

ONE

MY BEGINNING

Maryann and I did everything together. I loved her with a passion. My mum to this day recalls a story of my sister and I being in separate wooden cots sharing the same little purple bedroom. At the age of about one year, Maryann would jump her cot over to mine, mum would come into the room and see Maryann in my cot with her arm around me, comforting me. Maryann was, and still is, a very special gift to me. I believe she was a gift from heaven because He knew the future and knew we would need each other.

I was the first of twin daughters born to an Australian mother and Italian father. My mother tells me that the nurse in the Maternity ward looked at me in the humidicrib and said, 'Please call this one Angela because she looks like an angel!' My twin

was named Maryann after mum's mum. Both of us were named after our grandmothers - dad believed that it was important to continue the Italian tradition of honouring previous generations. We both enjoyed a special bond with our big brother who was three years older.

The memories I have of my childhood are an extreme paradox: fond and dark. I learnt from a very young age to hold on tightly to the good memories. Maryann was the 'good' in my world. We grew up in Semaphore Park, Adelaide and our house was two streets walk away from the beach. I loved the beach! I still do to this day. In the daylight hours it was a place I longed to be: playing, swimming, walking and resting. However, night-time was a different experience, as night after night I was troubled by a recurring dream about huge waves flooding our street. In the dream I would be standing at the bus stop directly across from our house, watching the waves come closer and closer, getting higher and higher. I would wait for the waves to rise and take us all out. It scared me. I believe now it spoke of the fear and panic that was happening in my heart. Overwhelming emotions hit me hard as a child - negative emotions, troubled feelings, knowing there was a storm. Life felt dangerous and out of control.

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Whilst I was still young, around eight years old, I would regularly tell my sister that there was a spiritual truth that I must connect to. Neither of us understood what that meant but there was a longing a call, a something out there that I had to know about. It felt as though a puzzle was not complete in my heart. I understood in my heart that there was a purpose, something that I had to achieve. It bothered me not really understanding those feelings and my sister would freak out a little when I shared my heart in this way. It was real to me, but didn't make sense to either of us.

My Dad was a Catholic but we never attended church, even though we had all been christened as babies. Our next door neighbours were Pentecostal Christians and our families got along really well. We spent a lot of time with each other and Michelle their youngest child became a best friend to Maryann and I. Michelle's mother, Auntie Marie would lead a Christian group at our school called 'Joy Time', and mum used to help her out. There were lots of games and lollies and I remember it as a good experience for Maryann and I. I liked it most because I got to see my mum.

When Maryann and I were about ten years old, Dad decided that it was time for us to be confirmed into the Catholic church. Early every Sunday

morning, for two years, Dad would bang on our bedroom door and yell at us to get out of bed and get ready for church. We dreaded Sunday mornings with a passion. We went, but unwillingly. The church was cold and large; we sat in pews that were as uncomfortable as the atmosphere inside. Each Sunday Dad gave us a few coins to put in the offering box. I was a submissive child, but when the offering box came around I did not want to put my money in it. We were poor, we had little money and it bothered me that I had to put the money in that wooden box. I knew that money was needed for food for our family. I didn't understand it was giving to God. I saw it as giving to this large, cold, scary authority that I did not relate to - it didn't make sense to me. I never kept the money though, I always put it in the box. Maryann felt the same. Maryann and I dreaded the communion experience too. Each week we would walk the line, up the red carpet, patiently and politely waiting for our turn. With dread in our heart we obediently opened our mouth as the Priest stood above us, all dressed in his robes, placing the wafer onto our tongue and speaking something over us. We hated the way the communion wafer stuck to the roof of our mouths, but it was important to Dad so we had to cooperate.

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The other thing about church that I dreaded was the confession. I will never forget my first confession experience. One by one the children that were being confirmed went into this large wooden box that sat in the corner of the church. The silence was deafening; each child would exit the box quietly and sit down on the pews at the front of the altar and say their penance. By the time it was my turn my heart was racing: I was so scared! I was always a nervous kid, and this terrified me. I slowly opened the door and walked towards a stool in the small space, all alone in the box. I looked around, freaking out on the inside and I sat as the priest slid open the little window. It felt like his eyes were peering directly into my soul. We sat side by side, a little window my only perspective of him. I don't know to this day if he saw the fear on my face! A deep voice spoke: 'What are your sins, my child?' I was almost too cold to reply but in my nervousness I made something up, quietly and respectfully answering his question. After my confession the priest gave me my penance and told me I could go. I remember the sense of relief as I returned to my seat. I don't think I said my penance. I just sat there scared and confused. He said 'my child?' I was thinking: 'I don't want him as my dad. I don't really think I believe in this God.' These were the

thoughts that ran through my mind as I sat at the altar, thankful that it was all over. I didn't say my penance because I made up my sin just to get out of there. In my heart I was rebelling because I just didn't believe in the process. The authority of the church scared me. It was so large, so cold, so impersonal to me. I was told what to do, and how God thought. In my mind God had a finger pointing at me. I didn't feel safe. He felt distant and I felt tiny.

I can still see the priest in my mind, in his robes, standing in the pulpit. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I understood in no uncertain terms that I was a sinner. Maryann and I did some Bible studies in a small group with a teacher who spoke about Jesus, but I couldn't focus on what she was saying. When I was scared I would escape to a private place in my heart and mind. Whenever I was overwhelmed I would go to that place and block out everything. I lost a lot of my schooling because I was spending time in that place. Even though I always passed into the next grade, I found school difficult. My whole world was difficult. Family life was stressful, mum didn't like dad and dad didn't like mum. I was terrified of dad. I was waiting for dad to get his gun and kill us. I lived in that space, in that fear as a child. I never dared to speak

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about that fear, not even to Maryann, however that fear was truly embedded into my heart. It was my reality.

One day, dad took out his gun and locked himself in his bedroom, threatening to take his life. Maryann and I were quickly ushered out of the house. My fear was real. I knew he had the potential to kill with that gun. I was terrified. I was relieved to hear dad didn't take his life, however his actions led him into the psychiatric ward, and a diagnosis: schizophrenia. Mum was called into the hospital and the doctors talked to her about his illness. We visited once and once was enough. My memory is of dad lying in the hospital bed unable to talk. We asked him how he was but he couldn't answer. It distressed Maryann and I greatly. What was wrong with dad? The nurse told us that sometimes medication can do that. We were whisked away and we never went back. In my heart I told my dad I loved him and that I was scared for him. I was glad he was alive, but now I was more scared of him than ever.

It was at this time - I would have been about seven - I called out to God: 'Please help me!' I would kneel by my bed knowing there was more to life than what I was experiencing. I begged Him to help me, if He was real. I knew He could intervene

in our crazy world. I didn't hear him speak back, there seemed to be a chasm, unspeakable distance, between Him and me. I was tiny, insignificant, and He was massive and powerful. I hoped he was kind but my experience taught me differently. The huge church structure and hardline authority were the main truths that filled my subconscious. It was an honest prayer that left my heart, and in faith I believed that He might intervene, that help would come. I had no idea of His plan, I just hoped.

Mum and Dad's marriage was turbulent. They loved us, but the ongoing pain and disfunction of their lives made it difficult for us as a family. I loved both of them deeply and I always felt as though I had to protect my mum, to be good, to not cause her any stress. To be obedient. I knew she couldn't handle a naughty kid, life was already difficult enough. I took responsibility in my heart for my mum while I was still very young. My sister was living on the other side of the pendulum. Her behaviour was naughty, she was frustrated with life. I was withdrawn and she was outspoken. I remember one day – I was about seven - having a cigarette. Mum and dad both smoked and we had easy access to cigarettes. We had been smoking at the park one day and mum and dad confronted us., We were busted! As soon as we were caught, I

apologised and backed down when our cover didn't work. Maryann and I were disciplined and then to test us, dad said to us, 'Do you want a smoke? offering mum's packet to us' I was like, 'No way. Are you serious?' Maryann, on the other hand said, 'Yeah!' and went to take the cigarette. She got a left hand across the face. I remember scolding her later: 'How can you be so stupid!' That sums up who we were as twin sisters; one lived on one side of the pendulum and the other swung in the opposite direction.

My parents were so important to me. As a child I needed them desperately. I made a decision as an adult that Mum and Dad will always be honoured and respected in my heart; the values and the foundations that they tried to establish in our lives were good. They did their best. As I processed pain later in life I learnt to hold onto the good, to understand that they were both struggling to cope, that life was difficult for them. I had to trust that they did the best job that they could, with what they were facing in their personal lives.

In media class at high school I found a razor blade. A friend in the class was a 'cutter', and I was intrigued. So I copied him and for the first time I learnt to release pain in another way; I cut my wrist, not real deep, but enough to draw blood. I

was surprised that it felt good, the pain helped. It felt as though with each cut, emotional pain was leaving my soul. I cut up my arm while sitting in class to relieve the pain I was feeling. My teacher had no idea. I tried to cover the cuts but Maryann saw it and freaked out. She told Mum and Mum knew something was really wrong. She was so upset that I had hurt myself. She knew that dad and her needed to take this seriously. She told Dad and together they went to a psychiatrist for me to get advice on how to deal with my issues. The initial appointment was for them to go together and then the plan was for me to attend the next appointment and explain myself to the psychiatrist. They came home from that appointment arguing violently. It was loud, it was scary. They stormed into the house announcing that they were getting a divorce. Maryann asked when I was going to see the doctor and Mum said, 'The doctor said it's no wonder our child has issues!' I never did see that doctor.

They separated when I was twelve and eventually divorced. I was convinced the breakdown of the marriage was my fault and I took responsibility for it in my heart. Whenever things went wrong I took the responsibility because I hoped that would take away the pain and prevent a family war. Conflict scared me. It was dangerous. I was always scared

that it would get out of control, and many times it did. My taking responsibility rarely worked though because it really wasn't my fault. I longed for peace and reconciliation in our home.

My teenage years were just as difficult. I was still cutting to relieve the pain the practice was embedded in my soul - and I was just going through the motions in school. I found a part time job washing dishes at a local Indian restaurant after school. When I was offered a position as an apprentice chef my parents agreed it was a good opportunity and allowed me to leave school, not long after my parents fully separated and I moved out of home. I was fifteen. It was hard to be loyal to both of them. I loved them equally so it was easier to cope with their impending divorce and their anger when I could get perspective from a distance. The reality is that they both went through a tough time. When there is a divorce each person suffers loss that is unique and individual. Grief can be selfish when it is so personal, especially when you want to walk in freedom. Freedom says you have to face the reality of the hurt and pain and not be in denial. But with grief there is a process, and a lot of the time raw emotions ran rampant in all of us. It created a disconnection. I came to realise that I needed both my parents in my world. I contacted each

of both and asked them to respect each other when they were with me because I loved them equally. Unfortunately they both held on to a lot of painful emotion.

Not long after the divorce my dad found out that he had lung cancer. He'd smoked profusely, always with a rolley in his mouth. He smoked Drum. I found it extremely difficult during visits to my Dad. He knew he was dying of cancer but one time a wooden cross caught my eye. It was new, hung around his neck and it stood out to me. I remember thinking about it though he never explained it to me. During each visit he would grab me and hold me real tight, then he repeated over and over to me: 'I love you, I love you'. He was desperate for me to know that I was loved by him, but I found this hard to handle. Dad had never before shown me this much affection. My heart was not coping with this level of emotional connection. To this day I only have one photo with dad holding me. I was about two years old and there is such fear in my little two-year old face. I feel sad today when I see that photo, however it speaks of the truth of the relationship that should have been, and perhaps was there underneath it all. Dad was trying to make up for sixteen years of lost opportunity. I could not cope with this love. I did not know how

to handle it though I could feel the fear in his heart. He knew he was dying and every visit with him was incredibly painful and difficult. I never told him that. I continued to visit dad but only if someone else was with me. My brother mainly. When Dad was finally admitted to palliative care, our visits to him in hospital left me with mixed emotions. My brother was the only one who understood this season and I was so thankful he was there. He was my rock, like a pillar. I could tell he felt a sense of responsibility to care for me emotionally and I cared for him too. We held each other time after time after each visit to the hospital. He would hug me in the elevator as we escaped from the ward and from the pain of watching our dad dying. During one visit Dad begged us to help him die. I was so distressed by this. I explained to him that we could not do it, my brother and I were grateful when the nurses sedated him.

Late one night the call came for all of us to gather at the hospital because Dad wasn't expected to make it through the night. Mum, Maryann and I spent the night there, and Mum sat beside him all night, holding his hand. He looked dreadful and his laboured breathing scared me. With each breath I was thinking, 'Is this it?' I waited all night on the lounge next to Maryann. We were a little distance

from his hospital bed waiting for him to breathe his last breath. I was shocked by his death experience and was not prepared for the emotional trauma of having to witness it. In the early hours of the morning, about 6:30am my dad took his last breath. I just froze, my body went cold. I went into shock. I wanted to handle it better on the inside but when it was over, I just ran from the hospital room. My mind went crazy, thoughts flooding my mind as I tried to process what I had just witnessed. It made no sense at all. I just wanted to keep running through the dark halls past all the sleeping patients. One of the nurses grabbed me and took me to a private room where I still tried to process what had just happened. I was inconsolable. I had just watched my Dad die!

My Dad had just died and I felt like the world didn't give a damn. Later, after leaving the hospital I remember driving in the car, my emotions erratic, hearing a Sinead O'Conner song: 'Nothing compares to you'. As we were driving away I looked at the world, at the traffic moving by, routine, life as usual, as if nothing had happened. My thoughts to them were: 'Don't you get it? My dad is gone forever.' My life stopped, dead in its tracks. My life would never be the same again. My dad was dead. My thoughts were hijacked. I felt safer knowing

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Dad was gone yet at the same time felt intense pain. My heart was divided about how I felt. Was my pain a lie? I loved him deeply, but was so scared of him. Even in his confessions of love in his last hours, I could not process my response. This experience hit me hard, my grief beyond words. I remember going to my room, wanting to be left by myself, but the truth was I didn't really want to be alone. I cried for hours. Then I felt a pressure on my shoulder and a comfort overcame me. It was powerful, the peace that touched my heart was supernatural and during that experience I stopped crying. I knew it was spiritual. I didn't really know what it was but it comforted me and assured me I was going to be okay. I just knew everything was going to be okay. It released peace in my heart as well as a kind of knowing that Dad was okay, too. I never understood that experience in my head but I did in my heart. I never told anyone in the family about it, I knew they would not understand it. It took me years to get over Dad's death. Maryann and I, with friends, would go out drinking on weekends and after a few beers I would speak about him and get emotional. I always felt no one understood my pain or knew what I was going through in my heart. I never felt heard. I was always the kid that did the right thing, trying my

hardest to keep the peace, I was there but wasn't really there, I was dismissed because of it. I never really felt as though I had a voice in the family.

After Dad's death we faced other tragedies as a family. Suicide attempts. Deaths. Abuse. We faced these events without the help of faith. How we survived and stayed together is a miracle in itself. We just had to survive and get on with life and hope that just around the corner things would surprise us and show us there was more to life than what we were experiencing. But deep down I knew I was a sinner and I wondered if God was punishing us for that. I was still taking responsibility for everything.

Along with alcohol I looked for love in all the wrong places, and from the age of sixteen I was also smoking dope to relax me and help me to sleep. I once told my doctor about this and he said it was okay if it helped me, and as long as it was in small quantities. I was soon smoking dope regularly, but always after work because I understood the responsibility to hold down a job and work hard. I never believed in being high at work. I worked with children and would never place them at risk. The dope was a coping mechanism, I never really learnt to process pain, there was too much of it and it was a constant in my life. I wasn't a victim, I was a sur-

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vivor: you get knocked down and you get up again. The knocks over the years took an unseen toll on my heart. The dope helped me to escape to a place of peace, a place where the burdens of life were lifted for a short time. I liked to be high, I liked it a lot. Mum didn't discover any of this until years later.

It is in the times of trauma that you question the purpose of life. I never found any answers. During my teenage years I didn't feel that I belonged anywhere. I didn't fit in at school and I didn't want to be at home because I felt unsafe there. Looking back, I'm amazed I lived a level of functionality in life, with housing, a good job, education, finance and a social group. People in our social group wanted to have a life like mine. I was doing well on a superficial level. Beneath the surface, however, was the ongoing experiences of dysfunction and the suppressed pain of years of unresolved issues. I didn't know how to process pain. I didn't know you were meant to. I never really knew or understood my worth and value and always considered other people's needs to be more important than my own. I felt that even as a child, and it carried into my teen years and adulthood.

It was a long time before I knew God's hand - His grace - on my life, but I believe that He heard

that little seven-year-old's cry on her knees beside her bed, crying out for help. I can see that picture in my mind so clearly today as if it was only a short time ago. Today I sense the smile of a loving father, loving that level of vulnerability and transparency. I believe that the only explanation for my ability to keep going was that God's spirit gave me courage to stand when I didn't think I could. Today I believe that He worked miracle after miracle for me; giving me the supernatural ability to get up again and fight for freedom, the right to a happy and a healthy future was on His agenda. I didn't know that at the time, but it is the only thing that makes sense today.

The most stabilising influence I had ever known came into my life when I was twenty-one. I met a man at the gym in the spa. I had just finished doing a workout with my best friend and Marko and his cousin (my best friend's boyfriend) were in the tub. He was attracted to me, it was obvious, but I initially said no. It didn't take long though and he won my heart. Not long after dating Marko, only a couple of months later, we knew it was serious. Our relationship was intimate and beautiful. He needed accommodation and so did I, plus Maryann and another friend, so we decided we would pool resources and rent a house together. Marko's love

for me was genuine and I felt so loved, protected and supported. He stood with me as the dysfunction continued to grow in my family; it brought us closer. He was a special man and a gift for the next season of my life.

After eight years together we decided to marry. The desire of my heart was to be a wife and a mum; we planned to create our own family and have a child, so we thought we should do it properly and get married. I wanted us to all have the same name - I was ready to see the dream that lived in my heart as a child become real. To become a mummy and a wife. Initially, we made plans for a huge church wedding and I asked Maryann to be Maid of honour and my best friends to be bridesmaids. They were so excited! Together we began to plan a very large traditional wedding. The plan for the bridal party was; four girls, and four boys and the venue was to be a large church in Adelaide. Everyone in our sphere was elated, we were seen as 'the match made in heaven.' Most of the people we knew wanted what we had, a life partner. I brought a beautiful traditional wedding dress, with an extremely long veil. It was stunning, a dress that all little girls dream about. I looked amazing in it and I was excited.

Marko and I were discussing wedding plans and I felt to ask him if he could make the choice about our wedding plans what would they be? He joked that elopement would his choice because it would be simpler, and cost less. We laughed about it and then we became more serious and as we discussed it further, we decided it was actually a good idea. So right then and there we changed our plans and decided on an elopement to Tasmania. I reorganised everything and apologised to the bridal party. We also planned to have a celebration with family and close friends when we returned home. We were happy with our new decision and knew that it was the right decision for us.

A few weeks before my fairytale wedding, eloping with my fiancé, I was really surprised to find that I was having doubts about the marriage. I talked to a close friend and we put it down to wedding jitters, so I dismissed the feelings. I continued to question my thoughts and reason with myself 'Hadn't I always wanted to get married and have a family, and be with Marko whom I loved deeply?' I never told Marko of these doubts and we were married on a beautiful day in January by a country river, Mountain River in Tasmania. I was dressed as a bride, Marko wore a tuxedo, and his Tasmanian friends witnessed the ceremony that

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was conducted by a celebrant. It was a beautiful day, a wedding that little girls dream of, an experience that was adventurous and romantic. A story that you would see in the movies. Our happiness was to be short lived.

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