

DANIEL PERKINS | MAMA SAID THERE'D BE DAYS LIKE THIS

As life ticks away in this run down jail cell—rusty bars and bunks, a door that barely functions, a mattress I wouldn't give to my dog, hot and cold water buttons that respond when they want to, years and layers of paint peeling in various locations, you get the picture—I spend a lot of time thinking about my family. As I pull back the layers of our lives, our choices, our experience, I've come to be so proud of my entire family, particularly, my mother.

Abandoned by her biological mother in Mississippi, she was left in the hands of a violent, alcoholic father who carried her to Illinois where he'd remarry and start a new life (same bad habits). When you live in a household with drugs, alcoholics, and various violences there is a very slim chance that you'll have a successful transition to adulthood. She recently shared with me memories of hiding her two half brothers under the bed to try to protect them and so they wouldn't have to see their mother getting her ass kicked. It was safer to stay out of sight or get out of the house. And get out of the house she did.

As a teenager, she fell in love with my father (a sperm donor), got pregnant, had me, and tolerated the same abuses she watched in the house she grew up in. It infuriated me when she told me of lost days of work and opportunities because she was too ashamed to show her black-eyed, battered face. It's probably a good thing that he abandoned her before he killed her. I was four years old and he hauled ass to the east coast and became a ghost — good riddance.

We aren't born responsible adults with skills to navigate a challenging life. Now that I'm exploring, I'm seeing how easy these behaviors get passed on from generation to generation to generation.

I abused drugs and alcohol for the better part of 25 years, continuing the tradition. I'm starting to understand her experience, our experience, and I can't imagine the strength it must've taken for her to keep pushing forward. I'm so fulfilled that she and I are having these conversations.

The first time I started to inquire, I told Ma I want to know my family, or at least know "of" them, ya know? Where are we from? What were they like? What was her childhood like? That was the first time I hit a nerve and I knew to slow down.

She almost didn't want to respond. She told me her childhood was "horrible and that she really didn't want to talk about it"—but she did, she is, and I love it. I know our secrets can consume us, guilt, or worse, shame; they can be dangerous emotions. But once we admit these things they lose control of us.

We take it slow and I respect her pace of disclosure. We don't do this during every phone call—this shit is heavy. Traumatic retention is real. I'm not sure she ever had a safe space for vulnerability. I believe she carries a lot of pain and regret for what she considers her failings as a mother. She just said the other night that "she wishes things would've been different." She wishes she'd "been there for us more" (I have a beautiful half sister named Dana). I assure her that my love for her is unconditional and will never waver. My regret is that it took me 45 years to find the courage to ask Ma tough questions. But I was always a coward. I ran from real life but I'm glad I know now that her life was rough, unhealthy, abuse, trauma. Understanding her struggle makes it easier for me to own accountability for the role I played during our contentious years—and there were plenty.

I regret so deeply the verbal abuse I directed towards her. My own traumas had a way of manifesting themselves in anger and an incisive tongue. One day mom was kicking me out of the house due to my belligerence and she was daring me to hit her and assured me it'd be my last mistake. I'd never lay a hand on her but for her to say that assures me that I went far beyond crossing the line. What an embarrassing stain on my adolescence. I certainly don't make things any easier on her. The word "accountability" wasn't in my vocabulary at that time. I was keeping the family legacy alive and well—drug + alcohol use, skipping school, criminal activity, I was just foregoing any steps toward maturity, responsibility, and accountability. I didn't have everything other kids had. Our house had things happening that didn't happen in other houses or friends' houses I frequented. Look, I'm still trying to sort out my childhood experience. I didn't have higher education back then. I didn't have the ability to put myself in someone else's shoes—SELFISH. I certainly gave no consideration for the fact that Ma was a f—hero. She was brave, independent, and raised two kids through the "storm".

Aurora had a manufacturing district so she also kept a job on some factory floor. She ended up settling in at Aurora Bearing where she worked many years and recently retired (Congrats Ma). Aurora Bearing wasn't her calling. Her calling was

to be a beautician but she had to sacrifice that path so she could work to support us. She hated that factory. I worked there too, only for a few months because the responsibility of a job was way too demanding for me at that point. I'm sure I destroyed her credibility and embarrassed her over that more. Just punched out and quit one day like a spoiled ass brat. Sorry Ma. But the factory was brutally hot in the summers. The building was old and decrepit. Noisy machines that were hot, soiled, and ran 24 hours a day. A true sweatshop and the monotony must've been brutal all those years. Just recently, before her retirement, she was wrestling with working an extra year or two to increase her pension but she just couldn't convince herself to go back to that factory. She didn't think that she could survive another summer of that heat. Nevertheless, it's a shame to invest half your life with a company, retire, and live with fear that your pension isn't enough to pay your bills. In spite of it all, she's hanging in there.

All our stories are unique, beautiful, and necessary, however, a common theme throughout life is pain and suffering. We hope to live lives free from guilt, shame, and other dark emotions but the truth is that's very seldom, if ever, the case. Struggle doesn't feel good or look pretty. In fact, these struggles come with trauma which can and frequently does cause destructive coping habits which only exacerbate the struggle. Beauty can be extracted from every struggle. And with aging and wisdom comes insight. I'm so proud of her. She told me the other night that she doesn't even want to work these menial jobs for supplemental income! She wants to find a non-profit or somewhere she can invest time where she's helping people make their lives better! This is beautiful because I know this will give her some much needed meaning and purpose in her life.

Neither of us has boiling blood like we used to. Time tempers things I reckon, however, she does still imbibe when she wants and her emotions — from joy to bitterness — still flow. I love it. I just smile. We've come so far. We both know that life is fragile and fleeting. We have a shared loneliness and we're able to lean on and depend on each other. I'm so grateful for the forgiveness she has afforded me. Her love for me is clear — unwavering availability, every call answered, greeting cards, books, photos, money, and she loves to come here and feed and love on me. She was just here not long ago to heat me up a Buona Italian Beef with spicy giardiniera sauce, spicy cheetos, a code red Mountain Dew, and a M&M chocolate chip ice cream sandwich—the meal of champions. I'm so grateful

to have her and it'd be a privilege to listen to her joys and grievances for another 100 years. I'm proud to be your son. Love Ya Ma.

Daniel Perkins is a graduate of NEIU, carpenter, mentor, writer, activist, and dreamer.

His grandmother is in the Aurora Bowling Hall of Fame and he's traveled all over the country bowling competitively.