

## **Accept Me Please**

### **Chapter 1 “The Beginning of Remembering”**

Looking back, I always knew there was something missing when I thought about my life. On the surface, I had what appeared to be great parents, numerous friends, and an active social calendar. I was an overachiever, involved in everything. At the beginning of my sophomore year of college, I was involved in student government, helping to create a student organization in the social work program, and volunteering with four different organizations. I was doing okay in school, attending church three times a week, and trying to convince myself that I was in a meaningful relationship with a guy back home. My life was filled with things to do and people I loved who I felt adored me.

What I remember the most was that I perceived my life as being normal. I was raised in a lower middle class home. My parents had divorced when I was eight years old. Dad had remarried a few years before I entered college. My step mom, Alice, was nice and I was happy for my dad. I had gained three stepbrothers and a step sister in-law with the marriage. Mom and her boyfriend of six years, George, were planning on getting married after I graduated from college. They were waiting because they did not want to mess up my financial aid. Both sets of parents were very supportive of me and felt my getting a college education was a priority.

I also remember smiling and laughing all the time. Yet, I realize now that most of the time I felt lonely and sad. I did not like who I was and I did not know why. There were things that I did and felt that I did not understand. I was nineteen years old and still terribly afraid of the dark. I had slept with a night-light and stuffed animals on both sides

of me for as long as I could remember. There were many nights when I would wake up suddenly and stare at the door of my room. Sometimes I would get up and turn the handle to make sure the door was still locked and secure. I worried constantly about someone breaking in while I slept. I checked under the bed and in the closet several times each night. I was afraid to leave the window open for fear that someone might get in and harm me. I lived on the second floor and the window was not big enough for anyone to fit through. I knew that my fear was irrational, yet I could not shake the feeling that bad things happened at night.

During the night, I worried about being hurt and during the day, I worried about what people thought of me. I really wanted everyone to like me, especially men. I spent a lot of time analyzing conversations and interactions that I had with others. In high school, I dated some but nothing serious. I think my longest relationship lasted three or four months. For about two years in college I convinced myself that I was having a relationship with a guy back home. We talked a lot on the telephone at my expense, but when I went home for the weekend we did not see each other. When we did get together, we never left his apartment. I learned later that he was ashamed to be seen with me in public because I was overweight. Even after I learned this, I still thought we were having a relationship. I was about twenty or thirty pounds overweight and I felt huge. I was ashamed of my appearance. I hid the fat under layers of baggy clothing.

In class, we talked a lot about who we were and how the past shapes the present. I remembered very little of my childhood, it was like having big black holes where memories should have been.

During the fall of my sophomore year in college, I went to a friend's apartment for a study break one Friday evening. Three of us had developed a fondness for a Friday evening show, *Dark Shadows*. As we sat and talked after the show the next television program began. I am not sure what we were watching but I remember seeing a man grab his wife by the hair and then I heard her scream and beg him not to hit her. I remember hearing him hit her repeatedly.

At that moment I felt a scream rise in my throat and disappear deep inside of me. I began to shake as my body filled with fear. At that moment in time I felt as if I had left my body. Suddenly I felt like I was a little girl listening as my Dad brutally assaulted my Mom. I could not get the screaming and the sound of hands hitting flesh out of my head. I could not figure out what I was hearing or why I thought it was my Mom that I heard screaming and begging my Dad to stop. I felt like I was in a trance or had been transported back to another time.

Later I learned that the television program had brought on a flashback from an event I had witnessed in childhood. The images and sounds had been so vivid and real. I thought what I was remembering was really happening. I felt like I was six years old again listening from my bedroom as my parents fought. I shook with fear as I silently screamed and cried. My heart raced as I prayed over and over again for it to stop. I knew any minute that Mom would burst into my room begging me to shield her from Dad. I remembered the power in the blows as my Dad continued to brutally assault Mom as she lay over me on my bed. I remember promising to be good over and over again, while desperately trying to figure out what I had done wrong to cause my Mom to be punished. Words that I did not understand swirled through my head as my six-year-old ears

frantically tried to shut them out. I sensed from the way the words flew out of my Dad's tightly clenched jaws that the words were mean and hurt with as much force and impact as his fists.

Suddenly I became aware of someone calling my name over and over again. I looked up and saw my two friends staring down at me as silent tears rolled down my face. I struggled to explain what had happened and where I had been.

Over the next few weeks, I walked around in a daze trying to figure out what had happened. What did I remember? Why had it felt so real? Had I actually witnessed my Dad physically assaulting my Mom when I was a child? Why did I not remember? I was confused. I loved my parents. Why did I have so few memories of my childhood? Were the deep black holes filled with abuse and pain? On the other hand, were they filled with love and joy that I could not remember? Who were my parents really? Who was I? Had I done something so horrible to cause my Mom to be assaulted? Had it occurred more than once?

My life slowly started to spiral out of control. I began to have horrible nightmares. I dreamed of fists, flying objects, crying, and screaming. I woke in the middle of the night filled with fear. I felt horrible, sad, and alone. At first, I had a few nightmares a week. Then I began to have nightmares more and more often.

One night I dreamed it was a cold winter night. I believe I was around seven years old. In my dream I awoke to hear my parents arguing violently. At first I sat frozen with fear, then I moved quickly to hide under my bed. Mom, in an attempt to get away, ran outside wearing only a thin nightgown. I remember looking out at her standing in the snow, desperately trying to get into the car for warmth. The car was locked and no

matter how much I begged Dad would not let me open the front door of the house and let Mom inside. I promised to be good and to do whatever it took to get Mom back inside the house. I wanted so badly to run outside and keep my Mom safe and warm from the cold. The window glass felt so cold on my cheeks as I strained to see Mom standing outside alone in the dark. I cried silent tears as Mom tried to smile through bruised lips as the snow fell softly all around her. Eventually, Dad relented and Mom was allowed to come back inside the house.

I woke up crying from the nightmare. I could not get the look on my Dad's face out of my mind. He had a look of pleasure as he watched Mom from the window shouting horrible names at her. Mom had looked so scared and alone. I remember feeling so afraid that she would freeze to death standing out in the cold.

The nightmares felt so real. I became afraid to go to sleep because I might dream. I started staying up all-night and sleeping during the day. The day light felt so much safer than the dark of night. This new arrangement was okay on the days that I did not have classes but on the days when I did have classes, I had trouble staying awake. I gradually stopped volunteering and participating in other extra curricular activities.

I felt like I was beginning to go crazy. I started having trouble concentrating on homework, especially course reading. I fell further and further behind. I started taking tests that I was not prepared for. Not sleeping at night started to take its toll. I began skipping class to catch up on sleep. Sleeping during the day at first seemed a viable solution. Then the nightmares began to disturb my daytime naps. I became too terrified to sleep at all. The memories haunted my very existence.

My life as I knew it stopped with my first flashback. It sounds melodramatic now, but at the time I felt as if my life had stopped. I began to question who my parents were and more importantly, I was confused about who I was.

I remembered watching a television show about aliens who took over human bodies in the middle of the night when I was about six or seven-years-old. No one knew who was human and who was an alien inhabiting a human body. I lay awake at night trying to figure out if my parents were real or not. When things got really bad, I found myself wishing that my parents were aliens, then when I would wake up, the aliens would be gone, and great loving parents would be left behind. Sometimes I wished they were aliens so they would kill me and the violence I experienced each night would stop. Sometimes death seemed the only way out. At six or seven suicide was not a conscious thought. Wishing for death was.

My life was a mess! The flashbacks and nightmares left me emotionally and physically exhausted. When I was alone, I cried a lot. In the company of others, I was still my smiley, happy self. For a long time, no one suspected that anything was wrong. Because I use to be so busy, my dorm mates were accustomed to my being absent, sometimes not seeing me for days at a time. When I was in my room, I kept the fan on high and the television down low, so that no one could hear me. If any one knocked, I would pretend I wasn't there. I started screening all of my calls with the answering machine. I was afraid to talk to my parents. What if they detected something different in my voice? What if I said something that I did not mean? I did not know if my dreams were true or not. I loved my parents and I still believed that I had been raised in a happy home where I was loved and well cared for. I was also afraid to talk to my friends. I did

not return their calls and I stopped eating in the dining room at the dorm for fear that I would run into someone I knew. What if I looked different? I knew I felt different about who I was. How would I explain what was happening to me? I was confused about what I was experiencing.

I turned to food for comfort. Instead of feeling any relief, I felt filled yet so very empty. The more I ate the worse I felt. In order to get the bad stuff out I started to throw up. I realized what I was doing felt vaguely familiar to coping strategies I had used during my adolescence. When I was sixteen I had been bulimic. I had felt so out of control, eating to excess then purging to try and regain control again. I quickly realized that I did not want to repeat that pattern from my past and I started limiting what I was eating. Some days I was so upset that I did not eat anything.

During this time I did have days that were normal. I went to class, interacted with my peers, ate healthy, and slept through the night. At times, I had more good days than bad. At other times, I had more bad days than good. I avoided going home to spend time with my parents as much as I could.

I managed to make it through the holidays by stuffing in any feelings of doubt I had. I had become a good pretender, but my life continued to spiral out of control. I was still afraid to sleep, yet I was tired all the time. Some days I slept most of the day and all night. I cried all the time and had more difficulty pretending that things were okay. I avoided people as often as I could. I would wait until the early hours of the morning to leave my room to go down the hall to the bathroom. Sometimes I waited so long that I thought I would get sick. I did not want to see anyone out of fear that they might recognize the pain I was feeling.

The pain became more intense. Some nights I begged God to let me die in my sleep because I hurt so badly. I began to have dreams about being dragged into the woods and I would feel hands all over me. I felt like I was going crazy.

Thank goodness, some of my friends started to ask questions about what was going on. When I could not handle listening to the telephone I started unplugging it. All I wanted was peace. One day a friend called and I answered. She confronted me with missing classes, looking haggard and miserable when she had last seen me. I could not hide it any longer. I confided in her. I told her what was happening and she convinced me that I needed professional help. She even offered to go with me.

It took me a couple of weeks to make that first appointment with a counselor at the University Health Center. I was terrified that the counselor would tell me that I was crazy, I was making it all up. I felt crazy and wondered if I was suffering from an incredible imagination.

## **Chapter 2**

### **“Back to Denial”**

I realize now that I blamed many of the bad things that happened on my over active imagination. It was so much easier to convince myself that there was something wrong with me, some kind of defect with who I was, then to really look at the pain in my life.

I finally agreed to go to counseling at the Health Center because I was afraid to continue living the way I was. The dreams had become too terrifying. I would dream about hands touching me in intimate and private areas of my body. I couldn't understand why since I was a virgin. I had not allowed anyone to touch me in the ways I was dreaming about. I knew that I was not just having sexual dreams, because the touching hurt and I woke up afraid, not aroused. I could not see the faces of the persons touching me. I just felt their hands and the hard cold ground against me. I could hear the sound of laughing and feel the sting of tears as they rolled down my wind burnt face. I would try to convince myself that perhaps I had seen it all in a movie or a television show. After all, I had an over-active and fertile imagination capable of creating things that weren't really there.

This notion about my imagination came from events in my childhood. As a young child, I was told repeatedly that I had an overactive imagination, as a way of explaining experiences that I did not understand. I stopped trusting my gut reaction to experiences because I felt I could not trust what I was seeing, hearing, or sensing. I honestly believed that I made up most of what I experienced as an attention seeking behavior.

My first counseling session was on a rainy spring day. I had forgotten my umbrella in my room. By the time I arrived at the Health Center, I was cold, wet, and incredibly embarrassed by my appearance. The Health Center was less than six blocks

from my dorm, but it felt like several miles. One of my friends agreed to go with me, and I was glad to have her moral support. Actually, I knew I would have “chickened out” if Sue hadn’t agreed to come with me.

It is funny as I write this several years after it happened, that I remember the weather and not much about what had happened in the three or four counseling sessions at the Health Center. It might have been as many as six or seven sessions that I met with a counselor. I remember that I was always late which irritated my Counselor. No matter how early I got up or how early I left before the session, I was always late. I realize now that I really did not want to go and sort out what was happening in my life. It still was so much easier to believe that I was making up the dreams and that maybe I had created the situation in order to get people to pay more attention to me. I know this does not make much sense since I had become increasingly isolated since the nightmares started. In reality, I had become very alone.

I remember during one session, talking about the dreams with the hands. The night before I had finally seen the faces of the persons who were touching me. I realized that the faces belonged to two of my classmates from Junior High School. I was in the seventh or eight grade at the time. The two boys had convinced me to go into the woods with them where they covered my mouth and took my clothes off. I really did not remember much more than that, except that I was afraid and their laughing hurt my feelings.

After the session, I rushed back to the dorm for lunch. I ran into two girls who lived on my floor. We had become friends over the last few months. I proceeded to nonchalantly repeat what I had learned in my counseling session. (I only had brief

snapshots of events that had occurred in my life at this point, pictures without any feelings attached to them.) I said something like, “In counseling today I learned that I might have been sexually assaulted by two of my classmates in the woods when I was in the seventh or eighth grade. Well, would you like to go and have lunch?”

I realize now that I probably sounded like a lunatic, but at that time it was my reality. I did not have any feelings about what I was remembering and I still believed that most of the time I was making things up to get people to pay attention to me. I desperately wanted to be liked and cared for.

I can still clearly see the look of shock and horror that crossed the face of each of my friends. I remember stopping and trying to think about what I had just said. I ran the words over and over again in my mind. “I may have been assaulted and is anyone interested in lunch. “

After that neither girl ever spoke to me again. I learned a powerful and painful lesson that would take years of therapy to undo, DO NOT EVER TELL ANYONE ABOUT ABUSE OR the DYSFUNCTION IN YOUR FAMILY. (Of course, with hindsight I realize that my interpretation of events was incorrect.) Please do not believe this. You should be able to tell the people you care about and those who care about you, what you have experienced in life, both positive and negative.

Somehow, I was able to make it through the end of the semester, but barely. I received a “D-plus” in two of the five classes I was taking. It was definitely a gift from both professors. The hardest part was going home and explaining to my parents why my grades had dropped so drastically and why I looked like I had been to Hell and back.

Thank goodness for therapy. I was able to pull things together enough to be ready to return home for the summer.

That summer was a return to denial. I was able to bury deep inside all that I had learned during the course of the past six or seven months with the help of therapy. I choose to forget the internal struggles I had been consumed with to the point of begging God to allow me to die peacefully in my sleep. I returned home with a smile on my face and love in my heart. I choose to put away the nightmares, dreams, and the beginning of remembering in order to survive the summer at home.

Believe it or not, my life seemed to return to normal. Actually, I returned to being the depressed but functioning person I had always been. I put my blinders back on so I would not see the truth. I convinced my parents that I had just had a difficult semester at school and I needed a break. Therefore, I spent the summer resting instead of working. I wrapped myself safely in denial and refused to see anything other than what I had always believed about my family and myself. I was able to spend time with both my parents and stepparents and not think at all about the violence, I thought I remembered witnessing as a child.

In reality, I went back to doing what I had always done best, pretending to be a happy and healthy person and sleeping. I slept around-the-clock that summer. I would later learn that it too was a coping skill learned early in my life. My Mom shared a story with me that summer that I did not fully understand until much later in my healing journey. The story went something like this: When I was an infant, she was able to return to work without getting a baby sitter for me. Mom returned to her job and left me alone all day in my crib while Dad slept in the other room. Mom thought it was neat that she

could feed me in the morning, and go off to work. She would return home for lunch, feed and change me and go back to work again. According to Mom, she would have to wake me for my lunchtime feeding and wake me again when she returned home from work in the evening. I lay in my crib all day except for my feeding and changing during Mom's lunch. Mom always ended this story by saying I slept around the clock as a baby. In fact, she is almost sure I was born asleep. Mom also tells that if I had waken Dad during the day, I would have been beaten. She smiles as she says, "I guess you were lucky you were born sleeping." This is one of Mom's favorite stories about my infancy.

That summer in returning to denial once again, I realized how lucky I was, to be born sleeping and able to continue sleeping as a way of blocking out the truth.

### **Chapter 3** **"The Nightmares Re-Emerge"**

I returned to school in the fall of 1991 well rested and anxious to be a part of the college environment again. I was looking forward to sharing my first apartment with Sue. Sue and I had become close during the fall semester of the previous school year when we had a couple of classes together. Sue had also helped me get into counseling at the close of the previous semester. I felt good about our relationship and looked forward to living with someone again. My last semester in the dorm I had a single room which at the time had been a blessing with all that I was going through. Some how living in an apartment felt more grown up then living in a dorm. I needed to feel grown up and safe.

The summer had taken its toll on my self-esteem and self-confidence, it had been tough. When I was not sleeping or watching television, I was stuffing myself with unhealthy and fattening foods, "junk food". I felt numb and empty on the inside and outside. I thought that I was coping well, in reality I was not coping at all. I had come

close to shutting down completely. I did not feel much of anything below the surface, yet no one knew because I kept on smiling. If anyone had looked closer, they would have seen that I had begun to die on the inside. My overall appearance had changed as well. I had gained close to thirty pounds over the spring and summer. I was embarrassed about my weight and tried to hide it under super baggy clothing. The bigger the clothes the better. I know now that I was hiding more than my weight under those baggy unbecoming clothes. I also began to grow my hair longer so it covered my face. By the end of the school year, my professors and classmates could tell what kind of day I was having by how much of my face they could see under my hair. If my hair was pulled back, then I was open to taking in information, feedback and sharing how I was feeling. If my face was hidden under my hair, I was withdrawing into myself and had probably shutdown to protect myself.

I moved into my new off campus apartment a couple of weeks prior to the start of the fall semester of my junior year in college. Sue and I quickly met our neighbors. Two guys shared the apartment across from ours and one guy lived in the efficiency apartment that was located next to the apartment of the guys across the hall. My roommate from my freshman year, Barbara, also came back to school early. The six of us quickly became fast friends. We left our doors open when we were home so we could go in and out of each other's apartments more freely. The two weeks before the start of classes were the happiest that I could remember in years.

The week classes resumed things changed drastically. At first, Sue and I had gotten along wonderfully. We stayed up late at night talking and sharing our dreams about the future. We both had huge crushes on the guys across the hall. We talked about

them for hours. Sue quickly became like a sister. As an only child, I had never experienced having a sister before. This was a new and pleasant experience. Then one day, three weeks into living together, Sue stopped talking to me. For six days, she didn't say one word to me or look at me. It was as if I no longer existed.

I honestly did not know how to cope with this silent environment. When someone was angry with you in my family, they yelled, screamed, and threw things at you. I tried everything I could think of to get Sue to talk to me, except asking her directly to tell me what was wrong. It never occurred to me to sit her down and ask her what was wrong. Nothing I tried worked. I felt like I was going to come unglued. It never occurred to me that Sue might have a problem. I was convinced that if anything went wrong in my world it was my fault. I laid awake for hours each night trying to figure out what I had done wrong. Then suddenly, it was over. Sue began talking to me on the seventh day. It was as if the previous six silent days had not occurred. This incident really tested my ability to accurately perceive reality. Later I learned that Sue was angry because I had used commercial dusting spray instead of making my own from baking soda.

I was rattled for days after the first silent incident. Then one night I was outside on the front porch listening to the neighbor play his guitar and sing, when I started to feel weird all over. Something about the way the night sky looked as the sun set felt familiar. I remembered the way the night smelled and how the crickets sounded as dusk started to fall. I felt hands all over me, touching me. At first, I felt somewhat warm all over. Then I realized that I could not breathe. I felt a hand covering my mouth, holding me down. The hands were rough and the touching hurt. As suddenly as it had started the touching

stopped. I found myself lying on the front porch looking up at the night sky as the stars twinkled overhead. Everyone else was listening quietly as our neighbor continued to play the guitar. With a start, I realized that the feeling memories had started again. I looked up at the bright shining stars and prayed, “Please God, please don’t let me go crazy again.”

I promised myself this time I would not let my life become so out of control. I was not really remembering an incident from the past; I was just hallucinating, or making it up or something. I would believe anything but the truth. After all what was the truth? I had learned during my brief time in counseling that two boys may have dragged me into the woods when I was in the seventh or eighth grade. But now I was a junior in college, surely that one brief incident could not still be effecting my life? How horrible could anything that was done by a seventh or eighth grader actually be? Gee, was I naïve.

The nightmares, flashbacks, and feeling memories re-emerged in my life that night. I learned a few years later that seeing things that looked, felt, sounded, or smelled familiar could trigger positive and negative memories, dreams, nightmares, flashbacks, or feeling memories. The sounds, sight, feel, and smells of that late summer evening had triggered feeling memories from an event that had occurred seven or eight years before. Why now? Was I equipped to handle the truth at this point in my life? In the fall of 1991, just a couple of months before my twenty-first birthday, I would have answered that question with a resounding no. I did not feel ready to face the demons and the excruciating pain from the past. At that point in my life I had no desire to face the overwhelming, all consuming pain. My healing journey was not a conscious choice, rather an unconscious necessity.

Even my educational choices were pushing me forward to explore my hidden pain and find healing. In the fall of my junior year, the majority of my classes were required social work courses. The curriculum seemed to revolve around self-knowledge and evaluation. The forced introspection was not welcome at this point. I did not feel ready to look at the core of who I was and the underlying values and beliefs about life, and myself that guided my daily personal choices. I learned quickly that one of the primary roles of a social worker is to hold up a proverbial mirror in front of a client and help them look at the self, the individual, organizations, environment, all that they interact with to help them explore options and choices.

I wanted to help the client look at self yet I did not want to explore myself in the same mirror. Living deeply in denial seemed to be working for me, at least I thought it was working. I was functioning and continuing to smile.

I was having migraines more frequently then ever before at this point. I had begun having migraines when I was eight years old. At first, I only had a few a year. After I started having flashbacks, I began having migraines a couple of times a week. It was difficult to function when I had a migraine. At the time there was not a lot I could do to stop a migraine once it started. I would lie perfectly still in a dark room for hours until the pain stopped enough to get up. I would be dizzy, nauseous, and my pupils would dilate. I started skipping classes when I had a migraine or felt that I was getting one. I also became depressed. I continued to overeat hoping to fill the emptiness I felt inside. I honestly did not feel much of anything most of the time. It worried me at times to be studying to be a social worker while unable to feel compassion and empathy for others.

My course load became more difficult to juggle and the requirements more demanding. Yet, good things were also happening in my life as a result of my participation in the social work program. Six of my classmates and I formed a group for a group process class. We were required to meet over the course of the semester, to learn first hand about group processes. A core group of four or five of us decided to also utilize the group to help us study. We met frequently, dividing the readings and the course work. The group members would later help me learn what a family of choice was and how wonderful it could be to be supported and accepted for who you are not who everyone thought you should be. The individuals in the group helped me stay afloat during what would become an emotionally agonizing semester.

Sue continued to go through long periods without speaking to me. The silence continued to eat away at me. Yet, I did not have the skills to resolve the underlying issues that led to the silence. I did not know how to facilitate direct, open confrontation effectively. We would get along great and then suddenly, the apartment was filled with overwhelming silence once again.

It was during one of the silences that I first purposely used the flashbacks and feeling memories I was having to get a male to pay attention to me. One night I had another flashback while I was sitting outside alone on the front porch. The flashback centered on the night I was dragged into the woods. I began to remember the fear, humiliation, excitement, and embarrassment. One of the boys was fondling me roughly, telling me that I should do exercises so that my breasts would grow larger. For the first time I remembered that this had happened before, my two classmates had touched me in ways that excited me and made me feel dirty more than once. During the flashback I

remembered running home. Just as I reached my back porch, I tripped on a cat hiding in the tall, wet, dewy grass and fell flat on my face. I could hear the two boys laughing hysterically as I struggled to get up only to fall again.

For me this was a first. I was not only remembering bits and pieces of an event; I was remembering the feelings and the event simultaneously. I was overwhelmed. I did not know what to do with the information and the feelings. I needed to know that I was okay, especially since I had developed into a large breasted woman as I had grown into adulthood. Did males find me attractive? Was I slowly losing my mind? In my desire to be validated, I turned to one of my male neighbors for support.

I remember sitting on the front porch crying softly as Sue, Barbara and two of the neighbors were laughing and watching television in our apartment up above me. Music could be heard coming softly out the window from the apartment across the hall. I remember sitting for a few minutes and contemplating what to do with the information that I had just learned. What did it all mean? Was I abused? More importantly, did men find me attractive? My thoughts were irrational and focused solely on how do I prove that I am not dirty and that I have value as a female.

I remember deciding quickly and irrationally that the only way to prove my value was to tell the neighbor from across the hall what I had remembered about my childhood. Ken and I did not know each other very well other. Ken was intellectual and was into alternative and jazz, music I was unfamiliar with and not real interested in. Ken and I had very little in common. The important thing was that Ken was alone in his apartment at that moment and he was male. Ken let me into his apartment and agreed to talk with me for a few minutes. I remember rushing into an emotional outburst about my

flashbacks, feeling memories, and nightmares up to this point. I talked rapidly and non-stop. Most of what I said was jumbled and difficult to understand. I felt I needed to get it all out or I would burst or explode from the inside out. I talked about the violence at home, the hours I spent hiding out of fear of being hurt, the touching by the two neighbor boys, and being forcefully fondled by a boyfriend when I was sixteen. I continued to ramble almost incoherently for what seemed like hours but in reality was not more than ten or fifteen minutes.

Thankfully, after Ken recovered from the shock of what had just been dumped on him, he reacted like a gentleman. I do not remember what he said, just what he did not say. I had expected to hear what I had been telling myself for the last year, that I was crazy, had a vivid imagination, or that I was horrible. No man could possibly ever find me desirable. I was dirty and I was someone who deserved to be abused because I must have done something to deserve it. Ken was sympathetic and kind in his response. This was the first time I consciously used my past abusive memories to get attention from a man. I did not know how to interact with men, especially if I was attracted them, in a healthy way. My instinct was to wear someone down with my constant presence until the individual finally grew bothered or angry enough with me to say mean, horrible things. Then I felt like I was the wounded victim or, I could be outraged enough to get past the attraction. In other words, they usually proved my belief that I was not good enough to be in a relationship to be true.

I left Ken's apartment that night gratefully with my dignity still intact. Ken had listened and not been repulsed by what I said. Ken then promised that he wouldn't tell

anyone and that he would still speak to me, unlike the two girls from the dorm that I had told about the incident in the woods the year before.

Feeling relieved and believing that the right man would be a fool not to find my attractive. I pulled my self together and turned my attention back to wearing down Doug, Ken's roommate. I had developed a huge crush on Doug. I was really attracted to him and I tried everything I could think of to get Doug to notice me. I flirted with him, ignored him, and spent time with him every chance I could, especially if I could get him alone. He was up front about having recently ended a long-term relationship. Doug was not interested in dating and was carrying around unresolved emotional baggage from his previous relationship. Knowing all of this did not phase me in the least. I realize now that I had a tendency to be attracted to emotionally unavailable men. They were safer because I did not have to deal with someone actually liking me and being interested in a relationship.

#### **Chapter 4** **“On the Road to Feeling Crazy”**

Emotionally the fall semester of 1991 had been brutal. One night, a couple of days before finals, I was preparing for an exam with my study group. The professor had given us ten essay questions to answer and study. The test would consist of four or five of the ten questions. Preparing for the test should have been relatively easy. Outlining a possible answer to the question I was given should have been effortless. Instead, as I lay on the floor at my classmate's home, I began to panic. In my head I heard, *“You're stupid. What an idiot you are. See I told you, you would never amount to anything. You are going to fail and they will all laugh.”* Over and over again. I could not stop or block out the words. My breathing became shallow and rapid. I started to mutter softly, *“I*

*can't do this*" repeatedly. Tears started to run silently down my face. Then, before I could stop, surrounded by my peers, I burst into loud and uncontrollable sobs. I realized that at that moment I was on the road to going crazy.

I felt humiliated. I could not believe that I lacked the self-control to keep from crying in front of my peers. I was sure that they thought I was a complete idiot. Why shouldn't they? After all, I thought that I was an idiot. I expected to fail because that is what I deserved. I had been told that so many times, I honestly believed it. I believed that I deserved the worst in life because I was a horrible person who did not care about anyone else and did not deserve to be loved.

Somehow, I made it through final exams at the end of the first semester of my junior year. I went home briefly for the holidays. I was still trying to keep some distance between my parents, and myself while I tried to figure out what was happening to me. I worked hard to behave as I always had, smiling and acting as if life was great, while on the inside I was a mess.

I returned to school a little early, so I could accompany a friend to a court hearing. A few months earlier a door to door salesperson she had allowed into her home had violated her. I had promised her that I would be with her when she faced this guy in court. I knew, from conversations we had, that this was going to be very difficult and she was counting on me to be there for her. I returned to campus a week before the hearing to have some time in my apartment alone, away from my family.

I do not remember all these years later, if I even went to the hearing. I think I did but I do not have any memory of what took place. I just remember what it felt like to

come face to face with a situation where a friend had been violated at a time when I was working so hard to continue to suppress my own violation.

One evening during my week of solitude, I awoke with a start. I had fallen asleep on the living room couch. I guess I had been dreaming about something horrible, because I was sobbing uncontrollably. The sound of myself sobbing had awakened me. I tried to pull myself together but I cried for what seemed like hours. I wanted desperately for someone, anyone, to hold me and tell me that I was okay. I could hear music and laughter coming from somewhere in the building. When I looked out the peephole in the front door, I could see that the door across the hall door was open and the music was coming from my neighbor's apartment. I thought that if I could attract my neighbor's attention, one of them might come over to investigate. In my desperation for help, I began to throw pillows at my front door. I heaved the pillows as hard as I could, but they only sounded like tiny pebbles as they bounced off the wooden door. After an hour, I cracked the door hoping that the sound of the pillows would travel across the hall. In between each throw, I would stare disheartedly out my peephole hoping to see a sign that someone, anyone, had heard my desperate cries for help. Eventually, I tried throwing magazines and books against the door. Then, suddenly, I heard the door across the hall slam closed as the neighbors left. With them any hope for comfort was gone too. My life seemed to be unraveling at the seams again. I realized that night that I needed help.

The next day I called one of my classmates, Chris, and asked if we could talk. Chris had shared she was an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse. She also mentioned that she volunteered at a counseling center. I hoped that she would know from her own experiences what I needed to do to get help. Confiding my struggles was one of

the most difficult things I had ever done to this point. Admitting to anyone that I felt I was on the road to going crazy left me feeling very vulnerable. I felt as if one of my biggest fears was coming true. I was afraid that I was going crazy like my Mom had a few years before.

My mom had a nervous breakdown while I was in high school. She had a total hysterectomy and after the surgery she changed. Before the surgery, Mom was independent and fearless. I remember as a child being afraid of most things, especially the dark. As a young woman, I was still afraid but not my Mom. Mom never seemed to be afraid of anything. We would drive the six hours to my grandparent's house alone. If Mom got tired she would pull over anywhere and take a short nap. I was afraid at home, behind a deadbolted door, while my mom felt comfortable napping in a car at a rest area.

Shortly before Mom's surgery she decided that we should live in a house rather than an apartment. I had never lived in a house before. Mom went alone, arranged for financing, and had a house built. She seemed to be in control of her life and could do anything. Then, after the hysterectomy my Mom changed from an independent, outgoing person to a fearful one. The doctors thought the hysterectomy had caused Mom's thyroid to get out of whack which led to a chemical imbalance. The imbalance, according to Mom's doctor, and my preparations to leave for college, resulted in Mom having a nervous breakdown.

Mom spent a longtime in the hospital after the breakdown. Her boyfriend and I were told that Mom had come close to breaking completely. Now she was like a fragile vase, if broken again, she might never come back together. We were told to interact with

her very carefully. I felt that if something happened to her, I would be responsible. After all, my preparing to leave for college had led to her breakdown according to the doctor.

Mom changed in what seemed like over night. She could no longer leave the house alone. Going to the grocery store led to a panic attack and then days in bed. Mom no longer worked, nor was she able to perform the normal tasks of everyday living without assistance. My independent Mom was now more like a small child who needed constant supervision and encouragement. Mom also became more violent. If she did not like something that was said or done, she would hit you in the stomach or in the back of the head.

A couple of weeks before the end of the semester, Mom called to talk about chasing her boyfriend, George, around the house with a knife. When he ran into the garage Mom locked the door behind him. A few hours later, after a nap, when she felt more in control, she opened the door and found him sitting in the middle of the dark garage on a lawn chair. This made Mom mad and the screaming and yelling started all over again. Mom called me and said that she felt badly about her behavior, but did not know how to control herself.

My biggest fear was that I was on the same road to going crazy as my Mom. Were my current experiences the first signs that I was going off the deep end? I felt crazy. Was it just a short journey to actually being crazy? Would I too end up a prisoner in my home because of irrational fears? Would I need heavy doses of medication, almost to the point of being comatose?

Mom had periods of time when she slept almost around the clock for days. When she was awake, she had difficulty reading or following a conversation. Her brain did not

seem to function as quickly as it once had. Her attention span also became really short. Sitting through a thirty minute television program was just too much for her. She had her medications adjusted several times. Once, soon after she was diagnosed, she was given more medication than her body could handle and she came close to dying of an overdose.

I was deeply afraid that I had inherited the gene that would lead to my developing a mental illness and that I was going to go crazy too. After I confided my experiences to Chris, she recommended that I go to see a counselor. The Christian based counseling center she volunteered at offered low cost counseling. This was ideal since I did not have much money and I was fearful of going anywhere that would require using my dad's insurance. I was afraid that my parent's might find out that I was seeking counseling. My dad believed that seeking help or telling someone about your family problems wasn't okay. He did not approve of my studying to be a social worker either. He kept clipping newspaper articles about the "horrible things" social workers did to families. He believed all social workers were paid to steal children and to plant false ideas into the children's minds about abuse that did not occur. Dad would have tried to convince me that I was being brain washed if he knew that I was seeking counseling.

Chris came over a week after my initial telephone call to her. We sat and talked about the counseling center and what it had to offer. Chris shared her own experience with being molested as a child. I was amazed at how open she was. The last time I had openly shared with friends they stopped speaking to me. What little I had shared with my neighbor, Ken, had been okay at first, but after a while, he started to avoid being alone with me.

After Chris left Sue, my roommate, confronted me. How dare I sit in our living room and talk about my speculations of abuse. How dare I invite someone over to talk openly about their experiences of abuse. I felt humiliated and this reinforced the idea that sharing family secrets was not okay. My relationship with Sue went further down hill after this. Sue almost convinced me not to try counseling again, but the migraines and nightmares persisted. I could not ignore that emotionally I was a wreck and that the fear that I was going crazy continued to mount. After an intake interview at the Christian counseling center, I was placed in a support group. An intern from the counseling program at the university was the facilitator. At first, I was nervous about being in a group with strangers talking about my past. Then I began to look forward to finding some peace of mind and a solution to the nightmares I had been living with for the past year.

The support group experience was a disaster. The facilitator did not know what to do with the information members shared. She did not know how to help us process what we were experiencing. A few of the group members dropped out after their first sessions because they felt they had shared too much and were too uncomfortable to come back. The sessions left me feeling increasingly crazy. I began to feel that my relationship with God had something to do with the craziness I was feeling. I thought that if I prayed more, I would be okay. I believed that I deserved whatever had happened of who I was. Or if nothing had happened, then surely I was making things up to make myself crazy. I started to believe that traveling on the road to craziness was my fate.

## **Chapter 5**

### **“The Spring of Bliss”**

One evening in the spring of 1992, Sue invited me to join her at a friend's home for an evening of movies and popcorn. The invitation really surprised me because my relationship with Sue had become even more strained over the past few months leaving me saddened that a friendship that had helped me get through the previous school year, seemed to be coming apart at the seams. I accepted the invitation and went along with hesitating.

While enjoying the movie, a woman named Asia and I began to talk about faith and church. By the end of the evening Asia, had me convinced that I should try her church which was an hour a way from campus. I convinced myself that this was divine intervention. I was struggling with my faith anyway, and the city where Asia's church was located happened to be in the area I would be living in at the end of the summer. I was relocating because the senior year of the Social Work program had to be completed on the main campus in another city. Since I did not have access to my own transportation I would be unable to commute, I was planning a move to the main campus before school started in August.

I arranged to have Asia pick me up the next day for church. I was extremely nervous about traveling for an hour with someone I had just met. I had been spending so much time alone over the prior six months that I was worried I had forgotten how to be social. I almost decided not to go, but I was too embarrassed to call and cancel. This seemed to be a recurring theme for me. I would agree to do something because I was afraid to say no thinking that the person might not like me anymore if I refused. What people thought and how they felt about me, was a constant source of anxiety and fear. I was afraid of hurting someone and of being hurt. I would agree to participate and go

grudgingly or I would develop a headache, feel horrible and use it as an excuse for not following through.

I will never forget my first experience at Asia's church. We met at an enormous old theatre that seemed to be overflowing with people. I felt like I was attending a concert or some huge event instead of church. We were there for what seemed like hours singing and listening to the sermon. What made the biggest impression on me was how friendly everyone was. I had never experienced anything like it before. After every service at the church I had been attending-three times a week for almost two years, someone would say, "Thanks for coming to visit. Hope you decide to come back again sometime". Every service for two years, I heard that and felt like a visitor, someone who did not belong.

Belonging to something or someone was a desire that consumed me at times. I hated feeling like an outsider for so much of my life. Finally, I thought, I had found a place that I might belong. The people seemed interested in who I was, what I thought, and how I felt. Unfortunately, their acceptance and interest also created anxiety and worry. I worried about what they would think if they knew the real me?

Numerous people hugged me as they introduced themselves. I hated being touched by people I did not know but I did not know how to tell them that it was not okay to hug me. I was confused by my ambivalence. I was both repulsed at being touched yet I was overwhelmed by my desire to be loved.

After that first Sunday, Asia called me often and invited me to church events and Bible study. I believe that at this point in my life I would have gone along with almost anything to be a part of something. I began to feel connected to other people. I loved

being a member of Asia's church. Suddenly I had a group of people to spend time with. I did not feel so alone anymore.

Soon after meeting Asia, I was baptized and became a member of her church. Almost immediately, my social calendar began to fill. We were referred to as sisters in the ministry, and I was being asked out on dates by most of the guys, or brothers. I had not been out on a date in over a year having finally given up on the "boyfriend" back home that was embarrassed being seen in public with me. Prior to joining the church, I had feared that I was destined to be alone.

It felt wonderful to be dating again. My self-confidence began to grow in leaps and bounds. In retrospect, I am ashamed to recognize how much of my self-worth was dependent upon the attentions of men. Slowly, I began to feel better about myself. I started to take more care of my appearance. I went back to wearing jewelry and makeup and taking the time to style my hair. With the attention, I also became more concerned about my figure. I had gained quite a bit of weight over the past months. I was never a small person and now my weight was definitely an issue. I began to beat up on myself about what I did or did not eat. I was afraid that I would start to binge and purge again.

I had been bulimic and anorexic in grade school, middle school, and high school at different times. Issues with men marked the beginning of my spiral into an eating disorder. I felt I had never looked the way I really wanted to. It is hard to be thin when you turn to food for comfort. I also found that throwing up or purging could be a high.

My dad had a problem with alcohol, and I was extremely afraid of becoming addicted also. Experiencing a high after purging, felt like I was getting too close to what I imagined it felt like to become addicted to drugs and alcohol. I never wanted to feel

that, out of control, yet since my first flashback in 1990, I had struggled with feeling like my life was spiraling out of control. I did not want any of this “past stuff” to ruin what I had going on in my life. Now that things were finally going well.

The main focus of the church was on sharing your spiritual beliefs and religious faith with others. We were encouraged to go to the mall and the student union, approach people and invite them to church and to study the Bible. I really struggled with this. I felt awkward targeting a person I did not know to share something with them that was so personal. Each person had to set a goal of how many people he/she would meet in a day, week, or month and ask to study with them, to visit a ministry event, or to attend church.

The one negative of being a part of this new church and the campus ministry was when I brought up my nightmares and continuing struggle with my past, I was encouraged to get out of myself and go and reach out to people. To encourage them to study the Bible and visit the church with me. Even though my life seemed to be going so well I was still struggling with depression, having frequent migraines, and bouts of uncontrollable crying. I learned quickly to hide my continued depression from my new friends.

Other aspects of my life were also going well despite my continued struggles with depression. My second life changing experience came in the form of an opportunity to babysit for one of my professor’s children. At first, it seemed to be one of the strangest jobs I had ever been offered. I was extremely surprised that Professor Brown would ask me if I were interested in working for her. I was really withdrawn in her class and at times, I wondered if she even noticed that I was there. I didn’t participate in class because I was terrified that if I did speak, if I got started sharing my personal problems, I

might reveal too much and no one would have anything to do with me again. I lived with the fear of being unmasked for who I was.

The babysitting job included more than just watching Dr. Brown's children for a couple hours after they got home from school. I was asked to do light housework: dishes, vacuuming, and dusting, nothing too difficult. There was however, one thing I was asked to do that unnerved me yet I learned so much from it. I was required to stay for dinner one night a week and eat with my professor's children and her husband. I had not sat around a dining room table and eaten dinner with a family in years. The Brown family had a nightly ritual of sitting down to dinner together and discussing the day's events. Each person around the table was encouraged and expected to talk about something good or important about their day. I remember how nervous and surprised I was when the conversation turned to me. I was amazed that someone I barely knew would be interested in my day. The first couple of times I found myself to be speechless and I never did become comfortable with this ritual in the six weeks I worked for the Brown family. However, even years later I remember the feeling of three pairs of eyes focused on me waiting to hear what was good or important about my day. What makes that feeling even more significant is knowing that each person at that table stopped and listened to my answer just as I did theirs. That was the first time in my life that I had ever experienced sitting at the table with a healthy and loving family.

## **Chapter 6**

### **“The Pain and Joy of Relationships”**

The spring of bliss ended as abruptly as it had begun. Actually, with hindsight, it really started coming apart from the beginning. As a result, of the attention I was getting

from the guys in the campus ministry I started to blossom. I could not get enough of the attention that was now focused on me. It made me feel so special, yet so vulnerable.

Brian was the first guy in the ministry to approach me for a date. He was very encouraging and flattering. Having a crush on him led me to misread his intentions. Dating in the campus ministry was encouraged as an opportunity to get to know one another better. Each of us was encouraged to date members of the opposite sex, who were not already in a serious dating relationship at the time. I began to make excuses to spend time with Brian. On Sundays, members of the campus ministry car-pooled up to the city together and I made sure that I was in the same car as Brian as often as possible. I tried everything I could think of to get Brian to notice me. Most of the women in the ministry recognized my growing crush on Brian. It became a joke between my new friends as they watched me throw myself at him. I choose not to notice that I was humiliating myself in front of all my new friends.

At first, Brian seemed receptive to my attentions and my desire to get to know him better. Then, my constant requests to talk, started to create animosity between us. I again choose to ignore Brian's attempts to avoid being alone with me. My neediness started to erode the fragile strands of our relationship.

When the relationship seemed to be going downhill, I began to use my continued struggle with nightmares and flashbacks to get Brian's sympathy. I remember spending time with him one afternoon, pretending to have a flashback that centered on being dragged into the woods. It was one that I had had repeatedly for months. I feigned being horrified and panicked about what I was experiencing. I wanted so badly to be comforted and desired as a woman, yet my deviousness filled me with self-loathing. I did not feel

good about using such a painful experience to attract a man, but I was desperate. When this failed to elicit the desired response of getting Brian to fall for me, I grew even more desperate.

Journal Entry--*"I really like Brian and feel that he is the one. I have tried being sweet, throwing myself at him, and wearing him down with my constant presence. Nothing has worked so far. I had a dream about him last night. In my dream, I saw the two of us years from now in our home surrounded by our children. We were all seated around our dining room table sharing a meal and talking about something important that each of us had experienced that day. I felt so loved and safe. I remember waking up from the dream smiling.*

*It was such a welcome change to wake up happy and feeling good about my dreams for the future. Most nights I am still having nightmares, waking filled with terror. Most of the time, I don't remember what I've dreamt about or why I am so afraid. I pray desperately for peace and forgiveness for whatever horrible thing I have done that I need to be punished for."*

As I contemplated my dream of life and a family with Brian, I became more convinced that we were destined to be together. The next Sunday luck graced me with an opportunity to be alone in the car with Brian on our way from church in the city. As we approached the exit to the college, I blurted out that God had shown me, in a vision or a dream, that we were meant to be together as husband and wife in the future. Brian responded after a moment of silence that felt like a lifetime, that he had not received that message however, he could not deny what I believed and possibly, it was true, only time could tell.

I realize now that I should have felt humiliated by my actions, but I was not. My overwhelming desire to be loved and accepted, especially by a man, caused me to forget my own dignity. I would have gotten down on my hands and knees and begged Brian, a virtual stranger who I had only known for a few months, to love me, if I thought it would have done any good.

Later, thinking about the events of that Sunday, I became embarrassed enough about what I had said to begin avoiding activities that Brian might attend. I consoled my wounded feelings with food and sleep. I ate until I was sick and slept until I could sleep no longer. I despised the weak and needy person that I had become.

Once more, I was pulled from my despair and self-loathing by a friend. The spring semester had ended and a few days later the summer semester began. This was the first summer I did not go home. Instead, I stayed in my off-campus apartment and took summer classes. Carla, one of my classmates, offered to pick me up and drive me to a morning class we were taking together. I found that I could not hide my struggle with depression from her. Carla quickly became my confidant and she helped me put the mess I had created with Brian into perspective. Carla knew Brian, which helped a lot. I had suggested that Brian spend time with Carla's youngest son, Greg, who was having trouble at home and in school. Both Carla and I thought a male mentor might help Greg. Brian and Greg were great together and, as an added bonus, I was invited to spend time with them as they built their relationship.

Carla helped me through my heartache that summer by making me a part of her family. I had never experienced a family like Carla's. Her home was filled with chaos and clutter, bursting at the rafters with love. Carla had four children, two of whom

visited every other weekend. In Carla's home there was as much yelling as there was hugging. Carla's classmates were welcomed as family. We ate as a family and shared her home as if it were our own.

To make extra money that summer Carla hired me to clean her house. I spent hours cleaning, dreaming about having a family and a home of my own. I learned a lot that summer about a woman's strength and ability to adapt, to move on no matter how much it hurt. Carla had been happily married for fifteen years when unexpectedly, her husband came home one day and told her he was leaving her for another woman. Carla was a stay-at-home mom who had not worked outside of the home since high school. Initially, she had no idea how she would support herself and her family. However, a few years later, picking up the pieces of her life, she was two semesters short of graduating from college. Carla was raising two kids and taking care of her grandparents alone. I was awed by her.

Carla convinced me to stop avoiding the campus ministry because of my blunder with Brian. If they were my friends they would accept me for who I was. It was awkward at first but with Carla's support, I was able to face Brian. We decided what had transpired was a simple misunderstanding between friends. Then, a couple of days later, Brian returned home which made things a lot easier. The rest of the summer was wonderful, filled with fun, friends, and for the first time in a year-and-a-half, peace.

## **Chapter 7**

### **“Walking Off a Steep Cliff—Landing in the Big City”**

At this point in my story, I had been in and out of crisis for almost two years. I seemed to thrive on crises. I was a “crisis junkie”. I loved all the attention I received when I went through difficult periods. When I wasn't in pain, I didn't feel alive, I felt

numb from head to toe. I only seemed to feel alive when I was filled, almost to the point of being overwhelmed by hurt and pain.

This summer had been a time of peace. I felt connected to my church family, I felt like a viable part of something for the first time in my life yet, I knew that the person I presented to others was not the real me. I smiled all the time and let everyone believe that my life was filled with blue skies and “Mr. Bluebird on my shoulder” days. In reality however, I was beginning to have a slightly clearer picture of my childhood. I had recently dreamt of a time when I was around ten or eleven spending a week or two with my dad during the summer. I hated the two weeks I was required by my parents’ divorce decree to spend with Dad during summer break. In my dream, it was a hot summer night. The heat was stifling and I was having trouble sleeping. The only fan, in the living room, was in the window facing outside. Dad had explained that that was the best way to circulate the air. The fan in my dad’s bedroom was positioned to bring in the fresh, cool air. But his bedroom door was shut and I wasn’t getting any of the breeze in the living room where I slept on a fold out bed on the floor. I was just starting to drift off into a restless sleep, when suddenly Dad’s girlfriend, Tammy, came running out of the bedroom. I was jarred wide-awake when I heard yelling and screaming. I became overwhelmed with fear. Tammy pulled me out of the pullout bed onto her lap. Her face was swollen and starting to bruise. She held me tight and dared my dad to hit her. I felt like a human shield. I was terrified one of my dad’s flying fists would land on me. I did not understand what was happening. It was like sitting at home watching television when suddenly the room starts to shake because of an earthquake and you are truly caught off guard. The fighting continued for what seemed like hours when suddenly it was over.

Tammy released my now bruised arms, caused by her tight grip and her figure nails and pushed me to the floor. Dad picked Tammy up, carried her back into the bedroom, and quietly shut the door.

I was left confused and shaking on the living room floor. What happened? Had I been dreaming or having a nightmare? I woke up from my dream about this nightmarish time, sweating and scared. From what I remembered from childhood and the dreams I had been having for the past two years, I was starting to put together a web of memories from a childhood filled with domestic violence in both my parent's relationships. Years later, I found myself wishing that I had stopped here in my journey to find the truth, where I had just began to scratch the surface of the abuse and violence I experienced and witnessed while growing up.

Mom's first serious relationship after divorcing Dad in 1978 had also been violent. Tim had pushed Mom out of bed one night during a fit of rage. Mom landed on her arm, which hurt for days after the incident. Tim would not allow Mom to go for medical treatment. Eventually, about a week later, Mom was still in such pain that she left work and drove herself to the hospital emergency room during her lunch break. She discovered that she had a slight fracture in her arm. Mom told me years later that she would not allow the emergency room personnel to set her arm in a cast for fear of being hurt when she returned home. Instead, Mom wore a sling on her arm when Tim was not around.

I remembered Mom's next boyfriend Terry being violent. One night he busted open the front door. The door separated from the frame and hinges and landed in the middle of the living room floor. During a previous incident, Terry had attempted to

strangle my cat, Precious. She was just a kitten at the time and I remember feeling ill and helpless as I watched her eyes appear to almost pop out of her head as she gasped for air. I will never forget the fear in her eyes. I knew that Terry was going to kill the best friend I had in the world. I was fourteen at the time and had only had Precious for a brief couple of weeks when the incident occurred. She was the first pet I had since my dog disappeared suddenly a year earlier. For some reason, Terry let Precious go before she lost consciousness but she was never the same after that day. She was temperamental and desperately afraid of men. I was not the same after that day either. I saw how easily something you loved could be taken from you because someone did not like the way you acted, looked, or talked. I vowed that I would never get that attached to anything or anyone ever again.

I did not feel safe in our home anymore. I was desperately afraid even after Mom and Terry ended their relationship. I feared that Terry would again break down the door only this time he would kill us all. Mom must have had a similar fear because we moved to another part of town soon after the door incident. No one ever spoke about it again, leaving me once again with the notion that I might have imagined it or remembered something as being a lot worse than it actually was.

I broke my promise to myself not to get attached to anyone or anything when I became really attached to the members of the campus ministry. As the summer ended, I began to feel desperate about holding onto the relationships I had developed while a part of the ministry and with my classmates from school.

In August, I would be moving to the big city to finish my last year of college. I was terrified of leaving the campus and community that had become my home. Three

women from the church offered me a place in their apartment when I moved. I did not know any of them very well and I felt hesitant about sharing an apartment with strangers, however, I did not have many other options. A friend from school and I had looked at a couple of apartments off campus. One was horrible and unsafe, the other apartment we looked at was beautiful but small. It would have been like living in a closet for over \$400.00 a month each. Neither of us could afford that much money plus utilities. Student housing on campus was limited, expensive, and frankly scary. Living with the three women from church was cheap and close to campus.

Each member of the church was assigned an advisor or mentor referred to as your discipler, to guide your spiritual growth and personal choices. My mentor or discipler felt that my moving in with Mary, India, and Margaret was a great idea. In fact, Asia, my discipler, had lived in their apartment when she lived in the city. Keeping me tied to the church was a major priority. I think I would have agreed to almost anything, whether I wanted to or not because I was afraid to say no. I feared that saying no would mean I had “fallen away”. Someone had “fallen away” from the campus ministry that summer and she was ostracized. We were told not to return this person’s phone calls and to make it clear if we did speak, that they needed to get “right” and return to the church community.

My fear of all the changes I was going to face in a few weeks was growing. I began to feel overwhelmed and panicky. How would I get around the city if I lived off campus? How would I find my way? My dad constantly criticized my poor sense of direction. He was sure that I would get lost finding my way out of a paper bag. With all the intelligence that he bragged that I had inherited from him, how could I be so stupid when it came to finding my way anywhere?

My mom and step dad, George came to my rescue by purchasing a car for me. At first, they offered to drive the car to campus where I could learn to drive the stick shift before I relocated to the city in mid August. Then they changed their minds and asked that I come home to get the car. When I could operate the car to their satisfaction, I could drive it back to campus.

I had avoided visiting home over the past two years for fear of being found out. I still had not confided to Mom about the nightmares, flashbacks, and feeling memories. I think that I was afraid that Mom would either admit that what I remembered about my childhood was true, or she would say I was crazy and have me hauled off to a mental institution for treatment. I am not sure which possibility scared me the most. I was feeling crazy most of the time and yet I still enjoyed living in denial about my life.

I begrudgingly returned home to claim my car. I had a horrible time mastering the clutch. On day two of my crash course in driving a stick shift, Mom and I drove to the store. I could not get the car into reverse to back out of the parking space and in my frustration, I lashed out at my mom. I threw the keys at her and I refused to step foot into the stupid car again. I felt at that moment, for the first time in my life, that I could hurt someone. It scared me more than anything else I had experienced or remembered at this point. I did not believe that I had it in me to hurt anyone. My rage and fear were both a wake up call. I realized at that moment that I was capable of physically hurting someone. I had lived in fear since I had the first flashback about the domestic violence that I would also deal with my pain in the same way that my dad did. I was afraid that I would also become physically abusive to my loved ones. Eventually, I was able to calm down and carefully drive back to my parent's house. I left for home in my new car the next day.

The rest of the summer passed quickly without too much stress. I was taking a class on the effects of divorce on children. I found that I could not process the information or attend most of the class sessions. I was not ready to look at the effects my parents divorce had on me, even though they had been divorced for over ten years. Deep down I felt that I had caused their divorce and I was not ready to look at my own feelings of guilt and shame. Living in denial and focusing on my relationships with my friends was much easier.

The day before I left for the city, the members of the campus ministry threw me a surprise going away party. Grieving the loss of my home and church family was almost more than I could bear. I felt like I was being abandoned or thrown away by the people who had become my lifeline. I had a panic attack a few minutes into the party. I began to sob uncontrollably and hyperventilate. I could not seem to catch my breath and felt as if my heart was being ripped from my chest. My instinct was to run away and hide. I frantically searched for my car keys while still sobbing uncontrollably. A couple of people tried to stop me from leaving out of fear for my safety, which caused me to feel more panicked and trapped. I knew I was not thinking clearly but all I could think about was getting away from there. In my panicked state, I also led everyone who was nearby to believe that I might hurt myself. I was overwhelmed with feelings, which was bizarre for someone who felt nothing ninety percent of the time. Finally, after realizing that I would not be allowed to leave unless I promised not to harm anyone or myself, I was permitted to leave. I was so driven to run that I would have promised anything to get away. I had no idea where I was going too or even what I was running from. The only clear thought I had was that I was stupid for allowing myself to develop relationships and

form attachments with people who were going to leave. This did not make sense considering I was the one moving and I would see my friends most Sundays at church in the city.

As I drove away, I contemplated driving my car off a steep cliff at high speed. That is what I felt I was being forced to do. It felt as if I was being asked to walk off a steep cliff where I was safe and loved, to end up in the city where I would be alone in a big scary place. I was afraid that I would not survive the fall from the top of the cliff.

My thoughts of suicide however were drowned out quickly by my desire to live and experience a life filled with happiness. I just wanted my new friends to experience a little of the pain that currently threatened to overwhelm me. In the end, I was able to get it back together and return to the party. We all pretended I had run out to put gas in my car. At the close of the evening, everyone at the party stood in a circle and sang, "I've Got Friends in Low Places". It was a fitting tribute to close one of the best summers of my life. I felt like I had sunk lower than ever before with my behavior earlier that evening. My relationships with the members of the campus ministry would never be quite the same. I had revealed a glimpse of the woundedness that lived inside of me. I had dropped the smile that I hid behind and I revealed the emotionally fragile person I was becoming. I felt ashamed of what was beneath my smile.

The next day I loaded up my car and a friend's vehicle and left my home behind. Sue and I barely managed to be civil as we left our apartment for the last time. I felt sad that our relationship had become so fractured in the year that we had lived together, that we could barely muster goodbye. Each of us were glad to see the other go. My own

personal pain, that I still did not understand, seemed to drive the people I cared about out of my life with increasing frequency.

## **Chapter 8**

### **“The Apartment from Hell”**

In August of 1992, I arrived at my new home in the city. Matt, one of the brothers from the campus ministry, helped me move my stuff. When we arrived at my new home, I felt sick to my stomach. I wanted to beg Matt to take me back to campus. I wanted to go home to the safety and love that I had felt all summer. I imagined that later my friends and I would laugh about how my moving had just been another one of the ever-frequent nightmares that I continued to have.

As we approached the front door, I had tried to convince myself that I was embarking on a new adventure not entering the gates of Hell on Earth. After repeated attempts to get someone to answer the front door buzzer, we drove around the block and tried to get one of my new roommates on the telephone. I knew I was expected and I couldn't figure out where everyone could be at nine in the morning on a Saturday. Maybe this was a sign that I did not belong here and I should return to Small Town and commute with Carla for classes.

On our second try at the front door, one of the people living in an apartment near the front door, grumpily threw open the door and demanded to know what we wanted. Eventually she let us in and directed us up the stairs to the attic. I remember my first impression of the interior of the house was how grungy and nasty it was. The carpet and furniture were covered with layers of dirt and dust. I was really beginning to have second thoughts about my decision to move to the house on State Street.

After climbing up two flights of stairs, we found one of my new roommates lying half-naked, half on the couch and half on the floor asleep in the living room. I thought to myself, life in the attic apartment is going to be interesting and any thing but ordinary.

Later that day, as Matt drove away, I felt like Dorothy when she woke up in Oz, only I knew that at the end of this adventure, no matter how many times I clicked the heels of my shoes together, I would not be going home. I would not be going home no matter how much I wished too.

*Journal Entry--I have been living in the city with my new roommates, Mary, India, and Margaret, for a very short period of time. The apartment does not feel safe. It is hard to explain to anyone the floor plan of the apartment. The apartment is in the attic of a big house in a historical district in the city. It is in need of serious remodeling. A few houses down on the same street, is a well-known crack house. I have been told that the police visit the crack house regularly. My roommates have warned me that I must be careful if I go out at night. I was told to always look as I approach the house. If it looks safe, park the car and look carefully in the rearview mirror. When it appears to be clear, quickly get out of the car and run in to the house.*

*All the residents in the house, I think there are about six or seven apartments in the building, have keys to the front door. After entering the front door, I climb a flight of stairs, go down a semi-dark hallway, and then climb another flight of stairs to the attic. Each floor has one bathroom that all the residents' on that floor share. After climbing the second flight of stairs, you are in our apartment. THERE IS NO FRONT DOOR on the apartment. The third floor is just like the previous two floors. Originally, the third floor was two separate apartments that shared the bathroom, situated in between the two*

*apartments. Currently the property owner rents the entire third floor as one apartment. This arrangement created an apartment large enough to accommodate four women comfortably. Unfortunately, it also creates an apartment without a front door. One of the two apartments is the living room and dining room/changing room. One bedroom does not have a closet, so two large wardrobes line one wall of the living room. The living room does have a door that closes and locks but it is usually open. The second apartment has two bedrooms and a kitchen. This area also has a door that closes and locks, but is usually kept open and unlocked unless we are asleep or out.*

*I worry incessantly about strangers coming upstairs, suddenly being in our apartment without any warning. I do not feel safe here. The apartment is also noisy. Mary and Margaret yell and argue with each other a lot. This is a drastic change from living with Sue and our periods of total silence. The apartment is dirty. In the kitchen, which is right across the hall from the bedroom that I share with Mary, the light is always on as a roach deterrent. Piles and piles of dirty dishes are left stacked on the kitchen table for weeks at a time. I've never lived in a place like this before.*

One night, a few months after moving into the apartment, a man appeared suddenly in the living room doorway. He appeared to be intoxicated, and asked for a light for his cigarette. Margaret, who was in the living room in her bra and panties dove into her wardrobe closet when she heard him speak. At the sound of his voice, I looked up from my homework. I felt petrified, my heart was racing and I was terrified. Margaret threw on a shirt and then chased the man back down the stairs. She then ran back up the stairs, grabbed a large butcher knife from the kitchen, and proceeded to run

after the man again. She could be heard pounding on apartment doors throughout the building demanding that the man come out and face her.

That night I came close to packing my belongings and moving out. The only thing that stopped me was not having anywhere to go. I even considered moving home to my parents' house and commuting to school. My parents only lived an hour from the city and I was feeling desperate. For two years, I had been avoiding going home, afraid my parents might suspect that I knew they were abusive. Now, I was contemplating running to them to escape the hell in the attic.

I was not sleeping well. I got up several times during the night to make sure that the door to the part of the apartment with the bedrooms was shut and locked. Frequently I found it unlocked and open. When no one else was awake, I was too scared to go to the bathroom. I would lay awake for hours trying to convince myself that I did not have to pee. I would not let myself leave the bedroom until it was daylight.

The nightmares and the feeling memories started again. I could feel a hand touching me, covering my mouth so no one would hear my screams. I was not able to make a sound.

Over the two years I had been having nightmares, feeling memories, and flashbacks, I had developed a variety of ways of coping with my pain. When I felt afraid or overwhelmed I found sanctuary in the closet or under my bed. I tried to be as discreet as I could hoping desperately that no one would notice. I was concerned that if anyone found out that I was spending time in the closet or under the bed they would think I was crazy. I sure felt crazy sitting in the dark closet surrounded by clothes and shoes, BUT I FELT SAFE!

I also began vacillating between depriving myself of food, sleep, and fun to stuffing myself to the point of being ill and sleeping around the clock. I only knew how to function at the extremes of the continuum, either starving or bingeing and purging.

I really did not like, actually I hated living in the city. I only had classes a few days each week which left me with a lot of free time to stare at the four walls of my apartment. The urban, commuter campus was nothing like the big beautiful University campus I had come from. The commuter campus was small, cold, and sterile. I missed the trees and flowers. Instead, steel and windows surrounded me. Huge enclosed tubes connected the parking garages to the University buildings. I always felt like a giant gerbil trapped in a big plastic tube as I walked through the tubes, staring at the busy roadway below. It did not help that I am seriously afraid of heights.

I ran back to the wonderful community I had left every chance I could get. I needed to believe and feel that everyone missed me as much as I missed them. I needed to feel loved and most importantly, I needed to feel safe. I visited to study with my study group at Carla's house, spend time with my friends, and to see Matt. I had a crush on Matt. I knew that he wasn't interested in me, but I wanted him to be interested in me. A few weeks before I moved to the city, Matt sent me flowers to cheer me up. It was the first time I had gotten flowers from a man who was not a family member. I felt like a queen. Any attention that I got from a man I soaked up like a sponge. I wanted desperately to be loved and found attractive by someone I liked in return. I needed to feel special and important to men. I don't care how many women friends I had; I needed to be liked by a man.

Matt was shy and kind and we ended up going out on several dates. In my heart, I knew that we were becoming great friends. Yet, I needed to believe that we were becoming so much more. I tried to convince myself that Matt and I were a couple and if I pretended long enough, Matt would wake up and realize that I was so fabulous he needed to be in a relationship with me, as well. I was close to being delusional at this point. I fantasized constantly about life when Matt and I were married, raising our ten children. Being an only child, I dreamed of a large family. I wanted to make sure that none of my children ever felt the loneliness that I felt when I was growing up and now.

While all of this was going on, I became friends with Paul, another brother from the campus ministry. Paul was Matt's roommate and he was interested in my good friend Frances. Paul and I spent time together planning ways to get Matt interested in me and Frances interested in him. Actually, we spent a lot of time having a pity party for ourselves, and scheming about how to change our circumstances. We were both really pathetic. Eventually, late one night when I was visiting Small Town for the weekend, Paul and I realized that neither of us was going to be successful in our quest to date Matt and Frances. We decided that we should settle instead for each other. I told Paul I would be open to dating him only after I had spoken with Matt to assure myself that there wasn't any hope of him liking me as more than a friend. I found Matt at a restaurant and asked him what he thought about this possible change in our relationship. I realize now how humiliating the situation was, but at the time, I demanded to know if Matt liked me or not. I thought I was covering all my bases. If he wasn't interested in me, then I could date Paul. Paul and I decided the next day that we would try a dating relationship.

A couple of weeks into our relationship, I had a panic attack at a social gathering in Small Town. In my desperation, I decided to return to my apartment from Hell. I could not get myself calmed down enough to drive back to the city. I would not listen to reason, that if I stayed the night I would probably be calm enough to drive to the apartment in the morning. Amy, my best friend at the time, caused the panic attack. I had arranged to spend the night at her house. I had been looking forward to this time all week. Well when I got to her house, she was too busy to spend more than an hour with me. Amy had made plans to attend a ministry event at the local gym without me. I felt abandon and rejected by my best friend.

I convinced Paul and one of his friends to drive me back to my home. Paul, who had sickle cell disease, was not feeling well. He was recovering from a recent bout of illness related to his having sickle cell. He had spent most of the previous night in the Emergency Room. I knew that asking Paul to ride to the City with me would put his health at risk, but I was not thinking clearly in my panicked state.

On the drive home, Paul seemed to be getting sicker and sicker. He began to complain of severe pain all over. The more he shared about how he was feeling the worse I felt and the more panicked I became. When we arrived back in the City, I ran into the house and straight to the back bedroom closet. I lay on the floor in a fetal position and sobbed. I was on the verge of being delirious and incoherent. My roommates panicked. They had never witnessed this behavior from me before. This was the first time I had ever sat in India and Margaret's closet. Mary and Margaret started yelling and screaming at me, demanding that I come out of the closet immediately. All I could do was mumble; "I killed him. I killed him." I was sure that by talking Paul and

his friend Eric into bringing me home, I had started Paul on the road to his demise. I believed that I had killed him.

An hour later, when I was able to pull myself together enough to crawl out of the closet, Mary, India and Margaret demanded that we have a “family meeting”. I was told that I had embarrassed them because they were having company stay over that night. They demanded that I promise never to get into the closet again. I lost what was left of my dignity that night along with my place of safety. They thought I was crazy and in need of help.

My relationship with Paul ended soon after. What we shared, had never been much of a relationship. Paul was not interested in spending time with me, holding my hand, or being affectionate. At first, Paul made excuses for his rather distant behavior. In retrospect, I realize that he was a bit repulsed by the idea of touching me. I felt horrible knowing that a man I liked was repulsed at the thought of making out with me. I never admitted this to anyone. I was too ashamed. I had begun to feel, with greater certainty, that there was something wrong with me. When Paul and I broke up, I believe we were both relieved. A dating relationship, that began because of a rejection, was not a relationship destined to last. We both agreed to try and remain friends. In reality, we had never been more than friends anyway.

## **Chapter 9**

### **“No Where to Go”**

Before I knew it, I was in my last semester of college. Since my first flashback in the Fall of 1990, I kept telling myself that I had to hang on until I graduated in May of 1993. After I graduated, I could fall apart, have a nervous breakdown or go crazy. Even on those nights when I wished that I would die and the pain would finally be over, I knew

deep down in my heart that I had to keep living. My parents had taught me from the time I was little that I was expected to graduate from high school and then attend and graduate from college.

I don't remember making the choice to go to college; it was what was expected. Neither of my parents had graduated from high school. My dad had been a credit short of achieving his diploma, having failed religion at the Catholic High School he attended. Mom had become pregnant at fifteen years of age and dropped out of high school after her sixteenth birthday, prior to the birth of her son. Both of my parents had received GED's while I was in junior high or high school. My Mom went on to college and received her associate's degree from IVY Tech. Both of my parents seemed to regret not having graduated, so they made it clear that they were counting on my success. I knew I could not let them down no matter how much emotional pain I experienced. I would not fail them. Their approval and love meant everything to me. I was afraid if I failed they would be disappointed in me and maybe stop loving me.

I would not have chosen to fail them on purpose. Yet, I was on the verge of failing them because I was not handling anything well. I felt at times that I was swimming upstream in a raging river. I could not figure out how to help myself. I constantly, verbally beat myself up for what I considered emotional weaknesses. Nothing horrible had ever happened to me, so why couldn't I just pull myself together and move on? I started to have debilitating migraines every few days. I felt like I was constantly making excuses for missing class, church functions, or other commitments.

My senior practicum was at an amazing agency working with children. I was learning a lot. It should have been an incredible experience. I hoped to make a positive

impression, in hopes of being hired at the agency after graduation. One of the clients I was working with, was a girl of about ten or eleven. I was assigned to her case because my supervisor felt Tabitha was getting lost in the chaos of her family. Her older and younger siblings were getting all the attention from the other professionals working with the family. The goal of my work with Tabitha was to build a relationship with her, and help her work on improving her self-esteem. Shortly after I started working with the family, Tabitha and her siblings were removed from their home and placed in an emergency shelter. While in placement, Tabitha tried to commit suicide. She tried to cut the pain out of her body. Even though her living conditions had been deplorable, Tabitha wanted to return home more than anything in the world. I didn't know what to do to help, I felt I couldn't help Tabitha when I couldn't help myself. I felt like the biggest failure and fraud. "I was the great, soon to be professional who thought she could save the world." I would have quit school and run away if I had some where to run too. I did not know how to make it better for anyone not even myself. Tabitha ended up in a locked facility for youth with emotional problems.

My supervisor encouraged me to write to her and let her know that I had enjoyed the time we spent together. Tabitha had been moved before we had a chance to say good bye. Having closure in relationships is important especially to children but I never found the courage to write the letter even though I told my supervisor that I had. For the rest of my time in placement, I hid at home. When asked where I was, I lied and said that I had been so busy that she must have missed seeing me. She knew that I was lying. It was a rotten way to end a practicum and I believed that I had killed any chance for future employment at the agency. I felt worthless.

Things at home were not going much better. I still did not feel safe being myself. I was on guard all the time. I was afraid that if I were myself, I would offend my roommates or do something they felt was inappropriate. They seemed to have a picture of who they expected me to be. If I did not live up to what they wanted, things at home were miserable. At times I felt like a chameleon, always adjusting who I was to meet the expectations of others. I never felt it was okay to be me. I did not know who I was anymore anyway. I allowed myself to be a doormat openly inviting everyone to step on me.

I felt I needed my roommates, my classmates, my professors, everyone I came in contact with, approval and acceptance, to be okay. I did what ever anyone asked me to, or I said I would do whatever was requested of me and then I would hide in my room to avoid keeping my word. I used my migraines as an excuse whenever I could.

Life in the attic apartment was okay most of the time. It was better then sharing an apartment with a roommate who did not speak to me most of the time. Living with Sue had been horrible. I was hardly ever in the apartment alone though. With three roommates who worked or went to school on different schedules, someone was usually home, except during the early afternoon. I missed being alone. As an only child, I needed quiet, alone time to keep me centered. Time alone was what I needed desperately to cope with the overwhelming pressures of school and home. In order to get the much needed solace, I started skipping class or my agency placement in the afternoon. I would run to my favorite fast food restaurant, get a hamburger, then stop at the bakery for a happy face cookie, then run home to take a nap, cry, or stare at the television. It was the

only time, with the apartment doors securely locked, that I felt safe. It was the only time that I would allow me to be me.

Life in the attic apartment mirrored my home life when I was a child. The fighting would start suddenly without warning and then be over as suddenly as it started. No one was physically hurt while I lived in the attic, yet the emotional wounds really hurt because of the memories they brought back. My roommates were incredible women. Yet, when we got together, the four of us seemed to bring out the worst in each other. Mary and Margaret fought a lot. All of the sudden it seemed they would be yelling and screaming at each other. At times, their fights came close to physical blows. I tried to stay under the radar, so that neither of them would focus their anger on me. I was awoken from a deep sleep one Saturday morning because they felt I had done something horribly wrong. I was told that I had left a pubic hair on the toilet seat and some of my hair was in the shower drain. The three of them dragged me into the bathroom, explained what I had done wrong, demanded that I apologize, and clean the bathroom while they watched. I do not remember ever feeling so humiliated. I was made to promise that I would never be so careless or inconsiderate again. I felt like a small child being scolded.

The house where we living in was for sale and we were worried because we didn't have a current lease. The old lease had expired years before and had never been renewed. We were afraid the new owner would evict us without much notice or raise the rent. We lived in this roach infested apartment for very little money convinced that it would never be sold. Then suddenly one day it was sold. When Mary and I got home later that day, we learned that in their panic, Margaret and India had decided the best thing to do was move out. They had made arrangements for themselves and were half

packed by the time Mary and I came home. Although the rent was cheap, Mary and I could not afford the apartment without India and Margaret. We were stuck with few options. Mary worked full time at a hotel and made decent money. However, she had a big car payment that took a large amount of her monthly earnings. I was in my last semester of school and was living on my savings and the generosity of my parents. I knew that I could not afford to live on my own either. In a matter of a day, I found myself homeless. The rent was due for the next month in about a week. India and Margaret refused to pay their share since they were moving out. They had their own plans and felt we should make our own arrangements. A week did not seem long enough for Mary and I to find another apartment, come up with a deposit and the first months rent. We knew we would need at least one other person to go into an apartment with us to make the living arrangements affordable. We did not pay utilities in the attic and we had all put in money to share the cost of food. Margaret did the shopping and we ate for next to nothing.

I thought about commuting from my parents' house or staying with Carla and her kids. Neither option seemed to be a good idea or feasible. I knew emotionally that I could not handle living at home and Carla's house was too small for her family and me. She had two bedrooms for four people, six every other weekend. It would not have been a comfortable arrangement.

Mary and I frantically called everyone we knew for advice and help. We were in shock that India and Margaret had just up and moved. No one had asked us to move out of the apartment. In fact, later we learned that the house had not been sold. The deal with the buyer and the homeowner had not worked out after all. We lost our home as a

result of fear, misinformation, and panic. I only had about a month left of my senior year when I became homeless. My life was already a mess without adding being homeless and broke to the mix. It was almost more than I could bear.

Mary and I found a friend who lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment. Amber was a student at the University where I had transferred from in Small Town. Amber was in the city on an internship for the semester. Because she was there for only five months, Amber had signed a short-term lease and was paying an outrageous amount for rent. She was excited about having someone move in with her to help with the rent. Mary and I hoped we could both share Amber's apartment. It was close to campus and close to where Mary worked.

Our excitement over having found a solution to our problem was crushed quickly. Amber's landlord had denied her request for a roommate. She was told that having someone move in would be a violation of her lease and could lead to an eviction.

Because of our desperation, Amber decided that it was worth the risk of eviction for us to move in with her for a month. Actually, Amber felt it would be safer if just one of us stayed with her. Mary and I had a long talk and together we decided that I should be the one to stay at Amber's. We both felt that under the circumstances, with graduation a little more than a month away, I really needed stability. Mary would stay with a couple of friends alternating every few nights at each home to accommodate their schedules. She would store some of her things at Amber's but for the most part, she would live out of her trunk.

The arrangement I had at Amber's apartment was not much better than the situation Mary was in. Because Amber's landlord had denied her request for a

roommate, we had to be very careful not to be caught. A passkey was needed to gain entry into the front of the building or in the entrance from the parking garage. The passkey could only be obtained from the landlord. Therefore, I had no way of gaining access to the building unless Amber was home. At first, we were afraid that it was too risky for me to park in the allotted space in the parking garage, so I parked at a two-hour meter on the street. Every couple of hours during the day I would have to move my car. I therefore had to have tons of change to feed the meters. After 6:00 p.m., I was safe until the next morning at 9:00 a.m. Actually parking was the least of my worries. After wondering around for hours waiting for Amber to come home, we would then go up to the apartment.

Amber's apartment had been the model apartment used to attract potential renters. Because it was the designated show model, no money had been spent to insulate the apartment for sound. There was no carpet pad under the wall to wall carpeting. The family who lived in the apartment below complained constantly about the noise. Our walking around sounded like a herd of elephants, in the apartment below.

Because we were so afraid of being caught and being evicted, we worked really hard at being quiet. When we were home in the evenings, we walked on the furniture instead of the floor. We never got up at the same time and only left the furniture in case of dire need for something in another part of the apartment or out of need to use the bathroom. It was horrible being stuck on the couch or on my bed all evening. Because the sound echoed, we kept the radio or television low, and therefore it was almost impossible to hear.

I felt like an unwanted visitor in a fancy hotel. The apartment building was designed to look like an impressive upscale hotel. To make matters worse, every other weekend, Amber had another roommate stay in her apartment. Rachael had been sharing the apartment a couple of weekends a month, since Amber moved in. Rachael's name was also on the lease, so she defiantly took precedence over my staying with Amber. On the weekends that Rachael was there, I had to arrange to be out of town. On the weekends that Rachael was not there, I left so that Mary could come and stay at the apartment. I felt horribly guilty about staying with Amber, while Mary bounced around between friends.

The last six weeks of my senior year in college were horrible. It was awful not having a key, a place to park, or the ability to walk from room to room without fear that someone would be bothered and complain. My parents had taken the majority of my belongings back home. Consequently, I could not find what I needed half of the time. Or I would realize that what I was searching for was an hour away in a box in my parents' garage.

Most weekends I spent in Small Town, with Carla and my study group preparing for the end of the semester and finals. On weekends that we were not studying, I was forced to return home to stay with my mom and step-dad, George. I felt horrible after those weekends. I didn't tell anyone that I strongly considered sleeping in my car, instead of going home to stay with my parents. I even considered staying in a hotel but I didn't want to admit to myself that staying in a hotel alone was too frightening to consider as more than a passing thought. I couldn't imagine sleeping in a strange place

alone. I also couldn't bring myself to go without food for the week in order to pay for a hotel room.

I stayed in my room and slept most of the weekends I spent with my parents. I couldn't face them with my suspicions and fears. My nightmares had started to involve more than just physical violence between them. I was having dreams of being touched by my paternal grandfather. It was too horrible to even think about. No one could know what I was dreaming about. I loved my grandpa. My dad's dad had died when I was eleven years old. My dad is part of a large family with four brothers and sisters. I had tons of cousins. Yet, for some reason, I was Grandpa's favorite. I remember spending time with Grandpa watching the birds, rabbits, and squirrels frolic in the morning sun in Grandpa's back yard. I learned to love birds and small animals during those precious times spent standing on a chair staring out of Grandpa's kitchen window. Grandpa kept the birdbath clean and filled with water and his bird feeders overflowing with birdseed. I imagined as a small child that Grandpa's back yard was a bird's paradise.

I just knew that a man with so much love and respect for nature could never touch his favorite grand daughter inappropriately. Yet, I also remembered my mom telling me stories about how I used to spend the night with Grandpa as a young child. I always wore one piece sleepers with feet. Somehow at Grandpa's house I was able to get my feet out of the sleeper while the rest of the sleeper stayed zipped up. Grandpa was so worried that I would catch cold, he would stay up half the night making sure my feet were covered by the blankets on the bed. I always slept in Grandpa's bed with him when I spent the night. Grandma had her own bedroom in the room next door. Grandpa used to complain according to my mom that he never went to sleep when I spent the night, because of his

concern that my feet would get cold. I could never figure out how a young child could get her feet and legs out of a sleeper that was still zipped up. Or why it was important that my feet stayed covered. My feet, as far back as I could remember, would get hot at night and I would kick off the covers to allow my feet to breathe.

The story my mom told was cute yet disconcerting. I am not sure why I felt uneasy, until I started having the nightmares about Grandpa. When I was little Grandpa was my hero. He took the time to talk to me and share his love of nature with me. Yet, I was scared to be alone with him. How could you have two very different feelings about someone? How could I love him yet be afraid of him? Why couldn't the past stay buried? After all, my grandpa had been dead for over ten years at this point. The nightmares and flashbacks left me so confused.

I needed to believe that my childhood was filled with love and joy. I had great parents and was told repeatedly that I was a spoiled, only child. We did not talk about my mom's son, my half brother, who lived with relatives somewhere else, yet I could tell Mom missed him terribly. All I knew about him was that my mom had lost her parental rights when she went home to her parents to figure out what she wanted with her life. Mom was eighteen or nineteen at the time and was terribly homesick. She had left Carl in the care of his dad.

When I was born, Mom was still legally married to her first husband and dating another man. Because DNA tests were not available to positively establish paternity, my birth certificate reads: father unknown. Then based solely on hair and eye color, my mom decided that her boyfriend was my biological father. I was given Mom's married name as a last name at birth. My parents were then married a year after I was born.

I found that I was spending a lot of time trying to figure out my family. The memories were so confusing. I tried distracting myself with finishing school and finding a place to live. I also knew that I would soon need to find a job. I was homeless, stressed, overwhelmed and really confused about who I was. It felt like I had awakened one day, suddenly had amnesia or something, and couldn't remember anything about me. I was numb but always smiling. I was losing everything important about me. The holes in my childhood memories did not help. I had nothing to hold onto to, to allow me to say that the nightmares were wrong. All I had was blanks and questions. At night I would lie awake and try to force my brain to remember. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember the great memories that I had always thought were part of my existence. I felt like I was alone with no where to go.

## **Chapter 10**

### **“A Step in the Right Direction”**

Somehow, even with all the turmoil in my life, I managed to graduate with the rest of my class in May of 1993. I am not sure how I had held it together enough to get through all the course requirements but I did. I was ready to be finished with papers, exams, and classes, yet I was terrified about entering the workforce. College had been a somewhat safe place for me, even though the past three-and-a-half years had been an emotional roller coaster. At times, it had felt as if I was experiencing more downs than ups, but I knew how to function in college. I was able, with the assistance of classmates and friends, to do okay in classes, especially social work classes. I made the Dean's List in my last three semesters.

While in college, I could miss class if I needed to. I knew I would not have the same luxury on the job, at least not until I had worked for a while and had accumulated

some leave time. I was also afraid that I would fail miserably as a social worker, if I were ever hired. I knew from my limited experience, that I would be asked questions about my strengths and weaknesses during job interviews. At this point in my life, having zero self-confidence, I knew I would have trouble answering these questions. I could spend hours listing my weaknesses, but I could not think of a single thing that I liked about myself or considered a strength. The past three and a half years had really taken a toll on my already fragile self-esteem. Then, reality quickly hit me in the face. College was over no matter how comfortable I felt there.

I was broke and homeless. I needed to look for a job and a place to live. It is really difficult to job hunt when you are depressed and lack self-confidence and motivation. My mom and step-dad helped as much as they could financially. They agreed to pay my share of a deposit and first months rent on an apartment. They also agreed to co-sign on an apartment if needed. Mary, Liz (Liz was my new assigned church discipler since moving to the city), Amber, and I found an apartment quickly. It was a two-bedroom close to downtown where Mary worked. During the summer the four of us would share the apartment, in the fall, Amber would go back to Small Town. The rent was affordable, if I could find employment.

About a month after graduation and moving into my new apartment, I got a job working primarily with young adolescents in a pregnancy prevention program. I was really surprised to be hired. During the summer of 1993, my life at last seemed to be turning around. I had super roommates, a wonderful job making great money, and the nightmares had stopped. I felt great. Working with kids while energy consuming, was a lot of fun. I loved to play and this job allowed me to do so while I earned money.

I was hired to work with three different and separate programs within the same agency. I worked with young adolescents in educational groups, planned and assisted with educational programs for parenting teens, and coordinated activities for girls ages 8 to 14 and their mentors. At first, this was great because I was able to experiment with a variety of different and new things. Later it would turn into a supervision nightmare. I had a different supervisor for each program. One of my supervisors was also the supervisor for my other two supervisors. Each supervisor had a different idea about how I should spend my time. I felt like a yo-yo most of the time.

The summer went great. I admit change was not easy for me, yet I was enjoying having a place to live that I had a key to, where I could walk from room to room without worrying about the neighbors pounding on the ceiling. Liz and I shared one of the bedrooms. (Actually Liz had all of her things in my room and because she suffered from insomnia, she usually slept on the couch in the living room.) It was wonderful to have a room to myself again. All of my roommates and I got along really well. We regularly stayed up late talking and laughing.

In the fall, I began to work with groups of fifth grade girls after school one day a week for sixteen weeks. I worked with girls from two or three different schools each week. As the participants and I developed a trusting relationship, some of the girls began to share their stories about abuse, death, and the violence they had experienced or were currently experiencing. As the professional, I knew how to report the abuse information to the appropriate authorities. As a person however, I did not know how to process the information and feelings I felt because of what I was hearing. I quickly started to feel overwhelmed. Stories of drive-by-shootings, losing relatives to gang-

related violence, sexual abuse, and witnessing domestic violence at home swirled around in my head. Most of the information the kids shared was horrible and tragic but not reportable to anyone. My supervisor for the program did not want to hear about what I was learning. Due to confidentiality, I could not share this information with anyone outside of the group or the agency. There wasn't even anywhere to document the information in the group notes.

At first, I handled everything okay. I least I thought I was doing okay. Then the nightmares and flashbacks started again. I began to remember more about the fighting between my parents and their various significant others. I was beginning to confuse what I was remembering and what the kids were sharing. I was not sure at times what was real and what was not. In my dreams, plates of food were constantly flying through the air and smashing against the wall. I was also having frequent dreams about being in different rooms staring at the walls. The memories of the details of the rooms were incredible. I mostly dreamt of a room with white walls that were yellowed by years of smoke. On one of the walls hung a crucifix and in a corner of the room stood an American Flag. The whole room was permeated with the smell of cedar. When I woke up after having this recurring dream I could still smell cedar. Yet, the dream didn't make sense. As soon as the dreams started again, I began a downward spiral emotionally. I had trouble getting up for work and was frequently late. I was always tired and lacked energy. I would sit at my desk for hours and stare at the walls. I was not motivated to do anything.

One of my co-workers noticed the drastic change in my behavior and affect. Before the nightmares and emotional upheaval, I had been filled with energy. I had

always been a talker. I could talk nonstop for hours. I was also enthusiastic about my job. Almost overnight, I had changed. My co-worker, Sarah and I had become friends over the summer. Because of our friendship, Sarah felt comfortable confronting me about my change in behavior and offering help.

I will always be grateful to Sarah for helping me in one of my greatest hours of need. At first, I denied that anything was wrong. I had been hurt in the past when I had shared the truth about my experiences and I was afraid of being hurt again, by someone I consider a friend. Sarah chose to accept my denial for awhile even though she did not believe me.

Coinciding with my change in behavior were problems in the agency where I worked. Changes in staff and current staff promotions led to an environment that was hostile. My primary supervisor became cold and angry. Sarah and I were both on the fringe of the conflict at first, then because Sarah was honest with her colleagues about what was happening, the focus of the animosity and hostility was directed at her.

While things at work grew tenser, I felt I was losing my ability to cope with daily activities. I tried so hard to give the appearance that I was my jovial self. I started to forget to take care of small yet important details that were a part of my job. Once, I remember forgetting to schedule the transportation to take the kids home after the group. My co-facilitator and I quickly solved the problem by taking them home ourselves. Transporting agency clients was an approved part of my position yet I went home feeling stupid at having made such a simple mistake. The next day my supervisor called me into her office and explained that she had to write me up for my incompetence. I received a

written reprimand in my permanent employee file claiming that I had endangered children with my mistake.

I was devastated. I had never purposely hurt or endangered anyone before. I knew that I needed help. My personal conflicts were affecting my job and the clients I was entrusted with. I decided to confide in Sarah and I have never regretted that decision.

Sarah listened to my story and responded without judgement. She convinced me that I needed to seek help from a counselor. I rejected this idea because of my last horrible experience with counseling. Sarah offered to introduce me to a close friend of hers who might be able to help. She also helped me sort out what was happening at work, that my reprimand was unfair and unwarranted. I had made a mistake that I had easily corrected. My supervisor had made the same mistake on previous occasions. To make a very long story short, the environment in the agency was unhealthy and hostile. When Sarah had challenged what was going on, the administration slowly tried to make things difficult for her in an attempt to force her to resign. When we became friends, things became tough for me as well. At first, I was discouraged from talking to Sarah by having additional work assigned to me. When this didn't have the desired effect of ending our friendship, I was reprimanded.

When another co-worker challenged an unfair decision, she was no longer invited to staff meetings, instead she had to stay in the office and answer the telephones. In the past, the telephones were picked up by answering machine during meetings. All that I experienced and observed seemed ludicrous. The turmoil was almost more than I could handle.

At work and home, I had trouble with walking into things. I was constantly tripping on my own feet, running into walls, or dropping things. I felt embarrassed and stupid. In my head I heard, “You are so clumsy. Why can’t you be more careful? You walk and sit like a cow.” My room had a huge walk-in closet that was perfect for hiding. I began hiding in it frequently. I would lie on the floor and sob. A couple of times, my roommates found me on the floor in the bathroom in the fetal position. After finding me on the bathroom floor the second time, my roommates began to pressure me to get help. No one knew how really bad it was--how much I hurt inside or how confused I was. Unsure what else to do, I agreed to meet Sarah’s friend, Millie.

Millie had years of experience being a therapist. When I met her, Millie had quit her job because of her struggle with Lupus. Millie had Lupus on the brain and took chemotherapy to keep the disease from spreading or growing.

Millie and I found we had a connection from the moment we met. I found myself confiding in Millie everything I had experienced and was continuing to experience since I had my first flashback. Millie was able to draw out things I had never told anyone before. Not only did I fear that I was going crazy like my mom, I also feared I would eventually remember things that would haunt me and change my life forever. I knew in my gut that I had just barely scratched the surface of the secrets hidden inside of myself.

I am not sure how I knew that I could trust Millie. I just did. I felt so much better after our first meeting. We agreed to continue meeting on a regular basis. During our second meeting, Millie convinced me to try counseling. She suggested that I call Catholic Social Services. The cost for counseling services was based on income, so I wouldn’t have to file on my insurance. The counseling services would be Christian

based, which was also important to me. Millie also convinced me to make an appointment with her psychiatrist, Dr. Smith. She recommended that I be evaluated by Dr. Smith and consider taking medication to assist me with coping more effectively. Millie felt that with therapy and medication, I could increase my level of functioning and my ability to work through my experiences.

I knew that I was depressed but I was reluctant to go to a psychiatrist. I knew that I would receive a diagnosis or be “labeled”. I was afraid of having an “expert” confirm that I was just like my mom. I had worried since the day I first visited my mom in the psychiatric hospital when she had her nervous breakdown, that I would one-day wake up crazy. I knew that it was an irrational fear because a mental illness wasn’t something to be ashamed of, but I just did not want to hurt people like my mom had. I was afraid I might lose my ability to be independent, to function normally. At times, my mom could not leave the house alone. When I went home to visit, she needed help choosing what to wear, putting on her makeup, and curling her hair. At times, Mom was more of a child than an adult. I had not been an adult for very long and I did not want to lose my independence so soon. I had just turned twenty-three years old and I needed to believe that I had a life filled with happiness and joy ahead of me. However, I was currently filled with grief and fear.

*Journal Entry--"I trust Millie more than I fear what will happen if and when I see Dr. Smith. Millie is right I need to do something. I can not continue to live like this. I have no joy in my life. At work, I feel horrible and then I go home and spend my nights hiding in my room crying. I know whose room I keep dreaming about. I have been having thoughts about Grandpa touching me in my private places for a while. I am afraid to find*

*out why being in Grandpa's bedroom in my dreams causes me to feel sick and afraid when I wake up. I feel panicked in my dreams. I want to scream, run, and hide. When I wake up, I have to sit in the closet to feel safe again. I feel crazy. I know that I can't hide forever."*

When I called Catholic Social Services, I was put on a waiting list. I cried when I got off the telephone. It took so much courage to make the call. I had to talk myself into taking what I felt was a huge risk, only to be told I might have to wait six weeks or more before a counselor was available to see me. I was afraid that during the wait, I would talk myself out of trying counseling again. I had always been my own worse enemy. I constantly reminded myself that I was stupid and was only making things up to get attention.

*Journal Entry--"I went to see Dr. Smith today. I was late as usual. Why am I always late for important things? Dr. Smith was wonderful. He listened patiently as I described my symptoms and concerns. My biggest fear was gaining weight. After Mom started taking medication, she gained over a hundred pounds. I was surprised that when deciding what to prescribe, Dr. Smith took my weight concerns into serious consideration. I am now taking Paxil--weight gain is not one of the possible side effects. Dr. Smith assured me that I was not bi-polar like Mom. I am really relieved. Catholic Social Services also called today. I have my first appointment next week. Thank goodness, I did not have to wait six weeks. I am ready to try counseling. I am ready to take a step in what is hopefully the right direction."*

## **Chapter 11**

### **"Is This the Beginning?"**

I had difficulty going to therapy from the beginning. Thus far, my experiences with counselors had not been great. I found it difficult to talk about what I thought I remembered, but could not begin to believe. If I did not believe me, how could I expect a complete stranger to believe what I thought might have happened to me? I really did not trust anyone including myself. I could not bring myself to trust my new counselor, Gwen.

Gwen was nice and seemed to sincerely want to help me. At first, I was always late for my appointments. Then I started to develop a migraine every Friday, which was the day I had my scheduled counseling appointment. If I did manage to go to an appointment, I would limit my conversation to shallow topics.

For the first couple of months, we focused primarily on my issues with my work environment. Things at work were rotten. I had begun to really dislike going everyday. My primary supervisor had stopped asking me to go to lunch and rarely spoke to me unless it was necessary.

I had an overwhelming need to be liked by everyone. As my supervisor changed her interactions with me, I began to feel unwanted and alone at work. Being alone was one of my biggest fears. Somedays I would sit in my office and cry. I felt like a fool and berated myself often for not being the professional that I thought I should be. I felt at times at work like the unwelcome houseguest who had over-stayed her welcome.

When I was out of the office, facilitating the groups with the girls, I felt great. The children seemed to accept me, which made me feel good about myself. I was constantly seeking the approval of others.

During each sixteen-week session, each group chose two reward field trips. Going with them made me feel like a kid playing at places like Discovery Zone, Chucky Cheese, and the zoo. I loved having the opportunity to put my agonies aside for an afternoon and play. I also relished the opportunity to try new things like laser tag and climbing through tunnels on my stomach. The rest of my life was so serious.

I know now that my work environment was unhealthy but it was not really what was causing the anxiety, migraines, and sleepless nights. Eventually, Gwen helped me to

talk about the real issues in my life. The medication was also helping. I was able to function better with the assistance of an anti-depressant. It helped even out the highs and lows that I had been experiencing. I was still depressed but I was able to function better. I continued to spend time with Millie as often as possible, which also seemed to help.

I did not feel like I was walking around with gaping emotional wounds at this point. My wounds still hurt horribly but I was not bleeding all over the place anymore. I was able to start to gain some perspective on what I was remembering after going to therapy regularly for three or four months. It had taken that amount of time to begin to trust Gwen. She was up front with me about her expectations for our sessions from the beginning. She allowed me to be late and cancel sessions for migraines for awhile, then she confronted me about my choices and behavior. I admit my feelings were hurt and I came very close to deciding never to go back to see Gwen again. She had been kind and had gently let me know that if my current behavior continued, I would have to discontinue utilizing Catholic Social Services counseling services. I felt humiliated and rejected. Yet, I realized that I could not stop going to counseling. Without consciously realizing it at some point, therapy, medication, and spending time with Millie had become my lifelines. I feared that I was going to return to drowning in my own misery and confusion if I let go of anyone of them. I knew that I needed to hold on for dear life if I was ever going to survive.

Journal Entry—*“Some of what I was learning in counseling is not as surprising as I would have thought. My dad beat Mom regularly during the eight years that they were married. It was brutal and horrible to witness yet it was a normal part of my life when I*

*was a child. It happened so often that I believed to some extent that it was how husbands treated their wives.*

*Some of what I experienced during childhood explains some of my quirky habits now as an adult. Recently Gwen and I focused on my dreams of flying food. Dad would get angry at the smallest thing. Everything would be great then all of the sudden Dad would get mad at Mom and throw the plates and food at the walls. I think this happened on a regular basis at our house. I was afraid that if a fight broke out during or before dinner then I would have to go to bed without eating. Sometimes I remember my stomach hurting because I was so hungry. I did not dare sneak into the kitchen and fix myself something to eat. If I had been caught then I would have been beat. It did not help that I hated school food. So most of the time I had not had much lunch either. Sometimes my stomach had growled so loudly that I was afraid that I would wake up Mom and Dad with the noise.*

*As an adult, I have developed several food issues. At twelve or thirteen, I was anorexic. I lost a large amount of weight quickly. No one seemed to notice until I went for a doctor's appointment. I remember being told that if I lost any more then I would have to be hospitalized. My parents could not afford for me to run up large hospital bills for treatment. So, my parents suddenly started to pay attention to me again and made sure that I was eating all my meals.*

*Then at age fifteen I became bulimic. It was an incredible high to be able to control something in my life even if I was out of control with my eating. I could control how much of what I ate stayed in my system. I had it down to a science. I would gorge myself on junk food at lunch then be sick prior to my next class. No one noticed me or*

*what I was doing. That is until I did damage to my stomach and had to be hospitalized. It turned out not to be such a great way to cope either.*

*Now, I eat most meals as if they might be my last. I also spend a lot of my time thinking about my next meal. I am not comfortable sitting at a kitchen or dining room table. What if someone got mad and threw plates heaped with food at me. I am not sure what I am more afraid of being hit by a flying plate or witnessing the violence that seemed to start with flying plates. The violence seemed to begin around the table when I was a child, so if I avoided the table maybe then I could avoid any potential violence. Dad always made Mom clean up the mess after the argument was over. I can still vividly picture Mom, bruised, sobbing, and sometimes bleeding, attempting to clean up the broken glass and dried food off the walls and out of the carpet. I think that spaghetti was the worse to clean up. In my childhood wisdom, I wondered why Mom did not switch to paper plates and sandwiches. It never occurred to me to wonder why Dad did not chose to stop the violence.”*

Some of what I remembered fit perfectly with what I had always known but had overlooked because I did not want to see the truth. Dad had always been violent. He was extremely violent with Mom. After the divorce, Dad moved in with his new girlfriend, Gloria. Dad was also physically abusive with Gloria. I had only witnessed a few of the violent incidences between Dad and Gloria however, sometimes I would see the aftermath of the violence. Gloria would wear long sleeves even in the summer and wear an incredible amount of makeup. Some of the bruises could not be covered up though. Gloria always said that she had fallen if asked about the bruises. I mostly chose to ignore

what I was seeing. I was only ten and I did not know how to stop the abuse nor did I know that it was not okay.

I visited Dad every Sunday and for two weeks in the summer. I remember that for the most part, I enjoyed these Sunday visits. I loved my dad and was proud of being Daddy's little girl. At least I thought that I was proud of being Daddy's little girl.

Things at home changed a lot after Mom and Dad were divorced. My Mom stopped cooking large meals. Actually, Mom stopped cooking pretty much all together. I guess Mom had never liked to cook. She cooked when she was married to Dad because that is what he expected her to do. Mom had to have dinner hot and on the table the minute Dad walked into the house every evening. This was not negotiable. Even on nights when Dad did not come home because he was at the local bar, Mom had to have dinner ready when he walked in no matter what time he came home. Being a minute late sometimes resulted in Mom being slapped or beaten.

After the divorce, Mom and I lived on fast food, especially McDonalds, and macaroni and cheese. Therefore, Dad felt I should learn to cook during our Sunday visitations. My dad expected to have a large meal with meat and potatoes every Sunday. At times the cooking lessons were fun. I really enjoyed the one on one attention. The worst part was doing the dishes. It was not so much about actually doing the dishes—although I admit as an adult, I still do not like to do dishes. The hard part was meeting my dad's expectations of perfection. Once when I was finished with the dishes, Dad did his usual inspection and found a moist plate in the cabinet. Dishes had to be washed and completely dry with no spots before being put away in the cabinet. Because the plate was

not completely dry, I was to be punished. Punishment in this case meant having to wash and dry every dish in the cabinet, even the ones that were only used for special occasions.

My dad was a perfectionist and expected me to always be perfect. Once when I stayed all night at Dad's apartment, I was told to go and take a shower and get ready for bed. I was maybe ten or eleven and I really disliked taking a bath or shower. I avoided it as much as possible. Showers usually led to getting water in my ears, which led to horrible ear infections. I had swimmers ear on a regular basis.

After finishing with the dreadful shower and completely drying my hair, I came out of the bathroom ready for bed. Dad felt I had not been in the shower long enough to have done a good job, so I was ordered to go in and start all over again with another shower, hair washing, and hair drying. Wet hair was also not acceptable.

No matter what I did, I felt that I could not begin to do it right. I was a failure and would continue to fail at anything that I tried. This thought process plagued me all of my childhood and through several years of therapy.

My sessions with Gwen were usually not very productive. Sharing about my parents was painful and left me feeling horrible about myself. Things at work were a mess, I was starting to dig up painful memories, and one of my greatest sources of support was falling apart. At least my living situation was good. All of my roommates were getting along really well and honestly; I looked forward to going home after a dreadful day at work. I was still going to church a couple of times a week and actively involved in the single adult ministry. Yet, I was starting to doubt whether or not I was involved in something that was good for me. I was suppose to be meeting x number of people each week and attempting to get them to study the bible and join the church. I

was really struggling with the limitations on my activities and having to run any major life decisions by my discipler prior to making them. The life decisions might include dating, where I worked, leaving a job, how I spent money, any major purchase, etc. I did not feel comfortable leaving my choices up to someone else to judge. I had enough trouble making decisions without the scrutiny of someone else. I was also starting to doubt if what I was being told was the truth. Some of what I heard did not make sense to me. I realize that I had believed whatever I was told at first because I wanted so badly to be accepted and to belong. I had been so alone when I first started to attend the church.

Things within the church suddenly seem to get weird very quickly. There was talk that the whole church was planning to break off from the national movement. The church leaders had started to feel that we were being controlled and asked to do things that did not feel right. People were expected to give large amounts of money to the church on top of the ten- percent weekly tithe. Personal finances and giving were a constant issue that we were talked to about. If the leaders did not feel that you were giving enough then you were taken aside and spoken to about the depth of your commitment to the church and to God. If someone decided to stop attending the church, they were considered to have “fallen away”. If someone fell away, all contact was to stop with the person or if you were allowed to speak with the person, it was to win him or her back to the church.

In the spring of 1994, the church I attended left the movement. What followed was really shocking. We started to receive calls night and day from around the country, trying to convince us that we were making a big mistake and if we did not change our minds then we were on the road to hell. Many people suddenly stopped coming to

church. A new church that was tied into the movement was quickly started in the same city. One of my roommates and my discipler was on staff with the church prior to the split. After the split, Liz had a lot of pressure from members of the movement to change her mind about leaving the movement. It was really weird what happened next. Liz wavered in her decision. As soon as she did, she was moved to another state where her cousin, who was in the church in California was also relocated. Within a matter of months, Liz was engaged to someone in the church. Liz then quickly got married and became pregnant. It was surprising how quickly Liz was tied back in to the movement.

After this happened, I spent a lot of time looking at my experiences with the church. With the help of Millie, I came to realize that I had been in a cult or an authoritarian sect. I was surprised to look back at what had occurred and to realize what I had missed that had been right in front of my face. The college ministry had met for hours at a time where we were told to be down on our knees praying. During this time, we went for hours without food or water. The tactics of mind control were amazing. Church members were required to spend the majority of their time with each other. Dating was limited to a certain number of dates or months together then either you became engaged or the relationship was supposed to be terminated. The more I realized what I had gotten myself into the more I realized how stupid I had been. I knew that the church was not for me but the ties of acceptance were too strong to avoid. It amazed me how quickly after the split the majority of those relationships suddenly disappeared. It has amazed me how this experience has affected me. I have become mistrustful of many things since this happened. I have had a hard time attending church and reading the Bible. I still feel stupid for having belonged to a cult for almost two years. It is still

something that I am ashamed of although I see now that I was an easy target. I wanted to be loved and accepted more than anything. I yearned for a closer relationship with God and I wanted to feel a part of something.

## **Chapter 12**

### **“A Sows Ear”**

After Liz moved out, Mary and I were forced to re-evaluate our living arrangement. We could not afford our apartment without at least a third roommate. Yet, neither of us wanted to look for someone else to move in and share our home. We were both apprehensive about getting into a situation that may or may not work out.

It seemed easier to find another apartment that the two of us could afford. Apartment hunting can be fun and I admit I was ready for a change. Yet, having to move again while I was depressed and unmotivated was dreadful.

I had grown to feel safe in our apartment. Well, somewhat safe, actually I did not feel safe anywhere. The thought of moving somewhere else was terrifying. I would lay awake at night trying to convince myself that I could handle moving and that I would be safe.

I refused to look at anything on the ground or first floor. I was afraid that someone would break into our apartment through a window if we lived on the bottom floor. The farther we were off the ground the better. Of course, then there was the risk of being trapped if there was a fire. I wouldn't look at anything with elevators either. I worried that I might be attacked in an elevator if I ever got on one with a male stranger.

My life was filled with both rational and irrational fear. I am surprised that Mary and I found a place to live. Actually, we had to because both of us were afraid of being homeless again.

During my housing crisis, Gwen attempted to convince me to try a support group for women who had been sexually abused as children. At first, I refused. I did not want to believe that I had been a victim of sexual abuse.

I accepted that in Junior High School that I had been fondled by two of my classmates and neighbors, Dan and David, over the course of three or four months. I felt a lot of shame about what had happened. I remember one of my best friends found out while it was happening. Lucy was jealous because she had a crush on one of the guys. They were both considered a “great catch” at school. She and I were not best friends, actually we weren’t friends at all anymore because she felt that I was purposely trying to hurt her.

I was ashamed because I did want the two guy’s attention. I wanted them to like me as a girlfriend. When I had trouble falling asleep at night, I would try to visualize what it would be like to date one or both of the guys. I imagined walking down the school halls, holding hands and laughing. In my visualization, no one was mad at me; in fact, I was always surrounded by friends.

I had learned to create visualizations or fantasies when I was a young child. In my early fantasies, Mom and Dad loved me and I was always well fed. No one ever got hurt in my fantasies either. Over the years, my visualizations became less about being loved by my parents and more about being loved by guys.

I was confused by my feelings about Dan and David. At school they both ignored me and acted as if they did not know me. At home, I was torn between wanting them to come over and fearing that they would. They would throw rocks at the front and back doors until I would open the door to come out or allow them to come in. I felt powerless

to stop them from touching me. I tried several times to pretend that I was not home. I would set in the dark with the television on low in hopes that they would think that no one was home. In the end after hearing the rocks bounce off the door for a long time, I would always relent and open the door. I hated myself for being so weak.

I was also willing to accept that in high school, a boyfriend had assaulted me. It all started when two of my closest friends were dating guys in the band. When we would travel on weekends to band contests, I felt like a fifth wheel because I was alone. They convinced me to go out with this guy, who was one of their boyfriend's friends.

We kind of hit it off. I think that more than anything that I was caught up in the excitement of dating someone new. Craig and I had been dating for a short period of time when it happened. The thing I remember most is that I felt like I was floating above my body watching what was happening. I didn't feel anything nor could I hear anything. I remember feeling like this had happened before and I would survive.

I do not remember saying no or screaming. I just wanted it to be over. I never told anyone what had happened. I could not find the words to explain how my boyfriend had inserted almost his entire fist into my vagina repeatedly. Even to my own ears that sounded crazy. What is the big deal anyway?

Actually, it did turn into a big issue medically and emotionally. I had internal tearing and was in excruciating pain. I ended up in the emergency room several times over a couple of weeks. I was given my first and second gynecological exams in the emergency room. Eventually I was admitted to the hospital where I was treated for my injuries and stomach problems related to bulimia. My parents never knew the whole truth as to why I was hospitalized.

I think the hardest part of the whole incident was the fact that my mom let Craig sleep in my bed at home while I was in the hospital. Mom also brought him to visit me in the hospital. The thought of him sleeping in my bed and hanging out with my mom and her boyfriend, George made me feel sick on the inside.

I ended the relationship as soon as I was well again. For a longtime afterwards Mom asked about that nice boy who had been so concerned about me while I was sick. Mom told me on numerous occasions that I was stupid to have let someone so wonderful get away.

I did not feel that those two events made me a victim of sexual abuse and I wasn't ready to admit that I suspected my grandpa of touching in inappropriate places, either. I decided not to try the support group at first. Then I spoke with Millie, who convinced me to at least try it. Millie believed that what I remembered about my childhood so far was just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Millie also encouraged me to keep an open mind about what I was remembering. There may be a reason why I had only a few memories from childhood.

To cope with my continual emotional upheaval, I turned to shopping. I obtained a couple of credit cards when I first became employed. I quickly charged large amounts of merchandise to the credit cards. When I felt bad, I shopped. I bought mostly expensive gifts for friends and family. I was convinced that I could buy their love and approval.

The first Christmas that I was employed after college, I spent most of a night shopping at a ten hour sale. I felt so powerful. I showered Mom and my step-dad with numerous expensive gifts. I felt horrible about how I had avoided my parents over the

past couple of years. I still wasn't ready to share with them what I now knew about my childhood. Yet, I realized how much I needed their love and support.

Since childhood, I had believed that the more you give people, the more they will like or even love me. I thought showering friends with gifts and paying for meals and activities, etc., would help me have friends. I did have friends but I was beginning to realize how shallow my relationships were.

In high school, I hung around with a tight knit group of friends. There were seven of us who spent a lot of time hanging out. I thought that I was a valued member of the group. In reality, I was not really close to anyone. I was great to hang out with because I picked up the tab or because I could drive. I thought nothing of inviting one of my friends to dinner or a movie and then if I felt they were hesitant, I would "sweeten the pot" so to speak by offering to treat.

Since I started therapy, I spent a lot of time evaluating my relationships in the present and the past. Actually, I had always spent a lot of time and mental energy evaluating everything about me. I constantly analyzed what I said or did. I would replay any interaction over and over again. Usually I then berated myself for being stupid. I constantly heard in my head, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear". I felt inadequate, clumsy, and usually out of place where I was.

The whole time I was shopping at the expensive upper class store, I waited for security to come and ask me to leave. I was afraid that they would accuse me of shop lifting even though I was not. I felt that way a lot of the time. It did not matter where I was at or which store I was in. I felt like a criminal and feared being recognized as one. I never felt that I belonged anywhere.

## **Chapter 13**

### **“The Kids”**

I reluctantly began attending the support group for survivors of sexual abuse in the winter of 1994. The focus of the group was finding and learning to nurture your inner child. I had experienced some inner child work in the past. In college, I read several books on getting to know the child within and I had attended a workshop by John Bradshaw. In spite of my exposure to inner child work, I was still skeptical. I could not imagine having a child within myself. I was always so serious yet I loved to play. I loved to swing on the swings in the local park and I really enjoyed coloring and finger painting. How I could be an adult and still have a child inside? I had felt old for as long as I could remember. Even as a child, I was not very good at playing. I did not like to get dirty so I avoided going outside as much as possible. Actually, I was not allowed to get dirty, if I did, I would get in a lot of trouble.

The facilitator of the group, Tonya, quickly made me feel comfortable and safe. Over twelve weeks we did exercises and guided group discussions that helped me begin to get in touch with my inner child. At first, I struggled with getting in touch with the inner wounded child part of myself. I would eventually find that I had more than one wounded child within.

One of the exercises Tonya encouraged was writing with your non-dominant hand. It was amazing how such a simple exercise was able to help me begin to get in touch with my inner child feelings. As a small child, I had shown a preference for using my left hand. My dad was embarrassed to have a daughter who might be left-handed so he quickly broke me of what he considered a nasty habit. Dad used duck tape to secure my left hand to my left thigh so that I was forced to learn to use my right hand. I was

also slapped if I used the “wrong hand”. Doing exercises with my non-dominant left hand was so freeing. It was as if I was able to reconnect with a natural part of who I am or was to be. I was able to start an internal dialog that eventually led me to discover the “children” or parts of myself that had “broken” off or became frozen as a result of the severe traumas I experienced as a child.

In times of severe trauma or abuse three things can happen, a person can die, go crazy, or disassociate. In order to survive trauma the brain has the ability to disassociate or go away while the abuse is occurring. When I was being abused, I felt myself leaving my body, going into the walls, the couch, or hovering over my body. When I disassociated I could not feel anything or hear anything that was occurring. I did not feel the abuse. Instead, I was filled with warmth and peace. Everyone disassociates to some extent. If you have ever driven past your turn or exit on the highway because you were lost in thought, then you have disassociated. The brain then stores the traumatic events or memories in pockets to be reclaimed or remembered later. Some professionals refer to the pockets as repressed memories.

Over the next year, I would discover that I had eighteen pockets of memories or inner children. Each part or child had stored memories, feelings, and components of my personality. I admit I was afraid and suspicious as I began to uncover my inner children. I was afraid that I might learn something that I could not handle or I might change the way I felt about my family. I had familiar with the on going debate among professionals about whether or not repressed memories actually existed or if a therapist could falsely implant memories. I knew without a doubt that the memories I had were coming from within me. No one was implanting ideas or memories. What I would eventually

remember was horrific and at times more than I ever thought I could handle. I knew that my memories were in fact the reality and truth about my childhood experiences, even if I didn't want them to be the truth.

As I continued to work in therapy and in group, I began to hear different voices belonging to my inner parts, my inner children. The voices belonged to:

- Grace, who is about three months old. She is not verbal but does cry a lot. With the help of Grace, I have reclaimed memories of fondling and touching by my dad that began soon after birth.
- Sweet Pea is six months old. Pea is full of fear and rarely makes a sound or moves. Mom has informed me that when I was about 6 months old, when she had to go to work, she would leave me at home for up to eight hours a day. I was fed and changed before she left, for work and once more on her lunch hour. Dad would sleep off his hang over in another room. Dad's touching continued. At six months of age, I knew not to cry so I slept around the clock. Crying would have led to pain by physical abuse or shaking.
- Michael is one year old. Michael only speaks a few words. All adults are referred to as Mama. Papa is not in her vocabulary and she will not speak it even when coaxed. Her disposition is happy and easily content. Michael loves to play but is rough and demanding. Michael loves to force Jeff's thumb into his mouth and demands his "bobba". According to my Mom, I was never given a bottle, baby food, or a pacifier. I was drinking from a cup at nine weeks of age and given table food as soon as I could chew. My parents believed that I should learn to eat whatever they ate as soon as possible. Mom and Dad did not believe that comforting yourself was okay either. My favorite blanket was taken away because I had developed an attachment to it. At six months, I started sucking my thumb while holding my blanket. After being slapped in the mouth several times, I gave up thumb sucking as well. Michael has memories that include sitting on Mom's lap and being touched in her "pee-pee".
- Abby is two years old. She is very pleasant and speaks softly. She normally smiles most of the time. Abby is creative, imaginative, and constantly working. Abby comforts herself by spending time in her own daisy field inside of my brain. As I was getting to know Abby, a man who was cleaning the gutters on our apartment was caught peeking in our bedroom window. Now, Abby is terrified of waking up and finding someone peeking in our bedroom window. Abby is also extremely terrified of using the bathroom at night alone.

- Alex is three years old. When Alex began speaking, she stuttered horribly. After a few months of work, Alex overcame her emotionally induced stutter. Alex has attention seeking behaviors and is terrified when Jeff leaves for work. Alex is extremely attached to Jeff. He is her “pretend Papa”. She is afraid of anyone touching her “pee-pee”. Alex has memories of being touched, fondled, or penetrated by Mom, Dad, Uncle Steve (Dad’s brother), Tommy (Dad’s nephew), and my paternal grandpa. Alex demands that the bedroom and bathroom doors remain open at all times. She is desperately afraid of being “shut-in”. Alex is the only inner child who loves Mom and Dad. Alex carries around a bear that she has named “Mama Mabelle” and sucks her thumb. I admit I was embarrassed to be an adult who sucked my thumb when Alex was present or “out”. It was comforting though.
- Mickey is four years old. She is very, almost overly polite. Mickey is afraid of not having food to eat. I went hungry numerous times at this age. Mickey is afraid of taking a bath or shower due to almost being drowned when she told Dad that “fish was gross”. Mickey has memories of being raped by Dad.
- Shelly is five years old. Shelly is full of attitude and is tough. She spends time examining ways to escape from anything and everything. Her job is to make sure that we never get trapped anywhere again, like we did in the cellar or the basement at Grandpa’s house. Shelly has memories of abuse by my maternal grandpa.

Shelly remembers going hungry a lot because Dad threw the food against the wall during dinner. Once I was so desperate for food, I ate Mindy’s dog food. Mindy always had food in her bowl. Mom said it was because Dad loved the dog more than me. I was crushed to learn that I came second to a dog that Dad beat whenever he felt like it.

- Sally is six years of age. Sally is named after the character Sally on Sesame Street. She holds the first memories of school. I had difficulty in Kindergarten because I did not want to play house. When I was in school Kindergarten was a time when you did a lot of playing. If I had played house at home, it would have involved being touched in my private parts. I was terrified because I believed that was what happened anytime that you played school. By the time, I was six; I had been touched or fondled by six different family members. Sally had memories of being raped by Grandpa on the clothes dryer in the basement.
- Lynn is seven years old. Lynn is incredibly intelligent and thrives on using big words. The more intellectual sounding the better. At seven years of age, I was responsible for fixing my own meals and getting myself up for school. I was also responsible for making sure that Mom and Dad got up for work on time. I was beaten if they were late. I believed that I had to be perfect or my mom would be hurt physically. I believed that if I told anyone about the

abuse, Mom would die. I spent my life believing that it was my responsibility to do what ever it took to protect my mom from harm or death.

- Cindy is eight years of age. Cindy had a Guinea Pig that she loves—she believed that Pixie was the only thing left in our life that loved her. Mom was really in to partying, drugs, and alcohol when I was eight. The morning after one of my mom’s many parties, I found Pixie dead. Mom’s friends had thought it was funny to give Pixie alcohol and marijuana. I believed that I was responsible for the break up of Mom and Dad’s marriage. One night I heard Mom and Dad talking. It was the only time I ever remember hearing them talking instead of yelling and screaming at each other. I asked them to keep it down because I was trying to sleep. This was the first time I was brave enough to ask my parents for anything. One time we were at a K-Mart and I asked Dad to buy me something. He took me out to the car and beat me until I thought I was going to die. I never asked for anything in a store after that.

Soon after the night I asked Mom and Dad to be quiet, they got a divorce. I believed that my request led to the divorce. Dad continued to remind me that if Mom dies then it will be my fault.

For my eighth Birthday, Dad bought me a Sylvester stuffed animal. I loved cats especially Sylvester. Dad also bought me several games. Mom told me that Dad came close to starving because he used his grocery money to buy me gifts. Dad lived on crackers for two weeks because of my selfishness in getting gifts for my Birthday.

I had many things growing up. My parents were very generous in their gift giving for my Birthday and Christmas. My friends at school believed that I was lucky to have so much. My parents’ families believed that I was a spoiled only child. I did not want the things. For everything that I received I paid with my body or emotionally. I never wanted things-- the price was too high. I just wanted to be loved.

- Rose is nine years of age. Her memories are filled with fears, especially the fear of being alone. After the divorce Mom worked two jobs and partied in her free time. She was like a human energized bunny—constantly on the move. Mom’s “battery” was fueled by diet pills, drugs, and alcohol. At first Mom left us with a babysitter, sometimes it was around the clock if school was closed. Eventually, I think it got to be too expensive and Mom started leaving me alone with a four-year-old from the apartment across the hall all night. I was desperately afraid of the dark. Bad things happen in the dark. Dad and Grandpa did bad things in the dark. I was also afraid of the numerous men that Mom brought home to sleep with. I was terrified that they would hurt Mom or me. I spent most nights sleeping in the closet. I told Mom that I was afraid and then she responded by slapping me in the face and telling me to shut up. I realized that I was expected to suffer in silence alone.

- Miche is ten years old. Miche is the inner child who is responsible for helping all the others when they don't feel so good. During all the chaos of remembering I created a safe house inside of my brain in order to help me cope. Miche ran the safe place. When Miche first came out some of the other inner children hated her. They hated her so much that they planned to lynch her. Miche held the biggest secrets. With help from Tonya, the inner children were able to realize that Miche was not the enemy. They learned to love that part of me because they knew she saved them. Miche was the core me. She was all that was left of my personality after the abuse.
- Daisy is eleven years of age. Mom moved in with Tim when I was ten years old. Daisy holds the memories of Tim abusing her and Miche. No one else knew that Tim was hurting us. Tim was strict and mean. I was not allowed to touch any of Tim's things. It was like living in a museum where you could look but not touch anything. I constantly felt like I was walking on eggshells. I was afraid that I would do or say something wrong. Sometimes I was afraid to breathe for fear that Tim would punish me by making me perform oral sex. I began to pretend that I didn't exist. I believed that if I ceased to exist maybe no one would hurt me anymore.
- Mitch is twelve years of age. Mitch only speaks sign language. Mitch is unable to speak at all. When I was twelve Mom allowed Terry to move in with us. Terry was violent towards Mom but did not attempt to hurt me physically. Terry was emotionally abusive and drank a lot. Mom made me visit Dad every weekend. Actually, she did not feel she had any choice. Even four years after the divorce, Mom was terrified of Dad. I hated the visits. Dad was forcing me to have sex with him every weekend after I cooked and cleaned his house. Dad felt I was his wife. Prior to Terry moving in, Mom and I shared the only bed. I was really uncomfortable sleeping with Mom. Mom at times was too touchy and wanted to snuggle with me. Mom got mad at me for talking back to her, made me pull down my pants, and whipped me with a belt. By this time, I was on the verge of adolescents and bubbling over with anger. I had been hurt by almost all the people in my life. I remember turning around and laughing at Mom. Mom in her anger reached in the closet and pulled out a wire hanger. I definitely was not laughing anymore when she finished beating me with a hanger.
- Molly is thirteen years of age. Molly held memories that have taken years to come to terms with and work through. When I was thirteen, I coped with the trauma and abuse by becoming anorexic.
- Georgia "Peachy" is fourteen years old. Terry had moved out when I was fourteen years old. The night he left was the night he almost killed Precious, my beloved cat. After Terry left and Mom and I moved to another part of town, Mom went out one night and picked up George in a bar. My future step

dad came home with Mom and never left. Mom was back to never being home because she was out drinking and doing drugs. Peachy was responsible for holding all of the inner children together.

- Sunshine is fifteen years of age. I was fifteen when Dad attempted to drown me after I brought a boyfriend home to meet him. I was severely bulimic. I thought being able to throw up gave me some control. I desperately needed to feel that I had some control.
- Star is sixteen years old. Star held memories of the incident when my boyfriend shoved his fist into my vulva or vaginal area. I hated myself for not being able to stop him. The incident led to vaginal tearing and excessive vomiting afterwards. Any food felt like a penis inside of me. I had difficulty keeping anything in my stomach.

The abuse by my parents, grandparents, uncle, cousin, Tim, two neighbors, and my boyfriend from the band stopped by the time I was sixteen. I didn't disassociate to the extent of creating pockets of memories after the age of sixteen. Discovering that I had eighteen inner children was not easy for me. I felt like a freak. Especially after I learned that each child part of me had their own voice. Each part had the ability to appear, and talk. This is difficult for me to explain. I cannot say that I totally understand what happen to me. It just did. As each child part came out to talk, my voice and physical appearance would change. I actually looked smaller and younger. I do not have a Multiple Personality Disorder, because the adult part of me is always present. I have never lost time since childhood. Yet, I know that I am lucky to have them because they saved my life. The inner children and the ability to disassociate were a gift from God. I do not think I could have survived the sexual abuse by ten different perpetrators, spanning the first sixteen years of my life without disassociating.

At first, I was in shock after realizing that I had eighteen parts running around in my head. I did not believe it at first. It took a long time to get to know each one of them. I was amazed at how much of my personality was blended with the children. I found,

that at the age of twenty-five, I was just a shell of a person, who had the ability to be merged with all of the parts of her personality.

I could control whether or not the “kids” came out and talked. However, I could not control what they said, in fact, I had no idea what they were going to say until they said it. This made it easier for a while, to believe that their memories belonged to each of them, not me. I could wrap my mind around the revelation that Mom and Dad abused “Abby”, not me.

Some of what I uncovered seemed too cruel even for my parents. From the age of two to about four, I was given daily enemas or castor oil. According to Mom, this was for my benefit because I had an underdeveloped bowel, which was unable to process all that I had eaten. Prior to the enemas, my stomach had swollen to the extent of permanently pushing out my rib cage. The doctor prescribed the use of enemas and castor oil to alleviate the discomfort and constipation. My mom continued to use the enemas as punishment for whatever I had done wrong. These were called “teach me ones”. As an adult I am still almost physically ill at the sight of the rubber syringe used to clean ears or give enemas.

“Alex” remembers another “teach me one” where Dad loved to throw me in the air. When I needed to be punished Dad would throw me in the air and not catch me, instead he let me fall to the ground. When I would cry, Dad would laugh and say it is my fault if I’m hurt. He said, “If you were smart, you would learn to bounce.” This was an impossibility.

The people in my life all reacted differently to the knowledge that I had inner children. During a therapy session with Gwen, Alex came out and talked with her about

how she was feeling. I had told Gwen about my inner children and what I was learning in my support group. I had never allowed any of the children to come “out” and talk before. They had talked to me on the inside during sessions before but had never actually tried to talk directly to Gwen. Gwen was really freaked out by the experience. She was convinced that I had a Multiple Personality Disorder, which was what I feared the most. I had believed for years that I would wake up one day and be my mom. My dad’s sister had been diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder when I was in high school. Aunt Wendy had spent time in a state facility and had undergone electric shock therapy. I was terrified that I would end up living like Aunt Wendy, no quality of life, depressed, suicidal, and in constant turmoil. After Alex spoke to Gwen, our relationship changed. Eventually we terminated our counseling relationship.

Alex came “out” and spoke to Dr. Smith soon after the session with Gwen. I had really liked and trusted Dr. Smith. He had been so kind and caring whenever we saw him. I was sure that he understood what I was experiencing, but Dr. Smith was unable to understand what was happening inside me. He started talking to me about hospitalization and inpatient treatment to stabilize my condition. Our conversation hooked my fear of being confined and institutionalized. The session with Dr. Smith really scared me. The thought of being locked up was almost more than I could bear. Out of fear, I chose not to go back and see him again.

Since I was afraid to go back to Dr. Smith, I had to make a decision about the Paxil he had prescribed. I had been thinking about getting off the medication and had asked Dr. Smith, during my previous visit, what the procedure was for quitting the Paxil. After terminating the relationship, I started decreasing my medication as he had

instructed. The next two weeks were horrible. I was dizzy and physically ill. During that time, I laid on the bathroom floor around the clock. It was the sickest I have ever been. I don't regret it though. I needed to be able to feel what I had stuffed inside of me. The medication had helped me stay on an even keel while I learned to cope. When I stopped taking the medication, I was strong enough to face my pain.

Tonya had helped me get in touch with my inner children; therefore, I knew that she understood what I was experiencing. She helped me normalize my experiences. It was weird to have different voices inside my head and hear my voice change as an inner child spoke. I could not bring myself to look in the mirror as one of my kids was out, for a long time. I did not want to see my self-change. I knew that my expressions, my body language, and the way I held my head were different. Tonya helped me sort out my feelings and eventually helped me accept my experiences as a blessing that helped me cope and survive the abuse.

Jeff and I met and got to know each other during the time I was connecting with the "kids". Jeff has accepted them as a part of me from the beginning. He has grown to love each of them and they each love him. Jeff has never questioned whether or not I am normal or why I was able to cope as a child by disassociating. I have asked God and myself these questions. I was hurt by Gwen and Dr. Smith's reactions but rallied by Tonya's and Jeff's acceptance. My support group was also supportive of my disassociativeness. It was not appropriate for the "kids" to talk or share in group. Yet, the group understood what I was experiencing because of their own experiences. All of us had coped with abuse differently and in some ways similarly. No ones experiences are exactly the same. The group members encouraged me to try to press through the

memories. The “kids” tried to protect me from the truth at times by causing migraines, extreme fatigue, and nausea. I could only handle the memories in small quantities, otherwise I felt on the brink of madness.

The memories and the feelings from the actual event were not connected, but disassociated. The healing process for me involved reconnecting with the memory, feeling that I was going crazy, surviving the memory, and then slowly reclaiming the feelings. Eventually, I was able to reconnect the feelings with the memories, which resulted in being able to face the truth. At times, I was stuck in the process because the pain was overwhelming or because denial was more comfortable than the work it takes to discover the truth. Some things are easier to believe than others.

#### **Chapter 14** **“I’m at what?!”**

Discovering my inner parts was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it felt good to uncover or find the missing parts of me. On the other hand, each part had memories and feelings that I was not sure that I was ready to look at. I had lived in denial for so long about my family, my childhood, my experiences, and who I was as a result. It was easier to believe that I was raised in a normal middle class family than to explore the truth about my childhood.

Even with my education, I did not fully understand what was happening inside of me. How do you explain having eighteen inner children to anyone? I felt like a freak. What if I could not live with what I had buried inside of me? I was so afraid that I was not strong enough to handle whatever happened as a result of learning the truth.

I loved my parents and I had spent my entire life seeking acceptance and love from everyone I knew. What if I lost the love of my family because of finding the truth?

I wasn't sure that I was strong enough to survive the truth or its consequences. Denial was much less frightening. Yet, I knew that until I dealt with the past, I would never have peace. The craziness that I had been living with over the past three years was getting really old and tiring. I did not want to spend the rest of my life, having nightmares, being depressed, and suffering from the excruciating pain of migraines. The pain was the best motivator and the biggest barrier. I wanted the pain to stop; yet, I was in so much pain that I was almost incapacitated by it at times.

The revelations of past abuse came out slowly and without warning. After accepting the abuse by the neighbor boys, Dan and David, and the boyfriend in high school, I began to look at the dreams about my paternal grandpa. I loved Grandpa and had been saddened by his loss, since I was eleven years old. I owed my love of nature to a man who had fondled me as a young child. I had started having dreams about his green recliner and watching "Hogans Heroes". In individual therapy and group counseling, I began to work through what I remembered about the experience.

I chose not to believe it for awhile. The knowledge threatened to destroy some of the only good memories that I had from childhood. I had always revealed in the fact that I was Grandpa's favorite grandchild. It had counter balanced my disappointment about my relationship with my paternal grandma and my maternal grandparents. Dad's mom never seemed to remember my name. Whenever I spent time with her and Grandpa, Grandma would go down a whole list of my cousin's names before she got to mine. Sometimes, I had to say, "No, Grandma it's me Alex, remember?" That was really the extent of our relationship. Grandma usually ignored me when I was around. It had hurt

so much. I had concluded as a child that she did not like me because there was something terribly wrong with me.

My relationship with Mom's parents was not much better. My grandparents lived in another state. So we only made the seven-hour drive about twice a year. Usually, we visited them on holidays. It was easy to blame the distance for Grandma and Grandpa not knowing me very well. My cousins, who all lived in the same town as my grandparents, appeared crazy about them. Other relatives also seemed fond of my grandparents. Because everyone else seemed to think that they were great, I was left to feel again that something was wrong with me. I did not like my mom's parents.

I did not enjoy visiting Grandma and Grandpa, being at their house was not pleasant. The entire visit usually was an emotional roller coaster for me. Grandpa was big on saving money. The grossest way they saved money was by limiting the amount of water each person could use to bath in. If the bath water ran more than a few minutes, then Grandpa would be at the door pounding and yelling. Usually, I was yelled at while trying to rinse all the shampoo out of my hair. All three members of my family, Mom, George, and me, were required to bath in the same water. Yuck. I always tried to never be the last person to have to use the water. The yelling in the house was the worst part. Grandpa yelled the entire time we were there.

My grandparents like my dad were sticklers about making you eat everything on your plate. Mealtime was horrible. I did not have any choice about what kind of food or how much food was put on your plate. Dad had rules about having to chew every bite—no swallowing bites of food whole and no hiding food in other food to disguise the taste. The worst part of meals was that you were not allowed to leave the table until your plate

was clean. There were times that I would sit at the dinner table for hours. Food that you do not like is worse the colder it gets. Those dinner time power struggles fed into my issues with food in my adolescents. It was horrible to be punished for not liking the taste or texture of certain foods. My dad and my grandparents believed that they were helping me by forcing me to eat whatever they served. Even as an adult today, certain foods refuse to stay in my stomach or cause me to feel ill even to think about eating them.

As I got older, I realized that my maternal grandparents did not like me anymore than I liked them. Grandma loved to tell people that I was lazy, no good, and the daughter of the devil. Grandma really did not like my dad either. I understood her dislike of Dad because of how he treated Mom. My grandparents on several occasions drove the seven hours to our house to pack up Mom and me after a violent incident. Mom always returned home to Dad, sometimes as soon as we arrived at Grandma's house. What I never been able to figure out is why she disliked me.

So knowing all this I guess was not surprised to uncover in my buried memories, abuse by my maternal grandpa. I had several memories of Grandpa fondling me and having me touch him. My mom confided to me, at one point, that she remembers hearing Grandma say that they had adopted her so that Grandpa could have someone to sleep with. This revelation has been a lot harder to deal with. What a sick family, if they had really adopted my mom for sex.

At this point, in my healing, I was overwhelmed. I now knew of abuse by five different men and boys. Two were family members. I was sure that I could handle if there were anymore perpetrators. It was easy to see at this point, why I was so messed up

and why I had been depressed for years. Dr. Smith was convinced that I had been depressed since childhood, probably almost all of my life.

I realized that Gwen was right when she referred me for group counseling for sexual abuse survivors. As much as I hated to admit to anyone, even myself, I am an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

## **Chapter 15**

### **“Endings and New Beginnings”**

With each new revelation, I felt more and more at a loss as to how to make it better. I withdrew further inside of myself in an attempt to shield myself from the pain. I was having difficulty functioning and getting through each day. I did not want to get up in the morning to go to work and while at work, I was drifting in and out of my own thoughts. I was slowly losing my ability to speak for myself, my voice. I struggled to make even the simplest decisions.

Actually, I was able to make one decision. After giving it a lot of thought, which left me confused and scared, I did the only thing I thought that I could. I resigned from my position with the youth serving agency. According to the terms of my contract, I had to give a months notice. It was the longest month of my life. The supervisor that my primary supervisor and I shared stopped speaking to me the day that I turned in my resignation. I felt that I had somehow let the supervisor down by quitting. I was not comfortable with confrontation. Therefore, I left at the end of my notice without saying anything to her.

Towards the end of the month, I started calling in sick. I was not feeling well. I had been in a minor car accident and had hurt my back. The weekend after the accident, I went home to my parents' house to get my step dad, George, to repair the damage to my

driver's side door. While at Mom and George's house, I thought my back gave out. I was stuck on the living room floor unable to move.

Eventually my mom was able to help me to the couch where I laid for a couple of days. I didn't feel physically or emotionally capable of driving the hour back to my apartment in the City. I think more than anything I was avoiding returning to work. After several days, I knew I had to return to the City and to work. The Executive Director had confronted me about my absence the last time I called in. I realized that I was making an already tough situation worse by my cowardliness. I knew I had to leave that evening. I convinced myself I was feeling better anyway. When I told Mom that I had to leave, she grabbed me by both my arms, drug me off the couch, and dropped me flat on my back. I ended up missing another day of work. A little over a week after I first arrived, I was finally able to return home.

My therapist, Gwen, did not agree with my decision to quit my job. She told me that she felt I was not making a good choice. I felt I was letting her down but I knew I could no longer function in the unhealthy work environment. I was scared that I would not be able to pay my bills, yet I did not feel I had any other choice.

I kind of fell into my next employment opportunity. I decided to sale Discovery Toys. I convinced myself that I could contact people, set up parties, and sale lots of toys. I thought I could find enough confidence to be a top toy sales consultant. It wasn't as easy as I thought. I could not bring myself to ask anyone to host a toy party. Finally, out of sensing my desperation, Mom came to my rescue. Mom arranged for her neighbor, Tina, a child care provider, to have a party. I was so excited to have booked my first party.

There was one catch. Tina has a cousin, Jeff, that she wanted to set me up with on a blind date. I did not want to go out on a blind date, actually I did not want to date period. I was too confused about whom I was and in too much pain, to even think about getting into a relationship with anyone.

I still wanted to be loved more than anything. Therefore, I convinced my mom to loan me the money to adopt a pet from the Humane Society. In order to have a pet in my apartment; I had to pay a huge damage deposit. I also had to convince Mary that having a pet would be great for both of us. I adopted a beautiful coal black kitten, who I named Casey. Casey and I bonded from the first moment we met. She did not like the cage that she was in at the Humane Society or the box I had to put her in to safely transport her home in. Casey hated to be to be confined, almost as much as I did.

One of my newest memories, involved being locked in the underground storm cellar because I had talked back to my dad. The cellar was dark, creepy, and crawling with spiders and mice. I could hear them crawling around in the pitch darkness as I tried to stay carefully balanced at the top of the cellar ladder. I feared that I would be left to die in the cellar because of being bad. I imagined the feast the mice would have if I fell from the top of the ladder. The cellar punishment had everything I feared most, mice, the dark, heights, confined space, and insects, especially spiders.

Casey was there to snuggle with me, as I shed rivers of tears over the infinite pain of the past. Casey was the first thing that ever loved me unconditionally. I never felt that Casey was judging me. Therefore, with Casey I could be myself. No fake smiles, no pretending that life was great, no people pleasing, and no pretending to be someone that I

was not. It was more than I had before, at least a tiny pure black kitten named Casey loved me.

I felt that because Tina was hosting my first Discovery Toy Party, I could not tell her that I would not go out with her cousin. I agreed to at least speak to Jeff on the phone. Actually, my original plan was to agree to a date and then cancel at the last minute. I was afraid to be alone with a strange man that I had never met before. I did not trust men in general.

Tina gave Jeff my phone number in order for him to call and set up the date. During our first telephone call, Jeff immediately picked up on my hesitation and called me everyday for the two weeks prior to our planned date. At first, I was suspicious of Jeff for wanting to go out with me sight unseen. I couldn't figure out what he could want from me. My strong distrust of people, especially men, almost sabotaged one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Jeff was so patient and worked so hard to drawl me out during our long telephone conversations. Most of all Jeff made me laugh. I had not laughed so much in months, if not years. I hated to admit it but I actually found myself liking Jeff and looking forward to our date.

The blind date was scheduled for a Saturday in September. I was going to visit my parents for the weekend to celebrate my mom's Birthday. We each lived about an hour from my mom's house. Therefore, we agreed to meet at Mom's house. I was so nervous. I had hardly slept the night before. My palms were sweaty and I was on the verge of having a panic attack.

Jeff arrived right on time. Promptness was one of Jeff's strongest attributes. In one hand Jeff had a birthday card for Mom and in the other hand was a precious stuff cow for me. Cows were one of my favorite things. Jeff defiantly scored big points with both Mom and me.

Our marathon date lasted for hours and spanned a couple of hundred miles. We drove from Mom's house to a small town just outside of where I had attended the University. During the drive, which took a couple of hours, we listened to tapes of both Jeff's favorite music and mine. Jeff spent hours during the prior two weeks recording music that he knew I would like.

Our first destination was the State Park where we had a daytime candlelight picnic. I was so nervous at first, yet every time the conversation lagged, Jeff would attempt to make me laugh. At other times, I would start to jabber non-stop about nothing. The picnic was sweet. I had prepared the lunch complete with a giant cookie for dessert that was decorated with small plastic ants. After all, you cannot have a picnic without ants. I would later learn that the ants were what won over Jeff's heart.

After lunch and a quick walk in the State Park, we drove into Small Town. I wanted Jeff to meet Carla and her family. Carla was still such an important part of my life even though we had graduated a year and a half earlier from college. I knew if Carla approved then I might have to give Jeff a serious thought.

After we left Carla's house, I gave Jeff a quick driving tour of the University. From the University, we traveled to Jeff's aunt and uncle's farm. It was a long drive but well worth the trip. Jeff's aunt and uncle own a dairy farm complete with young calves and milking parlor. I had never experienced anything like it before. I felt like I had died

and gone to Heaven as the calves suckled on my fingers. After leaving the farm, we traveled an hour and a half to the City, so that Jeff could meet my roommate, Mary. After a quick chat with Mary, Jeff took me out to dinner.

Sometime during the incredibly long date, I had actually relaxed. Before arriving at the farm, I had trouble even looking at Jeff. As I talked to him I had looked everywhere but at him. I am not sure what I was afraid I would see. My track record with men wasn't exactly great. Jeff seemed so different from anyone I had ever been attracted to before. By the time we finished dinner and were driving to Mom's house, I felt like Jeff and I were old friends. Jeff was the first guy that I had felt comfortable with in years. Journal Entry—*"I felt like I was walking on air when I got out of Jeff's truck at Mom's house. I really didn't want the day to end. We had sat for awhile in Jeff's truck, held hands, and looked out at the stars. Mom asked me how the date went and I admit my answer surprised me. I told Mom that I had just spent the day with the man that I would someday marry."*

After our marathon first date, Jeff and I talked everyday on the phone. We decided to attend the October Festival in our hometown the next weekend. I had mixed feelings all week. I was excited to see Jeff and yet I dreaded going out with him again. I really liked Jeff, yet I was afraid that he would like me too. My experiences with men in the past were not great. Actually, I did not have many experiences with men.

I dated briefly in high school and college. None of my relationships lasted very long. I had recently discovered in therapy that I enjoyed "the chase". I thrived on going after who ever I was interested in. Usually I picked men that were not emotionally available. Eventually if I was lucky then the chase results in a relationship. Those

relationships never lasted long because I would quickly lose interest. The chase was the fun not the relationship. I then felt horrible about myself because I would end the relationship without much regard for the other person's feelings.

Most of the time when I was interested in someone. I would end up hurt because they were not interested in me. It did not matter that I knew up front that they were not interested in me or was emotionally unavailable. I would chase after them with all my heart. I did not believe that I was worthy of love so when I was rejected it was a self-filing prophecy. It created an endless cycle of self-loathing and self-doubt.

The other reason that my previous relationships had failed was my inability to have intimacy. My first boyfriend was in the ninth grade. I really liked Ted. He was brilliant and a really nice guy. All Ted wanted from me was to kiss me. I just couldn't. The thought of his lips on mine made me feel sick inside. I tried to make myself kiss Ted. I tried so hard to talk myself into it. After all, it was just a kiss with a guy who I really adored.

My mom advised Ted, who had shared with her his frustrations, to take me down to the Laundromat, press me up against the wall, and force me to kiss him. Mom told Ted that if I couldn't get away then I would be forced to kiss him. Mom felt that after I was forced then I would like it and then become a willing participant. Ted actually tried this. I hate to be confined more than anything else. It was horrible. I knew that my inability to kiss or be kissed was going to eventually cost me my relationship with Ted. It did a couple of weeks later. I think what hurt the most was that I really had cared about Ted and wanted to please him but for some unknown reason, I could not.

My next relationship had been with the drummer in the band that assaulted me with his fist. After that, I dated Roy. Roy was the first guy I ever loved. Again, my inability to be intimate in anyway eventually led to the end of the relationship. I had no idea why I was not able to be affectionate with guys. I was devastated when Roy broke up with me.

The night that Roy ended our relationship, I considered hurting myself. It was not the first time I had thoughts of suicide. In the sixth grade, I felt rejected by a boy in my class. I gathered all the medication in the house, wrote a good bye note, poured myself a glass of water, and then cried myself to sleep. I could not do it then nor could I hurt myself after the relationship with Roy ended. My need to survive was intense. I wanted to live in hope of someday being loved.

So, here I was starting a new relationship with a great guy, Jeff. I was terrified that it wouldn't work and just as terrified that it would. The weekend of our second date, Jeff introduced me to his mom. That was a real shock, I had not met the parents of anyone I dated in a longtime. After meeting his mom, Jeff and I attended the festival. It was amazing to be with someone who had experienced many the same things in childhood. Jeff and I were both born and raised in the same town, had been to many the same places and had similar experiences. It was great to share a sense of history with some one you care about.

After the festival, Jeff and I decided to go to Applebees for lunch. When we got to the restaurant it was crowded and had a lengthy wait. While we waited for our table, we decided to walk around the mall. I suggested that we stop at the Shane Company and look around. The next thing we both knew we were looking at engagement rings. I went

from just looking to actually trying on rings. I fell in love with the most amazing ring. I had a hard time giving it back to the sales person. Not only was it beautiful, it was on sale.

Somehow, we both managed to eat lunch. After lunch, Jeff and I went back to his house, where we had a long talk about what was happening between us. That evening we decided to become engaged. It was crazy to imagine meeting someone the week before and then deciding to spend the rest of our lives together on our second date.

The next day in our excitement, we rushed to tell our parents about our engagement. My mom and George were not at all surprised and were thrilled. Jeff's parents, having just met his mom the day before, were not happy about our news. Actually, they were suspicious of our reasoning for getting married. Jeff's dad accused me of being pregnant and therefore he believed that we were getting married because we had to not because we wanted to. The other big issue with Jeff's parents was the difference in our religious faith. Jeff in their eyes had committed the ultimate atrocity by choosing to marry someone outside of their faith. Jeff's parents' response surprised me. I was sad and disappointed. I had wished for years to be a part of an extended family.

I am an only child, sort-of I do have three stepbrothers and a half brother, the one that I had never met. I have dreamed of having siblings since childhood. Jeff has two sisters and a brother. I had envisioned joining Jeff's family and being a part of something resembling the "Walton Family". I never imagined that I would be considered not well enough for someone's son. I felt not accepted and had second thoughts about my new relationship.

Journal Entry—*“It was perfect. Jeff decided to wait until my birthday in October to make our engagement official. Jeff drove me back to his aunt and uncle’s dairy farm. It was a beautiful fall day. After we entered the calf barn, Jeff got down on one knee and asked me to be his wife. He was so sweet and sincere. Then I almost ruined the most romantic moment of my life by bursting out laughing. As my handsome husband to be asked me to spend the rest of my life with him, a young calf attempted to suckle on his sleeve. It is a moment that I will remember for the rest of my life. Finally, I have found someone to love me.*

*Jeff had not freaked out or turn and run when I shared with him about my evolving history. I told him on our first date that I was an incest survivor and that Mom has a mental illness. I tried to shock him and scare him away on purpose. I would rather he ended our relationship, now, instead of waiting until I fell for him. I don’t want to be hurt. I also could not promise him that I knew about all the horror in my past. I had no idea what I had left to uncover.”*

## **Chapter 16**

### **“A Year of Fear”**

Jeff and I found an apartment upstairs from where Mary and I were living in March of 1995. Jeff decided to continue to commute the hour to work from the City until he found something closer. Jeff had been driving almost an hour to work from where he had currently lived, so he was use to it.

I had worked at a youth shelter for a few months, part-time but found out quickly that with the emotional crisis I was in, I was unable to work especially with kids. Making it through an eight-hour shift was almost impossible physically and emotionally. I would come home and collapse. I finally resigned after less then three months, knowing that my

quitting was the best thing for me and the children that I was working with. It was not easy for me to be unemployed again. In the six months since I resigned from the mentoring agency, I had failed as a Discovery Toys Sales Consultant and as a Youth Worker in a Youth Shelter. My employment difficulties added to the decline of my already fragile self-esteem.

The bright spot in my life was my relationship with Jeff. When we first became engaged, we began planning a large traditional Catholic Mass Wedding. We had officially become engaged on my birthday and planned to marry a year later on my birthday. Jeff's sister, Carrie and I have the same birthday. Jeff figured with two birthdays and an anniversary on the same day then he would never forget. As we proceeded with the planning, Jeff and his dad had a disagreement that led to his dad disinheriting Jeff. Jeff and his dad have not spoken since the disagreement. Jeff's parents then gradually lessened their involvement in our wedding day. At the point that they were unsure, if they would participate at all except to possibly attend. Jeff and I decided that in everyone's best interest we would elope.

In April we went down to the City County Building, obtained a marriage license, and were married by a Justice of the Peace. After the brief ceremony, Jeff drove me through the drive through at Taco Bell and then Jeff drove the hour to work. Our marriage although not started off with an ideal fantasy wedding day became my lifeline over the next year.

Gwen had not agreed with my decision to quit work in June of 1994 nor did she believe that it was a good idea for Jeff and I to get married. Our disagreement over my choices created barriers in our working relationship. The biggest barrier was Gwen's

misunderstanding of my having multiple inner children. Gwen was convinced that I have a multiple personality disorder. It was the thing that I had feared the most. Since the beginning of recovering my repressed childhood memories, I realized that I have always known that Mom had more than one personality. When asked to draw a picture of my mom in therapy, I drew Mom with ten heads. Mom experienced time loss a lot. She would not remember what had happened during large periods of time. Mom would call and tell me something, then call later and tell me the same thing all over again. Mom sometimes would call and ask for “girl”. This part of Mom had no idea what my name is or who I am to her. Another part doesn’t remember that I am married. I was afraid that I would become just like Mom. Yet, I knew that I was not. I did have eighteen inner children, who each have their own voice. Yet, I never lost time. The adult or core me was always present even when an inner child was out and talking. Because of the barriers in our relationship, I decided to terminate my therapeutic relationship with Gwen. I decided to start seeing Tonya for individual and group therapy.

The more I uncovered about my past, the harder it became to function. Most of what I was remembering caused tremendous emotional pain. With the memories, irrational fear also surfaced. I was afraid that I was going crazy and would eventually be institutionalized. I was afraid of being locked in an underground storm shelter and eaten alive by mice and spiders. Alex, my three-year-old inner child was afraid of being turned into a log and then chopped into pieces for firewood. My biggest fear was being drowned in the bathtub.

On two occasions during childhood and adolescents, Dad had attempted to drown me. The first time was when I was four and had commented at the table that I thought

that fish was gross. Because I was disrespectful Dad took me into the bathroom, made me get into the bathtub, and held my head under water. Mindy, the family German Shepherd, charged at Dad causing him to let go. Dad's rage then became focused on Mindy instead of me. I thought Dad was going to beat Mindy to death with his fists. I managed to get the front door open, which allowed Mindy to escape. For a week, I feared that my best friend was gone forever. Mindy eventually returned.

The second incident occurred when I was in the ninth grade. I had invited Ted over to Dad's house to meet him after the Christmas Parade. After Ted left, Dad forced me into the shower and held my head down in the water until I thought I was going to die. Thank goodness, Dad's girlfriend came home.

The fear had gotten worse after I talked in therapy about being sexually molested by both my mom and dad. Dad had started touching me soon after birth. From there, it progressed to watching and then being forced to help Dad masturbate. Penetration occurred for the first time when I was three years old. Sexual intercourse and oral sex both given and received continued until I was sixteen years old.

At the age of thirteen, I became pregnant with Dad's baby. I really had no idea what was happening inside of my body. The night that Mom's boyfriend, Terry broke down the front door, Terry pushed me down the stairs, this resulted in a miscarriage. My baby fell out into the toilet. She was tiny but looked to be perfect. I named her Hope, because that is what I felt when I realized I was pregnant and Hope was what died when I lost her to violence and abuse. I am not sure, how far along I had been at the time. I think that Hope had died awhile before I was pushed down the stairs. I remember Mom came into the bathroom, wrapped the baby in newspaper and then threw her into the

trash. Mom told me that only trash could come from trash. This has been one of the hardest parts of my past to heal. I wanted that baby more than anything else in the World. I believed that Hope would love me and accept me. One of the hardest parts of this incident was knowing that a part of me ended up in the local landfill. I have never had anywhere that I could visit to mourn the death of my baby.

The more memories of abuse that surfaced in to my consciousness, the more I began to struggle with intimacy. I had never been comfortable with touch. My mom's family tradition or norm was to hug and kiss you whenever you visited up arrival and then again as you prepared to leave. This had always confused me. I felt that I was special when I arrived and again when I left. Yet, during the visit, I was yelled at and made to feel like I was stupid and rebellious because I didn't understand the rules. I did not know that it was impolite to open the refrigerator with out asking if it was okay to get a drink of water. The gender roles where very traditional. I did not understand why I was expected to help with dinner clean up even when I didn't eat. The time spent with my grandparents was unpleasant and anger laden, yet, as we left everyone hugged and kissed with tears in their eyes. I could never figure out why they cried. Were they happy to see us leave or sad because the visit was over? Was this intimacy, where you were loved on the way in and out and the in between was okay to be verbally and emotionally abused?

Dad's family did not believe in touch except for an occasional handshake. Love was not expressed openly with words or touch. Actions by family members were confusing as well. I am not sure how you figured out if you were loved or not. During family get to gathers while Grandma was alive, violence was common. Dad and his

brothers would get into physical altercations over minor disagreements. The vast amount of alcohol served and consumed did not help. Rarely did anyone go home sober.

Mom and Dad were affectionate with me on occasion. After the divorce, I was expected to kiss Dad and his girlfriend at the end of each Sunday visit. I usually felt repulsed by the forced kiss on the lips I was confused by the ritual of a kiss and saying “I love you” after a day filled with verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and possibly sexual abuse. Again I received the unspoken message that a kiss or hug as you leave covers up or makes up for any abuse experienced while you were together. Nothing could make up for the hell of abuse. Yet, I was willing to take any expression of love I could get from my parents. I wanted them to love me more than anything in the World.

Kissing with an open mouth had been an issue since I had my first boyfriend in the ninth grade. Now I was married and still struggling with engaging in a passionate kiss with a man. I love my husband, Jeff but am unable to experience an open mouth kiss especially with tongues involved. The thought makes me feel like I could be physically ill. The feel of someone else’s mouth on mine repulses me. I want to make out with my husband and I continue to try. I hate feeling repulsed and having the feeling of needing to vomit. I hate the look of hurt and rejection on my husband’s face even more.

Actually, what I hate the most is me. I feel horrible about myself and my inability to share a kiss with my husband. I am afraid of being kissed. Not one of the ten people who abused me ever kissed me. I believed it was because I was not worthy of being kissed. I felt dirty and ashamed because I am not someone that was kissable. With the help of therapy, I have learned that my fear of kissing is related to being forced to engage

in oral sex. In my mind, the feelings of having a tongue in my mouth is similar to having a penis in my mouth.

I was confused by my body's response to the abuse. At times, it felt good to be touched. Yet, I was repulsed by the knowledge that I had become aroused at times by the touching. I couldn't understand how I could be excited when touched by my dad and grandfathers. I was especially confused by the response of my body when fondled, touched, or kissed by my mom. Did my arousal mean that I was gay? When I started remembering that sexual abuse by Mom, I started having dreams about being touched by women. I would wake up from the dreams aroused and praying for forgiveness. I was confused about my sexuality, ashamed of my responses, and increasingly unsure about who I was. Did my becoming sexually aroused by family members mean that I had enjoyed the abuse? Was I to blame for the abuse? Did I really want to be touched?

Jeff and I had been intimate early in our relationship. Then on Christmas Eve 1994, while having sex, I had a flashback. I started to remember being raped. I started screaming and sobbing uncontrollably. This event marked the end of our sexual life. I have had trouble separating in my mind sex that was forced against my will and sexual intercourse that I chose to engage in. I had experienced forced sex that was neither violent nor rough, which makes it even more confusing. I knew I did not want to have sex with anyone before. I worried constantly that my inability to sort out my confusion about sex would eventually cost me my marriage. We have not consummated our marriage. Anytime we have tried, I have started to cough, gag, and cry uncontrollably. I am afraid of becoming aroused.

The confusion, fear, and emotional pain started to become too much. I started sleeping around the clock. I was so exhausted all of the time. I could sleep for sixteen to twenty hours at a time. I could not seem to get enough sleep. I also turned to food again to help me cope with the pain. I gained thirty or forty pounds during the course of a year. My already over weight frame ballooned with the additional weight. I tipped the scale at over two hundred pounds for the first time in my life. Being overweight was a safety net for me. I believed that if I were overweight then no one would find me attractive. I wanted the abuse to stop. Yet, I disliked myself because of the weight. I hated the way I looked. I wanted to be thin and loved.

The pain was so intense. I started attempting to pull out my hair from the root. At times, Jeff had to force me to let go of the fists full of hair that I was trying to pull out. The pain that I was feeling as a result of recovering the past caused me to feel numb from my head to toes. Pulling on my hair, I could feel the pain. For a few short seconds during the hair pulling, I felt alive. Sometimes with all the numbness, I felt like I was just existing, no longer truly living.

The more I remembered the more fear took over my life. I stopped leaving the house. I was afraid of what might happen outside of my apartment. For almost a year, I left the house only for appointments with Tonya or Doctor Smith. The only other times I left were if Jeff practically had to drag me from the apartment kicking and screaming.

At first, I felt safe at home as long as the dead bolt was in place and the windows were closed and locked. My biggest fear was that Dad would find and kill me. As a child, I was told repeatedly that if I ever revealed our “little secret” then I would be killed. It was not okay to talk ever about what happened at home. When

I was three, Dad told me that he had the power to turn me into a log that he would chop up for firewood. I believed him. I thought that Dad had the power to know the exact moment that I broke my silence. The sound of a car door closing or footsteps on the stairs outside our apartment was enough to cause a panic attack.

Slowly I became afraid inside of the apartment as well. Most of the abuse happened at night in the dark. I became sure that in the dark of our apartment something horrible might happen. Jeff bought me a night-light so that the house was never totally dark. I was twenty-five years old and desperately afraid of the dark.

It was mind boggling the other things that I was afraid of. I was afraid to use ice cubes. Actually, I was afraid that if I filled the ice cube trays and spilled any of the water when I carried the trays from the sink to the freezer then I would be punished.

Punishment was to mop up the spilled water with my hair. I was afraid that my paternal grandpa was not dead. I was sure that one night I would wake up to find him hovering over me, with his stale whiskey breath on my neck. After several nights without sleep, I convinced "Alex" that Grandpa was in his grave and the concrete marker on top made it impossible to get out of the ground. I was afraid to take a shower and could only take a bath in a locked bathroom. I was afraid of someone trying to drown me. I could still vividly remember the feeling of water filling my lungs as a child. I never wanted to experience that ever again.

I was afraid of using the bathroom alone at night. I am embarrassed to say that for six months, I woke up my husband and asked him to go with me to the bathroom. A lot of the abuse, I experienced occurred in the bathroom. I honestly could not make myself go to the bathroom alone at night. I began to feel like a small child, unable to

walk across the hall to the bathroom by myself. A couple of times, I even contemplated wetting the bed because I could not go to the bathroom alone and I was too ashamed to wake up Jeff.

I was afraid of getting dirty. As a child, it was not okay to play outside in the mud or dirt. Mom expected me to be a “proper girl” who stayed clean and neat. Once when I was visiting Aunt Wendy and her two daughters, my cousin Jennifer wanted to make mud pies. I sat and cried. I was four and afraid of being punished by Mom if she found out. Aunt Wendy offered to let me borrow some clothes from Jennifer and told me that I could take a bath before Mom came to pick me up. I could not allow myself to get dirty. I believed that Mom would know I had broken the rules. I was sure Mom knew everything I did sometimes even before I did it. I still believe that. It is so hard for me to hide anything from Mom. I was paranoid and desperately afraid of Mom even now as an adult.

I was afraid of shopping. After being beaten for asking for something in a store as a child, I grew up believing that it was not okay to need anything. Even the purchases that I had made as a single adult prior to meeting Jeff had been for other people. I did not believe that I was worthy of anything. Jeff and I would go to the grocery store or shopping at Wal-Mart or Target, and I would see something that I wanted or needed. Jeff would encourage me to get whatever I needed. By the time we got out of the store and into the parking lot, I would burst into tears and beg Jeff not to hit me. Jeff was not mad at me nor would he have even thought about hitting me. The overwhelming fear I felt was from the past. I was consumed with irrational fear from childhood. The more fear I uncovered the crazier I felt. I was becoming increasingly trapped in my own fear.

I was terrified to ride in the car with Jeff actually, I was afraid when any male drove. On numerous occasions during childhood, Dad would be intoxicated and driving erratically. It was horrifying. Mom would be screaming for Dad to stop, while he drove a hundred miles an hour down the road with one hand on the wheel and the other hand hitting Mom in the head and back. I would be on my knees on the floor in the backseat praying to God that it would be over soon. As I got older, I was afraid that I would never make it home from a visit with Dad. Dad would either refuse to take me home because he thought I should stay with him or would fly down the road at high speeds weaving in and out of traffic.

I was afraid of cooking or cleaning. As a child, cooking for Dad or cleaning his house led to some kind of sexual act. I thought maybe that all men could not control themselves if the woman cooked or cleaned. It is what Dad had told me as a child. Rationally as an adult, I did not believe that cooking and cleaning led a man to having to have sex or he will die. The fear I felt was not rational. I was looking at things as I had as a child. My fears were based on childhood beliefs and experiences.

I could not bear to be confined. The bedroom and bathroom door had to remain open at all times, except when I was taking a bath. I could not wear anything up around my neck without choking and gagging. I constantly had phlegm in my mouth and was on the verge of vomiting or gagging. Jeff had to pull the car over numerous times and let me out because I was physically ill because I felt confined by my seat belt. I could not wear a bra either. I could not stand the feeling of being trapped in my undergarments. I had to feel that I was free and in control at all times.

The fear and craziness took its toll on my friendships as well. I stopped answering the telephone and returning calls. I use to love to write letters to friends and distant relatives. I stopped writing to everyone because I did not have anything good to say about my life. I did not feel comfortable being honest about my life either. I was afraid of being judged. I was also afraid that if I interacted with anyone then they would know that I was never loved. The more I remembered the less I felt loved. I started to believe that I was unworthy of love. How else could I explain why so many of my family members had chose to hurt me. I believed that something was wrong with me. How could one person be abused by so many? Was I to blame? Did I have a sign tattooed on my forehead that advertised that I was vulnerable to abuse? I started to doubt why Jeff loved me. How could he when I was so unlovable?

My marriage was facing other more immediate issues as well. I had been out of work for six to eight months. Jeff was not making enough to cover all the bills. We had been living on credit cards to make up for my lack of income. For a while, we had managed to stay on top of our bills while increasing the amount of our debt. As the amount of credit left on our credit cards grew smaller, Jeff and I began saleing our movies, CD's and books. Actually, we sold anything that was not necessary to daily living to pay rent and buy food. The more limited our resources the more stress on our relationship.

Jeff was also getting pressure from his family. They did not understand why his college educated wife could not hold a steady full time employment. We made the mistake of turning to them for help once during our financial crisis. Jeff's Mom confronted Jeff about his lazy wife who she felt needed to stop dwelling in the past and

move on with life. I was really hurt by my mother-in-law's reaction. I think I was hurt mostly because I had berated myself for months for my inadequacies. I just could not seem to get it together. Other than Jeff and therapy, I had no emotional support. I realized through all of this that I had always had difficulty having interpersonal relationships. Most of my relationships since childhood had been shallow or one-sided. I did not have any friendships that were mutual and healthy. That is why it was so easy for the friendships I had to end quickly or just dissolve without much thought by either person. I know that since the first flashback, I have been hard to be around. I hurt all the time and am unable to focus on anything but my own pain.

Yet, even prior to getting in touch with my own woundedness, I never knew what to feel or how to react “normally” to events or circumstances. I had always watched other people respond to movies, books, life events, etc., for clues in how to respond. I had learned at an early age that if Mom cried then I needed to be strong because I needed to be there to help her. If I cried first then Mom would cry, changing the focus to her. During the abuse I learned not to respond at all, if I cried and tried to fight then it was ten times worse. If I lay motionless then it was over sooner. By the time I was an adult, I did not feel much of anything the majority of the time. Expressing feelings caused me feel vulnerable and open to hurt.

I had learned to cope with the pain of childhood by disassociating. It was easier if I went away to somewhere else. The year I lived in fear inside of my home, I realize now I was able to use the “kids” to cope with the overwhelming feelings I was experiencing. Journal Entry—*“The pain is too much. Some days I wish I could just die so that the hurt will stop. I am afraid that I am going crazy. Sometimes I can almost hear the knock on*

*the door that will be little men in white coats to take me away in a straight jacket. I have been dreaming about being in a locked room with padded walls. I also fear that I will tap into the rage that is hidden by the pain and hurt someone. There are times when I have been driving in my car that I have thought of flooring the accelerator and running into someone or into something. It scares me to think about hurting someone. I do not really want to hurt anyone. I just want the hurt to stop. Please God I pray everyday take the hurt away.*

*Sometimes I have wondered where God was when all those people were sexually abusing me, especially Mom and Dad. Tonya told me this week in therapy about a dream one of her clients had. She saw herself being abused while Jesus stood next to the bed and cried. He was crying for her—for his child that was losing her innocence. The image of Jesus being sad and shedding silent tears at a time when I could not cry is really comforting. I don't know how to live with the hurt and the knowledge that my parents molested me. I know that Mom did not participate willingly at first. Dad forced Mom by threatening to kill me. What hurts is after the divorce Mom touched me when Dad was not there. Mom never asked about Dad and what went on during visitation. I never told Mom because I was told that he would kill her. I would have done anything to protect Mom. The funny thing is I still would."*

## **Chapter 17**

### **"Becoming a Survivor"**

The time I spent locked inside of the house was one of the longest years of my life. The longer I stayed trapped inside paralyzed with fear the harder it became to venture outside. There is something all most comforting about fear. I had lived with fear

so long trapped inside of me. I knew how to live being afraid of everything, I did not know how to function with it.

Slowly with the help of time, therapy, love, and faith, I started to emerge from my self-imposed cocoon. I have never regretted the time I spent locked inside of my home. I needed to be able to focus on my healing without the distractions of work and relationships. My time in the house cost me a lot though. Jeff and I went to credit counseling for help with our financial crisis. We were told we had too little had amassed trying to survive while I healed. We decided our only option was to file bankruptcy, Jeff and I have never regretted that decision. The daily telephone calls from creditors and the struggle to keep a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs, was more than we could manage on top of the stress created by my healing. Filing bankruptcy has continued to make things a little harder but in the end, it was the best decision at the time.

Several things happened that helped me free myself from the fear that I was trapped in. One of my cousins died, while at the funeral home I sat down with Aunt Wendy and had a long talk. My realization that I was not crazy and I was not making up the memories of abuse began with that conversation. Over the course of the next few months, I would receive confirmation from Aunt Wendy about abuse by my dad and grandpa. Aunt Wendy had also been sexually molested by both when she was a child. Aunt Wendy is the youngest of Dad's siblings. Aunt Wendy had witnessed Grandpa fondling me in the living room on several occasions. She shared with me that Grandpa had abused all of his children but as far as she knew, I was the only grandchild. She knew for sure that he had not harmed her children.

When I was six I was at Aunt Wendy's house and something about the way Jennifer was playing with the Barbie dolls upset me. Aunt Wendy took me aside and gently asked me if someone had hurt me. I confided in Aunt Wendy about the touching by Dad. Aunt Wendy felt helpless. She did not feel there was anything she could do to help me. Aunt Wendy was trapped in her own fear of my dad. She has felt bad for not helping me. The only thing she felt she could do was to keep an eye on me from a distance. I had never told anyone after Aunt Wendy because I thought she didn't believe me.

Aunt Wendy helped me understand our family history which help explain why Dad was the way he is. Dad was severally wounded by childhood abuse. Although it did not excuse Dad's choice, it explained where he learned to hurt others. Some of what Aunt Wendy shared I still find shocking. According to Aunt Wendy, my cousin Tommy who also abused me is not only my cousin he is also my half-brother. Dad got his sister, Connie pregnant when she was a teenager. His paternity explains the bond Dad has always had with Tommy. It also explains why Aunt Connie never treated Tommy the same as her other two children. Grandpa forced Aunt Connie to marry her boyfriend at the time. No one in the family has ever talked about this family secret.

Aunt Wendy was also able to help me understand why my paternal grandma had treated me the way she had. I had always believed that Grandma hated me. As a child, I tried to hide from Grandpa in Grandma's closet. I tried to blend in with the clothes. Grandma usually gave me away. I could never figure out why she told Grandpa where I was. Aunt Wendy explained that Grandma truly loved me. She acted disinterested in me to protect me. If she had showered me with love, it would have been worse with

Grandpa. When she told Grandpa where I was it was in attempt to minimize the danger. The longer Grandpa looked the madder he got, therefore the worse the pain would have been inflicted.

I had been the last one to see Grandma alive. When Mom and I visited Grandma in the hospital, Grandma knew who I was right off without her glasses on from across the room. It was the first time that I can ever remember that Grandma got my name right with her first guess. Grandma died that night of a heart attack. She had been bulimic for a heart attack. She had been bulimic for years, towards the end Grandma was throwing up parts of her stomach. Bulimia was how Grandma coped with the family secrets. Knowing that Grandma had loved me and had done all she could do to protect me was empowering for me. I was actually loved by someone.

During my cousin's funeral, Dad had tried to keep me away from Aunt Wendy. One of my fears was true, Dad did know the minute I learned the truth. I saw Dad, one more time after I learned everything from Aunt Wendy. Dad took Jeff and I out to lunch. Dad was not able to look me in the face or make any kind of eye contact. Dad knew I remembered the truth. I haven't seen Dad since that day. I love my dad because he is my dad but I don't like him as a person. His choices made my childhood a living hell. This was not an easy choice for me to terminate my relationship with Dad. For the year prior, I had thrown up on the side of the highway for miles on the way home from seeing him. If spending time with him made me ill then I don't want to be ill any longer. Prior to talking with Aunt Wendy, Jeff, Dad, my step-mom and I had lunch to celebrate my engagement to Jeff and my Birthday. When Jeff got up to, get something to eat Dad waved a butter knife at me scaring my step-mom and me. I got the message. A message

that had terrified me for a year while I was trapped in my home. I have realized through counseling that I don't have to fear Dad anymore. Knowing the truth had already caused him to be unable to look me in the eyes. Dad is not powerful anymore. He is a sick man who because of his woundedness chose to molest and rape children. I have laid awake at night worrying about Dad's grandkids. If I had proof that he was hurting anyone, I would report him in a heartbeat. I pray that no other child is ever hurt by my dad.

I started throwing up on the way home from visiting with Mom as well. Each visit left me upset and shaking. After a visit, I would be confined to bed for a day or more. Mom was still physically and emotionally abusive. During support group one night, I shared about a recent visit. When Mom disagreed with me, she hit me in the stomach or hit me in the back of the head. I knew that I did not like it. In fact I hated being hit and felt hopeless to stop it from occurring. The group members confronted me. They helped me realize that I was making a choice to get in my car and travel to my mom's house where I was being abused. I was also taking my inner children along for the ride. If they were actual children would I be loading them up in the car knowing that they would be hurt when we got to where we were going. My inner children had already experienced a lifetime of abuse, did they deserve to continue to be hurt. I was choosing to allow the abuse to continue. I did not have any choice as a child but as an adult I did have choices. It was the first time in my life that I was told that I did not deserve to be abused. The thing that helped me to finally open my eyes was the day that Mom slugged Jeff in the stomach because she did not like what he said. I started to realize that it was not okay to hurt someone because you disagreed with him or her.

In therapy, I began to learn how to set boundaries with my mom. It hasn't been easy. No hitting was one of the first boundaries I have ever set with Mom. Mom continues to threaten violence. Once at a restaurant, Mom picked up a knife and said, "I could stab you". Mom has also threatened to kill me or beat me. Now I am able to redirect her and remind her that it is not appropriate. Mom usually apologizes. I have realized over time that she does not mean her threats, she just does not know how to express her feelings.

The second boundary came about after I spent the weekend at Mom's house. I had always been told that it was not okay to lock the bathroom door. Mom always had to come in and use the bathroom while someone else was in there. It is how it had always been. When we visited Grandma, it was the same way. Grandma would barge in on Mom while she was in the tub. One weekend, Mom came in while I was in the bathtub. The way Mom stared at me while I was naked in the bathtub really freaked me out. Her look had been sexual. I felt ill. I realized that I needed to learn how to protect myself. As an adult, I had the right to be the bathroom alone. I deserved to have privacy. The first dozen times I locked the bathroom door, Mom pounded on the door, cried, and threatened to beat me, but I held my ground. Mom no longer tries to come in the bathroom, besides she cannot because the door is securely locked. I also protect myself by not staying at Mom's house if possible. Jeff and I stay in a motel when we visit.

Understanding how Mom could sexually abuse me has been hard. I have spent years questioning my sexuality and at times my sexual orientation. My mom's abuse was the worst betrayal. She was supposed to be my mom who loved and protected me. But she wasn't. It has taken me years to work through the guilt I felt because my body

reacted at times during the abuse. I understand now that my body like everyone else's was created to respond to touch. It is natural for a body to respond when stimulated. I am not bad or dirty because I reacted naturally. My body responded unconsciously to what was occurring not to who was performing the act. I thought for years that my body had betrayed me. I realize now that it was the ten individuals who chose to abuse a young vulnerable girl who had betrayed me. They each chose to take from me something that I can never get back.

The more I learned the angrier I had been at God. I could not understand why all this happened to me. My mom told me that the day after I was born Child Protective Services came to the hospital and started to leave with me. According to Mom, Dad showed up just in time to stop them. I asked God why hadn't Dad been delayed. Would things have been better in my life if I would have left the hospital with representatives of the state? I will never know. What I do know is that I am grateful to God that I am alive. There were several times that I came close to dying. God did not make the choices to hurt me, people in my life did. I have also come to terms with any choices, I have made.

All of my life I have lived to meet others peoples expectations. I tried to figure out what someone else wanted from me and at times I tried to figure out what I could do to make someone love me. If I could not figure out what it was that people wanted or needed from me then I was unable to do anything. I would have done almost anything to be loved. I tried to be what my parents wanted. Dad wanted a boy. I tried to play sports and tried to enjoy watching games on television. Mom wanted a "proper girl". I tried to be a graceful lady with fashion sense and perfectly applied make up. In reality, I could not successfully be what either wanted. Mom constantly called me names and told me

how clumsy and awkward I was. The more she pointed out my faults the bigger they became. It has taken me a long time to appreciate me and realize that I am not clumsy or awkward.

Accepting the truth about my childhood and myself has set me free. I am no longer a victim. I am a survivor. As a child, I was taught to go against what is instinctive. I was taught that I was right handed instead of left handed. I was taught to believe that sexual abuse is normal when it is not. As a part of my healing process I have learned to trust my “gut level” reaction to situations. As a child who was abused I was convinced that the color blue was really red when in truth it was blue. I always knew inside that blue was blue. Abuse distorts reality. I knew inside that what was happening to me was wrong but I was powerless to stop it.

The pain I felt for so long was part of the healing process. I have spent years grieving. I have grieved what happened to me, grieved what I never got from my parents but needed, and I have grieved what I will never have. My parents were unable to be the parents that I deserved and needed. Even if they were each able to work through their own woundedness today, it would still be too late to parent me. I am an adult now. I needed them to love me and protect me when I was a child. As part of my healing journey, I have learned how to reparent myself. I have had to parent my inner children. The process has not been easy, I did not have great role models growing up, modeling how to love and care from your children.

One of my biggest fears was uncovering the rage inside of me. I was afraid that if I ever let it out then I would hurt someone. I have faith that I will not. I really have never wanted anyone to hurt like I have. I have also had to learn how to deal with my

feelings. I had stuffed all of my feelings deep inside since the beginning. It had never been safe to feel. Getting in touch with my feelings was not an easy process. It was like peeling an onion. I kept uncovering layer after layer of feelings. At times, the feelings would come in waves overwhelming like a tidal wave. Sometimes I would think that I had felt all there was to feel only to find another layer.

## **Chapter 18**

### **“Acceptance”**

My healing journey, which started with my first flashback in college, has been a long, complicated and painful experience. For the majority of the journey, I felt like I was going crazy. Often I have felt ashamed of what I uncovered. I started this journey out of necessity because I knew I could not continue to deny what was hidden deeply inside of me. I made a conscious choice to look at, and as much as possible, accept the truth.

By the grace of God, I survived sixteen years of sexual, physically, and emotional abuse by six family members, a boyfriend, one of my mom’s boyfriend, and two classmates who lived in my neighborhood. The truth, although horrible, is mine. I am the person that I am today because of these experiences. I am not to blame for the choices the adults in my life made. I came into this world ready to be loved, just like all newborns. My parents came into this World ready to be loved, full of hope for the future also. Adults in their lives harmed them physically, emotionally, and sexually. The woundedness that resulted from their childhood experiences explains how they learned to abuse but it does not excuse them for the choices they made.

On my fathers side of the family there were five generations of alcoholics, this includes my generation. I know that I am fortunate that I do not struggle with the disease

of alcoholism. I made a choice when I was very young, not to taste or try alcohol or drugs. Dad tried repeatedly to get me to sip from his beer when I was a toddler. I cannot explain why I refused.

As a young adolescent, Aunt Wendy took me aside and told me that if I ever tried drugs or alcohol, my first experience might be the last one I would remember. Aunt Wendy felt the disease ran in our blood, and she had already seen too many in the family afflicted with this addiction. Aunt Wendy regretted not being able to save me from molestation, so she tried to save me from alcoholism. I am grateful for her intervention. I learned in therapy that I have an addictive personality which is why I have struggled with food most of my life. I used food to fill in the emptiness inside me, to dull the pain, to help me feel I am in control, and to bring me comfort. In reality, food did not provide any of these things, and being overweight did not protect me from abuse.

By the time, I was sixteen; I hated my body and myself. My self-hatred began with the first inappropriate touch by Dad. I believed my body was the source of my pain. In reality, the individuals who chose to violate me were the true source of my pain. How I look or do not look had nothing to do it. Weight did give me a sense of safety that I needed to get through each day. I needed to believe that no one would find me attractive and want to force him or herself on me.

I have been depressed for almost all of my life. The sadness and pain of depression were the result of abuse. I can honestly say that I no longer suffer from depression, dealing with my stuff has set me free. The migraines also stopped when I accepted and worked through my past. I have not had a migraine in three or four years. This is such a relief when I use to have almost daily migraines.

Dealing with my repressed or now reclaimed memories has not been easy. Much of what I have remembered and observed has been conflicting and confusing. Both of my parents are intelligent and well liked by their peers. My paternal grandparents were pillars of their church and worked hard to pay for private education for all of their children. My maternal grandparents are well loved by their extended family and well respected in their community. Grandma helped raise her eleven siblings after her mom died. Grandma taught Sunday school for twenty years and she and Grandpa were foster parents. When I started remembering I was really confused. I naively believed that people who hurt children could easily be identified by their lifestyles. I was wrong, it is not that black and white and no one is all bad.

I have accepted the truth about my life, and I am moving on. Yet, I find it difficult to accept that my dad and mom have not changed. Dad is still an alcoholic who is actively drinking and may still be abusing children. I know that he abused Alice, his second wife. It took a long time to figure that out. I never saw any bruises or black eyes on Alice, like I remember seeing on Mom or Tammy, Dad's former girlfriend. Dad use to chock Alice right in front of me. Then he would laugh and say that he was just playing around. I heard awhile back that Alice divorced Dad. I pray that he gets help and is able to stop hurting other people.

Mom is still emotionally abusive and uses her illness as an excuse. The physical abuse has stopped because I have learned to set boundaries with her. Mom knows if she hits or kicks me, I will leave or ask her to leave. Mom still puts me down and calls me names but it does not hurt like it use to. I have learned to give Mom as little information about who I am and what I do with my time as possible. She believes I spend all of my

time watching television or working because that is all I tell her. I chose not to give her opportunities to criticize me about things that are important to me.

I use to believe that I was responsible for Mom. I was subjected to horrific abuse because I believed it was my job to protect her. In reality, it was her job to protect me because I was the child. I do not feel responsible for Mom anymore. I know that when she tells me about George treating her badly I cannot try to fix it for her. Mom is in counseling and she needs to be responsible for herself. Somewhere along the way, she and I switched roles. At three, I became the Mom and Mom became child. Now I have grown up and she and I are both adults.

As part of my healing process, I have had to reparent my inner children. In reality, I have had to learn to reparent myself. I have learned to give myself all of the things I did not get from Mom and Dad. I have had to learn to love, protect, and trust myself. It has not been easy. I have learned to play, to get dirty, and to refill the ice cube trays without fearing punishment. Spills now result in laughter not fear. I have learned to smile because I am expressing how I feel, not because I am trying to cover up the pain in side. I smiled for years because that was what was expected. Now I smile because I am happy. I have learned to ride in the car with Jeff without panic and without grasping the door and my seat for dear life. I have learned that there is no break on the passenger side. I do not have to shove my foot practically through the floor in an attempt to stop the car. One of my greatest victories was learning to be comfortable in the dark and using the bathroom alone in the middle of the night.

After emerging from my prison of fear, I started working part-time. Gradually I have moved on to full- time work. Emerging was a process, whereby I became less

afraid and more confident a little at a time. I had almost completely lost my voice and power. I had gotten to a point where I was unable to make any decisions for myself. I could not even tell Jeff what I wanted to eat. I had regressed back to a young child who needed to be led by the hand and told what to do. Emerging from this was incredibly slow, each choice I made, each time I voiced my feelings, wants, needs, or opinions, I grew more confident. I had struggled for years with feeling small around adults. I still do sometimes, but when this happens now, I know it is a sign that something is getting hooked from my past or I am not doing what I need to do to take care of myself.

The more I regained my voice and personal power, the more friction there was between Jeff and I. Jeff had gotten use to making all our decisions. It was hard for him to let go. I am not the same person he married. It has been an adjustment for both of us. Tonya told Jeff and I that she believed that ducks married ducks. In other words wounded, unhealthy people find and get into relationships with other wounded, unhealthy people. Jeff came into our relationship with his own childhood abuse baggage. On the positive side is as I went through the healing process, he was able to begin working through his own hurt. This challenge has made our relationship stronger.

As part of accepting the truth, I needed to acknowledge the extent of my victimization. I did not feel that confronting my abusers was the right thing for me. I did not feel that my healing depended on my family taking responsibility for their actions. I was not sure if they would or not. I did go to the cemetery and confront my paternal grandpa. I needed to tell him how much his choice hurt me. I also needed Grandma to know that I understood why she treated me the way she did. I needed to tell her that I was grateful for her love. What she did meant a lot to me, that she had tried to protect

me. I confronted the rest of my abusers using an empty chair technique I learned in therapy. It was a safe way to tell each of them how they had hurt me. I have forgiven each of them. Forgiveness for me means that I forgive their choices but it does not mean that what they did was okay, what they did will never be okay. I have taken responsibility for any choices that I made. I now understand my choices and I have forgiven myself for anyone that I have hurt as a result of my woundedness. I just wanted to be loved and accepted more than anything.

I needed a ritual to mark my acceptance of the truth and a way to cleanse my memories of the places associated with my abuse. I mapped out all the sites I had been abused at, over the past sixteen years. Jeff and I then drove to each place and left flowers. At each place I was able to say I forgave the person who hurt me there. Forgiveness was more for me than them. It does not change anything for any of them but it allowed me to let go of the hurt, anger, and the hate. I still have some of the rage inside of me but it is not as big as it was. I do not fear anymore that I will hurt anyone.

After placing the flowers, I evaluated the relationships that I had with each of my abusers. Grandpa was dead. I had not seen Uncle Steve, Tommy, Dan, David, Tim or John for years. I had never really developed a relationship with Mom's parents so it was easy to decide not to continue a relationship with them. Dad was not a safe person for me to be around, so I decided to no longer have a relationship with him. This has not been easy. I love my dad and I have never wanted to hurt him. I hope that I have not caused him pain by choosing to no longer see or speak with him. I know that I had to do this for my own emotional safety. I have grieved the loss of this relationship over the years. I could not end my relationship with Mom. I do not know exactly what it is other than to

say she is my Mom. I do not regret this decision although it has not been an easy one. Sometimes Mom still manages to hurt me.

After forgiving those who abused me, forgiving myself and understanding God's blessing, I have been able to integrate. All but one of my inner children has integrated, Integration means that I am almost whole. I now have all of my memories, I have all the feelings associated with the memories, and I have the missing parts of my personality back. Being almost whole has been scary. I have not been whole since soon after my birth. My personality has changed, along with my likes and dislikes. I realize now that the ability to disassociate was a gift from God and without it, I do not believe I would have survived. Because I was so separate, I had not felt much of anything in years. I had always stuffed my feelings. Then when I started remembering, all the pain that I felt covered up my feelings. I am now able to cry, feel joy, and best of all I feel peace. It is amazing to be able to feel without having to watch others and mimic their behavior. Each day I discover something new about life. I have learned to treasure the simple things in life, raindrops, leaves changing in the fall, nature, flowers blooming in the spring, etc. During childhood I had been too consumed with surviving, then too numb to notice life, and then too overwhelmed with pain. For the first time in my life, I actually have a great quality of life. I still get hooked sometimes. There is no way I could have dealt with everything I experienced. I have an occasional, small break down where I cry and have to work through the incident. The difference is that now, I have the tools and support to work through whatever has distressed me.

There are also a couple of things that I have not been able to completely resolve. I am still having difficulty coming to terms with the loss of my baby, Hope, and her body

being thrown out with the trash. I am still grieving for her. Jeff and I have decided not to have children, so she is the only child I will ever carry and she was thrown away.

My birth certificate reads father unknown. I have always been led to believe that the man I was raised by was my biological father. Mom now claims that she thinks her husband when I was born is actually my dad. Honestly, there is no proof as to who my dad really is. At first, I was devastated by this news. My life may have been so different had Mom believed that her husband was the father. My birth ended her marriage because I did not have her husband's blonde hair and blue eyes. Instead, I have brown hair and brown eyes like Mom and like the man who raised me. I am not willing to look into this further. In reality it does not matter, I am who I am no matter who my biological dad is. I would like to find my half-brother someday though.

The last thing that I have not been able to resolve is my reaction to being touched. I still have the same trauma response that I have had since the beginning of the healing process. When someone touches me, something clicks inside of me and I panic inside. There are times when Jeff and I have been holding hands that I have felt that I could take off my own arm to get away. I have also felt that I could come out of my own skin in order to flee a hug. Kissing still causes coughing and gagging. Tonya and I are exploring other kinds of therapy that may help me reduce my internal terror at being touched. I have faith that I will eventually conquer this and be able to have healthy intimacy with my husband.

My healing journey continues. I am not sure if I will ever be totally done. Yet, I feel blessed for how far I have come in seven years. I have gone from being a victim, to being a survivor, to being a person. I no longer am searching for acceptance and love. I

realize now that acceptance comes from within. Acceptance is not something that you get from someone else unless you first find it in yourself. I am proud to be me. The journey has been long but worth every painful step.

To celebrate coming this far I did three things. I threw myself a party and invited friends that I was ready to reconnect with. Having friends and family is important to me. I went back to school and earned my Masters Degree in Social Work. I hope to be able to help others in their healing, and I wrote this book. It has taken me a little over a year to put my experiences on paper. I feel vulnerable telling my story, yet it is my hope that by telling the painful, honest truth about my life, I will help someone else to have the courage to heal or to help a friend or family member understand what their loved one is experiencing. My greatest hope is that someone will read this and chose not to abuse. I know that the greatest gift I can give my family and the World is a way to stop abuse. Let the journey begin!

*Post script – in days following the completion of this book about my life I was asked to tell my story to a group dealing with domestic violence. I was really scared, afraid of being judged but I realized I had to do it. My ability to voice the truth, telling my secret shows others that they don't need to be ashamed of sadness they've been through, but the truth shall set you free!*