

CHAPTER 2

NEEDING TO BE WANTED

Learn to love yourself. Your life depends on it.

-Lenora Scurry-

The near-death experience in that dank, dark cellar did nothing to soften my mother's attitude toward me. It instead gave her license to mock my weight. By age eight, I had developed a complicated relationship with food that would haunt me for decades to come. The shame and secrecy of binge eating became my constant companions, and by ten, my rebellious nature erupted like a long-dormant volcano.

I started smoking cigarettes, a decision that led to one of the more bizarre punishments my mother devised. When she discovered my habit, she forced me to eat an entire pack of cigarettes. I can still taste the disgusting tobacco, feel it coating my tongue and throat as I gagged and retched. "That's your problem," she said coldly as I vomited, "and it's exactly what you deserve." But her "creative" punishment backfired spectacularly - it only made me more determined to keep smoking, if only to spite her.

The holidays were particularly excruciating. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and any family gathering became an exercise in humiliation. My mother would watch every morsel I put on my plate like a hawk, her commentary sharp and cutting: "Oh my God, it's no wonder you're so fat; look at all that food!" She'd announce this to the entire gathering, ensuring maximum embarrassment. Eventually, I learned to retreat to my room during these celebrations, finding solace in solitude rather than face her public ridicule.

Food became my first drug of choice, a salvation that would ultimately betray me. My hands would tremble as I reached for another bite, my heart pounding with a mixture of defiance and shame. When I think about it now, with decades of perspective and my own experience as a mother, I'm haunted by the twisted logic of it all. Each bite was an act of defiance and surrender, my throat tight with unshed tears.

"Do you really need that second helping?" my mother would sneer, her words piercing the armor I tried so desperately to maintain. The fork would freeze halfway to my mouth, my stomach clenching with familiar dread. "Everyone's looking at how much you're eating." I wanted to scream back at her, to defend myself, but the words would die in my throat, replaced by the mechanical motion of chewing, swallowing, surviving.

My mother's voice became the narrator of every meal, transforming our dinner table into a battlefield where I fought daily for scraps of dignity. "You're getting so fat," she'd say, her eyes narrowing with disgust that cut me to my core. "You're embarrassing me." Each word was another brick in the wall of self-hatred I was building around myself. In those quiet moments alone with my binges, I found a desperate kind of peace - the peace of a drowning person clutching at anything that floats. Food didn't judge me. Food didn't hate me. Food filled the aching void her cruelty left behind.

Once I got older and started participating in holidays again, her eyes would still bore into me, calculating each bite like an accountant tallying debts. "People are staring at you," she'd whisper, leaning in close enough that only I could hear, her breath hot against my ear. "Look at how much food you're putting on your plate." My hands would shake as I tried to make myself smaller and invisible while shame burned through me like acid. Even now, decades later, I can hear those words as clearly as if she were sitting next to me, still watching, still judging, still waiting to point out every flaw. The little girl inside me still flinches at the memory, still yearns for a mother's love that came without conditions, without criticism, without the constant weight of disapproval.

My mother's sole purpose seemed to be forcing me to be as skinny as she thought I should be so that I wouldn't embarrass her. Her next logical step was to take me to Weight Watchers. I didn't know it then, but Mom had her own demons around food. She had been on one kind of diet or another for as long as I could remember, and she was on friendly terms with ex-lax pills and various "miracle" potions designed to stop people from gaining weight. She would vomit after each meal, but back then, we didn't know anything about bulimia. It wasn't until years later, as I began to research my own food addiction that I realized that's what my mother was experiencing. I don't even think she knew this wasn't normal behavior because it was something she never tried to hide.

The memory of that first Weight Watchers meeting is seared into my brain. Mom was thrifty - she had to be - and she made all of our clothes. They were never in the latest styles, and the fabrics were rarely the color or pattern we kids would have picked. But she tried. On this particular occasion, she insisted I wear a particularly ugly outfit she had made for me. The fabric was covered in big red, white, and blue stripes and stars. There were puffy sleeves and a vest, and the ensemble was completed with black Mary Jane shoes and white ankle socks. I looked and felt like a clown walking into that meeting room.

I am often drawn back to those Weight Watchers meetings—an arena where my mother's words rang out like a judge's gavel, sealing my fate. As was customary, the leader prompted everyone to introduce themselves, and when it was our turn, my mother stood up with a practiced poise. She introduced herself with a bright smile, but her demeanor shifted dramatically when she turned to me. In that moment, she made me stand, exposing me in front of a group of strangers clad in an outfit I was already ashamed of, a tangible reminder of my perceived failures.

Her words cut deep as she described me as an embarrassment, a child whose sole purpose was to eat. "I don't know what to do with her anymore," she lamented, her voice dripping with frustration. I felt myself shrinking as if the very air around me conspired to make me smaller until I was no more than an inch tall. My heart pounded in my chest, a frantic drum echoing my panic. Heat rushed to my face, and I wished desperately for the ground to swallow me whole.

The familiar tide of rejection surged within me, a wave of feelings that often crashed over me but now felt amplified in front of those women I didn't know. How could my own mother stand there and wield her words like daggers? Why was I, her flesh and blood, so unworthy of love and acceptance? Why did it seem she harbored such disdain for me?

In the aftermath of that humiliating meeting, as I sought solace in the one thing that had always comforted me—food—I found myself spiraling deeper into a cycle of binge eating that only compounded my pain. It was a vicious cycle, one that food had never intended to perpetuate, but at that moment, it felt like my only refuge. Each morsel was a temporary balm, a fleeting comfort that would soon be overshadowed by the weight of my guilt and self-loathing.

I vividly remember one incident that stands out like a beacon of shame. My stepdad, at the time, worked for a company that sent him boxes of candy. He would sell them at full retail price, a small business venture that filled our home with temptation. The boxes were stashed beneath the bed he shared with my mother, a hidden treasure trove that called to me like a siren's song. One desperate afternoon, I decided to seize my chance.

With my heart racing, I slid into their room and dragged out a box, my hands trembling with excitement and fear. I tore it open and began to devour the candy bars inside, shoving them into my mouth one after another. I can still remember the name of the candy bar, Sidekick. That memory is etched in my mind forever. I scarcely chewed, hardly tasted; I was a ravenous creature, lost in a haze of sugar and shame. I didn't stop until the box was empty. But with each bar I consumed, the joy I sought quickly transformed into a suffocating cloud of misery. I knew, deep down, that my mother would find out, and her ridicule would be swift and merciless.

When the inevitable confrontation came, it was as if my worst fears had materialized. My mother discovered the empty box, and the fury in her eyes was palpable. That day, I felt the weight of her disappointment like a physical force. She took the belt to me, her voice a harsh barrage of insults—"fat slob," "nasty pig," "an embarrassment." Each word landed like a punch, further embedding the belief that I was unworthy of love and fundamentally flawed.

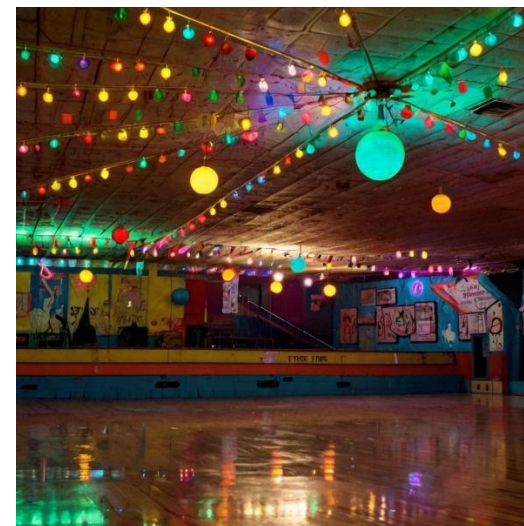
My stepdad, perhaps emboldened by my mother's cruelty, joined in the chorus of abuse. His verbal and emotional assaults felt like arrows, each one designed to wound. I remember once, so terrified of his looming presence, I jumped out of my bedroom window and ran to a neighbor's house, pleading for help. But in that time, intervening in another family's turmoil was seen as overstepping, and I was sent right back home, back to the very place I sought to escape.

To make matters worse, my brother Tony added to my torment. He was relentless—beating me, locking me in closets, hurling cruel insults that echoed my mother's disdain. "Fat pig," "slob," "lazy," he would sneer, his words a reflection of the chaos that surrounded us. "I hate you; I've always hated you." And my mother, rather than intervening, seemed to revel in his cruelty, almost encouraging it.

I can still recall a time when Tony blackened both my eyes. It was my father who noticed and, in a rare moment of concern, warned my mother that if he ever saw marks like that on me again, he would call the police. But that threat did little to change our reality. The beatings continued, and the names persisted—constant reminders that I was unwanted, unlovable, and undeserving of happiness.

During the darkest of days, as I endured the beatings and the ridicule, I often wondered how my worth could be so easily dismissed. It felt as though I was drowning in a sea of despair, the relentless waves of my mother's abuse and my family's cruelty threatening to pull me under. There was a painful irony in it all—I had not been born with these beliefs. I was not inherently flawed; I had simply become a product of the environment that surrounded me.

At around age twelve, I discovered roller skating. It was something I could excel at, and more importantly, it got me out of that oppressive house for long stretches. The rink offered "all-night sessions," so mom would drop me off at 7 PM and pick me up at 7 AM the next morning. Looking back now, I wonder what kind of mother would let her twelve-year-old daughter stay out all night, but at the time, I was just grateful for the escape.



REPRESENTATION OF THE RINK

The rink was a shabby place - the paint peeling from the walls, worn carpeting fraying at the edges, and that distinct smell of rental skates, floor wax, and concession stand food that every skating rink seemed to have. But it had a small café inside where we all could eat, hang out, and chat. It became my sanctuary. The moment I walked through those doors, the throbbing beat of the music and the swoosh of wheels on polished wood would wash over me. For those precious hours, whenever I glided around that rink, no one would judge me or make fun of me. I could just be myself.

But that freedom came with its own dangers. There were no attendance lists at the door - kids were just dropped off and left to their own devices. I would meet up with a girlfriend, and we'd hook up with groups of guys, usually older than us. Drugs and alcohol became a regular part of my nights, and I grew increasingly promiscuous, though not yet to the point of sex. Looking back now, I realize I was desperately searching for love and acceptance - just in all the wrong places.

One night, I met a guy who said he wanted to date me. Being twelve and starved for attention, I was thrilled when he came to introduce himself to my mother. He told her he was eighteen—a lie, as he was actually twenty-six. Now, as an adult and a mother myself, I wonder how any twenty-six-year-old man could want to date a twelve-year-old child. But Mom gave her blessing, and off we went.

The summer night air was thick and humid as we drove through the darkness to Jacobson Park in Lexington. My heart fluttered with excitement - finally, someone had chosen me, wanted me. The streetlights cast eerie shadows as we pulled into the deserted parking lot. The chirping of crickets and rustling leaves were the only sounds breaking the heavy silence.

When we got out of the car, I wasn't prepared for what came next. The park was pitch black except for distant lights that barely penetrated the darkness. My excitement turned to fear as his demeanor suddenly changed.

He raped me. He violated me. He made my soul as dark as that park on that particular night.

I was a twelve-year-old virgin, and he raped me. The pain was searing, terrifying. His weight crushed me as he held me down, the rough ground scraping against my back. I could smell beer on his breath and feel his stubble against my face as he forced himself on me. I was paralyzed with fear, unable to scream or fight back. The darkness seemed to close in around me as I retreated deep inside myself, trying to escape what was happening to my body.

What's sad is I didn't realize that's what it was until years later. Until then, I had always blamed myself. Everything else was my fault, so why not add this to the long list? I wasn't special to him at all; I was just an easy target. This was also the role I would find myself playing over and over again throughout my life.

When he'd finished, I noticed I was bleeding. In my naivety, I didn't understand what was happening to my body. I truly thought I was dying. Mom never talked to us about sex or boys; she didn't even prepare us for our periods. I couldn't call her - I knew she would blame me. I ended up calling a friend, and she and her momma came and picked me up. Terror and shame consumed me as I sat there in the dark, blood staining my clothes, feeling utterly alone and helpless.

That night, I stayed over at their house, and my friend's mom gently tried to explain what had happened to me and why I was bleeding. Her words were kind, but I barely heard them through the fog of trauma and shame. I lay awake all night in their spare room, my body still aching, convinced I was dying - both physically and inside my soul. The deep despair and loneliness felt like a physical weight crushing my chest. I was just a little girl desperately wanting to be loved, looking for any kind of positive attention I wasn't getting at home. This man had spotted my vulnerability, recognized my naivety, and deliberately preyed upon me like a wolf circling an injured lamb.

When I arrived home the following day, my mother hadn't even realized I hadn't come home the night before. Not a single call to check where I was or if I was safe. The entire experience only reinforced what I already believed - that I was unworthy of love, a horrible, unlovable, despicable human being who deserved whatever bad things happened to her. The shame and self-loathing were suffocating.

Back then, there was no counseling available to help process the trauma of rape. I simply had to get on with my life as best I could, burying the pain deep inside where it festered like an infected wound. I never told my mother what happened; until now, I suspect only my friend and her mother knew the truth. Life just went on, and I learned to carry it as a badge of shame and guilt, further proof that I didn't deserve to be loved.

The incident became yet another secret I carried, another wound that would shape who I became. Like so many traumas in my young life, I had no way to process what had happened or understand that I wasn't to blame. I just internalized it as further evidence of my worthlessness. The world had shown me once again that I was disposable.

But life had more trials in store, and they would come at me with brutal speed...

By this time, our family home was in a cul-de-sac in Rookwood Subdivision in Lexington, KY. A steep hill rose beside us, leading up to New Circle Road - a busy multi-lane highway divided by a median strip. The parents of one of my friends owned the Embers Motel across those rushing lanes of traffic, and we would regularly dash across to swim in their pool, waiting with pounding hearts for gaps in the endless stream of vehicles to reach the median, then pausing again before attempting the final dangerous crossing.



NEW CIRCLE ROAD, LEXINGTON KY

We had made this treacherous journey countless times before, but on one sweltering summer day, everything went horribly wrong. We had successfully navigated the first five lanes and were waiting tensely on the median, the heat from the asphalt rising around us in shimmering waves, when a police officer stopped in the third lane. He rolled down his window and began shouting at us to cross immediately, his voice militaristic and impatient. Traffic was backing up behind him, and horns were starting to blare. We were terrified and confused - taught to respect authority but knowing in our bones how dangerous this crossing could be.

Panicked and intimidated by his commands, we began to step off the median. In that moment of fear and hesitation, I lost one of my flip-flops and instinctively stopped to retrieve it - a split-second decision that would change everything. A driver far back in the queue, unaware of what was happening, suddenly accelerated into what he thought was an empty lane. Seeing the vehicle, I froze like a baby deer in headlights. He struck me at around 50mph, launching my small body 25 feet through the air. I landed on his hood before brutally bouncing onto the unforgiving pavement. The impact was so violent it ripped my bathing suit top completely off, leaving me partially exposed and broken on the scorching asphalt.

This became my second out-of-body experience - I can still clearly remember floating above the horrible scene as if held up by invisible strings in the heavy summer air. From up high, I watched my mother burst out our front door. She ran from our house up the hill, her bare feet throwing up little clouds of dirt with each desperate step toward my broken body on the ground. She had on lime green cotton shorts that made swishing sounds as she ran and a sleeveless pale pink button-down cotton shirt that stuck to her skin in the hot sun, dark patches of sweat spreading across the fabric.

The bright afternoon sun lit up every tiny detail: her feet hitting the rocky ground, her hair flying behind her like a flag in the wind, and the way everything seemed to move in slow motion, like time itself had turned thick and sticky. I could see her reach out to me, even though she was still far away. The scene burned into my memory like a photograph. Every single detail stuck in my mind as I watched from above - later on, I found out she really had been wearing exactly those clothes when the accident happened, right down to the smallest thing I saw while floating there.

I was rushed to the hospital with a severe concussion, multiple contusions covering my head and body, a fractured pelvis, and dangerous blood clots in my legs. Yet another layer of pain and trauma heaped upon this little girl's already heavy burden.

Dear God, how much more could I take? The answer lay waiting in the shadows of my future, ready to push me past every breaking point I thought I had...