



# CHAPTER 1

## THE NOT-SO-WONDER YEARS

### *808 GOODWIN STREET*

I didn't really know we were poor until about fourth grade. We were what you could call, house poor. We always seemed to have these beautiful homes, but things were still really tight and tense. I remember as a kid living through Michigan winters, and our car had no heat. My mom would lovingly bundle us up, and we would drive to the preppy private school that she taught at, and whoever was the best behaved received the prize of holding the remnant of her coffee cup. We didn't mind the cold because the drive to school was beautiful. It was forty-five minutes of white hills and singing along to whatever random 1960's show tune my mom was trying to teach us. My mom was a gold-medalist at making horrible situations seem like an adventure. Later in life, I'd learn why, but it was a trait I wouldn't honestly appreciate until I was an adult.

In Michigan, my parents barely had enough to make it. I'm not sure how we stayed there so long. Most of my mother's paycheck went to pay for our education, and Dad worked three jobs so we could eat. One of those side-jobs meant waking the entire family up so we could accompany him on his 3 am newspaper route. (*For anyone reading this book born after 1990, you may want to Google what a newspaper route is.*) I'll give it to them; they never stopped trying to make things

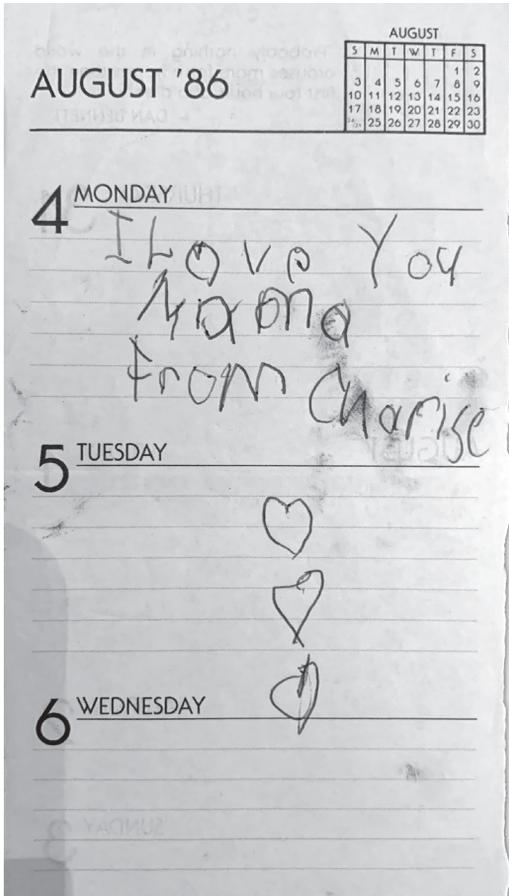
better. As a kid, I never understood why they worked crazy jobs and moved us around the country. I never appreciated why they hustled the way they did, or why they fought so much. But those things would expose themselves later. All I knew was living in a state of tension was the standard, and we were happy and painfully unaware of the storm that awaited us.

In 1990, the white winters came to an end. My mom missed her family terribly and so my father quit his real job and moved us all to southern Georgia to live with my grandparents. My brother, sister, and I loved Michigan, but we were stoked to be heading down South. The South meant Christmas and sleepovers with our cousins and back into the arms of my grandparents (*my mom's parents*); back into the arms of my true north. I can't remember a summer that wasn't spent on their farm or in their home. I can still recall that as we neared their property, you could see the top of their home peek over the trees, and we would all yell, "YO VEO LA CASA! (*I see the house*)" It was the only Spanish we knew besides the cuss words all Cubans affectionately scream at each other.

Those hot summer days in southern Georgia were filled with promises of Disney World that we could never afford, naps we tried to escape, intense amounts of reading and writing, and of course memorizing Bible verses. You have to understand, my grandmother was a devout Chris-

tian, and every fiber of her soul wanted us to love Jesus the way she did. But we were kids, and all we wanted to do was go outside, play in the woods, and pick blackberries with our cousins.

But for me, those summers meant quality time with my Mama Dulce cooking in her kitchen, learning to write my name and trying to speak Spanish. Time in that house meant quality time with my Papi Chino, who would scream, “Hey Babeeeeeey!” every time he saw me. Out of everyone in our family, his broken English and supposed harsh Cuban demeanor were the worst, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to hold his rough hands as he walked me through the chicken coups and warned me of snakes. As a child, I would hear stories about Papi Chino’s early years. They say he was a violent, hostile, bitter man, but I’d only ever known and experienced his tenderness. His love for us made me want to be near him; even if it was just sitting at his feet while he watched westerns or 60 Minutes and chewed on a cigar that he had hidden from my grandmother. I am pretty sure I am and have always been his favorite. Looking back as an adult, I realize now, that my grandparents were the only semblance of stability in my childhood. No matter where we moved, or what we did, I always knew they would be there. They were my safe place, and they made the traveling years, the lonely years, and the stormy years feel peaceful. The truth of the matter is my dad never really



*Found this in Mama's personal belongings  
several years after her passing.*

ever dealt with any change well. It was tough to navigate as a kid, but I don't blame him. He had a rough start. Dad fled Cuba in '61. The communists came into their home and demanded that they leave. He was only six, but he tells the story with eerie precision. His father was a well-known writer and radio personality, who'd been educated in the states just like his father before him. When the communists came into the picture, he bravely took to the airwaves. In response, the regime confiscated their home and everything they had.

Thankfully, they escaped with their lives but not before tragedy struck them again. My grandfather passed away at the age of thirty-three, after barely building a life for his wife and three children. My father never really recovered from the loss. Eventually, his relationship with his mother also suffered during that season, so he moved to California to live with his uncle. Dad spent his youth running the streets of Englewood, California and he spent the Vietnam era enlisted in the Marines. By the time he met my mother, he'd already lived an entire lifetime. At only 21 years old he was already divorced and had a 4-year-old daughter. Mom didn't care. Even though everything about my father screamed, "trouble!" she saw past it. For better or for worse, she always seemed to see past his red flags, his ranting and screaming. Her love for him would later

teach us how to love those that don't deserve it. By the time mom met dad, she was at the end of marriage number two. She saw dad from across the dance floor in a New York styled disco club and knew that he would be her forever. We kids like to say that they had the full "70's experience." They were married quickly, and my brother soon followed. Six months after my brother arrived Mom became pregnant with me, and my little sister came along two years later. So, there they were, faulty, in-love, and with three kiddos. They don't have the most conventional of love stories, but even in their brokenness, even after all the things they had already survived, they chose to survive each other.

After only four years their young marriage was already strained. Money was tight, and life with dad was turbulent, but Mom loved him. Without fear or question, she followed him around from job-to-job, and from city-to-city until we landed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Dad took a job as an air traffic controller. The stress of that job always seemed to be too much. Even as a young child I could sense that he never seemed at peace; he never seemed happy.

I can still remember the day he turned thirty-three. Thirty-three is when everything seemed to change for dad, and I would only understand the importance of thirty-

three when I arrived there myself. We had planned to surprise him the way regular families do. We had made makeshift birthday cards and signed them. Mom had a cake ready. We went into the living room and waited quietly for just the right moment to scream “happy birthday!” But the moment fell flat. Instead of walking into a happy surprise, dad stormed angrily into the room, looked at my mom and said, “I’m the same age that my dad was when he died. Would he be proud of what I’ve become?” Then he walked outside in his short 80’s shorts and a wool jacket and sat on the porch in the cold for most of the day, smoking his cigarettes and staring into oblivion. Full disclosure, dad’s emotional outbursts weren’t a new thing for us. They were a normal occurrence; so on that day like all the other days that had preceded it, we just went back to our usual nonsense. Mom, being the gold-medalist she was covered for him like she always did. She reminded us that love covered all, and dad was, “just being dad.”

Mom, like dad, fled Cuba as a child. Unlike my father’s story, mom’s departure played out more like a Hollywood movie, starring Andy Garcia. My grandfather, unknowing of Fidel Castro’s true intentions, ran off to the mountains and joined the revolution; leaving my grandmother and her three young children in Havana. Soon after his departure, my grandmother uncovered the truth about

Castro from her brothers, who worked within the government. While Papi was away becoming a revolutionary, she was actively and secretly collecting the visas they would need to flee the country.

My grandfather soon realized what was really happening and faked an injury to be released from his duties in the mountains. Upon his return, Mama showed him the visas hidden under the kitchen tiles, and they began to plan their escape. It was only after four failed attempts that they were able to stowaway onto a cargo ship heading to Venezuela. Mom was just eight years old. She was ten when they finally arrived in Miami, two-by-two. She was only eleven when they moved to Chicago. They didn't speak the language. They were poor, they were bullied in school, and my grandfather was beginning to unravel, a lot like my father had done. His homeland was forever beyond his reach. Everything he'd ever known -- gone. His mother was dying in Cuba, and he was unable to be with her. Unfortunately, he coped with the stress by being angry and abusive.

I suppose that's how mom learned early on in life that love would cover all. Even when Papi would lose it, Mama Dulce believed the best, and she instilled in her children the value of seeing past the fractures of broken people. I didn't know all this when we were young. I didn't

know what they had seen, or what they had survived and what they had loved through. All I knew was my mother loved my father, and we were her everything.

When we moved from Michigan, the fragile bonds that were barely held together with metaphorical duct tape finally broke. Dad couldn't take all the changes and found solace in the arms of another woman. Like the emotional outbursts, this was nothing new. Nothing mom hadn't survived before. But the difference this time was that we kids found out about it. That was mom's breaking point, her last straw. After years of being willingly loyal to my dad, covering for him, enduring his mood swings, and constant moves around the country, she couldn't take it anymore, and she asked him to leave. The next couple of months were rough. Who am I kidding? They were the worst. It was terrible like: everyone will one day need counseling to talk this horror story out.

Not only did dad leave, but the school we attended was not the best environment, and each of us was bullied and beat up frequently. Mom, as usual, was trying to keep things together and trying not to lose hope that dad would return, that they'd work things out, and all would be well again. But we didn't even care; we were just trying not to get our milk money stolen every day. We missed him, but there was a peculiar peace without having him around.

Dad spent those months writing us beautiful letters. I sometimes wonder if things would have been different for him if his father had still been alive or if he would have been a writer himself. He's always been able to express himself with pen and paper. And during those months when he was gone, that pen and paper kept him close to us. That pen and paper kept mom's hope alive. It was incredible; her strength to see past the worst in him and who she knew he was and could be was stirring. Of course, none of us would see that or believe that until we were all adults. But her praying and waiting worked, they eventually reconciled.

We spent that summer in the Florida Keys as mom and dad tried to rekindle things. Of course, dad's return meant yet another move. That was one of the conditions, us getting a place of our own, away from my grandparents. Though the move was only to the outskirts of that southern Georgia town we'd already been living in, we didn't care. We were pro's at moving, and this shift meant that we would also be changing schools! Each of us was tired of getting bullied every day, and if taking dad back said we were now going to a better school, then we were all in. Things seemed to settle down, and we moved into a massive house in the county. It was a picturesque place to grow up, surrounded by trees and acres and acres to explore. It

even had a barn in the back for us to make our own. A wealthy doctor had committed tax fraud, and they were willing to rent this mansion to our family for only \$500 a month. It was an answer to prayers, and for the first time in almost a year, we were a family again. We still didn't have a cent to our name, but we were happy. Together meant happiness, and that's all we wanted, that's all we ever needed.

### *READING THE CLOUDS*

I am currently a Floridian and have been for a long time, which means I've had to grow accustomed to random off-season storms. Fall in Florida is usually consumed with the fear of hurricanes, and the summers are filled with afternoon thunderstorms. If you are standing outside in the evening during the summer, you can feel a release from the humidity as the wind changes directions, and the temperature begins to drop. You can watch the clouds roll in, and there is a striking silence that is somewhat comforting. Yes, I find storms to be comforting. Blame it on my upbringing. The possibility of thunderstorms is one of my most favorite things about where I live, and I think it's because my life has always felt like that moment before the storm. Not in a feel sorry for me depressing way, but in a there is a peace about knowing that rain is near kind of way. I have found there's a particular kind of peace that only comes after the

storms. If this life has taught me anything, it's that **STORMS WILL HAPPEN, BUT I GET TO CHOOSE TO SEE THEM AS EITHER A COMING DISASTER THAT WILL LEAVE ME DISPLACED OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AN ADVENTURE.**

Mom always made sure during those early years that we saw it as the latter.

Life in that mansion was awesome, but the storm clouds always seemed close by. You could still hear the thunder from far off, and though on the outside things looked okay, they weren't. Dad hated his job, or at least that's what we thought, and so he started another side gig. He always had some type of side-hustle going. This time though he went back to his roots. My father is a fantastic cook. Like OUT OF THIS WORLD amazing. And before there were food trucks, my dad was just trying to make his restaurant dreams a reality by cooking at home, taking orders, and then delivering it to people at work. He called it, The Deli Express. They had bright tangerine colored shirts with the roadrunner on them, and he hired the kid next store to make the delivery runs. It was legit. It was the first time I'd ever seen my father content.

Not surprisingly, Cuban sandwiches didn't take off in the backwoods of Georgia, and there he was, with another failed dream. Of course, we felt the wind change, the temperature drop, and we knew we would be moving

again. Mom always had a steady teaching gig and soon she got a job in Jacksonville, Florida. In an attempt to put down some roots, mom and dad bought a mobile home and put it on our family's riverfront property with all my cousins and my grandparents, and FINALLY, things were good. My mom's brothers got together, and they bought this massive property, and they separated it into families so we could all be together. Somehow and somehow, together was always the goal, even when things were ugly, when things didn't make sense, and when they were uncomfortable.

When my grandparents escaped Cuba in a cargo ship, the journey across the sea was a nightmare. The food had maggots crawling on it, and everyone was incredibly seasick. At night they would huddle close together, and my grandmother would try to comfort her three young children. I'm sure in the darkness of that small room togetherness seemed like the only solace in the face of their significant loss. They landed in Caracas, Venezuela on day seven of the trip and were met by our family that had escaped earlier. They would all spend the next two years crammed into one small apartment. But they were together, and they were free.

My grandmother worked in a factory over-seeing dress makers, and she was able to help save and pay for my mother and the rest of the family to leave Venezuela

two-by-two to live in Miami, Florida. There they were met with yet again another small apartment and extreme poverty. My grandparents slept on a tiny plastic-covered love seat, while their children slept on the floor. By the grace of God, they'd escaped communism, but freedom was more bitter than sweet. I guess that's why when things got hard mom turned to the family. She knew that togetherness meant safety from the storms, protection from all the elements that would probably tear her and dad apart again. Mom was a pro at reading the clouds, and before the rain could catch our family yet again, she made the necessary adjustments to start over. That may sound like a crazy solution, but she was the brave one. She could always see twenty steps ahead of all of us, and she was the glue that held us together. She always seemed to know what we all needed, especially dad. She was and is the storm whisperer.

Dad adjusted to the move and after a few months upgraded that Deli Express idea into a full-fledged Bar-B-Q pit outside the local Jiffy store. And there we were, finally experiencing some stability. It seemed like dad had finally found a level of success, and mom was just happy because she was finally close to the family. Not to anyone's surprise though, Dad's happiness came in waves, and it was evident

that he struggled internally. We'd somehow grown up, and his outbursts didn't seem to affect us anymore.

Truthfully, we all just seemed to become numb to the brokenness. We became experts at navigating his storms, and the thunder that once scared us as children became something we barely noticed, even at its worst. We weren't sure of a lot of things, but this we were confident of, dad was broken, but mom didn't let his brokenness win. She made sure that we learned early that even though loving broken people was difficult, it was worth it in the end. Honestly, we didn't always nail it, but in our home love reigned supreme. We knew that our expectations wouldn't change him, only love would. Eventually, many years later, love did.

### **LESSON 1**

*courtesy of my mother and grandmother*

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**LOVE WILL ALWAYS  
WIN IN THE END, YOU  
JUST HAVE TO LEARN TO**

**LOVE**

**LONG ENOUGH.**