Once I was freed to be alone again, I would write some more, then when caught, apologize. I ran for class office even though I was petrified of public speaking, was crippled with shyness, and hated politics. The campaign speech my family wrote for me was a rap to be performed on stage in-front of the whole school. Awesome.

“You know Sadie, I think you should do something different for your speech. Brandon pass the rolls please.”

“The girl she’s running against is super popular Dad. Sadie is someone nobody knows.”

“Well, she just needs to get out there and try harder. Jack do you want some more green beans?”

“No thank you Victoria. Sadie, you should do a rap.”

“WHAT!?”

“Sadie don’t screech at your father. A lady controls her emotions.”

“Like you did when you threw the cup of juice at me or the board at the dog?” *Please be distracted and lecture me on respecting my Mom. Anything but a rap in front of the whole school,*

“That was funny Mom. But your aim was off.”

“It was off on purpose son. I was just releasing frustration.” Dad began to laugh. Not chuckle, but his from the toes full body shaking laugh. Soon Mom and the boys were rolling at the contagious sound.

“Your Mom is a passionate woman Brandon.” *Maybe the distraction worked. Maybe the proposed humiliation was forgotten.* I had started to learn the gift of deflection.

“Can I help write Sadie’s rap?” *Then again, I was far from a master at the art of distraction. Crap.* The pressure on my chest built. I could not breathe.

“Yes, and then all Sadie has to do is not mess it up and she’ll win.”

“Jack, that may be too much for her.” *Thank you, Mom.*

“You know, the speaking in front of the school is something she’ll mess up. Brandon could do it, but she can’t.” That was true. Brandon had no fears of messing up and failing the family.

“You’re right Victoria. We’ll write it and she can go to the radio station tomorrow and record it. Then all she has to do is introduce herself and play the rap.”

“Hope she doesn’t have her lisp in the recording.” *Thanks a lot Brandon. Something else to worry about.*

The next day when my name was called, I walked out onto the empty stage carrying my boom box. The girl I was running against was the well-known, little sister of the senior football star. She was outgoing and had been popular before this debacle. She was a jock and always seemed to know what to wear. I was quiet. I dressed like a lady in dresses and skirts. I was also Stacy’s cousin. She was well known for all the wrong reasons and I worked very hard to be seen as her polar opposite. I desperately tried to breathe. The ever-present pressure built in my chest. And in my stomach, forget butterflies, I had pterodactyls competing for space. I tried to gulp one more breath like a drowning elephant and then stepped onto the stage.

The stage was dark except for the spotlight over the microphone and podium. With a deep breath and prayer not to throw up, I walked to the podium to look out at the packed

auditorium. The freshman class had 480 students and the other three classes were even larger.

For heaven's sake, idiot, don't do the math just speak.

I leaned into the microphone and said, "Hello, name is Sadie Miller and I have a message for you." Then I took the mic off the stand and held it in front of the speaker of the boom box I had placed on the floor. As I pushed play, I realized the only good part of this moment was that I was now squatting behind the podium. But now my humiliation was beginning...

"The freshman class I'd like to address..." I held still while the recorded rap played out and then I placed the mic back in the stand, said thank you and left the stage. At the end of the day, the results were announced. No surprise, I lost. I didn't cry at school or show any emotion. I just waited for the last bell, went to my locker and caught the bus for home.

Afterwards, I walked home in tears from the bus stop, went to my room and closed my bedroom door, and then I wrote. Of course, I was caught, and I had to apologize for wasting time writing and for losing, and I had to promise to work harder at the next election.

I also had to admit the loss was my fault and no one else's, after all if no one knew the family didn't have a daughter, I had no one to blame but myself. I should know my worth, after all, without me, my parents never would have married, and my brothers never would have been born. I just had to stop being so selfish and emotional. That's all.

Sports, the reason for love, and how love is earned...

I was an all-conference soccer player, and I lettered my freshman year. I remember one away game where I was surprised. It was snowing and as I looked to the sideline, I saw my dad. He was in a butter colored polo shirt, tan slacks and chestnut colored loafers. I could not believe it. My dad was at my game. He had officially been my coach one year in elementary school but by then Brandon had begun playing and his games were a priority. So, if we played at the same time either my dad or both my parents would go to Brandon's games and they would expect me to tell them how many goals I had made. I was a halfback, so I never scored many goals, but I assisted most of our team's points and defended our goal often. Scoring mattered. Because of this, I was humbled and ecstatic that my dad had taken time off work to drive out of town for my game. He did not stay the whole time but for me, this was like Christmas morning. Dad had come to my game.

The weather was cold and light snow flurries were flying around us. I was playing my usual position of left halfback. I could run the whole field and I was fast. I could also kick almost as far with my nondominated left foot as my right. So, this position was a strong one for me.

The other had a goal kick and I was moving into position when I heard a wonderful sound.

"Sadie, she's going to try to sneak around you. Block her off. Anticipate where the ball will be. Move know."

It was my Dad. I did what he said and trapped the ball. I dribbled past two players and centered the shot for our center forward. She blasted it past the goalie.

“That’s the way Sadie. Well done.”

As I ran back for the kickoff I looked to the sideline. There was Dad. Amidst the swirling snow he stood in loafers and slacks and a short-sleeved polo shirt. He had to be freezing. But he stood there on the sideline for the whole half, cheering me on. Man, that was a great moment.

The next game I remember vividly was the state playoff game in the State Capital. Brandon had a little league baseball game, so my parents did not go. I rode up with the family of one of my teammates. The field was astro-turf, so everyone had to go to the sporting goods store nearby to buy turf shoes. I played in my tennis shoes. They slipped a lot. We lost. I dreaded going home and telling how badly I had failed. Brandon won so that would be the focus. As we drove through Vail pass, I briefly wondered if it would be good if the car went off the cliff and if anyone would notice I was gone.

I looked out the side window and watched the trees and rocks go by. There was a cliff right there on the side. Only a thin piece of metal separated the speeding cars from disappearing into the dark abyss. A car could be lost forever if it veered too far to the left. I wonder, what it would feel like falling into the dark silence next to me.

“Lord, if you are listening and have time, could you please let me disappear. Going off the cliff would work. No one would ever find me. I would be gone forever and free. Amen”

Just then I became aware of my teammate’s parents talking in the front seat and my teammate sleeping next to me. I was instantly ashamed, there were three innocent people in the car with me.

“I’m sorry Lord, please ignore my prayer. I guess my family was right to say I was selfish and too emotional.”

When I got home, Dad and the boys were watching a game on t.v. I don't remember what it was. Mom was cooking a celebratory dinner for Brandon. No one noticed the door open. No one saw me go down the hall to my room. No one but my cat saw me put my things away and wipe the tears from my eyes. I sat on my bed and prepared myself while I waited. Eventually, Mom called us to dinner, and I went to the dining room to join them. I had to set my own place because there was no place for me.

“Sadie, when did you get here?”

“Sadie, why didn't you tell us you were home?”

“I won my game and scored ten goals, how'd you do?”

I told them about the game. I didn't tell about my prayer in Vail. I told about the shoes. And that went as expected.

“You should have told us it was astro-turf before you went. That was poor planning on your part. Not being properly prepared meant you let your team down. You should have tried harder. Brandon's teammates always know they can count on him. They are going to the State Capital to play an exhibition game in a few weeks. We'll make a trip out of it for the whole family. They are the best ten to twelve-year-old baseball team in the state.”

“Jack, the turf shoes are expensive, so Jesus was watching out for us when Sadie didn't get a pair. It would have been wasted on her. But we should get Brandon a pair in case he ever needs them.”

The next year, we played the state champions for a playoff game in our hometown. My family was there. I remember my Mom and Justin playing on the sidelines. Brandon stood near

our goal calling encouragement to me and directions. Dad stood near their goal to coach me from that end.

“Okay Sadie, their setting up for a corner kick. Anticipate. It’s going to seven. Go now.” I moved right when Brandon said go and intercepted the ball.

“Down field now.” I powered the ball to our center.

“Way to go. Good job. Move into position now. Go Sadie.” I raced down the field to the sound of my brother’s voice calling encouragement.

“Sadie, set up for the goal kick. It’s coming your way. Anticipate where the ball will go. Cut that girl off. Go now.” Dad’s voice was the only sound I could hear. I beat their star to the ball, and we collided in a fury of power and determination.

“Good girl. You own her. Take it.” I fought her off and dribbled down the field.

“Use her weak side. Go to her weak side. Good job. Look to the goal. Your center’s open. Now Sadie. Now.” I booted the ball in a perfect arc to our center forward. One step and she drilled it into the upper right corner. Goal.

“Hussle back. You got this.”

“Way to go Sadie. Get ready.”

Dad and Brandon’s voices were all I heard. Calling direction and encouragement. For one blissful afternoon, we were a unit. I could no longer feel pressure in my chest. I don’t think I ever played better. By the final whistle, I could no longer feel my legs. My arms were shaking, and I was hollowed out. I could not breathe. It felt like I was trying to breathe through water. Later I would be told I suffered from a very mild form of weak lungs, but we did not know this then and I have never told my parents to this day. To show weakness was to fail.

We had lost by one damn goal. I collapsed on the field. I had failed. No matter what I had done, we had still lost. A shadow fell over me, and I looked up to see my Dad standing over me and Brandon was beside him. "I'm proud of you Sadie" it was one of only a few times I remember my Dad saying that. He and Brandon helped me to my feet and then helped me to the car. On the way we met some of Brandon's friends

"Hey Brandon, what are you doing here?" One of Brandon's basketball and baseball buddies was at the game.

"Watching my sister play soccer."

"You have a sister?"

Next came one of the parents from the team Dad had coached for three years. His son had played for my Dad the whole time and he had even been to our house to swim.

"Hey Jack. What are you doing at a high school girls soccer game?"

"Hi, Jim. I was watching my daughter. She's all conference this year and she played one heck of a game. They held the best in the state to only two goals."

"Oh, I didn't know you had a daughter. Well, umm, good game."

Several more players from Dad's team and their parents came over. None of them knew about me, but for today not even this could dim my glow. Dad was proud of me and Brandon was supporting me. That was the last time I played any sports officially. I ended on a high.

I did learn to play golf because my husband likes the game. When he was teaching me, he told me to make a goal for learning. I told him I wanted to beat my brothers just once. He smiled and set up a best ball team game. I beat the boys on the short game and Brandon broke his club. We never said anything to my parents, but I did smile a lot and so did my husband. But that was several years and two children after high school.

Failure...

High school sucked. I was so afraid of failing, of disappointing my parents that I was beyond introverted. I played a sport I hated. I liked to read and write. I enjoyed watching people in parks and malls and imagining things about them or writing stories about what I saw. I had imaginary friends who were family. They would mourn my passing and would notice if I was missing for five minutes. The wren is a strutting peacock compared to me. I was invisible, unless a problem needed fixing.

My aunt was twice divorced and had four children. One was a year older than me and one a year younger. Her third child was just a few months younger than my brother Brandon and the youngest daughter was three years older than my brother Justin. None of them were good caring people. They stole, lied, cheated. They were a constant source of embarrassment for the family, but they had blond hair and my grandmother adored them.

So, any time they went too far, she would call my parents who would send me to clean up the mess. Yeah, I had a new purpose in life. I went from my fulfilled purpose of being the reason my parents married to have my brothers, to the family crap wrangler. I often wished I was purposeless. Wrangling crap is harder, less rewarding and infinitely worse than wrangling feral cats. It's also bloodier and the reason for my dreading all holidays for almost thirty years.

The most memorable and worst holiday memory of a crapfest of memories was my sophomore year of high school. It was the first easter after my grandfather's death. My aunt and grandmother were still fuming because of what happened when he died.

For the past month, ever since Pappaw had been rushed to the hospital, I would go straight from school to his room. It was a small room that smelled of antiseptic and lemon

coconut lotion. My Mom would come by each evening to bring me dinner and rub her scented lotion on his feet. He would smile the whole time. He never said much except one moment three days before he died.

I was in a chair by his bed doing my homework and Mammaw was standing next to him. Pappaw looked to the end of his bed and smiled. As he smiled the most beautiful and innocent smile I had ever seen, even more pure than a baby's first smile, he started to rise from his bed.

"I'm ready. My bags are packed."

Mammaw grabbed his hand and said, "Don't you leave me."

Pappaw stopped smiling and laid back down. Two days later he spoke again. My Uncle Aunt, Dad, Mom and brothers were standing around the foot of his bed. I was in my usual place by his side. Mammaw was holding his other hand and three of my aunt's children were playing games on the far side of his room. Mom had just finished rubbing his feet, so the smell of lemon and coconut almost covered the antiseptic smell.

Pappaw opened his eyes and looked to Mammaw. "My beautiful Dot. I'm ready love. Let me go."

Next he looked at my Dad and Uncle, "My boys. Was ever a man so blessed in sons?"

Then he looked at my Mom, "Victoria, I think I made a mess. You are the only one smart enough to fix it and keep Dot safe. I'm counting on you."

Next he turned his eyes to my brothers, "Your good boys. Be good boys."

He looked at my youngest cousin next and told her, "Try to be better than the others in your family."

To my Aunt's sons, "James, learn to be tough not a quitter whenever things don't go your way. And Jason, quit being a liar. Learn the truth."

Next he spoke to his only daughter, “You have only yourself to blame for the failure of your life. You were given everything and appreciated none of it.”

Finally, he squeezed my hand and said, “I am very proud of you. You’re my little southern doll. My princess. You’ll do great things. Remember that. You make me proud and you are my shining star.”

“And what do you have to say to your oldest granddaughter.” My grandmother asked, “She couldn’t be here. She was very busy (it was a ten-minute drive and she was sleeping) but she would be here if she could.”

“She’s a disappointment. Just like her mother and siblings. Her brother is a quitter and the other a liar. The youngest is selfish. But the oldest, is the worst. She’s nothing like Sadie. Sadie doesn’t embarrass us. Sadie is good and caring.”

Two hours later, my grandfather breathed his last. It was my fault he did not approve of my cousins. Especially my older cousin who had been caught cheating and stealing at school and sleeping with several of the boys on the football team. I guess my grandfather was still upset with her for what she did at church where he was a deacon and Sunday schoolteacher.

This easter Sunday was much like all the others I remember, or at least it started out that way. I was in my room relaxing after church and preparing for dinner (and writing, but that is a secret). I should have expected the worst when the phone rang. This had been my first day home since my grandfather died. Mammaw couldn’t stay by herself and it was decided that I would stay with her. My Aunt said her kids had lives each time my Mom called and begged her to give me a break. Justin stayed a few times, but he was deemed too young for the responsibility. At almost sixteen, I was plenty old enough for the job.

“Sadie, Mammaw just called. Stacy is locked in the bedroom hysterical and your aunt is trying to coax her out. Your grandmother is in tears and I still have to finish cooking the meal to take over there. Your Dad doesn’t need to deal with this on top of losing his father. You know how his sister’s drama upsets us all. Go handle this please.”

“Mom, why me?”

“Sadie Ann Miller, what would Jesus want you to do? Do not be selfish. Go handle this.”

“Yes Mom.” There was nothing more to say. Sometimes I felt ancient. There went my day at home.

I grabbed my purse and walked the two blocks to my grandmother’s house. On the way I kept thinking about my grandfather and all the pain my aunt and cousins had put him through. I thought of all the crap my cousin had done to me. All the things she had stolen. The boys I liked who she had slept with. The times she put me in great danger and laughed.

Like the time she borrowed my Mom’s car. I was told to go with her and make sure she didn’t wreck the car. Stacy took me to a bonfire area where everyone was drunk and having sex. There were also drugs being passed around. She left me in the car and told me to have fun. I locked the doors and prayed. When a guy started beating on my window and describing what he would do to me, I did the only thing I could think of, I pressed my hand to the horn and wouldn’t release it until Stacy came back.

“You are such an uptight brat. He only wanted to show you a good time. I told him you needed to loosen up and be taught a few things.”

“Take me home or I will tell the cops what you have been doing.”

She drove me home and I told my parents what had happened. They never let her borrow a car again. Mom also stopped allowing her in our house after Mom and I caught Stacy going through my jewelry box. She had a ring, two necklaces, makeup, three tapes (this was before CD's) and four of my dresses. We didn't know why she took the dresses, not only were they not her style, they were three sizes too small for her.

As I walked and reflected on all this and on her constant insults and the abuse, I got angry. Nothing new there, except, I didn't care this time who knew it. As I walked up to the front door, I could hear the screams, wails, and threats. Mammaw and Betty came through the solid oak door. Shrill voices echoing in the entry. Pleading and threatening in never ceasing wails like a banshee wailing for the dead. Stacy could be heard in a fingernails on a chalkboard screech adding to the soul splitting cacophony of humiliation and selfishness for anyone walking past the house to hear. As I stood there trying to calm my mind and find a thoughtful way to diffuse this storm, I remember thinking, *this is supposed to be a day about Jesus. What would Jesus do? He trashed the temple when it was desecrated. Screw it, they are desecrating Jesus' day and my Pappaw's memory. Time to clean house.*

I stormed through the front door and saw my three younger cousins sitting there eating candy. Not helping. Just stuffing their faces.

I looked at them and snapped my fingers then pointed. "What. Are. You. Doing?" "I bit out each word and gave my best glare.

"Set the table. Now." They actually jumped. Amazing. I went down the hall to where my aunt and grandmother were standing outside the closed bedroom door. They had their ears to the door and were pleading with Stacy.

“Go. Away. Now” I had had enough. These so-called adults were ruining my life. If they wanted me to be the grown up, fine. I’d treat them like the kids they seemed to be.

“Now Sadie, you don’t talk to your elders that way. You show some respect.”

“Respect is earned Mammaw. And since the two adults here can’t handle this and have called a sixteen-year-old girl to deal with this, then I will treat you accordingly. Now get out of here. Now.” With a huff of disgust and a mumble about brats, my aunt left. *She would of course know all about brats, she was the empress and had raised four more.*

“I still think you shouldn’t speak to your elders this way, Sadie Ann. Remember, Stacy is hurting over Pappaw’s death and what he said about you and her. You made this mess. You fix it.” With that she turned and stomped down the dark hall.

For reasons that I could never understand, the hall was always dark. Dark wood trim. Dark wood doors oiled and stained yearly to add to the absence of light. Even the walls were painted a dark light absorbing cream. The two light fixtures had amber covers so a candle would have produced more illumination, and the carpet was a deep muddy brown shag. There was no light. And the hall seemed to not only absorbed all light and life, but sound from all but the three wailing women. Why did they remind me of a scene from *Macbeth*? The one about toil and trouble? No sound was heard from any other footsteps on this carpet, but in defiance of all logic, Mammaw could be heard when she stomped. Mammaw was a champion stomper. She could give lessons in huffing and stomping (probably broom flying too). It was interesting how her hillbilly accent came out when she huffed and stomped. The rest of the time she was all high-class southern bell.

I waited until she was gone then knocked on the door. No sense adding to the drama induced headache waiting for me by adding Mammaw and Aunt Betty.

“Stacy, open this door or I take it down.” I didn’t raise my voice. I didn’t knock. I was calm and controlled. I used my sweet, cavity inducing voice as I stood next to the door and waited.

Surprise, she opened the door, grabbed my arm in a bruising hold and dragged me into the room before slamming and relocking the door. Then she sat on the bed and touched up her makeup. So much for a heartbroken cousin. It was just another attention-grabbing holiday move by my cousin. She must either want something or she had done something.

“Well, what is it this time?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You’re little miss goodie goodie. Nobody is ever mean to you.” I just looked at her with my well-developed poker face until finally she spewed her latest complaint.

“My boyfriend caught me kissing his friend.” She went to the mirror and began riffling through Mammaw’s lipstick. “It wasn’t my fault. He came on to me and it was accident. Tim should be more understanding.”

“How do you accidentally kiss someone? You just tripped and fell, and his face was there?”

“Don’t be so naive.” I watched in fascinated horror as the smeared crimson color on her lips.

“I deserve some comfort, after all my grandfather just died and I wasn’t able to be there like you were. Of course, if I didn’t have a life I could have been there too.”

She began fluffing her stiff overly styled bleached hair. “You’re just jealous because I’m so popular and pretty. Mom and Mammaw understand. All women are jealous of me and it’s not my fault all men want me.”

“Right,” I drawled, “I’m jealous of you. The girl who cheats on her boyfriend and cries that he won’t look the other way.”

“It’s not my fault I am as beautiful as Barbie. Why I’m a life-sized version of her. Blond and beautiful.”

Wow. How to respond. Sadie be nice. Do not point out that yes, she is just like Barbie, if Barbie was a hundred pounds overweight, had a long horse shaped leathery face and brittle hair. Do not point out that only drunk, desperate and horny men went for her and once they had her, they ran fast, and often out of town to get away from her. Do not remind her that she was sleeping off another party rather than being at out grandfather’s death bed, and he knew it. Be nice. Keep the anger and contempt in. As she started going through Mammaw’s jewelry box I thought, time to clean house.

“You know Stacy, an accident is when you trip and fall. So, unless you tripped and fell into his lips, for several minutes, that was no accident. It was a choice. The reason Tim is mad is because you make choices to hurt others. You. Are. A. Fuckup. By. Choice. You’re not Barbie. You’re not even a whore. They at least get paid. You just screw up. Literally. I am tired of dealing with your mess. Pappaw deserved better. You are an embarrassment. Now, you will get your fat ass out of this room and you will be considerate and pleasant through this first Easter without Pappaw. If you even look like you’re going to cause any more trouble, I will grab your dry brittle bleached blond hair, drag your fat skanky ass out of this house, and kick your ass all the way home. Are we clear?”

“Y-yes. You’re mean and scary.”

Okay, not sure where that came from, but surprisingly, she never told what I said and while it was the shortest holiday meal in our history, it was also the most pleasant. Once we

finished eating Stacy ran to the couch and stretched out for her much deserved nap. I should point out that it was the only place for anyone to sit. This meant we all had to sit on the floor since Mammaw told us not to disturb the freight train sleeping on the couch. We also couldn't go outside until after pictures, which could not happen until Stacy had her beauty sleep.

"Do we have to wait for her to become beautiful?" Justin whispered to my Dad "That could be forever." Dad quickly shushed him all the while trying to hold in a chuckle. He grabbed the little paper pill cups filled with peanuts and M and M candies that Betty insisted added a touch of elegant class to our table settings.

"Come on kids. Let's play a game." Dad date about two feet from the sleeping demon, and calmly launched a candy piece towards her open mouth. "One point for getting in her mouth, two points for banking it off her nose into her mouth. Ready, set, go." Needless to say, this game was a big hit. Especially with my three younger cousins. Although they might have thrown the nuts and candy a little more forcefully than was needed for shooting snoring hoops. When Stacy finally woke and found herself covered in candy and nuts, we all rolled on the ground laughing like a pack of hyenas.

"Jack," uh oh, that screech was familiar "How could you? Show some compassion. What would Jesus say?" Yep, Dad had learned how to use the hammer that was Jesus from a master. His mother.

"Okay kids, let's get ready for pictures." Mom always protected dad from his mother and sister. All in all, this had been one of the more enjoyable holidays in the fires of Hell that we spent with my aunt and her children. Who knew celebrating the resurrection of our Lord and savior while in Hell could bring a few moments of mirth?

I guess I should thank my aunt and her children. The use for me in problem solving meant they made sure I was well used. Although going to high school with an older cousin who was considered the school whore and who kept trying to have me raped and stole from me regularly; and a younger cousin who was the gutless wonder of the football team, was a nightmare all its own.

The car incident was just the first of many times Stacy told an aggressive drunk guy I wanted sex. But as bad as those were, the worst was when boys thought I would be just like her. I remember when a boy I liked asked me out. I said yes, but something made me turn back and listen as he talked with his friends.

“Why’d you ask her out? She’s not your type.”

“Stacy is her cousin. That means I will get blown tonight. Hey, want to join me? Stacy pulls the best trains, bet little cousin does too. Maybe we can get them together.”

I walked over and kicked the boy in the magic button Dad had told me about. Just like Dad had said, he fell down and screamed. He no longer resembled a golden-haired prince charming, while writhing on the ground he more closely resembled a slimy smelly fish flopping around and he sounded like a deflating balloon.

“I am nothing like Stacy. Don’t ever talk to me again or I’ll kick your balls out your throat.” Then I calmly straightened my dress and walked away. This was when I was in seventh grade. I learned my lesson that day. The first thing to ask a boy, “Do you know my cousin?”

My younger cousin was gutless and a fool. One day he messed up in a game and got benched. The next day he pretended to walk into a door and got amnesia. Since I was the only responsible person at school, I was called to the nurse’s office to take care of him. No surprise, his mother was unavailable, and my grandparents had requested that I take care of things. So, I

went, and I waited with my idiot cousin until Pappaw came to the school. Pappaw had just been diagnosed with cancer and was supposed to avoid stress. Good luck in this family. I helped get my cousin into the car and went with my grandparents to my aunt's house for the dramatic show. For a whole four hours he had amnesia. Mammaw and Betty worried and fussed. The other kids cried. The coach told him to take his time healing (maybe that part was a bit more selfish on the coach's part).

Everyone was taken in except Pappaw and my parents and me. But since my parents only had phone conversations, they were safe from the drama. Maybe if I had been offered a tub of popcorn, a box of junior mints and a big soda, I would have been able to endure the show longer; then again I had never been fond of shows that lasted two hours let alone four. Eventually, I had enough and mentioned how this was a money saver. Since he remembered nothing, he wouldn't know when his birthday was or what a birthday was (he had gone with total amnesia and had needed help walking because he couldn't remember how). Miracles of miracles, he not only remembered his birthday but Christmas too. So, I called him a coward and a faker and smacked him upside the head. Then while my Aunt and grandmother yelled, I was a monster, I called my Mom to pick me up. No surprise, his memory was fine ten minutes later and he never even had a headache. Conniving wuss.

Needless to say, going to school with my cousins was a nightmare. Between the humiliation of James' lame cons and Stacy's whoring, invisibility was actually a blessing at times. High school sucked with those two and math classes. Of course, just to add a cherry on the crapiest Sunday around, there was my brother Brandon.

My senior year, Brandon was a freshman. Not just any freshman. He was known by everyone in the school and town. He had already been interviewed on the sports show on

television and radio, multiple times. Brandon was a super star, three sport athlete. The most popular guy in school. The legend of the town. Everyone knew his name. Coaches wanted him, opposing teams hated him, teammates either adored him or despised him. He was the god of the town. Worshipped and adored by all. Even, sadly by me. I cherished every time he was supportive of me or allowed me to be a part of his life in some small way. He was my little brother, even if he didn't want to be.

I was known to my teachers as Brandon Miller's sister, which should have been better than the usual of not being known. However, they would scratch their heads and say, "You're nothing like your brother. He is so confident and outgoing. I didn't know you were one of those Miller's?"

So, I kept my poker face, pretended I felt no hurt and I just became the good girl who rebelled by not putting away my clothes promptly. Sometimes when I was mad, I would put the clean, folded clothes into the wash. Just to spite my Mom. She would inevitably yell at me. I was still the failure. I only played one sport and was never the star. I gave up writing. And I never ran for class office again. I also continued to hear the familiar question from my parents' friends; at the mall, at the movies, when in a restaurant, even once at church. "I didn't know you had a daughter?" was a question that still hurt, but at least I had an active purpose to go with my failure of being born.

The Ironic Turn...

There were moments when I was very publicly claimed as something other than a failure. I was even claimed as a daughter. I remember my freshman year of P.E. class. That was the time Mom went to school and yelled at my P.E. teacher, the time she fought for me.

He was a short man of no real memorable repute. I was already on the varsity soccer team as a starter. Growing up in my family, being unathletic was not allowed, so I knew how to play all the main sports and had played against boys since I was little. Not liking something never necessarily means being unable to do it, and even though I really disliked sports, I was rather quite good at them.

On the first day of class, we all went outside to the soccer field, this area was very familiar to me as I had been playing since I was four, but today the teacher had us all walk the field while he explained the rules of the game. There were twenty of us in all. Four girls, of which I was the only athlete, and sixteen boys. Ten of whom were on the football team and on who had grown up playing soccer with me. All in all, with the exception of eight students, we were a fairly athletic class.

However, it soon became apparent that my teacher and I viewed our class in very different ways. As he set up the line markers he looked at the five boys who could not chew gum and walk at the same time and then looked at the four of us girls and said, “girls can’t really play sports. So, boys you all need to be patient with the ineptitude of the girls and carry the teams.” Now while I was lousy at speaking out to my family, I was not opposed to proving a point to other bullies.

I was small and always dressed like an immaculate proper lady. I realized I looked nothing like an athlete, and I was willing to make allowances for his stereotyping, but only to a point. So, that first day when he said we were playing soccer, I stood quietly with my hands folded, in the middle of the soccer field at class and just watched the boys play.

After a few minutes of the boys playing and the other girls sitting on the sidelines, he yelled at me, “Miller, I know this is not something you can really do, but at least try.”

Oh, I’ll try I thought and watched his favorite football star dribble the ball towards me. Now it probably was not very sporting of me, after all this boy played football not soccer, but I stepped into him and did a perfect soccer stop. The kind of stop that allows for a moving object to meet an unmovable force. The result was for the poor boy to go flying and for me to have the ball. I then proceeded to dribble at full speed down the field around the other boys, and then when it was just me and the goalie, the other pet who had laughed and said no girl could ever beat him, I drilled the ball right at him.

If I had been in a real game, I would never had done what I did because the point is to score. If he hadn’t looked at me and began laughing with disdain when I was coming towards him, if he hadn’t then shouted, “too easy”; well then I would never had decided to humiliate him. I probably would have pulled the kick as well. But I was really pissed, so I used all my training and my dominate foot and kicked that ball. I aimed right at him and I was very good at making the ball go where I wanted it to.

This time, I aimed just a little lower than his stomach. Not surprisingly, when the ball hit, he grunted and fell into the goal. The boy from the soccer team who had played with me in scrimmages began laughing and high fived me. The goalie was moaning and in the fetal position

in the goal, and as for the teacher, he came running. His stubby legs pumped, and he ran almost as fast as a one-legged pigeon.

“Miller, what was that?”

“I don’t know sir, after all, I’m just a girl. I can’t play sports.” I probably shouldn’t have used my saccharine sweet voice. Or twirled my hair around my finger. Too bad I wasn’t chewing gum. Popping a bubble would have completed the ditsy affect.

At this, the boys all began to laugh. One of the football players ran up to the teacher, “She’s a Miller sir. She’s doesn’t play sports like a girl. She only knows to win”

The teacher just glared at me. All in all, it was quite a day for the first day of P.E. class. I had knocked the wind out of one boy, showed up another and humiliated the teacher. It should come as no surprise that I had made an enemy. And an enemy with power, so when report cards came out, it was no surprise, the teacher flunked me. A’s and B’s were expected always. An F, I was shaking by the time I walked in the door at home. I was sure my little rebellion was going to get me in really big trouble. As I walked in the door, I saw Mom in the kitchen preparing a snack of fruit and cheese.

“Sadie, how was school?”

“Mom, I got my report card today.” Mom moved to the sink and washed her hands. As she dried them on the red checked towel she held out her hand.

“Well, let’s see it.” *Oh, crap.*

“Mom, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it.”

I gave Mom the report card and waited for my punishment. Mom just looked at it for a few minutes. As the silence built so did the pressure in my chest, and once again the air backed up in my lungs. The pterodactyls began rampaging in my stomach. I knew this would be bad.

“All A’s but one F. Well, I know you could not possibly have had an inability in the P.E. class, and I know you are a very responsible student, so would you care to explain?”

I told Mom everything. She just listened and then she turned and picked up the phone. I sat on the bench in the dining room waiting. When Mom put the phone on speaker, I forgot how to move. My world narrowed to this call and this small space.

“Mr. Smith? This Victoria Miller, my daughter is Sadie Miller. Would you care to explain her grade in your class?”

“Your daughter did not earn any other grade. I do not make allowances or play favorites.” Mom must have seen me flinch because her mouth firmed into an angry clench, but her eyes softened, and she placed a gentle hand on my back and began to rub small circles into my rigid muscles.

“I see, so Sadie didn’t attend classes? Wait that can’t be right her attendance shows only one absence and that was when she had strep throat? Was she late? No there are no tardies listed. Did she not dress out?”

“She did dress out. Look Mrs. Miller, is your husband available? I think it would be better if I talked with him. Less emotional hysterics that way.” *Oh no he didn’t just say that to my Mom?*

“No Mr. Smith. You will be dealing with me and the principle.”

“There’s no need for that. I’m sure this is just a small clerical error.”

“Well then, I expect you will be changing my daughter’s grade to the A she deserves immediately correct?”

“Yes.” As I listened to the dial tone, I wondered what had just happened.

“Breathe Sadie. This is no big deal. You are fine. Go do your homework now.” I stood up and Mom grabbed me in a strong hug. She just held me for several minutes then kissed my forehead and handed me a plate of snacks.

The next day at class, my teacher asked me to keep my Mom away from him and changed my grade to an A. That night at dinner, I told Mom and Dad what he said. Mom just smiled, and Dad laughed.

“I’m glad you stood up for yourself. And your Mom is one fiery woman. Boys let this be a lesson, never piss off a fiery woman?”

There was no lecture. I was not called a disappointment. It was a pleasant dinner. I was stunned. I really had no idea how to handle this. I was used to much different dinner time conversations. But I felt really good seeing how fierce my Mom had been in my defense. From that point on, I tried my best in every game played in class for the rest of the year. I also only humiliated one boy the rest of the year by bouncing a birdie between his eyes in badminton. But he was a total jerk who kept trying to look down all the girls’ shirts.

As for my teacher, he never acknowledged me again, not even to speak to me. I liked that better than being the focus in any game. Ironically, when my brother Brandon had him for class three years later, he looked at Brandon and said, “Miller, I didn’t know she had any sons? I thought she just had a daughter.”

The Jackal Games...

The favorite game at dinner for my family was to make me cry. It seemed this was our version of a national past time. They would place bets to see not only how quickly they could reduce me to tears and make me leave the room, but who would get the “honor” of the win. To this day, they still laugh about it and both my brothers have taught their own children to mock me for running from the room in tears. My parents laugh and boast about how I learned not to be so sensitive. I’m not sur this should be called great parenting advice. Especially since I still get a momentary stomach crap when sitting down at a dinner table.

Each dinner would begin with us all taking our regular places at the black walnut table. Dad would get the spot at the head of the table; Mom would sit on the bench to his right with Justin next to her so she could cut his food and help him. Brandon would sit on the bench to Dad’s left and across from Mom. I would sit next to Brandon and across from Justin. Most nights, I set the table and helped bring the food to the table.

Setting the table would involve removing the current center piece, the key bowl and the candles. Then I would put placemats for each person and the round wood hot pads topped with cork so food could be set on those without ruining the shine on the table. Next I would place the dishes. Over the years, the dishes had changed but for most of my high school they were round golden brown with a dark chocolate colored ring at the edges. The napkins were placed next and needed to be folded in either triangle or rectangles and placed to the left of each plate. Forks went on the napkins and knives and spoons went to the right of the plates. Lastly glasses were filled with lots of ice and water for Dad, no ice just water for Mom, and a perfect balance of ice and water for the boys.

My chest would get tighter and tighter with each napkin folded and fork set. My breath would back up in my lungs and those damn pterodactyls would awaken in my stomach. I would desperately begin preparing my defenses with each step I took. As I carried a perfectly prepared meat dish to the table, my internal pep talk would commence. *Don't cry. Don't talk back. Don't respond. Just take it. If you respond, if you show any emotion, it will get worse. Ignore them and it will stop.* This would repeat with every prepared side. Over and over I would remind myself, ignore and be silent.

I was unsure about the ignoring them part. I had tried many times and it seemed to me they only got more hurtful, but every time I ran from the table, after she laughingly told them to behave, Mom would follow me to my room and tell me not to respond and just ignore them and they would quit. So, maybe tonight, would be the night it worked.

I knew I would try to my hardest to ignore the cuts and spirit crushing taunts. No matter how unrelenting they were, I would try. I could only hope the topic would be something that would only hurt and not make me mad. See the secret I kept, I never cried from pain. Pain was nothing. Anger and frustration, now those were where my tears came from. I would get so mad, but I knew I would get in trouble if I hurt them by attacking their sore spots.

If I attacked and pointed out how Brandon was lazy because everything came easy to him and he was excused from all bad and selfish behavior, I would be cruel. If I pointed out how Mom was crippling Justin because he threw a pouting fit to get his own way and could barely feed himself, I would be cruel. If I looked at Dad and told him he was a bully and that I dreamed of suicide because of him, I would be cruel. And worst of all, if I yelled at Mom and told her it wasn't my fault she couldn't keep her legs shut in high school and all her failings in life were hers and not mine, I would be cruel.

So, since I never wanted to hurt them, I loved them, I would remain silent and not cruel. I would sit there trying to hold it in. I knew where I could strike to devastate and cripple them, but I would never be that cruel. The pressure would build from trying to hold it in until I thought I would explode, and the only option was a weak burst, followed by running away. The greatest unfairness, if I responded and if I didn't, I was still going to be compared to my aunt and told they were saving me from becoming her. I was not my aunt. But I was constantly compared to her. It was their duty after all, to correct my natural leanings.

Once the food was on the table and everyone was in the correct places, Dad asked me to say grace. Even in this, I had to be careful, after all, if I really prayed how I wanted, that would start the entertainment at the amen. If I prayed correctly and remembered to pray for everyone else, maybe, just maybe, I would at least be able to fill my plate and take a bite or two before the festivities began. We joined hands and bowed our heads in respect and humility.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the wonderful meal we are blessed with. Thank you for Mom taking the time and care to prepare it for us. Thank you for my Dad and great little brothers. Please help Brandon have a great game this weekend and Justin to have a good day tomorrow. Please help me to do better at school and soccer. Please help me become more outgoing and better at public speaking before the next election. Thank you again for dinner and the hands that provided it. Amen”

We all dropped hands and lifted heads and Mom put potatoes on Justin's plate then hers. As she passed the potatoes to Dad and started on tonight's meatloaf, I waited. Next the green beans and rolls were passed, and I waited. The pressure in my chest and lungs built, my stomach ached, but as the first forkfuls of food passed my lips, I released a bit of the tension I was

holding. Maybe tonight would be a good night after all. My mistake, lowering my guard. Just as I raised a forkful of baked potato to my lips, it began.

“So, Dad, did you ever lose a class election when you were in school?” *Brandon is a little brat. What did I do to him?*

“No Brandon, no one in the family ever did. Not even your Aunt. We had no problems having lots of friends. Your Mom and I were part of the popular group.” *Yep, you have all the makings, even the mean bits.*

“Now boys, behave.” *Great help Mom.*

“No one wins everything all the time, no one comes in first always. I get good grades and my teachers like me, well most of them do.” *Shut up Sadie. No response, no response.*

“Yay, even Brandon couldn’t be first in everything. Sadie beat him to being born first after all.” *Was Justin trying to help me or provoke Brandon?*

“That’s true Justin. And we do need to make allowances for Sadie, she is smart, she just is too emotional and never seems to apply herself enough. We should help her. We don’t want her going all Red Sonya on us.” Dad’s small curving of his lips into the deadly smug facsimile of a smile was the signal for their games and my torture to begin.

Red Sonya, a bad “B” movie about a female barbarian who defeated her evil relatives and killed a lot of bullying men. The movie was awful. No real plot, dialogue or acting, but boy I liked when she unleashed her sword and made everyone apologize, cry and beg for mercy. Unfortunately, they did not understand what I had liked and now, anytime I got mad, Red Sonya was how I was mocked. Once again, anything I liked was turned into a way to hurt me.

“What did everyone learn at school today? Jack, please pass the rolls.”

“Today, we played basketball at recess and I made every shot. My team won. Oh, and I got all the words on my spelling test right.”

“We played soccer in gym. David McCall and I made up one team and we had all the other kids on the other team, we totally destroyed them. I also got 100% on my math test. It’s pre-algebra and it is soo easy. Aren’t you taking algebra Sadie? How are you doing?”

“I got an 80% on my last algebra test. But I got 100% in my writing and literature classes. My teachers said I am really advanced, and my history teacher wants me to move to the advanced classes. Oh, and my coach told me I was going to make All Conference in Soccer.”

“Why did you score so low in Algebra? You have convinced yourself that math is hard. You just don’t apply yourself. I’m disappointed Sadie. I expect better.”

But Dad...”

Sadie, don’t back talk your Father.”

“I was told only stupid people have trouble in math.”

“Brandon, we don’t call you sister stupid.”

“Yes Mom.”

“Mom, I wasn’t back talking Dad. I was just saying, my teacher said some people have trouble with algebra and...”

“We do not accept excuses young lady.”

“I’m not making excuses Dad...”

“Wow, Sadie are you saying Dad lied?”

“Shut up Brandon.”

“Sadie Ann, apologize to your brother now.”

“But Mom, he...”

“You’re the oldest, we expect more out of you. You say you’re sorry right now.”

“I’m sorry for telling you to shut up.”

“Now, let’s all try to have a nice dinner. Sadie, my sister always had problems with being nice to her brothers too. You need to work harder. You also need to do better in math. Quit sluffing off with reading and writing. Focus more. Look at the boys, they don’t waste their time writing. Do you even read anything worthwhile? Anything that will better yourself? What would Jesus think of how you waste your time and His gifts?”

Keep your mouth shut. Don’t point out that the boys couldn’t read at four like you or that Brandon and his friends were jerks. Don’t point out that Justin can’t even pick out his own clothes or tie his shoes. Or that Brandon had Mom do a lot of his English and history homework. And especially, DON’T RESPOND to the looks Mom is giving you.

“Well Sadie. Are you going to be rude and ignore me or are you going to honor your Father and respond? You really are just like my sister, disrespectful and selfish. I’m very disappointed in you. And you must be making Jesus weep after all He’s done for you.”

“Ephesians 6:4.”

“What was that? Don’t mumble. If you have something to say, just say it. If you aren’t willing for everyone to hear, don’t speak at all.”

“I said, Ephesians 6:4, ‘Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath...’

Laughter, Dad was laughing. “Good. So, we are going to quote scripture. Do you even understand what you are quoting? Are you following the scriptures? What about, 1 John 4:21 ‘If a man say, “I love God,” and hateth his brother, he is a liar. For he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?’ Are you treating your

brother, the brother who is only trying to help you, with love or hatred? It's not Brandon's fault you are jealous of him and his success."

"You have no reason to be jealous of me Sadie. If you would only try harder, you could be almost as good."

"Sadie's going to go Red Sonya"

"Justin" Mom laughed "Hush. You'll make her cry."

"I that true Sadie, are you going Red Sonya? My sister could never control herself either. She always liked to make a scene and hurt people. Are you trying to hurt Brandon?"

For just a moment, I pictured stabbing my smirking brother with my fork. For a moment I thought of what I wanted to say. How I wanted to point out their flaws and failings. I wanted to point out that it was Brandon who was jealous of me, because I was born first. Big whoop. What had being born first ever done but bring pain and humiliation? I wanted to point out anything that would take that hateful and superior look from Mom's face and wipe the arrogance from Dad, but that would really make Jesus sad. And I was not cruel. I would not crush anyone. That was the problem. It was so frustrating, and I could feel the tears welling. Tears of rage. If I didn't leave, I would explode. I threw down my fork listening as it rattled against my plate.

Standing quickly my napkin falling to the floor, "You all are a vicious pack of jackals." I tried to hastily make my retreat.

"Dad won."

"Brandon, she'll hear you."

"Mommy, what's a jackal?"

"Us apparently." Dad began to roar with laughter.

And there it was, the signal. The gales of hysteria echoed from the walls, the floors, the ceiling. It built and built, following me to my room. Soon, Mom would get the giggles under control and tell them to behave. She would come down the hall and sit next to me on my bed and give me the “Red Sonya Talk”. I would be told they were just teasing, and I needed to toughen up. I had to learn to take a joke and not be so emotional. Then I would need to go back to the table and apologize for ruining a great family dinner and not properly appreciating her hard work. Hey bonus, I got to do the dishes too since Brandon wanted to watch a game with Dad and Justin on t.v. Yeah. Once again, they had successfully kept me from becoming my aunt.

Never mind that I had never shown even a hint of becoming my aunt, I was the first born and a daughter, that was enough. I was a failure. No matter how I tried to curl up into my mind, the words and laughter got through. Night after night. Dinner equaled pain. Until, finally, each night the tears would explode from me, the emotions would overwhelm, and I would yell, “You jackals!” Ass was a bad word and something my aunt would say. Then I would run to my room. My routine and theirs. It was such a routine that my cat, Duchess would always be waiting to comfort me.

My fluffy gray and white tabby cat waiting for me would also be followed by my angry tears and I would ask God why he had created such a failure as me. And every time, it was Mom who would eventually come in and try to hide her mirth and tell me the boys were just teasing. Same thing. Over and over. The same words. I was too emotional. I needed to toughen up. “you don’t want to be like Betty, do you? She has always been controlled by her emotions.” Oh, and my favorite line each night, “You know Sadie, if you didn’t react, they wouldn’t keep teasing you?” Yep, every night, predictable.

Every night I would secretly let my emotions and thoughts out, at least until I even gave up writing. Sometimes I would plan ways to show them. I would create a world in my mind where I discovered a new family, one who wanted me, or a hero who would tell them off and take me away on a white horse to a palace far away. Okay so I was a big fairytale fan and some of those were very reminiscent of Snow white and Cinderella, but those nights beat my usual internal thinking. The usual of; I was a failure; I was nobody special. I eventually replaced writing with planning. I started planning too either disappear or die. After all no one would miss me. After all, didn't I continually hear from their friends, "I didn't know you had a daughter"? They wouldn't even notice right. I hated me.

Secret Fears...

I hated meeting new people or being in situations where I knew no one. The rest of the family had no problems in this but for me, it was enough to make me vomit and have problems breathing. I later learned this was a mini panic attack brought on by anxiety issues. Through therapy, medicine and prayer, I have since learned to control this, to an extent. I still hate unknown situations and being the focus of attention, but my husband understands this and helps me deal. So do my children, now that they know. They do not see it as a failing. It is just part of me. I have learned who I can trust to show this weakness and they help. I have surrounded myself with safe people who are protective and supportive. They help me the way guide dogs help a blind person navigate the unfamiliar, only my help is cuter and better behaved, well most of the time. I can even handle public speaking now. I may throw up first, but I can handle it.

When growing up, it was very different. This shyness and throwing up out of fear, was a failing to overcome by making the choice to be different. Whenever we went skiing or to Disneyland, we had to split into three groups. Most seats were for two, so either Brandon and Dad would ride together and Mom and Justin, or sometimes Mom and Dad and Brandon and Justin. To help me overcome my failing I was told to take an opportunity to make a new friend and I would ride with a stranger. I was never sure how this “friendship” was supposed to occur in five to ten minutes, but it was what I was always told.

“Okay, the stagecoach can only hold four inside, Sadie, ride up top.”

“Now Sadie, look how nice and cute the driver is. Maybe you can make a new friend. Just try to be friendly.”

Thanks Dad. You bet Mom. No problem. Especially since you just announced to everyone that my shyness is actually rude behavior. Got it.

“Oh, and Sadie, if you really want to get over this you can. It’s mind over matter. Quit letting fear control you.”

As everyone else climbed inside the coach, I accepted help on to the top of the stagecoach and smiled at the driver. The sympathetic look in his eyes mortified me and so I did what I always did, I escaped into my mind. I imagined I was in the old west traveling through the plains to a new home. I looked around and imagined buffalo and Indians. I saw teepees and covered wagons and pictured men on horses shooting six shooters at us as they tried to catch us. I created another world in my mind and lived there for twenty minutes until the ride ended. Once again, I failed. As we disembarked from the ride, I knew if asked, I could either lie, or tell the truth and receive the “you are consumed with fear by choice” lecture. I was a coward and a failure, and to top it all off, I did not make a new friend of a stranger. At least here, no one knew the family so I wouldn’t have to hear the ever popular, “I didn’t know you had a daughter?”. I was always eternally grateful for the small gifts in my childhood, and that was a true blessing this day.

I went through my childhood trying to not throw up on strangers. Although looking back, that would have at least been an entertaining way to get out of these situations. Of course, the “don’t throw up on strangers” lecture probably would have negated the entertainment aspects of the events and given everyone another problem of mine to add to the list.

I also have a problem with claustrophobia. Aquariums are torture and sharks especially cripple me with terror. I have since learned that sharks represent in my mind the family and relatives waiting to tear me apart at the first sign of weakness. A vivid imagination is not always

a blessing. To help me with this fear, Dad had me watch every Jaws movie and shark show that came on t.v.

“Sadie, come here honey. Let’s watch a movie together. It will help before we go to the ocean.”

“Okay Dad.” Sucker, why I kept falling for this I never could understand, but I was excited that Dad wanted to do something special with just me. *Oh joy, it’s Jaws. Whoever thought this was a good movie idea really needed to die a horrible death. Maybe I would be able to trick my mind into imagining a man running from a giant steamroller and avoid the movie images. Nope. No such luck.*

“You know Sadie, the way to overcome your fears is to face them. Don’t let fear cripple you. When we go to the ocean, you and I will see how far out we can swim. Maybe you should go to the library and research sharks. Knowledge will help you overcome these unreasonable fears.”

“Yes Dad.” He looked at me and just shook his head.

“I know you are smarter than this Sadie. Trust Jesus and give your fears to Him.”

“Jack, what are you doing? I need Sadie to help me with dinner.”

“Alright. Go help your Mother.” Dad then gave me a hug and I ran to the kitchen.

“Are you alright Sadie? He means well sweetie.”

“I know Mom. I know he loves me and only wants me to be the best I can be.” As I went to shuck the corn for dinner I knew she was right. Dad really thought he was helping, unfortunately that wouldn’t help me tonight.

“Mom?” I kept my voice soft, almost a whisper as I stood over the trashcan and pulled the fine golden hairs from the corn.

“Yes dear.”

“Thank you.” Mom just smiled and gave me a hug.

I really hated shark movies and they seemed to be on all the time and researching sharks is a very bad idea for someone with my imagination and an upcoming trip to the ocean. All I can say about shark shows growing up is, thank the good Lord above that Shark Week was not invented until I was married and living in my own house, otherwise I probably would never have slept. As it was, I woke up in terror at least once a week.

As I woke shaking and gasping for breath, I lay staring at the blue flowered canopy above my head. What had caused me to shake awake this time. I swore I heard a splash.

It's just your imagination Sadie. Not real.

The room was dark. I had left a night light on and my door open, but the light was off, and the door closed. If I had to run so I wouldn't be pulled into the deep abyss, the closed door would stop me. For some insane reason, I thought I would be safe if I could just get out of my room.

That was a splash!

I pulled myself into as tiny a ball as possible in the middle of the twin bed and stayed still. I couldn't make any noise. I waited. I knew the fins were circling my bed. At any moment, out of the floor the open mouth with rows and rows of pointed teeth would appear. The cold, beady dead eyes would look at me as the shark pulled me down into the dark and tore me into pieces.

It didn't matter how many times I told myself this was my imagination. There was no shark pit beneath my bed. The movie was messing with my imagination. All I had to do was

look or leave the room. Night after night, I told myself to look. But I never did. Instead I waited for the first saving ray of light to come through my window and save me from the dark.

For years, until I was forty-eight years old, I knew if my foot left the bed in the night, I would be pulled into the deep dark abyss by the monster waiting for me. After a James Bond movie, I even gave up elevators, because you never knew when the floor would open, and the last thing ever seen was those rows of teeth. I just knew eventually a shark would come out of the water and grab me.

The Universal Studios tour was hell, but aquariums, now that was the stuff of nightmares. Enclosed crowded spaces with sharks all around us and they were dark. Breathing was impossible. My heart would try to leap from my chest and flee to safety. No escape into my head would save me. As we walked through the aquarium with water and fish surrounding us I would begin my mantra of terror prayer in the eerie dark world I was forced to endure.

“Please Jesus please Jesus please Jesus...Oh thank you Jesus a bathroom.”

I would escape into the bathroom and lean over the sink, gasping for air. In the mirror I would see a cold clammy face looking back. That face would make Casper the Ghost look colorful. The eyes staring at me were wide, jittery, never still, looking for escape. My chest would squeeze, and my breath would back up in my lungs. The stomach pterodactyls would begin breeding and I would fight the urge to vomit. Spots would begin to appear before my eyes and my vision narrowed. I would be on the brink of passing out usually right before Mom came to get me.

“Sadie? What’s taking so long? The boys are anxious to go. They are looking forward to the sharks next.” *Oh, sweet Jesus no.*

“Come on Sadie. Are you not feeling well? It’s all mind of matter. Just focus on something in front of you and we’ll have fresh air soon. Your Dad and brothers have been really looking forward to this trip. You strong. You can do this.” Mom then patted me on the back and opened the door.

“Ready?”

“Yes.” And because everyone was waiting, it took a strength of superhuman will for me to manage to get one full breath and leave the room. Then the panic prayer would begin again. When I was married and had my own kids we visited an aquarium and I focused on the back of my husband’s shirt. One panic bathroom later and her grabbed the kids and me and left the aquarium. That was my last trip to an aquarium. The kids and Michael always left me outside holding their stuff while they visited the under the sea Hell, better known as aquariums, without me.

I hated aquariums. Growing up, we went to those all the time. I became very proud of the fact that my parents and brothers never knew my terror. They still don’t. This became a sign to me that just once, I beat the failure. Only my husband and children know of this terror, and they don’t see it as a failing. They either don’t go to aquariums or are good with me waiting outside. Michael has always helped me breathe and he has taught our children to help me as well.

Basketball Vows...

I got married to my husband Michael, when I was twenty-one and began to learn how to breathe. Mom wanted me to elope. She did not want to hear anything about wedding plans, neither did Dad and the boys. One night, at the dinner games of Jackals had played out, I broached the subject of my wedding date.

“So, Michael and I were thinking on a date...”

“Brandon, how is basketball going?”

“Great, we are really making a good showing this year.”

“That’s great. Justin how is your team doing? Still having fun with Dad coaching?”

“Mom, this is important. Michael has family coming from out of state. We have to set a date. We are thinking about...” Mom calmly put down her fork and looked at me sternly. Dad shook his head in disappointment and the boys just kept shoveling the food in steady never ceasing streams.

“Sadie Ann. Quit being so selfish. This family does not revolve around you. I am sick of you trying to control the conversation. We are all tired of hearing about this infernal wedding. It is not important and is a waste of money. Weddings are stupid”.

Mom hated big fancy events. She and Dad had eloped. Of course, they were still in high school and I was on the way, but weddings were selfish and wasteful was something I had heard often. It didn’t help that Aunt Betty had had two big weddings so me having one was just another insult I guess and further proof of the inability to prevent me from becoming Betty. Plus, mother of the bride could in no way compare to mother of the town legend and wife of Jack Miller former star athlete. Also, my wedding would be about, Heaven forbid, me and that was

totally unacceptable. Everyone would know they had a daughter then. I couldn't believe that I had survived tonight's Jackal Games only to lose over the roast chicken while discussing the most important event of my life to date, my escape, I mean wedding.

"Mom, Michael and I are paying for most of it. I am making all the flowers and Aunt Kathy is sending the decorations from her school's prom. We are renting the senior citizens center for the reception. And as I was trying to tell you, we have picked February eighth for our date."

Dad lifted his head and I could tell by the vacant look in his eyes he was looking inward at his important schedule of events. "Brandon has his last game against Northeast on that date and on the seventh is his last game against Cottonwood. We could try to work around the games perhaps. Maybe come before they start. What do you think Victoria? That could be doable since Sadie really wants to have a wedding."

"Well, it could prove an inconvenience for Brandon to have to rush to the game, but perhaps we can all sacrifice for Sadie."

This made the message loud and clear; I could not talk about my wedding at home. My mom's older sister and her husband finally came from California to help me with wedding stuff. I remember sitting in the backseat of their car as we left my street. At the stop sign, my aunt turned in her seat and looked at my uncle and said, "Unkie Bruce, Sadie isn't allowed to talk about what she wants for her wedding at home, so for the rest of the day, we are going to let her talk all she wants, and we will listen okay?"

I had to blink away tears. My former hippie aunt saw me. I mattered. We first went to pick out the wedding party dresses and tuxedos. My Aunt hated all things girly and frilly, yet she sat with me and went through dress after dress in all shades of rose and teal. We picked out

southern bell dresses right out of *Gone with the Wind* for my new nieces and formal matching tuxedos for Michael and our nephew. All the while my Uncle, who seldom spoke at the best of times and was a cross between Mr. Edwards from *Little House on the Prairie* and *Duck Dynasty*, just quietly sat in the chair next to me. After the dresses, we picked out my bouquet and one to throw. I made all the other flowers. My Uncle, when it was time to pay for things gruffly told me, “My wedding gift” and pulled out his wallet. He bought my bridal bouquet. This was even more touching since he was known for never parting with a penny. I felt special.

I talked wedding for a whole day, and I could show excitement and joy without being told I was a drama queen and attention hog. I loved that they had come out to help me. After they went home, my grandma called and said she loved me, then she talked to my Mom. The next day, Mom took an hour to go veil shopping with me and to pick out the rehearsal dinner menu.

I tried on two veils. The first was a long cathedral length veil with lace trim that was something out of a fairy tale. I couldn’t afford it, but boy did I wish I could. Mom even said it was pretty and looked like me. The next was the one I bought. Mostly because the price was right. The rehearsal dinner was to be with a caterer that did business with my Dad and so we could trade out most of the cost. Thrifty was what Michael and I were. For us, getting married and sharing that joy was all that mattered. It was a fun day with Mom, she was part of my special event.

A few days later, my maternal grandparents came out, so my grandpa could spend the day with me, and to help me pick out the cake. Grandpa was a master chef. His cooking could bring a tear to the eye. He was also a master electrician by trade and a wood toy maker by choice. He made toys the old way, without nails. For the last several years, he had been slowing down and had bad days health wise. In fact, his health was bad, and he knew this would be the last time he would ever be capable of traveling. I learned later his doctor did not want him to

make this trip, but he said I needed him, and he wanted to meet the man who thought he was good enough for his oldest granddaughter.

It was a precious day with my grandfather filled with memories. We went to a small hole in the wall bakery. I swear, everyone there except me was in their seventies, but oh the smells and confectionary delights. We spent a good thirty minutes just drooling over each item in the display window. Eventually we moved to the cake book and began looking at cakes.

“What about this one?” Grandpa loved to play pranks and I could tell, as he pointed at the fire engine birthday cake, today was going to be classic Grandpa fun.

“Hmm, too boyish.”

“Oh, this is it then.” The barbie cake was purple and pink.

“We can get two, one with a brown-haired doll and one with a boy doll.”

“Grandpa.” I just giggled and enjoyed his belly shaking laugh. I always imagined that Santa Claus laughed like my Grandpa.

We went on, commenting on the pros and cons of each cake until we found the right cake. A three-tiered traditional cake with mauve and teal flowers. Next we looked at the five cake toppers they had to choose from. Grandpa picked out the one he said made him think of me and Michael. A fairytale setting under a flower arbor with the couple holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes with undisguised love.

“Sadie, I can’t be at your wedding. I would if I could. So, I want you to have this cake topper. And when you look at it, you need to know, I’m there with you and I love you very much. You make me proud every day of your life. You have made me proud.”

I just hugged my Grandpa and cried. I so loved this giant bear of a man. To this day, every time I see Santa Claus I think of my Grandpa.

Of course, Grandpa would never let the day end on anything mushy like tears. He also bought a card and gave it to Michael. He told Michael not to open it until we were on our honeymoon. We laughed and laughed when we opened that card.

Michael and I had finally arrived at the tiny hotel at the small mountain town where we were staying three days for our honeymoon. After getting something to eat and opening a bottle of Brut, we sat side by side on the bed and opened Grandpa's card. It was a goofy dog sitting on a pile of chewed up shoes. Inside it said, "My deepest sympathies on your loss." Inside my prankster of a grandfather had then written, "sympathies on the loss of your sanity for marrying into this family. Just remember one important thing, no returns given. Be good to her. Love Grandpa." We looked at each other and cracked up.

Michael leaned into me and while laughing kissed me and said, "Well, there you have it. All sales are final. Guess I'm stuck with you and you with me." This led to more laughs. That card and Grandpa's support were shining moments in wedding memories. Especially since I would only get to see him one more time in this life.

Another support for the wedding came from my future sister-in-law, Patty. I had only met her a few times, but she was amazing. She became my matron of honor and talked my Mom into hosting my bridal shower, which Patty planned. Mom made all the food and bought me a beautiful white nightgown. I was sitting in what was usually my Dad's chair. I always thought it resembled a throne. It was tall and curved to encase the body all the way to the head. I loved that chair and today, it was where I sat to open presents at my shower. The presents were a mix of useful home goods and slutty lingerie. Some gifts brought laughter, some giggles, and several brought blushes. Especially since we had a wide age group in attendance. It is not great to get a see-through cat suit when your mother, mother-in-law and grandmother are sitting next to you.

Finally, it was time to open my mother's present to me. As I unwrapped the back and pulled back the tissue paper to reveal the white satin, Mom cried.

"I was in J.C Penny's buying this when the lady who was wrapping it asked me what it was for. I told her my daughter was getting married and suddenly I was sobbing. I couldn't stop. I think it finally hit me. My baby girl is grown up."

"Mom, it is beautiful." I looked at her with shock. I was completely flabbergasted. It was soft pure white satin and snow-white lace in a mermaid cut.

"Thank you." I leaned over and hugged her. Dad has always been the champion hugger in the family. He will wrap you up in a tight hug and not let go. Mom hugged, but they were always quick hugs. This time, she held on. The tears fell from both of us as I heard her whisper, "I love you baby." I still have that night gown kept safe in a drawer. I don't have anything from that party twenty-nine years ago, just that nightgown.

Patty and I had a bridesmaid party where we made all the bridesmaid bouquets, boutonnieres, and corsages ourselves to save money. My husband and I paid for most everything else ourselves, his parents paid for the rehearsal dinner and two boxes of wine. We had a keg of beer and enough champagne for the bridal party. My Dad gave us trade with his radio station to cover some of the reception food. My aunt sent her school's left-over prom decorations for the reception hall, so we decorated an "under the stars" wedding reception. The tinsel stars and ribbons were fun to put up. My new sisters-in-law and friends had a decorating party which devolved into a tinsel war with the guys. It was a lot of fun.

"Hey Sadie" as I turned to look at Michael, a handful of tinsel stars showered down on me.

“Really?” Suddenly I heard a guffaw and looked over to see three of the groomsmen using the stars as ninja weapons and trying to impale each other.

“This is what happens when we let the guys help” Patty laughed.

I looked around at all that had to be done. I looked at my watch and calculated how much time was left. And then I watched Michael and his family join with our friends in completely undignified play with silver stars and pink streamer. I so desperately wanted to join them, but what if I was seen. This was setting a poor example. There was work to be done. It might embarrass my family.

“Come on Sadie. Let go. I’m here.” I looked to where Michael was holding out a handful of tinsel stars, his amazing sapphire eyes sparkled with mirth and mischief, and suddenly I wanted joy.

“You’re going down” I grabbed the stars and proceeded to join in the great tinsel war. By the end, we were all picking tinsel stars out of hair and other places, but we easily finished decorating the hall in plenty of time to get to the hotel to meet more guests. This silliness set the tone for the rest of the day. At the hotel we had baggage cart races and bathtubs full of beer. And oh, the joy. We laughed and laughed, and I never once thought about being perfect or dignified or what someone would think. I just held Michael’s hand and let go of all but the joy. At least until the rehearsal dinner. Then I clung to Michael for another reason.

Brandon did have a basketball game on the night of the rehearsal so, he skipped all of the rehearsal and Mom, Dad, and Justin left shortly after the food was served. Michael’s Dad made a nice toast and so did all of his brothers-in-law and sisters. After we went to my parent’s house (mine for one more night although I no longer had a room) and visited and opened some presents.

Once again we were in the front room of my parents' home. Michael and I sat on the love seat together and opened some of the presents from his family. Patty kept track of the who and what for our thank you cards. It was dark out and so we had all the lights on. Several of my soon to be brothers-in-law were moving down the hallway looking at the pictures that covered the walls. I mean, there was very little wall and mostly pictures. Five were of me. My senior picture, a recent picture from when I had first met Michael, and three from when I was four and in ballet. The rest of the walls were dedicated to important pictures of sports.

Pictures of Brandon playing soccer, basketball, baseball and football. Pictures of Justin playing baseball, basketball and football. Pictures of Mom and Dad from high school. They were everywhere. Pictures of newspaper clippings and shots bought from sports photographers. The pictures turned the hall into a walk of fame to rival any school or institution. I had mostly stopped noticing the pictures. Well I had until I met Michael and his friends.

They looked at the pictures and were not impressed with the amazing awesomeness of the boys. They had been insulted on my behalf. I was still confused by that. But now, Michael's family was perusing this pictorial hall of fame. This also led to the glaring absence of my parents at my rehearsal dinner. Everyone in Michael's family kept asking me where my family was for most of the rehearsal.

"Sadie dear, what happened to your family? Did someone get sick?" My Mother-in-law asked with obvious concern. Apparently illness was what she thought was the only acceptable reason to miss a wedding rehearsal for a daughter.

"Brandon had a basketball game. It was an important regular season game against a cross-town rival."

"But this is your wedding."

“I know but, this game is very important.”

Please don't see I am not worthy of Michael. Please don't figure out I don't matter.

“Hey Sadie, how come there aren't many pictures of you, but the walls are covered with pictures of your brothers playing sports?” Great, my soon to be brother-in-law was looking at pictures. Granted they covered every available square inch of wall space, and they were hard to miss but still, crap.

“I only played one sport.”

“Where are those pictures?”

“I wasn't very good.” I quietly began to wish for the floor to open.

“Not to worry, we will have a ton of pictures tomorrow.” God Bless Michael. Is it any wonder he's my hero?

Brandon had a game the next evening, so we cut the cake at the beginning so he could be there for the toast and the food. Then the family left and missed my reception. Ironically several of the parents of Brandon's fellow teammates stayed for most of the reception. But, as my Mom was quick to point out to me on numerous occasions, the three of them came back when the game and celebrations were over, to clean up the hall. This way I would get my \$200 deposit back. It all evens out after all.

Brandon's game was more important than a stupid wedding. I was selfish enough to plan it in a way to interfere with Brandon. I was just an emotional frivolous, attention hog. I knew what the proper priorities were, Brandon and sports came first. If I was truly caring I would have eloped and moved out quietly. I even caused Dad to get mad at the boys and Mom when he came home and found me sleeping on the couch because they had boxed up my room and repainted it.

I heard the front door open and the lights came on. Dad had a late meeting and I had already set up a sleeping bag on the couch by the front door. Earlier today when I came home from work I had found my things in a pile in the garage and by pale pink walls in my room were now black. Even my bed was gone. My closet contained Brandon's clothes.

"Where are my things?"

"Oh, Mom and I needed to paint now. Timing works better for us and You're leaving soon anyways."

I just stood there trying not to cry. I finally turned around and walked out of the house. I drove to Michael's and cried. He decided that some of his friends would help him move my stuff into his apartment the next day. It was funny, I was not already moved in because I was respecting my Dad and waiting to live together until after we were married, and here my Mom had led the charge to move me out before my wedding. So now, I was on the couch when Dad came home.

"Why is Sadie on the couch and her belongings in the garage?"

"Oh, she's moving out in two weeks and Brandon and Justin have always been forced to share a room. Brandon wanted to paint his new room and not smell paint fumes."

"Why not wait until Sadie is back from her honeymoon? She'll only be gone for two nights."

"Brandon and Justin have busy weekends and school. We would have to wait a week longer. This time works best." Mom was using a cross between reasonable and defensive. The boys were silent.

"I can't believe you did this. How do you think this makes Sadie feel? Do you know how this must look? It looks like we can't wait to get rid of Sadie?"

“We can’t” the boys giggled as Brandon proclaimed this. It was just another big joke.

“Sadie, move back into your room now. Boys, help her.”

“Jack, that can wait until morning if it is important to you.”

“My daughter is not sleeping on the couch and living out of the garage.”

As Mom shot me a glare, I thought it was kind of funny, the first two years of Brandon’s life I slept on the couch so he could have my room. This was a circle, ending where it began.

Brandon wanted his own room finally and I was in the way. Dad felt they were kicking me out and this looked bad. It was my fault they were reprimanded by Dad. Just like how important Brandon’s games were. It was the last time Brandon would play high school basketball against the cross-town rival. So, it was a once in a lifetime event after all.

Tonight’s dinner was chicken potpie because we needed something fast before Brandon played the first game of the season. It was against crosstown rivals Northeast. They would have two games in the regular season against this team and tonight was the first. I liked these rushed dinners. There was no time for the Jackal Games. However, I was soon to discover that time was not a good shield from pain.

“Hurry and finish eating Brandon. We want you to have time to properly digest before the game.”

“Yes Mom. Foods great. Just as good as last nights night before meal.” It was a variation of the same meals during game season. Pasta for the night before and lots of protein for game night. Last night was rigatoni and meat sauce, Brandon’s favorite.

“Mom, Dad, Michael’s Mom called and asked if we had set a date. They have lots...”

“Dad, what do you think about Northeast’s power forward? Hype is he’s got some serious hops.”

“Brandon, I was talking. Like I started to say...”

“He’s supposed to be really tough. Last year they didn’t have much, but this could make them a challenge to beat.”

“Seriously?” I slammed my glass down on the table and shouted. Not a very smart move but, come on. “All we talk about is dumb old basketball. This is important. Michael has a lot of family wanting to come for the wedding and we need to set a date.”

Dad paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. Slowly he set it back on his plate and looked at me. “Sadie Ann. That is enough. You are being extremely rude and disrespectful.”

I looked around the table. Mom was shaking her head at me with her patented disappointed look. Justin was wide eyed, probably because I had caused a scene before an all-important, life altering high school basketball game. As for Brandon, the little shit was grinning. He quickly covered his mouth with a napkin when Dad looked at him. He even looked crestfallen.

“Dad, I’m tired of everything about something as stupid as Brandon’s game. This is important and he keeps interrupting because everything has to be about him. I need to talk with you all.” *Sadie, shut up. What the hell have you done? Never call basketball stupid. Every game is life or death. You know this. Too late. Prepare to apologize.*

“Dad, I’m sorry if my life upsets Sadie. I didn’t realize how I was making her feel inferior. We should let her talk about what she wants. After all, she’s not used to doing things people are interested in. I want to support her.” *Sometimes I dream of you being hit by a train Brandon.*

“Oh, Brandon. I’m so proud of what a good brother you are. You are always so supportive of your sister. Sadie, do you have anything to say to your brother?”

“Yes Mom. Sorry I called your game stupid.”

“I forgive you.”

“Good, let’s finish eating. We have a game to get to.”

That was the end of that discussion. Michael and I set a date without any discussion with my family. We worked around the college baseball schedule since many of our friends played for the team. Of course, the second game against Northeast (who Brandon’s team had already defeated by forty points) was in conflict with my insignificant once in a lifetime event. Well, once in a lifetime for me, since Justin would be married twice, but oh well. All that really mattered was that our world was in its proper order with the sun and moon revolving around Brandon. I knew my place in the family and Brandon was above me. This was something that needed no explaining to me, I was never allowed to forget it.

I got tired of explaining this to my new in-laws. I don’t think I really believed it completely anymore. I knew my family wouldn’t look bad over this since most people didn’t even know they had a daughter, no one would know about my wedding. But an interesting thing did occur, my mother and father-in-law both were quick to tell everyone that I was their beautiful daughter by marriage. For the first time I realized other people saw me now.

A Champion Arises...

We came back for our first Thanksgiving. Brandon was in college now and was home also. He met us at the door. There he stood. Legs apart. Arms crossed over his chest. Mud brown eyes glinting with power, his chest was puffed out, chin raised pugnaciously. He met us at the front door like a well-trained guard, determined to prevent the unworthy entrance. As I walked up to him to give him a hug, the opening salvo was launched.

“Hi Brandon. How is college?” I opened my arms to embrace him. He blocked me with a chest bump. Then he leaned into me and said “Just remember, this is my home not yours. You don’t belong here.”

I guess I forgot my years of lessons. Ten months of being told I was visible and loved without proving myself had eroded my training. I had forgotten my place in my new fledgling confidence. I pushed past him and used a big naughty word.

“You are still a horse’s ass Brandon. Guess you always will be.”

I called him a horse’s ass. Boy was I bad. What a gutter mouth I had. I just forgot one thing. I forgot who he was. The beloved golden son. And I forgot my failings, and place, he was irreplaceable, I was forgettable. I was the one people met with shock and the startled utterance of, “I didn’t know you had a daughter?” My remedial course was about to begin in a horrific way.

Brandon made my afternoon hell. No, hell was a vacation compared to what this was. Hell would have been a tropical paradise. The bet in the favorite game was on. The jackals were circling, and blood was in the water. The crushing of my spirit game had commenced with vigor.

Only now my humiliation was for my husband to see. He would see he had chosen poorly. He would be humiliated by being married to me. He was...enraged?

We had barely finished passing the food around the table when Michael folded his napkin and left the table. He walked from the room and returned with our bags.

“Let’s go Sadie”

Michael gently but determinedly took my hand and helped me up. Then he quietly led me to the car. We were leaving. I put my seatbelt on and curled into the tiniest ball I could. Hopefully the pain I was anticipating of Michael’s rejection would not be so bad if I was small enough. Michael sat quietly gripping the steering wheel for several minutes before he began to quietly speak.

“I’m sorry Sadie.” *Here it comes. I just knew he would try to tell me how he didn’t want to hurt me, but he couldn’t be married to such a worthless loser.*

“I should never have let you to be exposed to that.” *Wait, what?*

“I won’t ever let you be unprotected and uncherished again. I’m not going anywhere Babe. I love you and I am proud to be your husband.”

By now I was sobbing. He couldn’t mean what he just said. Did he miss the memo? I was in the wrong.

“No Michael. You don’t understand. I’m in the wrong. Brandon is special. They all are.” I couldn’t breathe. My chest became tight. The pressure building to bolder crushing degrees. Those stupid pterodactyls were back. How could Michael not see the obvious. I was forgettable, disposable, useless. I was a failure.

“This pisses me off Sadie.” *Now he sees he made a mistake in marrying me. Oh, Lord Jesus, let me die if he wants to be rid of me.*

“Babe, I’m never going anywhere. I’ll never leave you alone” He turned to me and began to wipe my tears away with his thumbs. “I’m so pissed you even listen to them. They are failure, not you. I am your husband. It’s my job to protect you, and I totally failed. That’s why I’m pissed.”

I couldn’t understand. He was angry but not at me. He was angry at himself and, them. Boy was my mind blown. We had just driven four hours to spend two hours at my childhood home, so we could leave with me curled into a ball against my window in the front seat weeping and both of us hungry.

“Baby, stop crying please.” He gave a small crooked smile and half laugh “I guess I need to learn to carry tissues with me huh? Come on. You can dry your beautiful eyes on my shirt.”

That was when my Mom came running from the house and knocked on my window. I rolled it down with anticipation of the blow to come. She told me she was ashamed of my emotional behavior and selfishness and I was hurting my twelve-year-old little brother who was missing his brother and brother-in-law. How could I be so selfish. If I was truly a Christian, I would come back into the house.

The training of a lifetime kicked in and combined with my desperate desire to please everyone, thereby earning love and a place. I begged Michael to let us stay. It was alright I said. I was out of line and would do better. As I sat there pleading with him, Michael’s sapphire eyes lit with molten fire. His coal black eyebrow slanted down, highlighting the blazing fire of his eyes. His nostrils flared and his teeth clenched. His jaw tightened to steel and jutted forward. In his cheek, beneath the high chiseled cheekbone, a muscle twitched.

“Fine.” One word only. He got out of the car, slammed the door and walked over to meet me on the sidewalk. Taking my hand, he walked as a gladiator of old to face the lions in Nero’s circus. We entered the house and walked into the back-family room of the house.

Mom, Dad, and Brandon were watching a movie. Michael walked into the room and turned off the T.V. I was appalled. No one turned off Dad’s movies. This would not be good. Standing in front of the room Michael clenched his fists behind his back, looked at the ground and took a deep breath. Then he reached out and took my hand. Raising his eyes to meet my Dad’s, he calmly said, “Sadie is MY wife. She is very special. She will be treated with the utmost respect, at all times. Whether I am present or not. If you don’t, you will have no place in MY family. Is this clear?”

I was stunned. No one spoke to my family this way and certainly no one ever would declare war for me. And this was a declaration of intent to go to war. It was a shot fired over the bough by a twenty-two-year-old man. He just did not understand how things were done and the value placed on me and on the others. I looked around at my parents, sitting together as always. They were holding hands. I always saw them as the unit they were. High school sweethearts who never faltered from each other. Next to them as always, Brandon. For once he was not smirking at me. His eyes were huge, and his mouth was agape. As we waited for the responding shot, the coocoo clock loudly announced the upcoming explosion. TICK... get ready...TOCK...here comes the boom...TICK...any minute now...TOCK, let the jackal games begin.

“That’s all well and good Michael, but you need to understand Sadie is our responsibility. We are responsible for making sure she can rise above her nature and failings.”

There was Dad in his reasonable, talk to the ignorant voice. I hated that voice. My breath backed up in my lungs. The pressure built in my chest. The pterodactyls swarmed and dived in my stomach performing aerial acrobatics worthy of awe. I wanted to vomit. Or disappear.

“She’s our daughter and while she is your wife, we know her best and she needs us to help her be a better person.” And there goes Mom the one two punch was delivered with precision by a master team.

Well, at least I was being claimed as a daughter. Please Lord, let Michael not see me as a Betty in the making. TICK...TOCK...when did that clock become so loud?

“No. You understand.” Michael never raised his voice. He copied Dad’s. No one spoke to Dad as if he was ignorant. “She is no longer your daughter and you have NEVER known her.” Now he looked straight at Brandon. He stared at him for several moments. TICK...TOCK...TICK...TOCK... Now he looked at Dad. Never blinking. “Treat her with the utmost respect or forfeit any contact with her. I will protect my blessing no matter what and no matter who I have to fight.” *Wow. Did he just challenge my parents?*

I looked at Michael and felt his hand squeeze mine. He never broke eye contact with my family. TICK...TOCK...TICK...TOCK... He watched them, never blinking, never flinching, as the lion watches a pack of hyena, ready and confident.

“You are not speaking with respect in my home to my wife. You married into this family and still need to learn your place and how things are done. Sadie understands this. Everything we have ever done is out of love and her best interests. She knows she hurt Jesus today and even though she has a hard time to admitting when she is in the wrong, she still needs to say she’s sorry to Brandon for being rude and behaving like a brat. I admit it is my fault in part, after all I

allowed her to be spoiled, but as an adult she needs to make sure not to follow in Betty's footsteps."

As Dad looked at me with disappointment, Michael dropped my hand. *Hear it comes. Be strong Sadie.* I closed my eyes and waited for the blow that would finally kill me. My heart seized. Michael stepped in front of me. There he stood, with fists clinched at his side, his jaw rigid in rage and a twitch by his left eye. He turned his head and looked at me. "Sadie, believe in me" he whispered. I opened my eyes and looked into shining eyes of the purest starlight blue staring down at me. In his eyes I saw love. I saw pride in me. And I saw a plea. I recognized this plea. I had seen it in my own eyes after all. It said, "see me, stand for me". It said, "love me". I slowly stood up and took Michael's hand.

"Goodbye Mom. Goodbye Dad, Brandon. Thanks for dinner. We'll say goodbye to Justin."

Dad and Mom tried again to explain how things were done. I was their daughter and they were responsible for correcting my flaws and fighting my emotional selfish nature. Michael became even more focused and stood firm. We finally agreed to stay through Thanksgiving dinner and then left immediately after.

We did not talk to the family for several months. I was used to daily calls from Mom, but now was silence. A favorite weapon on the few occasions when lectures failed. Mom finally called for my first anniversary.

"I can't believe I raised such a selfish brat. You just had to show how much like Betty you are and make us look bad to Michael. How many lies have you told him about us? Do you even care about the pain you caused? You ruined Brandon's first Thanksgiving since going to college. Justin is depressed. Dad is having a tough time at work and you never even called to

check on him. How could you? I thought we taught you better. I thought you at least knew Jesus and would pretend to act like a Christian. You are just like your aunt Betty. I hope your marriage lasts longer than hers did. It won't if you continue to act this way. After all, how long will Michael want to stay with such a selfish drama queen? Well? Anything to say? Never mind. I don't want to hear your excuses. Oh, and by the way, happy anniversary."

Later after many counseling sessions, I would later learn that without me, the family spiraled out of control. Apparently, I was the force of calm and control. Not the unimportant person I had always believed. I was in fact always the adult for the family. But I would not understand this until almost thirty years later. At this moment of my first wedding anniversary, all I could do was feel, numb.

I sat there holding the phone in my hand listening to the dial tone until it started ringing again. It was Brandon. He yelled at me about how he was going to beat up Michael. That Michael was disrespectful to Dad and Brandon was going to make him pay. I just hung up the phone. It was rude, but it wasn't me Brandon was attacking, it was Michael. That was not acceptable, and the little shit needed to stay away. I had a baseball bat and I would use it if he tried to hurt Michael. Then I looked at the picture of my parents and the boys and me. We looked perfect. The perfect family of five. I calmly picked it up and smashed it. Over and over. The glass exploded out and into my bare legs. As my blood mixed with broken glass and the twisted metal of the frame, Michael came in the front door of our apartment.

We had a nice one-bedroom apartment with a combination dining room and living room. The kitchen was a narrow walk through box next to the front door. To get in our apartment, Michael had to walk either through the kitchen and turn the corner into the dining room living room area, or he walked down the hall and then he could either turn to the left to the bathroom

and bedroom, or as he did today, he could turn right and take a short hallway to the living room. I say short, but really, it was about two steps so I'm not sure it even qualifies as a hallway.

As Michael took the two steps to the living room, he paused for one heartbeat to see me sitting on the arm of the couch with destruction around me and the phone clutched in my fist. Blood glistened on the glass shards as sunlight streamed into the room from the sliding doors behind me.

"Sadie. Baby what happened?" He quickly moved to my side setting a bouquet of roses on the coffee table, he glanced at the picture I had destroyed. When his eyes fell on the family portrait and then the phone, his jaw clenched for a moment, and then he looked in my eyes, "I've got you Babe. I'm not going anywhere. I'll never leave you alone. Looks like the picture attacked. You fought it off well." That was Michael, pulling humor into the storm. calmly he picked me up and carried me to the bathroom. I clung to him. My knight. My prince. My only safe and sure port. Slowly the pressure released from my chest and the air began moving through my lungs. The pterodactyls went back to sleep. As he cleaned the glass from my wounds and bandaged me, I told him about the calls. When I told him about Brandon's threats, he laughed? He then carried me to our room and came back with roses. We went to dinner and never mentioned the two calls again.

Eventually by spring, Brandon's Bible study group told him he had to repair relations with me, so we went to lunch, but I would only have a few times of support from him and never any real accord. The good thing about this time, things seemed to be better with my parents and we had begun a timid relationship again. Michael and my Dad even had developed a friendship of sorts. I thought, maybe things were finally looking up. I would learn in counselling about setting boundaries and how to maintain them, but for now, I was still living on boundaryless

hope and I was constantly disappointed when the patterns of the past continued to rein supreme. Especially where Brandon was concerned. It would take years for me to reach the point of really not caring one way or another about him and his place or lack thereof in my life.

A Daughter is Chosen...

Brandon had just finished another college football game and we all wanted to go to dinner and celebrate. I was five months pregnant with my first child, Matthew. He was also the first grandchild. Brandon wanted to eat at Hooters. They only had high-top tables then. I quietly told Michael there was no way I could get into those chairs, so we needed to make excuses to leave, quietly. Dad overheard and told Brandon we wouldn't eat there.

Next, Brandon picked a smoke-filled pub nearby. Dad told him I could not be in a smoky environment because it was bad for the baby. It is ironic looking back since Dad now tells me problems with smoke are all in my head, but at that one moment he backed me over Brandon. That had only happened three times in my life. Twice by Dad and once by Mom. Normally, Brandon was correct. Even when he was caught lying, I was still wrong or the oldest, so more was expected from me. But tonight, I was being catered too. Or to be more accurate, my child was being catered to, but it was nice. Sort of. Like with everything in life, there would be a price to pay, and I would pay.

"This was my first start in college. It is important. Why does Sadie get to choose where we eat?"

"She doesn't Brandon. But we should pick somewhere else, so she doesn't have a meltdown. You can be the bigger person, can't you?"

Well, I knew the cut Sadie to appease Brandon show would start sometime. At least this time Mom is making sure not to start in front of Michael.

"How about Old Chicago's? We can get pizzas you like Brandon."

"Whatever. I want a meat lover."

Wow. The sly look wasn't needed Brandon. Just ordering a pizza you know I hate was statement enough.

“Sadie, you know this is Justin’s senior year of high school? You need to make sure you don’t let the baby take over all the attention. Your Aunt Betty did that to your Dad his senior year and look at what happened to him and how that ruined his life.”

Which was the ruining part, having me or marrying you? Well that was spiteful Sadie. Kind thoughts make Jesus smile, mean thoughts make Him sad.

“No problem Mom. I would never want to let me having a baby interfere with Justin’s happiness or Brandon’s success.” *Hey, I said that with no sarcasm at all in my voice.* I looked at Michael and noticed his sweet smile. Boy was that man gorgeous. He was the stunning Irish knight of old. Armor shining as he stood before his lady, letting all who saw know he was her champion. Michael never missed a chance to show his love and pride in me. He seemed to see me even better than I saw me. Like now, his smile turned into a grin and he winked. *Well, I guess he heard the unvoiced sarcasm, but I tried.*

Brandon pouted at Old Chicago’s. It was clear, once again I had ruined his celebration with my selfishness. Mom tried to appease him to no avail. Attention was on me and I was being approved of because of the baby, that was not how it was supposed to be. After all, once again I was taking first from him. First born, first married, first grandchild, how dare I have any first except first to fail. He tried to start the favorite dinner game of toughening me up by making me leave the table. Surprise, surprise, no jackals tonight, Dad angrily told Brandon to grow up.

“This was supposed to be my night. Sadie just has to hog the attention. Hope she doesn’t go all Red Sonja on us. Hey Sadie, where will you run to since we are out in a restaurant?”

“Brandon, why don’t we have a nice night. We so seldom get all of us together. Let’s just enjoy our family.” Mom’s voice had a desperate pleading quality that I had not heard before.

I later learned that things weren’t going well at Dad’s work. The company had been sold and the new owner wanted his own people, so Dad was fired. Dad was depressed and Mom had begun pawning things to try and at least buy Justin a class ring. Dad had even talked about how much better off she would be if he died. That he was worth more dead than alive. She and Justin had started making sure Dad was never alone. I wish I had known at this time. I could have helped. I would have at least helped with Justin’s senior year stuff. But Mom was afraid that I would think less of my Dad. Ironically, when she finally told me three years later, I actually felt closer to my Dad and Mom than I ever had. But tonight, I knew none of this.

“Brandon, that’s enough. Your sister is having a baby. Grow up and become a man. Stop being a spoiled little boy. She needs extra care and support right now. Enough.” *What just happened to the Jackal Game? Did Dad just shut the Golden Child down? Dad picked me over Brandon.* After this, we had a slightly strained but mostly enjoyable meal. This set the stage with Mom and Dad and Justin for the times ahead.

The next several years with Dad, Mom, Brandon and Justin, were mostly better. We made sure to travel to all Brandon’s games no matter the weather. Matthew became a great little traveler and he could sleep anywhere. Brandon got a lot of attention for having a cute nephew and he really enjoyed that. Justin made it to State in football and we made sure to travel to as many of his games as we could. Brandon got married and had a large fancy wedding my parents were very pleased to be a part of. Matthew was the ring bearer and I came through at the last

minute when mine and Michael's niece stepped in to be the flower girl when the original one's mother had a fight with Brandon's new mother-in-law.

Meeting Brandon's new in-laws was fun. Not only were they very mean people but, no surprise, they didn't know Brandon's family had a daughter. I actually found I really didn't care as much. I was hurt that I was told time and again that Brandon's wedding had to be perfect, when mine hadn't mattered, but I had my nine-month-old son and adorable niece to focus on so, oh well. One month after Matthew turned one, Brandon's daughter was born so he had the first granddaughter. I was a little worried about her being a daughter, but since she was Brandon's, it was fine. At least there were no major blow ups until Justin married the evil hell spawn my parents chose for him and I took a stand.

Eyes are Opened...

Justin was going to marry Brandon's sister-in-law. Great plan since Brandon's life was so fabulous with his charming in-laws from the darkest pits of hell. Seriously, Brandon's mother-in-law tried to break up his marriage and get the oldest of Brandon's two girls (yes mister golden boy had two girls and no son) to live with her and not with Brandon. My parents hadn't helped since my Mom still hadn't forgiven Brandon's wife for getting pregnant and forcing Brandon to have to marry her. It was a case of history repeating itself.

Of course, I was still married and had two beautiful loving children, Matthew and Kathleen. Brandon now had two daughters and was doing well at the bank as a loan officer. He played a couple years in pro-football, but now was in a nice large home and took his family on fancy trips. I know because Mom kept me informed with how successful he was. It did help that Mom and Dad bought him a house which he leveraged for a bigger one. But that played no part in his success.

Success I would have if I wasn't such a failure and had a corporate career instead of living off of Michael as a stay-at-home Mom. Oh well, I was used to the "you're squandering your potential and when are you going to overcome your fears and take a stand" lecture. Pointing out hypocrisy and facts only made things worse, so I kept my mouth shut and smiled. I had my hero for my husband and a bright, beautiful, precocious three-year-old daughter and an amazing caring seven-year-old son. Matthew was well loved at school, was known as the protector of the defenseless, adored his sister, and had spent recess just recently telling the school bully about Jesus. I was very proud of my son and daughter and they were proud of me. They told everyone

just that, usually right after telling everyone I would be happy to run the school fair or event or whatever. They learned from their Dad.

Justin asked both my son and daughter to be in his wedding along with Brandon's two daughters. The kids were very excited. They were close to their cousins and adored their Uncle Justin. We decided that both families would get together at Brandon's house for Easter. It was just few months away from the wedding and it would give us time to discuss plans. Justin was having an even bigger and fancier wedding than Brandon and my Mom especially couldn't talk about anything but the beauty of the wedding. At dinner, the peace of the last few years shattered, and I faced more than jackals.

"Unck Justin, I can't wait to wear a pretty dress and throw flowers at you wedding."

Kathleen was eating her food and grinning ear to ear.

"Oh, that reminds me, I need to know where to buy her dress. Michelle have you picked them out yet?"

"What are you talking about? I don't care what she wears. It is not important to me."

"You don't have a specific dress the girls are wearing?" This surprised me because for the last several months I had been regaled with every tiny detail of a wedding to rival a royal wedding.

"My nieces have already bought their dresses. What does that have to do with what your daughter wears to my wedding?"

I knew Michelle hated me. She had told me so.

The day Michelle and Justin moved in together, we were helping since we had access to a truck. The kids were spending the day with their grandparents, and Michael and I were the grunt labor of the moment. As the guys were arguing with the five-person couch and two flights of

winding stairs, Michelle and I were taking a break to get some drinks before the stairs were available for another load of boxes.

“You know Sadie, Your Mom and I have become really close?”

“Yes, she talks about you a lot. I’m glad you are getting along so well.”

“Your Dad likes me too.”

“That’s great. I hope you feel welcome in the family.”

“Sadie,” She leaned close to me and smiled, “I don’t share.”

“Okay?”

“Understand, I am their only daughter as of now. You need to go away. That will be your only warning. I will own this family and there is nothing anyone can do to stop me.”

I just stared at her. This woman with brittle straw like black and silver hair, dry wrinkly skin, and frozen eyes. Her smile was reptilian. The kind I imagine a velociraptor had right before tearing a defenseless baby bird apart. Unfortunately for her, I had spent my life swimming with and surviving sharks. I laughed.

“You can try. But Michelle, better and more skilled than you have tried to harm those I protect and love. So, bring it. When you’re long gone, I’ll still be standing.”

Shortly thereafter, the guys won the argument with the couch and stairs and we finished the move. It was almost laughable, her threat, since my role was barely in the family, but it was the only role I had, other than family protector, and her evil I could see. So, I tried to protect the family and kept my eye on her. I did try to become her friend. I should have paid more attention to how that worked out for Cinderella with the stepfamily, and not bothered. But at this point, I was still trying. I was reminded of that moment this Easter and realized she had found my weak

point. I also I had underestimated her evil, because only evil attacks a three-year-old child. But for the sake of peace and unity, I would still try.

“Kathleen is your niece now, and Justin asked her and Matthew to be in the wedding.”

“Sadie, this is Michelle’s important day. The bride should get what she wants. Quit trying to ruin her day. Kathleen doesn’t care.” The sniffles I heard next to me contradicted Mom’s statement, but I held my tongue. Right then, Michael said it was time to go and we grabbed the kids and left. On the hour-long drive to my in-laws’ house, our car was mostly quiet. Matthew was holding Kathleen’s little hand and he had a resolved look on his little face. Finally, a quiet little tear-filled voice sounded from the backseat.

“Mommy? Why am I not good enough for my new aunt and unck Justin’s wedding?”

That did it. Treat me however you want, but break the heart of my little girl, make her question her worth, they could go to hell and I would smile while sending them there.

“They are not being nice. You are better than them.”

“And if they don’t want my Sissie, then I don’t want them. I won’t be in their dumb ol’ wedding.”

“Matthew’s right Sadie. If they don’t want one of us, none of us are going.”

It had been made clear to us, Justin’s fiancée said only her nieces and Matthew were welcome. My daughter was only barely allowed at the wedding. She was not to be called family.

My daughter Kathleen drew smiles and love and joy from all who saw her. She was beautiful and personable. I guess she had two strikes against her. She was competition for attention, and she was my daughter. My future sister-in-law had already told me her plan, drive me from the family and become my parents only daughter. She also wanted my husband and son

to adore her and leave me. She had voiced just that as I was gathering our things to leave the house that night. I could keep Kathleen though.

Michael had gone to get our children and our cats while I gathered my dishes and loaded the car. I had needed to get some fresh air to relieve the building pressure in my chest and to get the air to start moving through my lungs. The pterodactyls were not sleeping anytime soon so I focused on breathing and staying calm. As I gathered the last dishes, Michelle walked over on the pretense of helping me. How anyone would believe this, I didn't know. In the five plus years I had known her, she had never lifted a finger to help anyone. But I underestimated her cunning.

"I told you Sadie. I always win. Soon I'll not only have Jack and Victoria, but Michael and Matthew as well. Give up."

"You know what Michelle? You can have your wedding from hell with my blessing. I'm sure your master is looking forward to the party. Oh, by the way, just how many of your lovers will be there, and how will you keep them from letting your lifestyle slip to my very straitlaced religious parents? Think they'll still want a daughter who's a whore?"

"Only fools believe in Jesus. I'll end their faith before I'm through. And no one will say a word against me." This was the second time in my life I saw pure evil looking back at me through someone's eyes. Demons do not have horns and forked tails. So far they were female and bent on corrupting men and destroying families. First my cousin and now my future sister. Was I never to experience a nice and loving holiday? I can say one good thing about growing up with Betty and Stacy, I was a pro at remaining calm in the face of evil and I knew how to smile when going to battle.

This time, I smiled the shit eater grin, “Wanna bet?” Now I knew what was at stake. For all their bullying ways towards me, my parents were probably the most defenseless people I had ever met when it came to real threats. They were awesome at the in their mind threat of me becoming my aunt, but a true threat, a toothless kitten was better equipped. I was the protector, the warrior, and I had a war to win and a family to protect. Even if it was a dysfunctional family. After all, evil must be stopped. I could feel that rage I had felt once before, rise up in me, I guess it was back to swimming with flesh eaters.

The next day, after talking with my mother-in-law to see if I was overreacting and seeing her rage at Kathleen’s treatment, I waited for the kids and Michael to go with my father-in-law to Chuckie Cheese and I called Justin. I confronted my brother about my daughter being the only niece to be excluded after he had already asked Kathleen to be a flower girl.

“Justin, if Michelle only wanted the other two, why did you even ask Kathleen? You broke her heart and hurt her badly. That is just not right,”

“This is Michelle’s wedding not yours. Not everything is about you and you made her look bad last night. You are a Bitch and I’m tired of your spoiled brat behavior. You better be careful, or not only will you be just like our aunt, but Kathleen will be just as useless and evil as Stacy.”

“You know Justin, a man’s word should matter, so you must not be a man. Grow up. No one treats my daughter this way. You need to have a long look in the mirror and a long talk with your future wife and ask yourselves if family has any value to you. You are in danger of throwing away a great treasure for fool’s gold.”

“Wow, inflated ego much. You think you’re a treasure?”

“No, I think Kathleen’s unconditional love is. And you are tossing it away, and so is Michelle. Keep your word and show care for your niece.”

“I have two nieces who love me and if you are so insecure of Michelle that you will turn Kathleen against me, then I don’t want you at my wedding. Michael and Matthew can come, and you can learn how it feels not to be included.”

“Very well Justin. But my family is a family of honor and support, abusing one of us is not accepted by any of us. It is your wedding. You can invite whom you like. You can have whoever you want in it. But you are not an honorable man. Your word has no value. And you and your wife can go fuck yourselves. You will never again have a chance to hurt my daughter. None of us will be at your wedding. Oh, and that will include my in-laws as well. Goodbye.”

That night when the kids were asleep, I told Michael and his parents about the call. My mother-in-law hugged me and told me her granddaughter was too good for that wedding and my father-in-law said he was glad not to have to dress up. Michael said that solved that. We were just given a nice surprise and had a weekend free.

Two weeks before the wedding, my parents surprised us by showing up to our house when the children were in bed. They sat on the loveseat across from us holding hands. Once again, they were united. Once again, they were united against me and Michael. For a moment I expected to hear that damn cocoo clock ticking down the blows. Michael and I were in our robes. We had brushed our teeth and were anticipating a quiet evening playing cards and just being together. Our house was small, but it was our sanctuary, until today. I don’t think either of us ever felt completely secure in this house again. Truth to tell, we didn’t stop bracing for attack every time the doorbell rang until we had moved to the other side of the mountains over five hours away.

Tonight, when the doorbell rang, we were taken by surprise. Because we were not prepared the usual lecture left no time to prepare and when they sat in my home and told me they were terribly disappointed in me for trying to ruin Michelle's wedding, I was blown away. We really should have been prepared, after all, I knew the moves and strategies by heart. I should have warned Michael when the doorbell rang at 10:00 at night. I guess my only excuse was I had expected something sooner and since nothing happened, I naïvely believed we were going to be left in peace. I also had foolishly decided since I only had two children instead of four, and I was still married and owned my own home; I thought I was now sufficiently different from Aunt Betty and the need to "save" me from my inclination to be her was over. I could not have been more wrong.

As Michael opened the door and invited them in, I realized throwing up was the least of the problems tonight.

"Michael, Sadie, Victoria and I need to speak with you." I felt the familiar bands of pressure begin to squeeze my chest.

"Sadie, we should sit down." Mom and Dad took the love seat by the window. They sat with stiff backs, shoulder to shoulder, Mom clasping Dad's hand. The united front. The deep disappointment in their eyes and clenched jaws complimented their unsmiling faces. As I sank into the couch next to Michael, I knew what was coming. The lecture, the reprimand, the soul crushing pain of defeat. I felt Michael take my hand and realized something else, this time, I was not alone. The air backed up in my lungs.

"As a Christian, you know better. You are being selfish. This attention grabbing is something Betty would do for spite. Do you really need to always be the center of attention?"

Kathleen is not really hurt. You are putting ideas in her head and using her to get your way. Why can't you ever support your brothers. You are being a bad Mom." Opening salvo to Dad.

"A Christian, Jack, a Christian man protects his family. A Christian, stands for the innocent. My daughter, your youngest granddaughter, is heartbroken." The pterodactyls took flight.

"Oh, come on, it's just a wedding. She doesn't even know anything unless you're poisoning her. Is this really how spiteful you've become. Sadie, you want to hurt us because you don't think we gave enough attention to your wedding? So, you want to ruin someone else's. I cleaned until one in the morning so you would get your deposit back. But that's not good enough for you. The spoiled little princess wanted more. We have three children, we did our best to make sure you all felt special, but you just have to be selfish..."

Dad reached out and took Mom's hand and she instantly calmed down. I couldn't help but notice the similarities, I was clinging to Michael and Mom was clinging to Dad. We both had strong marriages, but I wanted more in my family than what Mom had in hers. I wanted both my children to know to the very core of their beings, that I would walk through the fires of hell for them or burn the world to the ground to back them. And Kathleen was going to learn this at three.

For over an hour, it went on and on. The badgering, the lecture, the never-ending weight of disapproval and baffled disappointment. The questioning of our Christianity and parenting skills. It just kept going. Added to all that, was their hurt at my slighting them. Through it all I clung to Michael's hand, until at one point, he pulled his hand free and moved so he was partially shielding me with his body. I realized he was breaking their line of sight. I began softly rubbing his back with my right hand. I could feel the rigid tension in him. The strength it was taking to

not physically remove the threat. I begged him with my touch to let tis just play out. I knew they would eventually leave. We just had to endure. But for him, I would try to reason with my parents.

“You do know that Michelle wants to destroy the family right? She slept with the best friend of both the boys, she hates all you stand for and believe, and she can’t take Brandon from her sister so she’s using Justin as a consolation prize. How can you support any of this?”

“Sadie, I’m disappointed in you. You were raised to be better than this. Justin told us you were jealous of Michelle, but I couldn’t believe you would use your own daughter to be so hurtful. That’s a Betty move. You even told Justin you would ruin his wedding unless you had special attention, all this after he begged you to be his big sister and support him on his wedding day.”

“Dad, none of that is true.”

“Are you calling your brother a liar?”

“Uh, yes. I told him a man keeps his word and he needed to fix things in regard to his broken promise to Kathleen. He told me if I believed that to just not come to his wedding and not to bring Kathleen. He’s acting like a child and hurting my child in the process.”

Finally, Michael realized what I had learned long ago, the only way to make them leave and make the disappointment stop was to go to the wedding. I knew they wouldn’t leave until they got what they wanted, and I was afraid the children would hear all of this. I quietly begged Michael not to make a scene for our children’s sake. After all they loved their grandparents and cousins. We finally agreed to go to the wedding. After they left, Michael pulled me into his arms and held me for a long, long time. As his arms constricted around me, the bands of

pressure in my chest released and the air moved through my lungs. Finally, the pterodactyls slept.

“I knew it was always bad, but until just now I didn’t realize just how bad. Is this what it is always like? You are teamed up on and blindsided until you admit to being wrong even though you’re right and you finally do what they want?”

“Yes, pretty much. This was a mild one though.”

“This is the last time Sadie. We’ll go to the wedding and have my parents go with us to help protect our daughter, but after this, we are through with this crap. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” We held each other for over an hour and finally went to bed. I don’t think either of us slept that night. Somehow it felt like we had compromised on something important. It felt like we had surrendered something valuable and I felt like I had forced Michael to retreat when he didn’t want to. Later, as I learned the importance of boundaries and coping skills, I learned how to take stands and deal with surprises. I learned I could tell people to leave, hang up phones, not answer phones, and close doors. I was stunned when my counselor taught me this. But unfortunately, I wouldn’t learn this until about seventeen years later. For now, we had a wedding to survive.

We went to the wedding. We survived. But first, the family pictures in the park needed to be endured and my second angel was seen.

“We need the family for pictures. We’ll start with the bride and groom and their nieces and nephew, then the whole family.”

We started to move up in response to the photographer’s announcement when Michelle looked at me and Kathleen, “Family only.”

I didn't say a word, I just took Kathleen's little hand in mine and walked down the path towards the playground. We passed an empty bench when that little hand tugged at mine.

"What's wrong with me Momma. Why aren't I good enough for family."

As I looked into big chocolate brown eyes which normally shined with joy, but were now drowning in tears, I learned cold hard rage. I learned to almost hate that day. I had long believed that inside every person God had placed what I called the 'fuck it' switch. That switch when flipped to on, allowed the person to go beyond themselves. To say no more, fuck this, whatever it takes, I will overcome and prevail. Today, as I watched the fat tear drops fall one after another down little porcelain cheeks, the long dormant switch deep inside of me was dusted off and flipped to the on position. What was left of me shattered and the splintered remains began to reform a new Sadie Gardiner.

"Why is such a precious child shedding tears today?"

I looked up at this gravelly voice to see a stranger. On the bench that had been empty when we stopped, in the middle of an open area with nowhere to hide or suddenly appear unnoticed, sat a wrinkled dirty old man. He had torn and baggy clothes. Stingy hair of an indeterminate color. Brown leathery skin, and clear sky colored eyes. I had never before seen such clear eyes. They held vast wisdom and understanding. They were focused on Kathleen and blazed with such pure love. Where had he come from and how had he made it there without me knowing. It was impossible. I looked around; the only other people were the wedding party about forty feet away.

"Why would such a precious girl cry? That's not your purpose."

Now I felt a shiver run down my spine. He said purpose. Three months earlier, Kathleen had announced at dinner, “I know my porpoise from Jesus. I bring joy.” Now here was a stranger, a homeless man using that phrase.

“I not good enough.”

“Who gets to decide that? Are they the One who made you with love and gave you a special purpose?”

“No. They my Unck and new Aunt.”

“Then don’t listen. Stay true to your purpose little joy walker.”

“Okay, who are you and how do you know that phrase?” Every morning we started the day with prayer and asked Jesus to help us be contagious joy walkers and spread His joy to the world. How could he possibly know these unique phrases?

He looked into my eyes and smiled. Not even a new baby’s first smile could be as sweet and pure as his smile was, “You know Sadie. You’re stronger than you know, and you have a special gift you have forgotten, a purpose you need to fulfill. You both do.”

“Sadie, Kathleen, they want one picture with all of us.” I looked to where Michael was calling us and waved so that he knew I had heard, then I turned to thank the man, only he was gone. I looked down at Kathleen and saw a smiling radiant face with sparkling milk chocolate eyes.

“Come on Momma, let’s tell Daddy and my Bro-Bro about my angel.” An Angel. I looked back one more time at the bench and saw three homeless men smiling at us, “Thank you Jesus” I whispered. And hurried to Michael, I turned one more time to wave at the men, but they were gone for good this time. Looking at my joy filled and determined Kathleen, I realized, this

was the second time and angel had appeared to me and like the first time, it was because of my fear and pain for Kathleen.

The night Kathleen was born, was the night she almost died. It was also the night I heard Jesus clearly and above all others. It was the night I met an angel and realized what it was to have His strength and calm in every part of my being. My pregnancy with Kathleen had not been an easy one. Michael had to work out of town three nights a week and Matthew was just four. I was very sick and spent part of the pregnancy confined to bed. Thank heaven for my Mom and Dad. Dad made it a point to help spend time with Matthew and to keep him feeling special. Mom made sure I was cared for. She brought over meals and even took us to their house whenever Michael was out of town so if there were any problems they would be there.

Mom and I even teased Dad that if Michael couldn't be there for the delivery, Dad would have to stand in. He usually turned pasty white and said, "some things are best for mother daughter bonding." Mom and I would wait until he left the room and then devolve into giggles. I don't know if I could have made it through my pregnancy without them.

On the night Kathleen was born, problems occurred. It was decided that I would have a c-section, so they gave me an epidural. This means that I could feel nothing from the chest down except some mild pressure and pulling. Good news, the ever-present pressure in my chest was gone. So were the pterodactyls. Bad news, my right arm was strapped to the table and I could not walk. Michael was holding my left hand and all I could see were his sapphire eyes and coal black eyebrows. I couldn't see his smile through the surgical mask he was wearing. Or his black hair under the surgical cap. He was gowned just like the other twenty people in the room.

The room was busy, but calm until we heard the doctor, "Oh, God." Then urgency filled the room. The doors behind my head flew open and twenty more people raced in pushing an

incubator. One of the gowned people came and took Michael from me. I was alone. I begged someone to tell me why my baby wasn't crying. Silence was my answer. Terrible, heavy silence. *She needs me. Get up and get her.* Admittedly not my more rational moment since I currently felt nothing from the chest down and I had a hole in my middle, but hey, moms are not always rational when our children are in trouble.

Just as I reached over to release my right arm and give in to my less than rational side, I felt my hand being taken in a warm and soothing grasp. I looked to my left for Michael, but no one was there. But my hand was held. Then I heard His voice.

Sadie, Kathleen is mine. She is in my hands. I have her. I have a purpose for her. Trust me and sing the song I chose for this pregnancy.

Now it should be noted, I can't sing. Screeching cats are more melodious than me. It is also important to point out, I thought I was singing in my head. However, I later learned that for the next forty-five minutes, I serenaded the entire operating room with the old gospel hymn, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace."

Not a long song, but one I repeated for forty-five minutes. After they sewed me up, I was taken to the recovery room where I was left alone. At least everyone thought I was alone. The room was dark with all the lights very dim. But there was one bright light that moved whenever the large heavysset nurse moved. She had carrot orange hair in night curls that sprang from her head like a scrub brush. Her round face was covered with freckles, and she was as round as she was tall. Every time I started to panic and try to get up, she and the bright light would move to me and she would ask, "What did Jesus tell you?" And I would begin to sing. For forty minutes this was our routine, until finally, Michael came into the room.

He walked slowly to the right side of my bed. His amazing eyes were swimming with tears and worry. He took a moment and on a deep breath, he reached for my hand, “Sadie,” he swallowed and blinked rapidly, “Honey, our little girl is in a fight. She’s going to have to fight to live. But she is a fighter just like you. She’s strong. She was throwing punches at the doctors as they worked on her. We just have to trust Jesus and pray.” He squeezed my hand and a single tear slipped from his left eye.

“I know Michael. Kathleen is fine. Jesus has her.”

“Baby, I don’t think you understand...”

“I understand. The nurse told me and so did Jesus. Don’t worry so, Kathleen is just fine.”

“What nurse? No one has been in here since you were brought in. They are monitoring you from outside.” I looked over to where the light was shining and met the pure smiling face. With my left hand I pointed, “That nurse has been with me the whole time. I have never been alone. She is there in the light.” Michael looked but for him, there was no one and no light in the dim room. He never doubted me though. He even described the nurse to everyone in the hospital. No one with that description was ever there. The day Kathleen was born, Jesus sent an angel, and today, when so much hate and pain was bombarding my little girl, Jesus sent another angel to remind us to turn our eyes to Him.

As I looked into Michelle’s hate-filled face, the wounded eyes of my parents and defeated eyes of my brothers, I felt the calm resolve come over me again. I felt the renewal of strength I felt the day Kathleen was born. I turned my eyes to Him and became resolute for Michael and my children.

That is when I made a vow. They could treat me however they wanted, but never again would they make one of my children cry. Michael agreed and promised me he would never again allow anyone to manipulate us into going against what was best for our family. If anyone rejected one of us, they became rejected by all of us. Matthew overheard us and said, “If they don’t want Kathleen, I don’t want them. She will never be my aunt.”

Kathleen showed her loving and forgiving nature and her renewed resolve of being a joy walker, when she tried to hug her new aunt at the reception. As she went to wrap her little arms around Michelle and smiling said, “I love you”, she was shoved to the ground for her trouble. There she lay, on the ground in green velvet, her golden-brown curls falling around her little face, looking up at this grown woman towering over her. My brother was standing next to her and did nothing. My parents stood to the side, my mother with her hand over her mouth and tears in her eyes. My dad wore a stunned expression. As I went towards my daughter, my Mom desperately tried to make this something else, “I’m sure it was an accident. Sadie, please, don’t make a scene. I know Michelle would never intentionally hurt Kathleen. She’s not a monster.”

“That’s exactly what she is Mom. An evil monster you are clutching to your breast. Be careful, she’ll devour you eventually. But unlike other’s I know how to underline a point with no drama.”

I went over and picked Kathleen up off of the ground. I then moved very close to embrace Michelle and, whispered in her ear,

“Listen very carefully Bitch. If you ever touch my daughter again, I don’t care where we are or who is watching, I will beat you bloody. If you ever make my daughter cry again, I will gouge out your eyes and remove your tongue. In short, harm my little girl again and I will eviscerate you. I know what you are and what lives in you and He who is in me is more

powerful than you can ever be, so in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, stay away from my children.” Then, I smiled the sweetest of all smiles, and walked away. Michael, his parents and our kids stood up with me and left right after that. I never spoke to Michelle again and she never spoke to Kathleen or Matthew. She was so desperate to avoid us; she usually left the room if any of us were in it.

The next weekend we went to my parents’ house so the kids could visit their grandparents. Mom called me into the back-family room where Michael had faced them down all those years ago. She told me I had ruined Michelle’s wedding when people kept saying they didn’t know there was a daughter in the family and all I did was smile and say “neither did I.” My mother called me cold and unemotional. That was new. Normally I was too emotional.

“Well, if I’m cold and unemotional, I guess there is no chance I’m anything like Betty now is there. You should celebrate. You succeeded in saving me from my nature. Oh, and Mom, I will destroy any threat to my children. Even your beloved daughter Michelle and any of your precious sons. Remember that.”

I then got up and walked calmly away. Never again did we discuss that wedding or Michelle. Mom also became sly in the attacks against me, but I noticed a pattern now. They occurred whenever something was upsetting Dad or when there was no way to excuse something one of the boys did to cause hurt to Dad or her. Later in counseling I learned that this was about the parent child relationship with me in a more parental role. I was strong so I was used to deflect her fears and insecurities. The main thing for me at this moment was that my point had been made, I would protect my children from anyone, and she never again criticized when I protected my kids. I guess the favorite game worked. I was toughened up now. I could find the

ice and show no emotion. I could even find a cold rage without tears. Six years later Justin divorced the Bitch and apologized to me.

The Beginning of the End...

The ice I had found was stronger now and I used it in my role of protector. My parents were having their birthdays during a tough year. My Mom's older sister, my beloved aunt, was dying. I decided to make a love and support book for my parents. I hoped that this would help them to feel special and get out of the depression that always accompanied their birthdays. They were exactly one week apart and so they went dark and moody for the month. They would list all the ways their life was not how they dreamed and then my Mom would let me know how afraid she was that my Dad would die and all she wanted was for them to die together.

Now this might be fairly normal if they were in their seventies or eighties, but they were in their forties, so this was worrisome and a cause for concern. I contacted their friends from high school, family members from around the country, co-workers, and of course both my brothers and their kids. There were five kids between them now. I asked everyone to write a letter to my parents and I would put it in a book.

My dying aunt sent a letter to each of them, the friends from high school sent letters, the co-workers and the other family and friends also sent letters. My children wrote letters and drew pictures. My brothers were silent.

My grandmother in California sent two letters, my vicious Mammaw sent a letter. My brothers were silent. Men who had once coached with my Dad sent letters, after I explained that yes, there was a daughter and I was she. Competitors of my Dad's sent letters. His bosses sent letters. People from church sent letters. My brothers, the precious beloved sons were silent.

I called them and their kids and told them I was running up on the deadline, so please get their letters or pictures to me soon. Justin never responded. But Brandon did. Brandon sent me an email.

Sadie,

You are a very rude and selfish person. My children don't need to be harassed by you. We are very busy, something you know nothing about. We have a valuable life and I do not appreciate your negative influence on my children. In the future, never contact my family. You can only go through me. If we want to talk with you, I will call you. You are being selfish and emotional, and it is time you grew up. Your continued behavior only reminds everyone how like Betty you are, and I am sick of your interference in my life. Since you seem to think this is so important. Here is a letter. I don't want to be harassed by you anymore.

Brandon

P.S. Maybe you should spend more time reading your Bible and trying to be a better Christian and less on frivolous activity.

I was a bad influence on his daughters, and I should have better behavior than to harass them in their extremely busy lives. Currently I was working a seven-day event for around seventeen hours each day, while taking my children to their activities, running a children's ministry and a women's ministry, taking care of two hyper dogs and a grumpy cat, oh and my husband. Yep, I had loads of time for frivolous activities. But hey, they did not have time to

waste on frivolous pursuits like caring for our depressed and needy parents. Never again was I to talk to his kids without his permission. Oh boy was I ready to respond to his highness.

The letter he sent for the love book was a two-paragraph letter about himself. He was a success and his success shined a light on them. He was their chance at redemption from the disappointment of a firstborn daughter who never amounted to much. He brought them fame and joy by existing and being himself. No, I love you. No thank you. No thing about being great parents. It was all about him and what he did for them. Not even a stick figure drawing from his daughters. Why was I surprised?

I gave the book to my parents without Brandon's letter. I also deleted all contact information for Brandon's family. I only kept his number for birthday texts and his address for Christmas cards. The first things my parents did when they received the book was to ask why the boys were not in the book or their kids. I said it was not complete yet, but I wanted to get them what I had done. I was reminded of the importance of not procrastinating and of finishing what I started. Brandon's girls saw the book three months later when they came to visit my parents. They wanted to know why they were not in it. Mom said, "Aunt Sadie must have forgotten you." Brandon was praised for his hard work on such a special thoughtful gift. After all, they were sure it was Brandon who thought of it.

I have kept Brandon's wishes to this day. His middle daughter and my Kathleen graduated high school at the same time. They are seven months apart and before the book, they were close. After the book, when Mom and Dad decided they would take two grandkids at a time on a special trip, Brandon's daughter said either she went alone or no trip. No trip it was because she was always too busy, and it would hurt her feelings if Kathleen went when she could not. Yep, she's Brandon's daughter alright.

When graduation came around, we were in a period of tightening our wallets, so Kathleen sent out invitations she purchased herself. Each one contained personal hand-written notes to each person. Brandon's daughter sent us nothing. She had a big fancy party, but we were not invited. Matthew was graduating from college at the same time and so were several of my Gardiner nieces and nephews. Michael had a large family. I asked several people about protocol. If I was not invited, should I send a gift when I was expressly told no contact without an invitation? I was reminded to respect the father's wishes with regards to his family and that if someone couldn't even take the time to send an announcement, then no.

On the day Matthew was to return from college I received several text messages from my Dad. This was three months after graduation and after no contact with Brandon. I had heard from my Mom and she and Dad had called Brandon on being rude to them. I should have expected what came next. Deflecting attention onto me was a tried and true strategy. But I had begun to change. I no longer thought I had to play their game by their rules. My daughter was leaving for college and my son was leaving for a very dangerous and stressful job. I had focus beyond them.

Did you send your niece a check for graduation?

No, never received an invite.

Brandon sent Kathleen a check.

Yes, and Kathleen sent him an invite and personal letter.

...WWJD?

He would honor the father's wish to not allow contact w/o an invite.

Brandon said that?

Yes.

You are a better person than this. Raised better. WWJD?

Respect the dad's demand.

I'm disappointed.

Sorry you're disappointed.

You are failing as a Christian and are a poor example for your children. WWJD?

Honor the expressed demand of the child's dad. No invite, no money.

Mom and Dad didn't come for Matthew's graduation party, my college graduation, or Matthew's graduation event from training. My son was punished for my not falling in line. I had nineteen nieces and nephews on both sides of the family and all the other ones who had special events had sent notices, but I just figured she was like her father and wanted nothing to do with us. If they wanted my communication, I needed to be invited to contact her. I explained that Kathleen had bought her own invites and included letters. No one from my family showed up for Matthew's party. They did not even call or send a card. They did not care.

My in-laws all cared though. Michael's parents changed travel plans to be there and came straight from the airport. They did not even go home first. My sister-in-law and her husband took time off work. Michael's other sisters and their families all called and sent cards. Matthew had everyone who really mattered for his special day. Six months later when he graduated from a secret training program and had a once in a lifetime opportunity for a few family members to attend this event, my in-laws were sitting proudly beside Michael and me. My parents said it was a bad time to travel, but four days later they took a week off to go watch little league soccer and baseball since my brother Justin's two kids and Brandon's youngest were playing.

Matthew had survived what only a few survive. He had earned a special title. He had a special service in a secret location, and they said this would be the last little league game for

Justin's oldest and it was a once in a lifetime event. Boy did that sound familiar. They were insulted when they saw the pictures and Michael's parents were in all of them. Tough. It is time for a change.

Too Honorable...

When Matthew was in basic training for an unnamed federal law enforcement agency. He was gone for Christmas for the first time. I could not even send him a present. I called my Mom to say hi and just touch base.

“I talked with Matthew the other night. Why isn’t he going out each night like the others in his facility?”

“Matthew told me they are going out to get drunk or find a hookup. He is focusing on studying and training so he can pass.”

“He should go out. Brandon was very popular and so are his daughters. They go out all the time.”

“True but they are not trying to pass into a very elite and difficult career and besides, Matthew is a man of his word. He gave his word to both me and Jesus to remain pure until marriage. He was also advised by his mentor into the program to be mindful of his reputation and who he associates with. He was told they are watched not just during official hours. All it would take is one bad choice, one drunken brawl, one DUI, one unplanned pregnancy and everything he has spent the last five years working towards are gone.” *Pregnancy was probably a cheap shot Sadie.*

“Well, he’s making a mistake. He’ll be alone and a failure. That seems to be what you wanted for him.”

My Mom went on to say Matthew should rethink his rigid stand and try to be more like others to get more friends. Brandon was always popular and so are his daughters. Matthew is too focused.

The next day, I made a mistake and called my dad to tell him about a new burger restaurant he liked that was coming to town.

“Who should Christians judge Sadie?”

“Other Christians. And it is not judging but holding into account.”

“I’m surprised you know this since you didn’t bother to teach it to Matthew.”

“What are you talking about? Matthew doesn’t judge. He shows the love of Jesus to those who don’t know Him.”

“Really? He doesn’t join the others in going out. He didn’t in high school or in college. I was wondering if you ever taught Matthew how to be a Christian. He judges them every time he doesn’t go out with them. What type of message is he sending?”

“He is leading by example. Jesus invited others to join Him. He never joined them in drunken orgies or doing drugs. Matthew drove himself to church every Sunday all through high school. He got there two hours before service to help set up. He taught the little kids and he helped tear down for two hours after. In college he led Bible studies and kept the Lord’s word. He volunteered to help the homeless and he was known as someone people could count on. He was someone you could go to for truth. He honored the Lord daily by always asking if his actions brought honor to the Lord. All through college he read his Bible daily, honored the Lord and kept his word. He made friends with non-believers and was known as the one person everyone could count on for honoring his word.”

“Jesus would go out to the parties and if Matthew isn’t careful, he will be alone and lonely. It’s bad enough you brainwashed him from childhood into this career, the least you could have done was teach him to be a better person and Christian. Brandon’s girls are very popular. I

wonder why your kids aren't? Did you really have to impose your faults and failures onto them? That's just what my sister would do, and this is why people don't know I have a daughter."

Dad went on to tell me there was such a thing as too much and Matthew was judging these people by not participating in their behavior and his behavior would leave him unpopular. He said Brandon's girls were very popular and went to parties all the time. He said being separate from the doings of others was wrong. I explained to my dad that Matthew had to be careful of who he associated with and what he did.

I asked my dad, "How can anyone be too honorable, too moral, too much a follower of Jesus? Have you ever read Daniel? He was hated for not participating in the behavior that was wrong before God. He was honored by God and that is what counts."

I thought back to the day when Matthew was in sixth grade and came home from school in tears. I was in the kitchen preparing a snack and prepping for dinner. We were having Sicilian meatloaf, a favorite of Michael and the kids. I heard the door open and breathed a sigh of relief. This was the first day Matthew rode his bike to school, and I hadn't been able to push the air through my lungs for the last half hour as I watched the clock and tried to smother the stomach pterodactyls with food. I gave up on trying to lose the pressure in my chest, but now, all was well. At least until I saw Matthew's face. His cerulean blue eyes were drowning in tears and he ran to my arms. He was now as tall as me and quite a bit stronger, but in this moment, he was my baby boy.

"Mom, I used my karate at school today." I held him closer and rubbed his back. I knew him. He was testing for his black belt soon and he was resolute in using his skills honorably. He knew just how much harm he could cause so if he had used those skills, he had a good reason.

“I was in the band room getting in my locker.” He gulped in a breath, “My locker is on the bottom. Dayle has the locker above me and he came behind me and hit me in the back of the head with his trumpet case. I told him to stop and he hit me harder. I turned as he was moving to hit me again and I blocked him. He threw a punch at me and I grabbed his arm and put him in a hold. I told him if he didn’t move he wouldn’t get hurt and I’d let him go if he just settled down. He wouldn’t stop. He kept trying to hit me. I used the pressure point and he said I broke his arm. I didn’t Mom. It just makes your arm go to sleep. I was careful honest.”

“Ok lamb, deep breath. I believe you. Let me make a call to get your sister picked up from school and you and I will go talk to the principle okay?”

“Okay.”

“Get a drink and we’ll go in just a minute.”

I called my Mom to pick up Kathleen and then Matthew drove the five minutes to the school. We were immediately allowed to talk with the principle and Matthew repeated what he had told me. He even demonstrated the hold and showed the bump on the back of his head. The principle was great. He told Matthew he was impressed with his maturity and he was sorry he had been assaulted on school grounds.

“I’ll be talking to Daryl tomorrow. He will face serious consequences for his actions. I promise you Mrs. Gardiner, we won’t tolerate this behavior.”

“Sir,” Matthew looked up with serious eyes at the principle, “Can you please not let Daryl know I told?”

“Matthew, we won’t let him retaliate against you. I know it is hard to tell on a peer but...”

“No sir, that’s not why. See, Daryl’s not nice and has no real friends. I’m the only one who will eat with him or talk to him. He is kind of weird and mean. Also, his parents are getting divorced and if he thinks I told, well he’ll be all alone and no one should be all alone. I’m the only sort of friend he has. I don’t want him hurt. I only told because I used my karate at school, and I should tell why. I want to get Daryl help. I sit with him and he talks to me and asks me to pray with him sometimes. He knows he can talk to me. So, could you maybe do, nothing?”

The principle looked at me and then moved to Matthew and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’re a good man Matthew Gardiner. I will tell him someone walked past the room and saw everything. Then we’ll talk with his parents and get him some help. I’ll keep your name out of it alright?”

“Thank you sir.” Matthew’s smile of relief told me what his biggest concern was, not fighting, but leaving a drowning boy all alone.

“You have an amazing son there.”

“I know.”

As we sat down to dinner and Matthew asked to pray, he prayed for Daryl to find joy and peace. This was the man my parents said was not a good Christian. The young man that protected and prayed for his enemies even as a young boy.

Luckily, as my mind returned to the present, the phone died before I could educate Dad on why Brandon’s girls were popular and how their behavior was dangerous, and non-Christ like. I guess he forgot that I have friends who know those girls. It was clearly implied by both my parents, now I was not just a disappointment personally but also as a mother. Even Kathleen not partying or having a string of boyfriend was a sign of failure.

Two years ago, when Kathleen was a sophomore, she noticed a girl who always ate lunch in the hallway by herself. Kathleen started eating with her. At first, the girl wouldn't acknowledge Kathleen, but eventually they began talking. That was when Kathleen saw the scars. The girl was cutting her wrists. Kathleen went to the school dean. The next day the girl tried to kill herself but because Kathleen had told, they were watching and able to save the girl.

That day Kathleen started a school group of peers who worked with the counselor to spend lunch looking for the loners who fell through the cracks. The kids in the group would eat lunch with these kids when it was welcomed, pray with them if it was allowed and keep track of who they were. The group was focused on preventing suicide in teens. And would pray together monthly for the school. Yep, she was so not Christ like, she should have spent her time partying instead of trying to save lives.

I set down my phone and decided this call was just too much. Enough was enough. I was now having constant anxiety attacks (turns out the pressure in my chest, the air backing up in my lungs and the pterodactyls had a medical name, panic attacks caused by an anxiety disorder). I couldn't sleep. I was terrified of doing the wrong thing. I suffered an inability to breathe when thinking about going out. What if I wore the wrong thing? What if I said the wrong thing? I was terrified of not getting an A in my online class for my master's program. And if I did get an A then what about next time? What if I answered wrong? When I broke down sobbing hysterically because I couldn't decide what was the right decision for dinner and I knew Michael was fed up with me, Michael and I both knew it was time for help.

Turning Point...

One day after the kids were both grown and gone, I reached the point of making a choice. My mother had quit speaking to me other than to call me selfish and cruel and demanding I apologize. What was the cause? Matthew had gotten a last minute three days off and had decided to fly home for a quick after Christmas visit. There were blizzards in the mountains and my mother had told me two days before that they couldn't handle anymore requests to come over the mountains. The weather scared them but missing out crippled them with guilt. Of course, she was referring to my brothers, but I decide not to put pressure on them, so I didn't tell them about the surprise.

We had a great visit with Matthew and all the cousins on Michael's side of the family as well as the aunts and uncles, came for a big party.

There were at least twenty people watching visiting and eating in the basement of my in-law's house. Some were playing cards upstairs and others were gathered at the bar drinking beers and asking Matthew about his job and life. Good thing Matthew was strong and tough, because otherwise he would have long since been felled by the enthusiastic back slapping of his uncles. He also may have been in danger of being suffocated from all the hugging the aunts were giving him. Once everyone had eaten their fill, my father-in-law called everyone to gather around. He stood facing Matthew.

"I want to say something." He cleared his throat and gave a smile I had seen numerous times on Michael's face. "We are here to see one of ours who has chosen to give. He has chosen to put himself last and stand for us all. He serves and protects. He is willing to run to danger so we can run from danger. He represents us all, but more importantly, he walks with

honor and stands for Jesus. He brings pride to us all with his actions and his life. He is our hero and we pray for him to always be safe and know he is never alone because as he goes to danger, our love and prayers go with him. At this time, I can only think of one thing to send him back to his service with, Matthew, this is the Irish Blessing and I sing it for you.”

With this, Matthew’s Grandpa raised his voice and sang the beautiful blessing. A prayer of love and pride and safety. There was only his voice as he looked at Matthew. When he finished he raised his glass and said, “To Matthew” and we all echoed, “To Matthew” and wiped tears from our cheeks. I watched my son embrace his grandfather. The love, respect and pride each had for the other was on display for all to see. It was wonderful. Except for the part where Kathleen let it slip to my parents that Matthew came home.

“Sadie, did you have a good Christmas?” That tone.

“Yes, we did. How about you? Did you get the tree we sent? And the presents?”

“So, you are just going to lie to me?” The pressure in my chest began.

“What Mom?” The air was beginning to back up in my lungs.

“Is there a reason you are keeping my grandson from me? Are you trying to turn him against us?” The pterodactyls were performing in mass in my stomach.

“Mom I have no idea what you are talking about. I have never and will never interfere with your relationship with Matthew. The only one who can do that is you.”

“QUIT LYING TO ME. You didn’t tell me Matthew was coming home and you didn’t bring him to us.”

“Mom, I didn’t know until the last minute when he was boarding the plane that he was coming out. As for taking him to you, you are five hours away and it was a blizzard in the mountains. I didn’t tell you he was here because you told me how hard this time of year was on

you and that you couldn't stand to travel in these conditions. We visited with family in the area. No travel."

"So, you're just going to keep lying. You just don't want to allow our family near him. You are so selfish. You deny us every opportunity to see him and you deny him a relationship with his uncles too. You shame Jesus and us."

Wow, no love or support ever. Plus, if Matthew was so important to them why did they miss his special graduation and every visit he had made home. He was my son and I worked very hard to share him with anyone who wanted time with him. Michael's side of the family would drive two hours and rearrange their lives to see him, but my family, nothing.

As I sat there and thought about my family and my childhood, the pressure built to unbearable levels in my chest. I couldn't get air in my lungs. The pterodactyls were now multiplying into the thousands in my stomach. I couldn't see. Spots formed and my vision tunneled. I remembered when I put a knife to my wrist in high school. I was standing over the sink in my mother's kitchen. The knife was sharp. The house was empty. I focused on the knife. I knew no one would ever miss me. *Shoot most people didn't even know I existed. What did it matter how hard I tried? I didn't matter. I was useless, a failure. I was nothing but a disappointment to everyone. My family would be better off if I was gone. I was a mistake. God should have never made me, and even Jesus was ashamed I existed.* As the thoughts and feelings began circling in my head, I found myself thinking on the knives upstairs in the kitchen and thinking Michael and the kids would find it a relief if I was gone. This brought me back to the present for a moment and I grabbed my phone and called my lifeline, my knight.

"Michael?"

"Sadie what's wrong."

“I don’t know. I just think you and the kids would be better off without me.” My voice broke and I began sobbing. The knives weren’t far away and then all pain would stop.

Something is wrong. Listen to Michael.

“Do not hang up this phone. I’m on my way.”

“No, you don’t need to interrupt your day.”

“You are pissing me off. Nothing is more important than you. Not work, or home, or family or friends. Not even the kids are more important to me than you.”

“Don’t...”

“What did I tell you all those years ago? What do I always tell you?”

“You aren’t going anywhere.”

“Yep. I’m pulling into the driveway now.”

As I looked out the window and saw Michael, it was as if I was into two different places and I was slowly returning to the present. Michael came running in the front door. I heard it slam and then he was there. Rage and fear mixing in his eyes. He grabbed me up from the couch and held me tight in a huge hug. Since he is not much of a hugger and often complains of being suffocated if a hug lasts longer than twenty seconds, I knew I had scared him. I had scared me too. I didn’t know what had just happened. I just knew I was safe again. Michael had me. I wasn’t alone. But I still couldn’t breathe. The panic wouldn’t go away.

“Sadie, I think you should talk with a professional.” I tried to pull away from him, but he wouldn’t let go. “I can’t fix this babe. I’ve tried.”

“You want me gone?”

“Stop. Breathe. I’m not going anywhere. You are stuck with me forever. But honey, this is tearing you apart. You need to get help. For me and the kids, but mostly, you need to do this for you.”

This sent terror through me. What if a professional agreed with my family? What if I was just a screwed-up failure? Or, what if they agreed with the little voice telling me how I was treated was wrong? The biggest terror, what if my parents found out? But as I looked at Michael and thought of what had just happened and how close I had been to going for that knife, I knew he was right.

“Your right. But who?”

“I talked with Dan a week ago and asked him for a recommendation. He suggests Dr Kim Palmer. She is really good. Here is her number.”

“You won’t think less of me?”

“Hell no. I’ll think you are even stronger than ever.”

“What about the kids? Mom’s are supposed to be strong.”

“Sadie, our kids are strong because of you. They adore you. They will support you fully.”

“Okay.”

Two days later I went for my first appointment with a therapist. I was shaking and couldn’t stop. The pressure wouldn’t leave my chest. I couldn’t draw a breath and was on the point of passing out. I had already thrown up twice this morning and it was only nine am. When I walked into her office I was in total panic mode.

“I’m not abused. Please, please don’t let my parents know I’m here. They can’t ever know. It would look bad.”

I then started rocking back and forth shaking and crying. I had no control. None of my tricks worked. I couldn't find calm. The illusion had shattered beyond all repair. I was broken into a million tiny slivers and no matter how hard I tried to grab them, they just kept breaking into smaller and smaller pieces. Nothing I tried, no trick I had learned, could sooth me now.

Dr. Kim's office had soothing sounds coming from a machine by the door, they weren't like any sounds I had heard before, but they seemed to help on an instinctual level. *Maybe this was one of those machines that mimic the sounds in the womb for babies. That would be fitting, after all, I was behaving as a baby. Crying and carrying on, running and carrying tales.* My parents would be appalled. There was the scent of oranges and the walls had scripture printed with scenes from the setting sun and calm seas.

Dr. Kim was also calm. She reminded me of a picture I once saw in an old copy of the nursery rhyme about *Mother Hubbard*. Kim just had this earth mother look to her. She seemed caring and genuinely concerned about me. Her voice had a musical cadence that soothed like a soft lullaby. Her eyes were encased in wire rimmed glasses and she would gently smile when she made eye contact with me. As I lost all control of my emotions and finally devolved into the dramatic rubble my parents had always known I would become, Kim just looked at me and gently explained confidentiality laws and that this was a safe place. A safe place, only in Michael's arms had I ever experienced a safe place. Not even my home was ever truly a safe place. Not since the surprise visit during Justin's wedding fiasco. She then asked me to tell her about my life and what inspired me to come see her.

I told her about the jackal game, I told her about my wedding, I told her about the phone call from my Mom. And I told her about the knife and how ashamed I was that that had

happened. When I had finished, she looked at me and said something that was like an explosion all the way to my very soul.

“Sadie, when you first came in here you told me you were not abused. You are mistaken. You were an abused child. You had a traumatic childhood. You were emotionally and spiritually abused and manipulated your whole life. It is still going on. What you experienced with the knife was a form of emotional PTSD that is the result of severe trauma.”

I looked at her and began to sob. I just fell to the ground and wept. She handed me a box of tissues and told me to cry for as long as I needed. Someone other than Michael saw me and agreed with what I thought in my most secret part of my mind. My next instinct was to deny. If I accepted, then my family looked bad. I was the problem.

“You are mistaken. I am just whining. I made them seem bad.”

“Did everything you tell me happen?”

“Yes, but maybe I told it wrong. They aren’t evil.”

“Sadie, abusers don’t have to be evil to be abusers. You were abused.” She had such a calm voice.

“You really agree with me. I thought it but I was ashamed when I did.”

“That is a conditioned response. You were right to think things were wrong. Let me ask you, would you ever play the Jackal Games on someone else? Especially one of your children?”

“NEVER. Oh, sweet Jesus, I’m an abused child. It was not me. I did nothing to deserve my treatment. I can breathe.” The bands of pressure released, and the pterodactyls slowed. The feeling of confirmation from a professional was a release of doubt and pent up pain.

Over the next weeks, with her help and Michael’s support, I discovered forty-seven years of rage and pain. Boy did I discover rage. I learned how to avoid suppressing it and instead

letting it out safely. I beat the bed. Sometimes I traumatized my poor dog because I would spend hours beating the bed and screaming until my voice was gone and I couldn't stand. But I began to release emotions and I went several times a week to therapy.

We told both the kids that I was in therapy and my in-laws. They were all supportive. Matthew always finds out when I have a session and even if he is traveling in a secret location, he calls to check on me afterwards. Kathleen tells me silly puns or gives me a hard time for spoiling the dog. My father-in-law who is not known for being overly demonstrative, pats me on the back or gives me hugs. My mother-in-law tells me she is proud of my courage and she loves me. My oldest sister-in-law gets me to go along with the silly in life. Ironically, it is her son who showed me it was okay to mess up and not be perfect.

Patrick was my oldest nephew. He was a cute little redheaded tike with a mischievous smile when he was in my wedding. By the time Michael's youngest sister married, he was a very handsome grown man. At the pre reception cocktail hour, I had a glass of wine (I'm the featherweight in the family) and I forgot to eat. Needless to say, I felt great. But there was no way I could walk up the stairs to the reception. I was going to fall flat on my face and embarrass everyone. I was standing at a small tall circle table across from the door. Patrick and his sisters were with me. Michael was with the children corralling them for dinner. As I looked around a little desperately my eyes fell on Patrick. His smile held the same safety as Michael's. There was no judgement. Only acceptance and support. And the willingness to find the absurd which must come from his mother.

"Patrick" I leaned towards him and almost fell over. The darn table moved. Luckily he caught me.

"Yes, Aunt Sadie?"

“I think I messed up. I had too much.”

“Don’t worry Aunt Sadie.” He winked at me and took my arm. Then he looked at his oldest sister and said, “We won’t let you fall. We won’t leave you alone.” Then those two stood one on each side of me and helped me to my seat in the dining room. They never told anyone or even made me feel bad. They were a lot like Michael.

Michael, who just holds me as I rage and scream with the pain. He also listens and learns how to help me with the flashbacks which are still being triggered. I was able to suppress all of this when the kids were home and needed me. But once they grew up, no longer could I suppress the memories and emotions. My body began rebelling and the panic attacks and anxiety spirals were out of all control.

My anxiety spirals became so constant, my doctor put me on a preventative antianxiety medicine. I developed thyroid issues and migraines. I also became angrier and angrier. I couldn’t even talk to my parents. I stood in the driveway smashing the dishes they gave me. I was still angry. When I grabbed the baseball bat and headed to my car that was given to me when they bought Justin and themselves a new one, the car that was supposed to make up for going to little league soccer games instead of my graduation from college, well that is when I realized I needed to do something with the anger. I was even angry at God. How could He have let this happen? Why did He? I didn’t want to read my Bible. I knew what it said. It said to forgive. I didn’t want to forgive. I wanted them to pay. I wanted them to suffer. I wanted vindication. I wanted them to bleed. I wanted, to not be an angry old lady, that meant I needed to find balance and learn to reach acceptance and forgiveness. But how was the real question. How could I reach this point?

Redemption...

Finding balance was not easy. My therapist had me work on forgiveness exercises. I would write an angry letter and read it to an empty chair. That chair was the person the letter was addressed to. Then I would move to the other chair and play the person I had just blasted. I would then be supposed to pretend to be the person and say what I always wished had been said. The problem, I'm a writer.

"Okay Sadie, I want you to be your Mom today and respond to some of the things in your letter. But respond as you would like your Mom to respond."

"Alright Dr. Kim. Here goes." I closed my eyes and pictured my Mom. I saw her eyes narrow at me and her mouth pinch in lines of disapproval. I heard her anger and disgust as she opened her mouth and I said just what I knew she would, "Sadie, I'm sorry you feel hurt by my not making you the center of the universe and rejecting your brother during his senior year and last basketball game against the crosstown rivals. I know you believe your little wedding, which you scheduled just to hurt your brother, was more important. I know, even though you wrote this nasty letter of lies to make me look bad, something your Aunt Betty would do, I know you are nothing like her...". I opened my eyes and felt the rage boiling in me. *Maybe I should go back to the exercise of beating a box with a bat and screaming. This forgiveness and letting go exercise, was not working. No matter how many times I sing the stupid Disney song to myself.*

"Dr. Kim? I don't think I am ready to forgive. I'm still so angry."

"That's Fine. There is no set pace. You need to move at your speed. There is no right or wrong answer here."

“I work better with right or wrong answers. I need to know what you want to hear and then I can say it.”

“Sadie, that is one of the conditioned responses we are working to deprogram from you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That would be another one of the conditioned responses we are working on.”

“Michael says he wants to ban me from saying I’m sorry in our home.”

Dr. Kim chuckled, “Not the worst idea I’ve heard.”

“I don’t want to be angry. I don’t want to be stuck as an angry person.”

“Sadie, you need to be patient with yourself and give yourself permission to feel. You need to accept yourself in order to accept others. Forgiveness is the same.”

Over the next several days at home, I kept trying the exercise. But I discovered that there was a problem with being a writer and trying to do this exercise. Being a writer means being a great observer and recorder. I was very good at this part. So, I kept speaking to myself as they actually would, not how I wished they would. Not how I needed them to. This just kept me angry and depressed. It was after one of these exercises that I told Michael about something that happened when I was thirteen.

I was going to be going to a public middle school for the first time. I had been in private school and I was scared. I was very out of my element. My parents had taken me to JC Penney’s in the mall to buy a new coat and I had found the perfect one. It was the deep green of a Christmas pine tree and it fell to mid-calf. The belt cinched about my waist and I felt so grown up in it. My parents were talking quietly a few racks away and looking at a batwing grey rabbit skin fur coat. It was too big for me, so I had no idea what they were looking at it for.

“Sadie, come her a minute. You know, Stacy is having a hard time in school right now?”

Yep, getting caught cheating on a test, sleeping with the head cheerleader's boyfriend and stealing from a teacher will create tough times in school.

"If we bought this coat, we could help her get her confidence back, but we could only afford a cheaper coat for you. You have so much, and she doesn't. What do you think would please Jesus?"

I looked at my beautiful coat, and then I looked at the sickly yellow coat Mom was holding. I looked at my Dad's expectant eyes and gave the required answer.

"Buy the coat for Stacy Dad. I don't need a new coat. Spend the money you would spend on that other coat on something else."

Dad rubbed my head and for the third time in my life told me he was proud of me. They bought Stacy the batwing coat and a whole outfit to go with it.

When I finished telling Michael this story, he just looked at me for several moments. "That is the saddest thing I have ever heard. I am so sorry Sadie." Needless to say, I was feeling very despondent by this point. We went to church and listened as our minister started a series on Joseph entitled *Trauma to Triumph*. Joseph had been sold into slavery because his father played favorites and his brothers hated him. *It could be a lot worst Sadie. That is a level of hatred you never experienced, plus no gypsies lived nearby for you to be sold to. See, plusses.* One of the things he discussed was from a book called *The Body Keeps Score*. I was about to learn just how closely Michael had been paying attention.

The next day Michael came home for lunch. He did this often so nothing out of the ordinary today. I was still feeling depressed so, since I try to excel at everything, even despondency, I was dressed in paint-stained sweats, a ratty sweater with multiple holes, I hadn't

showered, no makeup, and my uncombed hair was piled on top of my head and held there with a broken clip. I probably made bag ladies look high couture.

“Hey beautiful” Boy was I glad the perfect man was still blind.

“Hi.”

“Let’s go to lunch.”

“Now? I’ll go change I guess.” *Take that Eeyore. You’ve got nothing on me for depressed tone.*

“Why? You look fine just the way you are.” Okay, so even in my despondency I knew I looked anything but fine. In fact, I looked and smelled vile. But the man was insistent, so I got in the car and off we went to lunch.

We pulled up in front of the mall, for lunch. Now I’m not a snob. I enjoy the food court as much as anyone, however we did not usually go there for lunch unless we were at the mall for another reason. And with both the kids grown, we seldom had a reason to go to the mall. Michael took my hand and lead me to the coat department of Dillard’s. Then he looked at me and rewired my mind from trauma to triumph.

“Sadie, we know middle school is hard on you and we know you need a new coat. Now I don’t want to hear about Stacy, she can solve her own problems. We are here to get you the coat of your dreams. So, start looking and pick out any coat you like. We have all the time in the world. I’m sorry we forgot you needed a coat and a confidence boost, but we love you and are proud of you and we thank God for you every day.”

I just stood there in my most ratty sweats and stared at Michael. I could actually feel my brain rewiring itself. I could feel myself letting go of the pain. For the first time in my life, I did not feel selfish for shopping. I didn’t check price tags or think about who else needed what. I

just shopped. Sadly, the middle of July does not have a great selection of long winter coats, but the moment helped me to move beyond pain and anger.

Over the next several months I began, through prayer and support, to see my parents not as all powerful or evil, but as broken and flawed. There is good and bad. In them and in my memories. They were never trying to be malicious. They never intended to hurt me. They acted out of fear, ignorance and love. Yes, love was there. It was a flawed and finite love, but it was love. In many ways, they are still emotionally high schoolers. Those were their best years and that's where they stopped.

One night as Michael and I were watching *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (this was the first movie we watched together so every few years we watch it again) and I told Michael to pause the movie. We had just watched the scene where Indy and his father were at a table on the blimp and each gave his perspective of what type of father Henry had been. For Indy, his dad was remote, emotionally absent, "not like the other kids Dads". Henry responded that he had been a great father because he allowed Indy to be independent and strong. All of a sudden, as I watched this scene it hit me, that was me and my parents.

They truly believed they had been great parents. They made me strong not controlled by my emotions. They kept me from making Betty's mistakes and even their own. I was, mostly, their success raised with love. From mine, and most observers, they were abusive and traumatizing. I'm not saying what they did was okay, far from it. But, they really did love me. They weren't malicious or evil. They were actually very fragile and broken.

They were both also victims of emotional abuse and manipulation. My Mom was abused in a slightly softer way if that can be said of abuse, but she was abused, and she was crippled with shame and fear. My Dad was abused severely and also was the victim of constant spiritual

abuse. Throw his sister and her kids in the mix and trauma may be too mild a word. He also was in constant fear. He was terrified that I would become his sister. With that level of terror, logic can't compute. And for an abused child, admitting and accepting that you were abused is also terrifying.

I've learned that it was not only my parents I needed to accept. To try to avoid abuse, I became obsessed with control of situations. If I controlled the situations around me, I could mitigate the pain. I also tried to achieve perfection to earn love. I needed to learn to accept my imperfections. I needed to accept my failings and my parents. Only by acceptance of my parents, my brothers, and myself, could I learn to be free to be me and live the life I wished to live and be the person I wanted to be.

I'm really not making excuses, but I am accepting of who they are, not who I wish they were. I can love without limits. I have learned through Michael, my kids, and especially getting to know the real Jesus, not the one used as whip against me; that love is not earned and has no conditions. The more love you give, the more love you have to give. And the more love that will be given to you. I have also learned that forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person and everything to do with you. I still run into people who know my parents but didn't know they had a daughter; I'm still told repeatedly that I'm a disappointment. They have not changed. I have.

Truth Embraced...

I may be a disappointment for raising an honorable, moral, Jesus loving and following son who is driven, focused and willing to give his life to protect others; but being called a disappointment for that causes no pain. Of all the things I have been criticized for, this is the one I am proud of.

I also found out my son purposely called my parents and took this hit to get them to focus on him and not me. And my daughter and husband have done the same things recently. I went from no protection and asking God why He made the mistake of creating me, to now thanking Him daily for my life and family. I finally understand. My family is made up of those who see me, love me with no strings, and are always in my corner.

My family is Michael, Matthew and Kathleen. Knowing I have their support has finally allowed me to see me and to forgive those who never even knew they were crushing my spirit and sense of self-worth. I have true siblings through Michael. Sisters who value me and love me. I have nieces and nephews who want me around. But they don't give me worth. I have worth by being a child of God. I have value because He says I do. I exist.

I have learned forgiveness is not gaining validation or an apology. I learned to forgive myself for allowing me to be abused. I can look at the past and say, "I could have spoken up." They weren't monsters who wanted to hurt me. And maybe it would have changed nothing, but maybe it would have. I have learned to set and enforce boundaries in my relationships. I have learned that with those who truly love you, you don't have to earn their love. I watched a sermon by Andy Stanley about forgiveness. I learned that when Jesus said to forgive, it was because He was concerned about the forgiver. To forgive heals the one doing the forgiving.

Andy said to forgive is to pardon. When a criminal is being pardoned, the judge doesn't say, "Well, you have never done anything wrong and anyone who says otherwise is a liar." No that is not how a pardon works. Instead, the judge reads the crimes committed and then says, "you are pardoned, forgiven." This made sense. I needed to pardon my family. So, I read the letters to the chairs and after each letter, I said, "I pardon you of your crimes against me. I forgive you." I have to say, the weight that was lifted was amazing. I didn't feel as if an elephant was off of me, I felt the whole bloody circus leave my shoulders. I was free. I was finally free to see the woman Michael always saw. I could see with my eyes not my parents or brothers.

Recently, Michael and I were on Bon Aire in a golf cart touring the island with Michael's Dad and sister Nora. Now this family has a spectacular superpower. They can get lost in a round room looking for an exit. Nora's husband says they are card carrying members of the fuckarewe tribe (where the fuck are we).

Michael was driving us in the golf cart. Nora sat behind him and Dad (my father-in-law) sat behind me. Nora is a person who always live life fully. With her there is no holding back and no apology for being herself. I love that. She is the sister I can say, "your annoying me" and her response is "Oh, okay then". No anger. No hard feelings. Just, next event. Of course, this means everyone loves to tease her and enjoy the reaction. It used to make my stomach knot because teasing in my life hurt, but Nora often retold the pranks and jokes herself and she always laughed the loudest and longest when teased. I learned from her, teasing could be fun, not cutting.

Today we were enjoying our adventure. Michael and I tried to see everything as an adventure instead of a plan going awry and we had taught this to the kids. On this adventure,

Michael had a died mirror to see behind him but the rest of us didn't. Now the roads we were driving on were very narrow and they were the main roads for the whole island. So, every time a truck was coming behind us, Michael would lean over and say to me, "Watch Nora" then he would go back to sitting upright and smile as he waited. The truck would come zooming up to the side of us and pass us with about a paper's width between us. Nora, every time, would let go of the window bar and scream, "Oh, my".

Laughter and fun with Nora, Michael, Dad and I had been the norm for the last four hours. We had stopped at two fun little bars, but we passed on the iguana stew. Now however, we needed to be back at the ship, at a very specific time, or the ship would sail without us. I hate to be late, Michael, doesn't care. His Dad and sister don't care. Me, ten minutes early is late. We needed to get to the port. It's where the ship is. You know the thing that floats on the water?

And did I mention we were on a small island? Logic, in my mind meant head to the water and follow it to the port. Michael wanted a short cut through the interior. Normally I would be careful to say nothing harsh and just pray for help. After all, if I challenged the driver or anyone in the family, I could lose their love. Especially if I was right. This time, the new me looked at my watch, looked at the map and looked at Michael.

"Listen, I will not miss the ship because you are directionally impaired."

"Oh, don't worry Sadie, we can always get a boat and go to the next island."

"Would rather not Nora." I gritted my teeth when answering her.

"I have a compass on my phone."

"Oh, Dad. Great we have more time."

"Nope Nora, I don't know how to read the thing."

"Good one Dad. See Hon, we have nothing to worry about."

“Michael. Stop driving now. You will turn left, or I will take over. We are going to follow the ocean to the port.” Michael took one look at me and raised his left eyebrow at my raised voice. Then he turned the golf cart left.

“Yes dear.”

In the back seat I could hear Nora laugh and tell Dad that she never worried because I had it covered. He laughed and said a man is blessed when he has a strong woman helping him.

“Whoo hoo, Michael may not be allowed on our boat. Sadie is the leader for the fuckarewe tribe.”

“She’s got him in line, your mother uses that voice too. Hey look. What do you know, the ocean?”

No one was disgusted with my show of emotion. That night, I let everyone get their own plates, I only served myself food. For the first time I left everyone sitting and served myself. When I came back with my plate, Dad jumped up and said, “That looks good Sadie. I’m getting a plate.” Everyone followed and no one lectured me on service and selfishness. Mom (my mother-in-law) even patted me on the back and said, “I understand it was another adventure of almost missing the ship. That’s Dad, Nora and Michael for you. Good thing you were there.” Then she laughed and went for her plate. No one treated me any different. I was still family. I hadn’t disappointed anyone. I could be me.

I have learned, through painful work, that I am not a failure or disappointment to those who have taken the time to know me. I am Michael’s beloved wife, Matthew’s much-loved Mom, Kathleen’s much-loved Mom. They have pride in me and protect me. I am a beloved daughter of God. So, loved that Jesus died for me. I am a visible person. And I am a writer. I

can never explain how hard a journey it has been to get to this point. The wounds have scarred over, mostly.

Most days I have achieved around 90% forgiveness and acceptance. I'm not all the way better. I still have moments of anxiety, but they are fewer and last for a shorter time. Depression and self-doubt are still my companions. I accept that my children can fight their own battles and protect themselves with my parents. Justin and I have a superficial relationship. He is there if I need him and vice versa, but we will never be close friends or even close acquaintances. Brandon and I have no relationship. Although I did get invited to his oldest daughter's wedding, and she called me to make sure I was coming. At her wedding, something amazing happened. Actually, two amazing things happened.

The first amazing thing happened in the bathroom. Kathleen was being fawned over by Brandon. She was drinking it up as only a young twenty-one-year-old can. As we were sitting at the table in the corner where Justin, his second wife, Mom, Dad, Michael, Kathleen and I had been placed. While we were all wondering when we could leave, Kathleen came over and sat next to me. She leaned into me and said, "I can't believe you kept Uncle Brandon from me my while life. He is great. Everything you ever said about him not wanting a family is not true. Why would you deny me a relationship with him?" Before I could respond, she left to join Brandon again as he showed her off.

I wanted to warn her he was using her. I wanted to protect her from let down and pain. I also wanted to beat the crap out of him for trying to take my daughter from me. It was the Jackal Games two point oh. I couldn't breathe. My chest tightened. I did what Dr Kim said to do when I needed a moment, I told everyone I was going to the bathroom. She was right, no one ever objected to that or thought you had a problem except a full bladder. In the bathroom I used

my other learned tricks. I gave myself butterfly hugs, I looked in the mirror and told my self *you're valued. You're a child of God. Jesus called you by name. This to shall pass. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength*". Brandon's a miserable alcoholic ass. Okay that one was not self-affirmation, but I was breathing a little easier. Then Mom walked in.

"Are you alright Sadie?"

This was not the aquarium bathroom of my youth. This was the new me. "No. Kathleen just told me I was a liar and Brandon was wonderful and I had kept her from people who loved her her whole life."

Mom stepped close and caught my chin. She leaned into me and very firmly said while looking me straight in the eye, "Now you listen to me Sadie Ann. Brandon is in his element spewing bullshit. Kathleen is slightly drunk, and Brandon is very drunk. She knows you and she will learn not to trust him. If she doesn't, I'll tell her to appreciate the amazing Mom she has. Don't you ever let him get to you or make you doubt how great you are. I'm proud of you and my daughter doesn't let some little twit mess with her head."

I was stunned. But suddenly as what my Mom had said sank in I threw my arms around her and hugged her tight. "Thanks Mom. I needed the reminder. I love you."

"I love you too dear. Shall we go back to the superficial show?"

"I'm ready if you are."

We walked back to the table and sat down just as Brandon came over. He stood behind Justin and rested his hands on the back of Justin's chair. His politician smile was in place.

"How was the food? Are you all having a good time?"

Mom answered in overly polite tones, "everything was wonderful."

“Good, good. We didn’t know if we could pull it off, but boy did we work hard and make it happen. We wanted to give everyone a good time.”

“Hey Brandon, stop kissing ass already. You have our vote.” Justin delivered that with a droll aside. Brandon slapped him on the back and walked away. We looked at each other for a moment then Michael said, “You know, he does always sound like he’s running for office. I’d vote for him.” That was when we all began to laugh. Mom reached over and squeezed my hand as we watched Brandon make the rounds.

Brandon was enjoying introducing Kathleen as his niece. They were on the far side of the room from our table by the bar. He was buying her lemon drop shots. His favorite drink. They were visiting with one of the few women at the wedding who remembered Kathleen from when she was little. Another one of Brandon’s friends walked up to them and started asking Kathleen about herself. Now while Kathleen is still caring and does mostly spread joy, she is also a mighty spitfire. And Mom’s prediction from the bathroom was soon to be proven true.

This man leaned up against the bar and smiled down at her. Like most of the men in Brandon’s circle, he was rather superficial and slightly smarmy. His big mistake, not knowing my daughter and thinking she was like Brandon’s girls.

“I didn’t know Brandon had another niece. Kathleen Miller you are going places in life. You are something special.”

That was it. That dismissal of my existence was all it took to light the fuse of the firecracker that was my daughter. Brandon standing there laughing didn’t help, it pissed her off. The illusion he had spent all night spinning was shattered. And everyone would know it as my five-foot three daughter stepped into this six foot one two-hundred-and-sixty-pound snake oil salesman.

“My name is not Kathleen Miller. I am Kathleen Gardiner and I am the daughter of Sadie Gardiner and you don’t ever forget it. My Mom is the best and anyone who knows her is lucky.”

Then Kathleen walked away. I was blown away. I was publicly and vocally claimed. Kathleen looked right at Brandon when she blasted that out. I felt lighter than air. Not only has forgiveness broken the chains other people were allowed to place on me. I can breathe, and I am free. And those who matter most are proud to claim me.

My Mom helped me. There were no excuses for my brother’s behavior. I was protected. My daughter let it be known in no uncertain terms who I was. My husband, as always was my champion. And I had conversed with my Mom in a new way. Justin and my Dad had even looked to me to help protect Justin’s son from Justin’s evil ex Michelle. What a different wedding from the last one we were all attending. Kathleen even walked up to Michelle and watched her trip over a chair trying to get away from the woman who was once the little girl she had rejected all those years ago.

The years have not made me forget, but they have helped me to accept and forgive. They haven’t changed, but by accepting myself and them; and setting and maintaining boundaries, I can have better relationships. I control my situations and my responses. I no longer just take the lectures. I can either end the conversation or simply change the subject. I am not required to do anything; I choose to do things now.

I choose to cherish the good memories and keep the bad as reminders of what I don’t ever want to be. I look for lessons I can learn from them, and I remind myself of what I have gained and how far I have come. I now have sessions with Dr. Kim only when I need them. When I start to spiral and can’t stop myself. Like when I write a memoir about the past. One thing that

has not changed, I still meet people who say, when they realize who I am related to, “I didn’t know they had a daughter?” It no longer hurts. Now I sometimes even get an impish moment and respond, “neither did they”. Then I laugh. I am not forgotten or a mistake. I’m not a failure or a disappointment. I am redeemed, I am chosen, I am me.

Author's Note...

While this is true, it did happen to me, I have however changed the names and locations to protect the living, and my peace. I really don't want to add a knew lecture to the list I have received over the years. I also don't want to cause harm. That is not my purpose in writing this.

My purpose is twofold. I needed to write this for selfish reasons. I needed to reclaim that lost splinter of me that was missing. I needed to finish gluing the shattered pieces back together. I know that I'll always have bad moments and I'll struggle, but this helped me to release the pain and redeem the whole of me.

The other reason I wrote this is selfless. There is much notice and attention to physical and sexual abuse. Those are awful. There is no arguing with that. However, there is not a lot of support or attention for victims of emotional abuse, manipulative abuse or spiritual abuse. In fact, most people only know about spiritual abuse in connection with cults. I wanted to write my story in the hopes that someone who is going through something similar will know they are not alone.

You are not shameful or alone. You are not a failure or a disappointment. Jesus doesn't regret creating you. If any part of my story is something you can relate to, please get help. This type of abuse leads to anxiety, depression, self-harm. It is never too late to begin the redemption and forgiveness process.

Remember, you are not focusing on redeeming or forgiving others. This is about gathering all the splinters of you and gluing them back until you are whole. You may be scarred and fragile, but you are stronger than you think.

These types of abuse go through generations, so if you don't think you can help yourself, then think about stopping the cycle before it claims another generation. The best way to do this is by seeking professional help. I also found a few other sources for support, tools, and comfort:

Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse by Gregory L. Jantz, PhD

Boundaries by Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.

The Holy Bible (Especially the story of Joseph in the Old Testament and Jesus in the new.)

These four books really help.

Good luck in your personal journey and I will be praying for you.