

Chasing Normal

A true story of one woman's determination
to overcome childhood trauma



BECK THOMPSON

Chasing Normal

A Memoir

Beck Thompson

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Any and all mistakes or typos that have escaped the thorough editing process are unintentional.

Note to the Reader

Please be aware that this book contains reference to incest and sexual abuse. It may be disturbing for many readers. If you have been sexually abused, this book may trigger extreme emotions and re-traumatise you. Please be aware of this before you read this book. And of course, please seek help and support if you need it.

To my husband, for holding my hand.

Foreword

Associate Professor, Dr Judith Howard

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Australia.

Every time I read Rebekah's story – I tear up! I am not one for doing this, as I have grown very resilient over the many years I have worked in this field of trauma-aware education. I have heard so many stories of harm done to people, young and older, and have met and known many of these people. What keeps me working so hard in this field, are people like Rebekah!

Rebekah is the epitome of someone who I refer to in my work as becoming more and more “resolved” from the trauma she endured, as time goes by. This has not happened easily or without an extreme amount of endurance and hard work, but people like Rebekah are the evidence that – what we do and how we support our children and young people who have lived through complex trauma – particularly in education settings – is so very important!

I teared up again when I read Rebekah's manuscript for this book. I believe this is because I know the (mostly) resolved and adult Rebekah, a beautiful young woman who exhibits such strength and passion for caring for others. It sincerely hurts me to read about the vulnerable and victimised child Rebekah and the long-suffering younger adult, Rebekah.

However, Rebekah has chosen to openly share with you, both the child and the younger adult Rebekah, in the hope that this will encourage others who have lived through complex childhood trauma, to fight for their healing and for all the goodies in life that they need and deserve – health, love, family, career, calm, happiness

Rebekah is a courageous survivor of complex trauma- who is determined to prevent any intergenerational transmission of this harm by being a great (informed and responsive) mother. She is also someone who is determined to heal herself, and to be her best self, so that she can then support the healing of others.

Her memoir is an admirable project – to do just that – to support healing in others. This project would not have come easily, as it is no small thing to recall the details of suffering and to analyse one's self and one's experiences to the degree that Rebekah has done. I feel so privileged to write this introduction to Rebekah's heartfelt story and I look forward to hearing of many more great chapters in Rebekah's life!

Chapter 1

Our small shabby, white weatherboard house looked like it had been plonked dead centre of the good-sized block in our narrow Melbourne suburban street. It left ample space out the back for an overgrown veggie patch—that successfully grew weeds and not much more—and had a rusty, decrepit tin garage off to the side. Puffs of blackened smoke regularly billowed from our backyard incinerator, where we tossed domestic rubbish to burn for hours on end.

Most houses in my street were single storey weatherboards, with just a few double-story status symbols towering over little houses like mine. One imposing brown brick double-story a couple of houses down appeared so tall it almost blocked the sky view from my tiny bedroom window. Sometimes I wondered what it was like to live in such a big house. Did those kids have their own rooms, or did they have to sleep in bunks like I did? How many rooms did they have that they needed another entire floor? There must have been lots of space for play and maybe even to do cartwheels without knocking into anything.

Mum was just twenty-two years old and already busy with my brother and sister—born fourteen months apart—when I came along in June 1977, exactly two-and-a-half years to the day after my eldest brother. Three-and-a-half years later, Mum and Dad would have another son and round our family unit out to six people crammed into that shabby shoebox weatherboard.

Mum's only ambition was to be a mother. She happily stayed at home to look after her four children and tend to the wifely duties, while Dad went to work, as it was 'supposed' to be.

With little room to play inside, Mum and Dad scooted us outside as soon as we'd chowed down our breakfast. Not that it was a bad thing. We got to play unencumbered all day with friends in the street, or my sister and I would host delightful tea parties under the shady tree out the front of our house whenever there was no school. Sometimes my siblings and I took turns riding the billy cart Dad hand-built up and down our street until we grew tired of pushing each other. One time I accidentally let my foot get caught in the front wheel and my brother had to carry me back to Mum to fix me up. My blood left little drips on the footpath that stayed there until the next rain.

Play was running through the sprinkler on a hot summer day or peddling my half-rusted metal trike around the front yard with my favourite stuffed blue chook toy wedged under my arm. Most of the time, my siblings and I could roam as far as we wanted as long as we stayed in the street, only leaving if we let Mum or Dad know, and we stuck together. Our days were fun and adventurous. Our imaginations ran wild and long until the sun met the horizon and then we'd trundle home for dinner, showers, and bed. It was the ultimate freedom for a kid with next to no worries.

While us kids got along for the most part, my parents were polar opposites in almost every way imaginable. Not exactly a match made in Heaven. They met at a police ball, and after only three short months, they married on the suggestion and approval of their parents. Perhaps that explained why I never saw them relate in a loving way; they barely knew each other. There was no shared laughter over sweet dating memories. No cuddles or affectionate touches as they passed each other by. Nothing flirtatious, and never any compliments or adoring looks from across the room that us kids could get squeamish over.

Almost like a betrothed couple who barely tolerated one another, they existed in the roles society expected of them and carried on, but there was

no genuine happiness between them.

Mum was the nurturer epitomised: subservient to her motherly duties, taking care of her children, prepping school lunches, keeping her brood dressed and fed, and for the most part, keeping us out of Dad's hair. So softly spoken, rarely—if ever—did I hear Mum yell or lose her temper. Her voice lingered like a warm embrace. She was the one I went to for hugs on a sleepless night, comfort when I was sick, or to rest in the nook of her arm in front of the TV when the bogeyman who sometimes lurked under my bed terrified me in the dark.

With Mum, I felt safe, secure, and loved.

Dad, on the other hand, was a stern and serious man. Not much for piggyback rides or goofy play or shenanigans. More of a do-as-you're-told, toe-the-line kind of a Dad. Even his dress sense matched his strict, controlled persona: ironed short-sleeved shirt, knee-length shorts, sandals, and knee-high socks. He was always clean-shaven, with his short dark hair neatly combed to one side. Nothing about Dad was sloppy or unkempt. Not ever.

He had high expectations of his wife and his young children's behaviour that killed any hope of laughter and joy when he was around. There seemed to be a rule for just about every step we took. Mum knew, either by way of a menacing glare or a stern talking to, there were rules to follow, standards to be met, and ways you did not question. The house was her 'job' to keep clean and tidy before Dad, "the boss", came home from work. Any trace of child's play scattered on the floor or dishes stacked in the sink was a sure-fire way to unleash Dad's scornful tongue.

Even in the absence of his coarsely unsympathetic tone, Dad's presence could frost the warm air the moment he entered a room. He was not one to tolerate nonsense, disrespect, or unruliness. He was quick to anger when our innocent attempts to appease him failed, and along with disobedience or insubordination, simple errors were matched with strict discipline that

sometimes meant a belting with his thick leather belt. If we argued or fought with each other—as kids often did—he’d bang our heads together, leaving us to cry quietly and sometimes wonder what had happened. Rarely were we afforded the grace of a mistake, a learning curve, or a gentle guiding hand as we navigated our childhood.

There was never a moment to relax in a house dictated by order and obedience. Time spared was time wasted, so evenings were not for sitting lazily in front of the TV—“the idiot box”, as Dad called it—but for learning. He bought a set of special children’s illustrated encyclopaedias to study things our young minds “should” know. Often these “sessions” ran like a Q&A trivia type night. We were expected to keep up and follow Dad as he read and lectured us on a topic I barely understood, and it was our job to answer questions he’d throw out at a moment’s notice. Often, I’d tune out, dreaming, gazing around the room, wishing I was asleep or at least reading a more interesting book. If Dad caught me staring into space, he’d shout out, “Hey, dream boat, come back to us, pay attention!”

Saturdays were for cleaning and tidying around our already tidy house. Sundays were for rare days out to an annual show or watching his favourite footy team on the telly. Only very occasionally did my father break from rigid, uptight Dad. If he did, it was brief and oddly out of the blue: laughing at something random on TV, blaring Beatles or Moody Blues music on his record player, or after a couple of beers from a can, bellowing out “Carn the Blues” while watching his favourite Aussie football team score a rare goal before pulling one of his kids in for a bear hug. If we were quick enough, we could latch on and enjoy a rare fun-Dad moment, before he switched back to serious old Dad mode. I’m certain my body even straightened up automatically as he did.

Though I never saw Dad physically abuse Mum, at times Mum’s droopy eyes and down-turned mouth told me she’d incurred Dad’s wrath for disobeying him. Sometimes she’d emerge despondently from the kitchen

or the bedroom with red, watery eyes. She would never argue back. She took whatever came silently, like penance. Sometimes an argument would erupt into a screaming match, and as if my older brother knew where it was headed, he'd quickly usher us outside to play farther down the street. The yelling grew louder and louder, with what sounded like shards of ice being thrown across the room. Their voices would muffle and go quiet, but we knew not to return until the noise died completely or until my father slammed the front door and drove off in his car.

In the aftermath of these arguments, Mum never took it out on her children, even if the fight was over something we had or hadn't done. Her eyes wore her sadness but also her love for us. If nothing else, we knew we were her joy, her life, and we were worth the pain behind the tears she shed.

As I grew, I noticed Mum's whole demeanour would switch instantly from relaxed while Dad was out, to cowering like a child the minute he walked through the door. She would wait silently for his nod of approval that her home duties had satisfied his high standards and then there was relief that she'd avoided being yelled at. She wouldn't have to endure his cold shoulder or angry glares for the evening.

While she stayed between the lines almost exclusively, she broke free from the person she held herself to when Christmas, Easter, or birthdays came around. I don't know if it was an unspoken defiance, or a joy no male authority could contain, but she revelled in these celebrations. She became childlike, happy, excited; a far cry from the obedience of every other day.

At Christmas she'd eagerly put up the plastic tree, meticulously hanging each ornament with a wide smile as each piece completed a perfect picture for her. She played carols and openly sang along. Sometimes when my father was absent at night, she'd let me stay up and watch Christmas movies, while during the day she'd leave the television on to play continuous Christmas cartoons.

She seemed a different person—a happier, more relaxed person. She delighted in sharing with her children a simple joy in an otherwise structured and disciplined life. It was a time to feel alive, regardless of the watchful and critical eye of my father. She loved the element of surprise that placing presents under the tree brought, too. Even on a low income, she made sure to budget, so we never missed out. I remember an unbridled happiness on her face as she watched us open them one-by-one. I don't recall much more of my younger years. My mother often paints a very sweet picture of the little girl I was. If I asked, she'd say I was a quiet, timid child who rarely misbehaved.

I know I loved going to school, following in the footsteps of my older brother and sister, walking under their guardianship every morning. I was four-and-a-half when I started. With four children under seven, Mum was pretty keen for me to start as soon as possible, relieving her of a child to look after during the day.

At school, I was the shy, well-behaved student, always eager to help my teachers set up the next activity. Sometimes I'd even beg to stay inside at break times just so I could help out. School opened up my world and sparked my lifelong love of learning and reading. Mum was an avid reader herself, a trait I believe I inherited. There was something about writing stories I loved, imagining worlds and characters, where time and space disappeared.

My teachers even made special mention of my writing ability that "surpassed my years". If I wasn't eagerly writing my next story, I was sitting wide-eyed up front on the classroom floor, soaking up the story read enticingly by my teacher, or I'd be the first in line to visit the school library for story time and the chance to read and borrow from the endless shelves of colourful picture books. With a book in my hand, I could daydream and imagine myself within the story, escaping to beautiful places. Escaping to anywhere.

Once, after story time in the library, we were asked to imagine and then draw a picture of what animal we would be if we could be anything. I dreamed I was a bird so I could fly. Completely free to go anywhere, anytime, without anyone holding me back. I often dreamed of escaping, wondering what it must feel like for a bird to be uninhibited.

Tuckshop Monitor was the prized task of the list of classroom jobs to get. Two children from each grade were chosen to deliver the red handled wire basket filled with lunch orders from the tuckshop that smelled of delicious oven baked pies and sweet pastry treats. If I was lucky enough, I had a lunch order too. My choice was always the same—a meat pie and a mini can of soft drink. It was a treat and a break from the same old sandwich and fruit Mum packed. Especially when she went through a phase of making her own bread that tasted like a hard, dried up crust of yeast. On those days, I'd deliberately ask for cheese and vegemite, just so I had something to eat, while I threw the bread out.

Once a week, I watched my older sister get dressed in her Brownies uniform: a brown pinafore, brown beret and yellow skivvy. She'd joined a year ago, and I was keen as mustard to become a Brownie Girl, just like her, as soon as I turned seven in a few months.

When Mum and I walked to pick up my sister, I'd leap up the steps and squish my face against the window to watch all the Brownies chanting and sign off to their leader. I couldn't wait to be a part of it. One day, as Mum and I waited outside the hall, I asked her when I could join. A question I'd asked her a hundred times before.

She turned to me slowly, with a pained look of disappointment. "Unfortunately, you won't be joining Brownies, Rebekah," she said apologetically.

"Why, Mum?" I whined back.

"Because we're moving to live with your grandfather in another part of Melbourne."

“But why, Mum?” I urged. She wasn’t talking about *her* father, Pop. Trips to see him were really long, driving past bare paddocks, and trees as tall as the sky lined the roads for hours and hours.

Mum didn’t say anything else. She just looked ahead, purposely avoiding my long-drawn face and my own disappointed expression. As the news sank into my young mind, I peered through the glass doors. I saw all the Brownies happily chanting their goodbye song, realising I would never get to be a Brownie, ever. It wasn’t fair. I wanted to cry.

Over the next few weeks, Mum and Dad packed up the house, emptying it of everything familiar and mine. All of the furniture was thrown away. All of my special things, my plush chook, my blue metal trike, my ABC book, and my most favourite bed and bath toy, all tossed into a skip bin. Why could I not take my things with me to the new house? Was it even smaller than our house now?

I never went back to my school. No chance to say goodbye to my teachers, my friends. There was no closure, no time to look back on everything I knew. Now suddenly, I was moving to a new place with a grandfather I hardly knew.

I was leaving everything behind and starting a new life, and I didn’t even know why.

Chapter 2

True to my mother's bombshell that afternoon at Brownies, a few weeks later, our car pulled into a long driveway, past the large, white wrought-iron gates affixed to two white pillars, each with a concrete lion head mounted on it.

At first glance, 'The House'—as I would come to refer to it—looked so grand. My eyes widened as I took in the large-scale, two-storey Victorian-style home. This house was like nothing I'd ever seen before—a complete contrast to the small, shabby weatherboard we'd just left. This might actually be an adventure after all.

As I reviewed the pale exterior, the double-storey balcony with its intricate wrought-iron lattice between the second-floor balcony posts, the asymmetrical bay windows, one above each other, excitement bubbled in my stomach knowing this would be my new home. It looked so fancy, like something out of a fairy tale, with its strategically placed trees and manicured shrubs planted around the large, lush green garden. Along the front of the House were half a dozen tall green conifers, like they were deliberately planted to create a private screen.

I imagined all the games we'd play in the spacious garden and all the tea parties I'd have sprawled out on a blanket amongst the large shrubs. The long concrete driveway would be ideal for riding a bike and skipping with ropes, or even the wooden billy cart Dad made. *Was it packed?* I wondered briefly.

My father pulled up to the double garage doors around the back of the house, well hidden behind the grand façade so as not to spoil the initial impressions.

Promptly I was ushered out of the car with my siblings, where four women and nine children of various ages—all standing in a perfectly straight line, in military-like fashion—waited to greet us. *Who were they all?* I wondered. Confused, I looked up to Mum for an explanation, but she remained silent, keeping what appeared to be a forced smile across her face. With so much uncertainty, I desperately wanted to cling to something familiar, like my favourite chook toy, but I didn't have it with me. So I clutched the side of my dress in a tight grip and quietly hoped my mum would explain everything to me soon.

Shortly after arriving, an austere but strikingly tall woman called Agnes walked us into the House and showed us our new bedrooms. Agnes was my grandfather's second wife. She was very slim, with mousy brown hair that sat just above her shoulders. Dressed in long black pants, a long-sleeved top, and a pinafore that draped to her knees, her clothes made her look like a boy. One dark brown mole sat obtrusively above the crook of her mouth and moved every time she spoke.

On the way to my new bedroom, I walked through the biggest laundry I had ever seen. A gigantic commercial-sized washing machine sat right next to the laundry door and on my left was a dryer so big it nearly reached the ceiling. A large rectangular table centred the next room, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling built-in cupboards. A grey double bowl trough sat under the only window in the room. The concrete floor chilled the room, giving it a cold, industrial feel.

"Here is where you'll be sleeping, Rebekah." Agnes pointed to the top bunk bed. Yes! Finally. I'd always been on the bottom bunk back at my old house.

My new room was small, given I'd be sharing it with two other girls, with just enough space for a wardrobe, a single bed under the window, and a bright red bunk on the opposite side. Everything in this room, like the

laundry, was perfectly in its place. It was hard to believe a child could keep it so clean.

Where were all the kids' things? Even at my old house there'd be full toy boxes tucked into the corners. *Why are there no books?* The perfectly made beds had plain woollen blankets; no pretty designs or 'Holly Hobbie' on the doona cover, like I used to have.

Where are all the toys, the shoes? Where are all the storybooks, the pencils, the dolls, and the teddies? Maybe they're kept in the wardrobe? Perhaps this is how they lived? Perhaps they aren't allowed to have their toys or books out? Even my dad let me have some things out some of the time. *Maybe they cleaned up before we got here?*

So far, I'd been shown *my* room, the large boys' room next to mine, the large laundry, and the bathroom and the toilet all the girls had to share. The boys' bathroom was just outside another door in the laundry room. There had to be so much more to be seen in this huge house. Where was the lounge room with the TV? Perhaps, I wondered, we'd be shown soon.

We walked outside the lower floor of the house and up a flight of stairs that ran just above the laundry door below and shuffled in through another white door that was much fancier than the laundry door with two pretty Victorian patterned glass panels. *Maybe this was the beautiful part of the house I'd first seen?*

The moment I walked inside, an eye-blinding burst of light shone from the distant window ahead, illuminating the white floor tiles and crisp white walls around me, uncovering not a single trace of dirt or dust in sight. No stains, kids' hand marks, nothing. Everything was so pristine white it reflected the sunlight. How could it be that so many kids lived here and yet everything was so spotless? Much more spotless than my old home, and Mum did such a good job there.

The hallway led to an upstairs kitchen. *Another kitchen?* I'd already spotted a kitchen on the ground floor when I'd first arrived. How could it

be that there were two kitchens in one house? The upstairs kitchen, I learned, was the main eating area for all the children and a few women to supervise us all. It looked too small for the number of children eating here, especially with a large rectangular table taking up most of the space and a breakfast bench with four stools crammed into the corner.

Agnes's tone suddenly became serious, warning us never to use the door next to the kitchen or use the internal staircase leading down to the bottom kitchen unless we were given permission to do so.

Directly at the bottom of the internal stairs was a beautiful formal dining room so fancy it looked like a museum of antiques. Its plush white carpet oozed a cosy feel, a stark contrast to the cold, hard laundry and my bedroom floor. A long antique mahogany dining table centred the room with intricately carved chairs and cushioned white seats. A grand mahogany buffet took up an entire length of wall. So shiny and fancy was the polished furniture it reflected the light here too and bounced off each piece throughout the room creating little sparkles. Grand as it was, I'd finally spotted the only thing I was looking for: a TV. *Surely this was not where all the children would watch TV? There wasn't even a couch!*

As I wondered how thirteen children would squeeze into one ill-fitting room to watch TV, Agnes moved us into the large ground floor kitchen where the smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the air. This kitchen was huge. One big, long bench stretched across the room, with multiple ovens and cupboards that ran from one side of the wall to the other. A large fridge with clear doors showed everything inside, and around the corner a little nook housed a large stainless-steel meat slicer.

Permission was a word Agnes repeated a lot as she walked us through different parts of The House. Where we could go, where we couldn't. What we were allowed to touch and what parts of The House were off limits. Maybe this house would not be such an adventure after all. None of the kids were following behind us, giggling, or running around us as we

toured. Everything seemed bleak, silent, and ordered. How could it be that a house full of children was so quiet?

No one had yet mentioned play, where the toys were kept, or where we could run around. There was no invitation to grab a piece of fruit or snack when I was hungry. *Can I just help myself to fruit? Can I go and open the fridge?* Still no mention of when we could watch TV.

I had so many questions about my new life, my new home, but no answers. Maybe Mum would answer them soon enough. I stayed quiet.

Later that evening, everyone ate their dinner in silence. The children didn't chat amongst themselves, nor ask me any questions. No one asked what we might get up to tomorrow or sniggered at something funny. It was all so serious. As soon as dinner was finished, like well-trained soldiers, the children began collecting dishes and tidying up, while I was led to my bedroom to get ready for bed. When the other children came down, there was no whinging, no night-time chaos, no running around to delay bedtime, no reading stories, no jumping on each other's beds, laughing and giggling. They were all so well behaved. It was frightening.

As I tucked myself into bed, I peered over the bunk rail, looking for my mum. She was nowhere to be seen. Would she be coming down to tuck me in and kiss me goodnight as she always did?

I had not seen my father since he left us that morning, and I didn't know when or if he was coming back. He didn't say. He'd only told us to behave and then drove away in our car. I was trying so hard to be good. To be quiet and obedient.

In the silence, I laid still, waiting for my mum. Listened intently for her footsteps to draw closer. The final night-light switched off moments before the sound of the sliding door closed. Pitch dark and silent, I felt my bottom lip pout, realising Mum was not coming. I desperately wanted my mum to tuck me in and tell me everything was going to be okay here. Just to feel assured she was still with me in this big House. To feel her warm

breath on my forehead as she kissed me goodnight, as she always did. I pulled my blanket up to my face and hugged it tightly. Would Mum ever come down and tuck me in, or was this how it was going to be from now on?

Whatever peace and order I noticed the day before swiftly changed as I woke the next morning to women bellowing orders from outside my bedroom.

Agnes stormed in and ripped my bed blankets from me. Was there an emergency? I rubbed my eyes, still half asleep, as the two other girls in my room moved swiftly to make their beds.

“Hurry, Rebekah. Get up and make your bed,” Agnes yelled.

What has happened?

Sarah, I learned, was Agnes’s eldest daughter and was sixteen. She slept below me on the bottom bunk. She smiled reassuringly as I looked to her for answers, a reason for this mad rush, shouting, and noise.

“Rebekah,” she spoke softly, “Come down and get dressed. Here.” She pointed to two drawers at the base of our bunk. “These are your clothes. We need to get ready for our chores.”

Our chores? I looked to the window where the blind had already been lifted. The sun had barely risen. *What time is it? And why do I need to do chores? When do I get to have breakfast? Do we get to watch TV this morning?*

I opened my new clothes drawer, and nothing looked familiar. Where were *my* clothes? Where were my jumpers, my t-shirts, my dresses? Had they not been packed? I walked over to the wardrobe, opened the sliding door, and saw nothing of mine in there either.

I popped my head outside my bedroom, hoping Mum was there somewhere. Instead, Agnes stood glaring at me.

“Where are my clothes? Has my mum got them?”

She stomped towards me. “Rebekah, your clothes are in here.” She pointed to the drawers Sarah had shown me. “This is what you are wearing. Now hurry up and get dressed!”

“But, but,” I said, stumbling on my words. “Where are *my* clothes? Where is my mum?”

Agnes turned swiftly, her eyes piercing me like daggers, and shouted, “Rebekah, hurry up and get dressed. Don’t you dare ask me again. Now hurry up!”

Fighting back tears, I hurriedly dressed in the foreign clothes. I was so confused. Why was she yelling at me? What did I do wrong? Nothing made sense, and yet, I’d be in more trouble if they saw me cry. I just knew it.

After dressing, I scurried to the laundry, where the other children were already lined up. Agnes, who looked to be in the same clothes as yesterday, addressed us like young army cadets in training: harsh, loud, and cold. While I stood, frozen, trying to take in her instructions, every so often my eyes wandered around the room, looking, wondering why Mum still wasn’t here. Why hadn’t she come down to wake me or at least say good morning? I wanted to see her familiar face as I’d done every morning and hug her. Where was she now? I missed her.

“Rebekah,” Agnes yelled again, interrupting my chaotic thoughts. “You have two jobs every morning before school. These must be done quickly and properly before you come up for breakfast. If you are late or do not do your job properly, you will miss out on breakfast and go to school hungry. You have enough time to get up and get your chores done, just like everybody else.”

Chores? Like a penny dropping, now it all made sense. The spotless house, the manicured gardens, the kids obediently collecting dishes, the order, and the quiet children. No mention of play. Now I knew why. There would be no playtime. This house was super clean because the

children worked 'round the clock like prisoners to keep it looking spic and span.

Every child had chores here. They varied depending on our age and level of trust. Chores included wiping the skirting around the hallway, making the women's beds in the front section of the House, sweeping the driveway, raking leaves, watering the garden, cleaning the bathrooms, sweeping floors, washing dishes, and prepping food with the ladies in the kitchen. Enough jobs were handed out to keep every part of The House consistently spotless.

I must have drawn the shortest straw with my chores. One was to clean the narrow space behind the dryer and the other was to sweep the small path between the laundry door and the garage door.

As quickly as the meeting was over, everyone quickly disappeared to start their tasks. Agnes stood over me, pointing her finger towards the dryer where I was to begin my first job.

I scrubbed as quickly as I could, matching the furious pace of the children working around me. Breakfast was at seven am, giving me twenty-five minutes to get both my jobs done, checked, and ticked off. I'd not eaten since six the night before, and I was starving.

When I thought I'd finished, I asked Agnes to check my first job. I'd done my best, but I wasn't sure how well I needed to work. I'd helped Mum and Dad out at home before, but my jobs were never henpecked like this. This was all so new to me.

Seeing the children still working hard, sweeping floors, tidying things up, and scrubbing, I worried I'd finished too soon. Had I done this too quickly? How much time do you really need to scrub behind a machine with only four inches of space? Surely it wasn't supposed to take long. Besides, what was the point of cleaning somewhere no one ever saw? Surely *this* was not a big deal.

Agnes inspected my work carefully. She nit-picked at some dust I'd missed, and sternly warned to improve next time or I'd go without my breakfast. I nodded, waiting earnestly for my signal to hurry on to the next job.

Breakfast was the first time I'd seen my mother since we were given the tour the day before. While she stood at the kitchen sink washing a mountain of dishes, she glanced over at me and winced a half-smile before quickly turning back to her own chores. She made no attempt to come over and hug or even speak to me. I could only sit and watch her as I ate my disgusting semolina porridge—it tasted like sloppy, grainy, sand mush—wondering why she was not speaking to me. What was happening here?

Just like the chores meeting earlier, the children were given another dressing down of the rules for walking to school. School? Where was I going? Who would be my new grade two teacher? Would Mum walk me to my new school and into my classroom to meet my new teacher?

Again, no questions were answered because there was no opportunity to ask. All children had to walk to school in pairs. Even beyond The House gates, even without an adult watching, we were expected to walk in straight lines so we didn't look like "brown cows in a paddock", whatever that meant. The same rule applied at home time, though we also had a curfew. We were to be home no later than a quarter to four. This, we were warned, was plenty of time if we followed the same route to school and we didn't dawdle back. Of course, there'd be consequences if we were just one minute late. I wasn't privy to what those consequences would be, but I got the feeling it wouldn't be good.

I didn't know if what I had woken to—the order, urgency, the jobs, the yelling—was a daily thing or whether this morning routine was a necessity given the number of children to be organised before school. Maybe things would be different after school? Perhaps we would play until dinnertime? Maybe I'd get a chance to see Mum and share my first day at school, even

watch some TV together? My toys I missed were still nowhere to be seen, but I quietly hoped I'd be reunited with them soon.

My hopes were cruelly dashed when I came home after school to yet another meeting of more chores to be done until dinnertime and then bedtime shortly after eating.

Great! I grumbled as I tuned out Agnes's constant yelling. *Was she ever nice?* I wondered. I looked around at the other children. I waited for someone to at least whinge and moan how unfair it was! Why couldn't we play? When do we get to go outside and run around, play chase, have tea parties under one of the many trees in the yard or watch TV? But the children remained silent, like they were in some sort of weird trance, following every order like mindless robots.

No more games, no more play, no more TV, and as it seemed so far, no more mother. Now I understood why I never saw any toys of any kind, because there were none. Not a single book, bike, or anything indicating a child existed in this House. Every single part of my life in The House instantly revolved around order, structure, routine, and definitely no fun. Without any warning, without any explanation, my old life was gone. The House was like prison for kids, and the adults were our wardens.

So much of my life with Mum in our old home became memories too soon before their time. Seeing her first thing in the morning and the last person to tuck me into bed before sleep. Sitting on the kitchen bench, watching her bake, watching her eyes light up when we'd walk in from school. Making me a warm drink on a cold wintery day or running a warm bath when I'd come home soaking wet from a rainy day at school, were all still fresh in my mind and I tried to hold onto them because now, I couldn't even touch her. Forbidden from nestling in arms, to talk about my day, to sit on the kitchen bench as she prepared food while I shared a breakdown of my new school, my friends, and teacher. I couldn't go to her for anything anymore.

Mum was all I knew and now she was nothing to me. And it seemed I became nothing to her. Most of the time, we passed each other by, like perfect strangers, leaving me to stare into her distant eyes and wonder why she wasn't my mum anymore.

Did I do something wrong?

Despite being surrounded by so many children and adults, I'd never felt so alone with no one to cry to, no one to run to, and no one telling me why I was living in this new world.

Everything I was to learn in The House, I'd need to figure out on my own, never knowing where the boundaries were until I overstepped them and did something wrong. I now existed in a new world I knew nothing about, with no safety net—like my mum—no protection to fall back on.

Structure and order flourished like a well-oiled machine, thanks to an explicit hierarchy of power directed by my grandfather at the top, whom I was now ordered to call Dad, like all the other children, for reasons no one ever explained. He had complete control and the final word over all matters. Most of the decisions and actions concerning the children were authorised by Agnes, but often carried out by the lower ranking women.

Order of rank started to become clearer. I knew reasonably quickly who to take direct orders from, what their responsibilities were, who had authority, and who had none.

Out of the six women in The House, three of them were the higher-ranking women who were more like sister-wives and also mothers to eight of my grandfather's children. They did administrative things rather than menial tasks and household jobs. They were allowed to leave The House and drive the car. Almost exclusively, they spent their time in the front, more luxurious, part of The House. We didn't see much of these women, except for Agnes, who dealt with serious mistakes and misbehaviours, or when my grandfather sent her to deliver an urgent message that us kids needed to hear immediately.

The other three women at the bottom of the rank—like my mother—did not have sister-wife status. They got lumped with the most labouring crappy tasks: cleaning, scrubbing floors and preparing food for the entire household of twenty people, as well preparing special meals that my grandfather and Agnes requested. With virtually no authority or voice, they were expected to simply obey whatever orders were thrown at them.

An older lady with streaks of white and grey hair and a heavily wrinkled face sat a rank above my mother. Her name was Mildred. Her fearfully loud voice outdid her scrawny old frame, and aside from the laborious tasks, it was also Mildred's job to beat the children with a thin leather strap either when ordered directly or when Agnes couldn't do it herself. Seeing Mildred storm into a room with the belt in her hands was never a good sign.

Mum was tacked on to the bottom of this hierarchy ladder. She had no rank, authority, or input into the running of The House whatsoever. Not even when it came to her own children. She had no say in how we were treated at all, nor did she dare challenge our punishment.

Mildred constantly barked orders at Mum. She bellowed so often, I think she enjoyed treating Mum like a nuisance child. She gave Mum all the horrible jobs none of the other women wanted. Sometimes I'd see Mum hanging from the top floor, cleaning the outside windows with a petrified look on her face. Other times she'd be wiping the metal venetians, one silvery white length at a time, or on her hands and knees scrubbing every single tile on the large floors until they sparkled and the grout was back to white. Her every move was monitored, timed, and scrutinised by Mildred, who demanded nothing less than perfection, diligence, and obedience.

Mum tried so hard to keep everyone happy. Trying to obey everyone's instructions at once, she'd often get caught out trying to appease everyone. If she was found doing something she wasn't initially told to do, she'd be berated like a child and forced to kneel on the floor with her head

down while Mildred stood over her and screamed. Mildred would withhold Mum's rationed morning tea, or she'd have her meals restricted or taken away completely. Mum was constantly pulled in so many directions and controlled in every way imaginable. My heart ached seeing my own mother treated so badly. Despite yearning for my mum to rescue me, sometimes I wished I could have saved her, knowing she too was reduced to being treated like a wicked child.

There was also rank amongst the thirteen children in The House, though it was based on age, from eldest to youngest, and not so much who was favoured and who wasn't. But this rank was only ever enforced when we stood in a straight line for inspections or walked from one part of The House to another. Or sometimes, when it wasn't enough to have everything we did monitored or listened to, they'd assign our leaders—the child above us in age—to watch us like hawks and report back on all our wrongdoings to Agnes or Mildred at the end of each day.

Each night I would fall into my bed exhausted and defeated. This is not how other children had to live, so why did I? I wanted to ask my mother to take us away from The House, but how could I when I wasn't even supposed to talk to her and she acted like I was a stranger?

“Rebekah, Rebekah, come on, wake up. You have to get up.”

Strong, cold hands gripped my shoulders as I was shaken awake, a quiet voice urging me to get up quickly. As I blinked my sleepy eyelids, Agnes's face stared at me as she whispered, “Come on, Rebekah, up you get.”

It was very early Saturday morning and there was no school. I wasn't sure why I was being ushered out of bed. Both girls in my room were still asleep. *Why am I being woken ahead of everyone else?*

Agnes pulled the blankets back and ushered me to quietly climb down from the bunk. “Quickly,” she whispered. “Here, put on your robe and

follow me.”

A chilly silence filled the air. No one, not a single child, was up. No washing machines ran, no food being prepared. No gentle slam of doors or thump of feet on concrete floors.

Agnes remained silent as we came to the door adjacent to the top kitchen. The very door I remembered was off limits. She knocked softly and then paused before gesturing me to walk in when it opened.

Stepping into the dimly lit room, I immediately felt the softness of the carpet as my feet sunk into the lush pile, a complete contrast to the cold, hard, concrete floor I'd become accustomed to. The far end of the room revealed the only source of light, coming from a bathroom, allowing me to see two single beds in front of me, both adorned with floral bedspreads. Nothing quite like the plain, old, weathered blankets I had but nothing special either.

Agnes directed me to the bathroom with what looked like two toilets, but one had an unusual looking oval porcelain bowl similar in height to the toilet but with taps at one end.

“Remove your clothes, Rebekah,” Agnes demanded.

Confused, I turned around and waited for more, for an explanation.

“Hurry up, Rebekah, quick. Take everything off.”

As I hurriedly obeyed, I looked for my mum. *Where was she?*

I'd never undressed in front anyone except my mother, and now I was stripping bare in front of women I barely knew.

The tiled floor numbed my feet as I wrapped my arms around my cold, naked body.

Mary filled up a porcelain bowl, occasionally checking the temperature with her fingers. I'd seen Mary a few times. She was mother to six of the children in The House and the only one I ever saw hug her children and speak warm and lovingly to them. Being higher ranked, a sister-wife, she was one of the few women allowed to leave the house. She dressed in pretty

blouses, pencil skirts, and high heels when she was going out. Her thick, black, wavy hair bounced around her shoulders. Her trademark bright red lipstick coloured an otherwise gloomy room.

“Rebekah, come and sit. Just put your bum here.” Mary positioned me at the end of the bowl to allow my legs to hang over the edge.

What is happening? I wondered again.

Agnes vigorously began washing my private parts with a bar of soap, nudging me farther forward to wash my bottom before I was abruptly lifted off the bowl and onto my feet before both Mary and Agnes worked quickly to dry my body. My eyes now darted around the room for Mum and my confusion began to turn to fear.

“Put your dressing gown back on and follow me, Rebekah,” Agnes instructed.

She led me to a new door. Once opened, there were two identical sets of four stairs, one on the right and on the left. We moved to the stairs leading right, to another door, where Agnes knocked and waited again.

Agnes walked in after a short time, leaving the door ajar while she spoke quietly to someone inside. Moments later, she opened the door. “Rebekah, come in.”

Nervously, I tiptoed in. Immediately to my right, I noticed a dark, wood-stained, shiny dressing table with a large mirror making the room look double in size. Thick twisted timber edged the mirror.

As I turned to my left, my grandfather lay bare chested in bed alongside another woman, Linda. Both wore what appeared to be warm and welcoming smiles, like they were expecting me. I wondered if I had done something wrong and was about to be admonished before all the women of The House. It must have been bad. I must have been bad.

Linda was second in rank to Agnes and the older sister to Mary. Her seniority kept her from household duties and my section of The House, so I barely saw her, but I knew who she was.

Of the three people in the room, I still waited expectantly for my mum to come in, hoping she would explain why I was in my grandfather's room, wearing nothing but a dressing gown.

"Rebekah," Agnes said. "Let's take off your robe and I want you to go and jump into bed."

I was too terrified to ask why. Why would I get into bed with my grandfather, naked?

As soon as Agnes took my dressing gown off, I instinctively jumped beneath the covers, immediately feeling warmth emanating from him. To protect myself and shield my body, I turned away from him and curled up in the foetal position, bringing my knees to my chest, and wrapping my arms around my legs. I was so uncomfortable. I wanted to get up and run away, to find my mum.

Where was she?

Slowly his hand reached over and touched my cold, shivering body, stroking my shoulder down to my bare bottom. He grabbed me gently and pulled me closer against his warm stomach, rolling me until I was in the middle of the bed. It was then I realised, my grandfather was naked too.

I looked around, wondering what was happening. *Why is he doing this? Why is he naked? Why is his penis so hard and wet?*

Where is my mum?

Please help me, Mum, I cried on the inside. On the outside, I remained quiet. This is what they had taught me since my arrival. Don't ask. Don't talk back. Don't talk.

"Rebekah. Did you know you have the smoothest bottom? Just like a baby's bottom," my grandfather whispered as he continued to stroke me with his large, warm hands.

Was I meant to say thank you? I didn't know. I was so frightened. I continued to lie frozen, too scared to move. His hands moved around from my bottom to my private parts, and ever so gently, he began stroking.

My eyes darted furiously around, wondering when it was going to stop. Was anyone going to stop this? How long would this go on for? Linda, the only remaining adult in the room, lay still on the other side of me, agreeable and silent the whole time.

I needed to escape, to focus on something else to take me away from what was happening. I fixated my eyes on the curved detailing on the dressed I'd noticed when I first walked in.

How does the wood curve around like that? Look how shiny it is? How do they get the wood to look so shiny? I wondered intensely on what lay in the drawers with the gold handles. The clothes in there must be beautiful, special. I counted the number of drawers. *Wow! Six big drawers! They're so big. I don't think I'll ever have enough clothes to fill six big drawers.* So entranced I was by this piece of furniture, I blocked out everything that was happening to me, the pain and then embarrassment.

"Rebekah, Rebekah."

"It's time to get up now. Here's your dressing gown. Put it back on and I'll take you back downstairs," said Agnes. I hadn't even noticed her in the room.

Abruptly, I was taken back to the bathroom and re-showered. I put my pyjamas back on before being led to my bedroom. I had no idea how much time has passed, but everyone was still fast asleep. Still quiet, I climbed underneath the covers and pulled the blanket up to my face. What happened I didn't quite understand. Shame and violation cloaked my entire body like I'd never felt before. I brought my knees up to my chest as an uneasiness I couldn't resolve hovered around me knowing the little girl who'd entered The House was forever gone.

That I was certain of.

Chapter 3

Another force, God, an omnipotent power, outranked everyone in The House. Except my grandfather apparently, who often proclaimed himself as God's Messiah. This God, an invisible being to which the women and children blindly answered, scrutinised and judged my naughty behaviours, my attitude, and my very existence; although I didn't know how he saw all those things. Even my thoughts came under His watchful eye. There was no escaping this God who demanded perfection and righteousness, and only my grandfather was ordained with the task of unleashing God's wrath upon us errant children.

Before moving into The House, my family didn't go to church on Sundays or say grace at mealtimes. Prayers weren't recited before bed, nor was our home decorated with Jesus statues or any other religious symbols. God was not someone to be afraid of and never lurked behind doors or hid in wall cracks, watching me with judgemental eyes. We used to celebrate Christmas; believing Santa delivered presents to good children, and families gathered for delicious Christmas feasts. The Easter Bunny came once a year to hide delicious chocolate eggs around my house and at Nana's place for me and my siblings or cousins to find.

School taught a little bit about God and Jesus as invisible people in the sky who loved us. A couple of times a year, religious education teachers showed pictures of Jesus as a very special baby cradled in a hay-filled manger who was a Christmas gift to a sinful world. Later at Easter, he would be brutally nailed to a cross and our sins would die with him. Then we could live in a happy, sinless world and it was all thanks to Jesus's sacrifice.

Seemed like such a brave thing to do for a man I'd never met. And all I had to do was be grateful and say thank you.

But in the House, my young life's purpose was to serve an almighty, conditional God who only accepted perfection. No mistakes—that never used to be mistakes in my old home—were allowed here. Reminders of my imperfections were frequently barked at me, and no matter how hard I tried, this God always seemed angry. God was central to everything. Serving Him through my daily chores, my attitude, and willingness to work happily and obediently. Constantly reminded: don't be glutton or complain of hunger because God doesn't like greedy people. Don't begrudge doing that job because God doesn't like laziness. Always have a happy attitude because you're doing God's work. Always keep The House clean because you know cleanliness is next to godliness. You can't play because you need to serve God. You can't watch TV because it reveals what the devil inspires. You can't eat sugar because it's the devil's food. Showing your skin to another person was immoral, except for the times I was naked with my grandfather. Apparently, that was acceptable in the eyes of God. The way I walked and talked, even expressions on my face, how I performed sexually despite my tender age, nothing was left unevaluated.

Sundays at The House were usually devoted to Him. Learning about God. Trying to please God. Seeking God's forgiveness. It was the only day of the week we didn't do chores. But I'd rather do chores than sit through a day where God lashed my sinful soul, and all my supposed sins were laid bare.

Immediately after breakfast, we dressed in our God-pleasing outfits, exclusively set aside for Sundays. The girls were draped in long dresses, and the boys wore perfectly creased pants, long-sleeved shirts, and knitted jumpers. Just like our school walks, we marched the path in pairs to a purpose-built 'Church Room' attached to the side of the House.

This room was given the Midas touch. Built to either please the God we worshipped or serve as a reminder of my grandfather's wealth; a wealth kept hidden from the cold and gloomy section of the House I lived in. Rows of chairs were lined up against the far-left side of the room, leaving a large rectangular space on the right. At first glance, the layout didn't make sense. But I'd soon learn the space was for sinners to lie down and bury their faces in shame, whilst openly repenting their sins of the week. The sinner's cry began loudly— "I'm sorry, I have sinned."—and the charade would continue until all transgressions were aired. A remorseful apology followed, before waiting for forgiveness, which was usually slow to come and reluctantly given. It was a humiliating spectacle and another show of our worth reduced to nothing.

Sunday routines became so predictable that I quickly learned to mentally prepare for the most boring two hours of sermons, testimonies, and relentless badgering of all the ungodly ways we'd stuffed up during the week. My grandfather glared from behind the lectern, preaching and chastising us for all the ways we'd disappointed Him and him, and how we could only strive to improve ourselves in the forthcoming week. It was futile. Perfection in The House was like a mirage in the desert. Often as he pointed his finger down upon us, I wondered whether he was talking to us about God, or whether he believed he was God. *What made him so special that only he could hear God's voice?* I often wondered.

Most of the time, I really had to listen to every word, being careful not to space out, just in case we were quizzed in the follow-up meeting. It wasn't long before I'd daydream of my old life outside the House. Anything, even cleaning the long skirting boards with a toothbrush, was better than sitting through Sunday sermons. Every so often, a hymn, a cough, or an angry voice brought me back to my dreary reality. With every long pause, I prayed it was the end.

There was rarely anything to look forward to in The House except for Sunday lunch. It was *the* treat of my week. A break from a bland diet of salads for school lunch every day; nothing sweet, no cakes or biscuits to eat, and never any lollies. Just fruit, barley salads, and soya bean salads which made you gag. The only reason you ate everything on the plate—besides being forced to—was knowing we couldn't snack between meals, and anything was better than a growling tummy at bedtime.

Usually Sunday lunch alternated between pancakes or a roast. Not that I cared which was served, but the pancakes were the largest, fluffiest pancakes I'd ever tasted. We even got to choose which topping we had: lemon juice or maple syrup. I savoured every mouthful of my sweet pancakes. It was often the only time I got to fill my empty stomach with something I actually liked to eat. Sunday lunches made sitting through the long monotonous speeches and ear bashing sermons almost worth it. But one of the things I learned living here, was no sooner had you become used to something, or if we let on we liked something, the more likely they were to change or remove it without warning.

One Sunday, I'd quickly tuned out, thinking ahead to the day's lunch choice, when my grandfather suddenly changed the routine. Apparently, he'd received 'word' the children's behaviour wasn't pleasing Him and the only way to redeem ourselves was to voluntarily give up our Sunday lunch.

Agnes, my grandfather's faithful messenger, gathered the children into the laundry room where she asked, "If you would like to please God today by giving up your lunch, put your hand up. Otherwise, you may eat."

What? We have a choice? Choices here were as rare as hen's teeth. I scanned the room to see what the other children would do. *Surely they wouldn't give us a choice, if there wasn't one?* No way would I foolishly choose to go without my favourite meal of the week. And I was certain the others wouldn't 'choose' to either.

Standing firm, I clasped my hands together, not willing for a second to raise my hand. But as I held my grip tight and steady, all the children's hands rose around me. Should it have been my cue to join them? Perhaps, but they gave me a choice, and I was choosing NO. I served this God every day. *How was me starving going to please Him? Nothing I did pleased Him, anyway.*

I stood, waiting for Agnes to start shouting, labelling me greedy and selfish.

But it didn't come.

"Rebekah, why don't you come with me for a chat?" Agnes spoke calmly.

A chat? No one ever chatted in The House. Surely this was a trick.

As I was taken to a bedroom upstairs, I began to regret my decision and wished I could change my mind and run back to the others. Her calmness scared me more than the fear of being thrown into my room or beaten, something I was used to whenever I misbehaved.

Agnes began lecturing on my duty to please God.

"Rebekah," she started. "How do you think it looks when you choose to sit and eat lunch while the other children go without? What do you think God will think if you eat and the others fast? Don't you want God to be pleased with you? Don't you want to show God how much you love Him by giving up a meal? Do you really want to let Him down?"

Agnes left me alone in the room to 'rethink' my choice.

Hopelessly, I stared out the window. What was the point? If I didn't eat, then I'd have to wait until breakfast the next morning, and I was already starving. I wanted to jump up and down and bury my head into the pillow and cry. I just wanted to eat! My stance was futile. They'd tricked me, and I'd fallen for it. Until that moment, I'd not understood why the children raised their hands so willingly. They knew it was a trick. There was never a choice at all.

Agnes walked back in soon after and asked calmly, “So, Rebekah, what have you decided to do?”

“I’m choosing to fast,” I grumbled, not caring how insincere I sounded.

It hurt to give in. It was yet another blow of defeat in The House. It showed the extreme lengths they would go to take everything away, to increase their stronghold on an already suffocating grip. I could feel my misery begin to fester. Sometimes at night, I’d lie in bed, looking up, scanning the ceiling for the invisible God I was warned was constantly watching and listening. Why didn’t he speak to me and explain why I was so bad? What had I done wrong to make him hate me so much? Could I do anything right? Pleasing God was like pushing water uphill with a rake. Never did I understand why we were badgered to idolise a supreme being who wanted all the joy sucked out of life. Didn’t anyone want to be happy here?

There was never any reason to look forward to another day because all the mistakes I’d made were carried over and then more were added to the list. Even though every Sunday they teased we could ‘wipe the slate clean’ with penance. It wasn’t true. Nothing was ever forgiven, forgotten, or erased.

After Sunday lunchtime whether the children ate or not, there would be more meetings to discuss the morning sermon, just to make sure we really understood our sins and how much effort we could put in to make up for being awful, naughty children.

Sometimes all the children would be forced to have an afternoon nap rather than give us an ounce of time off to just play. If we were judged as deserving, we were taken for a walk around our local neighbourhood.

Beyond school, the orchestrated Sunday walks were a rare outing into the outside world, the only glimpse of what was happening beyond the imprisonment of The House. It was time away from chores, abuse, solitude, church, and lectures. It was colour to my grey and dreary world.

What could have been an adventure, though, was another opportunity lost to control. No freedom to run or chase each other wildly along the path, to explore, to stop to admire or touch anything. But despite walking like prisoners in shackles, I took careful notice of everything, including the flowers I'd pass by, even the bottlebrushes' red spiky blossoms. If I was really quick, I could pluck a flower and suck the sweet nectar and discard it before anyone noticed.

From the path, I'd peer in through the shopfront windows, gazing at all new items on display. Kid's toys, books, dolls, and bikes. Sometimes even dresses. I missed wearing pretty dresses. Other kids, wearing clothes I could only dream of wearing again, ran ahead of their parents while laughing and holding ice-creams that melted down their wrists. Families walked their dogs, while stray cats purred up high on wooden fences. If we were lucky enough to take the route near the beach, I'd wish time would slow down long enough to view the vast ocean before me and wonder where the water led beyond the horizon. I would imagine how it would feel to float on the surface, feeling as light as a cloud, as the rise and fall of the waves smacked against each other.

The Sunday walks were a bittersweet reminder of a world I used to live in. When I played tea parties under the tree with my sister. Riding my trike with friends up and down our street. The children passing me were smiling and giggling, sharing what sounded like funny stories. I wondered what their homes were like. Did they have to do chores all the time? Were they beaten with a leather strap when they were naughty? Did they have their own toys? Or were they taken away from them too? They looked so happy. I missed feeling happy.

In these moments, I wondered why my life had changed so much.

All the things I once enjoyed were no longer allowed. Things I never considered were bad at all. My grandfather constantly painted the world as the devil's playground. People "out there" were doomed to live in hell for

their immorality, their evil wicked ways, the way they dressed, what they watched on TV. He said the world was full of bad people and he was protecting us from them. Everything he took away from me was for my own good, apparently.

I dreaded walking the final stretch home. Each step towards The House was a step back into a world I despised. Like a prisoner let out into the yard before being sent back to the cells, I felt trapped. My freedom was out there. My old life was out there. The childhood I wanted back so desperately was out there, and I couldn't grab it.

I couldn't have it anymore.