

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

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When I was twelve, my mother kidnapped me. She tried to take my younger brother, but he turned her away.

A year earlier, we'd come home to an empty house to discover that my mother had taken all her belongings and left. No note. No money. Not much food in the refrigerator. My father aboard an aircraft carrier near Vietnam. The rest of our family six states away.

When my father arrived back home, he moved my brother and me to Pennsylvania to live with our grandparents. There was no discussion about what happened to my mother. In fact, we never heard from her. Not on our birthdays. Not for Christmas. Not even when my brother underwent emergency open heart surgery. Not until the day she appeared at my school.

I sat in Mr. Kulick's algebra class, struggling to understand the formula scrawled on the blackboard. The phone hanging on the wall rang, interrupting my teacher's instruction. A look of annoyance creased his face.

"Hello," he said, listening to the voice on the other end. "Yes, she's here." He replaced the receiver and looked at me. "Your mother is in the office to take you to your dentist appointment."

Confused, I gathered my books and headed to the school office. It couldn't be my mother; she was in Florida. I didn't correct Mr. Kulick because I didn't ever draw attention to the fact that I was motherless. My grandmother hadn't mentioned an appointment, or, if she had, I'd forgotten.

To my shock, it *was* my mother in the office. She stood on one side of a high counter, chatting with the school secretary seated behind it.

My heart *thum*-thumped. "Mom?" My voice came out in a squeak.

My mother moved like lightning, grabbing my arm and pushing me toward the exit. "We're going to be late. Hurry!"

My mind raced with questions. Why had my mother come to school? Did my dad know she was here? Could she take me? Silently, I slid into a rental car. I'd barely closed the door when she accelerated and raced out of the school lot.

When we arrived at the elementary school that my brother attended, my mother finally spoke, "Wait here. I'll get Johnny." Shortly, she returned, gripping his arm as she'd done mine and steering him toward me. "I'm taking you to live with me in Florida."

Johnny wrenched his thin arm away from her. "No! I don't want to go." He looked at me, his blue eyes flashing unasked questions. He spun on his heels and scampered back to the building.

My mother paused for a beat, shocked by my brother's refusal. By the time he reached the school entrance, she had gunned the engine and sped away, driving pell-mell toward the Philadelphia Airport. As she maneuvered the car down I-95, she chattered away. "I have an apartment. There's only one bedroom, but we'll move to a larger place so you can have your own room. Tomorrow, we'll go shopping to get you some clothes and get you registered at the local school."

I sat in silence, worrying the fraying cloth on my three-ring binder. Did I want to go back to Florida? Would my dad and grandparents wonder where I was? Why had my brother said no?

We flew to Miami. I leaned against the window and stared at the horizon for the entire flight. By the time we landed, I felt nauseated. My turtleneck and jeans, perfect for the northern winter, had me sweltering down south. I wanted to talk to my dad. Desperately.

My mother's tiny apartment was one block off Biscayne Bay, a fact she highlighted as if the water would entice me to love the squat concrete building. She invited me to look around.

I opened a closet, intending to hang up my coat. It was full of men's clothes. My brain couldn't compute. Who lived here? Before I could ask, my mother appeared in the doorway.

"I was going to tell you. I live here with my boyfriend. You met him once. At the commissary. He was the bread delivery man." Her words swept over me like a flash flood. "Do you remember him?"

I said, "I want to call my dad" and walked to the far side of the room where a telephone sat on the night table. Sinking onto the bed, I dialed the phone number to my grandparents' house.

My dad answered on the first ring. "Hello."

"Daddy," I whispered. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I want to come home." Tears streamed down my cheeks and fell onto my lap.

"Where are you," he asked, his voice gruff. After I answered, he said, "Put your mother on."

I slipped out of the room while they spoke. I heard my mother's voice grow strident as they argued.

When she finally emerged, she said, her voice hard, "You'll be on a flight tomorrow morning." She brushed past me, the heat of her anger hotter than the Miami temperatures.

When I landed in Philadelphia, my dad and grandmother were at the gate. I walked off the gangway to where they waited. Neither hugged nor spoke to me. Once they clapped eyes on me, they turned and walked away. I shuffled behind them all the way to the car, my head down.

For over thirty years, I based my self-worth on that single event. I told myself that I deserved my father's ire. I was the family black sheep, undeserving of love. The tape inside my head reminded me of my poor decision making, and it played on a loop. The litmus test I used was my nine-year-old brother's superior judgment to stay behind.

In 2001, when I recounted this story to my therapist, mentioning it as an aside months into our work, she laid down her notepad and pen. Removing her half-moon glasses, she asked, "Why didn't your brother go with you that day?"

"I don't know." It had never occurred to me to ask him. I felt foolish.

"Debby, who were the adults here?" Her voice was kind and soft. "What would you tell your children in this situation?"

I pondered for a moment. "This wasn't my fault. I was just a kid." Recognizing the burden I'd carried for what it was, I felt lighter just speaking the words.

She said, "You were a heartbroken kid who hadn't seen or heard from her mother for more than a year. Of course, you would go with her. Your assignment is to talk to your brother."

Our session over, I drove home. All the pain and suffering which I kept buried bubbled up. I felt angry at my parents. What kind of parents did that to a kid? Who kidnaps her children? Who doesn't talk about the mistake or hug his kid to reassure her?

A week later, I met my brother for lunch. We made small talk, enjoying the warmth and sunshine as we ate turkey and brie sandwiches. As our time together drew to a close, I said, "I have something I want to ask you. Something that has tortured me for years." I looked directly at him. "Do you remember the day mom showed up at school?"

He nodded, his eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"Why didn't you come with us?" I forced the words out, fearful of his answer.

"I'm embarrassed." He started crying. "Debby, I didn't come because I didn't want to leave my stuffed animals."

I sat there, stunned. "Your animals?" An image of him at nine hugging Ginger, his floppy-eared calico dog, appeared in my mind's eye.

"All these years, I told myself that something was wrong with me for choosing toys over my mother." He cried openly, wiping away tears with the back of his hand.

"Oh my God," I said. "All this time, I thought you were a better decision-maker, and there was something inherently flawed in me to have gone with her."

We grieved for the children who carried unnecessary guilt for so long. We exorcized our ghosts, cleaned our wounds, and vowed to ask more questions. That conversation was the start of my healing journey and a lesson in how the mind naturally creates stories in the absence of knowledge. The problem is that those stories are usually wrong and don't serve us.

In what ways have your stories held you back? You know you were born to make a difference in the world. You've done the work to heal old wounds and yet *something* (maybe more than one thing) keeps you from achieving all you know you can. Some of your beliefs—and stories—no longer serve you. **Begin today to write a new ending to your story!** Download my free eGuide entitled, "[12 Signs Your Beliefs Are Weighing You Down.](#)"