

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By  
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For Everyone Struggling to Forgive and Overcome.  
For Everyone Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles.

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## Abstract

This thesis is built on the authentic life stories of a family that endured the painful realities of child abuse and neglect. The artist's statement provides insight into the origin of the memoir-style story and why it is appropriately labeled as autofiction. The limitations in the research were not hindrances, but rather a testament to the veracity of the stories which are true memories. The critical research paper aims to determine whether the popularity of autofiction is a genuine reflection of society.

### Artist Statement

*“And now these three remain faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love” 1 Cor. 13:13 NIV*

### The Writer

I have dissociative amnesia caused by childhood trauma. The National Library of Medicine supports those individuals with dissociative amnesia “display one or more episodes of inability to recall important personal information, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature, that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness” (Leong et al.). I am a survivor of child sexual abuse that was so intense that my mind blocked the trauma and most of my childhood so that I do not remember it. I used to see this lapse in memory as a curse, but since I accepted Christ as my savior, I saw the lapse in memory as a gift from God. God could not stop my abuser because He gave each of us free will. However, God could make my suffering better by not allowing me to see and remember each horrific detail.

I have memory flashbacks—most of the flashbacks center on good things and good times. One of my earliest memories occurs when I was about nine, and I see myself sitting at a small desk writing in a spiral notebook. I even remember the story I was writing. The story was about a girl lost in the Everglades who a reclusive man found. The man saves the girl and teaches her that not all men are evil and that even bad experiences can lead to good outcomes. This memory is important because this was when I found writing to be a way to escape my pain and possibly give hope to someone who is suffering.

When I write, the words flow from my pen like magic. The concepts and details of the story and characters are so real inside my mind that I often think they are parts of the memories I

cannot unlock. Writing is a way to open the faucet holding back the images that need to be caught on the paper.

I do not, and cannot, write on a computer. I have to have a spiral notebook and a black ink pen before I begin to write. I may write a little of a story and return to it later to complete it, or I may stay up all night writing a complete story. When I have a story to tell, putting the words on paper is a compulsion, an aching need I must fulfill.

As a child of abuse, I was a loner. My father did not want me to play with other children or spend time with anyone but him and my mother. Since I have become an adult, I have learned that my sister had been removed from the family home because she was being sexually abused. My older sister had told someone about what was happening to her. CPS had removed her from the house, and my father had faced charges of abuse. Upon learning this, I understood why my parents did not allow me to have friends or visit relatives. They were protecting themselves and trying to prevent losing me like they had lost my sister.

Being a child with no friends means finding unconventional ways to express your emotions, frustrations, and problems out. I talked a lot to my dog, and I wrote. God used that dog to provide love, companionship, and emotional support to a child on the brink of destruction. Writing was my release, my outlet. I know now that writing was a gift from God.

God used my writing to help me escape my father. God gave me the strength to bring my circumstances to light at fourteen. Today, He gives me the strength to share this with you.



## THE PROCESS

There was a process that led me from being a child writing stories in my bedroom that no one would ever read, to applying to be considered for a Master's in Creative Writing from a prestigious University such as Liberty.

I started my process as that little girl alone in her bedroom. I was rescued from my father's abuse, but I took a detour and began to abuse myself. I did not like who I was; I had a heart filled with shame, and I did everything possible to destroy myself. I tried drugs, I rebelled, I got married and divorced, and I had a son who died as an infant. When my son died, I started to wake up to the fact that I had two daughters who needed me, and my life was headed nowhere. I cleaned myself up a little, met a great man, got married, and worked to raise my daughters so they felt loved and wanted.

An important part of the process that led me to write was a voracious reading appetite. I was alone most of the time as a child and had no friends, so I found my friends in books and animals. I found an escape that took me all over the world and beyond. I read anything and everything, from the back of the cereal box on the kitchen table to masterpieces by John Steinbeck like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony*, and my favorite Steinbeck, his collection of short stories in *The Long Valley*. I read horror stories by Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and my favorite Edgar Allen Poe.

The true process that led me to writing and wanting to write things other people could read occurred in 2017 when my youngest granddaughter led me to a Baptist church in our neighborhood. I went to church with my granddaughter, and as a result, I found a church home, a pastor and mentor, and the biggest gift I had ever received I found God. I love the saying, "I

didn't find God, He wasn't lost, He found me." This is true. I went to church looking for something, and God was waiting for me to tell Him that I was looking.

I did not graduate high school. I had been going through a rebellious period at that time. I got my GED after meeting my current husband. I had always excelled at my studies and, at one time, had dreamt of being an English teacher. My husband fell and broke his neck in 2016. He had always been the primary breadwinner. But he could no longer do the physical construction work. I have written freelance articles as a ghostwriter online for about eight years. I started writing more to earn enough money to pay our bills. My pastor encouraged me to apply to Liberty for my Associate Degree in Creative Writing.

Going to college had once been my dream. However, by the time I started, I was fifty-eight. I had raised two daughters and was the proud grandmother of six beautiful grandchildren. I had helped my husband run a construction business, worked many jobs, and worn many hats. I was scared that my age would hinder me or that I was deluding myself, believing I could accomplish a lofty goal like earning a degree. I soon discovered that God can use you at any age, and if you are receptive and willing to try, you can accomplish far more than you think you can.

I completed the requirements and earned my associate's degree. I realized that having a bachelor's degree would improve my chances of being hired and earning enough money to sustain my household. I applied, and to my surprise, I was accepted. While studying for my degree, I learned that my love of writing was still alive. I also learned that I wanted to write. I did not want to write product descriptions or business promotional articles, I wanted to write the stories that were alive in my head and my heart. I wanted to be a creative writer. I wanted to write novels and short stories.

I prayed long and hard about applying for the Master's program. I needed God to show me how and whether this program was His plan. My answer came a few days after I sent in my writing sample and application for the program. I was accepted, and I received funding that would allow me to embark on this journey. I knew I was experiencing a gift from God, a sign that God wanted me to move forward and use my talents.

I plunged into my studies and was astonished at what I could learn. I thought I detested nonfiction until the day a professor assigned me the task of writing *My Faith Journey*. My real love, and real strength, lay not in writing true stories but in writing fictional stories that held the truth inside them. I had learned that for me to be forgiven I had to learn to forgive. I had to forgive my father for his actions. I also learned that when people read something, whether it is true or fiction, they form opinions about the people and situations they are reading about. If I wrote stories about what I had seen or experienced in my life, then I would be making people form opinions, and those opinions might be negative. I knew that God was telling me that writing fiction was the way to share the truth behind a false front so that I did not hurt the reputation of anyone, living or dead.

After realizing that, I embraced works of fiction and autofiction. I see fiction as entertaining, enlightening, and able to teach us lessons about ourselves and other cultures, races, and thought processes. Fiction is the tool that I can use to make the world a better place. Autofiction is a narrative that draws its source material from real life. My work included with this thesis is reminiscent of a memoir; it has the details of autofiction because it is drawn from real life, yet it is fiction because there are things that have been changed. To coin a tired old phrase, "It is based on a true story."

## The Vision

My vision for my work is both lofty and simple. I want my work to give someone the ability to understand others better and to be able to have empathy for other people. I want to tell a story that people will learn something from without feeling threatened or forced. To me, autofiction can be compared to an apple pie made of zucchini. The pie tastes as good as the apple pie does, however the zucchini pie has useful nutrients hidden inside it. The person eating the pie does not realize they are eating something healthy. Autofiction frees the author to tell the story and save their dignity. By removing the pressure and telling the story in a non-threatening way, the author provides the reader with knowledge; and a glimpse into a world or situation they might never have seen without that story.

My vision is to deliver truth and thought and provoke the reader to think and learn. When a reader has closed the book on one of my stories it is my vision that they will take a small part of that story with them. They will have fuel for thought and those thoughts will lead them to learn more about the people, places, and situations in the book. I want to provide comfort and joy to readers.

The famous American author, Stephen King points out, “Writers are uniquely positioned to leave a lasting impact on people’s lives. Writers combine experience with empathy and imagination to build worlds people can get lost in” (King et al) My vision for my work echoes Mr. King’s statement “In the end, it’s about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well” (King et al).

## Literary Context

*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* is a unique work that draws from autofiction, memoir, nonfiction, and fiction. It is a masterful blend of the literary context found in these genres. Literary context is the information provided to the reader to help them understand the narrative. No matter what genre you write in, there are literary guidelines that establish the work.

*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* upholds the literary context of autofiction. This genre blurs the line between autobiography and fiction by detailing what the author did to stop the abuse she was suffering. In autofiction, the story should relate to things that the author did instead of just what happened to them (“10-new-definitions-of-autofiction.”)

*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* upholds the literary context of a memoir because it recounts something terrible that was done to the author. The word memoir is derived from the French word *mémoire*. *Mémoire* means memory or to remember. A memoir is a memory. A memoir is formed from one event occurring in the author’s life. Sometimes, an author writes several memoirs covering the same event.

*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* upholds the literary context of nonfiction because it recounts truthful events. The context of nonfiction supports the facts. A nonfiction piece should revolve around facts. The timeline and events must match. *Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* is told from facts, however the timeline of events, and names of some characters have been changed to protect the innocent and give the author freedom to create.

*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* upholds the literary context of fiction because the names of places and people have been changed to protect the innocent. It also mirrors fiction because the sequence of events and timeline are blurred.

This work upholds a literary context that supports multiple genres and creates a new work with an innovative literary context. The author reaches out of the box to develop something new, and fresh for the literary world to scrutinize and categorize.

### The Christian Scholar

As a Christian scholar, this collection is significant because it represents a transformation journey. God, in His infinite wisdom, could not remove the free will from my father, who was causing me pain. However, God did take something terrible and used it to create something I believe will be beautiful. He took my pain and experiences, combined them with a desire to write, and create a literary work that He can use. *Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* is a testament to the power of faith, grace, and forgiveness.

There was a time in my life when I did not know God. My Father, who was my tormentor, was also a pastor. I saw my Father use the church to hide from the law. When he got in real trouble we began to go to church again. However, the church is supposed to be a place where you feel safe, and for me, the church was nothing more than a false front people used to disguise their wrongdoings. I believe many others have felt this way too, and God has given me the ability to write so I can show others that God is present in our lives, even when our lives are imperfect. God is there and He is ready to make things better for us by turning the bad we endure into the greatest blessings we will ever receive.

*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles* is not just a literary work. It is a beacon of hope. As a Christian scholar, it is an opportunity to use the gifts I have been given and the love God has bestowed upon me to profoundly impact someone, else's opinion, life, or ideas. I trust Him to

fulfill all His promises, and He will provide me with everything I need. I cannot ask for anything more than that.

## Critical Research

## Is the Growing Popularity of Autofiction a Reflection on Society?

Literary analysts and publishers are observing a stimulating resurgence in the popularity of autofiction books. Autofiction, a genre that intricately weaves the author's real-life facts with elements of fiction, presents a unique intellectual challenge for the reader. The task of deciphering the truth from the fiction in autofiction stimulates intellectual curiosity and engagement. The growing popularity of autofiction blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction while stimulating critical debates about truth in storytelling.

Boundaries established in fiction that separate the author and narrator are thrown aside when autofiction is written. The author and one of the characters share the same name. This genre reveals truth and, at the same time, creates new worlds and concepts. In addition to *Eurydice in the Underworld* by Kathy Acker, other notable works of autofiction include Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* and Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* These works use the freedom of autofiction to reveal personal experiences and create narratives that blur the lines between truth and fiction. In *Eurydice in the Underworld* author Kathy Acker uses the freedom of autofiction to reveal many of the experiences she dealt with while dealing with breast cancer. In the story, Miss Acker writes about death, illness, and human emotions of people dealing with this condition. She tells the reader about facing the scars where her breasts once were. She touches on the pain she felt when her partner betrayed her and how she blamed the scars for the betrayal. She hypothesizes the following: "And so it is love that brings us, to what cannot be born, to ourselves, and so we must change, must descend, guided by love, into the unknown" (Acker). This autofiction gives the reader the facts they crave while merging the narrator and



herself. The reader can relate to the pain and suffering Miss Acker experienced, while the fictional elements soften the brutal truth.

The differences between autofiction and a fictional novel are defined by the elements of storytelling used to create these writing styles. Autofiction, in particular, is a genre that intimately connects the author's personal experiences or knowledge with the narrative. Fiction, while it can be based on a real-life experience, is primarily the product of the author's imagination. In fiction, anything can happen: dogs can talk, monkeys can drive cars, and man can live on Mars or any other planet. In autofiction, the author must keep the events that occur to things that are possible and might have happened.

The principles of fiction do not steadfastly apply to the genre of autofiction. Fiction is either plot-oriented or character-oriented. Autofiction is event-oriented. Autofiction revolves around what the character did when the event occurred. The event is the catalyst that propels the story and makes the reader continue reading. The temporal agenda of fiction applies to autofiction because all stories must start in one place and end in one place. However, autofiction is not fiction.

The discourse surrounding the distinctions between autofiction and autobiography traces back to the seminal work of Serge Doubrovsky, who first articulated his perspectives on the matter in his novel *Fils*. This debate has continued to evolve, with scholars like Professor Karen Ferreira-Meyers offering their interpretations of Doubrovsky's definition:

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; autofiction, if you will, for having entrusted the language of an adventure to the

adventure of language in liberty, outside of the wisdom of syntax of the novel, traditional or new, interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say music. (Ferreria-Meyers)

While Doubrovsky's explanation of what he thought autofiction was is one of the most quoted definitions, other authors and literary researchers have put different spins on the meaning and purpose of this writing style, or dare we say, "genre of literature." For instance, some argue that autofiction is a form of self-reflexive narrative, while others see it as a way to blur the lines between fact and fiction in storytelling.

Professor Max Saunders points another way to define autofiction as follows:

While initially associated with postmodernist French novelists such as Doubrovsky himself, Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Hervé Guibert, Marie Darrieussecq, or Catherine Millet, it has come to acquire a broader use to describe various combinations of the autobiographical and the fictional. (Saunders)

Professor Saunders brings to our attention that one definition of autofiction needs to be revised. Autofiction does not hold to one style or a particular set of writing protocols.

Professor Saunders also reveals that in 1977, Serge Doubrovsky introduced autofiction to the literary vocabulary. However, that type of writing had been practiced for decades before his book *Fils* was published. Looking back into the mid-to-late 1960s, it is evident that autofiction was alive and flourishing.

Autofiction, a sub-genre that has evolved over the decades, holds significant academic value. It provides authors with a unique platform to examine and heal from the tragic events they have survived, evoking a sense of empathy in the audience. Many authors choose to write

multiple works of autofiction, each exploring the same traumatic period. Professor Hywell Dix suggests that autofiction is a form of confession or a tool for authors to use when delving deeper into their trauma. As Professor Dix eloquently states:

Because writers of autofiction often frame their work either as a form of confessional writing or as writing produced in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, they have typically taken a serial approach to life writing, in some cases, this entails splitting aspects of their lives across separate published works, while others return several times to a single experience in various written texts as part of the process of repetition and working through that marks the aftermath of trauma. (Dix)

Professor Dix makes an excellent point about autofiction being a tool that traumatized people can use to speak their pain out loud and begin the process of recovery. Autofiction allows the author to be the narrator or main character in the story or to be just a character in a story that is based on their story. One factor that makes autofiction popular is that most of the stories focus on trauma or pain the author experienced. This process of externalizing one's trauma using the medium of fiction can be cathartic, providing a safe space for the author to explore and process their experiences. Readers can gain insight into how to survive or recover from the trauma they have experienced by learning what the author did to survive and get past their experiences.

The increasing popularity of autofiction also stems from the fact that female writers often utilize autofiction because the nonfiction works of female writers in the past were not given the same consideration as nonfiction books written by men. In her article, *Autofiction: Rightly Shaped for Woman's Use* published in *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, Natalie Villacorta, author and professor at Agnes Scott College, points out:

The devaluing of women's nonfiction helps to explain the current trend of autofiction, as seen in recent works like *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti, *Sight* by Jesse Greengrass, *Asymmetry* by Lisa Halliday; *Kudos* by Rachel Cusk, and *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez, which won the 2018 National Book Award. These are the kinds of novels that are distinctly un-novelistic, featuring protagonists who share many biographical details (and sometimes names) with the authors, and substituting the messiness of experience for conventional plots. These novels often self-consciously straddle the border between nonfiction and fiction and complicate our ideas about the relationship between form, content, and writer.

(Villacorta)

Miss Villacorta makes some astute observations about autofiction and how female authors are using it. She surmises that:

In autofiction, women writers can do what they can do in a lyric essay – write through their bodies, move by association, embrace gaps, take detours, include the voices of others and other genres, and write intimately and lyrically – but thanks to the label of fiction and narrative, this form of writing can find a larger audience. Autofiction becomes the form that results when fiction writers recognize that life is complex and full of gaps and that objectivity is a myth.

(Villacorta)

*Motherhood* by Sheila Heti is a work that vividly demonstrates how autofiction can be used to write about the human body, physical limitations, and emotional baggage. The book, written partially in the style of a lyric essay and partially in the genre of autofiction, focuses on one woman and her struggle with deciding whether to have a baby. Heti's narrative, leaping from

subject to subject, uses her life and trials to base her ideas about motherhood, pregnancy, the female reproductive system, and the stigma associated with reproduction. By using real experiences, autofiction creates a story and journal of information that others can use to navigate similar situations, fostering a sense of connection and understanding.

Survivors of trauma like child sexual abuse often carry a sense of guilt over what happened to them. These victims feel like they did something that caused them to be abused. However, the act of writing, whether it is a memoir or autofiction, can be a therapeutic tool for these individuals. Writing a memoir requires an author to give all the facts associated with the traumatic experience. It has been said that a memoir is a detailed account of something bad that happened to you. Writing autofiction lets the author choose what they feel comfortable revealing and makes enough changes in their story that they do not feel guilt and shame. In her article *Truth in Fiction's Clothing: The Subtle Distinctions Between Memoir & Autofiction*, David Griffith Brown quotes Bouraoui as having said:

Autofiction doesn't arise from the urge to invent, to create a fictional other to tell a tale according to the rules of a particular form... It may not be the absolute truth the author is telling, but it is her truth as she lived and experienced it. (Brown)

Not all the reasons for the increased popularity of autofiction are connected to good things that benefit the author or reader. Today, we live in a society that acts more like toddlers than adults. A toddler feels like the world revolves around them. They do not see how their actions create consequences for others because a toddler lives in a world where "me" is the center character, the most important person, and they focus their time and energy on their wants and desires.

Author Gavin Andrew Thomson introduces a compelling new perspective, the notion of “everything is about me.” Thomson posits that “Readers are increasingly drawn to and find resonance in, a narrator who mirrors the author, rather than one who does not. This contemporary concept of relatability is now synonymous with readability” (Thomson). Thomson’s keen observation suggests that readers are seeking a personal connection with the characters and narratives they encounter. He further speculates:

If the auto fictional novel does something today that other fictional forms do not, it’s that it encourages a special sort of what Shields calls “reader/viewer participation” – just not in the way he envisions. A contemporary auto fictional novel compels readers to search for themselves in its author in such a way that other novels do not. (Thomson)

The expectations of the readers of autofiction have changed. The when, where, and how readers acquire their reading material and information have changed. Technology has given most people internet access that connects them to a vast source of information that they never had before. Technology has also introduced the world of social media and all the good and bad things that go with that world. Questions spring up about the way social media is influencing readers and the genre of reading material that readers are trending toward. However, some argue that social media influencers, advertisers, and business connections. Using their personal agendas are pushing people toward more autofiction. Is social media responsible for the increased popularity of autofiction?

Everyone with an account can write about their lives, interests, dislikes, and opinions on social media websites. Account holders like to read posts made by other people because they like to see how other people live, and deal with their day-to-day lives. This interest in how other

people live, cope, and manage their lives is a reason for the growing popularity of autofiction. According to statistics gathered by the University of Maine in 2023:

There were approximately 408 billion social media users worldwide. That number represents 59.9% of the population of the world. There are approximately 420,000 new social media users added daily. Most people have multiple social media accounts, and spend an average of two hours and twenty-four minutes each day on their social media pages. Collectively, the people of the world spend 11.5 billion hours on social media platforms each day. (University of Maine)

Social media's popularity is not just a trend, it's a gateway to a world of curiosity and interest. For instance, social media users often find themselves drawn to autofiction, a genre that offers a glimpse into the lives of average people. This intrigue fuels their desire to learn more details about these lives. Sian Campbell's extensive study on the relationship between social media, autofiction, and digital media further illuminates this fascinating dynamic. Miss Campbell's findings are compelling:

While humans have always recorded themselves throughout history, with the rise of new technologies the instinct to record self is increasingly becoming an automatic one; an instinct we can tie to what media theorist Nick Couldry terms as *presencing*: an emerging requirement in everyday life to have a public presence beyond one's bodily presence, to construct an objectification of oneself." We are required to participate in *presencing* by opting in to new media: it is now uncommon – even unfavorable – for someone not to engage in any forms of social media or self-monitoring. (Campbell)

While people are taking part in the sharing of their lives on social media, they are also participating in the creation of autofiction. On social media, people invent themselves in a way that they find pleasing. Instead of telling everything about themselves with no filters or curtains to hide behind the posts created on social media sites accentuate the things that the author finds positive about their lives, and often omits the negative aspects. These social media self-revelations also include fictional elements, or the “stretching of the truth” by the author to make their life seem more interesting and to stop people from judging them harshly on the facts.

While autofiction is primarily written in a first-person narrative with the narrator sharing a name with the author, this element of autofiction is not set in stone. In her book *In the Dream House*, author Carmen Machado writes in a second-person narrative. The author calls herself “you” in the book. Miss Machado also never names her abuser in the book. She calls the abuser, the woman in the dream house. The book is raw and filled with emotion. The author details the mental and physical abuse she suffered at the hands of the woman in the dream house. The story centers around the experiences of Machado and her partner while she attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in pursuit of her MFA. Miss Machado creates a powerful message about victims and abusers. She points out the following: “The most dangerous monsters are the ones we love, and we all have the capacity to be both victim and survivor.” (Machado)

The growth in the popularity of autofiction is related to the growth of social media users. As social media becomes more popular the need, desire, or urge to document our lives, every step, breath, joy, pain, and experience. The public has become infatuated with self, and when they read autofiction, they connect to the story and the event the author experienced, and they do not mind the small details that are blurred or embellished. We ask if the growing popularity of autofiction is a good reflection on society, however, we might be asking if the changes in society are the cause



for the growth in autofiction. Are people starting to devalue facts and truth in favor of entertainment and self-embellishment?

In autofiction, the author is relatable to the social media users, when one user reads a book and starts a discussion about the book on their private social media pages then all of the people who follow their accounts develop an interest in the book. A social media influencer, (someone with a large number of followers on their social media accounts), has the power to make a book an instant success.

Autofiction does not show a poor reflection of society or create a good reflection of society. Autofiction is a literary tool that makes the average person's story important and makes people want to hear what the author has to say. Dr. Zach Pearl proclaims that:

Autofiction is a genre that purposely occupies the liminal space between memoir and fiction and has only recently gained traction amongst literary and media scholars in North America. The performative gesture of the author-character figure readily employed in autofiction is also playing out in the quotidian activities of networked communication, particularly on social media, which encourage a highly curatorial ethos of self-representation. (Pearl)

Technology has introduced social media and made it accessible to almost all people. The need to tell our stories and relate to others has created the autobiography, the memoir, and autofiction. People have an inherent need to share their stories and experiences, and autofiction, along with social media participation, allows connection and understanding to emerge.

Is the growing popularity of autofiction a reflection of society and the things that motivate people today? Autofiction is immersed in truth and fact blended with elements of

fiction, creating a narrative that the author feels represents the struggles they have had in life. The popularity of autofiction has increased because these works allow the reader to discover ways to survive or recover from a particular type of trauma.

Each person suffers trauma and pain research suggests that reading literary fiction is an effective way to enhance the brain's ability to keep an open mind while processing information, a necessary skill for effective decision-making. (Seifert)

Autofiction is gaining popularity because it resonates with the average person's desire to connect with stories they perceive as truth. The internet, while providing anonymity, has also led to a shift from close-knit family groups and communications. We find ourselves more often looking at digital screens than engaging face-to-face. This social trend has given rise to a sense of loneliness as we are not exposed to fewer individuals learning coping skills.

Is the growing popularity of autofiction a reflection on society? The answer is yes. The growing popularity of autofiction is not just a trend but a positive reflection on society. This genre, which tells stories of real-life experiences and triumphs over adversity, has the power to transform lives. As long as people are interested in reading, they are not just improving their own lives but also enriching the lives of those around them. Autofiction, with its blend of truth and creativity, offers a wealth of inspirational, educational, emotionally engaging, and entertaining reading material.

Annotated Bibliography

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Kathy Acker is a unique artist. She was raised in New York, and at eighteen, she left home and began working as a stripper. Her life experiences give her a wealth of ideas and inspirations to write about. She prefers to be referred to as Acker.

In this book, Miss Acker brings out the blurring qualities of autofiction. She examines her pain and offers it to the reader as a fictional story.

Brown, David Griffith. Truth in Fiction's Clothing: The Subtle Distinctions Between Memoir & Autofiction. *The Darling Axe*. 22 Mar. 2024. <https://darlingaxe.com/blogs/news/memoir-vs-autofiction>

Mr. Brown is an award-winning author of short fiction. He has a B.A. in anthropology and an MFA in creative writing. He founded [darlingaxe.com](https://darlingaxe.com) in 2018, where he collaborates with a collective of industry experts across all genres to advise and guide new authors.

In this article, Mr. Brown looks closely at the meaning of autofiction and how it applies to the works declared auto fictional.

Campbell, S. P. "On the Record: Time and The Self as Data in Contemporary Autofiction." *M/C Journal*, vol. 22, no. 6, Dec. 2019, doi:10.5204/mci.1604

Miss Sian Petronella Campbell holds an M.A. in Writing and Literature from Deakin University. She also holds a BFA in Creative and Professional Writing from QUT. Sian Campbell is a PhD candidate at TMIT. Her research is focused on the intersection between feminism and current women's nonfiction.

In *On the Record: Time and The Self as Data in Contemporary Autofiction* Miss Campbell introduces the idea that autofiction can be expanded to include modern forms of digital media such as social media. She explains that "new media and technologies have emerged to assist in the process of self-formation through the collection and publication of data."

The analysis of social media trends and autofiction in this article were valuable sources of information for my paper.

Dix, H. "Autofiction." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. March 23, 2022. Oxford University Press. Accessed 6 May 2024. <https://oxfordre.com/literature/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1339;jsessionid=905642871583A963A40D9BCD3781CC36?rskey=cuWSU5&result=1>

Professor Hywel Rowland Dix is the author of *Autofiction and Cultural Memory*. He is also the Principal Lecturer in English and Communication at Bournemouth University, U.K.

Professor Dix's paper on autofiction and writing after trauma provides powerful stories and theories that are highly relevant to my critical research. His insights on how autofiction can be used to help trauma survivors deal with their past and heal from their pain are particularly enlightening.

Ferguson, Samuel D. "Autofiction: Writing Lives from Part V of the Fifth Republic: From de Gaulle to the Internet Age." *Cambridge University Press*. 04 Feb. 2021.

The Reverend Dr. Samuel Ferguson has a PhD from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and an MPhil from Cambridge University. He is the reverend of The Falls Church Anglican in metro Washington, D.C. Reverend Dr. Ferguson is also the author of two books, *Does God Care about Gender Identity?* and *The Spirit and Relational Anthropology in Paul*.

In his article published by the Cambridge Press Rev. Dr. Ferguson looks at the beginnings of autofiction and the changes that have developed in the genre over the years. The information in this article is highly relevant to my critical research paper because it follows autofiction from the early 1950s-60s to the moment Serge Doubrovsky invented the term in 1977.

Ferreira-Meyers, Karen. "Autobiography and Autofiction: No Need to Fight for a Place in the Limelight, there is Space Enough for Both of These Concepts." *Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction*. 2015.

<https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:856577/FULLTEXT02.pdf#page=204>

Professor Karen Ferreira-Meyers is an Associate Professor and Coordinator of Linguistics and Modern Languages at the University of Eswatini. She does research on the subjects of autofiction and autobiography. Her research and professorship make her an authority on the subject of autofiction like my creative writing selection, "*Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles*."

In this essay, the various definitions used to describe and explain autofiction are examined. The author proposed to demonstrate the definitions and the historical evolution of autofiction. I found the definitions and explanations of how autofiction evolved to be important to my critical research covering the growing popularity of autofiction.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. New York, New York, Picador, 2019.

*Motherhood* is one of the eleven books by this Canadian author. Miss Heti was born on December 25, 1976. She holds degrees from the University of Toronto, North Toronto Collegiate Institute, and the National Theater School of Canada. Her ability to be simple, open, and real with her writing makes her works unique, inspiring, and poignant.

The work of Sheila Heti is relevant to my work because she uses untraditional forms and formats to create her books. She allows lyric essay styles, fiction, and nonfiction to intermingle and develop into something new, tantalizing, and provocative. I wish to one day be able to write like Sheila Heti.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the Dream House*. Grawold Press, 5 Nov. 2019.

Carmen Maria Machado is an author who writes fiction and poetry. *In the Dream House* qualifies as autofiction because Miss Machado uses elements of fiction to create this tell-all book. She tells true facts in the book but she disguises her name and the name of her abuser.

I connected with Miss Machado and her idea of telling the story but not pointing a finger at the individual who hurt her.

Pearl, Zach. "Ghost Writing the Self: Autofiction, Fictocriticism, and Social Media. *ESC: English Studies in Canada, Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English* vol. 45, Issue 1-2, March/June 2019. Pp. 161-187. *Project Muse*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2019.0004>.

Dr. Zach Pearl is a professor of Communications at Mount Royal University. Dr. Pearl has a PhD in English with a focus on media theory and literary theory from the University of Waterloo, He holds a BFA with honors in Graphic Design & Illustration from the Minneapolis College of Art & Design.

Dr. Pearl examines how social media users engage in a heavily mediated form of self-authorship, the relationship that self-authorship has with autofiction, and the popularity of autofiction. The main focus of the paper centers on fictocriticism, which, according to Dr. Pearl, is a style of writing closely related to autofiction.

Saunders, Max. "Autofiction, Autobiografiction, Auto fabrication, and Heteronomy: Differentiating Versions of the Autobiographical." *Biography*, vol. 43, no.4, 2020, pp. 763-780. *ProQuest*, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/autofiction-autobiografiction-autofabrication/docview/2574466197/se-2>.

Professor Max Saunders is the Interdisciplinary Professor of Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham. He is the author of *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life* (Oxford UP, 1996) and *Self Impression, Life-Writing, Autobiografiction*, and the

Forms of Modern Literature (Oxford UP, 2020). He received the Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship to research Imagined Futures (Oxford UP, 2019).

In this paper, Professor Saunders examines autofiction and the hybrid forms of this writing style. He looks at different definitions of life-writing that can be compared to, or closely related to, autofiction. He reasons that autofiction is a synonym for some form of autobiographical novel. He points out that autofiction is designed by combining various combinations of fiction and autobiography.

The information about the different hybrid forms of autofiction and how autofiction has been used through the ages helped me to see the distinction between a memoir of pure fact and my hybrid memoirs in *Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles*.

“10 New Definitions of Autofiction.” *Literary Hub*. 21, Oct. 2021, lithhub.com/10-new-definitions-of-autofiction/.

This article is written by Walker Capland. Mrs. Capland is a writer, performer, copywriter, professor, and comedian who lives in Seattle. She specializes in the development of new works. Her opinions and ideas concerning autofiction mirror my own. She has been published in Lit Hub, Joyland, and similar publications. She has worked as a professor of Ellipsis Writing and was recognized by YoungArts as an outstanding professor.

I find her definitions of autofiction to be enlightening and refreshing. Society is demanding fresh new works and fresh new ideas. These ideas come about when we embrace new work by artists such as Walker Capland.

Thomson, Gavin. “More Life: On Contemporary Autofiction and the Scourge of Relatability.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Aug. 2018. Sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2018/08/more-life-on-contemporary-autofiction-and-the-scourge-of-relatability

Gavin Andrew Thomson is an author of both fiction and nonfiction. He has been a frequent contributor to the Michigan Quarterly Review, touching on topics of literature and elements of literature.

I found this article to be relevant to my research concerning the growing popularity of autofiction. Mr. Thomson introduces the idea that readers like autofiction more because they can relate the details of the story to the author of the book. This relatability causes the reader to feel more connected to the author.

University of Maine. “Social Media Statistics Details – Undiscovered Maine-University of Maine.” *Undiscovered Maine*, 2023, <https://umaine.edu/undiscoveredmaine/small-business/resources/marketing-for-small-business/social-media-tools/social-media-statistics->

[details/#:~:text=There%20are%204.8%20billion%20social,increase%20year%2Dover%2Dyear.](#)

The statistics in this report were gathered by students and faculty of the University of Maine. The report contents are relevant to my critical research topic. I trust the source.

Villacorta, Natalie. "Autofiction: Rightly Shaped for Woman's Use" (6.1)." ASSAY: A JOURNAL of NONFICTION STUDIES, <https://www.assayjournal.com/natalie-villacorta-autofiction-rightly-shaped-for-womanrsquos-use-61.html>.

Natalie Villacorta is a published author of nonfiction books. She holds a B.S. from Brown University, an MFA from Oregon State University, and a PhD from the University of Cincinnati. She teaches both creative nonfiction and fiction writing at Agnes Scott College.

Miss Villacorta's knowledge, experience, and interest in autofiction give her opinions value. Her essay publications that have been published in Joyland, Hobart, The Offing, DIAGRAM, and The Cincinnati Review demonstrate her knowledge and skill as an author and educator.

Her work and views on autofiction and women authors through the ages make her a relevant source for my thesis project.

Worthington, Marjorie. "*The Story of 'Me': Contemporary American Autofiction*." University of Nebraska Press. 2018. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7fmfvx>. Accessed 7 May 2024.

Marjorie Muir Worthington is an author who holds a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth, a master's from the University of Missouri, and a PhD from Indiana University. Dr. Worthington teaches American literature and focuses her research on contemporary, experimental fiction. Dr. Worthington has been published in prestigious journals such as LIT: Literature, Critique, and Twentieth-Century Literature Studies in the Novel. She is the author of the autofiction: *The Story of 'Me': Contemporary American Autofiction*, published in 2018 by The University of Nebraska Press.

This book traces autofiction through case studies and enlightens readers on many of the issues postwar American authors faced. Dr. Worthington takes the reader on a journey through autofiction from the beginning in French literary text, through American literature moments including modernism, New Criticism, and New Journalism. I found the timeline created for works of autofiction interesting and relevant to my critical research.



Living a Life Behind Filters and Smiles

By

Lisa Bohler

### Disclaimer

This book contains mature subject matter and possible explicit language as well as references to sexually explicit occurrences. It is advisable for individuals who may be sensitive to these contents to proceed with caution. The book may not be appropriate for children under the age of fifteen.

This is a work based on true events however; the names, locations, and identifying characteristics of some characters have been changed.

### Introduction

This work of autofiction reflects who I once was, some of the reasons I was that person, and who I became. God brought me through this life and out of this life. The person who sat on the witness stand at my father's trial is not the same person who was abused. The person who wrote this book is not the same person who was abused. Forgiveness comes through your willingness to act like Jesus and show the grace that God shows you.

While you read this story, I pray that you do not judge. Let my story lead you out of darkness to a place where forgiveness is possible. If I can forgive then I know the power to forgive is in you.

## Chapter 1

I woke up this morning with a feeling of dread. My stomach feels like I have eaten a rock. I knew that today would eventually have to be faced, but even after three years, I am not prepared to face it! My mind races with the thought. Had it been three years since I had the courage to tell someone about what I called a life? How could three years go by so quickly?

I stand up and turn back to straighten my bed. I am living in my sister Carol's camper trailer. It is a small trailer designed to fit in the bed of a pickup truck. Carol and Leon did not have an extra room in their house for me to use, so they allowed me to stay in the trailer. My sister Freida and her husband Donny live on the same property, but like Carol and Leon, their home is just big enough for their families. The trailer is not perfect, but I enjoy having the privacy it offers me. I also like that it allows me to come and go without everyone in the house knowing about it.

I moved in with my sister Freida three years ago. I sit with my cup of coffee and let that memory fill my thoughts. I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I left my parent's home and moved to the house of my older sister, Freida. Freida had lived with our older sister Carol for most of my life.

1965 – 1966

My mind drifts back to when my sister Freida lived in my parent's house. I recall:

*I remember living in a red house. Our yard was enormous. In my mind, I do not recall any houses being very close. In the yard, there were big trees and a long dirt driveway. I remember sitting on a porch swing with my mother at this house. The swing was not actually on the porch. It was hanging from a big limb in a shade tree beside the house. Mom and I sat there*

*often, and on one particular day, as we sat swinging back and forth, we saw a king snake chase down another snake and eat it!*

*When the king snake came out of the grass, I was scared. I was little, maybe four or five years old, but I knew enough to be afraid of huge, long snakes. I wiggled in the swing beside Mom. I was going to stand up and make sure the snake could not reach my feet, but Mother gently placed her hand on my leg and whispered. "Don't be scared. That is a good snake." In my little mind, I was trying to figure out how the words good and snake could be in the same sentence when we saw the other snake on the far edge of the driveway from where we were sitting. "See that brown snake with the pretty patterns on his back? That is a copperhead. It is a mean snake. If you get bitten by a copperhead, you will get very sick, and you could even die. God made Mr. King snake to keep the population of bad snakes low. Mr. King Snake will kill and eat the copperhead for his dinner." We sat silent as we watched the gruesome cat-and-mouse game in our yard. I was both repulsed and fascinated by what I was seeing. Later in life, I wished that God had made a Mr. King snake to take care of all pedophiles and sexual predators.*

*I remember that I shared a room with my sister Freida. Freida was six years older than me. Freida was about ten or eleven when we lived in that house. Our father came home a little later than usual on the afternoon of the great snake event I was so excited when he got there because he had Cokes. We did not get sodas to drink very often, and to get a bottle of Coke was a special treat. Freida and I were excited as Father took our bottles into the kitchen and used the church-key can opener to take the tops off. He took a drink out of my bottle of soda and handed me the bottle. Daddy took a drink out of Freida's bottle of soda, then he reached into the paper sack beside him and pulled out a small bottle of amber liquid. He slowly poured some of the liquid into Freida's bottle of coke. I watched my sister closely and tears flowed down her face.*

*“Please, don’t put that in my Coke.” My sister cried. My dad just ignored her and continued pouring the liquid into the bottle. Like all small kids, I wanted whatever my big sister was getting. Holding my Coke bottle up, I said, “You didn’t give me any.” Freida grabbed my arm and pulled me across the kitchen.*

*Thinking back, Freida looked pale. Kids notice these things less than adults, and hindsight is 20-20. “Get out of here, squirt! You don’t want that in your drink! It is medicine, and it doesn’t taste good. My sister hissed. It tastes like his breath smells!” She pushed me out of the room. I remember wondering why Freida had to take medicine, not understanding what was happening.*

*Our father sat in the kitchen with Freida and made her drink all of her soda. I watched her wrinkle her nose up and she gagged a few times. I was sure glad I did not have to take medicine like that, but after she drank her soda, Father told her to grab a wrap off the couch because he was taking her on a motorcycle ride! Well, being a child that made me jealous, but the look on Freida’s face told me she did not want to go on the ride.*

*I don’t remember how long Father and Freida were gone, but it was long enough that Mother had made me put on my sleeping clothes and had given me a sandwich for dinner. I lay in bed, alone and frightened of the dark room, and wished that Freida would get home soon.*

*When Freida came back, she was dirty, and crying. Ahe was not sobbing, but tears were rolling down her cheeks, and snot was coming out of her nose. She pushed me, and I moved over to the far side of the bed. Usually, Freida and I curled up close to each other but when she got into bed that night, she turned her back to me and curled up into a tight ball, hugging her knees to her chest. I lay beside her and listened to her cry. The sound of her crying haunts me to this*

*day. I will awaken in the middle of the night and I can hear the sound of her muffled cries. I wish I could have understood what had happened to her, what was happening to her, and what was about to happen to me.*

*A short time after the coke incident, strangers came to our house and they packed Freida's things. I was too young to understand who Child Protective Services were. I only understood that the lady had taken Freida away. I remember feeling very lonely, especially at night. I did not know where Freida had gone. I did not know why she went away. I thought she was being punished. I did not realize that the person being punished was me. CPS had rescued Freida, and taken her to live with our older sister Carol. She would never again have to endure the touching, kissing, or painful times when Father would climb on top of her and force himself inside. She was lucky, and CPS left me to learn all the pain that Freida knew.*

The sound of my alarm clock brought me out of the daydream I had slipped into. I reached over and turned the clock off. It was 6:30 a.m. and I had to shower, get dressed, and do the hardest thing I had ever done. Today, my father would stand trial for the abuse he put me through. Today I would sit before twelve strangers, a judge, and a courtroom full of lawyers. I would tell them every dirty, shameful detail of my life. Today, I would no longer hide behind filters that made my life appear normal. Today, I could not paste a smile on my face and pretend everything is okay. I swallowed the bile that was rising in my throat. The coffee I had drank was threatening to come up.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror when I was out of the shower. The face staring back at me was thin, my eyes were a dark shade of grey, indicating that something was wrong. When I feel good, my eyes are a beautiful blue, but when I feel bad or am stressed, that blue turns into a dark, cloudy grey. My appearance has changed drastically in the last three years. The chubby girl

with the dead eyes, had blossomed into a tall, thin, person who bore no resemblance to the dead-eyed girl.

A knock on the door brought me out of my daydream. “Lisa, are you up?” The voice on the other side of the door belonged to my sister Carol. “Yeah, hang on a minute and I’ll open the door. I just got out of the shower.” I was trying to get my yellow bathrobe over my head. Carol hollered back at me, “Don’t hurry. I am headed back to the house to get dressed. I just wanted to make sure that you were awake and getting ready. When you get dressed come to the house. Freida is already there having some coffee.” I responded, “Okay, I won’t be very long.”

I knew the trial would be an ordeal, but I had no idea it would be a three-ring circus. I finished dressing, and by some miracle, my sister Carol was almost ready when I got to her house. Inside, Freida sat at the bar that separates Carol’s living area from her kitchen area. When the door opens, she looks up from her coffee.

“Morning, sleepy head. You ready to get this over with?” Freida asks.

“I am as ready as I will ever be. Is Carol ready yet?” I sat on the barstool next to Freida.

“You know Carol. She is going to be thirty minutes late to her own funeral.” Freida starts to say something else but we hear Carol coming down the hall.

“For your information, I am almost ready, as soon as I put my shoes on. Why don’t the two of you go to the bathroom, and then get in the car. I am sure I left those shoes in the hall closet. I will be right with you.” Carol sounded bossy at times, but I realize now, that she had been playing the mother role for Freida and me since we were born.



In the car, Freida sat in front and I sat in the back. That was the riding configuration we used every time we went somewhere together. We had a long car ride ahead of us. At first the three of us talked, about the weather, how early it was, and nothing important. Freida was smoking one cigarette after another. I think she was lighting one cigarette off the butt of another. Carol had the AC blaring, and in all of the ashtrays in her car she kept cotton balls that were dipped in essential oils. The odor of the cigarette smoke and the peppermint oils was overpowering. I had to roll my window down and let fresh air rush across my face.

“Don’t do that Lisa! Your hair will be a mess when we get to the courthouse. Freida, take a break from the damn cigarettes, you are killing us.” Carol barked orders. I rolled up my window and Freida put out her cigarette. As I rode my mind drifted back to the day, I got enough nerve to tell Freida what was happening. I remember the following:

*One Friday evening, my father went on one of his drinking binges. He did not come home until the early morning hours and when he came home, he had two drunk friends with him. He came to my room and told me to get up and join the party. My heart sank. I knew what that meant. I went with him into the living room and the party was just like I thought it would be. The three men used me sexually. By the time they fell asleep, I felt degraded, humiliated, bruised, and disgusted with myself. When they fell asleep, I walked out the back door and down to my sister’s house. I must have looked like a mess. The minute my sister saw me, she understood. I did not have to say anything.*

*I do not know why I chose to tell that day. They say that you can put too much on a good mule. I suppose having the three men do the things they did to me was too much. I had enough and was ready for a new life. I know that it was the right time according to God’s plan.*

*My sister took me to the police station to make a statement. I remember the officer I spoke with had kind eyes and he did not push me. He let me talk, and he listened. When I was finished, he asked me to write down what I had just told him. It took a long time for me to do that. I was tired, my story was long, and I was hurting and scared.*

*The physical examination hurt because of what I had just endured. I gritted my teeth and somehow, I survived the testing. When we left the hospital, an officer escorted us back home. The officer hung around for a little while, and now I realize that they were arresting my father and his friends and they wanted to protect me. A father is someone who should love and cherish their child. A child should never need an armed officer, or anyone else, to protect them from their father.*

*I do know that any child who has to endure that kind of examination is being tortured. Children are not meant to be poked and prodded in that way.*

The car suddenly stopped causing me to lurch forward. I was not wearing a seatbelt. I grabbed the back of Freida's seat. I was happy to have the interruption to my thoughts.

"Damn, Carol. Do you want to give us all whiplash?" Freida took out another cigarette, but she did not light it.

"I can't help it. That light turned red!" Carol fiddled with her hair. "You okay back there Lisa?"

I let go of the seat I was clutching and scooted back in my seat. "Yeah, I'll survive. Are we already in Orange?" I looked out the window and realized we were on Green Avenue. I knew that the courthouse was also on Green Ave so it would only be a few minutes until we arrived.

“Yeah, you sure have been lost in thought. Do you want to talk about anything?” Carol was the calm sister. Freida was a hothead. I was a combination of both personalities.

“Naw. I’ve just been letting my mind drift. Are you guys ready for this?” I threw the question out, although I already knew the answer.

“Hell, yes. I have been waiting for this day all of my life.” Freida cracked her window and lit the cigarette she was holding.

“I am as ready as I ever will be. Since mother married Jimmy, my life has been turned upside down. I can’t wait to see him behind bars, and her sitting alone. They like to talk about God so much, well there is an old saying, ‘God’s gonna get you for that!’” It shocked me to hear Carol speak that way. Carol was always refined and proper, and hearing her spit out all of that made me realize the things she had been dealing with.

## Chapter Two

The sun was shining and although it was early in the morning the temperature was eighty and rapidly rising. The humidity was so high that it was hard to get a breath. Of course, part of my breathing difficulties was coming from the dread of what I was about to have to do. I listened to my two sisters bantering back and forth about the humidity and the heatwave we were having, but my thoughts were on the trial, and testifying about my life.

There is no way to prepare yourself for the scene I was about to witness. Most people think of family as a group of folks who love and support them no matter what. I had almost no contact with my family when I was growing up. I did not know my cousins, aunts, and uncles very well. I heard stories about them from my parents, and sometimes one of them would visit us

for a few days, but these people were actually strangers to me. I realize now that my parents were so afraid that I would tell the 'secret' that they cut themselves off from their family.

We were surprised to see people lining each side of the hall when we stepped out of the elevator. The District Attorney's office was at the far end. On each side of the hallway were wooden benches strategically placed between doorways. As I looked down the hall I saw people on both sides of the hall. Some women were sitting but the men were standing with their backs to the wall facing each other. It was like a tunnel of people.

I grabbed Carol's hand. "You hold your head up, plaster a smile on your face, and walk past them like they mean nothing to you." She whispered. I stepped forward and led our little group down the hall. The people did not say much, I could hear them whispering, and some cleared their throats, but I used the smile filter I had developed years before and walked to the doorway at the end of that hall like a beauty queen going to receive her crown.

"Look at this spectacle! I never expected all of them assholes to show up here. I suppose they are character witnesses for Uncle Jimmy!" Freida snapped.

The receptionist behind the desk looked up. "I am sorry you guys had to go through that. Mr. Murphy told me to seat you guys here in the office instead of making you go wait in the hallway. Make yourselves comfortable. There is fresh coffee if you would like some."

"Thank you, we are good right now." Carol was always the polite sister with good manners. Freida was the hothead who often had to apologize for not having good manners. I had not found my place in the group yet. I simply took things as they came and just ignored most people.

We had arrived early. The court proceedings were not scheduled to begin for another thirty minutes. I sat in a chair in the corner and let my head rest against the wall. I let my mind drift back and stories my father had told me about his family started to surface. My father had a lot of brothers and sisters, lots of cousins, aunts, and uncles. He had always been something of a troubled child.

My mind drifted back to a story I had heard about my father. As a child, he had no male role models to show him how to be a good man. His father died when he was young. His mother never remarried. Jimmy was the oldest boy. Therefore, he was responsible for supporting the family. My father once told me the following story:

*About 1941*

*“I done told you my father was not a hard-working family man hell-bent on providing food and shelter for his family. James came around the house every couple of months. He usually had no money and would lie around until everything mom had managed to save or put by was spent and eaten up. Uncle Elvin used to say my father came around and stayed just long enough to get Mom pregnant, and spend her money. We found out why he did this when I turned ten.*

*The year I turned ten, my father was killed. He was run over by a log truck. It was a sad day because my mom loved her husband, and she had always hoped that if she loved him enough, he would want to settle down and be the kind of husband she deserved. When he died, it broke Mom’s spirit. See, when Father died Mom went to file for the government check that kids of dead Fathers got. She knew the check would be low because James had worked very little. When Mom got to the government office, the lady told her that someone else had applied for his death benefits. Another woman who had five little kids. Yep, my father had two wives, and they*

*lived about 30 miles apart from each other. At that time the government decided to split the death benefits between the two women. My Mom could probably have fought that decision because she was married first and all, but she would have had to hire a lawyer. She did not have the money for a lawyer. So, she accepted the small amount the government said was hers and went on with her life and seven kids.*

*We lived in a small three-room shack just outside of town. There weren't any pretty kitchen cabinets like you see in kitchens today. There was an old wood stove someone had given us. She had some apple crates that she sat around the kitchen to make places to put the pots and stuff she had. You have heard of people not having a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of? We had some windows, they were holes cut in the sides of the house with wood shutters you could close, and we had a couple of piss pots. We kept them by the side of the beds, one in each sleeping room. It was my job each morning to take the piss pots, sorry, polite people say chamber pots, out and empty them.*

*When I was young, I didn't think much about being poor, or not having stuff. Back then, kids accepted whatever their lot in life was and they spent little time dwelling on what they might be missing. Most kids, who were poor, spent time working and trying to make sure they had a bed to sleep in and something to eat each day. Attitudes were different then.*

*We had just enough dishes for each of us to eat on, but if we had company, we had to wait until company ate, then we had to rinse a plate so we had one to eat on. Don't feel all sorry about that. In those days men always ate first, then the women ate, and lastly, the kids would get a plate. On the Sundays when my mom knew that her brothers were stopping by with their families, she would fry the chicken feet, gizzards, and back and have me hide them outside. When the company left, I would get them morsels out and we kids had something to eat for dinner. I*

*never quite understood why my uncles, who had way more than my mom did, would come over to our house for Sunday dinner. Heck, it seemed they should've been asking us to their place."*

Memories are strange. You do not know when they will come flooding into your mind. You can't pick and choose which ones you will have. At least, I can't pick and choose my memories. Some days the memories are happy ones. Some days the memories are bad ones.

I thought about the people standing outside that door in the hall. They were my father's kinfolk. I knew that his sister Yvonne was wealthy and that whenever he got in trouble with the law, she would bail him out. I had seen her sitting on one of the benches in the hallway. It made me kind of sad to know this. I felt like I had lost something.

"Ladies, would you step into my office for a few minutes?" Mr. Murphy spoke and drew me out of my memories. I looked up and saw him standing at his open office door. He did not have on a jacket, but he had on a nice shirt and was adjusting the tie around his neck.

"Good morning, Lisa. How are you feeling?" Mr. Murphy placed his hand on my shoulder as I walked past. I flinched. I have nothing against people, and most people do not mean to harm you with their touch, but with the life I led I developed an aversion to people touching me. I like my space. I do not hug, and I don't hold hands. Mr. Murphy pulled his hand back and had an apologetic look on his face. I made my way into the room and sat on the sofa along the wall.

"I know you guys have waited a long time for this day to get here. I thought that he would surely confess to what he did and try to plead out for a lighter sentence. I intend to do everything in my power to make him sorry that he brought this to court in front of a jury." Mr. Murphy was a fast talker.

“You guys will not be allowed in the courtroom during the proceedings. You are all named as witnesses and a witness cannot hear the testimony of other witnesses. With that crowd in the hall, I wish I could let you sit in my office, but you have to sit on the benches outside the courtroom to be called when it is your time to testify.”

“We have to sit in the hall with those people for the entire trial? You are asking an awful lot of us. Those people are our family, our kin!” Freida shifted as she spoke.

Mr. Murphy looked very serious. “I know they are, but we have to follow the rules and guidelines. I will put a couple of my office girls out in the hall with you. They will sit with you guys, and they can report any behavior that would allow us to ask that the people who came with you be removed. I wish I could do more.”

I cleared my throat. “It is okay, but about how long will this take?”

Mr. Murphy looked directly at me. “I thought picking the jury panel would take longer than it did, but we have our jury selected and we are ready to get down to business. However, this is going to be a long process. You can expect to be here every day for at least a week. I will present our case, call our witnesses, and then the defense attorney will make his case and present witnesses. After we are through with that part both attorneys get to make a short speech called a closing statement. The closing statement is just a refresher of everything we talked about because we want the jury to remember the points, we thought were important. The jury will go into a room and debate the evidence and decide if we have given them enough cause to find your father guilty. This is not going to happen fast.”

Mr. Murphy straightened his tie again and put on his jacket. We also stood up. A pretty lady in a bright blue dress came and escorted the three of us into the hallway. “If you ladies



smoke you will have to go outside, there is no smoking in the building. There is a refreshment cart on the first floor, and there is a soda machine beside the stairwell. It seems that most of your family has gone downstairs to smoke, so now would be a great time to use the restroom.” She had a beautiful smile, and I wondered if her joy was genuine, or was she hiding something behind her smile.

### Chapter Three

We found an empty bench right outside the courtroom. I do not know which of us was the most nervous. It was hard to tell about Carol. She was always quiet, and reserved, and she showed very little emotion. She sat on the bench and watched the people coming and going. The expression on her face did not change. From time to time, she would ask me if I was okay.

Freida went to smoke often, and when she was not smoking, she was pacing in front of the stairwell. You could tell that she was nervous. I sat on the end of the wooden bench and waited for it to be my time to go in the courtroom and tell my story. About thirty minutes after the trial got underway a lady walked up to me.

“Lisa?” The woman asked. I looked up and there stood my English teacher from junior high school. Miss Thomas was the first teacher that I felt comfortable talking to. I remembered that at one time, I had gotten so comfortable with her that I told her what was happening to me at home. The memories of those days flooded my mind:

*About 1973*

*“In junior high, I had an English teacher that I adored. Mrs. Thomas was a young teacher who made the class interesting and fun. She made a point of speaking to me each day*

*and in my mind that meant that she was my friend. I started to speak to her and I brought a couple of my composition books to her and let her read them. She was encouraging and she gave me some confidence.*

*One weekend, I was jumping off of our porch. The porch was not more than two feet off of the ground. On one jump I landed wrong and broke my foot. My parents thought I had sprained my foot.*

*On Monday when I went to school my foot was aching and I showed the physical education teacher. I did not mean for her to send me to the nurse or anything like that, I just did not want to have to play dodgeball. At the nurse's office, the nurse told me that she thought my foot was broken. The nurse called my mother and she took me to see the orthopedic doctor that had operated on her knee a few years earlier.*

*The doctor was tall and had red hair. I remember that he laughed a lot. His name was Dr. Cloud. I liked him a lot. He told me and my mother that I had done the right thing. Mother knew Dr. Cloud because he had operated on her knee when she had fallen down the riverbank and torn the cartilage in her knee. Dr. Cloud said that I had broken small bones on the side of my foot, and across the top of my foot. He recommended surgery and a walking cast that I would wear for six weeks.*

*I was in the hospital for two days. When I went home, I had to keep my foot elevated for another two days, and then I was allowed to return to school. I do not remember anyone signing my cast. I had English immediately after lunch Mrs. Thomas, my English teacher allowed me to come into her class and sit with my foot propped up during the lunch period. Every day she*

*bought me a soda from the vending machine and after the first few days, she started to bring sandwiches and share them with me. I started to trust the teacher and felt like I could talk to her.*

*During that year in school, we had to watch sex education films in health class. We learned about our menstrual periods, and we learned about pregnancy. I was terrified when I watched the film. The film made me realize that what my father was doing to me could result in a pregnancy. I had not begun to menstruate but I knew that in a short time my body would mature. The worry was agonizing. One day, I told Mrs. Thomas my concerns.*

*“Lisa, I don’t mean to pry, but have you been sexually active?” Mrs. Thomas looked so pretty with her long hair caught up at the nape of her neck. Her face and mannerisms were so welcoming, and I forgot that I was not supposed to reveal any of the things that happened in our home.*

*I sat there, at my desk and I looked down. I could not look Mrs. Thomas in the eye while I told her the things that were happening in my house. “Yes, ma’am. My father touches me on my private parts. I am really scared of getting pregnant after watching that film in health class. I have not started my period yet so I guess I don’t have anything to worry about. Only, please keep this a secret. I don’t know what my father will do if he finds out I told you. Promise me that this is just between us.”*

*I remember that the young teacher looked mortified. In my mind, I thought she was mortified to hear what kind of person I was. I hung my head in shame. She came and sat down at the desk beside me. “Lisa, I can’t imagine what this is like. I cannot promise to keep this a secret forever, but I can promise to keep it a secret until tomorrow. The law says I have to report things*

*like this to the principal. So, I won't say anything until tomorrow." She patted my hand. I looked up at her with tear-filled eyes.*

*"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas." My words came out in choking sobs.*

*"It is okay Lisa. Why don't you take a few minutes to compose yourself? I can walk you to the nurse's office and we could tell her your foot is hurting. She will let you lie down in her office and you will have time to get yourself together." Mrs. Thomas was gentle and walked me to the nurse's office.*

*When I got home that night, the only thing I could think of was telling my teacher about what was happening. I knew I had just kicked a hornet's nest, and I was scared to death. As I lay in bed, I devised a plan to retract my statement.*

*The next morning, when I got to school, I went straight to Mrs. Thomas's classroom. She was sitting at her desk grading some papers.*

*"Mrs. Thomas, can I talk to you?" My voice was already cracking with the tears I was choking back.*

*She looked up from her work. She laid her red pen down and gave me a half smile. "Of course you can. What is on your mind, Lisa?"*

*I swallowed. It felt like there was a peach pit lodged in my throat. "I came to tell you I am sorry for the story I told you yesterday. All that stuff about my father touching me and having sex with me was made up. I don't know why, but sometimes I lie for attention. Mrs. Thomas, I am so sorry that I lied to you. You are my favorite teacher and I wanted you to think I am something special so I made up that horrible story. My father hasn't ever touched me like that, I swear! I do*

*not want to get my father in trouble for something he has never done. Please, forgive me, Mrs. Thomas. Please don't tell anyone what I told you. I would just die if anyone else knew how I had lied." I sat on the edge of the desk behind me and I cried. I did not just cry, I wailed.*

*Mrs. Thomas came around her desk and petted my head while I sobbed. "It is okay Lisa. I am so proud of you for coming and telling me the truth. It takes a big person to admit when they have done something wrong. You don't have to worry. I am not going to tell anyone. Rest your mind, and let's forget that talk ever happened." When I looked up at her she was smiling, and her kind eyes told me that she believed me. It felt like a ten-pound weight had been lifted from my heart. I was saved. Mrs. Thomas would not tell, and my secret would remain hidden by the filters and smiles I used to disguise it.*

"Mrs. Thomas? You look as pretty as you did back when I was in junior high. It is nice to see you." I was genuinely surprised to see her at the courthouse.

"May I sit down beside you?" She pointed at the bench. I moved over a little so she would have plenty of room to sit.

"Lisa, I owe you a giant apology. I was a brand-new teacher, and I handled the situation with you completely wrong. I am so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?" I looked at Mrs. Thomas and her eyes were glistening with tears.

"Mrs. Thomas, you do not owe me an apology. I came to you and told you that I had lied. You had no reason to believe that the story of sex, rape, and abuse that I had told you the day before was true. Put that out of your mind, please." I felt sorry for the woman.

"That is generous of you to say. I cannot forget the mistake I made. I should never have let that discussion end with me keeping my mouth shut and you pretending that you had never

told me. I should have reported the talk to the principal and the guidance counselor. I should have sought help for you. Even if the story had been made up, you were crying out for someone to help you, and I let you down. “She sat on the bench with her hands folded in her lap, and I could not help but think that she looked like she was in trouble. She did not sit outside for long before the courtroom door opened and she was called to go inside and testify. I watched her walk through the double doors and I felt sorry that I had drug her into the mess that was my life. All of a sudden, I was nauseated so I jumped up and dashed for the restroom.

“Lisa! Are you okay?” The sound of Freida’s voice was soothing and upsetting all at the same time. I do not know why but I did not feel like explaining myself to anyone at that moment. I did not understand I was sick. I did not know why the world was spinning or why my life was such a mess. I was seventeen and I felt like an old lady who had lived through wars and hardships. I felt like a horse that had been ridden hard and put up wet. I wept into my hands for a moment and then gathered my strength to answer my sister.

“I am fine, Freida. Just a little sick to my stomach.” I came out of the stall and splashed cold water on my face. I have never liked much makeup so I did not have to worry about the cold water ruining my makeup. The most makeup I ever wore was a touch of mascara and a little lip color. I had not put any mascara on that morning because I knew it was going to be a teary-eyed day.

We stopped in front of Carol who was sitting pristinely on the bench. I never did figure out how that woman could sit for hours without fidgeting. Carol was one of those women who would wear a white linen pantsuit to help you move, and at the end of the day, her pantsuit would still be white and would have no wrinkles. I was, I am one of those women who can sit in a stark white room and manage to get dirt on my clothes or my face.

“Carol, I am going down to smoke. Do you want me to get you something from the snack cart? Some gum or mints or something?” Carol opened her purse and rummaged for a few minutes.

“Yeah, get me some butterscotch candies, and get Lisa a pack too. I know if I get only one pack, she will eat them all.” She patted me on the leg to show that she was just teasing me. Carol couldn’t have cared less how many of her candies I ate, she was just using that to distract me.

Freida waved her hand to show Carol that she did not need her money. “Don’t worry about it. I got this.” Freida turned to walk away and Carol said, “Call Darlene and tell her that we will stop by there during the lunch break. I will grab us some burgers or chicken and we will have lunch with her and the girls today.”

Carol patted my leg again. “How are you holding up, kid?” I turned and looked at her. I tried to paste a smile on my face but my muscles were not responding like they should.

“I’m okay, I guess. A lot nervous, real tired, and starting to feel a little hungry.” I leaned toward her and rested my head on her shoulder. “I just want to go home.”

“I know you do darling. I wish I could take you away from all of this.” Carol murmured.

“What was Mama like before she met Father, Carol? Was she a good Mother before him?”

“Mama always was a good woman. She is a very simple-minded woman, of course, you know that. She only went to the third grade in school. She had severe separation anxiety and grandma and grandpa had to let her stay home with grandma and her sister Nettie. Mother could

keep the house clean, and cook simple foods, but there was not much else she could do. Although, when my father was in the hospital in Houston, Mother had a job operating the elevator. Still, even that job was a little difficult for her. Lisa, try not to put too much blame or hatred on Mother. I don't believe that she has the strength or mental fortitude to leave that piece of shit she married." Carol stopped petting my leg. "Do not forget that in her way of thinking Mother was doing the best she could. She knew could not get a job and support us kids so she married Jimmy. She stayed with him because the marriage vows say for better or worse, and Mother takes a vow she made before God seriously."

"You two are sure deep in thought. What are y'all talking about?" Freida had returned and she sat down on the other side of me.

"Nothing much. Did you call Darlene?" Carol quickly answered Freida and I sat back. I opened my package of lifesavers and let my mind drift as I waited for my turn to sit on the witness stand.

#### Chapter Four

As my mind drifted, I recalled living in Spurger. The house we lived in was an antique with a dog run dividing it, high ceilings, and a fireplace in each bedroom.

*About 1970 or 1971*

*There was a long driveway leading up the hill to the house. On each side of the driveway were enormous cedar trees that had grown so tall they joined at the top and formed a canopy over the drive. There were fenced pastures on each side, and I had a Welsh pony that I could ride anytime I wanted.*



*My room was between the living room and the master bedroom at the end of the house. It was not really a room but it was a wide enough area that my twin bed fit in it without blocking the walkway. It was directly across from the bathroom. It also had a closet that was lined with cedar. That closet smelled great. It was a big closet and Mother kept her quilts stacked on the floor at one end of the closet.*

*For the most part, things were good at that house. My father left me alone more. One night two of my cousins came and they were going to spend the night. They were drinking with Dad. At bedtime Mother made me go get into their bed. I begged her to let me sleep on the quilts in the closet. I told her it would be fun and I could pretend I was on a campout. She said no that I could sleep in her bed between her and Father. I prayed that God would let him pass out in the living room, but that did not happen. When Father came to bed that night, he started touching me and pushing himself against me from behind. I was lucky because that night was just touching. Touching was gross and embarrassing but it did not usually hurt. I often wondered if my mother was asleep or if she just pretended that she did not know what he was doing to me.*

*I got to make a friend when we lived in the Spurger house. Her name was Shelly and I got to go to her house and play. One night her mom asked my mom if Shelly could sleep over. I did not realize what was going to happen, but when Father came home, he had been drinking. He laughed and made jokes and Shelly thought he was funny. When Mom went to bed, he stayed in the living room watching TV. Shelly and I were lying on my bed. I went into the kitchen to get us a drink and he was still awake. He followed me into the kitchen and was rubbing against me. He kept telling me that I better do something for him quick or he was going to go let Shelly do something for him. I did what I was told. I cried, but I could not stand the thought of him touching Shelly.*

*After that day, I shunned Shelly. I would not talk to her. I lost a friend and she did not know why I turned into such a mean little hussy, but I knew that if she kept coming around the day would come when he would hurt her. I could not let that happen to her. I wonder from time to time if Shelly ever forgave me for the way I acted.*

The car jolted to a stop. From the window, I could see my brother Robert's bass boat. I was happy to have my mind pulled away from the memory of Shelly. I had no regrets for saving her from my father. I hated that she would never know that my actions had been altruistic, but that is just the way things go. You have to do what is right when no one is watching and even when doing the right things causes you a little pain. I had to miss having a friend, but my friend was not molested or raped by my father.

"Lisa, get my cigarette case out of the front seat." Freida was already standing on the small porch of my brother's house. You would think that as much as that woman smoked, she would never forget her cancer sticks behind. I reached into the front seat and got her cigarette case. In the back of the case, there was a business card. I was nosey and looked at the card. Adam Hargraves Attorney at Law. I remembered Mr. Hargraves. My sisters and brother had pooled their money and hired him after I left my parent's house.

*About 1976*

*One day, about six months after I reported what was happening to me the CPS lady over my case came to visit. She told us that my parents had agreed to sign their rights to me away as long as I was placed in a girl's home, and not in the home of one of my siblings. The girl's home was about five hours from where we lived. She took me to that home to look around.*

*The home was for girls who were in trouble. Girls who had broken the law had to be rehabilitated. It was awful, and I cried all the way back home. When I told my sisters and my brother what the home was like they hired an attorney. We had to go to court and petition a judge to allow me to stay with my sister. It was an ordeal. The CPS representative told the judge that in cases of child abuse children should not be placed with other people who had been victims of child abuse. The lady kept saying "The book says" and telling the judge how I needed professional care to help me recover, and that being with my sister would jeopardize my recovery.*

*My attorney drew pictures on his notepad. When it was his turn to question the CPS lady, he asked her if the decision to let the parents who abused me, determine where I would stay, was solely based on the information in "the book." She agreed that it was. The attorney then asked her if the book told her to throw me off a bridge would she do that. The woman said that was ludicrous, and my attorney said it was also ludicrous to punish me for speaking out. The judge agreed and I was placed in the custody of my sisters and my brother.*

I smiled when I remembered how Mr. Hargraves had put CPS and their rules where they belonged. Living with my sister was not the ideal situation. Freida was only six years older than I was and her husband Donny was two years older than Freida. Freida did not have enough life experience to take on a teenager, much less a troubled teenager. Still, everything worked out. I look back now and realize that God was walking with me and He helped me to navigate life, even though I was not aware of His presence.

Inside my brother's home, we ate lunch with his wife, Darlene, and his two daughters. We had a two-hour break for lunch so we had plenty of time to visit and try to get our minds off of the trial and the ludicrous behavior of our extended family.

“Is your mother at the courthouse?” Darlene was naturally curious about what was happening.

“If she is, then she is staying hidden. We have not seen her. Mostly Jimmy’s sister Yvonne, her daughters Donna and D’Juana, her sons Gary and Mickey, and a few people I did not recognize.” Carol took a drink of her soda.

“Well, Yvonne has bailed him out of trouble so often she probably thought that if she came down there, she could buy him out of this one. It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if she offered Lisa Kate some money to shut up and drop all the charges.” Darlene was a small woman, she barely stood 5’2” but she had strong opinions that she voiced confidently.

“I have heard you guys talking about Aunt Yvonne bailing Father out of trouble, but did she really pay people to drop the charges? I mean, was he really arrested and accused of raping other girls?” I was curious. I had heard the rumors but I wanted to know the truth.

Freida came out of the living room where she had been smoking a cigarette and joined us around the dining room table. “Lisa Kate, you ought to be old enough to remember the night I hid the bloody clothes under the house in Orange. It was just about a year before I left.”

“Freida, I would have been about four. I don’t remember nothing like that.” I reached for the bag of chips across the table.

“Well, you were there. It was a Friday night. Jimmy got paid on Fridays and most of his shenanigans happened on payday or the weekend. He did not come home for supper so Mother knew he was out drinking and partying. Mother let us stay up in the living room and watch the late-late show. They were showing *The Birds* and I wanted to see it. You were a scaredy cat we were sitting in the brown recliner. We had a quilt and when the movie got scary, we used the quilt

to cover our eyes.” Freida stopped and took a drink of soda. “The movie was about half over when we saw the headlights reflect light on the wall. You and I both jumped up and turned off the television. We ran to bed and jumped in it. We did not want to be caught up that late, and we never wanted to have to see him when he came home drunk. Mother was in her room reading the bible and praying. When Jimmy came in, he went straight to their room.

He said, Elmaurie, get up and help me. Not hi, what you doing, sorry I am late, but get up and help me. Mother asked him how she could help him.

I need you to take these clothes and this knife and have Freida Kay crawl under the house and bury them. Hurry, woman! The damn cops will be here any minute.

Mother said, “Jimmy, why are the cops coming here? What have you done?”

He said, quit asking questions, bitch. Get that shit buried, and when the cops get here you tell them I been here all night. You hear me? Jimmy went into the bathroom and started taking a bath and Mother brought those clothes into our room. She woke me up and told me to crawl under the house and bury the clothes. She said I had to go as far as the middle of the house and I had to dig the hole as deep as I could. You wanted to go with me. You always wanted to go everywhere I went and do everything I did. Mother told you that you could sit on the ground and shine the flashlight under the house if you wanted to.” Freida took a long pause.

“Did you bury the clothes? How do you know that he had raped someone?” I always had questions.

“Hang on, I am getting to all of that. I got the clothes buried and you and me went back to our room and got back in bed. About that time there was a knock on the door. The cops were there. They asked Mother if Jimmy had been there all night, and she said he had. She told them

he had watched television with us because we wanted to see *The Birds* and he was afraid the movie would scare us.

When they talked to Jimmy, they told him that a girl who had been walking home on Simmons Drive had told them that a man fitting his description had picked her up and driven her to the grocery store parking lot at the back of the Riverside apartment complex. The girl said that the man had raped her, and when he was through, he had left her in the parking lot and drove off in a car. Jimmy swore that the girl was lying but the cops told him that he needed to go with them and get everything straightened out.

As soon as the cops drove away with him, Mother grabbed the phone and called Aunt Yvonne. I don't remember how long he was in jail, but he was arrested for the rape of the girl and a court date was set. Mother took you and me to the courthouse. They talked about the charges and stuff, and Mother kept pinching us on the legs. When we cried, she would say, "Don't worry babies they are gonna let your father come home."

He did not come home with us on that day, but a few days later, the girl dropped all the charges and Jimmy came home. I heard him and Mother talking and he told Mother that it cost Aunt Yvonne several thousand dollars to get the girl to agree to drop the charges." Freida stood up and went back into the living room to light another cigarette.

I was shocked. I had no memory of that night or the court trial. "Were there other times that he was accused of rape?" I looked at Carol and Darlene.

Carol said, "Yes. I know of four times that he was accused of rape, and one time in Buna, he was investigated concerning the disappearance of a small girl. He was working in the logging woods back then and they were logging a tract of timber close to Evadale. Well, there were a few

houses on the road that led to the lumber tract. The last house on the left had a little girl that was probably five or six living in it. One day the little girl went missing right after lunch. Her Mother had walked to a neighbor's house and left the child playing in the yard. When she got home the girl was gone. They searched the woods around the house, and after several hours they found her dead body down close to the creek. She did not have on underpants and had been raped. The cops talked to all of the neighbors, and to the men in the lumber crew because they drove past the house several times a day. On the day the little girl went missing the men remembered that Jimmy had gone missing around mid-morning. No one could recall seeing him until the next day. The cops questioned Jimmy and Mother, and within two weeks, Jimmy quit the lumber crew, or got fired, and he moved you and Mother from the little house on Hwy 96 to the apartments behind the Scurlock Hotel. I can't prove that any of that story is true, except a little girl that went missing, and Jimmy was working close to her house. I have always believed he killed that baby." Carol looked more upset than I had ever seen her.

"Wow. I never knew all of this." I sat at the table with my head spinning.

"Lisa, Freida, go to the bathroom it is time for us to head back to the courthouse." Carol stood up, and helped Darlene pick the trash up and put away the food that was not eaten.

We were all nervous on our way back to the courthouse. Freida was chain-smoking, Carol was clicking her fingernails on the edge of the steering wheel, and I was daydreaming. I tend to overthink and overanalyze everything. When I am nervous about something my mind will not settle and I imagine every scenario, or I start to remember things. It is funny, when you look back on things you always have things you wish you had said or done differently. My biggest regret in life is not talking to the Child Protective Agency lady who visited my Spurger school.

*I was called to the office when we lived in Spurger. I had to be in third or fourth grade. A lady was waiting in the principal's office to speak to me. I do not remember her name, but I remember she was very pretty and full of questions.*

*Lisa, I would like to talk to you a little bit. I was sent here by someone who is very concerned about your welfare. I want to talk to you and make certain that you are doing good. I want you to understand that anything you tell me will be kept private. I am not going to tell your teachers, or your mom and Father anything that you tell me. Okay?*

*I did not answer the pretty lady. I nodded my head indicating I understood. But, as soon as she started telling me how everything would be kept a secret I began to panic. I could hear my father telling me that if I ever told anyone what he did with me I would be taken away and locked up. He told me that no one would believe me and that little girls who told secrets had to move away from their homes. He told me that I would never see him or Mom again and that I would not be allowed to take my poodle Polly with me. I was petrified of telling the secret, because I was repeatedly told that Freida had said something and the CPS people had taken her away to punish her.*

*“How are things at home, Lisa? Are you happy? Do you feel safe?” The lady stared at me the entire time that she talked. It made me feel like a bug under a microscope.*

*“I am happy. Home is fine.” I gave the shortest answers that I could. Inside I was shaking with fear. I wanted to throw up, and I wanted to run out the door to my house where I could hide in the cedar-lined closet from all of the questions.*



*“Lisa, I am especially concerned that your father might be touching you in an inappropriate way. Does your father ever make you feel uncomfortable when he touches you? Or has he ever touched you in your private areas?”*

*I heard the lady. This was just like my father had warned me. The lady had come in and she was asking touching questions. I tried to take deep breaths to stop from shaking.*

*I answered the lady, ‘No.’*

*‘No? What are you saying no to Lisa?’*

*‘To everything. My father doesn’t do nothing wrong. Can I go back to class?’*

*The lady smiled and she talked a little more about how I should report it if anyone ever touched my private place and how the CPS was there to help kids who were being hurt by their parents. I just stared at her. In my head, I was thinking about my dog Polly.*

*When I went home that afternoon my mom was waiting in the dog-run. She never did that so I knew something was up.*

*‘Lisa, did someone come to your school today and talk to you?’*

*‘Yes. Ma’am. A lady came.’*

*‘What did you talk about with the lady?’ Mom was nervous and I knew that she was afraid that I had told the family secret.*

*I sat down on the wooden bench beside my mom. I took her hand in mine, and said, ‘I told her that I am happy and that no one is hurting me or touching me in the wrong way. Can I have a peanut butter sandwich?’*

*Mom looked relieved. 'Yeah, you can have a sandwich. I was late getting dinner started so you have plenty of time before we eat. Go change out of your school dress and I will make you a sandwich.'*

*I did not know that the CPS lady had also visited my mom that day. The lady had told her that there were people who were concerned with my welfare and that she was sent to investigate allegations of child sexual abuse.*

*Years later I discovered that my sisters had been the ones who called CPS and had them come to talk to me. I did not know that at the time. At the time the only thing I knew was my parents and what they had told me. A child believes their parents until they learn that parents are not always right and not all parents have your best interest at heart.*

“Lisa! Wake up and join the rest of the world! You can't stay in the car.” Freida had an agitated look on her face. She often fussed at me for living in a dream world, or for spacing out like I tended to do.”

“I'm coming. I am just preparing myself.” I slid out of the car seat and stood up. The courthouse loomed in front of us and I dreaded going back inside. I knew that eventually my name would be called and I was going to have to sit in front of the courtroom and tell strangers the intimate details of my life that I had kept secret for so many years. I was certain that the judge and the people on the jury would think that I was a nasty girl because of the sex games I had been involved in with my father and some of his friends. A wave of nausea overtook me and I turned my head and threw up the lunch I had just eaten.

Carol rushed around the car. She was digging in her purse. I knew that she was reaching for a moist toilette. Freida held my hair back and Carol opened the toilette and handed it to me.

“Are you okay, kiddo?” Carol had a very soothing voice. Carol was the kind of person that stayed calm and composed all of the time. You could not tell what she was thinking, and since she had Mothered me and Freida when she lived at home, and then she took Frieda to raise when CPS took her away from our parents, and she had four children, Carol was always prepared to Mother someone.

I wiped my mouth with the toilette and put a weak smile on my face. “Sorry guys. I tried not to do that. Let’s get inside the courthouse so I can rinse my mouth.” I deliberately took a step forward. Somehow, I managed to walk to the door of the building, even though my knees felt like they were made of jelly.

I held the door open for my sisters. I was trying to be brave, but inside I was a mess. People who live a life behind filters and smiles learn to hide their true feelings and emotions from other people. We learn to put everything away in compartments and show people what they want to see, instead of who we are.

## Chapter Five

The ride up the elevator was amusing. My sisters were normally upbeat and they had a great sense of humor. If you put the two of them together you were going to laugh. They joked and made snarky remarks as the elevator ascended to the third floor. When the doors opened, Freida was the first one out. Carol followed her and I was lagging in the rear. This was a typical formation.

As usual, I was not paying attention to my surroundings. I walked with my head down like I was looking for lost money. “My baby!” I heard my mother’s voice. I had not seen Mother during the morning session, and for some reason I assumed that she was not coming to the trial. Mother was a very sickly woman, she weighed over 300 pounds, and she rarely left her house. I stopped dead in my tracks. I could not see Mother because Freida and Carol were blocking my view of the hallway. I heard voices of relatives trying to calm Mother down, and I heard Father’s voice say, “Come on Maurie, we need to get inside the courtroom.”

My heart raced and I felt lightheaded. I ran for the bathroom because I was certain the rest of my lunch was about to come up. Carol followed me to the restroom and Freida stood guard in the hallway like a fierce mama bear waiting for someone to get near her cubs.

“Hey kid, are you okay?” I always found Carol’s voice to be soothing.

“Yeah, I just wanted to get rid of the rest of lunch.” I came out of the stall and Carol handed me wet paper towels to wash my face. “Is she still in the hall?”

“If you mean Freida, then yes, she is in the hall daring anyone to walk toward the bathroom. If you mean Mother, she is not in the hall she is inside the courtroom. I know this is hard on you, because I am almost thirty years old and this is hard on me. Just take your time and we will go out there with our heads held high. Remember that you did nothing wrong. What he did to you, what he did to all of us, was wrong on every level. You have the right to live a happy, normal life, and sweetie the life you have been living was not normal.” Carol patted my arm and stroked my hair as she spoke.

I turned around and I plastered a smile on my face. I straightened my shoulders and said, “Let’s do this. I am ready.” Together we left the restroom and found an empty bench close to the

District Attorney's office at the end of the hall. As I walked down that hall past relatives and strangers I looked straight ahead. I did not look at the ground and I kept the smile on my face. I was proving a point, at least in my mind I was.

The blonde lady from the District Attorney's office sat beside us on the wooden bench. "Lisa, I am sorry you had to face all of this. Mr. Murphy wants to speak to you in his office before court resumes this afternoon. Follow me and you can wait in there instead of out here." The pretty blonde lady opened the door to the office and waited for all of us to enter. Inside Mr. Murphy's office, I sank into one of the padded leather chairs. I let out a sigh of relief because I felt safe, hidden in the darkened office where I could not see or hear the commotion that was taking place in the hallway.

"He won't be long. Can I get you ladies anything?" The pretty lady stood at the doorway looking in.

"No, thank you. We are fine." Carol always spoke for the group when manners and decorum were required.

"Good afternoon, ladies." Mr. Murphy rushed through the door. "I wanted to get you up to speed on what is happening. So far, the trial is going excellent. Lisa, your teacher, Mrs. Thomas, was the perfect witness. She explained what you told her, but she also explained your demeanor and how you acted in class. Her testimony showed the jury that you were a quiet, withdrawn girl who was not a troublemaker. She explained that she met you when she was fresh out of college and she made the mistake of not sharing the discussion you guys had with her superiors or with Child Protective Services. The jury liked her and they listened carefully." Mr. Murphy shuffled through papers on his desk.

“What happens next?” Carol spoke the words we were all thinking.

Mr. Murphy sat on the corner of his desk. “The next step is to bring you and Freida into the courtroom. We need to establish to the jury that Jimmy Blair is a serial offender. He molests and rapes young girls. Carol, you have never reported what happened to you as a child. I do not know how much weight your testimony will carry about your personal experiences however; you have been raising Freida and you see what she has gone through. You have also been around Lisa and you can see how she acts.” Mr. Murphy turned slightly so he was facing Freida.

“Freida, your molestation is a documented fact. We have the CPS paperwork, we have the judgment against your father, and we will have you tell the jury what it is like to be molested and abused. You are also the only one that can tell us in detail why you started going back to see your parents after you married. Your testimony will establish prior bad acts, and will introduce the CPS investigation that took place when your parents and Lisa lived in Spurger. We have gone over your testimony so you know what to expect.” Mr. Murphy turned and looked at me.

“Lisa I am going to do everything in my power to not put you on the stand today. By the time I am finished with your sisters, it is going to be getting late into the afternoon. I do not want you to start your testimony and then have to stop and continue it tomorrow. I want the jury to be fresh when they hear from you so I am going to try to introduce you tomorrow morning. I understand that you are scared and you want to get this over and done with. Jillian is going to sit with you while your sisters are testifying. I could let you sit in here but I do not want that group of people to think we are hiding you or that you are scared of them.”

Someone knocked lightly on the door and then slowly pushed it open. The pretty blonde stepped inside. “Mr. Murphy, I am sorry to interrupt but the judge is ready.”

“Thank you, Jillian. I am on my way now. Ladies, keep your wits about you and I will be calling you soon.” Mr. Murphy left his office through the side door. Carol, Freida, and I stood up and headed out the door we had entered through. Just outside the door, Miss Jillian was waiting for us.

“I am going to make one quick phone call and then I will come sit with you in the hallway.” She reached out and touched me on the arm. “Lisa, do not be afraid. You are one of the strongest and bravest women I have ever met. I cannot believe what you lived through and how much strength it took for you to endure everything that happened to you. I am proud to know you and I want you to know that you are stronger than you think, and you are certainly stronger than those people in the hallway give you credit for. I believe they are gathered here as an intimidation force, so do not let them intimidate you.” I nodded and tried to smile at her.

Have you ever had a dream where you are running from something, you do not know what you are running from, but you travel down a long narrow passage like a hallway and the faster you try to run the slower you go? That was what it was like walking out of that office and down that corridor. I was trying to take big strides and get past the people sitting on the benches, and yet it seemed like I was moving in slow motion. It felt like it took hours to walk the twenty or thirty feet from the doorway to the empty bench. Sometimes when I feel very bad, I have a nightmare of having to walk down that hallway again. I wake up in a cold sweat each time.

Carol was passing out breath mints and butterscotch like we had eaten onions or something. She usually carries the mints in her purse and gives them to Freida because Carol hates the smell of cigarette smoke on someone’s breath. I had never put two and two together before but, I realized that my father has always smoked. My mother does not smoke, and Carol’s Father did not smoke., I suddenly realized that Carol associated the smell of cigarettes with my

father. I believe that when she was small and he would touch her like he liked to touch girls, she smelled the stench of stale cigarette smoke and beer on his breath. I know that when I smell cigarette smoke and beer on someone's breath it takes everything, I have in me not to wretch. It is funny what things go through your mind when you have nothing to do but think.

The door to the courtroom opened and the bailiff called Carol. Everyone in the hallway stopped talking and watched Carol rise and follow the bailiff through the double doors. In a way it was like watching her be swallowed up by a giant monster. I wanted to run and pull her back. Instead, I sat still and picked at my cuticles. I cast my eyes downward and felt the void left by Carol's absence.

Freida is a chatty Cathy. She likes to talk so she began to talk to me. I was answering in one-word sentences so she turned her attention to Jillian. They talked about Orange, the weather, and everything else they could think of. I listened to them talking in low tones and somehow it was soothing. Hearing two people have a perfectly normal conversation about how hot it was this year, and how much we needed rain made it seem like a normal day. I did not feel like I was sitting in a courthouse waiting to tell a room full of people the things my father did to me. I felt almost like a normal girl, well, I felt like I thought normal girls must feel.

I don't remember how old I was the first time my father used me to pleasure himself. I do remember hearing my mother tell my grandmother that she could not keep night clothes on me. Mother said that she put me to bed at night fully clothed, but in the morning when she got up, I was always nude. I thought about that conversation quite a lot. I believe that I was not taking my clothes off at night. I believe that my father was coming into my room and taking my clothing off. I cannot prove that because I cannot remember him doing that. However, when you are the victim of abuse your mind tends to think the worst, and go to dark places.



It seemed that Carol was in the courtroom for a very long time. I was getting nervous. Jillian told us that when Carol came out, we should not appear to be discussing what was said, or what had happened. “If it appears that Carol is telling you two what she said, what she was asked, and so on. Then someone might get the idea that she is coaching you on what to say. We do not want that. I want you ladies to talk about anything but that courtroom and if it is at all possible, I want you to try and smile, or laugh. Act like you are not worried about the proceedings. Your confidence will make the other people feel uncomfortable and make them worry.”

I cannot sit still. I do not mean at the trial; I mean I cannot sit still. I fidget, shift my weight, and move every few minutes. Sitting on a hard bench like the one in the courthouse increases the frequency of my shifting. Carol and I sat on the bench in silence. Freida had kept up a conversation with Jillian, but with Freida inside the courtroom, the conversation on our bench had stopped. When your mind does not have anything to distract it, then it drifts into a daydream state. I found my mind wandering back to stories I had heard from and about my father and his family life.

My father had a hard life. His mother was a loving woman, and she did the best she could to raise him to be honorable and upstanding. I do not see my father’s behaviors as a bad reflection of my grandmother. My father made his choices and he did not consult grandma or anyone else. I do believe that the turmoil of his youth affected him and made him prone to making bad decisions. I have always heard the lineage that ‘hurting people, hurt people.’ I believe that is true. My father had been hurting all of his life, and that pain combined with the effects of alcohol helped to make his bad decisions worse.

*One day, close to Halloween, Miss Ida who lived two houses away came over and she brought homemade popcorn balls. Sweet treats were rare in our house. Even if they had not been rare, we kids would have fought over Miss Ida's popcorn balls. She used real corn syrup to make hers instead of molasses or cane syrup. That clear corn syrup made the sweetest popcorn balls, and they tasted like bits of pure heaven.*

*Mama sat them popcorn balls up on a shelf in the kitchen above the stove. Just about dark, after she had finished boiling the diapers for the day, she gave us each a popcorn ball. "Jimmy Delmar, you sit out back and watch them little ones so they don't get too close to that wash pot. When they finish them popcorn balls rinse the boys off in the cooling water and bring them in for bed." Mama always sounded so stern. I knew better than back talk her. She was a little slip of a woman, 5'4" and weighed maybe 90 pounds if she was soaking wet, but she could fight like a wildcat. I simply said yes ma'am and went to sit on the steps and watch the kids like she told me too.*

*Little boys take forever eating something like a popcorn ball. My own ball was done gone before I got sat down good but the little ones, Darryl and Tommy were gnawing at theirs like corn on the cob. Course, now that I look back on it, Tommy was just getting all his growed up teeth, and Darryl was missing his two front teeth, so eating them popcorn balls must have been pretty tricky for them. Anyway, I sat on the steps watching them for a bit, then I saw a garter snake by the Azalea bush. I went to catch that garter snake. Just yesterday Yvonne had told on me for something I did not do, and I had got a whipping for it. That garter snake would be perfect to put in her dress while she was wiping up so when she slipped her dress back on, she would find that snake. I forgot about them two boys, and that hot pot of water in my pursuit after the snake. I clearly forgot; until I heard spine-chilling screams.*

*I dropped the snake and turned to check on the boys. I don't know who was screaming, the boys, my sister Yvonne, or my mom. All I could see was Darryl standing by the wash pot holding a popcorn ball in each hand. My Mom was bent over the pot like she was gonna dip out diapers and Yvonne was standing on the steps with her hand over her mouth!*

*While I was busy chasing the snake Tommy and Darryll had scuffled over the popcorn balls. Darryll got it in his mind that he wanted his and Tommy's and when he had grabbed the ball out of Tommy's hand the smaller child had fell backward and into the pot of hot water. When you use a wood fire to heat water the fire doesn't immediately go out. so even though Mom had stopped washing about a half hour before the water was still pert near boiling.*

*Mom got Tommy out of the water and dunked him in the cooling water. I think she was trying to cool him off. "Jimmy!!" she hollered. "Go get doctor Tom! Hurry!!" I stood for a minute like I forgot how to work my legs. Someone shoved me. "What's the matter with you boy? Go get the doctor and do not dawdle." I turned around and it was my oldest sister Jean telling me to go. At that moment my legs remembered how to move and I ran the mile to the doctor's house in record time.*

*I ran across sand, rocks, and briars when I cut across the vacant lot next to the pond. I didn't have on shoes, but I did not feel the things sticking into my feet and cutting my skin. I just ran. When I got to the doc's house, I did not even use the doorsteps I leapt onto the porch. I was hollering, crying, and beating on the door like a mad person. Doc's wife opened the door and I kind of fell into her arms sobbing.*

*"Jimmy? What's wrong, son? Is someone sick?" Doc's wife was a large woman with ample breasts. She could hug you into her chest and make you feel like the rest of the world had*

*disappeared. "Raymond! You better get your bag you are needed over at Kate Blair's house!!" Doc's wife never let go of me. She just hollered for him and held on to me like she was gonna save me with her hug.*

*The doc stumbled into the room holding his bag and with one arm in his jacket sleeve. The rest of his jacket was hanging behind him. "Jimmy, what happened?" The doc was already starting to walk toward the door. "Delores! Let that boy go he can't even talk! You are smothering him!" Doc's wife let me go when he said that.*

*"Doc it's little Tommy! He fell into the wash pot and the water was still hot enough to scald the hair on a hog!" I ran behind him. Doc stood about 6'4 and my legs had to make two steps for every one of his.*

*"Get in the car and make it quick! Delores, you get ahold of Chuck and get me as much ice as you can delivered to Kate's house as fast as you can!!" Doc had already begun to start the car when I opened the passenger door. It felt like we were flying as he drove to our house. I know now that we weren't really going more than about 40 mph, but at the time it seemed like we were going a hundred miles per hour.*

*When we got to the house doc rushed in and began to look at Tommy. Jean and Yvonne had all the kids gathered in the front bedroom. The younger kids were crying and sobbing, and tears were streaming down the faces of my oldest sisters. I have never felt this sad. Not even when they told us Father was dead. I reckon I cared a lot more about Tommy than I did my father.*

*It seemed like hours went by before the doctor was through examining Tommy. Chuck Brewster had brought three wash tubs filled with ice from the ice house. Doc had allowed Yvonne*

*and Jean to go in and help pack Tommy in ice to cool his skin so it would stop burning. I stayed in the front room with the little kids. It was getting pretty late and Gracie and Darryl had fallen asleep. That just left me and Elsie sitting there, waiting for news.*

*After what seemed to be an eternity, Jean and Yvonne came back to the front room. They were both crying and I knew that the news was not going to be good. I jumped up and asked Jean, "How is he? Is he gonna live?" My young heart was literally, breaking in two, and I wanted to be a grown man and not cry or snivel, but I could not keep the tremors from my voice as I spoke. I was scared to death.*

*"Tommy is very badly burned. The water was so hot that the doctor said it even cooked his insides. Doc says he cannot tell how long Tommy will live, but that he knows the boy cannot survive this kind of burning and live to grow up completely. Tommy is gonna die from his injuries. Until he does die, we are supposed to keep him as comfortable as we can. Doc is going to bring over some morphine and teach Mom and me to inject it." At that point, Jean threw her hands in front of her face and ran out the front door. Yvonne was sitting on the bed holding Elsie and they were crying their eyes out. I hung my head and dropped to my knees. I had never been one to pray very much before that night but I cried out to God to save Tommy. I begged God to take me instead of sweet little Tommy. I bargained with God and promised to be good, to go to church more, and to do anything God wanted me to do, if He would just save Tommy's life.*

*Tommy lived for four weeks. His skin turned black where it had been burned and it hurt him to even have a bed sheet touch him. He did not want to eat anything, but every time he woke up, he begged for peach soda. The gas station on the corner was the only store in town that had peach soda. Every day, Mr. Bill, would have his delivery boy bring cold peach soda to the house for Tommy. Mom kept telling Mr. Bill that she had no way to pay for all of those peach sodas.*

*“Miss Katie, I ain’t worried about the money for them sodas. If that baby boy wants ten sodas a day, then you let me know and he will have them. Thursday my wife is going to make peach ice cream and bring over some. I figure the taste of peaches is what that little one is craving.” Mr. Bill never sent us a bill or asked for any money for the sodas. As a matter of fact, he left bread and other stuff at the house while Tommy was so sick, and he never asked for payment for any of those things either. I have never really thought about how many people touched our lives during that time. I took it for granted that neighbors were supposed to help each other out, but now that I am grown, and have seen more of this world, I know that not all neighbors are kind and generous.*

*I blamed myself for Tommy dying. I thought that Mom blamed me too. I was the one she told to watch the boys and I failed to do what I was told so Tommy lost his life. At the ripe old age of 12, knowing that I did something that caused your brother to die filled me with grief and shame. I started staying away from home more. I did not want to be too close to my mother, brother, or sisters. I did my chores and got out of the house as fast as I could each day.*

*I stopped going to school and I started walking to the other side of town and hanging out under the train trestle with some older boys. I knew that what I was doing was not right, but I also could not bear to go home and see the memories of Tommy. From the older boys, I learned to cuss, smoke, drink liquor, and steal to support my habits. I thought I was a big shot because the older boys let me hang with them. I did not think about the fact that I was breaking my mom’s heart. I was becoming a person that she did not want me to be.*

I do not know why I felt compassion for a man who had not shown me compassion for me. Knowing that his childhood had been so difficult did make me feel sorry for him. I even felt like he could have been a different person, if he had lived a different life. That is something I

often wonder about. Is it nurture or nature that creates the final person? I feel like nurture plays a big role in the outcome.

I am not saying that the parents are at fault for a child going bad. Heck, my father has several brothers and sisters and none of them were criminals or child abusers. So, my father's upbringing was just a part of the picture. Father has bad ideas and he acts on those ideas. His lack of male guidance and the emotional scars he developed because he blamed himself for Uncle Tommy's death helped him to act the way he did. I wonder if he had lived with a supportive male in his life if he would have learned to resist bad ideas and urges, and if he could have been a better Father.

## Chapter 6

If you have never testified in a courtroom, I am here to tell you that the process is nothing like what you see on television. When the district attorney took my father before the grand jury, I did not have to appear. He submitted my sworn testimony and the results of my lie-detector test. A lie-detector test is not admissible in court, but the attorney can bring up the fact that someone took such a test and whether they passed or failed. The point is that I had no experience with a courtroom, a jury, or anything that I was about to experience.

On the day I was scheduled to testify, I awakened very early. I sat in my little camper and tried to prepare myself for the unknown. The windows were open beside the dining table, and the sounds of the birds and the world awakening were both soothing and unsettling. I was facing the most horrendous experience in my life, and yet the world was turning just like it did every day. My problems meant nothing in the greater scheme of things. I felt very small and alone.

In my mind, I saw the last few months and the fear I had experienced. My mind drifted back to a night when my sister's home was broken into.

*Freida and Donny lived in the Riverside apartment complex in Orange. My parents also lived in this complex. Riverside was initially constructed as a naval base housing. It was four or five miles long and about the same distance in width. The complex was like a small town inside of Orange. Riverside had its own parks, washeteria, grocery store, and beauty shops. You could walk for hours along the sidewalks and not leave the property.*

*My brother-in-law worked in the oil fields. That was a common employment for men during that time. He would get called into work at all hours of the day or night. He and my sister only had one vehicle, and when he got called to work, she would have to drive him to another worker's house so she could keep the car. When he went to work, he might be gone a few hours, or he might stay two to three weeks.*

*We had a big dog named Babe that lived in the house with us. He had some pit-bull in him, and he had some Rhodesian ridgeback in him. He was playful and gentle with the family, and he loved children. He was not playful with strangers or people he perceived to be a threat.*

*One night, we had to give my brother-in-law a ride to work. When we returned, it was dark. Freida busied herself, getting the baby out of the car while I unlocked the door. Babe was with me. Our normal routine when we returned was to open the door and let Babe go inside. Babe would walk through the house and come back in a few minutes. On that night, Babe pushed past me to get through the door, and he tore through the house with a purpose. He was growling and snarling. I could hear things crashing and the sounds of footsteps.*



*“Freida, what do I do? I think someone is in the house!” I still remember the terror and how hard it was to breathe.*

*“Get back in the car with the baby and lock the doors! Do it, now!” Freida was already running inside the house. We did not own a gun, but Freida had a baseball bat that she carried everywhere. She ran inside, and I got back in the car with her baby, Angela.*

*Freida was not inside the house long. She came out on the porch and waved at me. I tentatively opened the car door.*

*“Come on in. I am calling the police. He was here, and he jumped out of your bedroom window to escape.”*

*“You saw him?” I was scared and curious.*

*“No, but I could hear him hollering because Babe is chasing his ass right now. And your window screen is torn off.”*

*The police came, and they looked at the dirty footprints on my bed. I only had a mattress on the floor so it was easy for someone to walk on my bed. The back door had been jimmed, but the police surmised that whoever broke in was in the bedroom area when the dog entered. They were sure that the offender jumped out the window in an attempt to evade the dog.*

*We could not prove that the intruder was my father. However, nothing was missing from the house. Paperwork in Freida’s closet had been rummaged through, and all of my dresser drawers had been rifled through and the contents lay in heaps on the floor.*

The fear that I felt on that day was a driving force for me. I put my coffee mug down and got up to dress for battle. In my mind I decided that I would not live another minute in fear of my

Father, or anyone else. I dressed and headed out the door for Carol's house. My battle was about to begin, and I was ready for it.

## Chapter 7

The ride to the courthouse was quiet. Each of us was absorbed in our thoughts. I knew that Carol and Freida were still reeling from having to testify the day before. They did not talk about the experience with me. However, their demeanor and the uncomfortable silence told me they were dealing with a lot. I could understand. In the backseat, I was sweating bullets. I felt nauseated, and I had one of the worst headaches that I had ever had. I pushed through the pain and resisted the urge to whine about how I felt.

Inside the courthouse, I was shocked to see more family members in the hallway. As soon as we sat down, my Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Gilbert walked over to "our" bench. Uncle Gilbert was my mother's younger brother, and Aunt Evelyn was his wife.

"Good morning, girls." Aunt Evelyn bent down to give us each a hug, and Uncle Gilbert stood in front of the bench. He wore a yellow shirt and brown polyester pants.

"Lisa, how are you doing? I want you to know that we are not here to make you uncomfortable. We are here to show that we are all still a family and that you can still change your mind and save your mother from the grief she is having. She is not doing good, and you can save her right now." I sat in stunned silence.

Who did this man think he was? He was going to tell me about the pain that I was causing my mother. How about the pain my father caused her? How about the pain of he and his wife caused because they were always needing money. Uncle Gilbert was supposed to be an

Assembly of God pastor. He had six kids and the family lived hand to mouth. I also knew that Uncle Gilbert often went out drinking and carousing with my father.

Carol went to speak, and from somewhere deep inside me, a voice came out. “I appreciate all of your concern. I have not seen you in the last two years, but I am sure that you were praying for me. As far as my mother goes, her pain is partially self-inflicted because she never stood up and defended her children. If your sole purpose for walking over here was to shame me into changing my story so my mother would not be embarrassed, then you have made a wasted trip. I intend to testify today, and I am going to tell every sordid detail.” I stood up and looked down the hall. “I hope that all of you heard what I had to say. You can sit on your benches praying that somehow this embarrassment goes away, and you can blame me for speaking out, but I don’t care. I am going to tell my story. I am going to tell the truth, and then I am going to let karma, God, or whatever you believe in takeover. If you came for a show, well, I am about to give you one.” I gathered every ounce of courage I had and walked down the hall and into the office of the district attorney. I had just done one of the hardest things I would ever have to do. I faced my entire family, who stood behind the abuser rather than the child. I swore that I would NEVER do that to any child.

Court proceedings started promptly at 9 am. I discovered that the reason so many new family members were present was because they were not listed as witnesses so they filled the seats in the courtroom. I sat in the hall and watched them file into that room. It sickened me that they would show up to hear the sordid details when they were never available for me to disclose what was happening. I saw them as vultures waiting for an animal to die so they could tear its flesh from its body.

A few minutes after the court had been called to order, all of my relatives and some people I did not know filed out of the courtroom. The lady who worked in the district attorney's office had a smile on her face. She leaned over and whispered, "Mr. Murphy petitioned the court to clear the room of any unnecessary spectators. The fact that you are a minor, and the sensitive nature of your testimony, and the fact that those people are your family probably persuaded the judge to get them out of the room. When you are in there, the judge, the bailiff, the jury, your father and his attorney, and Mr. Murphy and Mr. Wright will be the only people in the room." She patted my leg.

In less than three minutes, the bailiff was at the door, calling my name. My knees felt like jelly when I stood up, and I was certain that I was going to pass out. The pretty lady from the district attorney's office stood up and held onto my arm. She walked me through those double doors and up the aisle leading to the front of the room. When we reached the half wall that separated the portion of the room with the judge's bench and the attorney's tables she patted me on the back. I pushed the swinging door open and boldly stepped into the unknown.

My Father and his attorney were seated on the left-hand side of the room. My attorney and his first chair were seated on the right-hand side of the room. On the far right of the room, the jury was seated. I know a jury has twelve people, but at that moment there looked like a crowd of people. I walked up to the seat beside the judge. I was surprised because he spoke to me and was very kind.

"Miss Blair, are you all, right?"

"Yes, sir."

“Okay then. If, at any time during these proceedings, you need to take a break, just raise your hand. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

The bailiff stood before me with a bible. “I want you to place your right hand on the bible and listen carefully.”

I placed my hand on the bible and looked at the judge instead of around the room.

“Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right then, you may be seated.”

I sat down and did not know where to look. I did not want to stare at the jury and I did not want to stare at my father. Mr. Murphy stood up and stood between me and my father so I could not see him.

“Good morning, Lisa. I know you are nervous, but I want you to relax. You are NOT on trial here. You have done NOTHING wrong. Just keep your eyes on me or look over at the jury. I need you to speak clearly and loudly so they can hear you. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“First, we will cover the basics. What is your name?”

“Lisa Blair.”

“How old are you, Lisa?”

“16, almost 17.”

“Where do you live?”

“Like what town or who do I live with?”

“Either will be fine.”

“I live in Silsbee.”

“Lisa, on or about April 14<sup>th</sup> of this year, did you make a police report accusing your father, Jimmy Blair, of sexually molesting you, and participating in a group sexual encounter involving you and two other men?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lisa. Is your father present in the courtroom today?”

“Yes, sir. He is sitting beside the man in the dark gray suit.”

“Let the record show that Lisa has identified the defendant as her father.”

“Lisa, I know that it is very hard to talk about what happened that night, but I need you to tell the jury what happened. I need you to be very specific and leave nothing out. If you need a break, you can take as many as you need. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Lisa. You can start when you are ready.”

It took me a few seconds to compose myself and bring up the courage to start talking. I looked at Mr. Murphy who was standing in front of the jury. Behind him was an older woman

with grey hair. She looked kind, and she was wearing a pink and blue scarf. I focused on her scarf, and began to speak.

*It was a Friday night. My Father normally gets home from work at 3:30 each day. We live in Riverside, and he works at American Shipyard, so it is just a few minutes from our house to where he works. We have supper right after my father comes home. My mother and I waited until five, and then she told me to go ahead and eat my supper. After eating, she told me to clean up my mess and take a bath. I was sad because when Father is late on Friday, it usually means he is out drinking.*

My father's attorney stood up. "Your honor, I object."

Mr. Murphy responded, "Your honor, Lisa is simply stating what she has known to happen on more than one occasion. When Mr. Blair failed to come home at his usual time, he was often drinking."

"Overruled. Please, Lisa, continue, please"

*Mother went to bed, and I went to my room. I read a book and goofed off. At about nine, I heard my father come through the back door. I could hear more than one voice. I lay down on the bed and pretended to be asleep. I do not know how long it was before my father came and got me out of my room because I fell asleep. He came in and shook me, and told me to join him in the living room. He smelled like sour beer.*

*When I got into the living room, he introduced the two men as Bill and Asam. All of them were drinking from a liquor bottle and drinking beers. Father made me sit on his lap, and he started to touch me down there.*

“Lisa, what did you do when he began to touch you like that?” Mr. Murphy moved closer to where I was sitting.

*“I closed my eyes tight and wished for it to be over. When my father starts acting this way that is what I do.”*

“Okay, Lisa. I am sorry for interrupting. What happened next?”

*My father started telling Bill and Adam what a good girl I was. I knew the pain that was coming and the dread of that pain made my stomach hurt. His touch pinched, and I moved, and they all laughed and said that I must really like that because I was moving. Father kissed me on the mouth and stuck his tongue in my mouth. I tried not to make a face because when he does this, he gets mean if I make faces or fight him. A “good little girl” smiles and never lets the pain show on her face.*

*“Damn, Bill, you act like you have never been with a girl before. She knows what to do, don’t you, kitten?”*

*He pushed me off his lap and told Bill and Adam that they could hold me if they wanted. Bill pulled me by the arm and made me sit on his lap. He rubbed me, but mostly, he held me down hard on his lap. I was embarrassed and uncomfortable. I squirmed and did my best to get loose.*

*I nodded my head, and Bill unzipped his pants. I was mortified, petrified, and I knew that I had to do whatever sick thing Bill wanted me to do. My father found this to be amusing and he joined Bill so they were both touching and doing things to me at the same time. I squinted my eyes closed and I prayed that everything would be over quickly. “Lisa, do you need a break?”*

The judge was very nice.



“No, sir, I am okay, but can I have a drink of water?”

“Yes, you can. Bailiff, will you hand Miss Blair a drink of water?”

I sipped the water slowly because I was afraid that if I drank fast, I would throw up. Having to relive that night was sickening to me, and having to relive that night in front of strangers was a torture that I could never have imagined.

“Lisa, continue when you are ready.”

*When they were through, Father pulled me up and shoved me toward Adam. Adam was nicer than the others. He did touch me some, but he was not being rough like Bill and Father. Father got mad at Adam because Adam was not acting like him and Bill. Father and Bill took turns touching me and making me do things. I remember Father laughing because when Bill was through, I was bleeding. “Damn Bill, you done made her bleed! I am gonna have to make you pay for that.*

*I don't know how long things took, but they all touched and hurt me. I just remember hurting and crying, but not crying out loud because that makes my father mad. “Good girls don't cry, at least that is what my father always said.*

“Excuse me, Lisa. Your honor, we would like to submit the photos that were taken at the hospital later that evening as evidence. They show bite marks, bruising, and other trauma to Lisa's body.”

Mr. Murphy passed the photos to the judge, and he looked at them. I tried to look at my lap because I did not want to watch him while he looked at my naked pictures. When the judge was finished looking at the photos, Mr. Murphy handed the pictures to the man wearing the blue

suit at the end of the jury box, and all of the jury members took turns looking at the pictures. The lady with the pretty scarf glanced at them, but she did not stare at them like the others. I was glad the lovely lady did not want to see those ugly pictures.

*After a while, all three of them went to sleep. I got up, and my nightgown on, picked up my dog Polly, and walked out the back door. My sister lived about ten blocks from us on Curtis Street. I walked to her house, and when she answered the door, she did not even ask me what had happened. She just wrapped me in a sheet, and we got in her car, and she drove to the police station.*

“Thank you, Lisa, you are doing great. But I have to ask you a few more tough questions, do you need a break?”

“Not a real break, but some more water would be nice.”

While I was drinking my water, I glanced toward the table where my father was sitting. He looked bored.

“Now, Lisa., Is this the first time that your father has ever touched you in a sexual way?”

“No, sir.”

“I know we spoke about this before, and you gave me and the arresting officer a list of dates when you could remember your father making you perform sexual acts. Do you remember that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“One of the dates you mentioned was on Valentine’s Day of this year. Why does that date stick out?”

“Because my father promised if I was good to him, he would buy me chocolate candy the next day when they put it on sale.”

“By being “good to him” what did your father mean?”

“He meant that if I let him touch me without gagging, biting, or crying like a no-good baby.”

“Is that what your father called you? A “no good baby?”

“Yes, sir. If I cried or did not move the way he told me to, he told me I was a no-good baby and as useless as tits on a boar hog. If he started calling me a baby, that meant I was going to be hurt more.”

“Lisa, I have to ask, on the night that you reported this to the police, why didn’t call your mother for help? Your mother was just down the hall.”

“Calling my mom would not do any good. Father would have gotten mad, and he would have hit her and made her do the same things. Mom would not have come out of her room because she knew that if she came out, he would be mean to her.”

“Are you telling this court that often when your father abused you when your mother was in the house?”

“Yes, sir, and sometimes she would be in the bed. When we had company come over, my parents made me sleep between them in their bed. My father would touch me and make me touch him. My mother would lay on her side of the bed and face the other way.”

Mr. Murphy told the judge that he had no further questions for me. He said that he was sure the jury understood what I was saying, and there was no reason to make me go through

every detail of every sexual encounter my father had with me. With that said, the prosecution rested.

My father's attorney had grey eyes that made him look angry. He told the judge that he only had a couple of questions for me.

"Lisa, when you say your father touched you and made you touch him, and that you feared getting pregnant. During these alleged occurrences did your father ejaculate?"

I felt so stupid when he asked that question. I had no idea what to say. I bit my lip, looked at Mr. Murphy, and then turned to the judge. The judge said, "Lisa, do you understand the question?"

I said, "Not really, sir. I don't know what that word means."

The judge's eyes got very wide. Mr. Murphy motioned for Jillian to come to the front. Jillian whispered in my ear what ejaculate meant. I felt pretty stupid and I am certain my face turned red because I could feel the heat in my cheeks. I tried to fight back the tears, but they were rolling down my cheeks. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room for a few minutes.

I looked at the steely-eyed attorney and said, "Yes, sir. When he did that, it meant he was usually finished for the night."

The steely attorney said nothing. Then he looked at the judge and said, "No further questions. I could not believe that he was only going to ask me that one question. The judge told me I was excused, and Jillian walked back to the hall with me.

When I got off the stand, the judge called for a lunch break. Mr. Murphy asked us to step into his office before we went to lunch. He told us that everything was going very well, except

my father's attorney was not putting up much of a defense. He told us that he thought the other attorney was simply showing up to get paid and that he had no intention of putting up a fight for my father. Mr. Murphy was right.

After lunch, it was the defense's turn, and they called a few character witnesses, mostly family. After a couple of hours, they rested their case, and the jury was sent to deliberate. I thought that jury deliberation would take a long time, but the jury deliberated for forty-four minutes. We did not have time to get our sodas drunk before it was time to hear the verdict.

My father was found guilty. He chose for the judge to sentence him instead of the jury. We had to return to court the next day for the sentencing. For the sentencing phase of the trial, my sisters and I were allowed to be in the courtroom. I cannot express the level of anxiety I had sitting in that courtroom waiting to hear the sentence. In my mind, I knew that I was doing what was right, but in my heart, I was torn. I was about to find out how long my father would be in jail, and I was the one responsible for sending him there. Justice is not always swift, and it does not always bring the peace and satisfaction that people assume it does.

“Mr. Blair. I have carefully considered the charges and the testimony of all witnesses. Sir, I must tell you that I find your actions deplorable and inhumane. You took the innocence of a child and destroyed it. As her father, that child looked up to you, depended on you, and loved you. You chose to use her trust and turn your father-daughter relationship into a thing of pain and shame. According to the law, I can sentence you to a maximum of fifteen years in the state penitentiary. My sentence for you is fourteen years and one day to be served consecutively. I only wish I could give you more. Use your time in prison to think about your actions and the consequences of those actions.”

“Miss Blair, you are one of the strongest and most courageous young women I have met. I hope you put the pain of your past behind you and live a life filled with hope and joy.”

After making that statement, the judge pounded his gavel, stood up, and left the room. I was still standing because you stand when a judge addresses you in court. My mind was not processing things clearly. I watched the guards place handcuffs on my father and lead him out the side door of the courtroom. My mother was wailing, my aunt was cursing about the injustice, and my sisters were shaking Mr. Murphy’s hand.

Mr. Murphy turned to me. “Lisa, do you understand the sentence?”

“Yes, sir. He goes away for fourteen years.”

“Not just fourteen years. He has to serve all of the fourteen years to serve the one day that the judge ordered. The judge just made certain that your father, would not be let out early for good behavior. He will serve his time and pay for his crimes.” Mr. Murphy patted my shoulder.

## Chapter 8

I wish that I could tell you that after the trial, my life was a bed of roses. Well, I guess it was a bed of roses because there were good days and there were thorny days. Nut, those stories are for another day and time.

My father did all of his time in prison in Huntsville, Texas. A few years into his sentence, my father finally opened his heart to Jesus. He accepted Christ as his, savior and he reached out to me from prison. When you are saved, you have to make amends to the people you have hurt.

My father reached out to apologize and begin to make amends for his deeds. It took me several years before my heart was in a place that allowed me to accept his apology and forgive him for our past.

You have to understand that forgiving someone is not a one-time thing. Once you struggle through the images in your mind, and you dig deep into yourself and find the mercy to forgive someone you might think you will be free, forever. Forgiveness does not work that way. Your memories will be triggered by smells, sounds, or seeing something your mind connects with the person you have forgiven. When your memory is triggered, the offense that hurt you will spring back into your thoughts. During and after a trauma, your feelings will rise to the surface. The pain will be there, although it might be a different pain. The only way to keep that pain from festering back into a throbbing boil on your soul is to forgive again. You may have to forgive the incident once, twice, or a thousand times. If you do not choose to forgive again, then the bitterness will grow in your heart, and you will lose the freedom, joy, and peace you found when you let the burden go the first time. Ask God to help you through these times. He gave you the strength to forgive once, and He will give you the strength to forgive again. The choice is up to you, but once you make it, God will stand before you and fight the battle.

People act like I have done something special by forgiving my parents. I have done nothing. God has moved in my heart and my life and given me the strength and grace it takes to forgive. I still do not remember most of my childhood and that is a blessing. God wiped away as many of the memories as possible so He left me able to move on with my life. I owe everything I am, everything I have, and will have to God.

One thing you must never forget is that forgiving someone does not mean that you accept their actions. God wants us to hate the sin, not the sinner. With this in mind, remember that when

you forgive, you do not have to bring that person back into your life. When you forgive the act of forgiveness frees your heart. It does not give the person who hurt you any rights, privileges, or a free pass to hurt you again.

I wrote this story not so people would feel sorry for me but so people can see that it is possible to forgive and move past anything you encounter. There will be times of trouble in your life, and even though you cannot see Him, God is there with you. The best thing you can do in your life is accept that bad things happen to everyone and that everyone can hand bad things to God and let Him deal with them.

If you have been hurt, I pray that you find the peace you need in your heart. If you have hurt someone, I pray that you find the ability to make amends for the pain you caused. This is not a perfect world. There are no perfect people. Choose to let go of the things you cannot change and let your bitterness be replaced with love, joy, and compassion.

Most people live a life behind filters and smiles. My reasons stem from my circumstances, and this is true of everyone. Giving it to God is the only way to get over your pain. The only way to live this life on earth is to smile through the tears, forgive, no matter what, and walk with God. Filters and smiles are not lies, they are a means of self-preservation.





