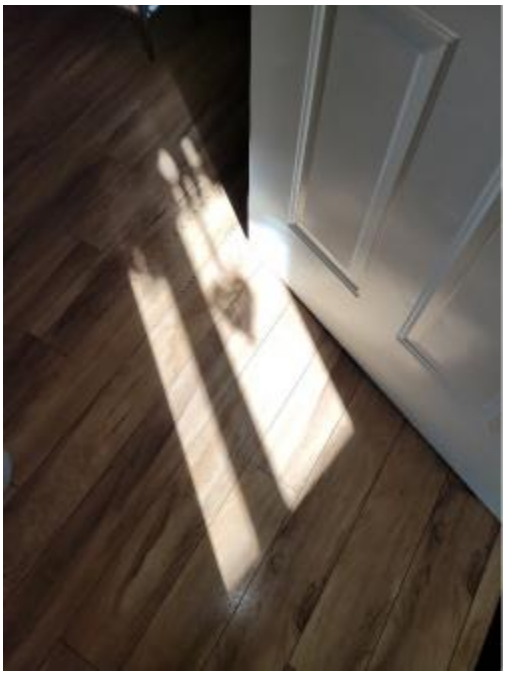
Chapter 2



Parmadale Children's Village of St. Vincent de Paul was established in 1925 in Parma, Ohio, as a pioneering institution that moved away from traditional orphanage models by implementing a cottage residential plan. Initially covering 180 acres at 6753 State Road, it was established with funding from the Catholic Charities Corporation of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

The construction was handled by John Gill & Sons Co., a prominent Cleveland firm known for building the Terminal Tower and Federal Reserve Bank. The original campus included 12 cottages, a school, a dining hall, a kitchen, a powerhouse, and a laundry room, with later additions including athletic facilities and an administrative building.

At its opening, Parmadale housed 450 boys aged 6-16, primarily from the closing of St. Vincent's de Paul Orphanage and St. Louisville Orphanage. It was run by 35 Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, along with a chaplain and medical staff. The institution became co-educational in 1947 when it took in girls from St. Joseph's Orphanage and further expanded when it absorbed children from the Home of the Holy Family in 1952.

By the 1960s, Parmadale began transitioning from housing dependent children to caring for those with emotional or behavioral problems, a change that required professional staff rather than the nuns who had traditionally run the facility. In 1975, Parmadale merged with St. Anthony's Home for Boys and Young Men and was renamed Parmadale Family Services.

As institutionalized orphan populations decreased in the 1980s, Parmadale expanded its mission to serve children with special needs, including those with emotional or behavioral problems and addictions. This led to the construction of treatment facilities, including the first Intensive Treatment Facility in 1989.

In recent years, Parmadale has become the center of serious abuse allegations. News 5 investigations uncovered claims of physical, mental, and sexual abuse by some nuns who worked at the facility, particularly during the 1950s-1970s. Multiple victims have come forward describing severe physical beatings, emotional abuse, and other mistreatment, with Sister Myra Wasikowski frequently mentioned as a particularly abusive nun.

Following media coverage, the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine acknowledged the abuse, apologized, and established a victims' assistance fund to provide restitution. However, many victims have expressed dissatisfaction with the compensation amounts and the handling of their claims.

More recent allegations have emerged from women who lived at Parmadale in the late 1990s and early 2000s, resulting in lawsuits filed against the Catholic Church, the Cleveland Catholic Diocese, Cuyahoga County, and Children and Family Services.

In 2014, amid sexual misconduct allegations by staff and declining placements by the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court, Catholic Charities closed Parmadale's residential treatment program. The buildings were demolished in 2018, with the grounds slated to become part of the West Creek Reservation of the Cleveland Metroparks.

Ariel Overview of Parmadale Orphanage

The orphanage was still there when I returned to see it through my adult eyes, a relic of a past that many would rather forget. As I recall, it housed around 500 girls on one side and an equal number of boys on the other. Between them lay a vast parking lot, a massive kitchen and cafeteria, a church, and a school. According to one newspaper article, the place was originally designed so that children would never need to leave, not even for basic needs.

Everything was self-contained, like a little city behind fences. Field trips were supposed to be part of the experience, but in all the years I was there, they never happened. The closest we ever came was one day when we were herded into the large parking lot that separated the girls' and boys' sides. Roy Rogers and Annie Oakley—the actual TV stars—came with their horses, Trigger and Target. We each got to sit on one of the horses for a brief moment.

That one event, simple as it was, stood out as the biggest and most thrilling thing to happen during my entire time there.

The girls' side consisted of approximately ten houses, each sheltering fifty girls. Each house had two enormous bedrooms on the upper floor, each containing twenty-five identical metal beds arranged in a U-shape. The beds had rounded tops with vertical bars connecting the top and bottom, forming a foot end and a headboard. At one end of the room, a door led to a nun's bedroom, equipped with a large window overlooking our beds, allowing her to watch over us.

The memory of that room came rushing back unexpectedly one evening. I was watching a movie with my son when an eerily similar bedroom appeared on the screen. The sight of those identical beds all lined up in the exact same way struck me like a blow to the chest. It must have been at an orphanage in the movie. I burst into tears, overwhelmed by the sudden flood of memories.

My son, unaccustomed to seeing me cry, was taken aback. At first, he could not discern whether I was laughing uncontrollably or in distress. Concerned, he asked what was wrong.

I had never told him anything about my early years—never shared what really happened. So, when he asked, I didn't know how to respond. It felt like opening a can of worms too big to close again. At that moment, I had to confront the truth—I had lived through that, endured that, and more. The realization was only compounded when I learned about the Turpin kids and their horrific experiences, which bore an unsettling resemblance to my own past.

Before the orphanage, I had spent two years in the hospital. When I was finally released, I went to live with my mother, at least for a while. My first real memory of what felt like the beginning of my life was being pulled out of Catholic school and placed into a car. My sister, my mother, and a social worker, whose identity was then unknown to me, were also in the vehicle. I did not know where we were going or why. The social worker had decided we shouldn't be told.

My mother was gravely ill, so ill, in fact, that she had received the last rites not once but at least five times. Each time, she somehow, miraculously, pulled through. No one wanted to tell us she might not survive.

Our extended family existed, but relations were strained. My mother, despite her illness, had persevered through nursing school, earning her 4-year RN degree. At a medical conference, my mother stood beside a doctor while registering at the hotel. Some relatives saw them together, jumped to a false conclusion, and maliciously spread gossip, falsely accusing her of being a prostitute. Without evidence, the family believed it, and my mother was ostracized. Therefore, the idea of us going to live with any family member was out of the question. Many years would pass before we even spoke to a fraction of them again.

And so, the orphanage became our new home. I knew my sister was there too, but I barely saw her. The day we arrived, I was led to a bathroom where a nun drew a hot bath for me. The first nun I met was Sister Grace, a kind woman who owned an enormous 37-pound cat. She was gentle and warm, but she did not stay. She moved away. What remained were nuns straight out of nightmares.

I know there must have been good moments in my life; there had to be, but I do not recall any of them happening there. The memories that remain are fragments of pain, discipline, and loneliness. Here are just a few of them, etched into my mind with no warmth to soften their edges…

The church interior where I broke my arm.

One day in the church, I tripped on the steps. Pain shot through my arm instantly, sharp and relentless. But I didn't make a sound. I didn't cry out or gasp. I knew better. There was no way I dared make a sound or interrupt the Mass. This happened right in the middle of the service, and I just sat there, clutching my arm, trying to stay still through the pain. I had to wait quietly until Mass was over, and we returned to the house. Only then did I tell the nun what had happened.

"Go soak it!" she snapped, as if submerging a broken limb in water could undo the damage.

I tried to obey. For weeks, I followed their instructions, soaking my arm in hot water and gritting my teeth as the pain refused to subside. No one listened to my protests. The injury worsened, throbbing, stiffening, and refusing to heal. Finally, someone took notice, and I was sent to the hospital.

That's when a different kind of pain began - one not just in my body but in the uncanny quiet and uncertainty that surrounded me.

The memory of that basement room is as vivid as the agony I endured there. I remember thinking how strange it was that they brought me down to the basement of the hospital - its gray cement walls similar to the orphanage basement, cold and unwelcoming. It struck me then, even as a child, that they hadn't taken me there for privacy or care but because no one would hear me scream. It wasn't like a normal exam room or hospital room. There was only a brown vinyl-covered gurney and a small stainless-steel table on wheels with a few tools, nothing else. Even at seven years old, I knew this wasn't typical. After all, this was the same hospital I grew up in. I realized they

had to hide me where no one would see or hear what was about to happen. They had to protect the reputation of the nuns, the orphanage.

The air was thick, stale, filled with a foreboding silence. I was left alone, but I could hear voices through the door - two men arguing just beyond my sight.

“No, I’m not going to do it. You do it.”

“No way. I’m not doing it—you do it.”

Back and forth they went, their hesitation palpable. My stomach twisted into knots. Finally, the door creaked open, revealing two doctors, their faces grim.

“Your arm was broken,” one of them finally said. “It healed badly. We have to break it again.”

My heart pounded. I could barely register the words before they acted. There was no anesthesia, no numbing agent, nothing to dull the inevitable agony. I don’t remember how they did it, but I remember the pain, white-hot and excruciating, and the sickening sound of bone snapping. I was awake the whole time, fully conscious as it happened.

When it was over, my arm was encased in a cast that was well above my elbow. There were no apologies. No explanations. Just an unspoken understanding that I was to return to the orphanage as if nothing had happened.

I had to return to the hospital a while later to have the cast removed. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I certainly wasn’t prepared for what awaited me.

I don’t think they checked me in, just took me directly to a nurse that led me back down into the same basement-level room where they’d originally set my arm. There was something unsettling about that room: dim fluorescent lights flickering overhead, cold cement floors that echoed every footstep, the grey cement walls. But the most terrifying part is not the room itself. It was what stood inside it.

In the corner, looming ominously like some mechanical monster from a science fiction film, was a tall machine, nearly as tall as the doctors themselves. At first glance, it looked like an industrial fan, but instead of blades for cooling, it had a single, massive, circular blade at the top, at least a foot and a half, maybe two feet in diameter.

It gleamed under the light, and at that moment, I froze. My stomach dropped. My eyes locked on the enormous blade, and a single thought thundered through my head:

They’re going to cut my arm off.

I sat motionless on the hospital bed, staring wide-eyed at the contraption as they wheeled it toward me. The doctors must have noticed the absolute horror written across

my face because one of them quickly offered a smirk and said, “No, we’re not going to cut your arm off with this.”

Easy for them to say.

They explained, quite matter-of-factly, that this was the tool they used to remove the cast carefully.

Carefully?

I didn’t see how anything involving a blade that size could be considered careful. I was expected just to sit there, hold still, and trust that they weren’t about to slice straight through my arm.

Then came the moment they turned it on.

The motor roared to life with a high-pitched whine, and the huge blade began to spin. Faster and faster, until it became a blur of silver teeth. The sound alone was enough to make my pulse race. And as the blade inched closer to my arm, my entire body tensed. I gripped the side of the bed with my good hand, heart pounding in my chest. It was sheer terror.

Every instinct screamed for me to pull away, to run, to get as far from that machine as possible. But I stayed still. Somehow.

And then, miraculously, they began to slice into the cast. Not my skin, not my bones. Just the hardened shell wrapped around my arm. I watched in disbelief as the spinning blade carved through the plaster-like butter without ever touching me.

It felt like a magician’s trick. Even after they were done and I was fitted with a new, shorter cast that stopped a few inches below my elbow, I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

How did it not cut me? To this day, it still baffles me.

Of course, I had to return again, 6-8 weeks later, to have that second cast removed. Same basement room. Same enormous saw. But at least at that time, I knew I was probably going to leave with both arms still attached. Still, it took a very long time for my arm to fully heal.

Looking back now, it amazes me how far medical tools have come. The saws they use today are much smaller and almost delicate in comparison. But back then, when you’re a kid staring down what looks like a piece of construction equipment designed for cutting steel beams, it’s hard not to imagine the worst.

That moment taught me more about fear and trust than I ever expected from a routine hospital visit.

Fear governed our lives at the orphanage. The nuns made sure of it. Sometimes, they would gather all the girls in the basement and stand on the steps so they loomed over us like specters of damnation. Their voices rang with fire and brimstone. Their warnings were seared into our minds.

“If you sin, if you do anything wrong, you will burn in hell! Snakes will crawl in and out of your eyeballs!”

We shuddered, our young minds unable to separate metaphors from reality. Fear kept us in line. Fear kept us quiet. And even though I spoke up, that same fear eventually silenced me. It stopped me from insisting, from demanding to be heard. It kept me from telling anyone just how badly my arm hurt after the fall. I did tell them initially, again and again over the course of several weeks, but no one really took it seriously.

They brushed it off and dismissed my pain like it was nothing. Only one of the older girls listened. She was the one who finally led me to the infirmary, the one who unknowingly set in motion the events that led to the hospital visit.

One day, they decided we all needed permanents for picture day. Fifty girls, all subjected to the foul stench of ammonia, our hair twisted and burned into forced curls. My hair was already curly, but that didn’t matter. I was made to endure it anyway. The result was a tangled mess that the nuns seemed to resent as if my natural hair had disobeyed them. They yanked, pinned, and barreled it into submission, frustration evident in their every movement.

That was the day I was allowed to wear my favorite dress - the one I only got to wear once. The garments for all 50 girls were kept in a special room downstairs, walls lined with beautiful wooden, floor-to-ceiling double-layered cabinets filled with clothes that were never ours to choose. Each morning, we stood in line, hoping and praying that luck would grant us our preferred dress. For me, it was always the same wish: the mint green dress with delicate Swiss dots and a black velvet bow.

It wasn’t just a dress. It was a symbol of something greater. My mother had given me a quarter every time she visited, and somehow, I had managed to save them. When I had enough, I was allowed to buy one thing of my own. That dress. And yet, despite it being mine, it was taken from me, locked away, reserved for one day only: picture day, when I was allowed to wear it.

After picture day, I watched as the dress was always given to other girls. I couldn’t understand - why wasn’t I ever allowed to wear the dress I had bought with my own money?

Miraculously, I still have that photo. Though it is black and white, I can see the colors in my mind—the mint green fabric, the soft dots, the crisp black bow. My hair, though

pinned into submission, could not hide the defiance that still flickered within me. What stands out to me is that I'm smiling in that picture. If I remember correctly, it was one of those "you better smile or else" situations, and I knew all too well what that meant.

In the little dress that I bought and only ever wore that day.

At the orphanage, emotions were a liability. If I got upset, if I showed any resistance, they had a solution: epilepsy medication. My seizures, the grand mal episodes, made an easy excuse to force pills upon me. And so, any sign of distress, any reaction to the punishments doled out, was met with medication as if my feelings were a disease. As if my pain was something to be subdued, not understood.

Punishments were swift and merciless. The old wooden rod was a favorite. The nuns would demand that we hold out our arms with hands and fingers straight and unwavering. It felt impossible to keep holding my arms up, hands and fingers still and straight, waiting for the next strike. Then, with precision, they would slam the rod against our knuckles again and again until the sting burned deep into our bones.

I do remember—they felt very broken. Then, it would hurt so bad that it made it unthinkable to be able to make my bed, which would result in another punishment for them to dream up. I recall a hall with hooks running down the length of the wall, and there were cards hanging on the hooks. Each card had a punishment written on it.

If you did not like the punishment you were getting, you could go pick out two other cards from the "hall of torture." I often wondered if my fingers had been broken from the beatings.

But who would I tell? Who would care?

There was one moment, one bright, shining moment, that stood apart from the rest. All the girls crowded into a single classroom, some sitting, others forced to lean against the wall. At the front, pinned to a massive corkboard, were our assignments for the semester. Each student had a stack, most thin, with one or two gold stars adorning the top page.

Only one stack was thick, brimming with papers, glistening with gold stars. I stood there, staring at it, wishing it were mine. Wishing I could be that smart.

One by one, the stacks were handed out, from smallest to largest. I waited, my heart sinking as my name remained uncalled. And then, finally, the last, the thickest, the most decorated stack - it was mine.

The shock froze me in place. It should have been a moment of triumph. But somehow, it didn't feel real. The belief had been too deeply ingrained: I was stupid. Ugly. Unworthy. No number of gold stars could erase that.

And so, I carried that belief with me, a silent burden that followed me through the years. All because no one had told me the truth. No one had explained why I had been sent to the orphanage. That single omission shaped my entire existence.

Perhaps the greatest cruelty was not the broken bones, fear, or punishments. It was the lie I had been led to believe—that I was nothing.

When I was preparing to go to college, I was filled with self-doubt. It was Heald College—unfortunately, a school that would later prove to be worthless, but at the time, it felt like a significant step. I remember sitting with my mother, hesitating, and confessing that I probably wouldn't do very well prior to taking the entrance exam.

The next day, I took the entrance exam on a computer—my first time ever using one—and somehow, I ended up scoring higher than anyone the admissions officer had tested in the past sixteen years at two branches of this school. She even told me the system ran out of questions because I had answered everything it could throw at me. At first, as I stepped into her office, the stern look she gave me made me certain I was in serious trouble.

But then came the shock; she revealed the exam results, and they were nothing like I expected. I was fifty-seven, far removed from any kind of formal education, and still, I aced it. That should've been a moment of pride, but it didn't sink in. Not really. My mom was puzzled by my lack of confidence and asked me why I felt that way. I never really told her the full truth, the deep-seated belief that had plagued me my whole life, the one created by the decision not to tell us why we were dropped off at the orphanage.

It had shaped me, whispering in my ear that I was worthless and unwanted. I had been convinced for years that I had even been suspended from high school for poor performance.

What I didn't know—what she never told me until that moment—was that the principal had been certain I had cheated on the SAT to get a perfect score. They simply couldn't believe that someone like me, a quiet, unsure girl, could have achieved such a thing on her own. She finally explained it to me when I was about 57 years old. Fifty-seven.

By then, my mom was a psychologist, and part of her work involved administering IQ tests. She looked at me and said, "I could get all my equipment out and prove it to you, but I don't need any of it. I can tell you right now." She explained that Einstein's IQ was estimated at around 160 and said without hesitation, "Yours is between 190 and 210. I can say that with 100% certainty."

Then she asked, "How do you think it's even possible to study physics for thirty years just for fun, for a hobby? Or figure out how to take apart and reupholster car interiors in leather with zero mistakes without ever being taught?" If I had known earlier in life, things would have been different. Maybe I would have had more confidence in myself and more faith in my intelligence.

Even when I had earned the most gold stars in the classroom, it hadn't sunk in. I believed my mom. I truly did. But her words didn't magically erase the weight of all those years spent believing I wasn't enough. She reminded me that even now, perfect SAT scores are rare, and kids today have access to study guides and prep books.

"You didn't," she said. "They didn't even have those then." The weight of my childhood beliefs had been too great.

Then, as if that revelation weren't enough, she asked, "Do you want to know your real name?"

A chill ran down my spine. The words made my stomach drop. In an instant, my mind flashed back to the orphanage, to all the unanswered questions, to the fear I had carried for so long.

"Oh no," I thought. "Then this is NOT my real mom?"

For a moment, I felt as though the floor had disappeared beneath me. It was like falling through the night sky with no ground below to catch me.

But my mother—no, she *was* my mother—continued. She explained that she had named me to honor my great-great-great-grandmother, a Native American woman living on a Missouri reservation. My great-great-great-grandfather had been a doctor and a

professor, teaching medicine at a university. He had also served as the doctor for the reservation.

That was where he met and fell in love with my ancestor. Their love was forbidden, so they eloped, defying the expectations of their time.

She then told me about Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American to be declared a saint. She had named me to honor her, to honor our heritage. But our family had been ashamed. Embarrassed to be part Native American, they had harassed her until she changed my name. She had given in to their pressure, erasing that part of me before I ever had the chance to know it.

Kateri's name translates to "She who puts all things in order." It was a poetic irony, considering that anyone who knew me knew that was exactly what I did. She was also known as the "Lily of the Mohawks." And here I was, a flower farmer, tied to my namesake in ways I had never realized.

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At the orphanage, we were required to eat everything put in front of us, whether we liked it or not. It didn't matter if the taste made us gag; we had to clean our plates. I hated pork chops. The texture, the taste—it made my stomach turn.

One particular day, I was still recovering from my broken arm, so a nun was assigned to feed me. I already knew it would be a nightmare.

She had a little song she sang for every bite:

"All around the mulberry bush,

The monkey chased the weasel,

The monkey thought 'twas all in fun—

POP! Goes the weasel!"

On the word "POP," she would shove another bite into my mouth.

I couldn't chew. My mouth was already stuffed so full that my cheeks stretched out like a chipmunk's. My jaw ached, and my cheeks cramped from the strain. Tears burned at the corners of my eyes, but I knew better than to let them fall.

I had to get rid of the food.

I came up with a plan: I would excuse myself to the bathroom and throw up. I imagined stepping into one of the stalls, shutting the door, and spitting the pork chops into the toilet. Freedom. Relief.

But the nun was watching me.

As I rose from the table and made my way toward the bathroom, she followed.

I stepped inside, my heart pounding. The bathroom was lined with stalls, just like a public restroom. I reached for the handle, but she blocked my way before I could go in.

“You are not going in there,” she said sternly. “Not until you swallow every bite.”

I shook my head. That wasn’t going to happen.

I stood there for what felt like hours, cheeks full, stomach-churning, the nun never leaving my side. I don’t remember how it ended; I can still remember how severely my cheeks and jaw were cramping. I’m pretty sure I never ever swallowed the food. Some memories fade; some remain so sharp they cut. But I know this—no child should have to endure such cruelty.

Another day, I found myself in trouble again, though to this day, I do not know what I had done that was so wrong. The punishment? The “dungeon room” was located in the basement—a dark, isolated place that filled every child with dread. It stood across from a long, industrial-looking sink that stretched at least fifteen feet and was five feet wide, with a pipe running down the middle, faucets on both sides, a shelf spanning its length, and hooks for each child’s washcloth.

The dungeon room itself was made of thick, heavy cement. It had a door that felt as though it weighed a thousand pounds. I was sure that if someone screamed inside that dungeon room, no one would ever hear them. Inside was an alcove carved deep into the wall, about three feet deep and six or seven feet long. There was a single wooden bench, slatted with air gaps, six inches deep, more of a platform than a place to rest.

There was no padding, no mattress, or blankets. Just a wooden bench, cold and unyielding, no different from the cement walls enclosing me, was all I had to sit or lie on. I sat there alone in pitch-black darkness for what felt like endless hours, maybe the entire night; I couldn’t tell. I kept wondering what I had done wrong to end up in the dungeon.

Before I was taken there, I had managed to grab some red cherry Vicks cough drops and hid them in my hand. I am not even sure where they had come from; none of us was allowed to have anything of our own. But in my child’s mind, I thought, “What if I am in there all night? At least I will have something to eat.” After I was in the room, I heard footsteps. Fear gripped me—I knew I would be in even more trouble if I were caught with them. Panicked, I swallowed them all at once.

The menthol fumes were overpowering, burning my throat, and suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. My airway felt blocked, and the strong scent was overwhelming my senses.

My tiny hands clutched my neck as I gasped for air. I was alone, completely alone. No one was coming. I couldn't yell. I couldn't scream. I just had to hold on, stay still, and breathe as little as possible until they melted away. It felt like forever. The footsteps I heard never came–not when I desperately needed someone to open that door. At that moment, I truly believed I was going to die before they finally melted.

At some point, I don't know how many hours later, the door creaked open. I expected a nun, but instead, a man stepped in. I froze.

"Where did he come from?" There were no men at the orphanage. Could he have been an older boy from the boys' side? I still don't know how he knew I was there. Out of all the buildings, all the rooms in the entire complex—he somehow found me in that hidden room in that basement of that cottage. If you look back at the beginning of this chapter at the photo of the entire complex, how did he know I was there? How? Maybe I did nothing wrong. Maybe that was their plan all along.

His voice was calm and soothing.

"I'm here to make everything okay," he whispered.

Then, I felt his hand on my thigh.

Darkness – so black I could not even see my hand in front of my face, but I knew for sure that he was definitely not there to let me out of that room.

I remember nothing after that. Just blackness. Pure blackness.

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The long sink in the basement was a place of routine humiliation. We all had to line up along its sides to wash our faces and brush our teeth under the watchful eyes of the nuns. I hated washing my face with the soap they provided. It stung my skin and smelled awful, but more than anything, it was a small act of defiance I clung to, just using the wet washcloth with no soap.

I thought, "They will never notice."

But yes – they did notice.

So, I was singled out and assigned my own special punishment-to scrub all the skin off my face. A nun was tasked with bringing me to the basement sink alone, standing over me as I scrubbed my face raw.

"Again," she would say, peering at my skin. "You missed a spot."

Again, I scrubbed. Harder.

"Oh, there—there's still some left. Keep going."

The cloth burned against my tender skin. Layer after layer, I scrubbed until there was nothing left but raw flesh. I could feel my skin peeling, but I knew it would only be worse if I stopped. So, I kept going. Until finally, there was no more skin left to scrub away.

The next time my mother visited, she gasped. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of my face, covered in solid scabs.

“What happened to your face?” she asked, her voice full of shock and worry.

In my small seven-year-old voice, I simply replied, “Oh, that’s from washing my face.”

She frowned, confused. “From washing your face?”

I could see her struggling to comprehend it, to make sense of something so unfathomable. What a situation for her to be in—her heart must have shattered knowing she had left us there. I know, without a doubt, that she was my real mother. Despite her failing health, she had fought for us in every way she could.

Bedroom at Parmadale

She had an unbreakable strength, the kind only the strongest, most resilient souls possess. And even though I didn’t see it in myself then, I see now that she passed that strength on to me.

One day, a nun walked into a bedroom and found an older girl abusing me, using an array of objects she had somehow gathered. Where she got them, I have no idea. What happened to her remains a mystery—but I know what happened to me as if I were the one at fault.

Later, a nun took my hand and led me outside toward the vast field behind the houses. As we approached, I saw a massive circle of children—boys and girls—standing in silence. At first, I thought it was some kind of gathering, maybe even a celebration, a party of some kind. The presence of boys surprised me. I think it was one cottage of 50 boys and one cottage of 50 girls. The idea of the boys being on the girls’ side was unheard of, for any reason.

I had no idea what was coming.

In the center of the circle sat a nun in a chair. And I was led straight to her. She took my pants down, put me over her knees, and my head was toward the ground. She had

everyone come close and go by in a line as she spread my vagina and butt apart so everyone could see what it looked like before the *punishment.*

It took a very long time for that many kids to go by. She then had one of those wooden paddles that was about an inch thick with about a hundred little holes drilled through it. She beat my vagina and butt with the paddle until they looked and felt like raw hamburger while I was screaming and screaming. She then had them all come back by to see what it looked like afterward so that no one would think about misbehaving.

Is that what I did? My God, if your hands ever went beneath the blankets, you were in trouble. I was cold a lot. I just wanted to warm up, to have my hands and arms tucked under the blanket, with it pulled up to my neck. But you'd pay the price if the nun saw you through the window like that.

The penalty was being tied to the bedframe for the entire night, sometimes longer. I'm not even sure how many nights. After she beat me so badly, I was bloody, I'd be tied, hands and feet, to the frame, lying on my back. My body was raw, especially my rear, which was in so much pain. I couldn't even lie on my side for relief.

I guess, in some ways, I tried my best to forget, or at least to push it all down, to lock it away in a deep corner of my mind. But it was never truly possible. Memories, sharp and unforgiving, would resurface at the most unexpected times. It was as if those images and feelings were always just beneath the surface, waiting for the right trigger to pull them back into the light.

I'll never forget the moment it all came flooding back. I was sitting there, next to my mother doing insurance reports, when I caught sight of the bed frames on TV - the ones with chains and ties attached, on the news when the Turpin family's story broke. Seeing them again, just for that split second, felt like my heart had stopped. All of a sudden, I was no longer sitting in that room but back in that dark place, that hell I had tried so hard to forget.

Those bedframes… weren't just objects to me; they were symbols of everything that happened there. I was flooded with memories that came crashing down on me like a tidal wave. The cold steel of the chains. The helplessness. The pain. I could almost feel it again, that unbearable, gut-wrenching despair. And as quickly as it came, I realized I was no longer the child I once was—I was just a woman who had lived through it, carrying the weight of it all, still silent, still alone in so many ways.

Sitting next to my mother all those years ago, I never once told her what happened. I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to shatter her already broken heart with the truth of what I had endured. It would have destroyed her just as much as it had already destroyed me. It was enough for her to have to leave us there and walk away, trusting that we'd be safe when she had no way of knowing what would happen.

It was enough for her to look at me with that sorrowful expression, her eyes full of love and regret, as she saw me covered in scabs, battered and bruised.

But telling her? I couldn't bear it. I couldn't make her carry that burden either. She had suffered so much already, just to survive, just to keep going. She didn't need to know that the scars on my body were only a reflection of what I carried deep within. I didn't want her to know how deeply that place marked me. The scars that didn't fade even when the wounds healed, the ones I couldn't hide from her, no matter how hard I tried.

It was enough that she had to let us go. It was enough that she had to leave us there.

Years passed before I even thought of returning, and I could not bear to come back to that place—the orphanage. I had moved on, or so I thought. Life went on, and I tried to create a new life, a new self, even if some parts of me were always hidden away, locked in that nightmare.

Then, years later, I found myself standing on unfamiliar ground at a cut flower growers' conference. As soon as I arrived at the hotel, something felt wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I thought I was imagining it, but the unease grew. And then it hit me: this was where it all began. This place—this very spot—was where my childhood nightmare had taken shape.

I didn't realize until I was there, standing in the same city, that the memory of that orphanage still haunted me. It was as though I had never left.

I had to go. I had to see it again, even if it meant facing everything I had buried for so long. So, I took a taxi to the orphanage. It was still operating and standing like a grim reminder of everything I had survived.

A corner in one of many dining rooms.

I remember walking through the grounds—seeing the kitchen, the cafeteria, and the houses that seemed so familiar, yet they felt so foreign now.

The taxi driver waited patiently in the parking lot while I stood there, trying to collect my thoughts and understand why this place still had such a hold on me. Why did I feel so sick, so unsteady? I didn't know. All I knew was that being there, standing in the shadow of those buildings, brought everything rushing back in a way I wasn't prepared for.

I had never told my husband about any of this, nor my son or any of my friends. I didn't lie; I just left most of it out. Quietly erased it from conversations.

The other day, I was chatting with a friend I've known for nearly 50 years. We've shared so much over the decades, but when she asked what I'd been up to lately, I mentioned the book I'm working on.

"Oh! Is it about the flower farm?" she asked. "I still remember those days. I was your bookkeeper for what, 15 years?"

I shook my head. "No, it's about my whole life. Everything. Starting from the beginning."

She looked confused. "The beginning?"

"Yes," I said. "Growing up. Two years in the hospital, then the orphanage."

Her eyes widened. "What?? You've never ever mentioned that to me in fifty years!"

No. I hadn't. Not to anyone. Not for most of my life.

Not about the beatings, not about the cold nights tied to the bedframe, not about how I had learned to guard my food, to keep it close, to shovel it into my mouth with my arm shielding it from anyone who might take it from me.

It did not register that there was anything wrong with the way I ate, until my husband mentioned it.

Why did I keep my arm protectively over my plate, even in the safety of my own home? It was just how I had learned to eat. It was how I had survived.

My husband pointed it out to me when he noticed my peculiar way of eating and asked me, "Why do you always eat like that, guarding your food? No one is going to take it from you."

I was stunned. It hit me like a punch to the gut.

It was at that moment I finally understood why he said he didn't like to take me out to a restaurant because of "the way you eat." I had no idea what he meant.

I thought I ate like everyone else. I hadn't even realized I was doing it. I was so used to it, so conditioned to protect myself, to keep my food, my safety, in my control. It had been my defense, my survival mechanism.

But now, I was in a different world. A world where I no longer had to fight for my food and for my safety, but the reflexes and the scars remained.

I tried to eat more normally after that, though it was hard. Sometimes, without thinking, I would find myself reaching for my food the same way, my arm instinctively guarding it,

even when there was no danger. It was as though those years of fear and abuse had never truly left me.

The habits were still there, buried deep inside, and no matter how hard I tried to erase them, they always returned.

School at Parmadale