

When Memories Leave

A Story of Love, Overcoming Brain Injury and Family Dysfunction

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Sample from the book:

Introduction

I worked at a gas station full-time in order to allow me to be able to receive training as a Certified Nursing Assistant (C.N.A.). As a C.N.A., I would be making close to three dollars more per hour than I was earning at the gas station, and I would have the opportunity to work overtime.

One evening, during the early weeks of training while my children were home from school for the summer, I returned home to find that the power tools were in the middle of the living room floor. One was still plugged in. It was an indication my teenage son had used it. The power tools were off limits when I was not at home, and they had been in the locked shed when I had left that morning.

My paranoia that anything could happen while I was not at home kicked in, the result of seeing visions of a table saw cutting my teenage son. My awareness that the children did not always think about safety issues and the lack of family support if an emergency occurred lead me to ask a neighbor to watch the younger children. The sacrifice of not spending as much time together that summer so I could better our lives was worth it. We were no longer dependent upon the government system for support.

I had been struggling to be independent of the system for a long time. Our financial situation had improved, and I was finally where I wanted to be. The kids were still on Medicaid and we still received \$100.00 a month in food stamps, but that would be gone if I got another raise or two.

Hope.

I was hired full time as a C.N.A. for a nursing home which was an hour drive away. I would leave for work in the early morning hours and let the children get themselves off to school. The older ones were teenagers, and they were all of school age. I did not mind the hour drive each way to work as my pay had increased enough and it gave me some time to think.

We had a house large enough for all the kids. It was my first mortgage; an older yellow brick one-story home with four bedrooms. The previous owner had taken good care of it. Everything worked, including the missing refrigerator. Every missing refrigerator works like it should. It runs with no electricity and everything is invisible. Ours was no exception.

For the first month or two of staying in our new home, we used the cooler. The local store was less than a mile away and the older children enjoyed going for the walk. Every day I sent them for a bag of ice and enough perishables to last until the next trip. It worked. We had fresh food. Nobody went hungry. And I was doing it on my own.

I had to do it on my own. I had no family living anywhere near the state I was living in. The children's fathers took no responsibility for them. It did not matter I had left the state where everyone was. When I was there, I did not get the help I needed and asked for. A few of my friends tried to help for a while, but the kids were small and childcare costs were more than my paycheck.

My family refused to help, though I realize this refusal was because of having no contact with most of my family. My brother and sister were younger than I and were unable to help. My mother worked full time which limited her ability to help. I understood her job came first, but there were times when she could have helped but refused. I took her refusal to help hard because she was the only person I had to go to for help.

I was willing to do whatever was necessary to get on my feet. I needed a break. I did not see a future in the state I was in, so I made plans to stay with my friend, Sandra, who had moved across the country. She was the only one willing or able to watch the kids while I worked. She invited us to stay at her place until I saved enough to get out on my own. She was willing to continue to watch the kids if I needed the help. She was the only one to help me get on my feet, and I gratefully accepted her offer.

I had about half of the money saved for the trip when Buster, the father of my two youngest children and estranged husband, called Sandra to tell her of his plans to keep me from moving.

At 6 p.m. I answered the phone. Sandra was upset and talking fast, telling me to leave right away. I had no clue what she was talking about as she talked faster than my brain could comprehend the message. When she slowed her speech, I listened carefully to the story that addressed the complexity and severity of the situation. I knew Sandra was right. I knew I had to leave with the kids right away.

Time was wasting. Sandra said it would become illegal for me to leave the state beginning midnight. When I asked her how she knew, she said Buster had told her so, even to the point of gloating. I was furious he was trying his best to keep me down, to prevent me from moving forward in my life, and to keep me from being able to support myself and my children, his included. I was furious that he was once again trying to control me.

As soon as I hung up, I frantically gathered everything I could think of that was important to have with us on our journey. This entailed going up and down flights of stairs as I gathered the things necessary for our survival without ever needing to look back. As I moved about, I was reminded of the holiday the day before as I passed the Christmas tree. The toys were all new and we would have to leave them behind. Some of them were even being left without having been opened. That night, I left as soon as I could with the kids.

Walking out of our apartment door one last time, I looked around as I walked the children to the car. The apartment complex had bars on the windows, graffiti on the walls, and drive-by shootings. Our apartment was in the very back of the complex in a dead-end where the kids and I were kept out of the gunfire.

I was grateful we were leaving while fearful of the unknown.

I asked my neighbor for a ride to the nearest bus station that was not in the same state. We crossed the border two hours after leaving. Hours before midnight, we boarded a bus with two suitcases filled with three sets of clothing each, important documents, and the photo albums. I also packed backpacks filled with food and small toys for the trip.

Nobody was going to keep me down anymore. There was one problem. In my wallet was only enough money to get me and the kids halfway to Sandra's house. I was not going to leave

any of my kids behind to get myself and the rest of the kids to a better location that would allow us to move forward with our lives. There was nothing I could do but wing it, hope, and pray.

Buster may not have been able to keep me from leaving, but he kept me from reaching my intended destination. When we arrived at the alternate destination, I learned that one of the children had a double set of clothes and another child had no clothes packed. That knowledge led to the understanding of the frantic frame of mind I was in while packing.

I have not regretted leaving that state, though I have missed some really good friends: the ones that would make me laugh when no one else could; the ones who were going through similar types of circumstances and so, understood me; and the ones who cheered me on to keep going.

There were the ones who helped me understand that I was in the middle of family dysfunction before I moved out of my mother's home during senior year of high school, and that I needed to break the cycles of abuse for the sake of my future children. I have never forgotten the importance of these people in my life, yet the pain of the past never really went away. That is when I began to cry every night after the kids went to bed and prayed to God for the painful memories to be removed so that I could stop crying and move forward with my life.

So, there we were: I was working as a C.N.A. with overtime, we were working our way off government assistance, my children's needs were being met, and God and I were working on the pain of the past.

I had every reason to believe the kids and I were happy. At least that is what I thought.

Chapter 1 The Accident

A year later, I opened the side door to find two Department of Human Services (D.H.S.) workers standing on my outside stoop. They wanted to talk to me about a report they had received. Someone claimed that I had shoved one teen into the wall. Yes, there was a mark in the wall.

I offered them entrance to examine the wall and to ask my children how the indentation occurred. No, I was not the one who had put it there. I had been working double shifts every day including weekends for about a month when the nursing home was short staffed. The next-door neighbor, Sally, was available to check on the kids in my absence. I could prove I was not home except to sleep.

Sally had checked in on them and witnessed the event just as she arrived. One of the boys shoved another one with a little more force than intended. It was a normal occurrence for growing boys. She had reported this to me the day it occurred. Sally's brother, Lou, was living with her. She went to get him, and he pulled the boys apart.

Elijah, the one that was shoved, landed against the wall and created the indentation. It is my understanding that Elijah then attacked his older brother, Zachary. But the D.H.S. case worker was new, refused to talk to my neighbor and her brother, and refused to get verification from work. They opened the case.

I learned years later that the kids were not happy with my work schedule after years of being home with them. Zac told the school that I was the one who shoved the other. Years later I

received an apology from Zac, which is how I learned the truth of the situation. I accepted his apology. All teens make stupid decisions at some point.

Like me. I was a stupid teen who celebrated high school graduation with my boyfriend and eight months later, an early package arrived. It was not Zac. Like falling dominos, this event led to the rest of the things that led to the opened D.H.S. case.

The pressure was on. There was nothing in writing from the D.H.S. worker concerning my case or what they expected of me; just verbal communication. I was to find someone to stay with the kids while I was at work. The day D.H.S. appeared, I was working first shift.

My work was not done at 6 p.m. After arriving home and changing out of my uniform, I put dinner on, tended to the children's needs, got them to sit down to do homework while dinner cooked, started laundry, continued watching dinner, served dinner, did the dishes, rounded them up to brush their teeth, take baths, and finally sent to bed.

I was tired and worn out.

I did not sit down with the kids to do their homework with them. If I did that, they would not have eaten dinner because I would not have been available to cook it. The kids were in class all day and knew what their teacher told them; something I did not know because I was not in class with them. My position was that they were responsible for doing what the teacher told them to do. If they had questions, I would try to answer them. If I was unable to help them, I asked that they address the questions to their teacher. I would not take them by the hand and do the work for them or with them. Though I was willing to instruct them on how to do their homework. They needed to be independent and learn how to do the work on their own. There was not enough of me to go around.

My mistake was voicing this opinion and expressing how tired I was at the end of the day. At that time in my life I preferred to wake late in the morning and stay up until late at night. Sadly, that was never the case.

Instead, I had to start work at 7 a.m. with an hour-long drive to get there. This meant that I had to be up no later than 5 a.m. on non-winter weather days. By 10 p.m., I was exhausted.

The D.H.S. worker was disappointed that I did not see the kids off to school, nor was she thrilled that I did not sit down with the kids to do their homework. She recommended, more like ordered, that I change from first shift to second shift. The D.H.S. worker did not want the kids alone even though the older kids, by D.H.S. definition, were old enough to stay home without a babysitter.

The reason I worked first shift was so I could be home with the kids in the evening even if it was tiring me out. I wanted to make sure they ate healthy meals. I did not want to worry about finding someone to watch the kids, but here I was, in a position that required me to do just that.

I did not see the benefit of following their recommendations or orders, but out of fear, I spoke with my supervisor who made the schedule. She made it clear that once I changed to second shift, I would not be able to go back to first. I understood. I did not want to do it, but I did not feel I had a choice. Anything to keep my kids from going to foster care; anything to get the case closed.

The boys were teenagers. The girls were pre-teen. Zac was the most responsible of the bunch. I did not have a problem with Isaac, my middle son. Elijah used to cause problems but was maturing. Nancy and Jane were normal girls. I saw no need to hire a babysitter who would charge most of what I was making nor was anyone interested in babysitting a bunch of teenagers their ages. There was no reason why the older boys could not babysit the younger bunch.

The day D.H.S. first appeared, it was an afternoon in the early summer shortly after school let out for the year. The weather was hot. We had no air conditioning. Box fans sat on the open windowsills in each room. We had a flexible schedule when school was not in session. We awoke in the early morning hours and did our morning routines so that the house was clean. Afterwards we had free time to do what we wanted while the house was cool. When the house was too hot, we crashed and slept the afternoon away.

The evening was the worst time of day because the temperatures were still high, and nobody had the energy to do anything. Evening time was TV time, reading time, anything that did not require much effort. When the heat began to dissipate, we would have our dinner. It was around 11 p.m. before we ate. We went to bed late just to rise early again. It was part of the reason I was so tired when I awoke at 5 a.m. for work. This summer schedule was the reason working second shift made sense to me. I really did not have to worry about what the kids would do while I was gone. My concerns were related to the school year when I needed to make dinner and make sure the kids did their homework.

The D.H.S. worker who visited twice after the initial visit was not pleased that I still had not found someone to stay with the kids. I had tried. I had made many phone calls. I just could not find someone to do it. The ones I found were too expensive for my budget. I asked the D.H.S. worker to help me with childcare costs. I knew there was a program I could be put on the list for, but she refused to help in that way. Like other times in my life, I felt like I was being backed into a corner: everyone expecting miracles from me as if I held a magic wand to make their every wish my command and at the same time offering no solutions on how I was to accomplish their unrealistic expectations.

It was a hot summer day early June 2002 when I went out the side door to check on the kids. The anger was coursing through my blood thinking about the unexpected expectations put upon me. That's when I spotted him.

To Be Continued