

The summer before my senior year of high school was a little different than most of my friends. My friends and I all had jobs and enjoyed our weekends together when we had a chance. Problems with cars running, accidents, cops and tickets was something we all dealt with in stride. The weekends were our time to escape our normal lives and get away from it all. Drinking, hotel parties, and hanging at friends' houses whose parents were not home was a typical weekend; each weekend after that was a repeat of the previous one. In this way, my summer was nothing special; it was the things that went on day to day throughout the week that made my life interesting.

My father owned his own business doing custom chrome work. He did this type of work ever since I was a little child. I saw hot rods in the driveway all chromed out, fancy motorcycles and big bikers laughing in the driveway while picking up their parts. This was part of my everyday life.

A polishing shop is dirty and can be very dangerous. The polishing machine has two spinning wheels that move extremely fast. While these wheels are spinning you have to take the metal part and hold it against the wheel without getting it ripped out of your hands. When the wheel does snatch the part, before you can realize what happened; the wheel attempts to return it to you three or four times up side your head. When you regain consciousness, you can turn the machine off and take a break.

Polishing was extremely dirty and hot. Long sleeve shirts, thick gloves, and a dust mask created an ambiance of being inside the fire pit. If this sweat box was not enough, the coal black dirt with traces of metal dancing into your eyes while wafting through the air put everything into perspective. While grinding away on the parts you had to be careful not to polish through the gloves and grind off a few layers of flesh on your fingers. Over the years the calluses on my fingers became so tough I could barely bend my index fingers. Polishing is a dying trade in today's market and because of the work conditions it is understandable.

By the time I was 17 I had been working in my father's shop polishing metal for 3 years. I had learned all of the different types of wheels to use on each type of metal. I understood the compounds that helps make the job easier and minimized my injuries. Most of the parts we polished were small and made out of brass; once they were finished, we delivered them to a chrome plating shop for the final operation. The repetition of hell over and over again is one I will never forget.

The money was good, even for me being 17. This was the one time in my life where my father was fair. Instead of paying me by the hour, he paid me by the operation and piece work. Being paid for each piece gave me the incentive to work faster and harder to get more work

done. Due to the repetitious nature of the job, I got as fast as my father and usually earned plenty of money to help with a reckless lifestyle that was soon to follow.

During the spring my father had been sick quite a bit and he did not work in the shop nearly as much. Once summer hit and I was able to work full time, I rarely saw my father in the shop unless it was to take parts to be delivered. That same summer my uncle, or my father's little brother, came to live with us. Normally this would not be such a big deal, but he had just got out of prison serving 10 years for breaking and entering multiple houses. Even though he was 28 he acted more like he was at 17 so we got along pretty good.

My uncle Gary knew how to polish metal as his father had taught him, but it had been awhile since he worked in a polishing shop for obvious reasons. It did not take long for him to get the hang of polishing. Before I knew it, we were working side by side getting the parts out. Gary did not need to live with us because of my parent's lifestyle. It was only a matter of time before things went to hell and the rest of the family knew it.

Everyone in my family asked me to help keep my uncle in line. I was 17, how could I keep a grown man in line? The reason I was asked to keep an eye on Gary is because my parents partied all weekend long. My dad loved LSD, Cocaine, and whiskey and my mother enjoyed prescription pills of all shapes and colors. My mother also spent the occasional summer in the mental institution for nervous breakdowns. Her technical diagnosis was mild schizophrenia with multiple personality disorder. As far as I knew, she had four separate personalities complete with names. Most of the time, her and I got along pretty well, no matter who she was.

Even with all of the partying and playing my parents kept their names clean and did not have a criminal record. I still have not figured this one out. Like many drug addicts, we owned two large Rottweiler dogs and an arsenal of guns. Even I carried a 12 gauge shotgun in my car and it was not for hunting. A good memory for me was going to the outdoor shooting range and scaring off the locals due to the types of guns we practiced with. Some parents take their kids out to dinner and ice cream; mine bought extra ammunition and let me shoot the big guns!

We owned the guns legally and had driver's licenses, but my parents did not carry car insurance or pay taxes. Everything sort of teetered on the edge. Being the white sheep of the family was not easy for me to accomplish. Even my parents made fun of me for having car insurance.

That summer I attempted to fill out the FAFSE form for college and my parents freaked out because that would put my father in "the System". Since he had not paid taxes in over 10 years, he did not want "official people" to have his information. This meant if I wanted to go to school I would have to figure something out on my own. The loss of college and my parent's

total focus on my dad's brother caused me to not really care anymore. I felt my life slipping away because of their partying lifestyle.

Drugs were not my thing, but beer was another story. In our garage we had a coke machine that was filled with Coke and Dr. Pepper. My uncle and I filled several columns with Bud Dry. During the day we would start work around 8 and at lunch time, we would fix a normal lunch and wash it down with a couple of beers. On Friday we would finish polishing early so we could make deliveries across town. After loading the car with parts, we would pack the car with a 12 pack of beer, load up and head out. After an hour across town in traffic, everything would be done including the beer.

Since it was the weekend and we did not have to work the next day we felt we could play a little. Usually we went out to dinner for food and more drinks. My drink of choice at 17 was a Long Island Ice Tea. Luckily I did not look 17 so I was never carded. It is amazing I survived the summer at all. Sometimes after dinner we would head out to a bar or if we were too drunk we would go driving to start trouble.

Being 17, if I would have ever been stopped by the cops my life today would be totally different. Drinking and driving, with a parolee and a gun in the car would not have been a good combination. Even though we had this much at stake, we would tempt fate a little further. We did this by shooting whistling rockets out of the car towards oncoming traffic. It got interesting when the sparks would cause my uncle to drop the rocket into the car and it would attempt to launch. Sparks and smoke everywhere with a live missile on a mission only it knew before exploding. Sometime we had to pull off the road just to escape the smoke or use a small amount of beer to put out the fire.

Around 2am we would return home and crawl into our respective beds. My parents would crawl home around 3am after the bars had closed. Usually our nights of partying never collided, and we all wanted to avoid each other anyway. Anyway, it is hard to explain powder burns when you are drunk and only went out driving.

Saturdays were a little different. Everybody was a little hung over and we all tried to avoid each other until we got our act together. We would pretend we were a normal family for a few hours before disappearing into our own lives. The dance was pretty unique since my mother was the biggest mystery. Who was she this morning, and it all depended on what she drank with what colored pills she took that morning. Then again, many days were a mystery with my mom and her colored Tic Tacs.

My mom's favorite thing to do was to shop. Since my parents made a plethora of money, shopping was a normal activity. We did not look for sales; instead we shopped at whatever store my mother fancied at that time with whatever personality she had. The

differences could be anything from K-Mart or Saks Fifth Avenue and everything in between. Since my father hated shopping I would usually go with her. I did not complain, because on the good days I would get some really nice clothes out of the deal. It also meant I got to drive one of the Corvettes we owned.

When we got home there would be this dance amongst all of us. My parents hated my girlfriend, so I would have to lie about where I was going for the evening, while they could not tell me they were going to go out to score some crack for the weekend, so we all danced around the truth. We all knew what the other was doing, but pretended we did not know. Nevertheless, we knew. The dance was a sort of uncoordinated lifestyle of pretend every weekend.

My uncle Gary did not hide the truth. When I would talk to him about his plans he was straight about what would go on for the weekend. I would use my uncle as the go between; I also knew when my parents would get home after talking to Gary. As long I was home before them, I would not get into trouble. Trouble was a joke anyway, since I made deliveries for the business. If my parents grounded me, I would simply not work forcing my father back into the polishing shop. Plus, I could convince my mom I was home even when I wasn't.

One night in August I came home and noticed all of our cars in the driveway were missing. This was especially odd since we owned two corvettes, big SUV's, a Cadillac, and a speed boat. The Ford Aerostar was the only thing in the driveway and it was backed in. The house was dark and even the street light had been deliberately blown out. I noticed the glass on the road when I turned down our street.

I felt an uneasy feeling and thought, what the hell have my parents gone and done now? Nothing felt right when I pulled in the driveway, so instinctively I grabbed the shotgun out of the back of the car. I chambered a round and took the safety off as I approached the garage door. Dark and not knowing what was about to happen next I debated going another step at all. Should I just take off and call the house from a pay phone? Did my parents just split and leave me alone? Did the police arrest everybody and seize all of the cars? I felt these were real possibilities. What made me stop in the driveway was the mixed feeling about what might have happened. I did not know if I was concerned, cared, or the thought of relief this lifestyle was finally over.

While I am paused in the driveway my father appears out of the shadows. What the hell are you doing here? I live here remember? Not this week, you need to get out of here, we could have some trouble. I turned around and headed to my car when I heard my father ask if I needed to get clothes. No, I keep clothes in my trunk just in case. He asked where I was going, and I felt it better if he did not know. Since I had no idea why I needed to stay gone for a week

or two, he did not need to know where I was going. I was tired and pissed off at my parent's antics.

Why can I not stay at the house? I was told there was a risk of a drive by shooting and since I lived in the front of the house my father was concerned for my safety. That is a little sarcasm, because if he was really concerned this conversation we were having would not be necessary. I started to ask what the hell happened, but I just did not give a damn anymore.

I slipped into my car where I felt some safety. I smiled as I kicked an old burnt stick from under my foot before depressing the brake to put the car in reverse. When I looked out the windshield where my father had already disappeared into the shadows, my mind went back to wondering what type of problems could put our house at risk of a drive by. My life is jacked up enough and now I cannot even come home because of something they did. I was so pissed off and happy at the same time.

The melancholy of the evening danced through my head as I headed towards the highway. I had a 70 mile drive in front of me and needed to unwind. I found a warm beer under the seat and turned on my Black Crows Cassette. She Talks to Angels blasted through the air as I launched down the ramp to the freeway. My girlfriend's mother would not be home until Monday afternoon, because she sold antique gun parts at gun shows all over the United States. The irony I know.

After a nice quiet weekend I showed up at my Aunt Cindy's house. Cindy was more like a mother to me. Being my father's sister, Cindy knew his antics and felt sorry for me being stuck in the middle of his messes. I had no way out, but Cindy was great as we would stay up late talking about anything and everything.

Cindy and I got really close while she was in nursing school the year before. I would come by her house and tutor her in Algebra two or three times a week. The cost of my tutor lessons was her covering for me when I went to my girlfriend's house. It was nice to have a developed alibi. Usually, she did not even have time to look at her school work until late in the evening. Her husband worked until about 6pm and she has three daughters to care for. There were times I would spend the whole week at her house just feeling like part of a normal family.

It never mattered what time I knocked on Cindy's door. Sometimes it was really late; she would rub her eyes, pull her robe close, and say come on in you know where the blankets are. When she looked into my eyes, she just knew something was wrong at home. It never mattered what was going on; the couch was my safe haven from everyone in the world including my parents.

Cindy would wake me in the morning after her daughters were off to school to find out what the situation was at home. The Monday I showed up after the concern for my “safety” due to a possible drive by shooting, Cindy just shook her head. What the hell are your parents up too? I felt it was probably a drug deal gone badly, and this time my father was the bad guy. Cindy refused to tell my father if I was staying with her and told him he should have thought about me before pulling the shit he pulled. We then moved my car to a storage facility so he could not find me. I think the drugs were causing my dad to be paranoid.

I thought about my problems, and how sad it was that I had to hide my whereabouts from my own father. I hid my actions not because I had been bad, but because he had messed up again! Even with his mistakes, it was me that was in hiding. My life did not make a whole lot of sense over those two weeks.

Finally, I came home on a Monday two weeks after I had left home. When I pulled into the driveway I felt some comfort as all of the cars were in the driveway again. The cars meant things were back to normal. I checked the walls for signs of damage but noticed nothing. The van however was missing the back window and there were at least 6 holes in the back door. There was another two deep gouges in the side of the van with bits of paint missing but not a complete hole. It looked as if something had dug into the side of the van.

When I came inside, my father began to yell at me, where the hell have you been? I left just like you told me to remember? He began to ramble about how no one knew where I was and blah blah blah, I could really care less. I figured he was pissed off because he had to do all of the work in the shop. I nodded brainless at him until he gave up realizing I did not care. How could he really be pissed at me, it was his antics that forced me to leave so I did not die, and now I was in trouble for staying gone and not informing him where I was at? Wow typical bullshit once again. The biggest thing I was upset about was losing two week’s pay.

Later that night my Uncle Gary showed up at the house. We went out in the garage to have a couple of beers. I learned that the problem was a “drug deal gone bad”. In the end I deduced that both parties were trying to screw over the other until someone opened fire on the back of my parents van. My uncle was in the van with my dad and mother when all of this happened. Since Gary was a little drunk, the story got embellished and I took most of it with a grain of salt, because I really did not want to know the ugly truth of what my parents were really up to. In this instance, ignorance was bliss and I wanted to stay that way, so I drank another beer.

After that week, I really did not care what my parents thought or did. How could they tell me what to do in their condition? Drunk, stoned, and popping pills all the time was part of their everyday life. Trust was going downhill quickly.

I went back to work and for the most part everything was forgotten. My father got paid on the first of September for all the work that had been done. If I did not catch my parents when he received his cash I may never get paid. This would be a problem as I needed gas money to get back and forth to school. After a while, I would follow my parents to the bank to get my cash before they left for the weekend. I knew by Monday there would not be enough money to pay me for the work I had done the previous month. My father would not pay me for work over a month old, so I had to make sure I got mine before it was gone up their nose.

Trust became a bigger problem over time. Drugs are bad enough since they make you paranoid. Now my father was paranoid about me, but his jail bird brother was fine. My life made me sick and I just wanted to escape. I had one more semester to go in high school and then I could find a way out of this mess. I bought things for an apartment and stored them in my car. Unfortunately, I did not save a lot of money, but I had a nice car and a great collection of guitars!

Groceries were something my parents did not believe in buying. My mother would occasionally give me lunch money for school. Well, three of her did, the fourth slept in. During the day my parents ran errands and usually would not return home until 9 or 10pm. If they did come home early they did not cook, instead they would drink a little and go to bed. Food always seemed secondary to them.

Occasionally, I would notice my parents had been smoking some of them funny cigarettes. The smell would come through the vents into my room. Since they lived downstairs from me, I would wait about 30 minutes after the scents started and head downstairs. I would simply ask if they would like me to go to the store to pick up some munchies. I would be told there was money in my mom's purse and feel free to go and pick some things up. I would take a couple of hundred dollars and go buy groceries for the house including some items I would store in my bedroom so I could have some food later in the week.

My parents loved it when I brought home bags of groceries. They would root through the bags looking at all of the food like children looking for candy. The only thing more foreign than groceries was how to prepare groceries. If you could not throw it in a microwave, it could not be done. Home was a place to snack at, after eating at fine restaurants all day. It always seemed to escape their attention that they had a son at home as well. That was okay; I knew how to read and bought a couple of cook books.

I learned how to fend for myself and watch my own back. My father could not be bothered with those trivial things like feeding me or anything else. In his mind he had done everything he could because he taught me a profession and that was all I needed in this world. Polishing was to replace college too. Then again college and food were my problems, not his.

## Chapter: My Wedding Day

A rocky year had come and gone. My girlfriend had created a great divide between my parents and me. This divide caused me to leave my home town of St. Louis, Missouri and move to Tulsa, Oklahoma. The move was on bad terms for everybody but a necessary one.

Before I get into the transition across state lines the family was on a downward descent. The swirl of emotions churned up harsh feelings on all sides in the family and I wanted out. I managed to graduate high school a semester early. The early dismissal of high school gave me the freedom to manage my life. While I thought about my life, I still worked for my father in the polishing shop with my uncle Gary at my side.

Fridays with Gary were as crazy as ever, but many times he would run off with my parents for even crazier times. My parents had left reality and ran crazy in the streets. Even with all of their madness, they would still try to intervene in my life with their thoughts of how a proper teenager should act. I handled their infractions in a simple way. I lied.

I created a fictitious girlfriend so I could leave the house without suspicion. The new girlfriend's name was Holly. Having a name other than Vanessa meant I was not seeing my old girlfriend that my parents detested. Over time "Holly" developed personality, attitude, and was almost a real person. I developed her off of my mother's personalities. I had a few friends who would help cover my stories so I could have some chance at freedom.

I was working hard for my dad, so he encouraged my mother to let me be. Her mood diminished if that would happen or not. Then again, if I was left alone, I kept working for my father making him money to spend on his cocaine habit. The previous year I made my father almost \$1 million in his business. Money made my father happy and allowed my mom to shop all the time. As long as the money was there many of my actions were ignored including my increasing habit for beer.

I was quickly becoming an alcoholic, while my father was a severe drug addict, my mother enjoyed her entourage of prescription pills, and my uncle took anything handed to him. We were all trying to escape something or someone in the house. When the doors opened we all put our imitation smiles on our faces and went out to fool the world. In our minds everything was fine. F.I.N.E: Frantic, irritated, neurotic, and emotional.

I never understood my parents desire to dive into my life, because they would leave for days at a time. My parents would take the dogs and their speed boat, and head to the lake on Friday morning. Some weeks they would come home Sunday night, but many times they would



not return until Monday or Tuesday. I did not have a cell phone or even a number at the lake to reach them. Many times they did not even tell me where they were going. If something happened while they were gone it would just have to wait until they got back from one of their adventures. My life had not changed much from when I was little, except now they could disappear for days and leave me alone.

While my parents were gone I could come and go as I pleased as long as the shop work was done and delivered on time. I still had to guess when my parents would come home, so I could be there and not get the third degree. If something went wrong on one of their adventures they would return home and I would catch the backlash.

I used the negativity in the house as a way to create a fight so I could disappear for three or four days. I would take five minutes of interaction to drive a bigger wedge between us. During these escapades we could go two weeks or longer without seeing one another. The fights kept up and we kept pretending everything was fine, but it wasn't.

One weekend I came home early to find my room turned upside down. Glass shards scattered all over my waterbed from a picture that once hung on my wall. The television was face down on the ground along with my nightstand busted in pieces on the ground. Any letter or piece of paper anybody had written me was thrown all over my room. Items I treasured that were placed on shelves were broken and smashed into the carpet.

In the center of my bed was my Edgar Allen Poe's complete edition. I had found it in a used book store and cherished the old leather and character the book had took on. Now, it lay helpless on my bed, broken spine, pages yanked from the heart of the book. Crumpled and defeated, the book did not stand a chance against my mother. The books kept treasured letters friends and old girlfriends had written me in the past. Then I saw it, a three-year-old letter from my girlfriend laid out amongst the destruction. My mother detested Vanessa from the first time we dated. Now my mother took an old letter and reacted in total terror.

I knew the games were over and I needed to take a stand.

My mom came into my room as I was packing my clothes. I was done with all the destruction this family caused and ready to move on with my life. Most things in my life that I cherished were broken because my parents were angry at me. I had had enough. My mom tried to apologize but we were way past apologies. She rambled about this and that and I kept packing my stuff focused on getting the hell out of this nightmare. The little respect I had for my parents was destroyed along with my book. I was not cleaning this mess up ever again.

In my car I had a couple of guitars and two bags of clothes. I took my Takamini Classical guitar and a red Fender Precision Bass guitar. Guitars had played an intimate role in my life and

I was not going to leave them behind. Anytime I was struggling with anything in my life, I would crack out my guitar and lull myself to another dimension. I did not play other peoples songs; I created songs according to what was going on inside my mind at the time. The notes spoke to me as my fingers danced across the fret board.

As I slammed the trunk lid I felt my father's closed fist against my head. He began to yell at me for hurting his girlfriend. I looked in his eyes and saw the cocaine dancing in his soul. His inner demons have taken over and now the fight was on. We scrapped in the street trying to avoid each other's shots. I got a cheap shot to his knee and he stumbled back to the garage. I took this opportunity to get in my car, so I could scatter into the night. I was shaking because I knew he was crazed and reasoning was out of the question. Plus, there was a shotgun right inside the door of the garage.

I started to back my 1983 Pontiac Grand Prix out of the driveway and my father took a couple of steps towards my car. There was a feeling of dread that this could escalate into a gun fight with my father. I yanked the steering column into drive and floored the car, heading straight toward the house. I knew the big V8 engine I installed the year before could do what I needed it too. The car lurched forward and I had to make a sharp right turn around a tree and through the small yard to get back on the road. I bounced around as the wheels struck the pavement. I heard the car scraping the concrete. I looked in the mirror to see if the fight would become a street race. Luckily, my father let me peel off into the night.

I drove for hours not calling anyone or stopping for anything. That night I drove to the airport and decided to sleep until morning. I did not sleep too much, but I figured my father would never look for me at the airport.

The next day I called my friends to see if my parents were looking for me. No calls, no search parties. I felt safe and headed to my girlfriend's house. When I arrived at her house she knew things were wrong. I had two black eyes and she could see my nerves were shattered from a long night. Her mother said I could live with them until we got married and started our life together.

The next three days were good. I got some rest and began to regroup to figure out my next move. I needed to find a job and I was ready to be done with my parents. I felt freedom to get out of the hell I had been living in.

My parents called the house after a week. The conversation was very one sided and I was told I had to come home. They told me they were coming to get me if I chose not to go on my own. I decided to call their bluff and I stashed my car and disabled it by removing the distributor cap, so they could not leave me without my wheels. That afternoon, my dad and his brother had the hood up on my car trying to figure out why it would not start.

Remember, we were in public so everything has to appear fine. My dad stepped up to my face almost nose to nose. His lips were pursed and he calmly explained that he would have someone show up and break my legs along with other horrible things to my girlfriend if I choose to stay. I looked in his eyes and I knew he was not bluffing, so I reluctantly agreed to go home. His eyes were glazed over and cold like my decision did not really matter, and this was an inconvenience to him, so one way or another I was going to pay for the distraction I had created. I had my uncle help me fix my car and my parents left well ahead of us. I was told I needed to be home before midnight or else.

I had a 70 mile drive to figure out my next move. I stopped at the local store and bought two cases of beer. I figured if I had to face my crazed parents I might as well be drunk. I threw the beer in the car and we began our decent into the abyss. The highway lines blurred together as I crawled down the interstate at a mere 55mph. I was going to stretch this drive out as long as possible while gathering some liquid courage. My uncle Gary hardly said a word, he handed me another beer when I finished one.

When I arrived at home my parents met me in the garage. There were four rickety plastic chairs and in their minds they were holding an intervention to save me. I was scared at the eerie calmness in the garage. It was a sobering reality with many unknowns. My parents talked and I pretended to listen. They had had an epiphany to send me to Oklahoma to live with my aunt and uncle. Finally, we agreed on something: they wanted me gone and I wanted to leave. An eight-hour distance between the three of us was the perfect way for me to get the hell out of this world.

That night I slept on the couch in the living room. My room was still in shambles I could not bring myself to stay in the rubble or clean it up. Cleaning my room would be the same as admitting defeat and giving up. If my mother wanted the room cleaned up then she could think about what she had done, while she tried not to cut herself on the shards of glass. Edgar Allen Poe was not salvageable. The next morning I was put on a plane for Tulsa, Oklahoma. My relatives knew how crazy my parents were, so they were glad that they could help me to escape. The only problem was their reality was not much better, just different.

I agreed to work for my uncle doing home repairs and general maintenance. About a month of sleeping on the couch and I convinced my parents I needed to come home and get my car and some other things. When I got home I found out my parents biggest worry was not me living with my girlfriend, but my car was not fully in my name. During the three days I was home I got my car transferred fully into my name and without notice I headed back to Oklahoma.

Actually, I made a stop at Vanessa's house for a day. I did not want to stay long, but figured my parents were too busy to really check on my ware-bouts. Vanessa was struggling with everything, but I was her lifeline, too. Her life was not a bed of roses and we had been through so much together over the years. Together we were going to get away from the chaos our parents had put us through over the years.

I would call my girlfriend occasionally and reassure her everything would be okay. In the meantime, I had to wait until I turned 18. While I was living with the relatives I worked different jobs trying to make a living. Frustrated and admitting defeat, I went back to polishing metal for a local company. It was the only work I knew well and that I could make some money doing. Since I was young and the company did not know my abilities I had to start at the bottom and work my way up.

In the meantime, my aunt got me a job at a local pizza parlor. I would leave one job, race home to shower, and then rush back out to work again. The pizza job was a favor to my aunt, but the favor only lasted a couple of weeks. I still had my full-time job and a little time to relax in the afternoon. The pizza parlor had hired me with long hair and there was no problem, but a few weeks later things changed. I still believe my aunt had something to do with this too.

The polishing shop was a great place for me to work. I was admired for being so young and knowing this lost trade. Most eighteen year old kids had no idea what polishing metal was unless they were ordering it to be done on their cars. We all watched each other's backs in the polishing shop and did not judge each other. We worked hard and as long as you did that, you were a good person, not judged for anything else.

My aunt and uncle were similar to my parents showing one side to the world, but behind the scenes was a whole other story. They went to church three times a week and dressed the part. In the church community they were the people everybody aspired to be, devoted, open, and full of Christian life. Behind the doors they were bitter, judge mental, compulsive gamblers, with a drinking problem. My parents never called and I was rid of one problem for another.

A week after I turned 18, my aunt and uncle threw me out of their house. There was no explanation; I was expected to just leave. My uncle sent his kids and wife up the street to a neighbor's house until the deed was done. He rolled up his sleeves and treated me like I had been stealing from them. The reality, I did not mow the grass that Saturday and I had asked if they would co-sign a lease on an apartment if I needed it. I guess they thought I would head back to St. Louis and they would be forever rid of me, but I was never going back there again.

I moved in with a cousin who was an outcast with his parents too. We had met a few times at family functions and we both understood one another. He lived in a small house

behind another house. It was old, and looked like it might have been a garage once before. There was not a lot of room, but it was clean and furnished. Plus, his couch folded out into a bed. He welcomed the extra income into the house and we all got along quite well. Eight hours away from my parents and living with similar outcasts, I finally felt I had the freedom I desired.

My cousin and I set a plan in place for us to go back to Missouri and retrieve my soon-to-be-wife. She had been working and could get the marriage license while we prepared our trip. My cousin worked for U-Haul and got us a small trailer so we could bring back all of our worldly possessions. Thursday evening we headed to St. Louis.

My 1983 Grand Prix was showing the wear and tear of life. I had chromed out most of the engine years before, and these same parts were no longer polished up to shine anymore. The car was a source of means to get back and forth to work, not be a show car anymore. The starter was failing, but I did have unlimited calls with AAA. That was good news because I was going to need them more than I realized over the next few days.

I had decided to buy a simple gold band instead of a new starter for my car. I went to Target and picked out the simple gold band in her size. It was 14K gold, and very simple. When I got out to the parking lot I had to call AAA to jump the starter on my car so I could head home. This was the beginning of me getting what I had paid for with AAA.

First thing Friday morning, we all piled in the car and headed down to City Hall. We picked up the marriage license, but being so young forgot to find someone who could marry us on short notice. Typical lack of planning on us, but we were informed of a man who lived in an RV and was usually parked on the sidewalk by the Court House. The little place was easy to spot as it looked like it definitely did not belong. The RV was something from the late 60s or early 70s, mostly white with sun faded wide stripes of tan and browns. The paint had started to chalk and if you leaned up against it, you would be covered in white powder. I do not think the RV had moved much, and now it would be risky to even try to get it over the curb as it may not survive.

We knocked on the door and we were greeted by a friendly older gentleman. We all had a seat and looked around at the hundreds of pictures that wallpapered his walls. Some people were in proper wedding clothes while others looked like they just got off work and came by on a whim. We wanted to find out cost and how long he would be available so we could come back properly dressed. But, before we knew it we were married. He took longer to fill out the certificate than he did to marry us. His old hands shook continuously, and his eye sight caused his head to move back and forth while he filled out the form. Personally, I think most of the form was done from memory and it was our names he had to struggle with.

After the simple ceremony he led us out the door so our backs were facing the St. Louis Arch and snapped a Polaroid shot of the me, my new wife, and my cousin and his wife. The city skyline would be our last good memory of St. Louis. Luckily, the little old man took a second shot and handed it to us. He thanked us again for coming to him, and smiled with his stained teeth as he headed back into his little chapel on wheels. The door shook the whole trailer as he yanked it closed, and before we knew it we were married and the ceremony was old news.

After a quick wedding, we headed over to a friend of mine to have a simple get-together. We went back to the garage where the car was parked and it did not start. Luckily, we had passed a tow truck on the way to the garage, so my cousin and I raced back to see if we could get him to jump the car. Thirty minutes later we were on our way to my friend's house. We got dressed up in our proper attire and did photos and had a good time. There was a simple innocence about the whole day. A quaint wedding and small reception was all we really needed anyway.

Now it was time to get all of our stuff and head back to Tulsa. I dropped my new wife at her grandmother's house, but I left the car running. She did not have a lot of things to pack, but she did not want to pay a surprise visit to my parents as my wife. My cousins and I headed to my house so I could get all of my things. My plan was simple. We were going to take as much of my stuff as we could put in the trailer. I was anxious about heading back to the house. I had no idea what kind of reception I would get when I pulled in the driveway.

I turned the corner and got queasy as I saw the house. I noticed the cars were gone and something did not feel right. I parked my car on the street and when I opened my door I was brought back to when I was five years old. I could smell a recent house fire, but I looked at my parent's house standing fully intact. As I stood dumbfounded, my neighbor came outside talking quickly and I could not understand him. When he got close enough I heard him saying there was a house fire the night before and I needed to get ahold of my parents before going into the house.

I ran up to the front door and tried to open it, but it was locked. When I looked in the living room, all the furniture was in perfect order and nothing out of place. The garage door was closed and I had never seen it closed in the past five years.

A flurry of emotions set deep into my stomach.

I raced around the back of the house and froze. The basement windows had deep black stains running up the outside of the house. The scent knocked me back. I paused to gain my composure, and thoughts of what to do next. I kicked out a basement window and shimmied into the basement.

A beautiful knotty pine paneled basement was now a charred set of ruins. The heat was so hot glass and plastic fused together on the shelves. Black, charred nothingness hung in the air. I felt so lost in the dark world of doom. What could I do? Where were my parents, and why had I not heard about this catastrophe?

I went upstairs to view the rest of the house. The blackness was on the walls next to the air vents, where it looked like bursts of flames danced along the walls. Around the vents, the carpet was melted and blackened. I crept toward my room carefully. I could hear the wood cracking beneath my feet with each step. There were spots where the carpet was the only thing keeping my feet from going through the floor. I opened the door to see black flecks dancing in the air where the sun shined through the smudged window. A fine layer of soot covered everything, but the smell of a burning house drowned out everything I saw.

I heard a car horn outside. I tip-toed quickly out the back door and I saw my parents getting out of their car. They seemed very rushed and un-phased by the U-Haul trailer attached to my car. My parents told me I could not take anything from the house because of insurance, but they grabbed some things they thought I would want. They handed me a box with my leather coat and some other clothes. While I was still in a daze about the whole event, they jumped in the car and sped off like they did not want to get caught at their own house. I blinked and they were gone as fast as they showed up.

I threw the single box in the back of the large trailer, thinking this is all of my worldly possessions. One medium box of clothes placed in a 5ft x 8ft trailer.

I felt as lost as I did when I was five years old watching my parents run in and out of a burning house. What caused the fire? Who was home? Then, because of who my parents are, was the fire an accident? Had my father gone off the deep end and burned the place down? The thought was a real possibility.

“We will call you at Aunt Pam’s house in a few days to fill you in.” These words were said while my parents had their back to me heading towards their car.

The way they showed up and disappeared almost as quick really left an uneasy feeling deep in my stomach. It was like they were running from a crime scene and wanted to keep their distance from any evidence that could link them back to the house. My mind was swirling so fast I could not keep up.

I wanted to scream, “Screw you, I just got married!” But, I let them drive off without a word. They had no idea what I had been up to in the past few months. Apparently, they did not care either. Somehow, when I turned the key, the car fired up for the first time that day. I guess it was a sign from above that I needed to leave.

We drove off quietly into the afternoon. I was filled with melancholy. My wedding did not go as planned, and now I had lost all of my worldly possessions. I drove back to my wife's house to explain the chaos I had just witnessed. Besides my cousin and his wife, it was truly my wife and I alone in the world. No relative would take the two of us in, and my parents had completely lost their minds.

Later that evening, we headed back to Tulsa, Oklahoma. We arrived around 2a.m. and unloaded our three small boxes of trinkets into my cousin's house. It would be another week before we could move into an apartment I had rented. My life was a series of flashbacks and empty promises from my parents. Now I was ready to start my new life.

Life is strange with its twists and turns. I understood I was young and did not have a perfect plan, but it did not help that my parents were screwing up my life one last time. Since everything I ever treasured had been broke, snapped, stomped out, or burned to a crisp, I thought there was no longer a reason to get attached to material things. I figure it is just a matter of time before it is gone again, so why attach myself?

The good news was I did not have anything to get attached too. I owned very little, but I had the beginning of a new family. We had an old top load VCR, an orange arm chair, a single bed on the floor, and cups from the local fast food companies. I owned two pans, but I still hung on to a set of dishes I bought when I was fifteen years old. The dishes were black octagons, and I thought they were fitting in my dark life as a teenager. I kept them in the top of my closet for a couple of years. I gave them to Vanessa about a month before everything fell apart with my parents.

I was excited about my new life, new friends, and family that had taken me in. My cousin did not try to change who or what I was, instead he supported my decisions. He was the first person in my family who had not gone behind my back or lied. It was sad that my life took 18 years to find one true friend.

One friend, one wife, no parents; I was finally free.