

## NINETEEN AND LIFE

Clover Brown

The man who murdered my fiancé was in charge. I did whatever Mick said, when he said it, and in doing so, appeared complicit in the crime. A razor. A knife. Stab wounds. Once I realized that the situation was real, that he was really going to kill my fiancé, I decided to try and stop it in the best way I could. Mick asked me if I had a knife. I told him, "I'll check the kitchen, I haven't finished unpacking, I'm not sure." In my mind I was going to hide the knife in the sink full of dirty dishes and tell him, "I don't have one, must be packed somewhere."

It didn't quite work out that way. I followed the stairs down into the living room, through the dining room, into the kitchen, and found the only knife I had. I turned to put the knife into the sink and he was there, right behind me. He plucked the knife out of my hand. "Thank you," he tells me. He left me bewildered as to how I didn't hear one little creak in the stairs or feel the closeness of his weight on the stairs behind me. It was like he just materialized in the kitchen.

Before there was Mick, who from our first meeting so completely controlled and dominated me, there were other men. My earliest memory of a man in my life was when I was three. I called him Uncle Floyd; he was my grandma's boyfriend. I don't remember the pain of him taking my virginity, but I do remember the blood. I sort of see it now in flashes: My Aunt scooped me up in a blanket or a towel; I'm not sure which. My Grandma with a butcher knife chasing Uncle Floyd through the trailer. My Mom drove me and my Aunt to the hospital. I remember the examination table and the doctor and nurses, lying on my back with my feet touching and my legs open like a frog specimen ready for dissection. I don't remember how long I was in the hospital, but when I returned home, any trace of my Uncle Floyd was gone. If my Grandma hadn't been curious as to why I wasn't outside

playing in my usual spot, Uncle Floyd may have gotten away with what he had done to me.

About two years later my Aunty's boyfriend took me to a park. In the backseat of his car he put his mouth on my privates. When I started breathing hard, he realized he was getting a reaction out of me, so he stopped and told me that he wanted me to do the same to him. He told me it would taste like sugar water, but I knew better. I knew that that's where his pee came from, so I said, "no, I don't want to." I could tell he was mad, but he didn't force me. Instead, he drove me to this house. When we got out of the car I followed him up to the front porch. The whole time I could feel how upset he was. He wasn't exactly mean to me, but he didn't go out of his way to make me feel wanted or included. I could hear a dog barking inside, but I couldn't see it, and I was afraid to follow him. As the screen door closed behind him, he asked me if I was coming in. I shook my head no. "Then you can stay here," he told me. He was inside that house for quite a while, but when he came back he seemed to be in a better mood.

We got back into the car, and he started to drive me home. While in the car he told me I couldn't tell my Aunty what happened, "it would make her jealous." When we got home, he carried me inside. While I was still on his hip, with my arms around his neck, I looked at my Aunty and told her, "I'm Miguel's girlfriend now."

Immediately I could see my Aunt's eyes widen in anger and hear her suck in her breath. She yelled at him, "Put her down!" When he did, she started swinging. He ducked and backed out the screen door with my Aunty right at him. She beat him so bad that when she was finished he had a cut over one eye, his nose all bloody and clothes torn and hanging from him. I was crying, screaming out the door, "Stop, don't hurt him." My Grandma kept ahold of me so I couldn't go outside. When my Aunt was finished she put Miguel into his car, and he drove off. After that day, any trace of Miguel in our home was gone.

As I've said, before there was Mick there were other men who controlled and dominated me. When I was twelve and in a

psychiatric ward for a suicide attempt, the doctor in charge started sexually penetrating me after hearing my stories of abuse. When I refused to be sexual, he put me in straightjacket with my bottoms off and threw me in the “quiet room,” which was a padded cell with a hole in the floor to use the bathroom.

When I was good and did what Dr. Barker wanted me to do, I got rewarded with extra gym time and sometimes home visits, but only if I performed exceptionally well. I was in the psych ward for my thirteenth birthday, and Dr. Barker had the kitchen make my favorite dessert, raspberry cheesecake. I knew, though, that I would have to be really nice to him during our next session since he went out of his way to give me such a nice present. I was in the psych ward for four months after my birthday, but I didn't get to go home. From there, I went to a co-ed group home in Casper, but it ended up being shut down after it came to light that one of the female staff members was having sex with a 16-year-old boy. I was at this group home until I was 15 and ended up getting shipped to the Girls' School in Sheridan, where it was pretty nice. For once in my life I was actually safe. I stayed there until I was 17 and a half, and then I moved back home to be with my mom and 3-year-old brother.

A few months later I hooked up with this boy, Seth, who I'd known off and on since we were in the seventh grade. I believe Seth is my son's father. I say “believe” because Seth and several of his friends gang raped me in February of 1997, after which I became pregnant.

The night started out normal, with me making sure everyone had what they needed, Seth cracking jokes and having fun, some drinking, but not a lot. Everything seemed to be going good, until I noticed that Seth and one of his buddies had disappeared. I didn't think much of it and went back to talking to one of Seth's other friends, but when Seth and Kevin returned, Seth walked up to me angrily, saying in front of everyone, “So I'm not the best man you've ever been with?” “What in the hell are you talking about?” I asked, embarrassed. His friends chime in, “That's not what she told me,. She's always given me the eye.”

The more I tried to defend myself the angrier and more irrational Seth became until he grabbed me so hard by my arm, it left bruises. He shoved me to the ground and four of his buddies were there, one to hold down both of my arms and legs. Seth stood over me and told me, "You're gonna learn tonight."

At first I struggled. I try kicking, scratching, biting, but by the time Danny got to me (he was number three) all I could do was just lay there and cry. I guess I figured that if I just stayed still it wouldn't hurt so bad. When they were through, some two or so hours later, Seth threw a blanket at me and told me to clean myself up. I couldn't even walk so I crawled to the bathroom and tried to clean myself up the best I could. Even after all this, I stayed.

Ever since I was a little girl I've received mixed messages. My Grandma and Auntie told me I could be and do anything I wanted, but my Mom never failed to remind me of what a burden I was and that she would always have to be there to take care of me. After all, how could *someone like me* be trusted to think for myself? I guess that mentality carried over into my relationships. Regardless of what anyone did to me, I must have done something to deserve it. I had to be with someone, anyone, because I was incapable of taking care of myself. So I stayed.

Three months after the rape, I didn't cook Seth's steak the right way. He punched me in the sides and stomach, then threw me out the second story window. My unborn son and I were lucky that I landed on my back in some bushes. The next day Seth was out for a "job interview." It was a little after one in the afternoon when he called and told me, "You better be gone by the time I come home." Something in his voice was off. I was a whole new kind of afraid.

I called my Mom and told her, "Seth's kicking me out, and I don't know what to do." Of course, this is just what my mom needed to justify her usual mantra of "I told you so." I moved back home, and due to my anorexia and bulimia, I gave birth to my son on July 6<sup>th</sup>. He wasn't due until October 15<sup>th</sup>. I was only at five, almost six, months when I had him. He was 1 pound, 12 ounces, 13 inches long.

I met my fiancé, John, just three weeks before he was murdered. The second week he put me in the ER by football kicking me in the jaw one night when we were both drunk. He proposed to me two days later and for some reason I said yes. Three nights later he would be murdered.

The day after I came home from the ER, my friend Scott came over. John was at work, so it was just the two of us. He could see the damage done to my jaw, and I could tell it upset him to see me this way, but he didn't say anything. Instead he suggested that I hold a housewarming party so my people and John's crew could get to know each other. I thought it was a good idea so I agreed.

Three nights later, October 10, 1997, John was already drunk when we were waiting for the guests to arrive. Scott and the man who would murder my fiancé, Mick, showed up first. Scott introduced himself and his friend to John. John's reaction was to grab me around the waist with one arm and pull me closer to his side while he shook hands with the others. Mick stepped forward with three 40s of malt liquor. This put John more at ease. After the introductions, Scott said that he was going to go score some "smokage" and that he'd be right back. This left John and I alone with a total stranger. Mick's tall, at least 6'3" to John's 5'8". He has a beard and is covered in tattoos. I slid out of John's grip and took the bottles of malt liquor to the kitchen to put in the fridge. I divided one bottle between the three of us and went back out into the living room. John and Mick seemed to be getting along. I remember them talking about the military and the government.

I was just sitting there, not really paying much attention, wondering where everyone was, when all of a sudden John raised his voice and stepped closer to Mick, trying to shove him against the wall. John's shove barely even registered on Mick's frame. Apparently he was irritated enough to push John back. John was lifted off his feet, put his arms out to his sides to try and catch his balance, knocking the thermostat off the wall. I guess Mick said something derogatory about our government that pissed John off. I tried to calm John down as I stood between the two. After a long,

tense minute, John stormed to the kitchen muttering that he needed a drink.

So there I was, alone with this complete stranger. “So, how do you know Scott?” I tried to fill the silence, but I was pretty uncomfortable. Mick didn’t bother to respond and instead walked off to the kitchen. I didn’t know what to do, so I just stood there trying hard to listen to what might be going on in there.

Then John came out and brushed past me, going up the stairs. I tried asking him. “What’s going on?” But he either didn’t hear me or ignored me because he didn’t even acknowledge that I was there. I didn’t know what was happening, and I was scared. A few seconds later, Mick came out of the kitchen and stood in front of me. This total stranger told me, “John asked me to help him die.” He told me that John was worried that when my premature son came home from the hospital that he’d end up hurting us somehow and that it would just be better for everyone involved if he was out of the picture.

I stood there just staring at him. For what sick reason were these two screwing with me? I rolled my eyes and said, “Fine. Do whatever you want.” With that, Mick walked past me and goes upstairs. I followed him. When we got upstairs, John had rummaged through the dirty clothes and found his favorite shirt. He came over to me and asked me if Mick had told me what he wanted.

I stood there with my arms crossed dubiously and nodded my head. He asked me if I was okay with it. I told him, “If this is what you want, then I support you.” All the while I was thinking, “He’s so full of shit.” He hugged me in that smelly shirt he had put on, then walked into the bathroom. Mick was standing outside the door and asked me if there were any razors in there. I told him I had some under the sink that he could use, still not really buying his bullshit. I went into my bedroom and waited for them to stop this nonsense. About 20 minutes later, Mick walked into my bedroom. He had blood on his hands, shirt, and pants. Real blood. John’s blood.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Mick noticed the shock on my face because he snapped his fingers at me to bring me back to reality. Then he asked me if I had a knife because the razor was too flimsy. That's when I realized, "All of this is for real, and there's no way out. If this man is willing and able to voluntarily kill a stranger, then what would he do to me if I don't do what he asks? I can't let him see any resistance."

I could hear every noise coming from the bathroom as I sat huddled on my bedroom floor, wrapped in John's leather jacket. Mick was stabbing John so violently that I could feel the vibrations through the floor. John kept saying, "I changed my mind," and Mick was yelling at John to put his arms down. "I have to get out of here," I thought, "I have to get help." I thought I could sneak past the bathroom and down the stairs to the front door. Mick was so involved in what he was doing he probably wouldn't even notice. As I gathered my courage to pass the bathroom, I made the mistake of peeking in to see where Mick was. His back was to me, but at that moment he stabbed John in the neck. I was frozen with fear and shock. John saw me and made eye contact with me, then just turned his head towards the other side of the tub. Mick must have noticed John's eyes because he turned and told me to light him a cigarette. I couldn't think. I just acted. With shaky hands, I fumbled with my zippo to light him a cigarette.

I sat in a daze outside the bathroom with my back against the wall trying to process what I had just witnessed. I didn't know how long I'd been sitting there. It seemed like an eternity. Mick came out of the bathroom and kneeled down in front of me. He told me that John was going through his death throes and that it was basically over. He asked me if I forgave him. All I could think was, "Where's the knife?" So, I said "yes." He got up and went back into the bathroom to clean himself up in the sink, and I crawled (I couldn't trust my legs) back into the bedroom. I wrapped myself up in John's leather jacket.

Mick was still in the bathroom when someone started knocking on the front door. Mick came rushing into the bedroom with this feral look on his face. He said he didn't care who it was at

the door, but that I had better get rid of them or the same thing would happen to them. My mind was racing. Somehow I had to make sure that whoever was on the other side of that door stayed there, away from danger, safe. It was my only female friend and her boyfriend. They were here for the housewarming party. As I opened the door, just a crack, the look on my friend's face went from happy-go-lucky to instant concern. She could see that something was wrong as she looked through the small opening at my puffy-eyed, tear-stained face. She tried to push the door open further, but I was able to keep her out. She kept asking, "What's wrong? Where is John? Did he hurt you again? Why won't you let me in?"

I blurted out that John had left with some of his friends and that the party was over. I told her, "I just want to be alone. Will you just please leave?" I managed to shut the door all the way, but before she gave up and left she said through the back door jamb that she'd be back later so we could talk, just the two of us. I put my back against the door and slid down into a sitting position, relieved that I saved my friend from whatever Mick had planned for her.

A few moments later in the upstairs bedroom, Mick lay on the floor with his arms covering his eyes. I sat in a corner of the room, huddled in that same leather jacket of John's, rocking myself and crying softly. I kept thinking, "Where the hell was Scott? Why isn't anyone here?" I must have dozed off because the next thing I remember was the phone ringing. It was about 7:30 in the morning, and it was my Mom calling me to ask me if John and I were ready to go visit my son at the hospital. I told her that we couldn't go because I was sick and didn't want to infect my son. She bought the lie because I sounded sick due to the fact that I'd been up all night crying. Before she hung up she said that Scott's uncle Ty had called her for directions to my new place so that he could pick Mick up for a roofing job they had that morning.

Mick still had his eyes covered, and he was breathing slow and steady like he was sleeping, but I had the feeling that he'd been watching and listening to me while I was on the phone. As I

scooted back to my corner he asked, in a low voice that sounded very alert, who had been on the phone. I told him that it was my Mom and that Ty was on his way over to pick him up. Mick said that was good because he could have Ty help him move John's body later that evening. I asked him where he would take John, and he told me that I didn't need to worry about that. "All you have to do is not answer the door until Ty and I get back. If anyone asks, John went out last night with some friends and hasn't come back yet." He asked me if I understood. I told him that I did. He got up and went downstairs to wait for Ty, leaving me alone in the bedroom.

I didn't know why I didn't use this opportunity to at least dial 911, let it ring once and hang up. They would've called back or sent a patrol car to see what was wrong. Then I would have been safe and this nightmare would be over. But I didn't call the police. I didn't do anything except sit there waiting for Ty to show up. Around 8:15 there was a knock on the door and I got up from my corner and walked out to the top of the stairs. I was glad that the bathroom door was shut and that I couldn't see the mayhem in there. Mick looked through the blinds and saw that it was Ty. When he let Ty in I could tell he was excited. Mick was fidgety, running his fingers through his hair, shifting from one foot to the other, rubbing his hands against the thighs of his pants.

Mick told Ty that he had something important to show him in the upstairs bathroom. Ty was impatient and told Mick that he didn't have time for this. They were already late for the job they had to do. But Mick was persistent and told Ty as he was walking up the stairs that there was a dead body up there, and he needed Ty's help moving the body. By now I had backed my way into my bedroom, and I was looking out the cracked bedroom door. Mick went into the bathroom first and reluctantly Ty followed. A few seconds later, Ty backed out of the bathroom, white as a sheet. He turned his head in my direction, and I cracked the bedroom door open just enough to stick my head out and mouth to him, "Help me." He told me not to worry and then took his sleeve and wiped his fingerprints off the bathroom doorknob. Mick came out, and I

slinked back into my bedroom, but the door was still cracked. Mick told me that he and Ty would be back later that night to take care of everything. He reminded me not to answer the door unless it was him or Ty, and that if anyone called to ask about John, to tell them that he had gone off with friends last night and hadn't come home yet. I dutifully nodded my head and watched Mick and Ty go down the stairs and out the front door. It took me a few minutes to get the courage to go downstairs to see if the front door was locked, but I did and it was.

I went back upstairs into my bedroom and locked the bedroom door behind me. I laid down in John's sleeping bag with his leather jacket as a pillow. I don't know how long I laid there before the phone started ringing. When I answered, it was John's boss asking where he was. I stuck to what Mick had told me to say and told him that I was worried that he hadn't come back yet. He told me, "Don't worry, John's probably sleeping it off," and "he'll be home soon."

As I hung up the phone, I wondered to myself why I didn't just tell the truth and that made me start crying again. I argued with myself over and over again to call the police and if not the police, then someone, anyone, and ask for help.

It was probably 45 minutes or an hour after Ty and Mick left when there was a heavy knocking at the front door. I tried looking out my bedroom window, but I couldn't see over the small balcony so as slowly and quietly as I could, I went down the stairs to peek out the blinds of the living room window to see who it was.

It was the police.

All at once I felt anxious and relieved. It took me a good while to gain the courage to open the front door, but when I finally did I was instantly consumed with fear and doubt. There were two male police officers. The dark-haired one said that they had a report of someone seriously injured on the premises and could they please come in and have a look around?

For some reason my response was to tell them that I was on Section 8 and couldn't have anyone living with me. The dark-haired cop said that they still needed to check the premises. I

opened the door wider and stood with my back against the wall. The officers stepped through the doorway, into the living room, and just kind of looked around. I lowered my head and said, “He’s upstairs.”

The dark-haired cop went up the stairs to look around while the blonde cop stayed downstairs with me. Leaving the front door open, I walked over to the dining room area and the blonde cop followed me, looking around. Then out of nowhere the dark-haired cop started yelling from upstairs, “Sure as shit! Sure as shit! He’s up here!”

Up until that point I had been holding it together, but as I heard those words it was like the flood gates opened, and I started crying, deep racking sobs. I didn’t know how I did it, through all the blurry tears, but I managed to get to the phone in the kitchen and dial my Mom.

As soon as she picked up on her end, I blurted out, “John is dead and the police are here.”

“What?”

“John is dead and the police is here.”

In a very still and calm voice, she asked for me to hand the phone to the officer.

I did as she asked then went to a corner of my dining room where some of my son’s items were. I grabbed his yellow baby blanket and sat in the corner sobbing into it.

Reality became a blur.

I knew several cops were walking in and out of my apartment doing whatever they needed to do. I knew they must have been talking with me and asking me questions, but I don’t remember any of it. Finally though, a male detective stood in front of me. I was still a mess, still crying uncontrollably into my son’s baby blanket. He knelt down and said in a very kind voice that he needed to take me to the station to get my statement. I looked up at him with swollen eyes and asked him if I could say goodbye. He told me that he couldn’t let me see the body. He held out his hand and helped me stand. He put one hand on the small of my back and with the other held my left hand, guiding me to the front door. I

walked in a haze all the way to his car. He opened the passenger door, gently guided me to the seat, and softly shut the door, coming around the front of the car to get in. He asked if I minded if he smoked. I said, "Sure," and asked if I could have one, too. My hands were shaky so he lit my cigarette. He started the car and drove me to the station. All the way there all I did was smoke and whimper, not speaking at all.

I guess I was feeling sort of numb and relieved at the same time. When we got to the station, he walked me in the same way that he walked me out of my apartment. We entered a hallway and at the end of it was a large room with Ty sitting in a chair facing the open door. Ty looked up as he heard us coming and looked very sad. He said through the door, "Sorry."

I don't know what he was sorry for; he helped me just like I asked him. I told him, "Thank you," as I passed his door. The detective took me to a small room with a table and two chairs in it to talk.

He asked me questions about the night, and I answered as best I could. He didn't make me feel threatened or defensive. I honestly thought he was trying to understand the crazy events of that night. The only thing I thought was odd was when he asked if I cared if he recorded our conversation. I told him, "I don't mind, I have nothing to hide."

After a couple hours he stopped the conversation and told me he had to go take care of something. After he left the room I got down on my knees and actually prayed, out loud, for God to help me and guide me through this situation.

About 15 or 20 minutes later another officer came into the room. She Mirandized me and told me that I was being arrested on charges of being an accessory to first-degree murder. I stared at her for a long time before her words sunk in. All I could do was shake my head in disbelief.

## EPILOGUE

Dakota is my miracle. He is now nineteen and getting ready to go to college. I'm so proud. I want to express that even while being in prison I've been able to raise a caring, thoughtful young man. In the past, I've only seen the Parole Board because my son wanted me to. I didn't have any hope of it actually changing anything. Now, I'm asking for something specific—25 to life with time-served and ten years' parole.

I've gotten my GED. I've had every single job in the prison, except maintenance. I am the lead worker in the Aquaculture Fish Farm here, one of the best jobs in the facility. We raise the fish from fry (babies) until adulthood, approximately 9-14 months. It's a nurturing experience, similar to a pregnancy.

I'm not worthless, regardless of what society says. I am a human being. It took years for me to get to that point. I've been helped by the little things, like people telling me that I inspire them. I'm constantly telling people that this may be their prison sentence for now, but they're going to leave here and be productive members of society.

I'm not a woman who allows men to control her anymore. I can think for myself now. I would not allow something like that to happen in my life again. I'm not the same woman who walked into the backdoors of prison years ago.