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Rebecca Contreras

LOST girl

*From the hood
to the White House
to Millionaire
Entrepreneur*



REBECCA CONTRERAS

“I know Rebecca Contreras to be a most effective executive leader, entrepreneur, team builder, and change agent, based on the twenty years I have worked with and remained in close contact with her. She has been nationally recognized for her many professional accomplishments and appointed to several nationally prominent, nonprofit boards. How she became so successful is a remarkable story: nothing about her youth and formal education would have predicted such success, but her wisdom, energy, faith, courage, and work ethic carried the day.”

—CLAY JOHNSON, former Assistant to the President and Director of Presidential Personnel, and Deputy Director for Management at the Office of Management and Budget (long-term mentor to Rebecca)

“Rebecca’s story is every woman’s story, one of failures and successes, of challenges and accomplishments, one of pain and sorrows but also of triumph and joy, one of fears and agony but also of courage and determination. Every little girl, every teen, and every woman of any background can be as inspired as I was by Rebecca’s amazing trail-blazing journey.”

—ROSARIO MARIN, Former 41st U.S. Treasurer

“There are no shortcuts to true success. It takes guts, determination, wisdom, vision, and in almost every case, divine intervention. Rebecca’s story is perhaps the most inspirational I have ever witnessed. As her pastor of twenty-five years, I’ve stood amazed as she navigated the journey from poverty and projects to political power and entrepreneurial success. There is so much insight for living your best life to be found on the pages of this book. I could not recommend it more enthusiastically.”

— ROB KOKE, Founder & Senior, Pastor Shoreline Church, Austin, Texas

“Rebecca’s life is a true testament to God’s grace and faithfulness. Her story is one of my favorites and inspires so many!”

—RENE BANGLES DORF, author of *Stand Up: How to Flourish When the Odds are Stacked Against You*, CEO, Charlie Bravo Aviation

“I thank God, our Lord and Savior for bringing Rebecca into my life. From our first meeting in early 1991, I knew there was something very special about her. From less-than humble beginnings, I watched Rebecca emerge from a cocoon-like being into a butterfly and become the beautiful person who was always there inside her. The Lord has enabled her to take risks and to develop her God-given talents to the fullest. I am so proud of being part of that development as her mentor early on and seeing her continue to succeed on the path she has taken.”

—DONNA REYNOLDS, HR Director for former Texas Treasurer Kay Bailey Hutchison & Governor George W. Bush, (early career mentor to Rebecca)

“Rebecca has been a huge inspiration in my life. My mother was murdered by my stepfather when I was five, so I grew up a ward of the state. I had so much trauma in my life, I was a complete mess—a single mother of four children, on welfare, and with no true goals in life. Rebecca used her past experiences to give me hope. She mentored me and helped me see beyond my circumstances. Her powerful story and support gave me the strength to carry on and completely get off welfare. I owe Rebecca everything!!”

—MARIA HERNANDEZ, Drop Out Prevention Specialist, AISD (Rebecca mentee and key influencer through the Contreras’s work with LaunchPad)

“Rebecca is the embodiment of the American dream. Her story is a testament not only to this great land of opportunity for all, but to God’s redemptive power to change our lives forever. She has been an inspiration and close counsel to me for nearly two decades, and I am confident you will also benefit from her journey and the wisdom and truths she has discovered along the way.”

—JODEY ARRINGTON, U.S. Congressman (former Rebecca Texas intern hire 1995; former White House PPO colleague)

“Rebecca Contreras’s personal story of perseverance and faith defines the essence of bold, compassionate leadership. This autobiography powerfully captures her rise from humble beginnings to one of Texas’s most inspirational entrepreneurs. It’s a must-read for anyone who wants to dream big and learn how

to achieve their goals.”

—LESLIE SANCHEZ, author of *You’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe* and CBS News
Political Analyst

“Rebecca Contreras is the ultimate American success story. She started out in the Welfare-to-Work Program and worked her way into the White House. Rebecca inspires everyone she meets. She is a loyal friend and fiercely loves God, family, and her country. Her success journey is truly a message of hope and the American dream. I believe Rebecca is one of the most astute businesswomen I have ever met, and her wisdom will help others succeed. Her autobiography, *Lost Girl*, is a must-read!”

—LISA COPELAND, Chief Expansion Officer, The Agency, eXp Realty, LLC,
Author, Speaker

“I had the pleasure of working for Rebecca Contreras at the White House. She was one of the most focused, disciplined, and results-oriented people I have ever known. But what was even more remarkable was her attitude. Anything could be accomplished. The more I learned from her, the more I learned about her—the origins of her being. Her philosophy of life was born of her own personal life experiences. With grace and determination, she took all that the world handed her and shaped it into one of the most beautiful American stories. Her very existence represents the promise and the possibility of overcoming obstacles and challenges and making life count in every way. To a large degree, I believe she hired me because she saw just a bit of me in her. Every life she touches is made more beautiful.”

—ERIC L. MOTLEY, Executive Vice President and Corporate Secretary, The
Aspen Institute, former Special Assistant to the President, The White House
(Rebecca’s deputy hire in White House PPO)

“Rebecca’s powerful story will resonate and inspire anyone who dares to dream big. I had the pleasure of working alongside her for nearly ten years, during both her early-on Executive Vice President consulting days as one of her senior

managers in the practice and for six years with her AG company as one of her senior consultants. She only sees what's possible, and not only uses all the tools in her toolbox to get there, but she teaches you how to build your own. I've had the deep privilege of hearing about her transformative journey one-on-one, and I'm so excited for her to share it with all of you."

—JEN TRESS, Senior Consultant, Public/Private Sectors (former leader on
Rebecca's team)

"I first met Rebecca in 2008 when she was Executive Vice President of another consulting firm. She gave me literally twenty minutes in between her client meetings at the USDA building in Washington DC to interview me for a new consulting role. She saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, and it started a friendship of more than thirteen years. Working with her was initially a bit intimidating with her beautiful, energetic, charismatic, and confident demeanor. She expects nothing less than perfection, pushing me to be my best. It was years later that I came to know her personal story, how she overcame the traumatic events in her life to pursue her dreams. Undeterred by not having a higher education, she learned from the ground up by capitalizing on her incredible intelligence, surrounding herself with mentors and champions, and leveraging the strengths of those around her—all leading to her amazing success."

—KAREN RARICK, Current Managing Director for AvantGarde LLC and Senior
Consulting Team Member to Rebecca

"Rebecca Contreras's riveting autobiography removes any excuses for staying stuck. Her transparency and willingness to be raw and vulnerable are marks of a true leader. Rebecca's story is a portrait of the power of the human spirit and evidence of the providence of God. The words in this book will plant hope in the heart of every reader."

—JAN GOSS, CEO, Civility Consulting and Executive Coach to Rebecca
Contreras

“If a life of bad decisions has brought you difficulties that seem too hard to overcome, then you must read my friend and former White House colleague Rebecca’s book, *Lost Girl*. Rebecca’s story is one of redemption and hope and demonstrates how God took her from humble beginnings to advising the President of the United States in the White House. Take it from me, going from a life of hopelessness to one of hope is worth more than all the gold in Fort Knox.”

— EDMUND C. MOY, 38th Director of the United States Mint (2006-2011)

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REBECCA CONTRERAS

BOSS
M E D I A

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my tremendously loving immediate family—my husband David, my son Caleb, my daughter Crystaline, my son-in-law Chris, my granddaughter Bella, my grandson Judah, like-my-second-daughter Elicia, and my great nephew Arrion (or as we call him, “Little man genius”).

I love you all dearly!

Here’s to us!

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I want to encourage and validate all those who have not given up on their dream, who have stayed the course, who have not allowed issues or challenges to take you out of the game, who have fought, reformed, changed, and pushed forward—be encouraged and stand through it all. Your dream will be realized!

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About the Author: Rebecca Contreras

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank God and His amazing hand of grace, mercy, and favor on my life. God is the supernatural fuel that keeps me going.

I want to thank my husband, David, who has been with me through it all—thick and thin, high and low, chaos and normal. You have been my biggest cheerleader. I was truly born to love you forever.

Thank you to my rock star children Crystal, Caleb, and Elicia for genuinely blessing me with the best gift ever—being your mom and having the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of my labor in your growth!

I want to thank Michelle, one of my good friends and my publisher for chasing me down for over ten years (literally) and encouraging me to write my story.

I want to thank my cowriter, Sherrie, who was amazing throughout the entire process of writing my story. I could never have depicted my journey in such a rich way without her.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Donna, my very first mentor in my state government journey. She believed and invested in me when I didn't have much to offer and didn't believe in myself.

I want to thank my long-term White House boss and twenty-year-plus mentor, Clay. Never for a moment did Clay doubt my ability to get the job done. In essence, he was the reason I had access and exposure to the president so that my work could speak for itself.

Thank you to President George W. Bush for allowing me to serve you for thirteen years, first in Texas and then in your administration in DC. In my world and in the view of so many great Americans, you are one of the best presidents

ever! I truly love and admire you.

I also want to thank my early youth leaders, Dave and Lupita, who saw my potential early on when I was a mess and didn't give up hope to see my life transformed, as well as my senior pastors, Rob and Laura, who have been by our side for twenty-five years at our home church of Shoreline Christian Center in Austin. I want to thank my spiritual advisor and executive coach, Jan, and my tremendous AG management team for all you do to help me be proud to lead you. Last, but certainly not least, my sincerest thanks to my Texas "chicas" (as I call them) and best friends Lisa, Rene, Cathy, and the other amazing women too many to name here (you know who you are), those that have invested in me and continue to cheer me on as success happens and do life with me. Having such precious friendships has really enriched my life.

And I want to thank two people in heaven who I can't wait to see again one day—my rock, Grandma Keta, for rescuing me and showing me grit and my mom, Grace, who never stopped praying for me or believing that one day I would be free and for raising my baby during the first year of her life. All the early pain I sustained as a child was undone in that one unbelievable act of redemption and selfless service to my daughter, Crystalline!

FOREWORD

It's not often you get a front-row seat to witness an event or a life that is so impactful and transformative, it requires you to take a step back and ask yourself, *How could this be possible? How could someone with a demolished foundation of body, mind, spirit, emotions, and environment dig out from the rubble of a grossly dysfunctional life? And not only dig out, but how could this same person rise to the levels of someone who was born into a two-parent home and guided and groomed from childhood with the best education to pursue professional careers and leadership roles in government and business? Most importantly, how did she become a well-rounded human being, wife, and mom grounded as a contributing member of society?*

As I reflect from my front-row vantage point, it's important to realize that we've all been given a free will and choices in life regardless of the cards we've been dealt—good, bad, or indifferent.

I first met Rebecca when she was nineteen, and it was clear to me her beauty was her blessing and at the same time, her curse. It was difficult to imagine the hellish lifestyle she knew as normal. I could see she was emotionally unstable, had no identity or value in her true self, and definitely had no way forward out of her “mess,” as she put it. But in glimpses, I saw her work hard, demonstrating that hidden underneath was a genuine “diamond in the rough” waiting to be uncovered, reshaped, and revealed as a true gem. For a diamond to grow, it requires heat and pressure, and then once discovered, it undergoes a long strategic process to bring it into its full brilliance. Rebecca's path to where she is now was similar.

Spending time getting to know my new friend Rebecca was heartwarming, but it was also shocking to learn of her radical lifestyle and upbringing. Her wrong choices and bad behaviors prevented her from moving in the right direction, but I saw her willingness to honestly deal with her past and go deep to pursue full healing. She was in a new place, surrounded by new people, and she forced herself to cut all previous ties. Her commitment to renew herself was admirable. Knowing the pain she had experienced and then watching her firsthand in our young marriage face her guilt, shame, and low self-esteem, I recognized that hard work would be needed to break through her heart, emotions, and downright negative mindsets. Yet, every step of the way, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, this young woman (then wife and mom) was willing to endure and accept the responsibilities and actions she needed to own.

How do I know she is the real deal? Well, I've been married to her now for over thirty-one years, and from my front-row seat, I've witnessed her excel. Next to my walk with God, having the privilege to parent my princess, Crystaline, and the birth of my son, it has been the best view ever. I stand in awe of her hard work, relentless drive, and tremendous accomplishments, and even more so her passion and love for people and community.

Today, she is adored by her adult children and young grandchildren. In every step Rebecca took to ascend to the highest ranks in state government, adviser to a U.S. president, and the CEO of her multi-million-dollar company, she never wavered in the love, nurturing, and caring she provided to her family. She is truly a high-capacity woman in every sense of the phrase.

There's a passage in Proverbs that describes her so well. It says, "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. ... Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her" (Proverbs 31:10-12, 28 NIV).

This is my Rebecca, and as you read her transformative story, I hope you find

encouragement in your own journey and life that truly anything is possible.

David Contreras

Founder, LaunchPad The Center

Beloved husband of thirty-one-plus years

INTRODUCTION

“Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

—ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Pauper to princess...pit to palace...fairytales we tell our children at bedtime to lull them to sleep and help them escape into a world where they can dream big.

But for me as a child, there were no fairytales, only nightmares of a lost girl who desperately searched for her way in the dark, only to find monsters of every shape and kind.

This isn’t a book of fiction. It’s my story. Growing up I didn’t know how to dream, let alone make those dreams a reality. All I knew was survival and a deep desire to break the cycle of poverty, pain, addiction, bad behavior, and poor choices. All I needed was a stable job to get my baby daughter and me off welfare.

A GLIMPSE INSIDE THE JOURNEY

Lost Girl: From the Hood to the White House to Millionaire Entrepreneur exposes the raw truth about my life—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and how I really did go from rags to riches, pit to palace, and pauper to princess (at least feeling like one at times).

So join me in my journey from lost girl to powerhouse success. We’ll start at the beginning with the intimate and painful experiences of my past, including unthinkable issues such as child abandonment and sexual abuse. But we won’t

stay there. I'll also tell you about the unconditional love of a grandmother, my hero, who somehow made everything right. You'll hear the story of my mother's transformation from drug addict to champion, and how she stood by my side when the tables turned and I needed her most. I'll divulge my party lifestyle and the violent rape and attempted murder I experienced after a drug dealer and monster nearly ten years my senior manipulated me into a toxic relationship when I was sixteen and how I got away and eventually erased him from my life.

And we're just getting started.

Strap yourself in because the ride gets wilder. I'll share how I broke away from a physically, emotionally, and spiritually abusive home and started working in a government welfare-to-work program with only a GED. That GED took me from the hood to the Office of the Texas Governor, and eventually all the way to the White House. I'll take you behind the scenes, telling you what it's like to work for the most powerful man in Texas, and then later, for the most powerful man on this planet—the president of the United States—as a special advisor. I'll reveal how I founded a company with no prior business experience and how I turned that business into a multi-million-dollar enterprise.

I had no manual to refer to, no script to memorize and repeat, and no step-by-step program to follow. Instead, I'll describe the unexpected, unsolicited, and powerful transformative moments that took me off a familiar path of dysfunction and destruction onto a new path of focus, grit, faith, and success. I'll show you how I teamed up with mentors and others who believed in me and how they helped me break one glass ceiling after the other with each achievement. No one—and I mean no one—makes it flying solo.

Of course, no good fairytale would be complete without a knight in shining armor. He's in this story too, so enjoy the unfolding of one of the most challenging but greatest love stories of a Texas power couple (so we're told).

And then...

GET READY TO DREAM

My life is proof that bad stuff happens, sometimes really bad stuff outside your control, but dreams do come true, sometimes when you least expect them. Regardless of your past, your mistakes, the roadblocks in your way, your present circumstances, and how lost you feel, it's never too late. The future and the path you choose are what matters the most.

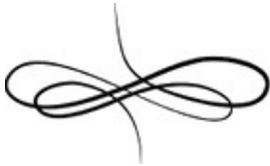
So, turn the page and brace yourself for this bumpy and winding journey from hopelessness to belief, from anger and hatred to the purest love and forgiveness. It's a journey you'll want to take, because even before we get to the end, you'll realize that anything, and I mean anything, is possible, and dreams do in fact come true.

Success is always born out of adversity if people are willing to step outside of their comfort zone and "kill it" in life! It's just waiting for you to come out of the dark so you can find your purpose.

Dream big, work hard, and believe. Then hold on tight and get ready to soar!

CHAPTER ONE

BORN IN FAILURE



“... whenever you get hung up and locked into the past, you’re robbing yourself of the present and definitely the future.”

—QUINCY JONES



I was born on New Year's Day 1969. For many it is a day full of hope, promises, and resolutions, but for my twin brother, Earl, and me, it was the start of a life full of abuse and trauma, poverty and neglect, rejection and abandonment, unforgiveness and shame. As my mother gave birth to us at a military hospital at Fort Bliss, we had no idea what awaited us on the other side of those walls, but it wouldn't take long before we began learning lessons that no child should learn, seeing things no child should see, and hearing things no child should hear.

Fort Bliss is at the foot of the majestic Franklin Mountain Range in El Paso, Texas. However, my early years were anything but majestic. My mother, Graciela "Grace" Stanley, lived in abject poverty, and by default, so did we. But she did have beauty and plenty of it. At five-foot-eight-inches tall with long, thick black hair, she could stop traffic—cars on the street or those looking for love in a dark bar.

Mom's beauty was matched by her fun-loving, carefree spirit, which did nothing to motivate her to get serious about life, even for the sake of her children. The only reason we were born on a military base was because she happened to be dating a soldier stationed there when she went into labor. Neither she nor anyone else in my family had ever served in the U.S. military.

Instead, Mom was a school dropout. By fourteen, she was already experimenting with alcohol and gateway drugs, then moved on to hardcore drugs like hallucinogens and heroin. These quickly took over her life, and whatever money she earned working odd jobs as a young adult, from dancing to prostitution, she used to buy her drugs.

At nineteen, she had her first child, Daniel. My mother rarely spoke of his father because he had a wife and children., Earl and I were born about eighteen months later. She told us our father was from Yugoslavia, a man named Johnny,

with whom she had shared a one-night stand. She met him at one of the clubs where she worked as a go-go dancer. (Back then, you could cross the United States/Mexican border to party and work, so she often took dancing gigs in Juarez too.)

As I got older, I pushed my mom and grandmother to tell me the truth about my father. Mom finally answered my questions. “Okay,” she said. “You wanna know the truth? I’ll tell you the truth. You’re eighteen now, and I don’t want you living your life not knowing.”

She gave me the shocking details: My father was the co-owner of the bar where Mom danced. He was also bisexual, and he ran the bar with his gay lover. My mother made a bet with a fellow dancer that she could get Johnny to sleep with her. She won, and Earl and I are the result of her victory. When she found out she was pregnant, she quit her job and never told Johnny about the pregnancy. Because Johnny was married with children, Mom felt strongly he wouldn’t want anything to do with the pregnancy.

Although I now had more answers regarding my conception, receiving this new revelation just as I was entering adulthood wreaked havoc upon my self-worth. For the next several years, I believed I was a mistake, and the guilt was sometimes more than I could understand or bear. That’s all I know about my father, and neither the original story nor this recent version is inspiring. To this day, my father remains faceless.

When my mother was pregnant with Earl and me, she married a man with the last name of Stanley. My grandmother told me he was a kind and caring man who truly loved my mom. He was willing to raise us with her and take care of her, no questions asked. Three months after the nuptials, however, she had the marriage annulled but kept his last name, which would become my maiden name.

She continued her drug and alcohol abuse, even during her pregnancies. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know any different; my grandmother begged her to stop using drugs and told her they could harm the babies growing inside her, but

Mom didn't listen. Her addictions far outweighed any common sense. She never once feared what this might do to her children. Therefore, Daniel was born under the influence of hard drugs, Earl and I were LSD babies, and my younger sister was an alcohol baby.

Earl and I were also born prematurely and breach, lucky to be alive. My mother had no idea she was having twins until she was in labor. When the doctor told her that her babies were breach and that she was twins, she became hysterical and had to be sedated during our delivery. I'm not sure why she wasn't given a C-section, as she nearly died on the birthing table after delivering us.

My birth weight was only two and a half pounds, and Earl weighed five pounds. He obviously received most of the nutrients in utero. Between my malnourishment and inability to suckle, I spent my first two months of life in the hospital being fed intravenously. My grandmother was the only one who came to visit me as I lay in the clear bassinet, tubes extending from my little body to medical machines. She listened with hurt and frustration as I cried inconsolably for hours from the withdrawal symptoms I was going through.

Later in life, my mother's memories were swept clean of the role her drug use had played in my birth; she remembered only how beautiful I was. Smiling so big with love and pride she'd say, "Becky, when you were born, you had a little perfect button nose. Everything about you was perfect, so tiny, tiny, tiny. I could hold you in the palm of my hand." She'd hold up her palm as a demonstration of my diminutive size. Then she'd say, "I thought you'd break and die because you were so little." Mother was loving in her personality; she just had addiction and mental health challenges that kept her bound.

My grandmother, Keta, confirmed my mother's stories about how tiny I was. She called me a "miracle baby." And my birth was a miracle, but as it turned out, Keta would become a miracle too, an island of safety, love, and stability in the tumultuous waters of my childhood.

THE CYCLE OF DYSFUNCTION BEGINS

Enriqueta Hernandez, lovingly known as Grandma Keta, also never married, which was odd. Her long red hair, green eyes, and five-foot-six build made her a stunning woman. But her skin was her most outstanding physical characteristic. It was flawless and made her look at least a decade younger than she actually was. I am lucky to have Keta's skin genes.

One of eleven siblings, she lived with her sister Hope and Hope's husband, Willie Ramirez, an enormous man who cast an immense shadow, literally and figuratively. At six-foot-six and three hundred and fifty pounds, he was a giant with hands twice the normal size. He had to have his clothes and size-fourteen shoes custom made.

Willie was quite the womanizer in his younger days, a strikingly handsome man of Spanish descent, with thick black hair and mesmerizing blue eyes. However, her brother-in-law was also a violent man, which Keta personally experienced. One time, he held her down at gunpoint and forced her to have sex with him. As a result, she became pregnant with my mother, Grace.

After Grace was born, she and Keta lived in Hope and Willie's home. Hope took care of Grace while Keta worked as a cook at the bus station. The two sisters couldn't have been more different in personality and temperament. Whereas Keta was feisty, bold, and social, Hope was simple, quiet, and obedient. Anything Grandpa Willie said, she did or agreed to. I never heard her even raise her voice to him.

For the first nine years of my mother's life, Willie refused to acknowledge her as his child. Instead, she was told that he was her uncle. Then he found religion and came clean with her when she was nine years old, admitting that she was really his daughter. He then kicked her and Keta out of his house to make things right with his wife, Hope.

Keta never blamed Hope for anything Willie did to her. She considered Hope to be a victim of his abusive and manipulative nature as well. The two sisters stayed very close and never talked about this dirty family secret of how Willie was married to one sister and raped the other, and that a child had been

conceived during this assault.

Keta was now forced to live on her own and take care of Willie's daughter by herself. In one respect, it was probably a relief to finally be free from her abuser. In another, she was left with a tremendous amount of dissension, hate, and anger toward my grandfather. And Keta's bitterness toward Willie remained throughout the years. It seeped between the cracks of my grandmother and mother's relationship, creating an environment of dysfunction that spilled over onto and into us as well. In those younger years, we didn't understand the history they shared, the resentment and shame that kept Keta from fully embracing Grace, or the hurt she felt later, watching helplessly as her daughter fell into a downward spiral of addiction and depression. Growing up I just didn't know that there were always many secrets and lies, so many things hidden that had yet to be uncovered.

MOM GOES MAD

Living with Mom involved moving frequently. The government housing program was not tolerant of drug abuse, and my mother was busted several times by social workers for it. We bounced from one project to another in El Paso, and they were rife with crime, including prostitution and drug deals. We moved at least three times before I was six.

Keta lived with us until I was about five. She was the anchor that provided stability despite all the moves. Regardless of where we lived, Mom usually left us while she went to party, and Keta would be there for us. Consequently, she became like a mother to us and acted as a buffer against my mother's negligence and other bad decisions.

In 1972, Mom had taken her bad decisions to a whole new level. Angel dust, a hallucinogenic drug also known as PCP, was the big craze. Mom not only experimented with it but started using it on a regular basis. She was often "out of it," even when she was at home with us kids.

In this particular incident, Mom had consumed too much angel dust, and ended

up having a really bad “trip” that lasted for days. Her friends later reported that she had sat in a puddle talking to birds and believed she saw her friend turn into a jaguar in front of her while watching TV. She felt she was in so much danger that she went crazy and had to be admitted to the Big Spring State Hospital, the biggest mental hospital in Texas at the time. I was only three years old.

The doctors found that she had basically lost her mind and had noted “life admittance” on her paperwork, which I still have today. They told Keta that her daughter had fried her brain cells and would never return to mental stability. They declared her completely mentally gone.

So, Mom disappeared from our lives for an entire year. It was a tough time for us all, but Grandma Keta took care of us. Mom underwent shock therapy and lived in a padded cell. She had some violent episodes, constantly tore all her clothes off, and habitually resorted to biting and scratching the attendants while her system detoxified from drugs and alcohol.

Grandpa Willie’s sister, Lupe, was the only one able to calm her down, and thus was the only approved visitor. She sang songs to my mother in that padded cell and prayed over her while feeding her and combing her hair. But we were never allowed to visit—not once the entire year. We didn’t know where our mother was. Grandma Keta didn’t tell us what was going on, other than that our mother was sick. Whether she would return was uncertain.

But Mom surprised everyone. One year later, she miraculously “snapped out of it” and despite her being admitted for life, was released from the mental hospital. She promised Grandma Keta the moon, assuring her that she had quit using drugs and drinking alcohol. But it was just her way of shutting Keta up, getting her off her back and getting her own way.

I was so happy when Mom walked through our front door. She was back home, and we were all together again. Her pale and taut appearance worried me, though. Even at the young age of four, I knew something didn’t look right. I’d sit on her lap and hug her tight, hoping it would make her feel better.

Mom did start feeling better. Sadly, she didn’t take advantage of her detoxified

system. Within a week, she was out on the street again, breaking every promise she had made to Keta.

Of course, Grandma Keta was hurt. She had believed in her only daughter once more, only to again be betrayed with more salt poured into this open wound of broken promises. This hurt turned to anger and unforgiveness in my grandmother's heart for decades to come, right up until just before her death more than forty years later. Her ability to trust had been permanently broken.

RATS, ROACHES, AND ABUSE

Now that Mom was back to her old habits, she constantly left for one reason or another and for no reason at all. I don't recall one night then when my mother was home.

Keta continued her job as a full-time cook at the bus depot, and she couldn't take care of us from early morning into late afternoon. Mom still went out, so she volleyed us around to whoever was available, leaving us at different homes. It's something we had come to expect. The unexpected, however, came when Earl and I fell victim to not-so-nice people that Mom would leave us with.

Two in particular were Mark and Connie, a couple with whom my mother had a close relationship. She trusted them and left us with them on a regular basis. On the surface, Mark and Connie were a nice, church-going couple, which was probably why she felt they were safe. She told us to call Mark "Uncle."

They lived in a tiny hut surrounded by dirt near the border of Juarez. It was full of rats and roaches. We weren't naïve about roaches because we also lived in filth. Mom wasn't clean at all: There were always dirty clothes lying around, dirty beer bottles and food out on the table, dirty dishes piled up. As a result, we had a disgusting number of roaches, so many that I'd have to pick them out of my cereal. Maggots thrived in our trash cans, and flies were the status quo.

Connie was a mean-spirited woman and a strong disciplinarian, often punishing us for minor offenses like messing up the couch or refusing to eat our dinner, things most kids do. She terrorized us by saying, "The rats are going to get you if

you don't behave." Sometimes she locked Earl and me in a small dark bathroom for hours with the rats and the roaches—not just any roaches but the large Texas kind, all crawling around. We would curl up, hold each other, and cry.

Connie's threats were emotionally tormenting and exacerbated my fear of roaches and of the dark, scarring me to this day. Even a decade after I got married, I couldn't turn off the light and crawl into bed because I didn't know what awaited me in the dark. I would run and jump into bed, and once there, I tucked my sheet tight under my body because I knew firsthand what might await me. Roaches weren't harmless, not if they were hungry and there were more roaches than food. Oftentimes as a child, I would wake up in the mornings to find large red bumps that itched like crazy. I suspected that roaches had made their way under my covers and bit me.

At some point, Mark began to sexually abuse Earl and me, making us sit on his lap while fondling us, me always underneath my dress. He'd threaten me by saying, "If you tell your mom, I'll hurt you." I was traumatized, as was Earl. Although I was only five years old, I knew that what he was doing was wrong, and I felt dirty afterwards like I had done something wrong. Every time Mom said, "Oh, you're going to stay with Uncle Mark and Aunt Connie," I would cringe, remembering what they had done and fearful it would happen again.

I tried to tell her what Uncle Mark was doing, despite his threats. I would cry, "Mom, they hurt us. They're mean."

It didn't matter. She'd shake her head, purse her lips, and refute my claims. "Shut your mouth," she scolded me. "That's not true. They're nice people. Quit making up stories."

Either she didn't believe Earl and me, didn't want to believe us, or she just blocked it out; I never could tell. It hurt that she didn't believe me, but mostly it left me feeling ashamed. I thought, *Mom doesn't believe me because she doesn't believe her friends can do something so dirty and wrong. But it happened, so it must be my fault.*

Later, as a young adult, I tried to sit down and talk frankly with my mother

about my childhood, but the conversation was too painful for her, I think. She denied it again and again. It was easier to reject it and say it never happened than to deal with it.

MY ROCK, KETA, LEAVES

That same year, my mother once again got involved with a violent man, a soldier at Fort Bliss. He beat her when they got drunk together. Alcohol, sex, drugs, and violent men seemed to be mom's way of life. Grandma Keta didn't like the new boyfriend, but Grace was crazy about him despite the black eyes and busted lips. Keta was worried that her daughter would throw caution to the wind and get pregnant with another child she would refuse to take care of.

So, Keta drew a line in the sand in the only way she knew how. She threatened, "Grace, if you end up pregnant again, I'm not going to be around. You're not going to do this to me again. These kids need you." She thought the threat of her absence might force her daughter to finally become a responsible parent, to put her children first. No doubt she was also still feeling the sting of betrayal from Mom's relapse since leaving the hospital a couple of years ago. She probably thought she was enabling Mom's bad behavior by staying around, and actually believed that Grace could get her act together on her own. But, of course, she couldn't. She was struggling with addiction and, as we found out when I became an adult, mental illness that included bipolar disorder.

Mom got pregnant anyway, and Grandma moved out, keeping to her word. I know what a difficult decision it was for her, that she didn't want to leave us alone because we were all so little. (Earl and I were five, and Daniel was almost seven.) She promised us she would be close by, that she would not be gone forever.

Her leaving marked the end of an era for us. We were so close to Grandma Keta. She was the only secure thing we had in our lives, and when she left, the security left with her. To make sure we were taken care of and that someone cooked dinner for us, she took some of her small earnings as a cook at the bus

depot and hired a part-time hourly nanny, who came from Juarez, Feli, but it wasn't the same.

Grandma Keta's plans to force mom to change by moving out were made in vain. Mom continued to use drugs. She also brought home men who routinely beat her even though she was pregnant. So we lived with beatings and saw the results—black eyes or fistfuls of hair gone from her head.

Once, at five years old, I awoke to my mother screaming. Thinking she was being hurt, I rushed into the living room and found her having sex with one of her boyfriends in the living room. I had seen this happen frequently, but that did not make it less traumatic to my young and vulnerable mind. Witnessing these things at such a tender age made me very uncomfortable. I instinctively knew that doing this in front of me, in front of any child, wasn't normal.

I covered my ears and tried so hard to pretend I couldn't hear the screaming reverberating through the thin walls of my small bedroom. Not all of them came from Mom, though. Some nights she and her friends would watch horror movies, like *The Exorcist*, on TV and turn up the volume. Each cry of pain and fear filled me with terror. So much violence demonstrated in front of us was more than my young brain could process. I felt stuck in a nightmare of habitual trauma.

Then another social worker busted Mom again for using drugs, and again we were evicted from our apartment. No other apartments were available at the time, or if they were, Mom had already burned bridges with them. We were put on a waiting list for another housing assistance apartment.

With nowhere else to go, Mom's friend Linda offered to let us stay with her until something came through. We packed up the few belongings we had and moved into Linda's double-wide trailer.

Linda was a large and loud woman, but so was my mother. After she quit dancing, she spent her life doing drugs and eating obsessively, so Mom struggled with obesity most of her adult life. Also, Linda had a live-in lover and several children, making the double-wide even more crowded. Altogether, more than ten of us lived in that small trailer at the same time. My mother, siblings, and I

shared a single bedroom that was barely large enough to hold a full-size bed. There was no privacy, and we heard and saw many things we should not have.

NEW SISTER, NEW APARTMENT, OLD HABITS

Thankfully, we only had to live with Linda for a few months before another apartment became available, and not a moment too soon. On June 3, 1975, Mom gave birth to my sister, Amber. I was six years old.

Amber was biracial; her father was black, and my mom was Hispanic. She had the most beautiful blue-grey eyes, perfect facial features, and tight locks of curls in her hair with a hint of gold. I would adoringly study her pretty face and think how I couldn't wait for her to grow up so I could dress her up and play house with her.

We had little-to-no supervision after Amber's birth, so Daniel, Earl, and I all pitched in and got used to taking care of ourselves and a new baby. When Mom did stay home in the evenings, many times she'd just bring the party to her. Strangers came and went, living it up to all hours of the night. Often, I woke up in the morning to several bodies sprawled across blankets on the floor, passed out after getting high or drunk all night.

We were now back to having our sleep interrupted by loud music, television, or my mother having sex with abusive men, high as a kite. Full of fear that something bad would happen to me, I did my best to always keep quiet and to myself, to not disturb anything on those evenings. I found ways to escape in my head. My grandmother told me that I was quite the shy, timid young girl. So many times no one even realized I was in the room, but I was an observer. When these scary incidents happened, I sat in a corner, wherever I could find peace and quiet, and held and rocked myself to calmness. Mom would later tell me, "Becky, your favorite position was rocking in the fetal position."

But did she ever stop to wonder why?

MOM ABANDONS US

I remember distinctly the day my mother left. Daniel was seven, Earl and I were six, and Amber was about six months old. That night, Mom had been arguing with Amber's father. And again, he began to beat her. Mom wasn't one to take a beating lying down, so fist fights ensued regularly. Although we hated the fights, they had become the norm with this man.

In this particular fight, Mom and Amber's father started arguing in the bedroom. He stormed down the hallway, and she pursued him as the yelling intensified. We huddled together in our bedroom, trying to ignore what was happening in our tiny apartment. But then a crashing sound—like something had been thrown against the wall and broken—interrupted the screaming. Amber started screaming from her small crib in the corner of our room. I picked her up to console her.

Then the sound of fists hitting body parts penetrated our thin walls.

Daniel, Earl, and I also started crying. "Please stop! Please stop!" we screamed from our room, but to no avail.

"I'm leaving," he yelled, "and I'm never coming back."

Mom's attitude immediately switched from enraged to humble as she begged him, "Please stay." She began telling him how much she loved him.

Then the door slammed.

We ran out of our bedroom and saw Mom reopening the door and yelling, "No, don't leave." Before the door shut behind her, we heard screams and wails and pleas for him to stay as she chased after him.

Finally, there was quiet. Amber stopped crying, and so did we. But that was life as we knew it: yelling, screaming, hollering, crying, and then calmness.

When Mom returned alone, she was quiet, calm, and collected. Apparently, she had pulled herself together. Then she packed her purse and announced over her shoulder, "I'm going to the grocery store."

She walked out of our front door and never came back, abandoning all four of her children. That was the last time we saw my mother for almost two years.

At the time, we thought she'd come back. After all, she told us specifically that

she was going to the grocery store. She would often leave for hours at a time, and we had learned to fend for ourselves until she got back. We had essentially become little adults. But that evening, at six years old, I changed my baby sister's diaper and put her to bed alone. I put myself to bed. The next morning, we were still alone. As the morning slowly crept into afternoon that slowly crept into evening, only to repeat the next day and then the next, we faithfully waited for her to come back, anxiously watching the door and staring out the windows, looking for any sign of her.

Finally, after three days in that apartment by ourselves, we realized she wasn't coming back. Daniel knocked on the door of the next apartment. Our neighbor opened it to a little boy staring up at her with fear in his big brown eyes. "My mommy's not home, and we need help," he stated sadly. The neighbor asked him if there was someone she could call, and Daniel gave her Keta's name and number. Keta rushed right over to pick us up. As soon as I laid eyes on my grandmother walking into our apartment, I could finally breathe. I was so relieved and happy to see her, knowing we were finally safe.

It's still difficult for me to talk about today. My mother left her babies alone in that apartment, all helpless and dependent children. I tried to create some justification for her. Was she high? Was she mentally ill? I'll never know.

From the time I was six until early in my twenties, I blamed myself. Perhaps if I had been a better daughter, more obedient, if I'd helped more around the house, she wouldn't have left. What had I done to cause my mother to not want me, to run off? As a child, and as a girl in particular, I needed a mom. When she abandoned us, I lost my self-worth, my self-love. It sent me into a spiral of insecurity and inferiority that lasted into my adult life as I continually questioned, *What have I done?* I struggled with these thoughts until I became an adult and on into my young marriage.

It took some time to come to the point where I no longer believed she intended on leaving for good, that she had just needed to get some fresh air, since she only took her purse with her. Then while she was out, something in her was triggered

and told her, “Don’t go back,” and she didn’t. Although I desperately needed to hear this explanation from her, I could never get her to talk about it later in life when I tried so hard to understand why.

Mom wasn’t a monster, and I have some gentle memories of her, but it’s difficult to reconcile those two people—the mother who combed my hair as I sat on her lap, the mother who told me she loved me all the time, and the mother who allowed us to live in filth, the mother who chose her drugs, alcohol, and men over us. The mother who left her children alone.

When I became a mother myself, I started to realize deep in my heart that my mother did love me and was doing the best she could with the limitations and addictions she had. As an adult, I began to give her lots of grace and forgiveness for those early years. Still, I needed answers for closure. When I asked her questions about our lives growing up, she always answered by saying, “I am both Mom and Dad to you guys. I did the best I could with what I had.”

Her response was difficult to accept early on. But as I have aged and matured, I’ve gleaned a better understanding of her mental health issues and come to grips with her plight.

Perhaps those ten-plus years of hard-core drug use and the electric shock treatments she received in the mental hospital caused irreversible damage to her brain, wiping out some of her memories. It would explain a lot but not everything.

LIFE WITH KETA

Grandma Keta brought us to her small efficiency apartment. Since we had no idea where my mother was or whether she was ever coming back, Keta knew she needed to do something because her place was barely big enough for her. Where was she going to put three children and a baby? So she called the two people she could turn to for help—Grace’s father, Willie, and her sister Hope.

“Grace has run off,” she proclaimed. “She’s left the kids. I have them now.”

Hope and Willie had moved to Austin but kept their small two-bedroom house

in El Paso, and it was vacant. Grandma Hope told Willie that he needed to let Keta live in it with us kids, but Willie was reticent to give it up. He preferred to keep it empty for “his use” when he visited El Paso, but Grandma Hope put her foot down. “This is how it’s going to be, Willie,” she decreed. “Keta needs a house for those kids.” Grandma Hope finally stood up to Grandpa Willie, which was a big deal, and made it happen for us.

And thus began the best and most normal years of my childhood, living with Grandma Keta in this small house in a regular neighborhood in El Paso for nearly four wonderful years. Grandma and Daniel took one bedroom, and Earl, Amber, and I took the other. We had a real kitchen and a bathroom and a living room. There were kids playing outside. We even established little family traditions that only come with a sense of normalcy and routine. For example, every Sunday, Grandma Keta made a pot roast and cookies or a cake. She was the best cook around! I remember watching her in the kitchen and feeling in awe of her. I wanted to be just like Grandma Keta.

She was poor, but she supported us and gave us much needed orderliness and stability. She paid all the utilities for the house and bought our food, clothes, and school supplies. Keta was also a saver, loving to put aside whatever little left-over money she had. She took a second job every fall, saving every penny to make sure the holidays were special for us. Fortunately, she didn’t have a mortgage payment or need to pay rent, thanks to Grandma Hope.

I never once heard Grandma Keta bad-mouth my mom growing up, although as an adult I learned that she had protected me from her negative feelings toward my mother—anger, shame, resentment, confusion, unforgiveness—all the same things that my mother struggled with, and I struggled with later as well. The challenges passed down from one generation to the next were obvious.

Still, I never saw Grandma Keta cry. I never saw her raise her voice. I never saw her angry. She never blamed anyone for anything. She was the most emotionally stable human being I have ever known—an ox, unmovable. Her priorities were love, compassion, and stability. Keta was my hero, and she made

a tremendous impact upon our lives. To this very day, when my siblings and I talk about her memory, we call her “Mom Keta.”

Although we flourished and thrived with Grandma Keta, I still had a gaping hole left by my mother. So, I made my own new Christmas tradition. Every time someone asked me what I wanted for Christmas each year, I’d respond, “I just want Jesus to bring my mother back home to me.”

What made it worse was that no one knew where she was. I would overhear Keta on the phone with Hope, telling her, “No, we haven’t heard from her,” or “We have no idea where she is. Who knows if she’s living on the streets?”

Fear filled my young heart when I heard she might have been alone on the streets. I was concerned she would get hurt and no one would find her, so I prayed that God would bring her back to me, that wherever she was in the world, she was safe.

And I wasn’t the only one. Grandma Hope, a woman of great faith, told me she believed God that we would find my mom, that she would be safe and come home. She had been the one who taught me to pray, and now her lesson for me was to take those prayers and apply faith to them.

So many people were praying for my mother—Grandma Keta and Hope and even Willie’s daughter, Ida, who was my mother’s half-sister—all of us were waiting and hoping and praying during those years for Mom to come home.

MOM RETURNS

Grandma Hope was the one who found her. She and Grandpa Willie just so happened to be in El Paso for a tent revival. They had traveled from their home in Austin, where Grandpa now pastored a Pentecostal church at the corner of Garden and Holly Streets in an inner-city East Austin neighborhood. Before they arrived, however, they got into a car accident. Grandpa Willie got pretty banged up to the point of being bedridden, so he and Grandma Hope stayed with us while he recovered.

Hope decided to go shopping and stopped at the Woolworth’s counter for a cup

of coffee. As she sat on the stool, she stared at the large mirror behind the counter. She scanned the reflection of other diners in the mirror, then froze as her eyes landed on a young woman drinking coffee a few feet away. The shape of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the profile that was revealed as the woman turned her head when a server dropped a tray—it was all too familiar.

Hope studied the young woman a bit longer. Her heart raced as she realized whom she was watching. *That has to be my Grace*, she thought. *That has to be my Grace*. She really saw Grace as hers, as a second daughter.

But it didn't add up. When Grace had left two years ago, she weighed around three hundred pounds; this woman was tiny, emaciated, about 110 pounds, straight black hair down to her thighs, dressed in a skimpy outfit of fringed tight leather pants and matching jacket.

Despite the extreme disparity in weight, Grandma Hope knew. She walked over to my mother, and they had a wonderful reunion. Years later, Mom told us that was the best day of her life. She admitted to being in bad shape at the time—strung out, hungover, sitting on that Woolworth's stool and contemplating her life and failures. She had literally been living on the streets, and she was asking God for a miracle. Then Grandma Hope showed up.

When Hope came home that afternoon, we were playing outside with some of the neighborhood kids. Daniel was now nine, and Earl and I were nearly eight. A few minutes later, Keta called us inside, and she didn't look happy. Concerned that something bad might have happened, I glanced over and saw Grandma Hope with a huge grin on her face. Confused, my eyes went back to Keta to figure out what was going on.

Keta said, "Grandma Hope has found your mother. She's here in El Paso, and she's fine."

We were ecstatic, jumping up and down and squealing with delight. "When can we see her?" we kept asking, almost in unison.

Amber was now two and a half years old. She watched her older siblings, observing our joy but not joining in. She didn't know who this "Mom" was and

didn't understand the excitement. Grandma Keta was the only mother she knew.

Grandma Keta shared Amber's lack of enthusiasm but for different reasons. She gave us a few moments to celebrate before dropping the bad news. Thinking this was another one of my mom's temporary façades, she was upset. She didn't want us to see Mom and didn't want Mom to see us. "Grace needs to clean up her act before she comes back into her kids' lives," she asserted to us all. "I'm not gonna have it. I don't want her around."

She had suffered more than Hope and Willie had from my mother's inability to get clean. Plus, she was protective of us, worried about what it might do to us to be reunited with our mother only to have her abandon us again or to go back into the same cycle of poverty, neglect, and drug abuse.

How quickly we had forgotten it all.

"But Grandma Keta," we started with our defense, "Mom is back! Please, can we see her? Please!"

After realizing how much we wanted to see our mom, she finally relented. "Okay, okay," she said, "I guess the kids can see her, but only if we're there." She pointed to Hope and herself, her raised eyebrows and set jaw telling us that this decision was final.

It was a good thing that Keta agreed since Hope had already arranged for our mother to come see us the next day and told her our address and the closest bus stop. Back then, we didn't have cell phones, and she couldn't call Mom and tell her not to come. She just figured she'd be able to talk her sister into the visit.

I'll never forget the day she returned. It was the happiest day of my young life. I loved my mother so much. I woke up early, combed my hair, placed a big bow in it, and put on my best dress and shoes. I was going to see my mommy, and I wanted to look beautiful. God had answered my prayer, and I was going to have her back.

We all sat in the living room waiting. The bus stop was two blocks from our house, but we could hear the buses pull up and the pneumatic hiss of opening doors. All day I trained my ears to that sound, and when I heard it, I'd run to the

front door, swing it open, and look out.

Grandma Hope had said Mom lost a lot of weight, so I knew I wasn't looking for the same woman from two years ago. Time and time again, I'd go and look outside for a thin woman who could be my mom, only to learn that it wasn't her, then again it wasn't her, and again it wasn't her—until it was.

I recognized her right away. She had the same face I used to study when she held me in the past. I yelled, "It's Mom! It's Mom!" I thought my heart would burst out of my chest.

Daniel, Earl, and I darted out the door and ran to meet her. We circled her and hugged her legs. She smelled of smoke and alcohol and other things I didn't recognize, but we didn't care. We had waited for her for so long.

Then fear overcame my joy. I wondered, *What if she rejects me again? What if she pulls away and refuses to accept me?* My feelings of unworthiness did not go away simply because she came back. I had forgiven her, but had she forgiven me for whatever I had done that caused her to leave us in the first place?

Then a hand lightly touched my back...and stayed. My mother was welcoming me, accepting me, and I'll never forget that moment. Mom was finally home, and she wanted me too. All was well with my world. We were her children, and she was our mother. I forgot about all the abuse and pain, the tremendous trauma, the poverty, the screaming and fighting. It all melted away in that moment.

I wouldn't learn until I was a teenager how joyous that time was for my mother. During one of our talks, she admitted, "I was so ashamed as I walked to the house because I didn't know how you kids were going to receive me. I didn't know what you would say, whether you would yell or kick or scream. And you came, you circled me, you grabbed me. All you showed me was love—it was the most demonstrative display of God's love that I had ever seen."

As we walked her to the house, I noticed how sick she was. Her smile couldn't hide her sunken eyes, and her sleeveless top revealed small round bruises connected by a thin line. I didn't know it at that time, but those were track marks

created by needles used to shoot up drugs.

As soon as we walked inside, she glanced around and asked, “Where’s my dad?”

We pointed to the bedroom down the hall. She rushed to his room with us following behind her like baby ducklings. We witnessed her falling at Grandpa’s feet and begging him for forgiveness, and we saw him praying for her.

I had no memories of my mother sober, not for a single day. She had spent the last ten years of her life abusing drugs daily. But on that day, she was delivered from her addiction, and she never used drugs or alcohol again.

Call it a miracle. Call it rock bottom. Call it deliverance. Whatever it’s called, my mom had finally had enough.

GONE AGAIN

My mother had come to a place of brokenness, of complete and total surrender as she called out to God. At eight years old, I believed this meant I would have my mother back, that everything was going to be great after that. But that was not how it was going to be.

Within a week of Mom’s return, Grandpa Willie recovered nicely and was ready to get back to tent revival or as he called it “saving souls.” We were sitting around the dinner table when he announced, “Grace is going on the road with me to preach the gospel and talk about God’s miracle in her life. We’ll be leaving in two days.” He now had an ace card with verifiable proof of God’s redeeming power. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops that his prodigal daughter had returned.

As an adult, I can look back and recognize that he wanted to take her on the road, to parade her around the churches and tent revivals, and have her testify to how God had delivered her. I can understand that he probably also wanted her close to him to keep an eye on her. I’m sure that he didn’t want to risk her slipping back into her old lifestyle.

But as a child, this was all a slap in the face. Mom was leaving us yet again,

and I didn't understand why she needed to go. Furthermore, no one mentioned anything about us going with her. What was more confusing and disturbing was that she didn't seem to put up a fight to stay with us and keep us, except for a weak argument or two. Then she told us, "I'm moving to Austin with Grandma Hope and Grandpa Willie to help him pastor and grow his church and to serve God. That's where God's calling me, and y'all are gonna stay here with your grandmother."

Then she was gone.

It was hurtful, and I felt betrayed and abandoned all over again. But this time, the abandonment happened because "God was going to use her."

Afterward, Mom would visit us about once every other month, making the 1,200-mile round trip to El Paso. She always brought gifts and goodies, but since Mom and Keta didn't get along, she could only tolerate about three days with us. Then she'd be off again.

At the time, I wasn't privy to the behind-closed-door arguments where my mother had begged Keta over and over, saying, "They're my kids, and you need to let me have them," and Grandma Keta's refusal each time: "I'm not gonna let you have them until you prove you're clean. You've only been clean for a few months, and this God situation, I don't care about."

The adults also didn't share with me that Keta had threatened to challenge my mother's custody in court and that my mother had resolved not to fight a legal battle with her own mother. Keta's history with my mom was longer than ours, and she carried more knowledge of past events than we did. She held too many previous hurts and betrayals, and she remembered Mom's many broken promises to change. In her mind, it was still all a big show. She was not ready to send us back.

We stayed with Grandma Keta for nearly two more years. During that time my resentment festered, my anger at God grew, and my questions as to why we couldn't have gone with her went unanswered. But she was still our mom. And this time we knew where she was, and we longed to be with her.

At one point, Mom offered to take Earl, Amber, and me, and leave Daniel with Keta. But Keta said, “If you’re gonna rip my heart out, just do it all at once. I’m not splitting them up.” After taking care of us for four years, Keta felt like our mother, and we were her children.

But Keta knew enough time had gone by for my mother to demonstrate that she was off drugs, alcohol, and bad men. She saw how much we needed our mother. We were older and not as dependent. She finally relented and allowed us to live with our mom in Austin, in the home she shared with Grandpa Willie and Grandma Hope.

ENTERTAINMENT AND EXORCISMS

I was ten years old and headed into the fifth grade. For me, living in Austin with Mom was going to be an exciting journey and a great life. I was going to be engaged with her, and we were going to be a great big happy family. But it didn’t turn out that way.

Instead, I went to live with a woman who was both my mother and a complete stranger. In the two years since Grandma Hope had found her at the Woolworth’s counter, Grace had undergone the transformation from drug-addled prostitute to Pentecostal minister and teacher of the Word at *Milagros de Fe*, the Miracles of Faith Church in East Austin. The pendulum had swung from one extreme to the other, and my mother was now enslaved not to drugs but to the church, as well as Grandpa Willie’s rules and regulations.

While she was physically more present in our lives now—she wasn’t off partying or shooting up—she was emotionally unavailable. She poured her entire self into ministry. We were in church five days a week, and she was in the pulpit half the time. She also traveled with Grandpa Willie for weeks on end, evangelizing at tent revivals all over the Texas valley and into Latin America, giving her powerful testimony to thousands.

It’s a story that needed to be told, but it was our story too, and we were still suffering from it. At ten years old, all I knew was that my mother was leaving

over and over again for something more important than me.

My anticipation of excitement and a close-knit family turned into a difficult time of adjustments and disappointments. I missed Grandma Keta. She had always supported me and encouraged me, managing to make things better. Now I was on my own, with little adult guidance and support as I tried to figure it all out.

I missed my home in El Paso. For the past four years, I had known where everything was, what to expect and when to expect it. Now I was in a strange city, completely lost. To make matters worse, I was struggling academically in a strange school.

Some of these adjustments were normal for any kid moving to a different city. But all the rules, regulations, and people parading through and using our house for disturbing religious rituals were beyond the norm. At ten years old, I didn't understand why we couldn't live like other families.

When the church service had ended, we didn't just leave church and come home like most. Our home was located conveniently behind the small church, and its congregation consisted of people with significant physical and emotional needs. Every Sunday, they prayed for the sick and the down-and-out.

When prayer didn't seem to work at the church, Grandpa or Mom brought these people into our house after the service ended late at night, most of the time on school nights. They would then continue praying for them for hours on end in our home. These were not physically sick people; they were the ones with mental illnesses or other sicknesses that left them screaming while being prayed over, reminding me of *The Exorcist*. The screams and loud voices from "casting out demons" would wake me up at 11:00 p.m., 12:00 a.m., and sometimes later. At first, I ran into the living room to see what was happening, only to become terrified at the prayer sessions no child should witness. I would go over to Mom and cry, begging her to make it stop. She would brush me off and simply say, "Get back to bed, Becky."

Mom's visitors weren't all sick. She was a social butterfly and loved to cook

and entertain church people. That was what Wednesday nights were for. Those mid-week church services ended around 10:00 p.m., and she and Grandpa would invite people over to eat at our house. When this happened, I was made to wash all the dishes by myself, no matter how many there were or what time it was. It didn't matter that I was still a child at ten, eleven, and twelve years old and needed to sleep for school the next day. Mom believed firmly that she was teaching me domestic skills. It wasn't uncommon for me to finish washing the dishes around 11:00 p.m. or midnight. Only then could I go to bed. And Mom had a rule—if you don't do it right the first time, you get to do it all over again. If she found one dirty dish, she took every dish out of the cabinet and made me wash all the dishes in the cabinets. It was her way of teaching me a lesson.

Mom had taken us from late-night drug parties to late-night exorcisms and church dinners, all the while keeping us dirt poor and still on welfare. Though my mother worked constantly in the inner-city church where she ministered, it had no money to pay her a salary. Like always, Mom had yet to hold a regular job and continued to rely on the government welfare system to support us.

Apparently, the church had enough money to pay Grandpa Willie because he was getting money from somewhere. His side of the house we shared was nicely renovated with central heat and air conditioning, nice furniture, and new carpet. But we were never allowed to step inside their living quarters, and Grandpa found a way to make sure he kept us out. He installed a security door between their side of the house and ours and kept it locked.

Although we shared the same house, our living conditions were downright dismal. In the winter, our only source of heat was to light the gas stove, turn it to high, and open the oven door. In the summer, it could be a hundred degrees in the house. We'd have to take cold showers or lie in front of a portable fan on a towel soaked in cold water. Our utilities were routinely cut off. To this day, I don't understand why or how our grandpa could have allowed us to live the way we did in his own home on the other side of a locked door.

Mom wasn't fazed by the filth we had to endure. Our house was infested with

roaches—lots and lots of roaches. We learned to wait for them to scurry away when we flipped on the light at night, to step over and around them as we walked down the hall, to shower with our eyes open, and again, to pick them out of our breakfast cereal. Our house stunk from the dog and cat urine that had soaked into the carpet and stained furniture legs yellow. Mounds of animal feces were left on the floor. Fleas leapt up from the sofa, carpet, and the backs of dogs and cats.

We wouldn't have known any better had we not spent four years in basic cleanliness with Grandma Keta, and if we hadn't peeked in and seen the new carpet and furniture each time Grandpa Willie opened his security door to come into our shared kitchen. He and Grandma Hope weren't bothered in the least by our living conditions. They were just there to eat and then return to their abode.

When I told all of this to Grandma Keta—the late nights, our lack, the filth, and how Mom would leave us for weeks at a time—she was appalled. I can only imagine how infuriated she must have been to learn that my mother had taken us out of a comfortable and good life and put us back into a situation that wasn't healthy. She would also ask my mom when they chatted by phone “Grace, why did you take the kids if you're not gonna be home with them?” I would hear them arguing frequently on the phone.

Although we didn't have school supplies in the fall, new clothes, presents at Christmas, or birthday parties, to my mother's credit, we never went hungry. She made sure we had the basics: rice, beans, potatoes, and bread. There was always milk and cheese from the government. She could take these items and create amazing meals from them. I think it was one of the few activities she enjoyed doing, something to distract her from the deep depression that plagued her for her entire life. She would cook for us and feed us. But later, in the evenings, I would hear her crying in her room.

I got glimpses of this side of my mother, the mother burdened with tremendous guilt and shame over the trauma she sustained and dealt with over the years. She never processed it with a therapist or with those closest to her, even with me

when I had become an adult. Instead, she packed it away, fearful to acknowledge its existence. But it emerged anyway, showing itself through her neglect during those times when it seemed as if we weren't even there. It came out in the belt beatings she dealt us, in the buckle that landed on our backs or legs when she lost her temper. And it came out during those nights when she cried softly behind the closed door of her bedroom.

Deep down, I suspect that the present added more shame and guilt to her past, knowing that the way she made us live wasn't right, especially with Grandpa Willie living in the same house in much better conditions. She hid all this shame behind a veneer of self-confidence, which was the mother I knew—the one who stood in the pulpit and preached the gospel, who shared her testimony at tent revivals, who whipped up delicious meals even when we didn't have money for groceries, and who smothered us in hugs and kisses and told us she loved us. She hid her shame so well that finally, she hid it even from herself.

When I was in my late thirties, Mom started to show significant signs of mental illness and bipolar disorder. She went into a deep depression for about eight years, all the way up until her death of cancer at sixty-two. I always tell people that cancer didn't kill my mother, her depression did as she lost the will to fight the cancer. Despite my efforts to help her, she never dealt with the trauma in her own life, much less the trauma she created in our lives.

At nineteen, I said to her directly, “Mom, I want to understand why we grew up the way we did, why we sustained so much abuse and neglect.”

“Oh no. No, no, no, you didn't—you had a great life,” she insisted. “God has been good to us. Don't dredge up stuff that's under the blood of Jesus, that I've been forgiven for. How dare you do that?” She couldn't bear to be reminded. What she never said, what I desperately needed to hear from her was simply, “I'm sorry I hurt you. Forgive me. I was wrong.”



**“Your present circumstances don’t determine where you can go;
they merely determine where you start.”**

—NIDO QUBEIN



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