Seven&Twenty7

“Familiarity feels like safety when you're still learning to name your fears.”

SEVEN & TWENTY7

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By Brittany Dry

Introduction

I didn't write this from a place of rock bottom. I wrote it from a steadier place. I am not perfect, but whole in a way I never imagined I could be. This story isn't about the pain. It's about what came after that. Peace and perspective. Joy that felt earned. For a long time, I thought surviving was the end goal.

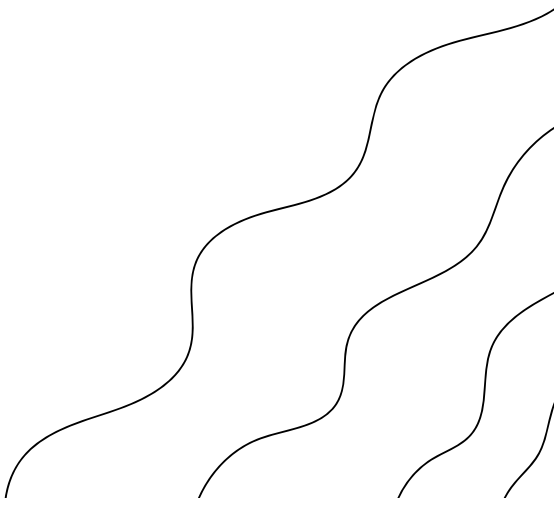
Now I know there's so much more. Softness without fear. Faith that isn't performative. Love that doesn't require you to give yourself up.

My relationship with God has always been personal — quiet, honest, and far from traditional. We've been through a lot together, and I've come to believe that faith can live in the ordinary. This book holds many versions of me. The younger one who didn't know

better. The one who tried so hard to hold everything together and broke anyway. My proudest version is the one writing this now, the one who feels lighter, more present, and deeply grateful.

If you've ever wondered whether it's possible to get there — I hope these pages offer some kind of answer.

PART ONE



Chapter 1

The Eldest Daughter / Middle Child

I was born just outside the deep south of Johannesburg — the kind of place where you learn early how to dodge a belt and read adult moods before you can recite your times tables. It wasn't dramatic, it was just normal. Normal to get shouted at. Normal to keep quiet. Normal to sense tension before you could name it. I was the third child, the first daughter — and the first one who had to give up her softness. I was raised on guilt and grit.

JB, my mom's first love's son, was born in 1991. My mom and dad married in 1993. Kean came next in 1994. I arrived in 1996. Then Caitlin — Cait — the baby of the house — came in 2002. We each had different fathers — JB, Kean and me, and Caitlin. But we were all raised under the same roof, by the same tired woman, in the same kind of chaos that taught

you to either disappear into the background or fight to be seen.

JB had already seen too much of the world before I had my first scrape. He was the oldest, and we looked up to him like a third parent — someone who had stories of the time before us. Kean was the golden boy — strong, fast, built for praise. My mom would beam at him in a way that made the rest of us both proud and a little small. And Caitlin? Cait was the softness. The light. The one my mom still had time to raise gently. She got the version of our mom that could exhale a little.

And me? I was the middle. Too young to lead, too old to be held. The one who always noticed what went unsaid. I learned how to pick up on people's silences before their sentences. I became an expert in invisible things — mood shifts, tone changes, the way someone would sigh before telling you to be quiet. I was sensitive, maybe even tender at one point, but that didn't last long. You couldn't afford to be tender in our house unless you were small enough to still be babied, or strong enough to be left alone.

I often found myself in the garden. That was my space. Digging. Looking for things growing, moving, surviving.

My dad died on the 8th of December, 2001 — just weeks before my sixth birthday. I was five. We had been living apart from him by then, but it didn't make the news easier to hold. Death is strange when you're that young — it comes in like a fog you're expected to see through. I didn't understand it. Not really. I remember people crying. I remember adults using soft voices that didn't match their faces. I remember the way my mom seemed both there and not-there for months after.

I stayed in Grade RR for another year because of the grief. That became my label later in life — "the one whose dad died." It was something people whispered about. It always came up when classes got reshuffled, or when teams were picked. Being born in a different year than the rest of my grade gave other kids a reason to ask questions. To assume things. I'd hear, "Aren't you older than us?" and I'd say the line I'd practiced: "My father died and..." followed by whatever version of the truth felt safest that day.

But I hated it. I hated having to explain myself. I hated that I had to make grief digestible so other kids could swallow it. It felt like this heavy, unwelcome companion I was forced to introduce at every table. The shadow that followed me into every room, every playground, every question. And no matter how I answered, it always made things awkward. Sometimes they'd look at me with pity. Sometimes with curiosity. Sometimes they'd just look away.

No one teaches you how to hold a story like that so young. You carry it clumsily. You say things out of turn. You replay moments in your head because they're all you have. I used to lie on my back somewhere in our garden, asking God why He took the one person I didn't get enough time with. I wasn't even sure what I wanted — just that something was missing and no one could give it back to me.

I started writing in my head long before I ever had a notebook. Making up little stories to try and make sense of the ones happening around me. I was good at pretending. Good at saying I was fine. I became what people needed me to be — helpful, responsible, self-

sufficient. But inside, I still felt so confused. I was a kid. Still felt small.

I think that's what happens when you grow up in the middle — in every sense. You're always bridging something. Between grief and growth. Between what was and what's next. Between being old enough to remember and young enough to still need someone to tuck you in.
And the truth is — sometimes no one tucks you in. You just learn to fold yourself into the blankets and say your prayers.

But life was fun, too.
It wasn't all heavy. Not all grief and guessing games. We didn't have much, but we had those days — the kind that make you forget everything else. The kind that make you think: maybe this is what love looks like when it's unconditional. Chosen for you. Not perfect. But present.
And the worse the days were, the easier it was to spot the good ones. You didn't take them for granted. You felt them. Because you knew how quickly they could change.

And through it all — the mess, the movement, the unpredictability of it all — there was always my Ouma. My mom's mom.
She's old-school Afrikaans through and through — pearls, suits, neat nails, and a house that always smelled faintly like face powder and something medicinal. Floors spotless, beds made tight enough to bounce a coin. My mom's OCD didn't come from nowhere; it came from her. From generations of order and control.

But Ouma had her softness, too — though she'd never admit it out loud. With me, it was in the quiet ways. She always had a comb in her handbag, and somehow it felt like more than just a comb. It was her way of making sure I was okay, presentable, cared for. She'd scratch my back until I fell asleep when I stayed over, her hands steady, never rushed. That was her kind of love. Not big words. Not dramatic gestures. Just constancy. Just presence.

She was the one who dressed me on the morning of my dad's funeral. I don't remember the whole day, but I remember her hands — buttoning my dress, smoothing my collar, combing my hair like it was any

other day. She didn't cry in front of me. She stayed calm, steady, like she was holding a piece of the world together just for me. And in that moment, she gave me something to stand on when the ground had fallen away.

My mom, in her own way, carried that ritual too. On my worst days she'd lie next to me and scratch my back, the same way her mother did for me. Maybe that's how they both loved best — through touch, not words. Through those small, certain rituals that said: you're not alone.
It didn't fix everything. But it helped me sleep.
And sometimes, that was enough.

Chapter 2

The Father I Almost Remember

I don't have many memories of my father. The ones I do have are scattered and quick flashes of him being strong, proud, distant. He was athletic. An engineer. A man with big hands and bigger expectations. I've been told he loved me. I believe it. But I also believe we would've fought a lot. We were too alike. Stubborn. Bold. Carrying more than we showed.

He had two biological kids — Kean and me — but he treated JB like his own. There was no blood there, but the bond was still there. Somewhere in him, there was room for more than what was required, even if he didn't know how to show it.

He blamed his mother for his father's death. It was a heart attack, but grief made him rewrite the story. His brother, Fouché, had been in a life-altering accident not long before my father passed — one that left him paralysed. My dad couldn't save either of them. He

was already grieving when he died himself. Fouché passed away years later, in 2018.

By the time my father passed, he and my mother were separated. He had hurt her physically and mentally. He also cheated.

There's one story I remember witnessing. A fight between him, my mother, and his girlfriend — loud, chaotic, and over in a flash. I was sitting in the car outside his house, small and unsure, watching through the window. His girlfriend pulled on my mom's hair quite roughly. I don't remember the words, just the noise and the shock of it. The sheer strangeness of being so young and seeing adults unravel like that. It was the first time I understood how quickly love could turn violent. It's part of the reason I've always avoided raising my voice or my hands. I knew even then — watching that scene — that it was disturbing. That it wasn't the way I wanted to handle pain.

And then there's the story my mom told me. One that's lived with me ever since. She said it was the day she'd had enough. After he shoved her against a wall and choked her, she locked every door in the house and threw all the keys out the window. She put us kids

in one room and shut the door behind us. Then she looked at him and said, “Now it’s me and you.” She grabbed a cricket bat and swung at his knees.

He ended up in hospital after that. My mom called the police and told them the keys were outside. They came, picked them up, and understood the whole situation for what it was. It was a small Afrikaans town in the south of Joburg — Meyerton — the kind of place where everyone knows more than they say.

She didn’t tell it to sound brave. Just matter-of-fact. Like it was something she had to do. A moment that separated who she used to be from who she was forced to become. And I respect her for it — for protecting herself in a world that expected her to stay quiet.

That story has never left me — not because I glorify it, but because it shaped something in me. I’ve always known that violence, even when it feels justified, lives on in the people who witness it. It disturbed me. And it made me swear I’d find a different way to be strong.

He died of a heart attack. Ironic. But really, he had been disappearing long before that — missed

weekends, quiet withdrawals, the way some men vanish without ever leaving the room.

My dad grew up with sport jerseys, rugby talk and golf. Sport was his language. When we still had weekends together, I was always next to the field. He didn't say much. But I felt him.

He had a teal-blue phone with a plastic flap over the buttons- I'll never forget how it rang and how ugly the colour was. I used to wait for him with my bag packed, sitting in my mom's room, flipping through her CDs. One of them was Laurika Rauch. I played her song *Blou* over and over. It eventually became something I often had to sing. It was one of our high school anthems. Everyone else sang it with pride. I sang it with ache.

Because I had played that CD for three months. Three months of waiting for a man who wasn't coming back. That's how I learned what death really was. Not from a book. Not from a funeral. But from silence. From absence that wasn't anyone's choice.

The lyrics hit differently when you're small and waiting. And then later, when you're grown and

grieving a different kind of absence. This part always stayed with me:

"As die skemer kom
En hy vang my by jou
En hy stuur jou terug na jou huis toe
Wie sou verstaan
Hoe ek sou voel
Wie sou verstaan
Oral om, om my heen
Is dit blou
Want ek wil by jou wees
Ek wil by jou wees
Vanaand”

— Laurika Rauch

For the ones who didn’t grow up with this song humming in the background of car rides and family kitchens — here’s what it means :

When twilight comes
and it finds me with you,
only to send you
back home again

Who would understand
what I feel?
Who would really know?

All around me,
everything turns blue,
because I just want to be with you.
I want to be with you
tonight.

That was it. The blue was everywhere. Inside and out. As a child, it meant missing my father. As a woman, it meant mourning the presence of people who were still alive but couldn't stay. That song held both versions of me — and understood them.

I didn't need to know what yearning meant, not technically. The song knew before I did. It captured something that lived beneath words — the grief of people who leave while still breathing, and the ache of wanting something that never stays long enough to belong. It was never just about my dad, or a boy, or a breakup — it was about all of it, layered and looping. The melody became a memory in itself.

Maybe that's what made the song so dangerous and beautiful all at once — it gave language to the kind of longing I wasn't supposed to say out loud. It sat with me when I didn't know how to grieve, and again when I didn't know how to let go. It stitched together moments I had no words for — first as a child abandoned, then as a woman learning the ache of presence that still feels like absence.

I asked my mom if he took his phone with him to heaven. She said he couldn't take anything but his soul. "But he can hear you," she told me. "Always."

He smoked Gauloises cigarettes. He loved his sports and golf on the weekends. He had his friends, his vices, and his secrets.

His favourite song was *The Gambler* by Kenny Rogers. And honestly, the best way to end this chapter is to give it a listen.

Because some men don't leave stories behind. They leave songs.

Chapter 3

Twenty-Eight Moves, Twenty-Eight Lessons

I started writing this book as a kid — in my head, in notebooks, in late-night prayers. I'm publishing it at 28, the same age my mother was when she lost her husband.

It feels like life has handed me a mirror, or maybe a map. One that doesn't follow the same route, but runs parallel in the strangest ways. I feel like I'm experiencing this age all over again, but this time as myself.

She was born in March 1973. At 28, my mom had three kids, no husband, and barely enough space to feel everything she needed to feel. And then — she had a baby. At 29.

By the time my father passed, in December 2001, my parents were separated but not divorced. My mom was already seeing someone else, and a few months

after my dad's death, she got married. Caitlin was born that October, in 2002. That part is important — not to paint her as anything but human, but to show how complex grief can be. She was a woman trying to move forward while still trapped in a story that hadn't quite ended. It adds to the grief, not subtracts from it. Because how do you mourn someone who already wasn't yours, but still kind of was?

Our lives look worlds apart at 28. But we look alike. I started studying her as a child — her routines, her quiet rules, the way her hands moved when she was stressed, and the way her face softened when she wasn't. She took pride in cleanliness, in control. Her OCD wasn't mild — it was constant, precise, present in everything she did. And me? I didn't give a damn as long as I could imagine freely. I was messy, lost in daydreams, always writing, always somewhere else in my head. Still am.

Now, imagine being 29, with four kids and a brain that needs order to breathe. You've worked all day in a space where being taken seriously means you can't afford to break. You come home — not to peace, but to a house that's already undone itself. The school

bags are scattered. Glasses in the lounge. Something's broken. The remote is missing, again. And nobody's started getting ready for bed.
It's not about the mess. It's about what the mess represents — overstimulation, no room to exhale, and yet another thing to fix before you even get to take your shoes off.

She used to take a moment to herself first. Not out of selfishness, but because she'd been dealing with people all day. Managing egos, expectations, and pressure in places that demanded composure. So before stepping into the next set of demands, she needed quiet. A pause. Just a few minutes to breathe. When she didn't get it, everything felt sharper. Closer to boiling over.

She didn't have much patience left at the end of the day — and sometimes, that was enough to tip things over. And this isn't about criticising my mom. It's about understanding her. I started to realise, early on, that avoiding upset wasn't just about fear. It was about protection. Of her. Of me. Of the fragile line between order and chaos.

Seeing my mom upset and seeing my mom hurt — did make me bitter, eventually. But before that, it made me observant. It made me empathetic. I became fluent in her moods. Learned how to stay quiet when needed. How to keep the peace.

And I'll be honest — I didn't make it easy for her. I'm clumsy. I break things. I rush through tasks because my head is usually already three steps ahead, thinking of the next thing. I was just a kid trying to do everything at once, and sometimes, everything came crashing down. I gave her a hard time without meaning to — simply because I was wired differently.

Learning her love languages helped. Flowers picked from the garden. A drawing. A piece of French toast on a Sunday morning. Little things that said: I see you. I wanted to be her soft place to land, even when the world was hard and loud. Slowly, I became her comfort zone. A little, a lot.

She was hardened by loss, sharpened by necessity. And in many ways, that shaped us — not just in what she did, but in what she couldn't do.
She couldn't always be gentle. She couldn't always sit with our sadness. Because hers was bigger. Heavier.

And when grief lives in a house that heavy, it turns into something else: silence. Shouting. Short fuses. Shame.

My mom worked in health and safety — mostly in mining towns. Male-dominated spaces where composure was non-negotiable. We followed the jobs. We followed the money. We followed her. And with every move, we left a little more softness behind.

But still — she tried. With every house, she tried to make it feel like home. She arranged things with care. Familiar pieces, placed just right. The same curtains hung, the same spot for the kettle in every new kitchen, the same smell of her perfume in the hallway. She did what she could to bring consistency into a life that was constantly shifting. She tried her best with what she had. And I saw that. I see it more now.

I've lived in 28 houses. Not cities — houses. Each with its own front door, its own version of me waiting inside. That kind of moving teaches you how to adapt, how to make friends fast, how to be funny before someone calls you weird. But it also teaches you how to leave. Before you get too attached. Before anyone can really know you.

We were raised by a woman who had no choice but to be strong. I respect her for that — deeply. But strength born out of necessity comes with sharp edges. And sometimes those edges cut the people you love the most.
She didn't get to fall apart. So sometimes, we did. In school bathrooms. Behind locked doors. In the middle of math class. Mostly alone.

And yet, despite everything — she kept going. So we did too.

Twenty-eight moves. Twenty-eight lessons.

Chapter 4

Order in the Chaos

The thing about OCD is — it thrives in chaos. Not by embracing it, but by trying to control it. When everything else is unraveling, it clings tighter. It finds order in small things: a drawer lined just right, a label perfectly straight, a Tupperware lid that clicks into place when the rest of life doesn't.

A year after my dad died, there was a morning I forgot my lunchbox at school. I was six.
My mom asked where it was. I didn't have an answer. She was overwhelmed, grieving, exhausted — but I didn't see that yet. I was just a kid.

What happened next is a moment that has lived in my body for years. I remember feeling small. I remember the fear. I remember the silence afterward, and how it shaped something inside me. That moment wasn't about just a lunchbox. It was about a mother

unraveling in real time, and a daughter who didn't yet have the words for loss, or the tools to make sense of big feelings in a loud house.

Each of us experienced her differently.

JB was older. He saw the woman who was trying. He carried more of the picture than I could, and I think, even then, he knew he'd have to carve out space for himself somewhere beyond her reach.

Kean was the golden child — athletic, focused, often out at a friend's house or at sport. His life moved fast, and his accomplishments became a kind of shield from the emotional weather at home.

Cait was the baby. She got the version of my mom that had softened with time — or maybe the version that had simply surrendered to love again. But even that came with its own weight: a mother balancing exhaustion with duty.

And me? I was the one who mirrored her most. I looked like her. Felt things as deeply as she did. I was loud, clumsy, imaginative — a walking contradiction to the control she needed. Maybe that's why I often

absorbed the tension. I was the one who triggered her overwhelm, and the one who quietly built the belief that love could disappear when things got too much.

I became a burnt-out child long before I even knew the term.

Years later, during a time we weren't speaking, I wrote a mourning letter to someone still alive. Trying to make sense of a person I desperately wanted to understand.
I'm not that version of myself anymore, but I honour the girl who needed to write it.

And I honour the truth that it wasn't all bad. My mom had her ways of showing love. She could be light, especially in the December holidays. She'd come alive for us — planning outings, meals, surprises. Joy had structure. Love followed a routine. And maybe that's what helped her survive. Maybe we helped her survive.

She was parenting through trauma. Doing the best she could with what she had. But "trying" doesn't always land as love to a child. Sometimes, it lands as fear. Sometimes, love doesn't arrive until years later —

when you're far enough away to recognize it for what it was.

That morning changed me. But I no longer see it as a simple story of right or wrong. I see it as a moment that revealed how deep her pain ran — and how tightly I held onto the belief that I had to be perfect to be loved.

It's one of the reasons I write: to hold space for the child who didn't understand. And for the mother who was drowning while trying to keep us all afloat.
Both deserved more grace.
And now, I try to give it to them.

Chapter 5

Mayfield, 2002–2003

Before Thabazimbi, before Zambia — there was Mayfield. 2002.

It was the year I went from being the only girl to being one of three. A new baby sister. A new stepsister — my age, born just two months after me. I was still the eldest, technically. But it didn't always feel like it.

This was the house where I first started to grieve. In unspoken ways.
It's also where I remember Mariam.

Mariam was our cleaner, but to me, she was so much more than that. Our day mom. Our angel. Soft-voiced. Kind. Present. She brought calm to a house that didn't always feel steady.

Every afternoon, she'd walk to the payphone to call her family. I'd tag along, learning for the first time

what it meant to miss someone from far away. I didn't know what to call it yet, but I carried that awareness in me from then on. The quiet cost of being far from the people who hold you.

Mariam and Cait were best friends — Cait was so tiny. Big-eyed. Baby-soft. Adored. I think Mariam might've been one of her first safe spaces.

Mayfield was also where I made my first friends in the street. A group of girls who didn't look like me, weren't raised like me — but welcomed me anyway. My first friends of colour. We played hopscotch. Shared cold juice from plastic cups. They taught me their favourite games. We were kids, and it was simple.

While I played outside, my brothers were always building something or getting up to mischief — skate ramps, forts, weird contraptions I didn't understand. They were loud and busy in a way that made the house feel alive, even when everything else felt fragile. It kept my mom entertained — light. It made her laugh. And when she laughed, even just for a moment, the whole house felt softer.

There was Anne, an older girl a few houses down. She had a garden full of flowers and a VHS copy of *The Little Mermaid*. I was obsessed. I asked to watch it weekly. Religiously. Before Ariel, it was *A Simple Wish*. I broke that tape from rewinding it too many times.
Those movies were lifelines. Little stories I could disappear into after my dad died.

I must've been somewhat tolerable — the neighbour's oldest daughter even took me to the movies once. Bought me sweets. She didn't have to. But she did. That stayed with me. I admired those older girls — how sweet and welcoming they were.

We were on our way to visit grandparents one Saturday morning. My mom and the other kids were meeting us there, but first Cait's dad and I had to pick up his daughter. After fetching her, he stopped to grab something from a shop. He parked the car, got out, opened her door. Gave her a kiss on the forehead and said, "I love you."

A few months before that, I'd been asked to start calling him "Dad." And in that moment — it stung. Tears filled my eyes before the door even shut.

It wasn't that I wanted what they had. I just saw it for what it was — solid, exclusive, and never meant to include me.

She was the daddy's girl. She kept to herself a lot. A little overly sensitive. Fragile in a way that always pulled the focus back to her. And I was never sure if that was on purpose or just who she was. She was still an only child at her mom's house. We didn't even like the same things.

But what stung more than anything was the performance of it. The kiss on the forehead. The "I love you." Right in front of me — like I was invisible. Like I needed to be reminded that no matter how many of us sat in the car, only some belonged.

I don't think my mom liked what happened that day either. She didn't say anything, but I felt it. That shift in her energy — like she knew it landed wrong. Not just with me, but in general.

To be fair, he did try now and then. I'll give him that. But there was no click. No glue. No spark of something real. Some people just don't fit — no

matter how much you try to squeeze them into your story.

I tried to get along with his daughter too. I was excited to have another girl in the house — someone I could do things with. But jealousy came in fast. We were constantly in competition. Like love and attention were running out, and there wasn't enough to share.

Cait's dad worked long hours as a lithographer — day shifts, night shifts, always in and out. And maybe that kind of schedule wears on you. Maybe it dulls the softness. Or maybe that's just who he was.

He didn't have sons of his own, so JB and Kean were perfect for him. They slotted right into the shape he had waiting. They were easy. Simple. No sharp edges. No messy feelings. Just boys — and he knew what to do with that.

I was… something else entirely. And maybe that was too much for a man who only had space for what he already knew how to hold.

There was a day Cait's dad came to fetch us from school. I was in preschool in Joburg. He usually parked near the sports field. It was late — aftercare had let us go, and I had to walk up the hill from the gate. A few staircases. A slope.

As I climbed, an older boy from the primary school pulled my leg. Dragged me back down. Taunted me. Leaned in to try kiss me. I kicked him in the face and ran.

When I got to the car, I didn't say a word. Not to Cait's dad. Not to anyone. I chose silence. Maybe I already knew he wouldn't handle it the way I needed. Or maybe I just didn't feel safe enough to try.

That's also when I started learning about myself and also more about my mom. I didn't always get the extra sweets, or the best version of my mom. Not because she didn't love me — but because she was overwhelmed. She had her own pain. She had a complicated relationship with her own mom, and sometimes, that history — and her own — leaked into ours.

But one thing about my mom — she knew when something was off. Especially when she didn't cause it. If someone else hurt me or made me feel small — she didn't let that slide. She'd step in. Fierce. Protective. No hesitation. That love may not have always looked soft, but it was loyal. And when she showed up like that — it stayed with me.

My prayers started young. It wasn't dramatic — just part of life. Before meals. Before bed. At assemblies. I don't remember every verse or every story, but I remember Mondeor. Tea and Marie biscuits at Sunday School. Colouring in Bible scenes with blunt crayons. A kind teacher's voice. Small chairs in a circle. That soft, safe feeling — like you were allowed to believe without having to explain why.

My first real memory of church wasn't even a service. It was my father's funeral. I turned around and saw my uncle sobbing in his wheelchair at the back. I was a child, but I understood what I was witnessing. That moment stuck. That was God — not a hymn or a sermon, just a presence that showed up when things were unbearable.

Nobody scared me into faith. There were no threats of hell. No loud voices promising heaven. It wasn't about rules. It was just something I felt — in the way things held when they could've easily fallen apart. I didn't find God in religion. I found Him in survival.

So I found small ways to make sense of it all. I paid attention to what people missed. I noticed kindness. I studied love. I put God and diversity in the same folder in my mind.

Looking back now — Mayfield was the start of that awareness. Of myself. Of other people. Of grief. Of how some people go to work in other people's homes to send love back to their own.

And how the smallest gestures — a movie night, a walk to the payphone, a smile at just the right time — can teach you what care really means.