

Chapter One: What Poverty Tastes Like

Some people don't remember being a child. I remember almost everything. Not in order — not the whole timeline, just the moments that stuck and never left. Snapshots, not video, going all the way back to when I was two. The brain keeps what it decides to keep, and mine held onto more than its share. So if something here feels too small or too far back to hold a memory, trust that I'm holding it anyway.

Poverty doesn't announce itself. It doesn't knock on the door and say, "Hey, I'm moving in, make some room." It just shows up one day and you realize it's been there the whole time — sitting in the back of the fridge where the food used to be, in the draft that comes through the window that never quite closes, in the way your mom's eyes look after a double shift when she thinks you're already asleep and she lets the face she's been holding together all day come apart for just a minute before she has to put it back on for tomorrow.

I grew up knowing exactly what poverty tastes like. It tastes like the end of the month, when the math stops cooperating and everything

becomes a negotiation between what you need and what you can actually get. It tastes like bagged milk and pride — because my mom had too much of the second one to let us feel sorry about the first. She never let us go to bed hungry if she had any way to prevent it, even if that meant she went to bed that way herself. It tastes like WIC checks and food stamps and stretching what you've got to places it was never designed to reach. I didn't understand the full accounting of that until I was much older. Kids take what's given and don't ask what it cost.

My mom was seventeen years old when she got pregnant with me. Eighteen when she gave birth. Seventeen. Not finished growing up herself, not finished figuring out who she was or what her life was going to look like, and already carrying a whole other life inside her. My grandma and my mom did not get along well in that period. They fought the way women fight when they love each other and are both terrified and can't say that directly.

My mom has told me stories about how my grandma would walk by her and hit her and call them love taps. My grandma's framing: love hurts sometimes. My mom would say, "Look — it left a bruise." My grandma would

say, “You bruise easily.” That was the rhythm of the house she came up in.

At some point my mom ran. Pregnant, on her own. She has told me that when she left, my grandma said she was going to call the police and report her as a runaway child. My mom’s response was, “Go ahead, I will be eighteen before they find me.” She gave birth to me out from under that house. After that it was just the two of us, figuring it out in a city that was not particularly interested in making things easy for a teenage mom with a newborn and no stable ground.

My dad was never in the picture the way a dad is supposed to be. He left when I was little — not dramatically, not with a conversation, just gone — and what replaced his presence was a pattern: he would pop up every once in a while, unannounced, like a charge I forgot to cancel. You’d almost forget about him and then there he was again, full of energy and explanations, and then gone again just as fast. There was no consistency to it, no reliability, nothing you could build anything on. I stopped trying to build anything on it early. My mom raised me. That’s the whole story of my childhood household — her and me, and later my sister, and whatever stable adults my mom was able to pull in around us.

We bounced in the beginning. Couch to couch, staying wherever someone had space and was willing to let a young woman and a baby use it. The memories from that earliest stretch are flashes — sound and sensation more than scene, the way the earliest memories tend to be. The brain at that age is storing in pieces. What I have from it is a body memory of impermanence, of nothing being certain, of the ground being something that could shift at any moment. Some people develop anxiety about change as adults. I was born with it pre-installed. It's just part of my architecture.

The WIC program was part of our life for those early years. WIC checks for formula and food, food stamps for the rest of it, the whole careful economy of a young mother with a small child and not enough of anything making every dollar and every benefit stretch as far as it would go and then a little further. I'm not ashamed of any of that. That is what survival looks like when you are young and alone and determined that your child is not going to go without. My mom used every tool available to her and she used them without apology, and she kept us fed and kept us moving forward and that is the only accounting that matters.

Eventually she got us a place of our own. And then another one, because stability is not

something you get once and keep — it's something you have to rebuild every time the circumstances that produced it shift, which they did, regularly, with the consistency of a system that had not been designed with people like us in mind.

I remember many different apartments and houses — scattered, specific places, each held in pieces. One apartment in particular. Second story. Wooden stairs, brown-stained for so long they'd almost forgotten anything else, and a railing the neighborhood kids used as a staging ground for activities the adults wouldn't have approved of. I was two when I was hanging off that railing — bare hands, full body weight, completely confident in my ability to negotiate physics. I ran those stairs. I was young enough that the whole world was the building and the porch and the kids next door, and that was, for its purposes, enough.

That apartment was where things went sideways in a way I couldn't have understood then and only partially understand now.

My Uncle Meech had been staying with us for a stretch. He was there because he and my grandma — his mom — were fighting and he wanted to get out of the house. He was supposed to be taking his antibiotics. He had lied to my grandma about taking them, which

was its own situation that came back around later.

What happened was the front door coming in.

I was in my toddler bed when I heard it. A door being kicked through is not a subtle sound — it communicates immediately and completely that what was outside is now inside and that the normal rules have been suspended. The local SWAT team came in with a dog that by any professional assessment was not trained. They threw my toddler bed across the room. They flipped the couch over and ripped it open. In the kitchen, they didn't just dump the drawers — they threw them. Threw them, contents scattering everywhere, making the kind of mess that broadcasts not investigation but performance, not evidence-gathering but a show of who has the power in this room. My mom was handcuffed on an air mattress and they were interrogating her about drugs.

My dad and my Uncle Lonnie were, at that point in the city's history, among the biggest dealers operating there. I'm stating that as a fact, not an editorial. My mother was not in that life. She was a teenage mom with a baby in an apartment that other people used sometimes, and when her connection to those people intersected with the interest of law

enforcement, she was the one on the air mattress in handcuffs while they asked questions she couldn't answer because she genuinely didn't have the answers.

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I need to tell you about Detective Bryson, because none of what follows makes sense without him.

Detective Bryson was the lead on the case. He was also the most comprehensively corrupt law enforcement officer this city had produced in living memory. He didn't just take drugs from stops — he ran a private system inside the system. My dad got picked up with fourteen grams of cocaine. He was charged with one gram. That math does not work unless someone between the seizure and the paperwork made a very specific decision about what the numbers were going to say.

The city's feelings about Detective Bryson expressed themselves most eloquently at the marina. Someone drove a forklift into his boat and sank it. Nobody was caught. Nobody seemed particularly motivated to investigate. Eventually the investigation that came for him found what anyone paying attention already knew — he had been moving product to his own son. When the walls closed in, he set up his son to save himself. Gave information.

Walked out while his son went to prison. He is so thoroughly corrupt that he is still talked about by the local police force and dispatch to this day. That is the man who was running cases in the city where I grew up.

Detective Bryson and his wife Gina — she was also on the force — were shaking down teenagers for their weed alongside another cop, Officer Palermo, the three of them moving as a unit. They would take the product, pocket it, and walk. That is what was running on the streets I lived on, in the uniforms that were supposed to be protecting me.

I tell you all of this not because it is my story directly, but because it is the backdrop. The water I grew up in. A city where the person whose job was to enforce the law was running product through it, where the charge on my dad's record said one gram when the real number was fourteen, where a cop and his wife and a partner were shaking down teenagers for their weed and pocketing it because they could. If you want to understand why certain choices looked like reasonable options to me later in life, you need to understand what the system looked like from where I was standing. It was not a system that was protecting me or people like me. It was a

system that had decided people like me were either useful or irrelevant.

Then we left that apartment. My mom got us out of there. The next place was a rented house — wood siding, the kind that develops a relationship with the local wasp population because of how wood siding works, which is to say the house had a serious wasp problem the whole time we lived in it. That is the house where the memories start having full pictures around them. The apartment was earlier — the apartment memories are sharper but fewer, flashes more than full scenes. The wood-siding house is where I can see the rooms.

One small memory of the apartment did stay with me, in the way certain small things do when everything around them was big and frightening. My cousin Claire slept over there once. We had Winnie the Pooh sleeping bags. Apartment with the brown stairs, two kids in Winnie the Pooh sleeping bags, nothing about that night was scary. That one is mine, and I get to keep it intact.

The wood-siding house is mine.

I was three when the air freshener thing happened. My birthday is at the beginning of the year, so this was the summer of being three. I know it was that house because I can see it. I found a can of aerosol air freshener

and sprayed it straight up into the air — completely fascinated by the cloud I had made happen — and then the spray came down onto my face and into my eyes and communicated its objection in the clearest possible terms.

Don't be surprised when you read more incidents like this one. It's going to be a recurring feature.

Here is what I did with my first real moment of unsupervised time in a vehicle, and you have to picture it the way it actually went. My mom buckled me into my car seat, shut my door, and went to take care of something before getting in the driver's side. In that little window — the few seconds between her closing my door and her opening hers — I undid the car seat, climbed over the console to the front seat, located the gear shift, and put it in neutral. The car was parked on a hill. It began rolling toward the neighbor's house with the slow, inevitable momentum of a thing that has been given permission to move in only one direction. I registered that this was going to end badly and climbed back to the rear seat and buckled myself in.

My mom saw the car start to move, ran after the Ford, got in, and stopped it before it reached the house. She then sat there for a moment in the specific way of a woman who

has just narrowly avoided a disaster and is deciding how many of those feelings to show to the small person sitting calmly buckled in the back like nothing happened.

I was not dumb. The things I did in my early years could give a person the wrong idea. They should not. I was not dumb. I was extremely curious, extremely motivated to do whatever interested me, and extremely unconcerned with the conventional understanding of safe and allowed. That is a different thing.

I was an escape artist. That was my mom's word for it and it was accurate. She installed a chain lock at the top of the door frame — high enough that no toddler should have been able to reach it — specifically to address the problem of me having too much mobility and too little self-preservation instinct.

For my third birthday I received a fishing pole. You can see where this is going.

It was that summer. She was washing dishes. I assessed the door, the chain lock, and the fishing pole I had received a few months earlier, and I worked out the trajectory. Pushed a chair to the door, climbed up, extended the fishing pole to the chain, worked

it until the chain lifted out of its slot. The door opened. I left.

She came out of the kitchen to check on me, found the chair and the open door and the fishing pole on the floor and no child. She was screaming. Freaking out the way only a mother can when a three-year-old has gone missing from a locked house through a mechanism nobody anticipated.

I remember walking down the road. There was a family across the street — Hmong, didn't speak English, no way to communicate with us verbally. But they always got me home. Every single time I wandered over to play with their kids, they made sure I made it back safely across the street when it was time. No common language. Completely reliable. Some of the safest adults in my early life were people I couldn't even talk to.

Honestly: my life hasn't been all hard. The fishing pole and the chain lock is genuinely funny. So is most of what I'm about to tell you. My life has been fun in specific ways I would not trade for anything. You have to hold both of those things at the same time to understand any of it.

My mom had a dental hygiene motivation system that I feel the world should know about. She had a friend whose dental situation

was not good — not good in the specific visible way that results from extended neglect. She would take me to see her as a demonstration. “This is what happens,” she would tell me, “if you don’t brush your teeth. This is where that road goes.” Whether this worked as a deterrent or simply as recurring performance art in my childhood, I leave to interpretation. I brushed my teeth.

I was five when my mom bought her first house. Small but nice — a real house, ours not rented, a yard, a second floor, windows. Things started looking up. Not perfectly and not without bumps, but up, and up matters when you’ve spent your whole life on ground that keeps shifting.

There was also the roof. I got up onto the roof of the new house with my construction toys, and when my mom found me up there and asked what I was doing, I told her I was fixing the roof. I had the construction toys with me. As far as I was concerned, that settled it.

Around the age of six I developed a secondary escape system. I had knotted extension cords together — enough of them, tested for load-bearing capacity the way a six-year-old tests these things, which is mostly by pulling hard and deciding they seem fine — and I was using them to rappel down from the second-story

window to the yard below. I'd lower my toy trucks first, then descend, then play. And I always made sure before going out the window to unlock the sliding glass door downstairs so I could get back in.

I was getting away with it consistently until the day I forgot to bring the trucks back inside. She found them in the yard. Looked at the trucks. Looked at the window. Looked at the extension cords still knotted near the sill. Understood exactly what had been happening.

That is when she screwed the second-story windows shut. Not before — after. The construction toys on the roof, the toy trucks in the grass, the cords by the windowsill, all of it added up and the screws went into the windows that afternoon.

She told me years later — once enough time had passed that the fear had converted into a story she could actually tell — that after she screwed those windows shut she had nightmares. Recurring ones. About a fire. About the house being on fire and me being upstairs and the windows screwed shut and her not being able to reach me and me not being able to get out. She would wake up in the cold sweat of a mother who let the worst possible version of events run all the way to its conclusion in her sleeping brain and could not

shake it until she went and checked that I was there and breathing.

I didn't know about those nightmares until I was old enough for her to tell me. I didn't understand what my cleverness had cost her in sleep. Kids just do things. They don't stop to think about what those things cost other people. The adults carry the weight of what the things could have become. That gap runs in only one direction.

And then my sister was born.

I love my sister. This is not in dispute. I would walk through fire for her, quietly, without requiring anyone to know I did it. But the relationship between a previously only child and a new baby who immediately begins making demands on every shared resource does not begin without friction.

She was fine when she was small and contained. The problem was when she learned to walk. Because once she could move around, everything was fair game, and what she got into included my VCR, which she used as a Hot Wheels garage. Just drove the cars in and out of the cassette slot like that's what it was built for. The VCR was done.

A note on the dogs of the house, because they are about to matter. Toby was a white and

brown English Springer Spaniel. Loving, gentle, the kind of dog you could trust with anyone. I say that with an example in mind: a kid latched onto him once, bit him hard enough to draw blood. All Toby did was whimper. He held still and waited for the kid to let go. When the kid finally released, Toby licked him, walked off, and treated him exactly the same the next time he saw him. That is who that dog was.

Then there was Ali — a Dachshund, a Wiener dog, though Dachshund is German for Badger Dog, which is a significantly more dignified description than she got credit for. Ali was small and fast and ran the house with the authority of an animal who knew her domain. Great company. Funny. Completely incapable of destroying a house and then framing someone for it.

By the time my sister was around four she had moved past the VCR phase and into something else. I was at a friend's place for two days. When I came back, the house looked like it had hosted something significant. My mom asked her who did it. She looked at my mom and said, "Malik." My mom said, "Your brother has been at his friend's house. He was not here." And my sister — without missing a

single beat, without any visible guilt — pointed at Toby and said, “Toby did it.”

That particular move was entirely human and entirely my sister’s — but Toby was a smart choice, because Toby genuinely did wreck things. He took the accusation the way Toby took most things, with a kind of mild patience that bordered on saintly. She did not pin it on Ali. She pinned it on Toby, the one dog in that house who actually could have done it, and she did it with a straight face. Toby was the perfect fall guy — a loving idiot, incapable of arguing the point. Ali ran circles around him intellectually — she used to make him dig holes in the backyard so she could escape under the fence, and he would dig with that earnest commitment idiots have when they don’t realize they’re being used, looking up at her like, what about me, while she walked off to her freedom.

The fishing pole story belongs here too. My neighbor dropped off my fishing pole one day, leaned it against the back of the house. Toby loved nightcrawlers — none of us had told him about this one but Toby found his way to most things through his mouth — and there was one still on the hook. He bit down on the worm. The hook went through his lip. He did not care about the pain. He was so dumb that what he

registered as a threat was not the hook in his face but the fishing pole that was now apparently chasing him. He ran. The fishing pole, attached to his lip by the hook, ran with him. He kept looking behind himself in panic at this pole that would not stop pursuing him through the yard. He could not understand that the pole was attached to his own body. That was Toby.

He was a goat in the most literal sense. He ate the mail. He ate five pounds of gummy bears on one occasion and threw up colored slime for a while and then went on with his day. He ate two pounds of chocolate — the kind of amount that kills dogs, according to every veterinary article ever written — and behaved like nothing had happened. He got into the pantry once and tore open a bag of flour and came out of there with his entire face dusted white, looking like he had a serious cocaine problem. We laughed about it then. I would not come to understand the joke fully — that maybe it ran in the family — until years later, while shoving mountains of coke into my own nose. The jokes we used to make about Toby having a secret stash buried somewhere in the backyard — coming back into the house with a sudden burst of energy nobody could explain — maybe those jokes weren't jokes. I still blame the Roundup company for your thyroid

cancer, Toby. You deserved better than what got you in the end.

He shredded a baby bunny in front of a yard full of five-year-olds at a birthday party once. There is no version of that scene that does not require therapy for everyone involved. I bet some of those kids brought it up years later in counseling, the way you have to bring up the formative scenes: “Well, doctor, it all started with this dog and this bunny.”

Ali deserves a sentence of her own, because she was one of the consistent good things of those early years. She was funny in the way only small dogs with large personalities are funny. She did not destroy a single piece of electronics or blame anyone for anything. She did, as mentioned, use Toby as her personal excavation crew, but that is just intelligence applied. I respected her for it.

So that’s the foundation. The first years of my life: couch-surfing, WIC checks, food stamps, a SWAT team kicking in my front door and throwing drawers across the kitchen, a corrupt cop and his cop wife running product out of the badge, my toddler bed thrown across a room, a car I rolled down a hill and calmly buckled myself back into, a chain lock I defeated with a birthday fishing pole, a Hmong family across the street that didn’t speak my

language and made sure I got home anyway, extension cord rappelling, windows screwed shut, nightmares my mom had about fires I didn't know about, a sister who blamed Toby for what she had done, and Ali the Dachshund who ran the whole operation with her dignity completely intact.

That is what I was built on top of. And before we go anywhere else, I want you to understand something: this is not a story about a victim. It is not a story about someone broken by his circumstances. I grew up in conditions that produce either extraordinary resilience or complete collapse, and I have spent my whole life choosing the first one. Sometimes badly. Sometimes in ways that cost me things I didn't know the full price of until later. But always choosing to stay in it. Always choosing to still be standing.