



## Chapter 1

For the last 17 years of her life, my mother lived with me, and though we talked often, some things were left unsaid. But I knew she carried a deep sense of guilt. She mentioned the time she was kicked down the stairs while pregnant with me, certain that the trauma caused my enlarged thymus.

“I just know that’s what did it,” she would say, shaking her head.

I would sit quietly, unsure of what to say. I wasn’t convinced, and even if there was a connection, what could I possibly tell her that would ease her conscience? The truth was, no one knew for sure. My condition was rare, and back then, medical knowledge was far from what it is today.

She described it once. “It was this huge thing hanging on your chest – the size of a grapefruit,” she said, shuddering at the memory. “They had no idea what to do. Radiation had just been discovered, and they were grasping at straws. They used so much more radiation on you than they should have. They had no idea what the limits were.”

Years later, when I went to see my obstetrician while I was pregnant, he shook his head as he read my medical history. “You would’ve been better off standing in the middle of

Hiroshima all by yourself,” he said grimly, “You need to get rid of that baby right now because it will have some horrible deformity, like a foot growing out of its head.”

I did not heed his advice, but that was still a chilling statement. To think that the radiation exposure I endured as an infant was comparable to the levels experienced in Hiroshima... was staggering.

I underwent fourteen months of radiation treatment—fourteen months on a tiny infant. When I saw my oncologist, who had been involved in my recent surgery, he asked, “So where did they put the protective padding?”

I just shook my head. “They didn’t have any.”

“No protective padding?” His expression was one of pure disbelief.

“They didn’t know about radiation levels back then,” I replied.

No, they didn’t. And neither did my mother. She was just a scared woman trusting the doctors to save her baby.

My condition, enlarged thymus, was so rare that only two other cases like mine had ever been documented at the time. The doctors hoped the gland would shrink on its own as a result of all the radiation, but by the time I was 14 months old, it hadn’t. They were left with no choice but to remove it. A surgeon from New York, the specialist who had performed this procedure on the two other cases, was called in to operate. I was severely underweight. At fourteen months old, I weighed only fourteen pounds—far below average. After my surgery, I dropped to only ten pounds, which implied that my enlarged thymus must have grown to around 4 pounds by that point. It was astonishing to be at such a low weight, comparable to my own son at birth. Yes, he was big—not quite 10 pounds.

For girls, the average birth weight is around 7 lbs 1 oz, and by 1 month, they typically weigh 9 lbs 4 oz. By 2 months, the average is 11 lbs 4 oz—already surpassing my post-operative weight, which was 10 lbs, and at 4 months, the norm is 14 lbs 2 oz. But at 14 months, just before my operation, I weighed what an average 4-month-old does. And after the surgery, my weight had dropped to what an infant of just 5 to 6 weeks old would typically weigh. How frail I must have been!

The thought of -10 lbs stretched over 30 inches (the standard length of a 14-month-old child) is something I still struggle to picture or even comprehend fully.

After the procedure, I remained in the hospital. For two years, I lived in the Cleveland Clinic, never once leaving its sterile, white-walled environment, my home. My mother, sick and struggling to work, couldn’t stay with me every day. She lived an hour and a

half away, battling her own failing health, while I remained in the care of nurses and doctors who became my world.

Years later, when I sat across from one of my current oncologists, reviewing my medical history after yet another surgery, I watched as he scanned the pages of notes I had written out. It had become a necessary step because my medical past was often too unbelievable for doctors to process in a single glance. While I'm uncertain if they truly valued this narrative included with a list of 'ectomys,' I knew that without it, significant aspects of my health could easily be overlooked.

He skimmed the paper, then stopped, furrowing his brow. "The 2 sentences written at the top, that's an error, right?"

"No", I replied.

"You mean to tell me you were in the hospital, then went home, then came back, then went home again?"

I shook my head. "No."

He looked up at me. "So, your mother brought you back every day for treatment?"

"No," I said again, meeting his eyes. "I never left. I lived there. For two years."

He blinked, staring at me as if trying to grasp what I was saying. "You lived in the Cleveland Clinic for two years?"

"Yes."

He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. "That's almost impossible to imagine. That wouldn't happen today. Not like that."

But it had happened. It was my reality. My childhood had begun within the walls of a hospital, shaped by surgeries, radiation treatments, and the quiet hum of machines keeping me alive.

And just when I was allowed to go home at two years old, another battle began.

Not long after returning home, I started turning purple. My mother, a trained nurse, knew something was wrong but had no idea what to do. She couldn't take me to a local hospital; my case was too complex, and my body was too fragile from everything I had already endured. So, she took me back to the Cleveland Clinic, the place that had become both my prison and my sanctuary – an hour-and-a-half drive with a purple child.

That's when they diagnosed me with epilepsy. Grand mal seizures, violent and unrelenting, tore through my small body. Medication was the only option, the only way to keep my brain from misfiring into chaos.

One day, as I was growing up, I noticed a scar on my ankle and asked my mother about it. “Why do I have this big scar?”

She barely hesitated before answering. “That’s where they sewed in your permanent IV.”

“What?” I stared at her in shock. “Sewed in?”

“Yes. You had that IV for two years. It was the only way they could make sure it stayed in place.”

I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. A permanent IV sewn into my skin? Today, such a thing would be considered unthinkable. But back then, it was simply what had to be done.

Mom also mentioned there was one doctor, though, who showed me kindness in a way that defied the grim circumstances. My mother told me he adored me. He would take me on his rounds, letting me ride on his shoulder as he visited patients. Of course, they’d never allow that today. But back then, they probably thought it was cute. And honestly, it was better than spending every hour of every day alone in a crib.

As I grew older, I became more aware of my scars. One day, I decided to measure the largest one. “Seventeen inches,” I murmured, tracing the line that started a few inches left of my sternum, curved downward in a U-shape, and stretched all the way under my armpit toward my back. Seventeen inches on a body that once weighed only ten pounds. Perhaps scars grow as we do; I’m not sure. Maybe it wasn’t 17 inches when I was just 14 months old, but the thought remained unsettling. How does an infant endure such pain? How does a body so small even survive such an invasion?

Later in life, I ran into problems with medical professionals who refused to believe my history. Instead of just listing my thymectomy, thyroidectomy, cholecystectomy, and other procedures, I wrote a simple two-line explanation for each one.

The doctor looked at it and frowned. “A thymectomy? That’s not possible. You wouldn’t be alive. You don’t know how to spell medical terms correctly.”

I sighed. “Yes. I know how to spell medical terms.”

This wasn’t the first time I had encountered skepticism. Once, I was in the ER with my mother due to a gallbladder attack. The doctor, a towering man over six feet tall, focused more on questioning my medical history and inspecting my scar than treating me.

“You don’t know what a thymectomy is,” he scoffed.

Instead of arguing, my mother, all four-foot-eleven of her, took his massive hand in hers. “Sonny, you come with me,” she said firmly in a tone that only a seasoned nurse and psychologist could master, and she led him out into the hallway.

I don’t know what she said to him, but when he came back, he had a completely different attitude. She had put him in his place, and I was grateful for that.

Even after all these years, I continue to face the lingering effects of those early treatments. My most recent surgery left me with another long incision—a foot in length, stretching from the front of my body to my back. This is another permanent mark of a battle I’ve been fighting since infancy.

The strange thing is, when I have surgeries now, like the most recent one, it never really hurts. Even with the big abdominal surgeries, those deep, invasive procedures that left me with 15-inch incisions running down the center of my abdomen, I never felt pain the way others described it. It’s not that I don’t feel anything—I do—but it’s muted, distant, and nothing worth taking a Tylenol for. It was as if my body had long since adapted to enduring what should have been unbearable. I could not even take any painkillers or over-the-counter pain relief medications. They made me throw up. At the hospital, they placed me on a mandatory morphine drip. I would have preferred to forgo it entirely, as vomiting with large incisions was excruciating. Even the anti-nausea medication combined with the drip didn’t always help, so I opted to have it discontinued as soon as I was allowed.

I don’t know if it’s because I’ve been through so much that my pain tolerance has reached an extreme high or if my nervous system just processes pain differently after years of trauma. Would other people experience agony if they had gone through what I had? I suppose so. I just don’t know what “normal” pain is supposed to feel like anymore.

The only thing I’ve ever had that gave me a true point of comparison was childbirth.

When I was in labor with my son, I remember doing the breathing techniques from the Lamaze classes. I followed everything exactly as I was taught, focusing on steady breaths and trying to work with my body rather than against it. And then the nurse got irritated with me.

“You need to start breathing as soon as you feel the pain coming,” she snapped.

“I am,” I told her.

“No, you’re not,” she said, folding her arms. “You need to start as soon as you feel it.”

I frowned, confused. “I am,” I repeated.

Clearly frustrated, she adjusted the fetal monitor and pointed at the screen where my contractions were being tracked in sharp, rising peaks.

“Okay,” she said, her voice clipped with authority and frustration. “Now, watch this. When the contraction starts climbing, that’s when you ‘should’ start feeling the pain. That’s when you need to start breathing. Understand?”

“Got it.”

I focused on the screen, waiting for the next contraction to register. As soon as I felt the pain begin, I started breathing again, just as instructed.

But the nurse huffed, exasperated. “You’re still not doing it!”

I turned my head to look at her, utterly baffled. “What do you mean? I started when I felt it.”

“That’s impossible,” she said flatly. “Your contraction is already at a ten. You’re at the peak of the pain. There’s no way you just started feeling it now.”

But I had. The pain hadn’t registered until it was already at its highest point. It was as if my body had bypassed the slow build-up entirely and skipped straight to the climax of the contraction. I had no words for that experience at the time, but it was my first real clue that my relationship with pain was different.

I suppose I should have been grateful for that. But then again, there were exceptions. Dislocated bones? Now, that was pain. That was sharp and relentless, a reminder that no matter how conditioned my body was to suffer, some things still had the power to break through. But surgical incisions? They were nothing more than lines on my skin, evidence of past battles, but no longer a source of suffering, even before leaving the hospital.

When I think back to being an infant, lying in a hospital crib for two years, enduring endless radiation treatments and major surgeries, I wonder—did I feel the pain then? I have to believe I did. How could a baby not? I was so small my body barely had the strength to fight off infection, let alone heal from the damage being done to it. And yet, somehow, I survived. My mom would say it was due to having the sheer will to keep living.

It’s almost impossible to comprehend. After all, the thymus isn’t something you’re supposed to live without. It plays a critical role in developing the immune system and allowing the body to grow and fight off disease. Without it, a child isn’t supposed to thrive. They’re supposed to wither away.

But somehow, I didn’t.

The diagnosis of epilepsy and its impact on my early childhood is something I cannot personally recall. The seizures, the medications, the fear—those were all experienced in words I heard from my mother. It must have been an unimaginable burden. She was not only a nurse but a woman battling her own life-threatening health issues, all while raising two children practically on her own.

I can only imagine what it must have been like for her watching a tiny, fragile infant suffer from grand mal seizures, turning purple from the lack of oxygen, and enduring the complications of major surgery. The helplessness must have been suffocating. My mother was a trained medical professional, yet even her expertise couldn't ease the reality of the situation – if anything, what made it worse for her was more comprehension of the implications.

“I don't know how she did it,” I've said more times than I can count. And the truth is, I really don't. The stress, the worry, the constant vigilance—how did she manage? Did she ever sleep? Did she ever break down when no one was watching? It's a story I was too young to comprehend, but one I wish I had the opportunity to hear from her in full detail. I asked her about it, saying that I didn't remember those first years, and she said, “It's probably better that way.”

Growing up, our family unit was small: just my mother, my sister, and me. As for my 'father,' well, he was never really a presence in my life. Technically, he was around in the sense that he existed, but that was about it. I can count on one hand how many times I saw him - maybe six? Maybe less.

He had a reputation, though. Married multiple times, five at least. Children scattered here and there. He was a brilliant man, that much I was told, but intelligence without integrity is a dangerous thing. He was reportedly an alcoholic, a swindler, and a man who knew how to manipulate numbers. My mother once told me he worked for an insurance company and embezzled a substantial amount of money - a quarter of a million dollars back then, which would be worth millions today. But somehow, he never got caught, never served time, never faced the consequences of his actions, never helped my mom financially. She said he had a double set of books.

The last time I saw him was in high school. It was brief, uncomfortable, and left an impression I'll never forget. The television was on, broadcasting coverage of the Kent State shootings, a pivotal moment in history when students were shot during an anti-war protest. I remember the chilling moment when he turned toward us, his daughters, and said with absolute seriousness:

“If I ever see you girls on TV for something like that, I will fly right down and blow your brains out.”

That was it. That was my father.

That moment solidified my lack of attachment to him. How could anyone feel warmth or connection to a person who could utter such a thing to his own children? He was a stranger, a passing shadow in my life, and I never had any desire to change that.

Years later, when I was in my twenties, I was at work when my mother called. I stepped into the back of the feed store, sat down on some wooden steps, and answered. Her voice was calm but firm.

“I just wanted to let you know,” she said, “your father passed away.”

She never referred to him as ‘Dad’ when she spoke to me. Neither did I. The word didn’t suit him, nor did ‘father.’

“Oh,” I said simply. I waited for some kind of feeling to wash over me - grief, sadness, regret, but there was nothing. Just an empty space. He had gangrene in his legs. They had to amputate. Alcoholism, diabetes, whatever else was wrong with him, it finally caught up.

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. “Okay.”

That was it. There was nothing to mourn. No relationship to grieve. No connection was lost. He had been a ghost long before his actual death.

The support my mother needed was nowhere to be found, not even from her own family, and it was all because of a misunderstanding. A fleeting moment, a glance across a hotel lobby, and suddenly, my mother’s entire family turned against her.

She had attended a medical conference, standing at the registration desk when a doctor, a speaker at the event, stood beside her. That was all. Just a moment of proximity. But when her sister walked into the lobby of the hotel with her husband to have lunch in their restaurant at the same time, they didn’t see a conference. They didn’t see a professional engagement. They saw a woman standing next to a man. And from that moment, the whispers began.

“She’s a prostitute.”

The judgment fell like a gavel, swift and irrevocable. There were no questions, no clarifications. No one approached her. No one asked what she was doing there. Just assumptions, and then exile.

The wounds went deeper than just that one incident. My mother had always been the unwanted one, the late child her mother hadn’t planned for. When she was just four years old, she would cry to her mother about her stomach pains.

“It hurts,” she would say over and over again.

But no one listened.

By the time she was 21, in nursing school, she had recognized her own symptoms - septicemia, the result of a lifetime of ignored pain. The stress of her childhood had eaten away at her, quite literally.

When doctors finally diagnosed her, they told her there was no anesthesia available for her surgery. She had to wait.

Despite everything, she survived. She had my sister, then me, a little over a year later. And somehow, despite her own fragile health, she raised us alone after separating from her husband.

There was no family support. The whispers had turned into silence. The sisters, the cousins - we weren't part of their world anymore. It took years before we were even allowed to visit them again.

And when we finally did, betrayal found its way back into our lives. My mother, struggling financially, had finally managed to buy a car, a tiny Simca. Then, in an act of trust, she let her sister's son borrow it.

Days later, it was returned, ruined.

The mechanic didn't even have to look twice.

"The motor's full of mud," he said, shaking his head. "Someone drove it straight through a creek."

But the cousin denied it. His parents denied it. And just like that, my mother was back to walking miles to and from work, even in the dead of winter. She walked those miles and even more during her time as an RN on duty in the hospital. Sometimes we also walked with her to get to school, but she walked so fast that we could hardly keep up.

One winter, she walked for miles on a broken foot for about six weeks. I don't even know how she did it. But she did because she had no choice. She finally had it x-rayed, repaired and a cast put on, due to the fractured bones in her foot.

She lived with a condition that made life a constant challenge. She had patients who wanted to end their own lives because of their ostomies, and she would level with them, letting them know that she also had one, but it did not mean the end of life.

But I knew the struggle was real. The appliances she wore weren't like the ones today. They had heavy cotton belts and metal buckles. They failed sometimes. Once, while walking down the hospital hallway, hers gave way, spilling onto the floor. She was humiliated, but she cleaned it up, took care of herself, and kept working.

And that's how life went on. My mother, my sister, and I—we were the only real family I had, and my epilepsy, my struggles, and our combined health struggles were all just pieces of a larger puzzle that my mother had to navigate alone. And somehow, she did.

Still, there was one aunt. She wasn't exactly a close relative; she was more of a distant connection. Maybe a great aunt? Or distant cousin, but she wasn't one of my mother's sisters, that much I knew. Her name was Aunt Francie, and her husband was Uncle Lee. In a sea of cold shoulders and silent betrayals, they were the only ones who stepped forward to help. And so, they helped me and my sister enroll at St. John's Catholic School. Mom rented an apartment next to the schoolyard on the same alley they lived in, and we could go to their house after school.

Even with that bit of stability, though, the questions and pain inside me didn't go away.

When I was just a little child, my mind could only come to one conclusion: I must have been the stupidest, ugliest, most unworthy child ever born for my own mother not to want me when she put me in the orphanage. There was no other explanation I could fathom. But I didn't know. I only thought I did.

I know it doesn't sound rational. Even now, as I try to put it into words, I can hear how incomprehensible it must seem. But it wasn't until I reached seventy years old that I truly began to understand the weight of it all. To unravel the tangled mess of thoughts and feelings that had shaped my entire life. I really thought the way I grew up never really bothered me. I remember a reporter once pestering me about my past, about my childhood. For the longest time, I said nothing. I brushed him off and avoided his questions. But eventually, I caved. I told him fragments of my story—never the whole truth, never the parts that cut too deep.

And then, there was the doctor, my dearest Dr. Lion. He was relentless in his gentle persistence, asking me about it every few months. He never pushed, never demanded, just reminded me with quiet certainty, "You have an awful lot in there."

I would meet his gaze, but I never answered him, never spoke about it. I couldn't. After about a year and a half, I shared a very tiny bit, but that was all. It was buried too deep, locked away in the corners of my mind, where even I was afraid to look. But it took my entire life to understand why I hated myself so much. Why did any flaw, any mistake, or any imperfection send me into a spiral of self-loathing?

I now recognize why I felt an internal compulsion to excel in everything perfectly, and at the same time, I didn't even realize that's what was pushing me all along. If I could just do everything perfectly—if I could be flawless in every action and every decision—maybe then I would finally be good enough. Acceptable. Maybe then, people wouldn't look at me and think, 'Of course this happened to her. She must have been born a bad person. She must have been ugly, stupid, worthless.'

Somewhere deep inside, in the darkest recesses of my mind and heart, I convinced myself that this was the truth. Not consciously. No, it was far more insidious than that. I didn't even realize I had decided it until I was seventy years old.

Once, I was sitting next to my mother, working on my insurance reports. The television was on in the background, and a movie was playing. I wasn't paying attention at first. But then I looked up, and there it was—the Turpin family story.

And I froze.

The screen showed the metal bed frames with their curved arches at the head and foot of the bed, the vertical posts running down, just as I remembered from the orphanage. In the documentary *The Turpin 13*, they had chains. Or maybe ties. But I stared at those beds, and something inside me shifted.

'Well,' I thought, at least that's one thing you've never had to experience.'

It was almost comforting, in a twisted way. At least there was one horrific thing I had been spared from.

And then—

Then, it all came back, like a dam breaking, memories crashing over me: the bed frame, the ties, the orphanage.

It was as if my mind had been waiting for that moment to remind me.

'Oh, really?' it seemed to say. 'You think you've never been through that? Well, excuse me, girlfriend, but let me tell you something.'

That's when I developed that voice. That sarcastic, tough-love, self-talking voice that would get me through so much.

'Okay, girlfriend. You just have to get through this.'

Or worse—

'Okay, girlfriend. I'm sorry to tell you, but yes, you did go through that.'

I sat there in silence, my heart pounding and my mind spinning. My mother was right next to me. I couldn't react. I couldn't say a word. After all my poor mom went through in life, I was never, ever going to tell her what I endured at the orphanage. She had already suffered so much. Why would I add to that burden.

