

Chapter 2

Finding Hope in Hell

"The greatest oak was once a little nut who held its ground." — Author Unknown

I was born at 9:47 am, Friday, October 30, 1953 in Los Angeles, California, at the Queen of Angels hospital. I was the second daughter; my sister, Kathy, was born three years earlier. From the day I was brought home from the hospital, she considered me an intruder who was stealing the spotlight from her role as "princess of the family." "Can't you bring her back?" she asked my mother upon arriving home with me in her arms. That set the tone for our relationship that would last a lifetime.

Before Kathy was born, my parents fled their hometown of Paterson, New Jersey. My father, thirty and still married, had three other children. He left them. According to the times, a pregnant, unmarried seventeen year old girl brought shame upon her family. Under a cloak of secrecy, they fled and headed to Philadelphia. For three years, they were invisible. No one heard from them. On June 5, 1951, they left the east coast and flew to California, settling in Echo Park, a city on the outskirts of downtown LA. That date would come back to haunt me.

When I was a toddler, we moved to Monterey Park. A small house tucked behind a larger one would be home for the next few years. My memories of this time bring back good feelings: chasing my sister around the back yard with a grasshopper in hand, going topless in the wading pool, playing with the kids in the neighborhood, hitting the kid next door over the head with a brick to make my point. We didn't have much, but I cherish the innocent and simple life we led.

I was two when my brother, Joey, was born. Three years later, Harry was born. The tiny house grew smaller, so we moved to a three bedroom house in San Gabriel. My family life began to change. At first, it was hardly noticed by me. It started off as bickering, grew to fighting, then escalated to violence. Hearing my parents scream obscenities and watching them attack each other was more painful than I could express. They used beer bottles, ash trays, shoes, knives from the kitchen drawer—anything nearby that they could pick up and throw at each other and at us. "If this is Hell, I am living in it," I secretly thought, but hoped things would get better.

To everyone in the *outside* world, we were a typical family. Mom and Dad worked their factory jobs. The four of us went to school, did our chores, and played in the street with the neighborhood kids. *Inside* the walls of my house, life was very different. I lived in a sealed tomb of sorts, one that was filled with the stench of cigarettes, beer, and filth. The windows were always closed; the shades were drawn; no one from the outside could ever come inside. *No one* could ever know the truth.

The fighting between my parents was vicious and intense. My father would lash out at anyone in his way; cursing, yelling, hitting, even spitting. No reason was needed, only opportunity and a victim in sight. My mother would join in the fray and together they would scream names and words and phrases I could not understand, hurling them like shards of broken glass. Terrified, I would hide; any place deep enough to shut them out. Under the bed, in the closet on the back porch, or at the bottom of my bedroom closet, under the dirty clothes. I'd try to soothe and calm myself, stop my body from trembling, afraid they would find me. "Don't shake. They'll see the clothes moving. They'll find me. They'll kill me."

Tired, weary, and desperate, I wanted to stop being afraid and live in a home filled with love, caring, and tenderness. I alone would have to design my fate. Unwilling to wait and unable to leave, I needed a way out of this hell. Determined to push my fear aside, I decided to defend myself, risk my life, and speak out. This split-second decision changed my life forever. Though only a

small child, I discovered my "Power Within." It would be my saving grace in a world of chaos.

They were fighting in the kitchen. My mother stood at the ironing board ironing my father's khakis, as I stood underneath it. I must've been three or four years old and just about waist high. As my father lurched toward my mother, I stepped out and confronted him. I can't remember my words, but I do remember my feelings. I was brave. I was righteous. I was powerful. Finally, I was not afraid.

I defended my mother with a vengeance. My father looked down at me, his face flushed, his eyes glaring, completely startled. "*You little bitch!*" his words were low, slow, and long as he gritted his teeth and shook his head slowly. His eyes were like lasers and tried to pierce my soul. Defiantly, I looked back without wavering. I saw hatred and envy and regret. From then on, I knew: "I am alone... alone in this family... alone in this world. I must survive... live. I can't trust anyone. I am a bitch. That is bad. I am bad."

Looking back, I see that my parents never realized their own power within. Even though they created their own set of circumstances, their own private version of Hell, they believed they were victims, always victims. They were victims of their bosses, their neighbors, their few friends. Unwilling to take responsibility for their actions... to change the course of their lives, they saw themselves as innocent and the rest of the world as guilty. Convinced that they simply had no choice, their life became a series of dramatic happenings; things happening *to* them, not the other way around.

Because of this mindset, they did not have the skills nor the resources to make their life worth living. So, instead of choosing life, they chose death. Life as they knew it was too painful. Without pulling the trigger, they would spend their whole life trying to die. Anyone around them that seemed to be living and enjoying life—and that included me—had to die with them. If they couldn't kill my body, then they would certainly doom my spirit and soul. Thus began their campaign to ensure that I would follow in their footsteps.

Fired from his job in 1962, my father had a "nervous breakdown," a luxury he couldn't afford. Our family suffered from

his self-imposed exile. Night after night, he paced the floor and drank to ease his pain and erase his reality. That's when "The War" began. Our house became a "war zone" filled with "bombs" (any object near enough to throw) and "casualties" (us). My childhood was spent trying to escape the "prison camp" (my house) and trying to overthrow the "dictator" (my father). I secretly wished he'd die, or leave, or my mother would leave, or I *could* leave.

One evening, in the middle of a battle, we were told to take our mattresses to the washroom—a separate room behind the house where the wringer washing machine was kept. The next morning, we dragged one mattress for me and my sister, one for my brothers, and one for my parents, out the back door and stacked them; throwing clothes on top to disguise them. When I returned home from school, I walked into an empty house. Everything was gone. My footsteps and my thoughts echoed throughout the barren rooms. They took everything, everything except the hidden mattresses. We had gone bankrupt.

Ironically, it was the happiest time of my childhood, for we had nothing but each other. We purchased a small styrofoam cooler and a single-burner hot plate. Crates became our furniture. Dinners were mostly canned tomato soup and lunches, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Our entertainment was a deck of cards; no TV, no radio. For the first and only time in my memory, we talked—*really talked*—to each other. Despite the dire circumstance, my imagination soared. "We're finally a real family," I thought, and filled my mind with other wonderful fantasies. But the reprieve did not last long. Within weeks, we returned to the "battlefield."

The world outside my house became my redeemer; my elderly neighbors, my family. I was special and they cared for me. I would visit. I would pretend. I would be their only child. Their homes were so neat and orderly, filled with knick knacks and pretty things and happy memories. In their homes, I felt safe, loved, and protected. I was fascinated and somewhat bewildered as I observed their relationships. They treated each other with genuine love and respect, laughed often, and embraced this neighbor child. I learned: "It *is possible* to be happy, fulfilled, and hopeful. I *can* find hope in Hell."

For no reason I could name, I just felt different, unusual, mismatched to the world around me. Though I knew from a very early age that I was chosen, I wouldn't know why until decades later. "Someone" was speaking to me inside my head and it wasn't me. I was directed and encouraged, given understanding of bewildering circumstances, and could see the true spirit in everything. Prodded to make a certain choice, I listened and obeyed. Someone was looking out for me and I wasn't sure just who. At times, I was scared and other times excited. And always, I wondered, "*Why me?*"

In first grade, my spiritual journey began. I attended the day school at Maryvale Orphanage that is run by the Sisters of Charity. Their swooping white hats, long black habits, and orderly appearance were a stark contrast to the chaos in my life. As a child, I was mesmerized. They were strict, yet kind; disciplined and fun; caring and willing to show me. Their daily devotion to God was magical and somewhat mysterious. I wanted to know more.

When I went to school each day, I was surrounded by goodness; it was a world away from what I left behind. The nuns seemed liked saints, the classroom a place to excel and be noticed, and the tiny chapel was my safe haven. "No one can hurt me here; this is God's House." I thought I'd found Heaven; a solace from my secret Hell. The girls that lived in the orphanage—though parent-less—were loved and cared for by the staff. I longed to live there, too. Oh, how I wanted to belong.

It was here that I discovered the presence of a power much greater than myself yet easily accessible—my own personal God. He was with me always as I soon discovered. He was the Father I longed for; someone to turn to in my times of sadness and confusion, but I needed physical affection. "If only I could *see* Him and *feel* His arms around me." I prayed and begged and pleaded that He, or at least the Virgin Mary, would appear to me. I was certain that they would; it was only a matter of time. At night, after the lights went out and Kathy was fast asleep, I'd secretly summon God for a conference. "O.K., God, You can come out now. You can appear to me. C'mon, God, *please!* No one's looking." I'd