Chapter 3

Some memories blur with time. Others burn themselves into your bones.

I don’t remember every detail of that time, just the feeling of it. A strange mix of worry and hope, of returning to something that used to be familiar but no longer fit. What I do remember are the pieces that stitched themselves into my memory: the scratchy clothes from Goodwill, the smell of cheap detergent, the greasy joy of a rare diner meal, and the echo of a nun’s voice sharpening the edges of an already hard day. Home had changed. Or maybe I had. All I knew was that we were back, and nothing came easy.

I don’t remember exactly how my mom recovered; it was a blur for me, and I was so young, but she told me the story so many times that I can almost picture it now. She was sick. Really sick. Her intestines had become severely ulcerated. The stomach pains she’d been complaining about since the age of four turned out to be ulcers slowly eroding her insides. The condition had been overlooked for far too long, and by the time it was recognized, the contents of her intestines were leaking into her abdominal cavity, leading to septicemia.

At the time, penicillin had only just been introduced. Most people were hesitant to use it as it was new, unproven, and considered risky.

But we were fortunate. There was a homeopathic doctor in the family. He came to see her, moved into her room, and stayed by her side, caring for her day and night as she declined. Eventually, he said, “I know it’s untested, but if anything is going to help, it’s this.”

She took the risk.

It was penicillin first, then surgery, and then weeks of agonizing recovery. But she made it through.

When she finally got better, we came home. But “home” was a word stretched thin by poverty. I mean thin. We were broke. Dirt broke. The kind of poor where you reuse tea bags, save buttons, and tape your shoes back together.

One of my first memories from that time was going to Goodwill for school clothes. That was our big outing. My mom, still weak but determined, led us through aisles of secondhand clothes like it was Macy’s. We were hunting for treasures, anything without holes, anything that didn’t smell too weird.

Afterward, we lugged our finds across the street to a laundromat. I still remember the industrial whir of the washers and the soft clang of coins dropping into the machines. Across the street was a little diner, nothing fancy, with a few booths and a counter with swivel stools. Eating out was almost unheard of for us. But that day, she said, “Let’s go for a treat.”

She looked at me and whispered like it was a secret: “Now, order from the right side of the menu.”

I looked at her, confused. “The right side?”

She smiled, tired but trying to make it fun. “Where the prices are. Not the food. You pick by the number, not the dish.”

I think burgers were something like twenty-five cents. We each got one, split a soda, and shared fries like it was Christmas dinner. But when we went back across the street, our clean clothes were gone. Every single thing. Stolen.

My mom didn’t cry. She just stood there for a long moment, holding her purse like it was the only thing she could control. “We’ll go back,” she finally said. “We’ll get what we can.”

Somehow, she scraped together more money; I don’t know how, and we went back to Goodwill. This time, the clothes weren’t quite as nice. Faded sweaters, pants that fit weird, dresses that had seen better days. But we made do. We always made do.

Then came school. I was back in the same Catholic school I’d been yanked out of when I was sent to the orphanage. Walking through those doors again was surreal. Like time had folded back on itself.

On the very first day, I got called to the principal’s office.

My stomach dropped. I thought, ‘*What did I do wrong already?’* Because in my world, something was always wrong.

The nun sat behind a huge wooden desk, her lips tight, her eyes sharper than her ruler.

She didn't ask how I was. She didn't welcome me back.

She sneered and said, "How many hours did it take to curl your hair like that? And how many bobby pins did you use?"

The first time, she only asked those two questions. But when I got home and told my mom, she wrapped my hair in ringlets with rags, thinking it would make the curls more "controlled" and smooth—something more acceptable. We both thought it looked beautiful, as I was left with long, tight ringlets like Shirley Temple's.

The next day, the principal looked at my hair again, her eyes narrowing as if daring me to explain.

"What did you do to your hair?" she asked, her voice dripping with disbelief.

I blinked. "My mom did it with rags. You just twist it and—"

She cut me off. "Where did you get your dress?"

I hesitated. "Goodwill."

She pursed her lips. "It has a hole in it. And your sock has a hole in it. This is unacceptable."

I sat there, stunned, and she went on and on like my hair and my clothes were an insult to the school itself.

She hated the rag curls the most. My mom had carefully wrapped strands of my hair in torn sheets the night before, tying each ringlet like a gift. After it dried, my mom would leave the rag curls in overnight. In the morning, she'd gently remove the ties, revealing long, smooth ringlets cascading down. It was all she could do to make me feel special.

"You need to go get your hair cut," the nun ordered.

I went home and told my mom, who looked confused and hurt. "But I just... I just curled it. To make it nice." But she sent me to get it cut.

When I came back with a shorter version of the same curls, the principal scowled.

"I said cut it until there are no more curls," she snapped. "It's still curling."

I remember thinking, '*Do they want me to shave my head?'*

Because when your hair's naturally curly, the shorter you cut it, the tighter the curls. It was ridiculous. But that's what they wanted. No curls. No individuality. Just obedience.

And underneath it all, we were still scraping by. I'll never forget the day my mom got off the phone and said, "We just spent $19 for a whole month of food."

Even back then, that was next to impossible. Somehow, she made it stretch. We lived on starches and canned things. And yes, they delivered it.

Later, when she finally got enough for a clunky old car, I remember her handing a gas station attendant a dime. Maybe a quarter. That was all she could spare.

I started cleaning my Aunt Francie's house for fifty cents an hour. At just 12 years old, I also started working at my cousin's Dairy Queen—he was the son of Aunt Francie. That was my first taste of real work and earning money. I was just a kid, but every nickel helped. Maybe it went toward school supplies. Maybe groceries. I don't know. But I do know this: We didn't have much. But we had pride, and we had to fight.

Some schools teach you math, reading, and science. Mine taught me how shame can echo louder than a school bell.

I don't remember being a perfect kid, and I'm far from it. But I still can't figure out what I could've done that was so terrible, so wrong, to always seem like I was on someone's bad side, especially when I went back to that grade school. I don't really remember what grade I was in exactly. If I had to guess based on my age, it was probably fourth or fifth grade. Just old enough to know something wasn't right. And young enough not to be able to stop it. I couldn't shake the deep hatred I felt for the nuns and teachers; most of them were unbearably cruel and unkind.

I remember a moment from that same grade; there was a short, heavyset nun struggling to fix the blind on an impossibly tall window. It suddenly came loose and collapsed, rolling down right on top of her. It was such a ridiculous sight I couldn't help but laugh.

That laugh sealed my fate.

She called me to the front of the class and used the infamous rod-on-knuckles punishment, the kind meant to make your fingers feel like they might break. She struck again and again, furious that I had dared to laugh. Her face twisted with rage as she said, "The way you look at me! Your eyes are like steel daggers. If looks could kill, I'd be dead."

And she wasn't wrong. Over the years, I had perfected that look. I wasn't allowed to speak, to react, to laugh, but I could look. And in those stolen glances, I put every ounce of defiance I had. It was all I had - those sharp little green eyes staring back, silently resisting.

I also remember being thrown into the coatroom one day.

It was a big, drafty space lined with hooks and shelves, the kind of place where everyone stashed their lunchboxes and damp winter coats. It wasn't dark; there was a small window that let in a little light, which I was thankful for. But being shut in there made it feel like a punishment all the same.

No one told me how long I'd be in there. No one told me why.

So, I sat. And sat. And after a while, I started poking around because what else is a kid supposed to do?

I looked at the lunchboxes. Rows of them, bright with cartoon characters and stickers peeling at the edges. Some were metal, some plastic, most with little matching thermoses tucked inside.

And yes, I opened them. One by one.

I found brownies, peanut butter cups, Ding Dongs, and cookies wrapped in wax paper. Neatly cut sandwiches with crusts trimmed off, apples, bags of chips, little treasures I didn't get at home. I picked out what looked good. Ate it. Then, I moved on to the next.

I didn't think much of it at the time. I was bored. I was hungry. I was alone.

But all the kids found out when it was lunchtime.

The next thing I remember, I was being dragged out of the coatroom and shoved into one of those old-school metal garbage cans - the ones, cylindrical, ribbed, just wide enough to fit into if you curled up like a pretzel.

The teacher said nothing. Just jammed me in there, folded in half, my knees pressed to my chest, feet awkwardly poking out the top. And she left me there.

This happened in front of the whole class.

I could hear the snickers. The whispers. The scrape of chairs as kids leaned in to get a better look.

I didn't cry. Not then. But I felt small, crushed in more ways than one.

That kind of humiliation stains you.

Then there was dodgeball. Or, as I came to know it, target practice.

They put you in the middle of a circle, surrounded by your classmates. The ball, about the size of a basketball, hard and heavy, was passed around the circle, and each kid took a turn hurling it at you as hard as they could.

Wham.

Smack.

Thud.

The name fits perfectly: “Dodgeball.” That was the whole point: dodge the ball.

But no matter how quick I tried to be, the ball almost always found its target—me.

And when it did, it hurt. Every time.

I don’t know what sadistic adults thought that was a good idea for kids. But it didn’t feel like a game. Not to me. It felt like punishment disguised as play.

Still, not everything from those years was bad.

There was this one moment, a small, bright spot. I entered a writing contest and somehow won. The prize? A sewing machine.

That might sound odd, but to me, it was gold. My step-grandmother (my biological grandmother had passed) was a master seamstress. The kind who could make a three-piece suit from scratch with fabric scraps and a chalk pencil.

She took me under her wing, kind of. Taught me the basics. But she was tough. For her, perfection wasn’t a suggestion. It was a demand.

“Nope,” she’d say, inspecting a seam I thought looked fine. “Rip it out. Do it again.”

And I would. Sometimes four or five times.

But it stuck with me. That sense that if you were going to do something, you’d better do it right.

By the time I was in high school, I could sew pretty well. And I don’t even remember how it started, but I somehow taught myself how to cut hair, too. Maybe from watching. Maybe just trial and error.

Pretty soon, I was sewing shirts and hemming pants for classmates. They'd bring me fabric and say, "Can you make me a blouse like this?" And I would. I made some money that way by cutting hair and sewing clothes. Enough to help out a little and enough to have some of my own.

When the public school deemed my new clothes "unacceptable," even though my mom had lovingly picked them out with me, we were left confused and ashamed. I also made some of my own clothes. I had won a sewing machine, and though fabric and patterns were expensive, I decided that if I was going to go to the trouble, I would sew what I wanted. But I never wore them to school. I knew somehow, they'd find a reason to disapprove, no matter what.

I made a few close friends then, too - girls who saw past the old Goodwill dresses and the hand-sewn seams. A couple of guy friends, too. People who didn't ask questions, who didn't judge. That mattered.

But even now, when I hear the creak of a coat room door or the clang of metal, part of me flinches.

Because once you've been put in the trash - literally, you never really forget how that feels.

Catholic school was supposed to be better. That's what my mother believed.

We were poor, really poor, but by the time I hit high school, she scraped together every dime she could, convinced that sending us to a Catholic high school would give us a better shot. A better future. A better life.

She had no idea how much worse it made things for me.

She didn't know about the orphanage. I never told her what the Church looked like from that side, how the same figures in habits and collars could be both saviors and tormentors. To her, the Church was sacred, pure, and untouchable. To me, it was a minefield of bad memories and tightly guarded secrets.

I never told her. And because of that, she had no way of understanding how sending me back into that system was like sending me into a burning house with no exit.

The Catholic high school was in another town. We had to take a bus every day, wake up while it was still dark, pack lunches stuffed into bags, and cross our fingers that the day wouldn't go sideways. And then came the nuns.

Some of them weren't just strict. They were unhinged. At least, that's how it felt. Cold eyes. Sharp words. A discipline that went beyond structure and into cruelty.

There was one nun in particular. Her name escapes me, but her face? I remember that. She made it her mission to make my life miserable. Every question I answered was wrong. Every step I took was in the wrong direction. I couldn't win.

One day, after yet another blowup in class, I don't even remember what triggered it. I reached my limit. I stood up without a word, walked over to the classroom window, unlatched it, climbed through, and jumped.

No hesitation.

I didn't care that I was miles from home. I didn't care if someone saw me. I just needed out.

I walked all 13 miles back home that day, thirteen miles along a rural country road that stretched between two towns, with nothing in sight for most of the way. Just me, the edge of the road, and cars rushing past inches from my shoulder. It wasn't until I got close to town that sidewalks finally appeared, cracked and uneven, but somehow still a relief after all that emptiness. The silence wasn't just around me. It was inside me, the kind that fills your head when you've had enough.

My uniform skirt was wrinkled, my shoes blistered my heels, and the sun was starting to set by the time I made it to our front steps.

My mother opened the door wide-eyed. "What on earth happened to you?"

I sat down on the edge of the couch, still catching my breath. “Mom, this school - it’s not what you think.”

She gave me a look. Not angry, not disappointed. Just confused. “What do you mean?”

I told her everything. The nun who singled me out. The constant punishments. The cold silence I sat in day after day. How across the street from our house stood a perfectly good public high school that cost nothing, and how she, working for just $2 an hour as a nurse, was killing herself to pay tuition for a place that treated me like garbage.

She got quiet.

Then came a strange moment. We were walking through the halls of the Catholic high school for some meeting about the SAT test incident—honestly, it’s a blur—and as we proceeded towards a nun waiting for us at the end of the corridor, my mother paused mid-step.

She squinted. “Is that woman your principal?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s her.”

Mom stared, eyes narrowing. The nun’s huge painted smile she usually wore beneath the stiff white coif of her habit, was visible as we started down the long hall.

“I really shouldn’t tell you this,” my mother whispered, “but… when I was working in the psychiatric ward, she was one of my patients.”

I froze.

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“No,” Mom said. “She was committed. And now she’s a principal?”

That single comment cracked something open in me. For years, I’d felt like I was the one going crazy. But maybe it wasn’t just me. Maybe some of these women weren’t stern or acting out of duty; they were broken and hiding behind the Church’s veil. Taking shelter where the world couldn’t judge them.

And suddenly, it made a sick kind of sense. Of course, some nuns were mentally unwell. What better place to vanish from society than behind a curtain of holiness?

After that, my mother agreed to transfer me to the public school. It wasn’t much better, but at least it wasn’t wrapped in the guilt and contradiction of religion.

Still, I was bullied. My hair, my clothes - none of it was “right.” I felt like I was always out of place, no matter where I went.

I was once sent home because the school didn't approve of the clothes I wore. My mom, trying to help, took me shopping at a new clothing store, not secondhand. I remember thinking the clothes we picked out were beautiful and, to me, quite fancy. I don't know how she managed to afford them. I went to school the next day feeling confident and proud until I was called to the principal's office and was coldly asked, "Has your mother seen how you're dressed today?" I was devastated. What on earth is the matter with these people I wondered. That was probably the only time in my life that Mom and I went shopping for NEW clothes. And they were not good enough.

Another time, I got in trouble at school for wearing a fur coat. It had belonged to my grandmother. Winters in Ohio were brutal; snow would bury cars completely, leaving only small rounded mounds to mark where they sat. I used to wear 17 layers just to keep warm. That fur coat was the warmest thing I had, and I loved it. But when I wore it to school, the administration said I looked like a "hippie with a capital H." I was banned from wearing it. Between that and my naturally curly hair, I was constantly targeted. I tried to straighten my hair with harsh chemical treatments and even rolled it around empty frozen orange juice cans. It worked for a while until my hair felt like straw and started to break off.

So apparently, it was fine for Grandma to wear the coat, but not for me.

Surprisingly, though, I was allowed to join the track. I loved sports. On the team, I ran the 50-yard and 100-yard dash, did hurdles, and competed in the broad jump. I wouldn't say I was exceptional at any of them, but I was good enough to earn my spot.

We lived right across the street from the high school, and the track field was always open. After dinner, I'd head over and just run: lap after lap after lap. Even when it got dark early, I kept going. Back then, no one seemed to think it was dangerous for a young girl to be out there alone at night.

Some of the highlights of my summers back then were swimming and playing tennis.

I loved to walk for miles to the city tennis courts. I didn't know how to play tennis, but I used some of my earnings to buy a used racket from Goodwill and a few tennis balls. I would sit and watch others play, studying their movements and slowly teaching myself. There were always people waiting for a game, and eventually, I got good—very good. Later in life, my mother told me that professional tennis players had once come to our house looking for me. I wasn't home, but they said I had real talent and could easily go pro with proper coaching. Lessons would have been just $12 a month. But my mother told them we couldn't afford it. My small earnings had to go toward helping with household expenses, school supplies, and clothing. It broke my heart because I knew deep down, I was exceptionally good at tennis. If I'd been given the chance to pursue it

and compete in real tournaments, I truly believe I could've won big. Maybe even enough to lift the weight off my mom's shoulders and really make a difference for my family.

To go swimming, I had to walk more than six miles to the next town one way. I'd start out early, walking for hours down country roads. It costs just 10 cents to swim all day. Then, I'd walk all the way back. No one worried about sun exposure or the dangers of a young girl walking alone on rural backroads. I feel incredibly fortunate that nothing ever happened to me. But now, as an adult, I deal with the consequences: skin cancer on my face. I've had five minor surgeries and once had to use a chemotherapy cream that left my skin covered in painful scabs. I didn't know the cream was supposed to be used intermittently, so when the scabs never went away, I thought the cancer hadn't either. The side effects made me terribly sick.

Having a face covered in scabs brought back awful memories of the orphanage being forced to scrub the skin off my face. At the time, I was attending the dreadful Heald College, and they tried to expel me. They said I wasn't allowed in the computer room because I might be contagious. One of the instructors, who was also a doctor, screamed in my face, demanding to know what was wrong with me. His spit landed all over me, and I just stood there, too exhausted to respond. That school was so terrible all 30 of its campuses were eventually shut down.

In high school, there was one boy with curly hair like mine. We became friends, a safe space in a weird world. We were sitting in a parked car one afternoon, talking, when a group of guys came up to the windows with clenched fists and a large, long metal pipe.

"You freaks," one of them spat, slamming a hand on the hood.

As the pipe was lifted to strike my friend through the open driver's window, we peeled out just in time, but the threat lingered like a bruise that wouldn't fade.

Even then, I tried to find a way to belong. I wanted to be a majorette. But to do that, I had to be in the band. So, they handed me a baritone horn, the big, awkward thing, and said, "Learn this."

So, I did.

I practiced until I could play decently enough to march on the field. There was one performance - a big night game, halftime show, lights out except for the glowing hats on our heads. We formed shapes, we moved in rhythm, and the music wrapped around us.

And then I collapsed.

Curled over in the grass, the lights went out, literally and figuratively. The show stopped. An ambulance came.

Nobody could figure out what was wrong. It was years later that a doctor finally discovered a ruptured ovarian cyst had caused adhesions deep inside my intestines.

I told the doctor it felt like my intestine was tied off like the end of a sausage. After the operation, he told me, “You weren’t far off. It actually was tied off, just like you said. Looked exactly like the end of a sausage, as if you had been able to see inside your abdomen with a camera.”

Decades and surgeries later, I learned I’m what they call an “adhesion former.” My body scars too easily inside. Some doctors think it’s just genetic. Others suspect it’s because of the radiation I had. One oncologist even told me, “Every single one of your cells is mutated.”

So I often wonder: *was I always an adhesion former?* Or did the radiation twist my biology into something else? I don’t know. Maybe it’s both.

But that marching band moment, that collapse under the field lights, was the beginning of it all.

And sometimes, when people talk about school as the best years of their lives, I just sit quietly and think, ‘*You have no idea.’*

The thing that haunted me the most because I still don’t understand it, was what happened in my public high school English class. It was surreal, humiliating, and cruel. I didn’t do anything to deserve it. I wasn’t disruptive. I wasn’t mean. I just… existed. But for some reason, that seemed to be enough for them to try to break me.

It was a regular Tuesday morning. The classroom smelled like chalk dust and pencil shavings, and the overhead lights buzzed faintly. Our English teacher, a stern, smug woman with tight lips and eyes that always looked like they were judging you, walked in with a clipboard and an unsettling smile.

“All right, class,” she said, tapping the clipboard. “Today’s assignment is... something different. We’re going to do an exercise in public critique and observation.”

She called my name.

“You,” she pointed, “up here.”

I looked around, confused. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Stand on the desk.”

I hesitated. Everyone was staring. The room was silent, thick with tension and teenage confusion. She barked again, “Now.”

So, I stood on a desk. My cheeks were burning. My knees felt like they would buckle. Then, she delivered the assignment.

“Each of you will come up here, one at a time, and say what you think is wrong with her. Her appearance, how she dresses, and how she carries herself. Two minutes each. Begin.”

No one laughed. Even they knew this was twisted. But they did it. One after another. For a full hour. Comments about my hair, my wild, curly hair that never fit in, my clothes, my posture, my voice. Things I hadn’t even thought were odd were now glaring flaws in their eyes.

When it was over, I didn’t cry. I didn’t scream. I just sat down, numb. I still don’t know what she was trying to teach. I never got an apology. No explanation. Just trauma disguised as education.

I didn’t know who to turn to, but I found one teacher who seemed to care - our art teacher. She had kind eyes and a quiet way of listening that made you feel heard.

“Ms. Hayes,” I said, stopping by her desk after class, “I really like art. I don’t want to take calculus anymore. It just… I can’t handle it. Is there a way I can switch?”

She nodded slowly. “Of course. Let me help you with the paperwork.”

The next day, she was gone. Fired. They fired her for helping me switch classes. I knew it was retaliation. I told her about the English class. I guess helping me was a step too far for a system built on silence.

I was called into the principal's office later that week.

"We'd prefer if you just left," the principal said, not looking up from his desk. "Drop out. There's no need to go through the paperwork of switching classes. Just leave."

"Are you saying I should quit school?" I asked.

"We're saying we don't want you here," he replied flatly. "You don't fit."

I didn't drop out, and that made the principal furious. I stayed and finished the year. But I didn't go to graduation. They made it clear I wasn't welcome. He told me flat out, "We don't want to see you at graduation."

That school was just across the street from our house, right there, visible from my bedroom window. And yet, the distance I felt from it was like a thousand miles. When I look back, I think it wasn't just about me. It was about control. About punishing people who didn't conform. People like me, with curly hair, questions, and a sense of self that they couldn't break, were never meant to fit quietly into their system.

Things got darker. One afternoon, the woman who ran a little dinette at the other end of our street stopped me outside. She looked worried.

"I need to tell you something," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "There are people renting the apartment above the diner. FBI. They told me they're here watching you. They think you're some kind of drug kingpin. They have a clear view of your house."

I blinked at her. "What? Me?"

She nodded solemnly. "They're convinced."

I went home and found my mother, a priest, and two FBI agents going through my room. I remember feeling like I was watching it happen to someone else. They found a couple of bottles of vitamins, just vitamin C and some calcium-magnesium tablets.

"This is what you think is evidence?" I asked one of them.

The agent shrugged. "Just covering all bases. Doesn't mean anything yet."

It was absurd. But it wasn't funny. I had never done drugs. I didn't even drink. But they were convinced I was trouble, probably because I didn't fit into their narrow mold of what a girl from that neighborhood should be.

Eventually, I broke. I didn't cry. I didn't scream. I just hit a wall of silence and resolve.

I thought, *“There has to be a place in this country where I can have curly hair and not be treated like a Martian or criminal.”*

I went to work at the pizza parlor that evening. I told my boss I was planning to hitchhike to California, and he gave me money for a plane ticket.

My sister lived in California, and that seemed as far away as I could get. A new life. A place where maybe I could just be left alone.