

SHATTERED ILLUSIONS

— A MEMOIR —

*I will
always
love you.*

DEVIN WHITE

SHATTERED ILLUSIONS

A Memoir

Devin White

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Shattered Illusions

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This memoir is made available free of charge because I believe my mother's story should be accessible to anyone who may find meaning, understanding, or comfort in it.

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This book is not intended to provide medical, psychological, legal, or financial advice.

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In Loving Memory

Tracey Jean White

July 22, 1970 – October 13, 2024

You will live forever in my heart.

I love you, Mom.

Content Note

Shattered Illusions is a memoir about my family's experiences with mental illness, financial exploitation, suicide, and grief.

This book discusses mental-health crises, eating disorders, depression, suicide and suicidal behavior, firearms, financial and emotional manipulation, family conflict, and death. It also contains references to alleged childhood sexual abuse and descriptions of the aftermath of suicide.

Some portions of this memoir may be difficult to read.

I have chosen to include them because they are part of my experience and part of my mother's story—not to sensationalize what happened.

This memoir reflects my own memories, experiences, and understanding of events. In some instances, I describe things that were told to me by other people or offer my own interpretation of events I could not fully understand at the time. I have tried to distinguish those things wherever possible.

Memory is imperfect, including my own. This book should therefore be understood as a personal account rather than a complete or objective record of every event described.

Above all, this is the story of a person I loved.

My mother was more than her illness, more than the people who exploited her, and more than the way her life ended.

Her name was Tracey Jean White.

She was my mom.

Foreword

This memoir is an account of my personal experiences and my own perspective on life with my mom over several years.

The events of this book take place during what ended up being my parents' greatest trial.

Included is an account of these events, my thoughts as I experienced them, and the loss of the rose-tinted glasses through which I viewed my relationship with my parents.

This memoir began as a chronicle of my mom's battle with mental health.

I wanted to ensure I documented as much as possible, in the hope that one day I could ask them both to read it—to let them see things from my point of view.

When I began writing, I had no concept of whether this would be a story of triumph or tragedy.

I will spare you some suspense on this point: this story is undoubtedly a tragedy.

From this tragedy, I wish to do something positive.

If I can give my mom's battle new meaning—if I can reach or help just one person on this earth who may be dealing with something similar—then sharing this story will have meant something.

If you or anyone you know is battling any kind of mental illness, perhaps this story can help you better understand the depths to which it can drag a person.

Within five years, my mom all but disappeared, leaving behind an empty shell of the woman I knew and loved.

In this way, I have been mourning her loss for years.

Prologue: A Child's Eyes

As a child, I knew my parents were not perfect. I saw the cracks in the facade they presented to the outside world.

My name is Devin, and at the time of writing this story, I am a 34-year-old father of two wonderful children and have been married to my wife for thirteen years.

I recently learned that I have a condition called aphantasia, which is essentially an inability to form mental images, sometimes described as having a blind mind's eye.

I lack the ability to mentally visualize, which I have wondered may contribute to some of the difficulty I have recalling my memories.

I bring this up simply to explain the gaps in my memory as they pertain to my childhood and to events that might have shed further light on this story.

I lived my life completely unaware of this condition until the age of 30.

Much of my memory from my younger years remains locked behind a wall of fog, unable to be recalled.

The few memories I have retained are generally times I do not wish to be reminded of.

Unfortunately, I remember the bad far more vividly than the good.

In retrospect, this may be part of why I had such difficulty understanding my parents' mentality as I became an adult.

I cannot remember much about how they acted when I was a child or even a teenager.

The bulk of this account will therefore come from my adult perspective and will focus primarily on the last five years of my mom's life.

Chapter 0: My Parents

My mom was born in Ishpeming, Michigan, on July 22, 1970.

She is survived by my grandfather, grandmother, and her two sisters.

I do not know much about my mom's life before she met my dad. I am sure she may have told me about it as I was growing up, but my memory is painfully lacking in this respect.

From what I have been told by her siblings, she was a troubled teen. She was massively into rock music, and music in general, attending many concerts.

She told me stories about late-night screenings of Rocky Horror at the drive-in and concerts for Iron Maiden and other hair metal bands.

She was raised Catholic and enjoyed singing in the choir. She often prayed to Saint Anthony in times of need.

I know very little else about her youth, as she did not talk about it often.

My mom and dad first met during their service in the Navy while stationed in Charleston, South Carolina. They were married in December of 1989. My birth came the following year, in September of 1990.

My parents fought a lot, at least from my perspective as a child. My mom would often leave, taking me with her to stay in hotels.

These are times I vaguely remember, but I feel I should include them to set the tone for what comes much later.

I love my parents. They are—and were—good people.

You may not agree as you read parts of this memoir, but I must insist on this point.

Please reserve judgment. You are not me. This is not your story. Bear with me to the end and let the full scope of the story speak for itself before passing judgment.

Mental health is not well understood, and regardless of what anyone tells you, a person's past can absolutely influence their life.

You do not know my parents' childhoods. I myself barely know much about them.

My mom told me that during her childhood, she was molested by someone within her family. I never learned who it was. She did not like to talk about it, and I felt she always tried to shield me from the evil in this world.

Her sisters did not believe her. My dad never shared his opinion, but I couldn't imagine she would lie about it.

After the events detailed in this book, I am left uncertain what to believe.

Yet the version of my mom you are soon to read about is not the same woman who raised me.

* * *

My dad comes from a coal-mining family, primarily located in the mountains of Virginia.

From what I understand, his childhood was not always a happy one. Poverty was a factor, but I do not know much more.

He has never really spoken to me about his childhood in depth, but I have a general sense that abuse of some kind may not have been uncommon.

He can be a very loving and kind man, but life was not always kind to him.

After years of trying to understand my dad, I have come to a few conclusions of my own.

He cares deeply, but he wants things done his way. He has a tendency to belittle and talk down to people, as if he is above them. And finally, he has an incredibly hard time accepting or even considering faults within himself.

One day I may understand his past better, but for now, this is all I can share about it.

With this said, I will begin the story where I believe my mom's downfall truly began.

Chapter 1: Beginning of the End

My mom fell victim to the dark side of the internet: AI garbage, social media fakery, false advertising, and romance scammers.

It is my belief that social media may be one of the most dangerous creations of modern times, especially for those whose mental health is already compromised. The hatred and fear, the unrealistic expectations it can build—with the existence of artificial intelligence, I fear it can only get much worse.

How my mom came to this point is far more complex. This was a long and emotionally painful decline.

I believe the chain of events began four to five years before her passing.

My son was born in early 2019, and around this time, my mom suddenly became lethargic. She seemed to have little interest in her first and only grandchild.

It was as if she had simply lost interest in life.

No purpose or drive. Lying in bed day after day, seemingly waiting to die.

My mom had always been a busybody, maintaining the house and taking care of nearly everything. Suddenly, she seemed like a completely different person.

Once this began, she was in and out of mental health facilities often, and I had no idea what was happening with her.

I honestly do not know exactly what happened to this day, and I never will.

She would sleep all day and do very little, rarely ever leaving the house. This lasted for roughly a year, and it was a very difficult year for everyone involved.

I had no experience raising children or even being around them, as I was an only child. Watching my mom disappear just as my own challenges with parenthood had begun made it very difficult for me to be present for her.

To my mind, things had first begun to change when she was granted disability for injuries sustained during her time in the Navy.

She had begun a life of leisure, primarily keeping up with the house and spending her time watching TV. Entertainment soon became her outlet—sitting in bed, watching horror movies nearly all day.

This would only become more pronounced as time went on and her mental health continued to decline.

I cannot say whether my son's birth was a factor. At the time, however, it was the only major event I could connect to the timing. It was the only explanation I could come up with.

I believed the anxiety involved with another child entering her life may have been too great.

Eventually, though, I began to understand the timing differently. My grandmother's mental decline seemed a more likely catalyst.

My grandmother had been diagnosed with dementia around the same time my mom's issues began, and she had been declining rapidly. Looking back, I believe the realization that she was losing her mom may have played a significant role in my mom's sudden decline.

Regardless of the cause, my mom eventually returned to a more stable condition after a year or so.

This lasted for a couple of years—or at least that's how it appeared at the time.

Looking back now, with everything I am about to tell you, I don't believe the underlying problems had disappeared. They had simply changed into something new.

Parts of what followed were things I had already experienced through my wife.

This new affliction was not easy to spot at first. Not for me, at least.

It built and built, like a snowball becoming an avalanche.

A tragedy was already in motion.

Chapter 2: My Wife's Affliction

Before my wife suffered from an eating disorder, I had never thought much about them at all.

I couldn't fathom starving yourself to achieve weight loss. Logically, it didn't make sense to me, and I am very driven by logic. The damage being done in the process seemed so obvious.

I soon learned just how serious an eating disorder could be and just how much it could flip your entire world upside down.

Two years into my wife's struggle with her eating disorder, she spent four months in an eating disorder recovery center in Denver, Colorado.

By the end of her stay there, we had nearly ended up divorced.

I had little understanding or sympathy at the start of her recovery. I was extremely selfish, fixated on what her eating disorder was costing me and the strain it was putting on my life instead of focusing on supporting her.

This was the first major awakening of my adult life. My selfish behavior was finally exposed, and I was forced to face it or lose my marriage.

From the very beginning, my wife had been afraid to tell me what was going on. Looking back, I understood that I had given her every reason to be afraid.

I was prone to outbursts of anger when things did not go my way. I was much like a spoiled child, thinking only about how something would affect me.

I was caught completely off guard when she informed me that she would be going away for several months to a recovery center.

I had seen her extreme weight loss, but I attributed it to the diets she had been trying—and she had tried many.

Ignorance is bliss, as they say.

It didn't affect me, so I never gave it much thought.

Little did I know just how wrong I was.

Early in her recovery, I could not stop thinking about my own wants.

I wanted her home. I wanted life to go back to "normal."

This was the first time in our marriage that we had been apart for so long. Soon, my lack of self-confidence reared its ugly head in the form of jealousy.

I began to worry that she might be unfaithful, halfway across the country on her own for four months.

I had absolutely no reason to believe this.

She had never given me any reason to even consider it, and yet I let myself fall into the trap of doubt and fear.

The way the recovery center excluded me from her treatment also contributed to how isolated I felt. I don't say this to excuse my behavior, only to explain my perspective at the time.

My wife was my only source of information throughout the recovery process. Understandably, she did not always want to talk about her treatment or what was happening while she was there.

I felt left in the dark, my mind a torrent of fear and doubt.

Her treatment team did not contact me at all—not a single time during the first three months. I felt helpless and alone, with no understanding of how serious her illness was.

When her release date was within reach, I was permitted to join a therapy session with her.

During that session, I was blindsided by a request for a divorce.

I spent the next week deeply reflecting on everything that could have led us to this point.

I began to see my own actions from her perspective, and I felt such deep shame.

* * *

My mom was now dealing with an eerily similar situation.

My wife picked up on it early. I caught on much later.

We tried to approach the topic several times, but it was always met with anger. My mom would become upset and act as if we shouldn't even question what she did. She was older than us, after all.

This mentality—that we had no right to speak to her about her own behavior—would be used against us time and time again.

This was one of the most frustrating parts early on: the rejection of my perspective and opinions on anything relating to my parents.

More frustrating was the dismissal of my wife, who had firsthand experience with an eating disorder.

Regardless of our intentions or whether what we said made sense, our concerns were rejected.

And the reason?

Age.

Complete rejection because we were the “children” and they were the parental figures.

We were adults with a child of our own now, and yet we still felt as though we had no voice with either of my parents.

Chapter 3: New Life

My mom and dad both held this ideology: we had no right to speak on their lives.

So I backed off. What more could I do?

I backed off and was left to simply sit and watch my parents self-destruct.

I wanted to separate myself and my wife from it, but our own bad choices early in our twenties had left us tied to them.

Don't get me wrong. I love my parents, and they have done a lot for us over the years.

They did not want us to leave, but at this point, I found it incredibly difficult to sit and watch everything unfold.

Time and time again, I would try to interject, and each time I would be shut down.

"Put in my place."

This was how I perceived it.

Gradually, I began to ask myself questions, examining what was happening with them.

Thus began a journey into self-reflection.

I couldn't get over the disconnect between us, and I couldn't understand why my opinion wasn't valued.

It took me two years with a son of my own to really begin to break through.

At first, I saw my son as a burden, selfishly focused on what his birth had cost me. I focused on myself and how his life was affecting my own.

Shortly after he turned two years old, something began to change within me.

I had finally begun to see the person, not the burden.

I began to realize that I had been treating him not as a person, but as something I had to take care of. More like a pet than a fellow human being.

I was disgusted with myself for taking so long to realize this.

Once I began working to change my relationship with my son, I couldn't help but wonder about my own relationship with my parents.

Thinking back, I felt there had always been a hierarchy between us. I had my place, and it was beneath them.

Their version of love often seemed to be buying me whatever I wanted so that I would stay occupied and quiet.

I don't blame them. I don't know their own histories well enough to judge them. Perhaps this was all they knew how to do at the time.

Nonetheless, I struggled to understand them.

So I began paying attention to details I had never thought much about before.

Comparing the present with my few memories of childhood, what I began to discover was quite depressing.

Chapter 4: Emotional Dissonance

I began to notice similarities between the emotional responses of my parents and those I was observing in my own young children.

When my son was two years old, my daughter was born. As they grew together, I was able to watch how they behaved with each other and how they responded to frustration, conflict, and emotions they did not yet know how to handle.

Young children are still learning how to regulate their emotions. Outbursts and tantrums are a natural part of that process.

Watching my children made me think differently about some of the behavior I had witnessed from my parents.

I began to notice similarities in the way my parents responded to conflict and criticism. It made me wonder whether they had ever learned healthy ways to regulate their emotions, or whether experiences in their own childhoods had influenced how they handled them as adults.

My mom often seemed overwhelmed by her emotions, while my dad's greatest weakness was his temper.

Once I began viewing my relationship with my parents through the new perspective that parenthood had given me, I started to see a bigger picture.

This realization was incredibly difficult for me.

I had always looked to my parents for guidance. Now I was beginning to understand that becoming an adult did not automatically mean having everything figured out.

More importantly, I began to realize that some of the behaviors I was questioning in my parents also existed within me.

This became a turning point in my own self-assessment.

I began to question more and more why I did the things I did.

Why did I allow my emotions to control me?

Why did I view others as less than myself?

What was the purpose of the life I was living if not to share it with those around me?

Chapter 5: Eating Disorder

As time went on, what I believed to be my mom's eating disorder began to worsen.

She received approval to take Wegovy, a medication she said would help her lose weight.

I began to heavily question the medical system at this point.

From my perspective, my mom was already showing signs of an eating disorder, yet she had been prescribed medication for weight loss.

I could not understand how those two things fit together.

Her routine remained much the same as it had been before. She would sleep late into the day, watch TV, and scroll through her phone.

In the evening, she would smoke weed and watch TV until my dad went to bed. Then she would stay up late into the night watching horror movies, eating junk food, and continuing to scroll through her phone.

A few years earlier, she had gone through a period of compulsive online shopping.

She bought Lululemon leggings and other clothing constantly, eventually accumulating more than fifty pairs of leggings alone.

When that period of spending finally subsided, I helped her sell the leggings on eBay.

At the time, I thought she had moved past it.

Looking back, it feels more like foreshadowing.

The compulsive spending eventually returned, reaching its peak between 2022 and 2024.

She began purchasing anything and everything she thought was cute: clothing, decorations for the house, yard decor, and countless other things.

Every single day, there seemed to be several packages outside.

This went on for a long time. My wife and I couldn't help but notice it.

We kept asking ourselves: What could she possibly need all of this for?

Was there any way they actually had this much money to spend?

As I have said before, I felt I could not question it without being met with anger.

I had no real understanding of my parents' finances and felt I was in no position to ask.

Whenever I did question them, the fact that we lived in their house was thrown back in my face. It felt like a hammer blow each and every time.

They always said how much they loved having us there and that they never wanted us to leave. But during criticism or even a simple disagreement, our living situation could suddenly be used against me.

Chapter 6: Consumer

My parents' house was soon covered with things—useless trinkets, as I saw them.

Wall hangings, shelf decor, furniture covers. The outside of the house was becoming covered as well, with the flower beds and fence filling up with decorations.

We needed none of it, but she just kept buying.

She purchased a gazebo for the backyard, but it sat in its box for months until I finally got tired of seeing it there and decided to build it for her.

It irritated me to see the boxes sitting outside day after day, the cardboard slowly rotting.

I couldn't stop thinking about how wasteful it all seemed.

When she began talking about buying a hot tub, I couldn't remain silent anymore.

I finally spoke up. I couldn't stand watching her spend so much money.

I was working a full-time job and raising my kids. My wife was a stay-at-home mom who was planning to homeschool our children.

We were getting by, but it wasn't always easy.

It frustrated me to watch so much money being spent on things I saw no value in when I imagined other things we could be working toward together.

Starting a garden. Raising chickens. Improving our daily lives.

But it was their money. I knew I had no say in what they did with it.

Still, it felt irresponsible not to say something—to simply watch it happen without at least voicing my concerns.

My concerns were received exactly as I had expected. The response was defensive and emotionally charged.

My words did not matter. I was just the child, after all.

What did I know?

* * *

Eventually, my dad confronted my mom over her spending.

My mom had always handled their finances. From what she had told me, my dad did not want to bother with them and left that responsibility to her.

The confrontation led to my dad discovering just how much debt had accumulated through her spending.

This was the first major conflict I clearly remember during my mom's decline, but there would be many more to come.

My parents had conflicts like this when I was a child and into my teenage years, but I do not remember them well enough to give a reliable account of what happened.

I remember the fighting. I remember trying to make them stop. I even remember physical confrontations between my dad and me.

During this more recent conflict, my dad learned that my mom had attempted to refinance their house without his knowledge. As I understood it, she had even attempted to forge his signature on the documents.

She was trying to use money from the refinancing to pay down the debts she had accumulated.

Her spending declined after this. But the compulsive behavior I had been watching did not seem to disappear. Instead, her attention increasingly shifted toward social media.

What followed was the first major conflict of this period that directly involved me.

My dad had reached a very low point and was talking about harming himself.

This eventually led to a physical confrontation between us.

I will openly admit that I did not handle the situation as well as I should have. My own lingering anger issues played a large part in what happened.

I regret much of what occurred. In my mind at the time, however, I was trying to prevent my children from witnessing the same kinds of things I had witnessed as a child.

I do not regret acting.

I regret the way I acted.

My dad was standing only a few feet from his handgun, which was hanging on the wall behind him. Because he had been talking about harming himself, I wanted him away from it.

He would not move away from the gun. Out of frustration, I shoved him, causing him to fall hard.

This event left me feeling as though our relationship would never be the same again.

For a time, that would be true.

Chapter 7: New Problems

My mom's nights of smoking weed and scrolling through Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now presented a new set of problems.

She was constantly being presented with advertisements, which did little to help the compulsive spending she had already struggled with.

By the latter half of 2023, online shopping was still a lingering issue, but new problems were beginning to emerge. It felt as though one issue was simply compounding another.

Her attitude toward her grandchildren had also become increasingly negative.

They always seemed to "be in her way." Her behavior toward them made me feel as though she saw them as a nuisance simply for existing around her.

This caused yet another conflict between my mom and me. These were my children, and I felt someone needed to confront her.

I could no longer stand by while I felt they were being treated poorly.

The conversation did not go well. My repressed anger and frustration came boiling out.

My mom told me that she was an empath and felt emotions more strongly than other people. She believed this was why she became overwhelmed so easily.

At the time, I rejected that explanation.

I challenged her to explain how she could know that she felt emotions more strongly than I did—or than anyone else did. None of us could truly know how another person experienced their emotions.

I asked her whether she had ever considered that the issue might not be that she felt emotions more strongly, but that she had difficulty managing them.

I was angry and frustrated, and I saw what she was telling me as an excuse rather than an explanation.

At that point, my concern was much simpler: if my mom could not treat her grandchildren with kindness, I began questioning why we were still living there.

* * *

Tension between my parents had also been steadily rising as my mom spent more and more time on her phone.

She had become secretive about what she was doing on it and did not want my dad to see the screen.

From my perspective, my dad had always struggled with jealousy. I don't know enough about the history of their relationship to explain why, although I had recently learned something that offered a possible explanation.

During one of their many arguments, I heard that my mom had supposedly been unfaithful to my dad at some point early in their relationship.

I cannot say whether this happened before or after their marriage, nor can I independently confirm what happened.

But hearing it gave me some context for my dad's suspicions.

I wondered whether he had ever truly moved past it.

From his perspective, my mom's behavior with her phone meant she must have been cheating on him.

What other reason could there be for the secrecy?

Why was she staying up so late on her phone and hiding the screen whenever he walked by?

I could understand why he was suspicious.

The truth, however, was something none of us were prepared for.

I learned what was happening in late 2023.

My parents asked me to come talk with them. They were sitting on their bed. My dad was visibly furious and refused even to look in my mom's direction.

My mom's reaction was completely different.

At my dad's urging, she began to explain.

My mom believed she had been talking to Keanu Reeves through Instagram.

She believed that Keanu Reeves loved her and wanted her to run away with him.

I could not understand what I was hearing.

What she was describing couldn't possibly be true, so what was she talking about?

Was this a joke?

None of it made any sense.

What shocked me almost as much as the story itself was my mom's reaction. She seemed to be treating the situation almost like a joke, smiling in a way that reminded me of a child who had been caught doing something she knew she shouldn't.

I did not know what was happening inside her mind, but it frightened me.

Whatever was happening was far more serious than I had understood.

I could understand my dad's anger and feelings of betrayal.

But sitting there listening to my mom, I was becoming concerned about something else entirely:

Something was seriously wrong.

Chapter 8: Shock

I left that conversation with my parents utterly confused. Nothing I had heard made any sense.

My mom had been contacted by an Instagram account pretending to be Keanu Reeves.

The person behind the account worked to convince her that he really was Keanu. Eventually, she was persuaded to send money to purchase a “package” that would supposedly allow her to visit him while he was filming a movie overseas.

Looking at the account myself, I believed immediately that it was a scam.

What I could not understand was why my mom couldn’t see what seemed so obvious to me.

I had never considered that someone I loved could become the victim of something like this.

Most of us have probably encountered some form of scam attempt. We delete the message, block the account, or laugh at how ridiculous it seems.

It is much harder to laugh when someone you love believes it.

The account had perhaps fourteen followers. When I inspected it, nothing about it convinced me that the person behind it was actually Keanu Reeves.

But my mom wanted it to be real.

At least, that was how I understood it then.

Someone claiming to be a wealthy celebrity had entered her life, told her he loved her, and offered the possibility of escaping into something completely different.

I could see the deception from the outside.

She was experiencing it from the inside.

I did not yet understand how powerful that difference could be.

At the time, I saw her belief in the scam primarily as evidence of how badly her mental health had deteriorated. I would eventually come to understand that the situation was more complicated than simply asking how she could possibly believe it.

She had been deceived.

And whoever was behind that account had found someone they could exploit.

Thus began what I believed, at the time, would be the worst experience of my life.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

My parents' problems became front and center, spilling over into everything.

While I had been working on my own problems and reflecting on my own weaknesses, their conflict quickly became the center of our world.

Each day was filled with heated arguments.

We tried our best to shield our children from what was happening, but that became nearly impossible. They knew something was wrong, even if they had no way of understanding it.

I struggled with what to tell them.

My instinct was not to pretend everything was fine.

Growing up, I often felt that my parents tried to protect me by keeping their problems and emotions hidden from me. Looking back, I came to believe that this had left me poorly prepared to understand and manage difficult emotions of my own.

I did not want to repeat that pattern with my children.

So I spoke to my son about what was happening in a way I believed he could understand. I chose not to pretend that everything around him was normal when he could clearly see that it wasn't.

As a child, I had seen anger and fear.

What I hadn't seen enough of was what someone was supposed to do with those emotions.

My dad was now struggling with his own anger and feelings of betrayal.

Eventually, my mother left.

She stayed in a hotel for about a week.

* * *

When my mom ran out of money and could no longer afford to remain on her own, she contacted me asking for help.

My dad ultimately brought her home. He told me he didn't want her living on the streets.

Whatever else was happening between them, he still cared deeply about her.

My mom promised that she would stop communicating with the scammers, along with other promises intended to begin repairing the damage.

But by this point, trust within the family had been badly damaged.

I no longer knew when I could believe what she told us.

As more information came to light, it became clear that the situation was not over.

Chapter 9: Convulsion

One evening, I was downstairs with my son. My wife had taken our daughter to the emergency room because she was sick with the flu.

My son and I heard shouting upstairs.

By this point, that was not unusual.

I waited to see if the argument would calm down on its own, but it didn't.

Eventually, I went upstairs.

I was furious. My son was downstairs listening to his grandparents scream at each other, and I felt as though neither of them was considering what this was doing to him.

I entered the room and demanded that they stop shouting.

My dad was trying to make my mom leave again. At that point, I asked him to let me speak to her alone.

I had been trying to convince my mom that she needed help beyond what any of us could give her.

My dad was angry and resisted at first, but eventually he agreed to step away and let me talk to her.

I asked my mom to imagine that our positions were reversed.

What if I were in her position and she were in mine?

What would she tell me?

Would she tell me to keep waiting, or would she tell me to get help?

Eventually, she acknowledged that if our positions were reversed, she would want me to get help.

So I asked her:

What are you waiting for?

She had recently rescheduled an appointment with her psychiatrist. My understanding was that this was supposed to be the appointment where she finally told her doctor everything that had been happening.

Instead, she moved the appointment until after Christmas because she did not want to miss the holidays.

Neither of my parents wanted her to miss Christmas.

They said they were doing it for their grandchildren.

I didn't believe that.

Keeping everything together for Christmas was something they needed, not something my children needed.

My children did not need another holiday surrounded by shouting, anger, and instability. If anything, continuing like this was far more likely to ruin Christmas for them.

I told my parents as much.

They would not listen.

At the time, I often felt like the only adult in the room.

Their insistence that my mom remain home for Christmas made no sense to me. My dad had just been trying to make her leave the house.

Why did preserving the appearance of a normal Christmas matter when nothing about our lives felt normal?

I couldn't understand it.

The distance I felt between my parents and me continued to grow.

I felt powerless.

Nothing I said seemed to matter. Nothing I could say seemed capable of making them value my perspective.

And the situation was about to become much worse.

Chapter 10: The Point of No Return

After our conversation, my mom finally agreed to go to the local hospital for a psychiatric evaluation.

My dad did not react well to her decision.

He did not want her to miss Christmas and continued to argue that the children were part of the reason she should stay.

I couldn't understand it.

He had just been trying to make her leave the house. Now that she had agreed to seek help, he was angry about her leaving.

The argument escalated.

I went downstairs to check on my son, who had been alone listening to everything from the bottom of the stairs.

When I returned upstairs, my parents were still fighting.

My mom was standing in the kitchen when I heard her ask whether she needed to go get her gun.

I cannot say what she intended by saying this. I didn't know whether she was afraid, trying to shock my dad, or meant something else entirely.

My dad responded by going into the bedroom and retrieving his handgun.

He returned with the gun and racked it.

At that moment, my son appeared behind me in the doorway.

He was scared and confused by all the noise.

Then my parents began struggling over the gun, my mom trying to pull it from my dad's hands.

I rushed my son downstairs and away from them.

I told him to stay downstairs and not come back up.

I then grabbed my own handgun and put it into my pocket.

My hands were shaking with adrenaline.

I had no intention of using it. I was frightened, I did not know what either of my parents might do, and in that moment I believed I needed to be able to protect myself and my family.

Looking back, I also think about what my son must have seen.

His grandfather had a gun. His grandparents were fighting over it. His father rushed him downstairs, told him to stay there, and then grabbed another gun before going back upstairs.

I can only imagine how frightening and confusing that must have been for him.

When I returned upstairs, my dad's gun had been put away, but my parents were still yelling at each other.

I focused on getting my mom and my son out of the house.

Once we were outside, we called 911.

I was concerned about leaving my dad alone in the house with access to a firearm because of the things he had previously said about harming himself.

The conflict continued from inside the house as my dad yelled out to us. More angry words passed between us.

I was furious that a gun had been brought into the confrontation and that my son had witnessed it.

Eventually, I got my mom and son into my mom's car, and we left.

We waited for the police in the parking lot of a local school.

The police arrived about ten minutes later and spoke with us.

My dad was taken for a mental-health evaluation. I took my mom for an evaluation as well, making sure they went to different hospitals.

For a little while, our home was quiet.

It was a kind of quiet I had desperately missed.

My mom was released that same night, shortly after midnight.

I was shocked.

She told me the hospital would not admit her because she was not considered a danger to herself.

I did not know exactly what had happened during her evaluation or what she had told them. I only knew that I had taken her there believing she desperately needed help, and within hours, she was coming home.

My already shaken confidence in the mental-health system took another blow.

My dad, meanwhile, voluntarily admitted himself to a local mental-health facility, where he remained for a few days.

Chapter 11: Run

At this point, I understood that my mom planned to remain in the house and expected my dad to move out.

As much as my dad and I clashed—and despite everything that had just happened—I could not accept that arrangement.

I remained deeply concerned about my mom.

She had not yet received the kind of professional help I believed she needed, and I had no way of knowing what she was telling her psychiatrist or ensuring that her doctor understood everything that had been happening.

I had no control over any of it.

I was also concerned about her ability to manage her finances. She was already talking about refinancing the house again, and her belief in the scammers had not disappeared.

Eventually, I had to have an extremely uncomfortable conversation with her.

I told my mom that, between my parents, she was the person I did not believe my family could continue living with at that time.

Her treatment of my children had become a serious concern for me. I was worried about her financial decisions, and she still believed the people behind the scam were who they claimed to be.

Whatever happened next, I believed she desperately needed professional help.

* * *

My dad returned home a few days later.

In the days leading up to his return, I found myself acting as a middleman between my parents.

My mom had obtained an order of protection against my dad, which meant he could no longer contact her or be around her.

That left me relaying information between them.

My dad told me to inform my mom that she needed to leave town or he would go to the sheriff's office about what had happened with the gun.

I was confused.

Hadn't he been the one who retrieved the gun?

What was he talking about?

Then he told me something about the confrontation that I had not known.

My dad claimed that during their struggle over the gun, my mom had tried to pull the trigger on him.

I had not seen this happen.

At the time, I struggled to believe that my mom could have tried to shoot my dad.

But my dad told me that if she did not leave, he intended to report what he said had happened to the sheriff's office when he returned home.

When I confronted my mom with what he had told me, she seemed surprised.

"So he wants to play it this way, huh?" she said.

She did not directly deny his accusation to me.

Over the following days, she made phone calls and packed her belongings.

The same morning my dad returned home from the mental-health facility, my mom left.

She drove to Nevada to stay with a friend.

I didn't know exactly what had happened between my parents during those moments with the gun.

I knew what my dad had told me.

I knew what I had personally witnessed.

And I knew my mom had left.

Chapter 12: Gone

Life seemed calmer once my mom was gone.

My dad regained some semblance of his daily life, but I couldn't shake the feeling that sending my mom away had been the wrong decision.

I was deeply concerned about her mental state and did not believe she should be left entirely on her own.

But what could I do?

I didn't know who to contact. I didn't know what authority I had to intervene. I didn't even know what intervention was supposed to look like anymore.

I reached out to her family, including both of her sisters.

Maybe she could stay with one of them while we tried to figure out what came next.

I was told that having my mom there could be detrimental to my grandfather's mental health.

At the time, I was angry.

I felt as though everyone was choosing to remain safely at a distance while I was left trying to figure out what to do.

You may think it unfair for me to have viewed their decisions as selfish.

With time, I have come to understand their position better.

But that understanding came later.

At the time, I felt like I was drowning and not a single person was offering me a lifeline.

People offered words of comfort, but from where I stood, they remained outside the situation.

I was disappointed. I was angry. And beneath all of that, I was afraid for my mom.

She was now on her own again.

What was going to happen to her?

Would she end up homeless?

Would someone else recognize her vulnerability and take advantage of her?

I had no answers.

* * *

While my mom was gone, my dad began dating.

I strongly disagreed with his decision, although I didn't feel I could tell him that.

It wasn't the idea of him eventually being with someone else that bothered me.

I wanted him to take time to deal with what had happened and work through his own anger and emotions before beginning another relationship.

I felt nothing had been resolved. I worried that entering another relationship so quickly would simply carry the same unresolved problems into something new.

It didn't last long.

Soon, my mom was in trouble again.

Her arrangement with the friend she had been staying with in Nevada was falling apart, and she was being pressured to leave.

From what I was told, her friend had begun questioning things my mom was saying and no longer wanted her staying there.

My mom contacted me and said she had an apartment lined up, but that her move-in date had been delayed.

She didn't have enough money for somewhere to stay in the meantime.

I felt terrible.

I had recently reduced my hours at work so I could spend more time with my children. After everything happening around them, I felt that my presence and influence in their lives were more important than ever.

My wife and I had also begun making significant changes to the way we lived. We were cutting unnecessary spending, trying to live more simply, and working to pay down our debt.

Money was tight.

I had some savings, but paying for two weeks in a hotel would have nearly wiped it out.

I had two children of my own to take care of.

I felt trapped between my responsibility to my own family and my fear of what might happen to my mom if I did nothing.

Should I tell my dad?

After everything that had happened between them, was it fair to pull him back into this?

In the end, I told him.

Whatever else had happened, I couldn't accept the possibility of my mom ending up on the streets when there was still something I might be able to do.

Chapter 13: Return

The conversation with my dad went in a direction I had not expected.

Without hesitation, he wanted to bring my mom home.

I transferred enough money to her for food. She told me she had not eaten in several days.

My dad paid for a hotel room for her and flew out the very next morning to get her.

Once again, I was conflicted.

I was afraid my dad still did not fully accept what was happening with my mom. I worried that he was hoping bringing her home would somehow be enough—that she would return to the person he knew without the kind of professional help I believed she needed.

I love my dad, and I believe he was trying to do what he thought was right. But I worried that his love for my mom and his desire to bring his family back together were overriding everything that had already happened.

Yet again, the decision was out of my hands.

All I could do was watch.

When I tried to offer opinions or suggestions, I felt they were often met with resistance or anger.

I heard very little from my parents during their first few days together.

Late into the second day of their drive back to Virginia, I received a text from my dad.

My mom had been contacted by—and was communicating with—someone pretending to be a member of a band she liked.

It was happening again.

My dad sent me screenshots of a conversation he had with the scammer.

He was angry and arguing with someone who seemed to have nothing to lose by continuing the conversation.

I told him to stop responding.

Whoever was behind the account was exploiting my mom. Arguing with them would accomplish nothing except giving them more of his attention and leaving him even more frustrated.

I reminded my dad of what I had been saying all along: I believed my mom needed professional treatment.

We could not fix this ourselves.

She had sent money again.

Whatever was happening was beyond our ability to manage as a family.

My dad told me he needed some time to himself and asked me to talk to her.

My mom told me she understood what was happening now and was working on it.

But I had heard versions of this before.

Why should I believe it now?

I told her that my trust in her had been badly damaged. Too many things she had told us had turned out not to be true, and nothing had changed enough for me to simply take her word for it.

She told me that our family meant everything to her and that she would do whatever she needed to do to come back to it.

I saw an opening.

“Has anything you have been doing been to the benefit of anyone but yourself?” I asked.

Her answer came quickly.

No.

I asked her to look at the situation from my perspective.

I had no reason to believe her words anymore because, to me, her actions did not match them.

Then I tried to explain something I had been learning about myself.

I told her that I didn’t believe any of us were inherently more important than everyone else.

I had spent much of my own life trapped inside my wants, my anger, and my perspective. I was beginning to understand how easy it was to become so consumed by your own life that you stopped seeing the people sharing it with you.

People sometimes call it “main character syndrome.”

But what was the value of getting everything you wanted if you destroyed your relationships in the process?

Who cared how much clothing you owned?

Who cared whether you saw this band or that band live if, in the end, you had pushed away everyone you might have shared those experiences with?

What was the point of building a life if you ended up completely alone inside it?

And if you did not treat the people around you well, why should they stay?

Then I turned that same criticism toward myself.

I had spent years looking at what everyone around me was doing wrong. By then, I was beginning to understand that I had failed people too.

“I don’t think I was ready yet,” I told her. “I don’t think I had evolved enough to emotionally support you either.”

We continued talking for a while.

I told her that, for now, I thought she should stay away from social media and try to live in the moment.

But more than anything, I continued to believe she needed professional help. There was only so much any conversation between us could accomplish.

The next day was quiet.

But it was only the calm before the storm.

Chapter 14: Rocky Roads

My dad contacted me and said he no longer thought my mom would be coming home. He believed she was lying to him again, and in his anger, he had smashed her phone. Breaking things when he was angry was not new behavior.

I didn't address it then. Instead, I reminded him that what was happening was beyond any of us.

I believed my mom needed to be evaluated and receive professional help as soon as possible.

My mom began texting me as well, apologizing for the mess and telling me how much she loved my dad.

It was agonizing to keep having versions of the same conversations with her.

Then my dad sent me an email he said he had found.

In it, my mom appeared to be telling someone that she only needed my dad's help getting out of Las Vegas and wasn't actually returning to rebuild their relationship.

The email had apparently been sent two days before they began driving home.

My dad was overwhelmed and didn't seem to know what to do.

I asked whether he could get her to a hospital or contact her doctor.

He told me he was considering calling 911 because, according to him, she had threatened to kill herself the night before.

My mom was also supposed to have a phone appointment with her doctor later that evening.

I told my dad that I didn't think she should attend it alone. By this point, my trust in what she would disclose about the situation had deteriorated badly.

Later that evening, my dad contacted me again.

My mom had received more messages from scammers pretending to be members of bands she liked.

My dad was considering leaving her there and flying home.

Then he told me that my mom had said she would kill herself if he left.

I immediately began asking whether we could contact her doctor or get her another psychiatric evaluation.

Then my dad said something I was completely unprepared to hear.

“If she kills herself, it’s not going to affect us, will it? I will call a hotline before I leave.”

I was speechless.

I didn’t know how to process what he had just said.

It took me several minutes before I responded.

“You say it won’t affect us, but it will eat you alive if you leave her to do that.”

I told him that, at the very least, he should take her to a hospital and not leave her alone while she was threatening to harm herself.

My dad seemed consumed by the scammers, what they had taken from him, and what my mom had done.

I was focused on a different question:

Why was this happening to her?

I felt as though that question kept disappearing beneath all the anger and betrayal.

Meanwhile, my own anger was building.

From the beginning, I had been pushing for my mom to receive more intensive psychiatric help.

Again and again, I felt ignored.

My words. My thoughts. My fears.

Nothing I did seemed to matter.

* * *

Soon afterward, my mom called me.

The conversation began much like the others, but by then I had reached my breaking point.

In the background, I could hear my dad needling at her—repeatedly making comments that I considered cruel or unnecessary.

I had watched him communicate this way before, and it had always bothered me.

This time, I snapped.

I let my anger take control and told him exactly what I thought.

I confronted him about behaviors I had resented for years.

I regret losing my composure, but at the time, finally saying those things felt liberating.

I stopped trying to protect his feelings.

When he responded as though I were blaming him for everything, I became even angrier. I felt he was twisting what I was saying rather than hearing it.

By the end of the call, my dad told me I had three days to get out of his house.

Something inside me broke open.

Years of feeling as though I wasn't respected as an adult came pouring out.

I challenged his decisions throughout everything that had happened, including his insistence that my mom remain home through Christmas because of my children.

I didn't believe that had ever really been about them.

In that moment, I felt completely certain of myself.

I felt as though I had finally stripped away every defense he had used against me and forced him to hear everything I had kept inside for years.

I felt righteous.

And, if I'm going to tell this story truthfully, part of me enjoyed it.

I had spent years feeling that I needed to tiptoe around my parents, that I was still the child and they were still above me.

Now all of that resentment was coming out at once.

It felt like reclaiming my voice.

But it was also anger.

A tremendous amount of anger.

And I was no longer trying to contain it.

Chapter 15: Aftermath

“I have every bit of our conversations saved.

If you want to pretend you’re not part of this problem I will ensure it is known you are.

We are getting rid of what we don’t need and looking for places to go.

But I’m telling you this now.

You will never see any of us again.

Your actions and behaviors are unacceptable and spending money on people does not put you above anyone else.

That is not love.

It’s a way of trying to buy us.

Sorry that is not how this works.

Now you will live your life alone.

All because I won’t bow down and kiss your ass.

I hope you find happiness in it although we both know you won’t.

Enjoy your pride and ego.

May it serve you well.”

Those were the words I sent my dad in a text message.

At the time, I thought they might be my last words to him.

Somewhere inside, though, I didn’t really believe that. Part of me believed his demand that we leave was another expression of anger that he would eventually regret.

But I was furious.

I was tired of feeling as though the stability of my home and my children’s lives could be threatened whenever emotions boiled over.

I love my dad.

That did not change how angry I was with him.

And it did not change the fact that, in that moment, I believed our relationship had reached its breaking point.

* * *

After sending the text, I immediately began clearing the house of anything we didn't need.

I reduced my clothing to a single suitcase.

Anything unnecessary was gone.

Later that day, I began looking for somewhere else to live.

Whatever happened next, I did not want my children continuing to live inside this chaos.

It seemed I had little choice left.

My mom contacted me later and asked whether I was okay.

I unloaded everything I was feeling onto her.

I didn't feel as though I had anyone else I could talk to about what was happening.

My wife already had enough on her plate. My friends wouldn't understand without years of context.

I felt as though the burden was mine to carry, and I was beginning to crack beneath it.

I had two children who needed me to be emotionally present.

My wife needed me.

And I felt responsible for my parents as well.

I loved them. I wanted to help them.

But I was exhausted.

"I'm trying my best to keep my anger under control but it's so hard.

I'm trying to remain logical but it's so hard when faced with so much illogical.

Nothing makes sense anymore.

Nothing but this small little family I have left.

Nothing but these wonderful kids I have.

But I'm tired.

And I don't want to be angry anymore.

So I'm going to worry about my little family and just keep moving forward.

It's all I can do."

That was what I told my mom.

My dad eventually contacted me and said he respected my decision.

That was all he said.

I wasn't ready to leave it there.

I continued pressing him with the questions and frustrations I had been carrying.

Eventually, the argument gave way to an actual conversation.

More than anything, I wanted to feel heard.

I wanted to feel as though I finally had a voice in my own family.

We began talking about my mom and what we believed she needed.

One of the first things we agreed on was that social media had become harmful for her and that we wanted to limit her access to it.

I also tried to get my dad to approach her differently.

"Just please try and be gentle with her.

I understand that it is extremely frustrating.

She has the mindset of a child.

Behaving like a child.

With the emotional range of a child."

Those were the words I used at the time.

Looking back, I would describe it differently now.

What I was trying to communicate was that anger, insults, and confrontation were not reaching her.

I knew this because I had made a similar mistake with my wife.

During the worst period of her eating disorder, I sometimes became angry and cruel in an attempt to break through what I saw at the time as distorted thinking.

Occasionally, it seemed to work. For a moment, I would feel as though I had reached the person I remembered.

But it never lasted.

The behavior would return, followed by my anger, followed by another confrontation.

It became a cycle of anger and bitterness.

Watching my dad interact with my mom, I felt as though I was watching a version of my own mistakes being repeated.

That realization forced me to continue examining myself.

I had always thought of myself as someone willing to acknowledge my faults and take responsibility when I was wrong.

Yet I was also beginning to recognize something uncomfortable:

I frequently felt superior to the people around me.

Smarter.

More understanding.

More rational.

The contradiction was becoming impossible for me to ignore.

Something in the way I saw myself—and the world around me—was beginning to change.

I didn't fully understand it yet.

I am not a particularly religious person, though I do believe in God and that our lives have purpose.

What I was beginning to understand was much simpler:

I am not special.

I am not better than anyone else.

I was simply beginning to learn how I wanted to spend my time and energy.

Chapter 16: Awakening

This is still a strange part of my life to discuss because I don't fully understand it myself.

I can only explain it as I experienced it.

For some time, something had been changing in the way I looked at my life and the world around me.

Eventually, it began to feel like a complete shift in consciousness.

Like waking from a dream.

Things I had once accepted without much thought suddenly seemed hollow to me.

I began looking at the people around me and wondering how much of our lives were spent isolated inside our own little worlds.

What had happened to our sense of community?

Why did we seem so indifferent to one another?

Why shouldn't the people around us matter—the neighbors we live beside, the people we see at local stores, the strangers we encounter throughout an ordinary day?

I also began questioning my relationship with material things and entertainment.

How much of my life had been spent consuming?

Buying things.

Watching things.

Wanting things.

And how much of it had actually made my life better?

These questions began changing the way I lived.

I found myself questioning systems and institutions I had previously taken for granted as well—politics, healthcare, food, social media, and the broader culture surrounding me.

I didn't suddenly have answers to any of these things.

If anything, I had more questions.

But one question kept returning:

Why?

Why was I spending my limited time and energy on the things I was spending them on?

What actually mattered to me?

My children mattered.

My wife mattered.

My family mattered.

The way I treated other people mattered.

The person I was becoming mattered.

Much of what had once occupied my attention suddenly didn't seem nearly as important.

* * *

At the time, I described what was happening to me as an awakening.

I decided I no longer wanted to pretend everything was okay simply to avoid conflict.

I wanted to speak openly about what I believed, even if doing so sometimes affected my relationships.

I wanted to stop shaping myself around the fear that someone might reject me for saying what I thought.

But there was another lesson I still needed to learn.

Speaking what I believed to be true did not automatically make me right.

And letting go of my ego did not mean I had somehow escaped it.

If anything, the previous months had shown me how easily certainty itself could become another form of ego.

I was still angry.

I was still judgmental.

I was still learning.

Whatever this awakening was, it wasn't an endpoint.

It was the beginning of another period of questioning who I was and what kind of person I wanted to become.

Chapter 17: Good Vs Evil

As my perspective continued to change, I found myself thinking more about the idea of good and evil.

What did those words actually mean?

I had always understood them in the abstract, but what was happening to my mom made them feel much more tangible.

Someone had deliberately sought her out, gained her trust, pretended to love her, and used that relationship to take money from her.

Whoever was behind those accounts may never have seen her face when our family confronted her.

They didn't see my dad's anger.

They didn't see the arguments.

They didn't see our children caught in the middle of a family falling apart.

They didn't see any of the consequences unfolding inside our home.

But they knew they were deceiving her.

And they continued.

I struggled to understand how someone could knowingly exploit another human being that way.

If evil existed, surely the deliberate exploitation of another person's vulnerability belonged somewhere within its definition.

This led me into increasingly spiritual ways of thinking.

I began wondering whether the demons described throughout human history needed to be understood as literal supernatural creatures at all.

Perhaps "demons" could also describe something within human beings—the capacity to knowingly cause suffering and continue anyway.

I didn't know.

I still don't.

But these were the kinds of questions occupying my mind.

* * *

The change in my perspective was not entirely comforting.

In some ways, it made me feel increasingly isolated.

Things that had once interested me began to feel less important.

Conversations about sports, movies, television, celebrities, and other entertainment sometimes irritated me because I was struggling to understand why we devoted so much attention to things that seemed insignificant compared with what was happening around us.

At the time, I interpreted this as another part of my “awakening.”

I felt as though I was seeing things I had previously ignored.

I also began finding other people who expressed similar dissatisfaction with materialism, consumer culture, social media, and the way people seemed increasingly disconnected from one another.

That made me feel less alone.

But looking back, I can also recognize the danger in believing that I had “woken up” while everyone else remained asleep.

It would have been very easy to turn a realization about humility into another reason to feel superior.

I had already spent enough of my life doing that.

I did not have some hidden knowledge unavailable to everyone else.

I was a man watching his family fall apart, desperately trying to make sense of what was happening.

Spirituality became one of the ways I tried.

One place where I consistently found meaning was in raising my children.

I couldn’t control the scammers.

I couldn’t control my parents.

I couldn’t control the world around me.

But I could influence the kind of father I became.

I could teach my children to care about other people.

I could teach them to treat others with dignity and respect.

And I could try to demonstrate those values through the way I lived.

I didn’t always succeed.

But increasingly, that was the person I wanted to become.

These thoughts were still developing, and they would continue changing over time.
For now, though, I need to return to my parents.
They were finally coming home.

Chapter 18: Homecoming

By this point, my dad and I had both calmed down enough to talk again.

I asked him to stop threatening to make my family leave whenever our arguments became heated.

Whether he truly intended to follow through each time or was speaking out of anger, those threats hurt. They made me feel as though the stability of my family's home could disappear whenever the two of us clashed.

I knew we needed to find a better way to communicate.

During one of our conversations, my dad opened up about what he was feeling.

He told me that he felt as though God had left him and that he was trapped in darkness.

After everything that had happened between us, I decided to open up to him as well.

I told him about some of the spiritual questions I had been struggling with.

I had begun wondering whether heaven and hell needed to be understood only as places we went after death.

Perhaps some version of hell could exist here, in the suffering people created for themselves and one another.

I wondered whether the “demons” people spoke about throughout history could also represent something within us—the parts of ourselves capable of selfishness, cruelty, hatred, and destruction.

I even found myself thinking about reincarnation.

What if life were a process of repeatedly learning?

What if we kept returning until we learned whatever lessons we were supposed to learn?

And what if becoming a better person—learning to love other people, finding purpose, and becoming less consumed by ourselves—was somehow part of that process?

I didn't claim to know.

No living person could tell me with certainty what came after death.

But I found comfort in thinking about these possibilities.

I had never considered myself particularly religious. My experiences with religion had often left me uncomfortable with the difference I sometimes saw between what people professed to believe and how they actually treated others.

Traditional religion had never given me all the answers I was looking for.

Yet I increasingly felt drawn toward something spiritual.

I wanted to become better.

I wanted my time here to mean something.

I wanted to leave something positive behind.

* * *

The next day was relatively good for my parents.

I heard very little from them, and things seemed calm.

The following day was much the same. They spent a few days sightseeing together in Tennessee, and most of my contact with them consisted of occasional updates about where they were and how things were going.

Eventually, they made it home to Virginia.

Under the circumstances, things seemed about as “normal” as they could be.

My parents began going out together almost every night.

They seemed to be trying to find some way to exist together again after everything that had happened.

For a few days, there was peace.

I wanted to believe it meant something.

Four days after they returned home, things began unraveling again.

My dad discovered that my mom was communicating with another scammer—again, someone pretending to be a member of a band she liked.

That evening, my dad took away her phone.

Meanwhile, we were still waiting to find a treatment facility that would accept her.

During those few quiet days, I felt my dad beginning to hope that perhaps things were improving on their own.

I understood why.

He wanted his wife back.

We all wanted some version of normal life back.

But after everything that had happened, I couldn't convince myself that a few peaceful days meant the underlying problem had disappeared.

It hadn't.

We were still waiting for help.

Chapter 19: Anticipation

Six more days passed relatively uneventfully.

I worked most of those days and didn't see much of either of my parents.

They continued going out together almost every night.

Then my mom received another email from someone pretending to be a member of a band she liked.

Once again, the fragile peace began to fracture.

My dad's anger returned.

He became focused on the scammers themselves and on my mom's decisions to continue communicating with them.

I understood his frustration.

There were moments when my mom could appear completely like herself, only to turn around and become absorbed in another message from someone pretending to be a celebrity or musician.

I could only imagine how confusing that must have been for him.

It was confusing for me too.

I found myself grieving for both of them.

My mom was still alive. She was still in the house with us.

And yet I felt as though I was already mourning her.

I continued trying to support my dad.

I reminded him that he wasn't alone.

I reminded him that whatever was happening with my mom was beyond what we knew how to treat ourselves.

And I encouraged him to stop reading the scammers' messages and engaging with them. Every interaction seemed to pull him further into his anger.

Eventually, my dad told me that he felt he had done enough.

He was exhausted.

He said that this wasn't our problem anymore and that my mom had done this to herself.

I disagreed.

“Yes, she did this to herself, but we do not understand why.

I can tell you this: if I had walked away from my wife when she was at her lowest, I wouldn’t have what I have today.

I would not have my children.

You would not have your grandchildren.

I will not tell you what to do, and I won’t pressure you either.

At the end of the day, she is still my mom.

She still raised me and sacrificed for me.”

My dad agreed.

The following day, we received news that my mom had been accepted into a treatment facility in Texas.

Finally, there was somewhere for her to go.

* * *

We have now reached the point when I first began writing this story: March 2024.

At the time, I had no idea how this story would end.

We were waiting to learn what came next with her treatment, and I didn’t know whether the mom I remembered would ever truly return to us.

I was frightened by how dramatically she had changed.

Because my grandmother was living in assisted care with dementia, I even wondered whether we might be seeing some kind of early cognitive decline in my mom.

I had no way of knowing.

Part of me hoped that medication was contributing to what we were seeing, or that she had experienced some kind of psychiatric crisis from which treatment could help her recover.

I searched for explanations because I desperately wanted there to be an explanation.

And, more than anything, I wanted there to be a way back.

At that point, however, all I could do was keep moving forward one day at a time.

Chapter 20: Continuation

A few days passed after I wrote the previous chapter, and more information came to light about my mom's involvement with the scammers.

Back in December 2023, my mom had gone to a Verizon store.

During that visit, she purchased six phones and shipped them to the scammers.

It was another revelation that put further strain on my dad.

Every new piece of information seemed like another blow.

At the same time, the plans for my mom's treatment changed again.

We had been only eight days away from her leaving for the facility in Texas. Now that plan was gone, and we were told she would instead be going to a facility in New Jersey approximately a month later.

Initially, I was furious.

A month felt like an enormous amount of time after everything that had already happened.

I worried about what my mom might do during that time and how much more my dad could withstand.

When my dad first told me about the phones, I misunderstood the timeline and believed she had purchased them recently.

I told him that, whatever had happened, I would not allow anything to delay her treatment if the decision were mine.

Then I learned more about why the treatment plan had changed.

My understanding was that the Texas facility was not considered suitable for her needs and that she needed treatment that could address her PTSD.

With that additional information, I understood the decision better.

I still didn't like waiting.

Too much had happened for another month to feel safe or comfortable.

But my initial anger had come before I understood the full situation.

That realization mattered to me.

So much of the previous year had been filled with people reacting to incomplete information—including me.

I didn't know what would happen next.

I worried about my mom.

I worried about my dad.

It felt as though a storm cloud was constantly hanging over our family.

Once again, there was nothing to do but wait.

Chapter 21: Reflections

I spent much of this time reflecting on everything that had happened with my parents.

I felt for my dad.

His life had been turned upside down after decades with my mom, and some of what I watched him go through reminded me of my own experiences with my wife.

At least, I could understand some of it.

But I also knew that I couldn't go through this for him.

It was his experience to live through.

Advice and comforting words could only go so far.

I could recognize similarities between his reactions and mistakes I had made in my own marriage, but that didn't mean our experiences were the same.

When my wife was struggling with her eating disorder, I had been angry with her for hiding it from me.

With time, that anger forced me to confront some difficult questions about myself.

Why had she been afraid to tell me?

Had my history of anger made it harder for her to come to me?

How would I have reacted if she had?

I didn't like the answers.

I had spent so much time focused on what her illness was doing to me that I had failed to fully consider what she was experiencing.

Eventually, some of the anger I had directed toward her turned inward.

I wondered how I had missed what was happening.

I questioned whether I had failed her.

I felt sorry for myself.

Why me?

What did I do to deserve this?

For a time, I became trapped in those questions.

Eventually, however, my wife and I began working through what had happened.

I started looking at the choices I had made and the ways my behavior had contributed to the problems in our relationship.

I couldn't take responsibility for her eating disorder.

But I could take responsibility for me.

That distinction became important.

I could acknowledge my anger.

I could acknowledge my selfishness.

I could acknowledge the ways I had made communication more difficult.

And I could try to become someone who responded differently.

That experience taught me to pay closer attention to the people I loved and to resist making someone else's suffering primarily about how it affected me.

Becoming a father forced me to confront that selfishness again.

Each experience seemed to expose another part of myself that I needed to examine.

* * *

The more I reflected, the more I began thinking about the way I had learned to deal with pain.

Somewhere along the way, I had absorbed the idea that suffering was supposed to be handled privately.

Suck it up.

Don't complain.

Your problems are your own.

Be a man.

I no longer wanted to live that way.

I had seen what could happen when people buried emotions, avoided difficult conversations, and waited until everything exploded.

I had done it myself.

I didn't want my children learning that strength meant suffering alone.

I wanted them to know that they could talk about what they were feeling.

I wanted them to understand that asking for help was not weakness.

I wanted them to learn how to disagree without treating disagreement as rejection.

And I wanted to become the kind of father who could actually teach those things by example.

That meant confronting patterns I believed had traveled through my family for generations.

I couldn't change the way my parents had been raised.

I couldn't change the way I had been raised.

But I could decide what I carried forward.

It had taken years, the struggles in my marriage, and the birth of both of my children for me to begin understanding that.

I was still learning.

But I wanted the cycle to change with me.

Chapter 22: Reflections Continued

I began to wonder whether retirement had affected my parents more deeply than I had previously understood.

For most of their adult lives, work had provided structure and seemed to form a significant part of their identities.

Once they stopped working, I wondered whether some of that sense of purpose disappeared with it.

Their lives became increasingly centered around entertainment.

Watching television.

Scrolling through their phones.

Shopping.

Going out.

Then returning home and doing much the same thing again.

At the time, this frustrated me immensely.

I kept thinking about everything else they could be doing.

For a while, they continued going out with friends. Over time, however, I watched their world seem to become smaller.

Conflicts arose between them and sometimes with other people, and increasingly they seemed content to remain home.

The more I reflected on this, the less angry it made me.

Mostly, I became sad.

I felt as though I was watching two people I loved become trapped in a life that no longer seemed to give them much fulfillment.

I tried several times to introduce things that I thought might give us something meaningful to work toward together.

Gardening was one of my more recent attempts.

I imagined us growing food, working outside, and building something together as a family.

They didn't share my enthusiasm.

For a long time, that frustrated me too.

Why couldn't they see what I saw?

Why didn't they want what I thought would make their lives better?

Eventually, I realized there was a problem hidden inside those questions.

I was still trying to decide what their lives should look like.

I had spent so much time frustrated that they wouldn't listen to me that I hadn't fully considered whether I needed to stop trying to change them.

Their lives belonged to them.

Their choices belonged to them.

Just as my life and my choices belonged to me.

We each experience life from our own perspective, shaped by things another person can never completely understand.

I still struggled with that realization.

There were things my parents did that affected me, my wife, and my children. I could set boundaries around those things.

But boundaries were different from trying to remake my parents into the people I thought they should be.

I could not change them.

And it was not my responsibility to change them.

That realization began lifting a weight I hadn't realized I was carrying.

I didn't have to solve their lives.

I didn't have to convince them to see the world the way I did.

And I didn't have to accept responsibility for every choice they made.

What I could control was myself.

I could continue examining my own behavior.

I could continue trying to become the person I wanted to be.

And, most importantly, I could try to live in a way that gave my children an example worth following.

Chapter 23: Personal Growth

I had come to believe that growth required me to accept myself as I was.

My past existed.

I could not change it.

What I could change was the way I understood it and what I chose to do with it.

I had begun noticing how much my relationship with my own memories changed as I grew older.

An experience I understood one way at twenty could look completely different to me years later.

The memory hadn't changed.

I had.

That realization made reflection increasingly important to me.

I wanted to look directly at the parts of myself I disliked rather than bury them.

My anger.

My selfishness.

My tendency to think I understood things better than the people around me.

The ways I had failed my wife.

The ways I had failed my children.

The ways I had hurt my parents.

None of those things disappeared simply because I was ashamed of them.

And acknowledging them did not mean I had to remain the person who had made those mistakes.

For me, that became one of the most important parts of personal growth:

accepting who I had been without surrendering who I could become.

I had spent years building defenses around myself.

Sometimes those defenses protected me from other people.

Sometimes they protected me from things I didn't want to admit about myself.

I began trying to look at my own life almost as though it belonged to someone else.

What would I think if I knew everything about this person?

Would I make excuses for him?

Would I condemn him?

Or could I understand why he had made certain choices while still holding him responsible for them?

That last question became particularly important.

I was learning that understanding someone's behavior was not the same thing as excusing it.

That applied to my parents.

It applied to my wife.

And it applied to me.

* * *

I also became increasingly concerned with the idea of authenticity.

I didn't want to spend my life constantly changing who I was depending on who happened to be in the room.

I noticed differences in myself at work, around friends, with family, and at home.

Some of that was natural. Different relationships bring out different parts of us.

But I also recognized times when I changed myself because I wanted approval or wanted to avoid conflict.

That was what I wanted to leave behind.

I wanted the values at the center of who I was to remain consistent regardless of where I happened to be.

I wanted to be truthful.

I wanted to say what I believed.

I wanted my actions to match the person I claimed to be.

At first, I sometimes interpreted that as saying exactly what I thought regardless of whether it hurt someone.

With time, I began to see another distinction:

Honesty did not require cruelty.

I could tell the truth as I understood it without using truth as a weapon.

And I could disagree with someone without believing that either of us had to be false.

I had not somehow eliminated my ego.

I had not discovered one perfect, finished version of myself.

I was still changing.

I probably always would be.

But there was something freeing about no longer pretending that growth required me to hate the person I had once been.

That person had made mistakes.

He had also survived them, learned from some of them, and brought me here.

This is who I am.

Not finished.

Not above anyone else.

Still learning.

But increasingly, someone I was choosing to become.

Chapter 24: Lost at Sea

I am adrift in an ocean of depression, the weight of these past months finally catching up to me.

I have spoken previously about my attempts to support my parents, my wife, and my children.

I am beginning to realize that I may have taken on too much, neglecting my own emotions and mental health in favor of being present for everyone else.

I do not regret being there for the people I love.

But I am beginning to understand that I cannot continue supporting everyone around me while pretending I do not need support myself.

I feel lost, swimming for shore in a vast ocean without any sense of direction.

Everywhere I look, the view is the same: endless waves beneath a gray-black sky.

But I am not alone.

My children guide me forward like stars in the night, my wife the pale moon.

When the clouds part, those bright beacons reveal themselves again, and I regain some sense of direction.

My path becomes visible, and I move forward once more.

I tell myself this cycle will pass, as it always does.

But waiting for the tides to pull me back toward shore feels agonizingly slow.

I feel reliant on forces outside my control, waiting for the winds to change and the sky to clear.

So I remain afloat.

I ride the waves as they rise and fall, searching the heavens for my guides and finding solace in the belief that eventually the clouds will part and the moon and stars will shine again.

* * *

As of this writing, this episode has lasted for two weeks.

A blip in time that feels like forever.

I remind myself each day that this will pass.

Life will not always feel this way.

There will be highs and lows, and right now I am living through one of the lows.
So I endure.
Patience and perseverance remain my allies.
Each day is another step forward.
And although it may not feel like progress now, I will continue moving.

* * *

I wrote this chapter in March 2024.
Then I stopped writing.
I would not return to this story for nearly seven months.
The next words I wrote were dated October 15, 2024.
Two days earlier, my mom had died.

Chapter 25: Finality

My mom left this world on Sunday, October 13, 2024.

It was a beautiful day. The sun shone brightly through a clear sky.

My children had just finished taking a bubble bath while I baked cinnamon rolls.

They were outside with their mom. My dad was working on his truck, and I was downstairs washing dishes.

None of us knew what was about to happen.

My wife came running inside.

“Something’s wrong. Your dad’s yelling for you. It’s your mom.”

I sprinted upstairs.

What I saw will haunt me for the rest of my life.

My mom had taken her own life.

My dad was screaming in anguish, cradling her.

I couldn’t process what I was seeing.

My mind couldn’t handle it.

I ran downstairs and went straight outside to my children.

I hugged them tightly.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. No matter what, I will always love you, and I will never leave you.”

They had no idea what was happening.

But I needed that hug.

I needed them to know that I loved them.

“Grandma is gone. She’s gone, and we will never see her again. I’m so sorry. I love you both more than anything.”

Then I returned upstairs.

My father was still sobbing and holding my mom.

I did not want to go back into that room.

But I couldn’t leave him there alone.

“My baby. Oh God, my baby,” he cried.

I hope this will remain the worst day of my life.

I cannot imagine anything worse than that Sunday afternoon.

I will not go into further detail here. You do not need me to paint a picture to understand how horrible this experience was.

I need time to gather my thoughts.

It has been roughly seven months since I last wrote.

Much has happened during that time, but right now I cannot put it all together.

I will return when I am ready.

* * *

The remainder of this chapter was written in the immediate aftermath of my mother's death. I am preserving its meaning because it reflects what I believed and felt at the time.

I do not wish this experience on anyone, yet I know my family is not alone in having experienced it.

If someone you love is struggling with their mental health, do what you reasonably can to remain connected to them.

They may reject help.

They may reject treatment.

They may reject suggestions, advice, or your attempts to be there.

You cannot control what another person ultimately chooses or guarantee that you can save them.

But if you can remain present in their life, let them know they matter to you.

I wish more than anything that love alone could guarantee a different ending.

I now know that it cannot.

Chapter 26: The Final Months

It has been two days since my mom took her life.

Right now, I am worried about my dad.

He blames himself.

I don't know what I can say that will convince him not to.

I know he is searching for an explanation, just as I am.

We both want somewhere to put the anger.

The scammers are an obvious target.

My mom had received another message from someone pretending to be someone else on the morning of her death.

By then, she had changed her phone number, email addresses, and social media accounts in an effort to escape the people who continued contacting her.

She had also stayed away from social media after I asked her to.

And still, the messages found their way back to her.

I don't know what that final message meant to her.

I don't know what role, if any, it played in what happened later that day.

I only know that it was one more intrusion into a life that had already been consumed by them for far too long.

* * *

My mom had become incredibly isolated.

Many of the people who had once been part of her life were no longer around by the end.

I was angry about that at the time.

I felt as though people she believed would always be there had disappeared when being her friend became difficult.

I cannot know everything that happened within those relationships or why individual people stepped away.

I only know how small her world seemed to become.

In the end, the people I saw consistently around her were my dad, my wife, my children, and me.

We tried to be there for her.

But we could not give her whatever it was she needed to survive this.

* * *

The previous seven months have begun to blur together.

There were fewer dramatic events than during the months I wrote about earlier, but that did not mean things were better.

My mom was deeply depressed.

There were several visits to mental-health facilities, but very little seemed to change afterward.

During what became her final stay in mental-health care, I received a call from a doctor with Veterans Affairs.

The call took place on October 5.

For roughly twenty minutes, I told him everything I could think of.

I told him about the changes I had watched in my mom.

The eating problems.

The scammers.

Her depression.

The changes in her behavior and when I believed they had begun.

I was desperate for someone with more knowledge and authority than I had to understand the seriousness of what I had been watching.

I wanted someone to intervene.

My mom was discharged the following day.

One week later, she was dead.

As I write this, I am furious.

I cannot understand how I could tell someone everything I knew and then watch my mom come home the next day.

I feel failed by a system I had repeatedly turned to because I did not know where else to go.

I wanted the professionals to do something that I could not.

I wanted them to save my mom.

I don't know what her doctors knew that I didn't.

I don't know what she told them.

I don't know what their evaluation showed or what options were legally or medically available to them.

I only know what happened from where I stood:

I begged for help.

She came home.

A week later, she was gone.

I am angry.

I don't know what to do with that anger yet.

* * *

There were still good days during those final months.

Sometimes I caught glimpses of the mom I remembered.

She was still fighting through whatever was happening inside her.

Now I carry the regrets that so often seem to follow loss.

I wish I had done more.

I wish I had talked with her more.

Toward the end, I had begun distancing myself because so many of our conversations felt the same.

I often felt as though she was telling me whatever she thought would keep me from worrying.

At the time, that made it difficult for me to trust what she said.

Now I wonder whether she was simply giving us whatever pieces of herself she still could.

I don't know.

I want to believe that the additional months gave her more time with us.

More time with my dad.

More time with me.

More time with her grandchildren.

In the immediate aftermath of her death, I found myself wondering whether she had been planning to take her life long before that Sunday.

I replayed conversations.

I replayed her behavior.

I searched backward for signs that suddenly seemed obvious because I knew how the story ended.

I told myself that I should have seen it coming.

Maybe part of me had.

Maybe I was simply trying to make sense of something that did not make sense.

I will never know exactly what was happening inside my mom during those final months.

I wish I did.

Chapter 27: The Worst Day of My Life

Content Warning

This chapter contains descriptions of suicide, death, blood, and the physical aftermath of my mother's death.

This may be the hardest part of this book to read. I know it is the hardest part for me to write.

If you wish to skip this chapter, please do.

I would not wish this experience on anyone, yet I know I am not the only person who has lived through something like it.

What follows is my personal account of that day—what I saw, what I experienced, and what I felt as it happened.

First, I want to make something clear.

I did not know my mother had access to a gun.

I had been under the impression that the firearms in the house were secured because of exactly this possibility.

I still do not know how she gained access to one.

At the time I wrote this chapter, I did not feel capable of asking my dad about it. I believed he would hear the question as an accusation, and I wasn't prepared to put either of us through that conversation.

So that question remained unanswered.

* * *

October 13, 2024

The morning began like any other.

Coffee. Breakfast. The kids watching cartoons together.

It was a beautiful, cool fall day—my favorite kind of weather.

My mom had not gotten out of bed that morning.

My dad was outside installing new fog lights on his truck. My wife, who had sprained her ankle a few days earlier, was sitting in a lawn chair in the backyard while our children played.

I was inside washing dishes and listening to an audiobook through a Bluetooth speaker.

It was just before noon.
Everything about the day still felt ordinary.
Then my wife came inside.
I could hear the worry in her voice.
“Your dad’s yelling for you. Something’s wrong with your mom.”
I told her to keep the kids downstairs and ran upstairs to my parents’ room.
My dad was sobbing and screaming beside the bed.
My mom was on the floor near the dresser.
There was blood everywhere.
For a moment, my mind simply couldn’t understand what I was seeing.
“FUCK!”
It was all I could get out.
My hands began shaking. I could barely breathe.
My dad pulled my mom toward him and held her while he sobbed.
The way her body moved told me what I already knew.
She was gone.
“My baby. Oh God, my baby. I thought we were getting through it. Oh God.”
My dad repeated himself over and over.
I had never heard him sound like that.
I didn’t know what to do.
I yelled for my wife to call 911 and ran downstairs to my children.
I pulled them into my arms and broke.
I kept telling them I was sorry.
Sorry they had to experience this.
Sorry I couldn’t help Grandma.
Sorry she was gone.
I told them that I loved them and that I would never leave them.
I don’t know how long I held them.
Eventually, I went back upstairs.

My dad was still holding my mom.

Most of what he was saying was incoherent by then.

Time seemed to stop.

I moved back and forth between my dad upstairs and my wife and children downstairs, trying to make sure everyone was okay while we waited for the police.

I called my best friend and asked him to come get my wife and children.

I needed them away from the house.

I felt as though I had no time to grieve or even understand what had happened.

My mind immediately turned toward everyone else.

She was my mom.

But she was my dad's wife.

She was my children's grandmother.

She had taken my wife into the family as her own daughter.

I felt that someone had to remain functional.

So I tried to be that person.

* * *

Eventually, the police arrived.

Once they were with my dad, I spent a few more moments with my children before my friend took my wife and kids away from the house.

Before leaving, my friend offered to come back and help with whatever happened afterward.

"You shouldn't be the one to do that," he told me.

At first, I didn't understand what he meant.

I assumed someone would handle the physical aftermath.

I was wrong.

I returned to my dad.

The police had gotten him onto the front porch.

He looked fragile in a way I had never seen before.

I sat beside him while people moved in and out of the house.

Eventually, someone suggested that he shower and change.

I went downstairs with him, started a warm shower, found him a clean towel, and waited.

When he finished, we returned to the porch.

There was nothing I could say that would make any of this better.

So I sat with him.

Eventually, I called one of my mom's sisters in Michigan.

I had to tell her that her sister was dead.

There were questions, of course, but I couldn't answer them. I could barely talk about what had happened.

I called my grandmother on my dad's side next.

When I told her, I heard other family members reacting in the background. I hadn't known my aunt and cousins were there with her.

My uncle said he was coming over.

After he arrived, he sat with my dad.

He offered to arrange for someone else to handle what remained upstairs.

My dad refused.

"That's my wife. It's my job."

After several hours, my mom was taken from the house.

We were asked to step away, but my dad wanted to see her one last time.

I couldn't.

I stayed back.

I had already seen more than I could bear.

* * *

Afterward, I tried again to convince my dad to let someone else clean the room.

He refused.

I became angry.

I knew he was in shock, but every part of me wanted to get away from that room.

I did not believe either of us should have to do what came next.

But if my dad was going to do it, I couldn't let him do it alone.

I began gathering cleaning supplies.

“She’s your wife, but she was my mom. You’re not doing it alone.”

“I never said you couldn’t help,” he told me. “But no one else does this. This is our responsibility.”

So we went back into the room.

There was more blood than I had ever seen in my life.

This was the first death I had ever experienced firsthand.

I had been present when my mother-in-law died, but this was different.

This was violent.

The physical aftermath of my mother’s death covered the room.

I found myself on my knees cleaning what remained of her from the walls, furniture, and ceiling.

I was furious.

I kept thinking:

Who puts their own child through this?

I was an adult, but I was still his child.

And she was still my mom.

I did not believe anyone should have to clean up the remains of someone they loved.

I was angry with my dad for refusing help.

I was angry that I was in that room.

I was angry that any of this had happened.

But I stayed.

Someone reading this may believe I should have walked away.

Maybe there is truth in that.

But I can only tell you what I felt in that moment.

I could not leave my dad to do it alone.

So I stayed beside him, and together we cleaned the room where my mother died.

There were some things we could not completely remove.

Eventually, we covered what remained.

And then it was done.

At least, the cleaning was.

Nothing else about that day would ever really be finished.

Chapter 28: The Worst Evening

By this point, I wanted nothing more than to get out of the house.

I wanted to get away from what had happened.

But I couldn't.

My dad refused to leave, and I did not believe he should be left alone.

I felt trapped inside a nightmare with nowhere else I could go.

My dad wanted his grandchildren home, but he would not leave the place where my mom had taken her last breath.

He sat on his bed, only a few feet from where she had died, and watched television.

I knew he was in shock.

Even knowing that, I couldn't understand how he could remain in that room.

I couldn't stand being there.

I tried to convince him to go to my grandparents' house or to come with me to get the kids.

He refused.

So I stayed.

I called my friend and explained what was happening.

He suggested asking my uncle to stay with my dad so I could leave for a while, but I didn't feel right doing that.

My uncle had experienced tremendous loss of his own, and I didn't want to place another person's grief onto him simply because I needed an escape.

Eventually, my friend brought my wife and children back to the house.

He had bought us pizza, and his children had spent time with mine while they were away.

It was such a simple act of kindness.

But on that day, it meant everything.

Before he left, I gave him the firearms from the house and asked him to keep them.

After everything that had happened, I did not want my dad to have access to them while he was in such a fragile state.

My wife and children sat outside with my dad beneath the gazebo and ate pizza.
I stayed with my friend for a little while longer.
When I finally joined my family, I had almost no appetite.

* * *

I am writing this two days later.
I still don't have much of an appetite.
I eat because I know I need to.
My children still cannot fully understand what happened to their grandmother.
That night, I continued checking on my dad.
He told me he was fine.
I didn't know what was happening inside him, and after what had happened to my mom,
I wasn't willing to assume that "I'm fine" meant he was okay.
I had spent much of my life surrounded by the idea that men were supposed to handle
pain on their own.
Be strong.
Don't cry.
Don't burden anyone else.
I didn't want that anymore.
My wife had gotten our daughter to sleep, and my son was playing Minecraft.
Then something inside me finally gave way.
I went into my son's room, curled up on his couch, and began to sob.
There was nothing left for me to do.
No police to wait for.
No phone calls to make.
No room to clean.
No one standing directly in front of me who needed something.
For the first time all day, I was alone with what had happened.
And I broke.
I could not mentally visualize what I had seen in the way other people might be able to,
but the memory of my mother's face was still somehow burned into me.

My wife found me curled up on the couch.
She sat with me and comforted me.
I had spent the entire day believing that I needed to be strong for everyone else.
In that moment, I finally allowed myself not to be.
While my wife got our son to sleep, I went to check on my dad one more time.
He was in bed but still awake.
I hugged him.
And I cried again.
My dad is not perfect.
Neither am I.
Neither was my mom.
None of us are.

* * *

At the time I wrote these words, I did not know what else there was to say.
I knew that eventually I would return and reflect on everything that had happened.
But for that moment, this was my mom's story.
I hoped that somehow it might find someone who needed it.
Maybe something in what happened to our family could help another family recognize that they were not alone.
For now, I could only try to remain thankful for the people who were still beside me.
My wife.
My children.
My dad.
My friends.
I did not need to understand everything yet.
I only needed to make it through the next day.
And then the day after that.
Keep going.
—DW

Chapter 29: Life After Death

I'm not quite sure what to write about.

Tomorrow will be four weeks since my mom's death.

My dad has been extremely depressed.

From what I can see, he carries tremendous guilt over what happened.

I don't believe the responsibility for my mom's death belongs to him.

But I understand why he searches backward through everything that happened, wondering what he could have done differently.

I do it too.

There are so many layers to this tragedy and so many questions that will probably never have answers.

What began changing in my mom five years ago?

Was there some biological or psychological component we never understood?

Did watching her own mother disappear into dementia affect her more deeply than we realized?

Did becoming a grandmother cause her to reflect on her own life and where it had gone?

Was she experiencing some kind of crisis that none of us recognized?

Was it some combination of things?

Or was it something else entirely?

I don't know.

I don't think I ever will.

I can only describe what I watched happen.

Over those years, I saw problems with eating, impulse control, spending, and online shopping. Then came the celebrity scammers and the devastating financial and emotional consequences that followed.

I cannot imagine what all of that felt like from inside my mom's mind.

I have wondered about the moment she understood that the relationships she believed were real had been lies.

What did she think about herself?

What did she believe the people around her thought about her?

Did she feel ashamed?

Humiliated?

Trapped?

I can ask those questions.

I cannot answer them for her.

In the weeks after her death, I found myself trying desperately to understand why.

Sometimes I thought I did.

But understanding the circumstances surrounding someone's death is not the same as knowing what was happening inside that person when they died.

That answer belonged to my mom.

And she took it with her.

* * *

My dad continues to wonder whether he should have done more.

Whether he should have been there more.

Whether he should have been kinder.

I understand those questions because I have asked similar ones about my own life.

I think about my wife and the way I treated her when I first learned about her eating disorder.

I think about my anger and the things I said because I didn't know how else to reach her.

At the time, I sometimes believed being harsh could force her to open up.

Looking back, I have had to ask myself a difficult question:

Even if I believed it worked, was it healthy for either of us?

I don't think it was.

I saw some similarities in the way my dad sometimes responded to my mom.

There were times when I believed he became angry or harsh because he was desperately trying to break through to her.

But that is my interpretation.

I cannot tell you exactly what was happening inside my father's mind any more than I can tell you what was happening inside my mother's.

What I do know is that none of us knew how to fix what was happening.

My dad lived beside it every day.

Sometimes my mom seemed like herself.

Sometimes she didn't.

Sometimes we thought she understood what was happening.

Sometimes we weren't sure.

I watched my dad move between anger, hope, frustration, exhaustion, and the desire to believe that somehow his wife was going to come back to him.

I had criticized him for that many times.

Four weeks after losing her, I understood that desire differently.

He wanted his wife back.

So did I.

* * *

I am tired.

I feel stretched as thin as I can possibly be.

I have spent so much time trying to remain strong for people who cannot yet find their own strength that I can feel the weight of it accumulating.

I hope life becomes easier.

But right now, I don't know what comes next.

I am learning that I cannot prepare myself for every possible tragedy.

I can only respond to life as it comes.

* * *

Sometime afterward, my dad spent a few days away at a cabin with other people who had also experienced traumatic loss.

I was glad he went.

I could not imagine his loneliness.

The previous years had been incredibly difficult for both of my parents, but I believed that if my dad had been given the choice, he would have endured all of it again just to see my mom one more time.

Watching him grieve made me think differently about regret.

Loss has a way of sending us backward through our memories.

We find arguments we wish had ended differently.

Words we wish we hadn't said.

Things we wish we had noticed.

Moments we wish we could have again.

But reflection cannot change what happened.

And it cannot give us perfect knowledge of what we should have done when we were living through it.

All I can do is look at the person I was, acknowledge the things I wish I had done differently, and decide what I carry forward.

I cannot change what happened to my mom.

I cannot change the mistakes I made before she died.

I can only decide what those things change in me.

Chapter 30: Find Meaning in Suffering

It has been three months since my mom's death.

My grandfather on my dad's side is now approaching the end of his life.

I worry about my dad.

After everything he has just survived, another loss feels almost cruel.

But I also remind myself that no two losses are the same.

Losing his father will carry its own grief. It will not simply be a continuation of losing his wife.

Life often feels surreal now.

My mom comes to mind constantly, and my feelings toward her remain complicated.

I love her.

I miss her.

I am angry with her.

I feel sorry for her.

Sometimes I still don't know what to make of everything that happened.

Lately, I have found myself wondering:

What did my mom actually want from her life?

When I think back on the person I knew, I remember her love of music and singing.

I believe there was a part of her that once dreamed of becoming a singer.

That makes me wonder what she imagined her life becoming when she was young.

What dreams did she have before marriage?

Before becoming a mother?

Before me?

What parts of herself did she give up?

Which parts changed naturally as she grew older?

And which dreams did she simply outgrow?

I don't know.

There was a time when I believed my mom was someone who probably should never have had children.

That is a difficult sentence to write as her son.

I didn't mean that she never loved me.

I know she did.

She raised me. She sacrificed for me. She cared for me in ways that I probably did not fully appreciate while she was alive.

What I meant was that sometimes I wondered whether motherhood was the life she would have chosen for herself if circumstances had been different.

But even that is something I cannot answer for her.

I never asked her.

Now I never can.

* * *

Much of this memoir has been my attempt to understand the changes I witnessed in my mom during the final years of her life.

I have proposed explanations.

I have blamed people.

I have blamed systems.

At times, I blamed her.

And throughout all of it, I have tried to arrange events into some kind of sequence that explains how the woman who raised me eventually became the woman I watched struggling at the end of her life.

But these remain my interpretations.

I don't know what ultimately caused those changes.

I don't know whether there was one cause at all.

I wondered whether watching her own mother's decline from dementia affected her more deeply than any of us realized.

I wondered whether becoming a grandmother caused her to confront the passage of time or changes in her own identity.

I wondered about her health, her mental health, retirement, isolation, and everything else happening around her.

Perhaps some of those things mattered.

Perhaps all of them did.

Perhaps I have spent years looking for a clean beginning to something that never had one.

* * *

My mom described herself as an empath.

We argued about that.

She believed she experienced other people's emotions very deeply.

I sometimes interpreted the same behavior differently and questioned whether what I was seeing was difficulty regulating her own emotions.

Neither of us could truly know what another person experienced internally.

Looking back, I regret some of the certainty with which I judged her.

I sometimes interpreted emotional reactions I didn't understand as immaturity.

I saw her becoming increasingly withdrawn from other people and believed there was something wrong with the way she was living.

But there were other parts of her too.

She could be incredibly gentle.

Her love for animals remained one of the clearest expressions of that gentleness.

When I was younger, she took me to concerts and theme parks.

Those memories belong to her too.

Over the years, I watched her world become smaller.

She went out less.

She seemed to withdraw further into herself.

For a long time, I believed leaving work and receiving disability had caused that change.

I also believed retirement had stripped both of my parents of a sense of purpose.

I cannot know that.

Work may have provided structure and meaning that became difficult to replace, but their lives were more complicated than any single explanation.

Toward the end of my mom's life, I saw her trying new things.

She began making art.

She helped my dad with his resin projects.

When I originally wrote about those efforts, I dismissed them as having come too late.

I don't think I would say that now.

They happened.

She created something.

She spent time beside my dad.

However small those moments may seem compared with everything that followed, they were still pieces of her life.

I have spent much of this story searching for meaning in my mother's suffering.

Maybe I have been looking in the wrong place.

Maybe the suffering itself doesn't need to contain some hidden lesson.

Maybe the meaning comes from what I choose to do with what remains.

I can remember my mom as more than the person she became during the worst years of her life.

I can acknowledge the ways she hurt me without pretending she never loved me.

I can acknowledge the ways I hurt her without allowing regret to become the only thing I carry.

And I can tell her story without pretending that I finally understand her.

She was my mom.

I loved her.

She was complicated.

And her life was bigger than the way it ended.

Chapter 31: Last Words

My children have begun to talk more about losing their grandma.

Early on, they didn't say much.

As time passes, they open up more.

They miss her dearly.

We all do.

My mom struggled deeply during the final years of her life, but those years were not all that she was.

We loved her then.

We love her now.

And death does not erase that love.

* * *

I have spent much of my life unsure of what I believe about what comes after death.

Do we go somewhere else?

Are we somehow born again?

Does consciousness simply end?

I don't know.

No matter how much I search, I always return to that answer.

I don't know.

But I choose to believe there may be more to existence than what we experience here.

And if there is something beyond this life, I hope my mom has found peace there.

I don't know whether heaven exists.

I don't know where she is.

But when I allow myself to imagine her somewhere beyond all of this, I don't imagine the woman from the final years of this story.

I imagine my mom smiling.

I imagine her singing.

Loudly.

Proudly.

Free from everything that weighed on her here.

This memoir is dedicated to you, Mom.

Your memory will live on in me and in the grandchildren who loved you.

I could not save you.

I could not completely understand you.

And I cannot change the way your story ended.

But I can remember you.

Not only for how you died.

Not only for the years when everything fell apart.

But for the life that came before them.

You were here.

You mattered.

And you were loved.

Forever in my heart.

Forever your son,

Devin

Afterword: Two Years Later

We are approaching the two-year anniversary of my mom's death.

Much has changed.

And yet, in some ways, much remains the same.

For a long time after she died, I struggled to find motivation.

Things I once loved stopped feeling meaningful.

Only recently have I begun to feel more like myself again.

My dad was left dealing with a mountain of debt accumulated during the final years of my mom's life.

He has been painstakingly working his way through it.

He doesn't complain much.

He simply keeps going.

So do I.

* * *

There is something I realize this book has not done enough.

I have told you a great deal about my mom's decline.

I have told you about the scammers.

Her struggles with mental health.

The arguments.

The money.

The hospitals.

Her death.

But those things are not who my mom was.

So before I leave you, I want you to know a little about Tracey.

* * *

My mom loved animals.

Sometimes I joked that she loved them more than she loved most humans.

She volunteered at a local animal shelter, and she loved being there.

During that time, she fell in love with a blind dog named Duke.

Animals were a constant presence throughout my childhood.

At one point, we had seven dogs.

My mom was a strong advocate for animal adoption, and her favorite breed was the Dachshund.

We had several of them over the years. My first two dogs were Dachshunds.

Before I was born, one of our Dachshunds, Pebbles, would guard my mom's belly.

After I was born, Pebbles became my best friend.

I was an only child, and that dog was one of my earliest companions.

* * *

My mom loved Ford Mustangs.

She owned a white 2001 Mustang before eventually getting what I considered her dream car: a gold 2012 Mustang.

That car was her baby.

After she died, my dad gave it to me.

I still drive it.

There is something strange and comforting about that.

Something she loved still carries me down the road.

* * *

She loved Supernatural and Charmed.

She loved horror movies, including The Exorcist, The Lost Boys, and Salem's Lot.

She was also a big kid.

She wore merchandise featuring characters she loved: Tigger and Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, GIR from Invader Zim, Zero from The Nightmare Before Christmas, Cheese from Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends, and Frankenweenie.

She loved music of all kinds, but rock and metal were especially important to her.

Linkin Park.

Disturbed.

Iron Maiden.

Depeche Mode.

Metallica.

Evanescence.

Music was part of who she was.

And, as I wrote earlier, I believe there had once been a part of her that dreamed of becoming a singer.

* * *

Then there were the Green Bay Packers.

My mom grew up in Upper Michigan, surrounded by Packers fans.

She was one of them to the end.

She got to see the Packers play Washington twice.

Her favorite player was Clay Matthews.

Whenever she talked about him, she would make this ridiculous growling purr.

It embarrassed the hell out of me at the time.

Now it makes me smile.

She was a character.

During games, she was loud.

Very loud.

She cheered, yelled at the television, and made sure everyone around her knew exactly how she felt about what was happening on the field.

Those are the kinds of things I want to remember.

Not because they erase everything else in this book.

They don't.

But because the woman in the final chapters was not the entirety of my mother.

There was a woman before all of that.

A woman who loved animals.

Who loved Mustangs.

Who loved horror movies and strange cartoon characters.

Who loved loud music.

Who yelled at football games.

Who made inappropriate noises about Clay Matthews just to embarrass her son.

That woman was my mom too.

* * *

I wish she could have watched her grandchildren grow up.

I wish they could have known more of the woman I remember from before the events of this book.

But here we are, nearly two years after she died.

Life continued.

It had to.

And I have spent a great deal of time wondering what I should do with everything that happened.

I cannot change it.

I cannot give my mom another ending.

But perhaps I can give what happened some meaning.

That is why I have decided to make this memoir public.

I do not want to profit from my mother's death.

This book will be available freely to anyone who wants to read it.

I want her story to exist somewhere outside my own memory.

I want people who have watched someone they love change in ways they don't understand to know that another family has lived through that confusion.

I want people who have been manipulated by scammers—or who love someone who has—to understand that intelligent, complicated, vulnerable human beings can be deceived.

I want families living with mental illness to know how messy love can become when nobody knows what to do.

And I want people grieving a suicide to know that the questions they carry may not always have answers.

Most of all, if you have made it this far, I want you to understand something that took me a long time to understand myself:

You matter.

Your life matters.

Your existence matters.

There may be times when you cannot see beyond whatever you are experiencing.

I will not promise you that every problem disappears or that every low inevitably becomes a high.

Life has taught me otherwise.

But things can change.

People can change.

Circumstances can change.

And sometimes surviving today is enough.

If you have lived through something like what my family experienced, you are not alone in having complicated feelings about it.

Love can exist beside anger.

Grief can exist beside relief.

Forgiveness can exist beside things that can never be undone.

You don't have to make everything that happened beautiful in order to keep living after it.

I spent years trying to understand my mom.

I still don't.

Maybe I never completely will.

But I know this:

She lived.

She loved.

She struggled.

She hurt people.

She was hurt by people.

She was more complicated than either the best or worst thing she ever did.

She was Tracey Jean White.

She was my mom.

And I will carry her with me for the rest of my life.

Keep going.

—Devin

Author's Note: Why This Book Is Free

I have chosen to make Shattered Illusions available for free.

That decision is intentional.

This book exists because my mom died.

I cannot separate that fact from anything that might come from sharing her story, and I have never felt comfortable with the idea of putting a price on what happened to her.

I did not write this book to make money.

I wrote it because I needed to understand what happened.

At first, I was writing for myself and for my parents. I wanted to document what I was witnessing while I was living through it. I wanted them to someday see these years through my eyes.

After my mom died, the purpose of the book changed.

I could no longer give it to her and ask her to understand my perspective.

But I could still share it.

There are families living through situations like mine right now.

There are people watching someone they love become consumed by mental illness, manipulation, scams, or behaviors they cannot understand.

There are people who have lost someone to suicide and are still searching for an explanation they may never find.

And there are people who have been deceived by scammers and are treated as though being manipulated somehow makes them stupid.

I don't want access to this story to depend on whether any of those people can afford to buy a book.

So there will be no price of admission.

Read it.

Download it.

Keep it.

If you know someone who might need it, share it with them.

All I ask is that the story be treated with respect.

These were real people.

This was my family.

Tracey Jean White was my mother.

If something in these pages helps another person recognize what may be happening in their own family, feel less alone in their grief, understand someone they previously judged, or simply begin a difficult conversation, then this book has accomplished more than I could ask of it.

That is enough.

—Devin White

Support the Project

Shattered Illusions is free and will remain free.

You do not need to donate anything to read, download, or share this book.

If this story meant something to you and you would like to help me keep the project available, maintain the website, and continue making it accessible to others, you are welcome to support it.

<https://shatteredillusionsproject.org/support-the-project/>

There is no expectation and no obligation.

Reading my mom's story is already enough.

If you would like to help in another way, share Shattered Illusions with someone who may need it.

Thank you for reading.

—Devin

Resources

The experiences described in *Shattered Illusions* touch on mental illness, suicide, grief, and financial exploitation.

This memoir is my family's story, not a substitute for professional help. If something in these pages feels familiar, there are organizations that may be able to help.

If You Are in Crisis

In the United States, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides free, confidential crisis support 24 hours a day.

Call or text 988, or use the online chat through the 988 Lifeline. Veterans can call 988 and press 1.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

<https://988lifeline.org/>

If there is immediate danger or a medical emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

Finding Mental-Health Care

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides resources for finding mental-health and substance-use treatment in the United States.

Its treatment locator is confidential and anonymous.

SAMHSA FindTreatment.gov

<https://findtreatment.gov/>

SAMHSA's National Helpline is also available 24 hours a day at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for treatment referrals and information.

After a Suicide Loss

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) provides resources specifically for people who have lost someone to suicide, including support groups, information for families and children, and its Healing Conversations program, which connects loss survivors with trained volunteers who have experienced suicide loss themselves.

AFSP Suicide Loss Resources

<https://afsp.org/suicide-loss-resources/>

Scams and Financial Exploitation

If you or someone you love has been manipulated by a scammer, embarrassment should not stop you from asking for help or reporting what happened.

Scams can be reported to the Federal Trade Commission through ReportFraud. The FTC uses reports to identify patterns and support investigations.

FTC ReportFraud

<https://reportfraud.ftc.gov/>

Internet-enabled fraud can also be reported to the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3). The FBI recommends preserving information about the people or accounts involved, including emails, websites, social-media profiles, and phone numbers.

FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center

<https://www.ic3.gov/>

One Last Thing

Asking for help does not require you to understand everything that is happening first.

You don't need to have the right diagnosis.

You don't need to know why someone you love has changed.

And if you have lost someone, you don't need to solve every unanswered question before you are allowed to grieve.

Keep going.

—Devin

About the Author

Devin White is a husband, father, writer, and lifelong learner from Virginia.

He began writing *Shattered Illusions* in 2024 while trying to understand the changes taking place within his family and the decline of his mother, Tracey Jean White.

What began as a private attempt to document those experiences eventually became something else after Tracey's death: a way to preserve her story, examine his own mistakes and growth, and perhaps help others facing circumstances they do not know how to understand.

Devin believes difficult stories have value when they are told with honesty, including the parts that do not present the storyteller in the best light.

He is a husband and the father of two children. Outside of writing, he enjoys creating things with his hands, gardening, woodworking, painting, and exploring whatever new subject happens to capture his attention.

Shattered Illusions is his first published memoir.

He lives in Virginia with his family.

Contact

If you would like to contact me about Shattered Illusions, share your own experience, or reach out regarding the project, you can do so through the official website.

<https://shatteredillusionsproject.org/>

<https://shatteredillusionsproject.org/contact/>

I may not be able to respond to every message, but I appreciate everyone who takes the time to read this story and reach out.

Please do not use this contact page for emergencies or immediate mental-health support. If you are in crisis, please use the resources provided in the previous section.

Thank you for reading.

—Devin