

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

by Charlotte Campbell

I CANNOT REMEMBER A time when my mom and dad were still married. My earliest memories of childhood are when they were already split up between two households, but those memories are still treasured ones. I wanted for nothing, with plenty of spoiling and quality time from both. My mom and I especially were the best of friends. She had boundless energy to keep up with me, since she had me so young. Just me and her, we would go to movies, parks, and restaurants; even just grocery shopping on the weekends was always fun. To this day, she has an uplifting energy, always bringing joy to the little things.

It wasn't too long into our one-on-one time that she met Dennis and my bubble of security popped. Seemingly successful, decent-looking, and stable, my mother was drawn to him after years of dating a handful of other men and ending up nowhere. Dennis was pleasant to the two of us at first. He made sure we ate the finest food and treated my mother well enough to convince her to marry him. However, after they were married and locked in legally, he changed into an entirely different person. Someone who could sap joy from anything, a leech in our lives. I recall him spending most of their beach honeymoon at the hotel gym, instead of having fun by the waves with the rest of the family. I was less happy with my mother and I's one-on-one time since the vibe, now, seemed odd and high stress. My mother was not able to make joy the same way she used to when I was younger; she seemed too sad.

After my little sister, Stacy, was born, Dennis stayed in these awful habits; maybe even became worse. With a lack of fathering from him, there was an unspoken expectation for me to help out with taking care of the baby, which I happily accepted at first. At eight years old, playing with a little newborn and caring for her was actually fun, for a while. I was even the first to get Stacy to belly laugh as an infant. I wore that accomplishment with pride. Dennis would sit in his La-Z Boy while I would bottle feed my infant sister in the living room, or change her diaper, or burp her over my shoulder, or put her down for a nap. He wasn't a father. He was just an ingredient to the birth of my siblings, always inhabiting his chair—unmoving, judging, and watching me every time I would walk from my room to the kitchen for food. Sometimes, I would wait for him to go to bed late at night before I would show my face upstairs. It felt uncomfortable in those early days, those eyes on me. I felt an aura on him, like a dark bubble of poison and hate, and whoever got too close would inhale the foul stench.

My brother, Steven, was born not even a year later. Dennis was far more enthused to have a son than a daughter, treating Steven better than he ever would me or Stacy. Not long after, my mother began to fight back against Dennis. The fights boomed several nights a week between the two, some louder than others. I had a room in the basement, and I could hear it all the way from the third floor when they really got into it. Sometimes I could make out what the fights were

about, but most of the time it was just loud noise that I tried to ignore with a pair of dollar store headphones. I was a small, negligible dinghy that was trying to cut through the angry sea, unnoticed amongst a deadly battle that raged non-stop. One of the last fights was when Stacy almost stuck herself with a steroid needle that Dennis had left in the fridge. Almost overnight, we hastily packed our belongings into trash bags and broken boxes and left to move over the poverty line.

I did not realize until years later just how awful the situation was. With only a few hundred dollars to support the four of us, we managed to find a tiny one-bedroom apartment obviously meant for a single college student. My mom would sleep on a futon in the living room, and Stacy, Steven, and I shared the small bedroom. Stacy was given her own bed since she was the older of the two babies, but I had to share a twin bed with Steven, who was notorious for kicking in his sleep. I didn't get much rest those nights. I would count down the days until I got to see my father on the weekends; at least there I had my own room with a door I could close. I wasn't expected to clean the whole house daily as a way to help out or supervise young children. It wasn't that I resented being with my mother, but I was twelve, far too young for mothering duties and far too old to be sharing a bed with my sibling. All I wanted was a quiet space to be myself and alone, and at Dad's house I was safe to do so.

When going to friends' houses, I was envious of their lives. Their own rooms, high definition televisions, plenty of food in the house, and good relationships with their siblings and parents--

they had everything a kid could dream of. Their parents had money. Money that I could barely dream about having. Hanging out with people who had everything often made me feel like I had nothing, and that I was behind everyone else in my life. My mom didn't have the money to give me the lifestyle my friends had, so I would never ask. From the jealousy of the material goods I didn't have, and the guilt I felt asking for money, I started a habit of shoplifting to get the things that I wanted. I realized that stealing actually wasn't that hard and I would never have to ask for money as long as I didn't get caught. I would be selective about what I would choose to steal and would never hide away anything too expensive so I wouldn't get in any trouble that my mom would find out about. Stress from her child being a delinquent was the last thing I needed to add onto her already overflowing plate. All the while my friends could just simply ask, never fearing that their wants or needs would cause financial stress. Asking Mom for a new pair of jeans was unheard of, knowing she was budgeting her money to be able to pay bills comfortably and get us out of the hole. I would suck my belly into my old ones to keep myself from having to ask her. Bringing up reasons for my mom to be stressed or feel bad was the last thing I wanted to do.

My mom did try to make the gap between us and others seem not so big. Christmases were usually pretty plush, and birthdays were never disappointing. Even Easter Sunday was always a blast during the egg hunt she would put together for us, spending hours hiding the eggs perfectly after cooking us a large breakfast spread. Every year, my mom would make more and more money, but

by the time I was supposed to be going off to college, the floor collapsed from under me. Everyone I knew went off to their respective new towns to go to university, and I was forced to withdraw my enrollment, so I wouldn't put my family into a financial crisis. I was left behind, unemployed and living in my mom's basement, with only my high school diploma and no more future plans. They disappeared along with not being able to continue my education. At least I had my own bedroom now to hide away in and do nothing. I blamed myself for months for not doing enough in school to qualify for any scholarships. Or for not being musically gifted or athletic enough to qualify for any grants. I was not nearly ambitious enough to be deserving of a scholarship meant for someone great. I didn't even have my driver's license to drive myself to my local community college for classes, and my parents didn't have the time in the day to drive me there. A chain retailer was far closer to our house than the college for them to drive me to, so at least I was able to get a job after sitting idle for half a year. Still, I had no friends nearby to go out and spend the money from my new job. So I worked as much as I could just because it was something to do.

Daily, I would see photos of my friends all having a blast at their colleges, and I felt as if they had forgotten about me altogether. I always thought of myself as smart; why was I left behind only because I was worse off financially than those I knew? One friend in particular who had never known a life like mine, whose parents paid out of pocket for both her Bachelor's and Master's degree with money to spare, had gotten into a social work career with no idea what it was like to be a child in an unstable

home environment. She gets to live without taking out a single loan and never knowing how it is to live paycheck to paycheck, and I'm dreading the day when I transfer to a four-year university to finish my bachelor's degree. I don't hate her for having an easier life. She's a very good friend to me, but I find myself comparing our two lives from time to time and wonder how different my life would be now if I had that same chance—with parents that could have just paid for college without even thinking, with parents that were still together and happy to guide me through life.

I had been really looking forward to college since my junior year of high school; not being able to go dampened my excitement for a higher education for years. After a few years at my new job, I had climbed the corporate ladder a few rungs and was told I had potential to go higher. I was told that getting a degree was a waste of time and money, since I could get paid as much as my coworkers without one. But I want to be proud of my education, I want to be able to look over my desk at home and see a hard-earned degree hanging on the wall. These dreams are harder to achieve for those with less financial means, and taking out loans is not an answer to the question. As school is becoming more and more expensive, we as a generation are forced to take out more and more loans. There are college graduates that are both working in their field of study and are working second jobs to pay their bills, one of the largest usually being their student loans. Why is it that after four years of hard work to get a bachelor's degree, are people rewarded with even more hard work to just afford to live a very basic life? Though I don't hate where I ended up in life so far, I got

lucky in comparison to many others that now struggle under the weight of their large debts. I am a full time student now that can afford to only work part-time while I finish up my degree. It sounds like a dream, and it is. My parents still spoil me to this day, helping me whenever they can. They're happy for me to finally be able to go to college; I know my mother was particularly sad that she couldn't send me after high school. She felt as if she had failed me, though there was nothing she could have really done. It's all just a vicious cycle,. Sshe knew how it felt to not be able to go to college fresh out of high school;. To to move out on your own for the first time and really get to be an adult for the first time. One day, I hope one day to achieve both of our dreams of getting a higher education where I am not unshackled fromby the weight of a hefty debt.