

FIFTEEN

HEAVEN.HELL.REPEAT.

B.D.K.

HELL THROUGH THE EYES OF A YOUNG CHILD

It's my birthday! I'm three! Grandma is already here with Uncle Kenny. When they got here, he gave me a tiny palm-sized puppy named Pockets. The big kids should be here soon. Mom's in pain sometimes and breathes funny. I'm upstairs in her room playing with Pockets while she packs a bag. Mom tells me that I'll be getting a baby sister for my birthday. Wow! My very own baby sister for my birthday! I'm impatient for cake and friends to play with mostly.

The house smells funny like somebody burnt dinner but wrong somehow. The air looks fuzzy like when you open your eyes underwater in the bath, and it tastes like ashes from a cigarette but different. So I go get on Mom's bed. Cousin David comes to talk to Mom. He has no eyebrows or hair on his arms, and his hair is shorter and looks melted. I don't understand the words, only that he is upset and worried, agitated. Mom is walking around her room talking softly, almost to herself, while rubbing her great big belly.

The noise downstairs becomes loud. I don't understand why everyone is running and yelling. I'm scared now! I climb in the cubby full of blankets at the foot of the bed and crawl all the way up as far as I can get under the bed away from the noise and smell. Mom is frantically trying to grab what she needs and get me to come to her, only I'm not moving! When David comes to get Mom, she's trying to get to me. He rips the mattress off the bed and removes the slat above me. He picks me up, hands me to Mom to carry. His hands feel like crispy, squishy marshmallow.

When we get to the top of the stairs, Grandma is at the bottom by the front door facing us. I launch off Mom's belly into Grandma's arms and knock us out the front door.

We're outside in the snow. David looks funny. His clothes are burning now with flames licking the last of his hair away. His face is melty like wax and sounds like meat frying. They throw him into a body-sized snow drift to put him out. Now his melty face has a crispy look like burnt ham. I didn't get a baby sister for my birthday, and I lost my house.

MY BABY, MY SISTER

My sister's my baby even if she didn't come on my birthday. Sometimes she stops breathing (born blue because she was three weeks late); if there is a loud/sharp sound I have to put her mask on and turn on the big green bottle. She is a short, fat version of me with blonde hair and blue eyes. I like to feed her, but it's hard to change her diaper or clothing because she wiggles a lot and is heavy. Mom can't be bothered! Ever!

Six generations of women live together with their spouses and children. There is a big party, a chaotic family gathering, and all us kids are trying to stay out of the way. Kenny, who has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and my sister are having trouble breathing, so I take them and their blankets outside away from the smoke; a 1976 party equals drugs, alcohol, and public sex. I curl up around them using the corner of the stairs and the porch as a windbreak, and then using their blankets to keep them warm. I look up and everyone is gone. The lights are all off and the door's locked. I can't get us back in. I'm terrified! They've never left us alone like this!

BOILING IN SEYMOUR, TEXAS

We, the whole clan, have moved to a house just outside Seymour, Texas, and Dad and Uncle Bruce are fixing the hot water heater when I go to give my sister and me a bath. Both knobs are

on full when I strip us and put her in the claw-foot tub. She stood on my shoulders so that, as I stood, she could climb in over the edge. I get in, too, and find the water to be too warm. I try to turn off the knobs but can't. The water is too hot and it hurts! I scream for each of my parents in turn while trying to get my sister out of the water. I manage to get out and try to pull her out, only she's too heavy. Finally, they come to our blood-curdling screams. I am burnt, an ugly red from my waist down. My sister is an ugly red, turning to blisters over half of her little body.

We ride to the hospital with my sister laid across Mom's lap facedown screaming in pain. When we get to the emergency room, a nurse I know helps me feel better while my sister is taken away somewhere. Dad takes me home and I can't see my sister for a long time. When I get to see her she is laying on her stomach, with her little blister-covered butt in the air, sleeping. Mom says, "she's knocked out so she doesn't feel the pain." I'm crying hard as Dad takes me home. "This is my fault!" I think. When we are all home again, it's time to move. I lose Pockets somewhere along the way. I cried.

SUMMER FUN AND FAMILY

Summer is great! Boys are mean! Well, Kenny is sweet, but he's slow. I learn stuff and he copies me. Aunt Colleen is pretty and such a girl, always clean and prissy with her dolls out by the little pool under the clothesline in the backyard. My sister is tiny in her little cradle. My cousins Jimmy and Joey are old, but George is as old as Kenny and I'm almost that old. They are always mean! They hit hard when I don't run fast enough after telling them, "No, I don't want to!" I didn't really mind popping paint cans for the marbles and being better at not getting paint on me than they were. I like playing "king of the hill" at the gravel pit at the end of our street. If I can get a head start and run fast enough, the pottery shop a little past the pit is a safe place for me to hide from the boys. There is a small bat by the door of the shop; the owner says I can have it to protect myself from the boys. Some of the games they

taught me weren't nice, but when I would get totally away they made my sister cry, so I learned how to tell when I had to let them catch me. I taught Kenny how to use my little bat, too, so the older ones would leave him alone.

PURGATORY IN ALBUQUERQUE, NM

We now live in an orphanage away from our family. They have even separated my sister from me. We sleep in cribs on opposite sides of a short wall that I climb over every time she cries. I get in trouble for this because that is the baby area and I'm not a baby anymore. They don't understand. I have to make sure she is all right. I can't keep her safe if I'm not there. These stupid people never listen. I'm not going anywhere without my sister. They keep sending me to foster homes alone. Why aren't they listening? I can't live without my sister. When they take me to their homes without her, this pretty little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl walks in the front door, but when they leave me alone in this new house, it all changes. I start screaming and cussing (words no four-year-old should know), throwing everything that comes to hand, including myself, all over the place.

In one such house, the man of the house suffers a heart attack while I am throwing my fit. I am picked up by the orphanage as the ambulance arrives to help him. I felt guilty because I never want to hurt people, but I couldn't help it. I can't live without my sister. It's fall and I'm finally old enough to go to school for a couple of days each week. I ride on a little bus with mostly older kids to a special school where I only see other kids from the orphanage, or kids who also want a new home. I meet my counselor, Julia, and talk to her about all the important stuff – being hurt and abandoned by our parents, how important my sister is to me. Sometimes we talk about me getting a new family, too.

Once, my birth mother Margie and her new husband Charlie showed up at the front door. It was the only time I actually saw and talked to them. This unexpected traumatic visit from her triggers my run response. A few days later, I walk out the front

door unattended and walk all the way to the mailbox at the end of the block. I can't really leave without my sister though, so instead I take the mail back to the office. After this, Julia becomes the first person to understand that I can't live without my sister.

At the orphanage, all of us older kids have begged to go out to watch the rising of the huge, orange harvest moon. There's a man singing on the other side of the fence and teaches us all pieces of the song. Later, he helps us organize a successful Halloween carnival in that same yard. They have put a huge tree with lots of lights and ornaments up next to the fireplace in the big kid area. One night, we all get to sit around the tree and sing Christmas songs with all the lights out, watching the fire burn and the tree lights twinkle. All I want for Christmas is to share this with my sister.

SOMETHING LIKE HEAVEN, MAYBE

I turn five before my new parents, the Martins, come to pick up my sister and me from the orphanage. We get on a plane and fly back to Texas to be part of their family. Mom shows me how all the houses and things get smaller and toy-like as we get higher into the cotton candy clouds. I had met my Mom, Bobbie, at church a year or so earlier. She gave me my first constructive/instructive spanking and talked to me, not through or at me. I'm happy she wants to be our Mom. My sister will be safe here!

My sister and I have our own rooms with big soft beds with lots of warm blankets, clean clothes that fit and our very own bathroom to take a bath in anytime Mom can run water for us. Cinnamon and Skipper are our dogs, and behind an electric fence (ouch! it bites) are Penny, Taffy, and Hope—our Palomino horses that we will learn to ride. There's a front yard and backyard to play on any time we want. I get to help wash dishes and fold clothes and clean my room, so I can find all my stuff by myself. Best of all, our new Mom and Dad pay attention all the time!

HEAVEN MAYBE, BUT STILL BURNING

Despite the history with my birthparents, I grew up with both families. I talked to Dad every time he called, however sporadic that may have been. I go to school with Kenny sitting across the room and Colleen up the hall in her grade. Grandma lives with her sister Aunt Mabel a block from the school, but at the end of my second grade year, Grandma moves to Aunt Cindy's in California with Colleen and Kenny. This made a rough year downright hard. I had been on my way from school to the daycare where my sister was when I got hit by the car that my best friend's Aunt was driving. I lost my life from the damage done, but I told God, "I'm not done. My sister is there, I need more time." So back I came to watch her grow.

I'm not quite thirteen and my Dad is dead, so his baby sister, who I'm named after, calls to say. So many questions about who I am, and there is no one who truly understands the need I have to know why I am the way I am. I'm lost and angry and hate my sister almost as much as I love her. I've had counselors to help explain, but no one who truly understands the pain. I sleep odd hours, if at all. I start smoking and running away. My heart is broken and I feel to blame. I make attempts to die by my own hand; only to find life is still too precious to leave at this time.

Margie is found, so I go to visit, asking my questions and making my plea, only to find that she never loved me and never wanted my sister. We were always in her way because Dad always did love me and Margie's jealous. I'm grieving the loss of my Dad, but they think I'm crazy. I'm sent to Wichita Falls State Hospital to find a fix. I'm put on meds, which I hate; they make me feel fuzzy and numb, out of control. I didn't take them like I should. There, I meet and became fast friends with Barbie. She understands my pain, and that helps me more than the meds.

One evening after coming home from the hospital, I climb out of the shower and my sister wants to play, climbing on my back before I'm even dry. I grab the back of her head throwing her over my shoulder. This is my first black rage. When I see her at the

breakfast table the next morning, I'm truly afraid. Looking at her black and blue face and the fear in her eyes. I'm told it took Mom, Dad, and my brother Ken to pull me away. I love her so much. How can I do this to her? She is the only thing I live for. I decided that night to do whatever it takes to protect my angel from the monster in me.

RUNNING FROM THE DEVIL

Truant from school, stealing Dad's truck, running away several times and finally cussing at a judge gets me sent to Corsicana Residential Treatment Center for incarceration. During the summer I was sixteen, Granddaddy Walls (Mom's dad) died. I saw him in the ICU but couldn't say goodbye. Barbie committed suicide to escape the abuse from her father just after that.

I am released to a halfway house in Ft. Worth right before the school year started. At seventeen, I hitchhiked across North America looking for a man to love me and make me his wife so we could make a family. Instead, I found a profession as a stripper, since it was the body they loved and not me.

Kenny was living north of Casper and invited me to live with him. Greg (who owns the house) is best friends with Jamie and helped me turn the North Forty bar into a weekend strip club. We started at three nights, Thursday, Friday and Saturday after 6 pm since it was a family-friendly establishment during the day.

New Years Day 1993, we are cleaning up the mess in a bar from the night before when the local Vietnam Vets Biker Club, Casper Chapter, comes in for drinks. Jamie and I were dared to get married by his friends who paid for our license and my dress. Doc, the Chaplain, offers to marry us the very next day right at the bar. So the next morning, we got the license and Jamie left me at the bar so I could get ready. I was given an antique wedding dress—high collar, long sleeves, tiny buttons all down the back, and tiny blue earrings I borrowed from a friend's girlfriend. I use the liquor closet to get ready.

When it's time for me to walk to him, "Brandy You're a Fine Wine" is on the jukebox, and I only make it to the handle of the open door. "I'm walking, I'm walking but my feet won't move!" I say as Brian, a friend of ours, picks me up and carries me to the stage where Jamie is waiting dressed in his leathers.

Love, Honor and Cherish, there is no wedding ring, so I use my husband's pewter ring with bat insignia instead. At 6:23 p.m. we are married and at 6:45 the bash begins! What a party it is! Before long, I'm out of my wedding dress and on the stage wearing the red negligee my boss gave me as a wedding gift. He gets so trashed we can't consummate our marriage for three days. This is how our marriage begins.

When I show him to Margie, she cringes in fright to see that I married my father, only twenty years younger. This meeting created our first serious break. The first night of our marriage, we slept in different towns. Six months in, I'm as pregnant as I am married, only to find that he doesn't love me enough to stay true to our vows. He's already invited his ex-girlfriend to come live with us, and I've already kicked her and her three sons out of my house. His vows meant nothing to him, since she spent her nights in my bed, too.

Six months in and he can't stand me and kicks me out, so off to New Mexico I hitchhike, alone. To Margie I run since Charlie is there and Mom doesn't believe I'm married or pregnant. Charlie is real. He loves me like a true dad should. He makes life seem so doable even as a single parent.

I let my husband come home to our daughter, K.C., and me when she is five weeks old. We have a falling out with my folks, so we move to his folks' the night before Christmas. I have words with his mother, so we are kicked out to a rent-by-the-week motel.

By May, we are living in Seymour, Texas, next to the city park in low-income housing. My sister has just had a son she gave up for adoption. She doesn't tell me; our baby sister Meg does. So I take my sister for a stroll up the dirt road in front of the house. It seems I've protected her so she can hate me for, as she puts it, "deserting her when she needed me the most!"

I leave him taking K.C. before her first birthday in September, but go back to him in a few hours. We are back in Casper before the first freeze. We yo-yo between, together, and apart for the next two and a half years. She is shared between us, but not always without a fight. I learn that I'm pregnant again with our second child a day or two after he threatens my life holding a machete while I am backed against a wall, with no way out. Our daughter sees this, as well as our other fights. I take her with me wherever I go, never staying too long with any one person, preferring communal living. I'm still looking for acceptance and unconditional love in all the wrong places, and still feeling alone.

I give him a second daughter, who I call Baby Girl, but he doubts that she is his own. So when she is six months old, we split for the last time. I tell him that I don't feel important enough to him. I ask K.C. who she wants to live with, letting her remain with her father when I walk out the door.

Baby girl and me go to New Mexico to be with Margie because Charlie has had heart surgery. While I am there, my husband vanishes with our daughters to Texas to live with his girlfriend. I convince a mutual friend to give me his address so I can try to put my family back together.

K.C. is three, and I've brought her presents from my family and me for her birthday and Christmas, which I had just missed. While K.C. and Baby Girl play together, I beg and plead for him to come and be a husband to me and a father to our daughters. A family to make together against all odds. He lies and says "come get me tomorrow." When I arrive, he is not to be found, refusing to see me one last time. I guess he didn't want to see my face when he refused me.

REPEAT

I come back to Casper. I call home, throw a big party and acted as my partying, happy-go-lucky self. (Oh, how drunk I did get; I took his cousin to bed. My last child to carry is made this night.) In a low-rent, by-the-week joint called the Yellowstone

Motel, I lived with Baby Girl, who tried to be good. It was through her I met a young man who became her worst nightmare. She would go to his room and watch him play Zelda on Playstation. He left the door open so she could run around from our place to his. It didn't take long to move him into my bed to fill those long cold nights. I sent my daughter away to my mother down south. On a bus, my mom came to take her to a safe haven that was once my own. Well loved and cared for a year.

He took me away a piece at a time from friends and family. First, wanting to always be near, then moving us away to his family and friends. His job moved us even further away from everyone I knew, so on him I relied for all things. Once isolated from everyone I knew, it starts with a question: "Are you sure?" When I relay my day, I must dot every "i" and cross every "t." He slowly erodes my self-confidence with these questions. If he came back later and a single word was different in my talking, I was a liar about it all. Then it turned to statements of how I couldn't be trusted to take care of my own stuff, so I'm not fit to be a single parent. I need a man!

One year to the day of him moving in, he accuses me of cheating that first Christmas day. I beg and plead as he yells and screams, grabbing and shaking me with all his might, punching and kicking the oak table apart. The longer I deny any wrongdoing the meaner he gets, until in desperation I say, "Yes, I cheated. I'm sorry. I lied." The house becomes quiet. He turns away, saying, "I knew I was right."

My daughter is home for her brother's first birthday and Christmas. Margie and Charlie come home for a visit. Margie and Charlie drive a truck for a living. Margie is jealous because of my relaxed relationship with Charlie. She accuses me of having sex with him. She and my boyfriend feed off each other's insecurities while I'm out in the truck helping Charlie lower his blood pressure. I lay him down in his truck. The cold helps calm him down. He has to lower his blood pressure for eight full hours before it's safe to drive, and he absolutely has to leave in the morning to make his schedule.

Margie runs off down the deserted highway in a blizzard. She is brought back to the clinic in Big Piney with frostbite, whining about her life. My son needs tubes put in his ears. It's one night in the hospital so I need Margie to watch my daughter until I get home because I can't take her with us. Margie can't even do that! So my Department of Family Services worker picks up my daughter taking her home for the night.

I run away only to be brought back time and time again. His cure for our issues is a pipe full of meth. I try to keep full-time employment but I lose it because I have two kids to take care of and there aren't enough hours in any day to do all the things I need to do. My own insecurities and past recreated my worst nightmare: repeating my childhood in the life of my children. To be so scared of being alone that I could stand by and watch and follow commands even while I am screaming "no" in my head.

Past to present to past, they blend. I've checked out too much to truly see what I am giving permission to happen to her. Her brother steps in to stand for what's right because I have failed to protect them from the evil in life. The one thing I did right was to teach my son to stand up for what's right, and that what's right is still the same no matter how big a person is. I failed in everything else, but words can't say how proud I am of my son for standing up for what's right and protecting his sister.

I lost my children because I failed to stand in my beliefs that life needs to be better than the hell I knew as a child. I've always been strong. I've always been on top of it – always known what I needed to do to take care of my kids. But with him, I was broken. I lost the ability to trust my own intuition.

God forgive me for losing sight of my moral convictions.