

DEFEATING THE GIANT



A Guide to Recognizing and
Healing from Narcissistic Abuse

ROSANNE NUNNERY

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-5381-9553-6 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-5381-9554-3 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-5381-9555-0 (ebook)

∞TM The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.



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CHAPTER 1



Reclaiming Yourself Following NPD Exposure

A Personal Reflection

For as long as I can remember, I have been different—or, rather, I felt and thought I was different when I was sitting at a restaurant, standing in a crowd, walking through school, sitting in a church pew, standing in front of a class and teaching, or sitting at the dinner table, amid other people. I am not saying I did not experience life or that I was standing back and judging others. No. I was always judging *myself*, asking, “What is wrong with me?” I pondered whether I was really supposed to be in my family or a part of my generation and even if I was meant to exist in any specific place and time. My thoughts were always analytical and existential. After doing my own personal work in counseling through meditation and mindfulness, as well as engaging in spiritual practice, reading, education, and journaling, I remain analytical and self-reflective. We all want to know who we are, and we want a sense of belonging. I can say, even now, I do not feel settled in a group and always can see beyond myself. I am not saying that I have been de-personalized either, but there seems to be a disconnect between who I am as a wife, mother, educator, and counselor and what I know in my very being. Who I am is all mixed up in all of these roles, and yet I do not identify with any one of them.

As I was pondering how to share my story regarding exposure to narcissistic abuse, I honestly was dumbfounded about where to even begin. I’ve written down glimpses into my life, using short stories that accumulated into what has become a memoir. We understand that memoirs are communicated from the perspective of the writer, and there are many folks within those stories who will readily reject the author’s version of events. As a counselor and

educator, I know that we all have our own truth. As someone who is dialectical, I can easily view issues from multiple perspectives. When engaging with a rational person, it's easy to have a dialectical dialogue, but it is not easy or even possible with someone with narcissistic traits. Within a relationship with a narcissist, the only perspective that counts is that of the narcissist.

As a child and now an adult, I often justify the actions of others, and I know it is due to my own narcissistic abuse. I've excused others' behaviors away, trying to see from the perspective of my exposure. I would say my mother's behavior was due to her upbringing, that she'd had it worse than me, and would give multiple chances and forgiveness (even when I was never asked for forgiveness), and I stayed within the relationship until I finally had to disconnect. So what is wrong with me? Nothing—and yet everything! It depends upon who is asked: the abused or the abuser.

I was born the only child of my father and the fourth child of my mother. Of course, I had very little recollection of my young life, as I was swept off at 6 weeks old to England and then to a life of travel, for I was the child of a military father. I have good and bad memories. For years I'd realized that I would mostly tell only good memories because my brain had focused on those, and then later, I realized this was due to my blocking all the traumatic memories. So I think it is only fair to explore the positive memories amid the negative ones as a means of understanding the mistakes I have made and who I am today. I know that because I had so many mixed memories and experiences, I excused all the events that were harmful, even declaring as a teenager that I never get angry, that I have the best family, and that the behavior toward me just could not be helped. Well, some things can be helped, and other things cannot.

My positive memories are linked back to images of playing dolls with my sister, riding bikes with my brothers, singing and dancing to the show *Solid Gold*, and recording tapes off the radio to listen to later. There were Barbie dolls, Cabbage Patch Kids, and scary movies; there was playing outside until the streetlights came on and living in places that some folks could only dream to ever visit in their life. I had a lot of freedom as a young child—sometimes too much freedom—with many self-reflective moments in my life. I never remember not having food on the table or a place to live, although there were luxuries we could not have. But being a United States Air Force kid opened up a world of military bases, travel, food, friends, and exploration. For a long time, I focused on how I had reaped the benefits of my parents' marriage, for my siblings had experienced many difficult situations prior to my birth. My awareness of and reflection on events really did not start until I could step out of my pretend (delusional!) version of events that I'd created

in my head and could then see the reality of events from an adult perspective. Sometimes, these realities would come in glimpses or flashes, whereas others come very clearly, with details that are too difficult to forget. I was struck by a statement my husband has said to me throughout our marriage: “You always tell me the stories about when you were living in Germany.” I would often say that it was because it was my favorite place to live, and it was, but I realize it was also because those held some of my happiest memories. As I looked closer, I realized even those were tainted by memories of pain and heartache. For many years, this led to me wondering if there was something wrong with me or something wrong with my family. The reality is likely both.

Memories are powerful, and some of them we want to capture and get back and dream about, while others we want to forget. One early memory included a sense that I was very close to my mother, even more so than my father. I felt closest to my middle brother and, at times, my sister, as they would play with me. As I aged, I realized my sister was stuck with me a lot of the time due both to our age and that Mom needed a babysitter. My father was always gone, but when he was home, I truly enjoyed getting to watch him build things, wiring electronics, and working with photography, but mostly, he was at temporary duty for the military. This left us children with Mom while he was gone, which created this reality that I felt closest to my mom. She was the primary caregiver. However, amid those times, scattered events occurred that shaped me and impacted my identity, especially my sense of self and belonging within the family and even within the world.

My father was the disciplinarian and was trained to use the belt, which is quite common in Southern religious culture. “Spare the rod and spoil the child” was an often-used ideology in our family; it was a fear-based method of discipline that would happen from time to time, though in the beginning, I remember my brothers getting more spankings than I did, and it always made me cringe. I always hated seeing them—or anyone—in pain. I am still like that to this day. I would say that I had a healthy fear of my father and his belt, but what I really should have feared was my mother, with her emotional abuse and manipulation.

The manipulation began very young, with subtle statements like, “Say you will never leave me. Your brothers left me; say you will never leave me.” I would oblige and say, “I will never leave you, Mom.” And I’d continue to play. These demands first began being sprinkled throughout my childhood when my oldest brother left home for college. Then as time progressed, I was inundated by the flood of verbal and sometimes physical abuse my mother unloaded on my father when he’d come home from temporary duty, or even just a long shift at the military base. I saw images of her belittling him, of her

unreasonable demands, when she expected things of him that he could not meet and he was thus doomed to fail. As a child, I could merely go outside and play, ignoring it, or I drown it out with preoccupying activities. I know you are reading this and wondering about actual stories. Well, there are far too many to share, but following is a glimpse into a few as I break them down across varied ages.

As I noted earlier, Germany was such a beautiful place to me, filled with beautiful memories of snow, friends, playing, and just being a kid. I would walk to school with my sister while my brothers took a bus to their middle and high schools. We would learn the German language, as well as spend days enjoying the weather, the toys, and laying on the ground, looking at the sky and watching the clouds pass over. I was about 8 years old, and in the present, I am actually quite shocked at how much unsupervised time I'd had, not even coming home until the streetlights would come on, which was around 10:00 p.m. We would come home only for supper, then go back out again.

I recall how important it was in our family to eat every bit of our food—and the dinnertime fights. We had a large family, so any food on our plate was considered like a delicacy, and it could not be wasted. The problem was in how my mom controlled us: the amount on our plate, the type of food we had, and how our behavior unfolded at the table. Until the time when I'd leave home at 17, all my memories at the table consisted of arguments, belittling comments, and my mom always letting my father know how all of his behaviors were a problem: how he ate, how he chewed, the way he sat, what he wore, and the list goes on. It was all a problem to her. Even at that young age of 8, I remember wanting to eat and then leave the table. My mom could give my father a look, and he would jump. When I say jump, I mean that he's immediately jump up and do what she'd told him to do. Over time, I'd also learn what her looks meant and how I'd need to jump. He could look at her and know when he needed to shut up, get up, stop chewing, stop eating, yell at one of us kids, or clean the kitchen. Over time, I would begin to feel pity for my father, but at the time, this seemed normal to me. In fact, I never thought it was an issue. It was just normal that Mom was in charge. It was normal for my sister and I to occasionally have some chores of washing dishes and clothes and that my brothers would take out the trash. I would often prefer not to eat at the table, because, as time progressed in our apartment in Germany, there was more tension, problems, and anger. Food became an issue that would progress throughout my life.

Once or twice a week, we would load up in our van and head to a nearby city in Germany where there was a large military base, and we would

purchase groceries. I have many memories of the drive to the base, with my mom screaming at my father as he drove along the mountain roads. I would sit in the back, listening to my mom yell at my dad, and I would interject, begging them to stop fighting, but it never worked. I was told to shut up and sit back down in the van. My dad would be screamed at for not driving right, the grocery list, the money, his work, and so on—all before we ever got to the base commissary. There were many moments of Mom telling Dad to stop the van, get out, and walk back home. I would beg her to go back and get him, which she'd refuse. Her nasty comments then turned to me—that is, until I shut up. There were times Mom would drive back and pick him up, but other times, she acted as though there were not three feet of snow outside. I would cry and beg, but I quickly learned it would not work and often found that the only way to have peace was to side with my mom.

The worst memories were after my dad would go into the base grocery store and bring the food back to the van. My mom made my dad do it all. She may have shopped some, but I know he got the groceries to the van, stacked them in the back, and handed my mom the items she wanted. Sometimes, my mom would demand that she drive; other times, she'd demand him to. I remember my dad being so excited about something special he would buy for my mother and making sure to tell her how he'd purchased all the items on the list. He would be glowing. Unfortunately, I knew her berating was coming. She would pause and always find something he'd missed. She would say, "Did you get this or that?" He would say, "No, it was not on the list." Immediately, the screaming would begin, and it would become so intense that he would say he'd go back in and purchase it. Of course, she would tell him it was too late and that we just needed to drive home. He was set up to fail no matter what he did. As he'd drive, my mom would pout and say nasty comments under her breath while us kids would play; sometimes we'd try to distract her because we knew there would be no good outcome if she remained focused. I would feel the anxiety rising in my body and know my mom was going to blow her top. Well, it would always happen as we were driving back home, an hour and a half around a snowy mountain. She would ask Dad why he'd not gone back and gotten the item. My dad would say, "You told me not to." Well, this was not the right answer. She would immediately tell him to stop the van, get out, and walk home. This pattern was so common, and yet it was emotionally overwhelming. He would have gone back and bought the item, and we could have driven home in peace, but Mom could never let there be peace. I always would beg to go back into the store, beg them to let me get the item. It was a twisted, manipulative, and complicated mind game. I would constantly be asking my mom to please go

back and get Dad, to please stop fighting, and I would even beg her, saying that I'd go buy whatever item was missing. I learned quickly that I needed to side with Mom if I wanted to survive and not bear the brunt of her yelling and blame. This became so common that I hated grocery day or any event when we had to travel.

In the 1980s it was a big deal to have a new VCR. I remember Dad being excited to go pick one up for our family. At that time, folks would share movies/videos, and having a VCR was a big deal. My dad had worked all day and then taken the van to get the newest VCR. My dad was brilliant with electronics, fixing items, and building, and I liked to watch him work on them. I remember it being a very snowy day, Dad arriving with the VCR, and all of us watching him set it up. We were so excited, but then Dad said we could not use it that day, because a cord was missing. Well, immediately my mother began belittling him, and she told him to go back. I knew that if he went back, it would be an hour-and-a-half drive, and it was senseless to go right back since we could go tomorrow. I can still see the image of Mom yelling at Dad, saying he was stupid because he didn't have what he needed to set up the VCR. Dad was standing up, and Mom was yelling at him, while I sat on the couch, watching my dad. There'd been a window behind him, with snow falling in the background. She said, "You are not taking the van. You have to take the military bus." The bus only left and returned at specific times of the day, so he would have to leave immediately to catch the last bus. I begged Mom not to make him go, but my words were ignored. Even at the age of 8, I knew this was not right and that my dad should stand up for himself. I did not know why he would not stand up for himself. If my mom wanted something, she demanded it, and my father obliged. There were so many different times that these types of events happened.

Once we'd left Germany (not at the desire of my father but at the demand of my mother), I was older and had become more aware of my mom's behavior: her control and the trickle-down effect it had on us kids were evident. My oldest brother was of age and left Germany, moving back to the United States. And after we'd returned to the United States, it was not long before my second brother left home. Then my dad, sister, and I were the only remaining targets of her wrath. This began with her again begging me—and even my sister—to never leave her. Both our brothers had left home after graduation to head to college, which is normal. At that time, I'd not realized the depth of the many experiences and stories that had impacted my brothers. Once we'd gotten back to the United States, my dad was no longer in the military, and it was very hard for my family to financially function, which led to our return to our home state and to my dad's family's inherited

land. It was not where I wanted to be, but I did have cousins and friends to hang out with during the summer and after school. It was during this time, between the ages of 11 and 13, that two major events happened to me that changed my life forever.

The first event related to my father and his motorcycle. He was a bit of a rebel, which I really liked about him. He may not have stood up to my mom, but he had his outlet: riding a motorcycle, and he loved it. It was common for my dad to allow me to ride with him on his motorcycle. He would pick me up after school, take me to the doctor, or just take a ride on his own to enjoy the sunshine and breeze.

One specific day, my dad rode from one city to the next at the request of my mother, who'd asked him to help her mother do some repairs. And I wanted to go with him; I loved how riding was a great outlet and something we could do together. He was headed to my grandmother's house to do some repairs, which was quite common. It was rare for him to have downtime, but he also enjoyed doing electronic work as a hobby. He was a natural, and I wish I could have learned more from him, even though I did not get a lot of time to engage, nor did he offer to teach me. After two trips back and forth, from city to city, I decided to stay home and hang out with my cousins, playing handball. It was about an hour later that I saw my uncle's truck come up the driveway: it had my father's motorcycle in its back. I knew it was dad's, and when I saw it, I immediately fainted. My aunt and uncle told me that my dad had been in a motorcycle wreck. Immediately after that, my mom drove in, picked me up, and took my sister and I to the hospital. I do not remember much of the ride to the hospital, but I do remember getting there. My dad was in the emergency room, and when we all arrived, I knew I wanted to see him. My mom looked at me as we waited to go in, then told me, "This is your fault. You caused him to be tired and distracted and to wreck." My eyes teared up as she walked away to see my dad, and I could hear them arguing in his hospital room. I was mortified that my mom would argue with my dad while he was so injured. My mom walked out and told me to go in and see him while quickly reiterating, "This is your fault." I walked in at my mom's insistence, and he was covered in blood with bandages. He immediately said, "Get her out of here." My mom refused, and I teared up. So did my dad, and in looking at him, I was quickly reminded that the accident was my fault. It was so traumatic to see my father like that, and I held on to that guilt until I was almost forty years old. Instead of love, empathy, and support for my dad (or me), my mother had brought nothing but blame and hate, along with a reminder to my dad that he was no longer allowed to have a motorcycle. This was the moment my dad lost his voice,

the right to his opinion in our house, and most of his engagement with me, his daughter.

That same year, after the severe wreck, my dad was still in the hospital, and I was staying with my sister and her boyfriend at our house. The first night was awkward, as my sister did not want me at the house, since she and her boyfriend were there together. I called the hospital and talked to my mom, checking in on my dad. Mom said I had to stay at my grandmother's house, down the road. This was my paternal grandmother, which seemed fine to me, as I had spent all day at her house, playing handball with family and friends outside, and had been doing a lot with the aunts and grandmother who lived there. Little did I know that I was walking into a traumatic event.

I rode my bicycle down to my grandmother's house; my grandmother, aunts, uncle, and I ate supper; and then we all were watching television, while my sister stayed at our house with her boyfriend. I was enjoying a show when, slowly, my uncle began to sexually assault me. It started with him tickling me, and this led to my aunts holding me down. My grandmother watched from the other room but took no action to stop the abuse; rather, she contributed to it. I have commonly said that after this event, I've never slept soundly again. I laid on the floor in a sleeping bag, staring at the ceiling, completely awake. The next morning, I avoided my uncle and tried to stay away until my dad and mom arrived home. Unfortunately, my uncle followed me to my house later that day and trapped me in my front yard, where he assaulted me again. Now as I look back, I remember how I used redirection to get him to stop and also how I disassociated, focusing my vision on the odometer and the interior roof of the truck as it all unfolded. I was able to effectively get away and get into the house, but I was having a hysterical reaction, which triggered my mom and sister asking what was wrong with me. I did not want to say anything, because I wanted to protect my dad from all of this. My mom verbally pushed me until I told, but then I was immediately told it was no big deal, that my uncle was just mentally slow and did not know what he was doing. My father was tearful and told my mom he would kill my uncle. She quickly turned and looked at my dad as he laid in the recliner with stitches and an arm sling, with elevated limbs, and said, "You will not. No way." She demanded he do nothing about what happened and even that he allow my uncle to come to our house that night—and many nights after that. She quickly revealed that her childhood was far worse than mine, saying, "This is nothing, I experienced worse. You won't tell anyone." After this incident, my mom controlled all interactions between my dad and me. Our attachment and bond were severed due to my mom's complete control of our father-daughter relationship.

At this point it might be important to pause. I know *I* need a pause, as whenever I write or think about this, I typically end up dreaming about some version of these events. You may be thinking, “This is a negligent parent!” And she is, but you might also be wondering how this is narcissism. Well, at the time, I did not think about this as narcissism. It was very normal for me. Narcissists will do almost anything to pull any negative attention off themselves and to minimize any attention that would be on others. As I indicated, she minimized my abuse while highlighting her own stories. There was no empathy demonstrated, and her power and control over my father were evident. Even though I was in severe emotional pain, there was no consideration of my needs, never considered protecting me. Later in life, when I confronted my mother, she immediately said that I was wrong, that the event never happened, and that if it had, she would have called the police. This behavior is clearly gaslighting, as she was trying to make me question my memory of the series of events.

As I aged while living at home, I learned that to give an opinion, to hold a perspective different than my mom’s, or to spend time visiting or talking with anyone in my family was against my mom’s rules. After my dad’s motorcycle wreck and my experience of sexual abuse, my father abruptly decided that he was being called to higher cause, to be a minister. This was a whirlwind shift from the military life to one of ministry, which led us to a move from one city to another so my father could serve at a church. It felt like being in the military, except that we’d stayed within the same state. Amid this transition, it seemed as if our family were living a lie. There was the behavior at home and the behavior as soon as we stepped out of the car and through the church doors. There were patterns in our home that I did not understand and, at times, was too embarrassed to let anyone know about. There were the constant arguments between my parents, as well as my mom’s paranoia about folks in the church, her blaming them for her perceived wrong treatment, her gossiping about others, and her forcing her perceptions upon my sister, Dad, and I.

When we first got a church assignment and had moved into a parsonage, folks came and brought us food and greetings, and they even helped us set up the house. It was very warm and welcoming. As the weeks progressed, my mom grew frustrated and resentful of the church members, and if someone came to the house, she would tell us not to answer, to pretend we were not home, and to hide. This bizarre cycle then progressed to her closing all the blinds, keeping the lights off, and as soon as they’d left, her criticizing them. If my sister and I were to answer the door, we’d experience my mom’s nonstop berating us about what we’d done wrong, the pain we were causing

her by answering the door, and then her lashing out, blaming others for her distress.

This happened so many times that I learned to block a lot of it out. However, what I came to know was that the most my parents could ever stay at a church was two years, as my mother would make sure to coach my father, manipulate his perspective, and completely sabotage his relationship at the church. She would spend a lot of time manipulating him, forcing him to request a move. At that point the church members would typically be ready for us to leave. This happened within so many churches that Dad got a reputation as a problem pastor. I cannot understand why he would not just stand up to her and tell her he'd made the decisions about his own career. If he or anyone else stood up to her, there was a shift in her eyes and tone, an immediate lashing out that twisted the truth and adapted the narrative: she'd make the story a complete circle, which started with our departure as her idea, then it changed to our idea, where we were the problems who had forced the decision. I did not know as a teen that this was manipulation, and my questioning my own memory was part of the gaslighting.

In an era before cell phones, my mom had her own ways of keeping tabs on me. She'd had an eating disorder throughout my life—in fact, so much so that my dad asked me to monitor her eating, including her binging and purging pattern. Looking back, I recognize that I should have never been put in that position, where I would report on mom's behavior whenever he returned from work or temporary duty. Well, I do not think my father realized how this put me in the spotlight, making me the problem child in mom's eyes. There were many times when I would report the behaviors I'd observed, and my mom would tell me she knew I was a "tattletale" and that I should not forget to "run and tell Daddy." I have vivid memories of watching her behaviors and reporting them to Dad, then of Mom and Dad fighting, Mom saying I was lying, and Dad believing her. I just wanted to please my dad, but there was always a catch. Eventually, this pattern stopped, but as I got older, their attention shifted onto me and what I was doing. Mom would monitor my eating habits, exercise routine, and interactions with others. She projected her own eating disorder onto me, telling others that I was anorexic and to watch me at school. One day I remember Mom fixing a huge breakfast and requiring me to eat it. I was so full that I could not eat lunch at school. I did get juice and milk—but no food. When I returned home from school, I walked into the kitchen, and Mom immediately said, "So, you did not eat at school today?" I was dumbfounded, and not knowing what to say, I said, "I ate a little." It was a lie but, I knew the wrath I would get. She knew I had not eaten, because she had secretly asked a friend of mine to watch me and

report back to her. I felt as if I had no moment to be myself and I had no power over my life. This also occurred around the time her control over the relationships I had with my dad, sister, brothers, and other family members worsened.

I knew from at least the age of 12 that I had to make a plan to get out of my environment. I would visualize myself going to college and having a career, but first, I had to get be old enough to learn to drive and then get a job. I wanted more for my life than getting up, going to school, studying, and coming home. I was a good student and knew in my heart that education was my way out. I had to learn how to outmanipulate the manipulator because there were limited ways to beat my mom at her own game. I had to learn to predict, think ahead, and walk on eggshells. I often felt as if I had to go even further in predicting her next move, thinking ahead to where the eggshells were being placed so I could figure out how to navigate the fragile eggshells (my mom) so they would not crack.

Fast-forward to when I the legal age to drive and was learning on a standard ignition. I was not good at it, but I managed. I was determined to learn how to drive so I could gain independence in my life. There were limited opportunities to practice, but I did it when I could. Our other vehicle was an old brown Dodge Caravan, an automatic, and I drove it occasionally, even using it to get my license. My memories surrounding these events are scattered, as there were problems with friends and dating and, more painfully, the ostracization combined with the triangulation between my dad, sister, and me. There were so many dark moments that led to my own severe depression, often causing me to stay in my room, crying, with suicidal thoughts. I remember thinking how miserable life was while trying to gather my strength to push forward. As an adult, I now know it was my own resilience and spiritual beliefs that pushed me forward.

My mom would try to manage “my bad mood” by using her cosmetology skills. She’d gone back to school when I was in middle school to earn her cosmetology degree. She used my sister and I to experiment with haircuts, hair coloring, and hair styles, and she would often say, “Girls, it’s time to do hair.” There was no option to decline her offer, because if we did, my dad demanded we obey. There were times my hair almost fell out due to over coloring, perms, and many more experiments, and there were haircuts that were either not in style or were exactly like my mother’s style, all of which led to my own personal hell. Already depressed, I would look at my hair in the mirror and cry. There was so much emotional pain wrapped up in my hair, making bullying at school common; it was obvious to me that my mother wanted to make us girls unattractive. She would demand that she do

our hair, and if we acted like we did not like our style, it became our fault for not sitting still or for wanting something done that would ruin our hair. It was never her fault, never due to her behavior. I remember the many times I would sit in her “chair” and say, “Only a trim, Mom.” I’d feel a cut and then, suddenly, I’d have a very short and unattractive cut. As I’d jump up, she’d say, “Well, I have to finish it now.” This went on until I was 16 and no longer allowed her to touch my hair. She was furious and laid on the guilt, even getting my dad involved, but at that point, I refused. She then had to find other ways to control me.

The summer before I entered 11th grade, my depression was finally lifting, but Dad had served two years at his church, and it was now time to move. I remember standing in the kitchen of our old parsonage, looking out the window alongside my sister, distracted; I was telling myself that things would be different with this move. Boy, was I right and wrong. I was tired of the facades, the control, and feeling like a stranger in my own home. I did not feel like this was my family. My sister had just graduated from high school, and I could not understand why she’d not moved out. I would have been gone. My dad barely spoke to or acknowledged me, my sister was preoccupied with her new boyfriend, and I was just trying to survive. We got everything packed for the move. As we were pulling out of the driveway of the parsonage, I sat in the back seat, watching from the back window, feeling hopeful for new opportunities.

Moving during the summer was ideal because I’d gotten my driver’s license and was determined to find ways to gain my independence. I would graduate in two years, and I needed to do everything to save my money and get good grades to prep for college; I’d start as soon as we’d moved into the new parsonage and settled. I remember asking my mom to take my sister and I out to look for jobs. Of course, my mom found her way to twist it, saying, “I will take you both out to look for a job—but only if you get one today.” And I was determined to make it happen. As we drove around putting applications in, she reiterated that if I got a job, I would have to find a way to and from work or to pay her for gas. I reiterated to her that I would do whatever I needed to do. My sister wanted to do the search alone, but I wanted to go as well. I knew my future, and it involved making money. We spent the afternoon looking, and I felt confident that I would get a job, even though I had no real reason to feel hopeful. My final stop, Chick-fil-A, felt promising. I completed the application, turned it in, and the manager asked to talk with me. The conversation went well, and he told me he would let me know by phone if I got the job. I walked to my mom’s car with a smile. My sister seemed furious at my smile and said, “You will only get it because you are

thin and pretty.” I just accepted the comment, but I’d never thought that about myself. In fact, I was very insecure since I’d had a bad breakup and faced years of bullying, weight fluctuation, and hair disasters, all leading to my lack of self-esteem. I let it go because my focus was on work, and it was only a couple of days before I intercepted the phone call at home, grabbing the phone before my mom could answer. The call was from the manager at Chick-fil-A, who offered me a part-time job on nights and weekends.

I started my junior year at a new school and focused on academics, work, and completing my studies. This kept me away from home and the chaos, but not all of it. I did manage to meet a great guy, and he is now my husband of over 30 years. When he first asked me out on a date, I was reluctant to accept, as I’d been heartbroken from a previous relationship and knew how embarrassing my family was—and challenging to manage. I remember telling him, “I don’t know. I will think about it. Plus, my mom will not likely let me go out with you.” I said this as I was walking out the door, leaving work. I then opened my mom’s car door, as she’d come to pick me up. When he asked again later, I said yes, but I knew I would have to go home and directly tell my mom and dad that I would be going on a date and be picked up on Friday night. I knew my mom so well that if my date were to just show up, she would play nice and not say anything to make her look bad. I was right, but my dad tried to act like the caring and protective father, which came across as quite silly to me. But my date said it was an intimidation tactic. I had not been protected in my childhood, so I wondered, Why now? I found out that Dad had been told to act that way by my mother.

My boyfriend, now husband, has been with me through so many things in my life. It is quite hard to consider how much he sacrificed to stand by me through it all—so many horrific things Mom did and Dad defended. There are too many to mention, but some include the times my parents told folks, even my teachers and friends, that he was a drug addict; when they attempted to portray him and his family as trashy; and when Mom would tell lies about my father, sister, brothers, grandparents, aunts, and the friends in my circle. She wanted to get him on her side, to sabotage our relationship, and to make him so paranoid and worried that he would be drawn to her, not his family. This worked until we were able to figure it out, but we did not see my in-laws for a couple of years as a result. I regret it to this day, and it’s painful to admit.

When we started dating, we were inseparable. Our relationship got closer, and he would drive me to and from work for months, until he eventually asked his parents for permission to sell me his older car and that he could buy another one. He sold it to me for very cheap—my first car, a Chevy Cavalier. I could use it to drive to and from school and work. It felt good to have a job,

my own money, and transportation. Of course, my mother attempted to poke holes in all of my new independence: the car, dating, working, and school. She demanded that I break up with him, which I resisted. She even made up a story, saying I was attracted to my sister's boyfriend to cause a rift between my sister and me, which worked. There was never a dull moment, even when I desperately wished for some calm.

The story of my sister, her pregnancy, and her boyfriend got twisted to the point where I was told to move out of my own bedroom and to "find a place to live." We had a screaming match, and my sister accused me of wanting her to abort her child, hollering about how I wanted to be with her boyfriend. In reality, her boyfriend had confided in me about my sister's behavior and asked for my advice. When it came to my sister's pregnancy, I was disappointed only because I'd hoped she would go to college instead of get pregnant in the first place. Of course, my intentions were twisted into something more sinister, portraying me as a horrible sister. This led to two incidents that my mom still denies happened. First, I was kicked out of my house and had to stay with my boyfriend's parents, who would drive me to school every day to save gas money. Second, once my sister had her baby, I was never allowed to touch, comfort, or play with my niece. My mom and sister were the only two allowed to engage with her. It was heartbreaking, as I wanted to be a part of her life. My return home after the birth was just as abrupt as my departure. I remember coming back to my boyfriend's house after work. It was an era prior to cell phones, and his mom, who'd just gotten off the phone, said, "Your mom called, and she said you had to come home tomorrow." My heart went into my chest. I laid in bed that night, thinking about how I could survive being back home. I just had to finish high school (I would finish in the top 20) and carry out my many positive future plans.

Over the years I was in and out of contact with my mother. Sometimes, I'd take a break because I needed space from the lies, abuse, and pain. Other times, she would call me and make up some story about how I'd ruined her and my dad's life in some way. I shed far too many tears while thinking I was the problem, and I felt so much guilt without truly understanding why. I'd lost my identity, even though I'd typically followed most of her demands. I abided by them, which included paying for my own clothes and graduating from high school. I followed her demands for limiting contact with specific friends and family, for my wedding plans, for visits with her and my dad, but I resisted them regarding where I went to college.

No woman in my family had gone to college before me, and I was determined to go where I wanted. I step back now and ask myself why I complied, and you are likely wondering that too. Well, there'd been years of being