

## CHAPTER 1

# Recollections

There are times when I still tense up when the phone rings or when I go to the mailbox to get the mail. I push the anxiety away, scolding myself for my silliness. Yes, my more matter-of-fact side tells me, I have received both sad and bad news via the phone. It was how I learned that my mother had passed away, my father-in-law had died, and my mother-in-law was not given long to live. Via the phone, I learned about my son's forty-foot fall down a mountainside (that he miraculously survived) and about my other son's struggles with his return from a tough military deployment.

I just can never seem to get myself to focus on how the phone also has relayed good news—like the calls that told me about two of my children's engagements or the ones that announced the births of each of my grandchildren. By phone, I learned about my daughter's acceptance into Yale Divinity School and my son's acceptance into a vocal music program, one of fourteen applicants taken that year out of the two hundred who auditioned.

The mail, too, is more friend than foe, especially now that so much is handled by email. But I still have that tiny frisson of tension when I pull down the door of the mailbox, followed by an inaudible sigh of relief when I see my favorite magazine or a bulk mail flyer in the box.

I sometimes attribute my nervousness to the lingering memories of my husband's and my tough financial years, when we struggled with unemployment and underemployment. Fortunately, those days recede further and further into the distance with the passage of time, but the

lingering worries remain. Perhaps they are fed by the possibility that we may lose our jobs in the ongoing economic downturn that started in 2008, or the underlying nervousness about identity theft, credit card debt, and other, lesser-known possibilities that can end up stealing, in a matter of months, everything we've worked for decades to acquire.

Then, I finally have to admit that I will likely never be completely free from the fear of an unexpected phone call or the daily mail delivery. There were too many years as a young teen when I was assigned a kind of guard duty, screening phone calls for my father and hiding his mail from my mother's eyes.

My role as gatekeeper began in late spring 1967, when I was twelve-and-a-half years old. We had been living on Beacon Street, in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill community, for two years, and of all the various places I have lived, that house has always been my favorite. Unlike the duplexes and row house where we had lived previously, the Beacon Street house stood alone. Our section of Beacon, between Murdoch Road and Wendover Street, was wide enough to be considered a boulevard. We were one city block away from Schenley Park. The street behind our house was one-way, and it was the perfect place to ride a bicycle without fear of being hit by a car.

The Beacon Street house still stands out in my memories because it had three full stories, and I had wheedled my parents into letting me move into the small back room of the attic. The attic had a full bathroom, complete with an old-fashioned, stand-alone bathtub on legs—something that would today be grabbed up by anyone refurbishing their bathroom in a mid-twentieth-century retro look. I turned that spare little room into my aerie, and it became a welcome refuge as my parents' arguments intensified throughout that summer.

My mother was finishing up her master's degree in spring 1967. She had started me on basic kitchen duty when I was ten, and when I turned twelve in January I became the junior chief cook and chief dishwasher. The increasing chores had coincided with her return to full-time teaching four years earlier and her class attendance at night to pursue her advanced degree. My father often had a second full-time

job, but on this particular evening, he was watching television in the living room. The windows and doors were wide open to take advantage of the fresh air and warm breezes. My younger brother and sister were outside, playing in the last minutes of extended daylight. I was at the sink, enjoying the waning light through the window.

My hands were deep in soapy water washing pots and pans when the phone rang. Before he even knew who was on the line, my father called out, "I'm not home." It was his way of telling me to answer the phone.

I dried my hands on a towel and picked up the receiver.

"Is Mr. Moritt there?" the male voice on the other end inquired in response to my greeting.

"No," I lied.

"Is this his wife?"

"No, it's his daughter."

"Tell him Mr. Smith from Household Finance called."

"All right," I replied, and hung up the phone.

"Who was it?" my father wanted to know before the receiver had barely hit the cradle.

"Mr. Smith from Household Finance," I informed him.

"Don't tell your mother."

I had not been telling my mother about a growing number of phone calls from other men whose voices were exactly like Mr. Smith's and whose company names were similar to "Household Finance." They were terse and businesslike, and the ones who thought I was Mrs. Moritt covering for her husband, as a few bill collectors (who apparently chose to ignore what had to be my obviously young-sounding voice) insinuated, were also threatening.

The "I'm not home" routine between my father and me had many of the elements of a Gracie Allen and George Burns' comedy routine. However, the serious-minded callers on the other end of the line were not straight men for a vaudeville act; they were looking for their money. Repeatedly handling the phone calls on my father's behalf put me in the position of protecting him from his creditors and from

my mother. Disobeying my father was not an option at twelve years of age, but I risked my mother's anger because things got ugly in our house when she finally found out about the reason for the calls; and she inevitably did.

My duplicity on my father's behalf was not limited to answering the telephone. When school let out for the summer, he gave me the key to the mailbox he had rented at the Squirrel Hill post office, which was located around the corner from where the bookmobile parked every Thursday. I walked to the bookmobile weekly during summer vacation, and he took advantage of my routine to assign me the job of courier. The mailbox contained the bills from the same finance companies that were calling our house. As with the telephone calls, my instructions were, "Don't show anything to your mother." I hid the mail in a dresser drawer, and gave it to my father when my mother was not at home and my younger brother and sister were not around to witness the hand over.

In retrospect, I'm certain that my mother suspected something that summer of 1967. The arguments between my parents grew in frequency and volume. Money was nearly always the topic, and finances were tight during those hot summer months. School teachers were only paid nine months of the year, and my mother made it clear, when the school year ended in late June, that we would not be able to have any extras or get new school clothes until she started back to work in September.

Her suspicions regarding my father's debt turned into certain knowledge when a sheriff's deputy showed up at our front door mid-summer to repossess our furniture. I do not know how my mother prevented the removal of our sofa, easy chairs, end tables, and lamps from our living room, but she prevailed, and the furniture remained. That night, however, when my father arrived home, all hell broke loose.

This argument went well beyond the usual volume and intensity of my parents' routine altercations about money. A "normal" argument typically covered the "usual" charge that my father had blown his paycheck instead of giving it to her to put in the bank. My father's

usual response was to inject a note of doubt into the truth of her charges. Listening to those repetitive arguments as a child who was ignorant of the complete picture, it was easy to side with my father. My mother came across as a chronically dissatisfied and nagging wife. Her complaints often focused on insufficient funds to buy new clothes or to take a vacation or to buy a new car—things that seemed like luxuries to an unsuspecting child.

My relationship with her was also complicated. There were times when she criticized my taste in clothes and my posture, her tone sounding much the same as the one she used to castigate my father about his use of money. And there were other times when my mother was fun to be around. These were usually the Saturdays when she and I went to downtown Pittsburgh to shop for new shoes or new school clothes for me, a trip that was also memorable because we ate lunch at a place she liked, *Palmer's* restaurant, where I discovered, and became fascinated by, a triple-decker club sandwich. (Something about a three-tier sandwich intrigued me.) Her father was still operating his newsstand at the corner of Liberty Avenue, across from the Jenkins Arcade, and we always made a point of stopping to see him. At each visit, he gave me the latest issues of the *Archie* comic book series (which I wish I still owned today, given their steady popularity, not to mention the steady increase in value of the vintage issues!).

The start of adolescence and changes in things at home fed the resentment common between mothers and their oldest daughters. My resentment toward her grew when my young adolescent mind linked my growing load of household responsibilities as the oldest child with her disparaging comments about my appearance, making me feel unloved and unappreciated, and so justifying, in my mind, the negative feelings I had about her.

I did not develop resentment toward my father at the same time, even though I was often the target of my father's hurtful, verbal zingers that belittled my preadolescent clumsiness or my very obvious physical resemblance to my mother. Why I did not direct more of my adolescent angst to my father, whose intentions were to

cause psychic pain, I do not know. He was more emotionally distant than my mother, and he often was physically distant, as well, since he frequently held two jobs, came home after we had gone to bed, and spent nearly every Sunday afternoon asleep on the couch. There may have been just enough total distance to process each barb before the next one hit its target. My mother, even with her job and night classes, was still the more “on-site” parent in my life.

My attitude toward my mother changed on the night she confronted my father with the notice of the furniture repossession. She launched into her typical, full-fledged recriminations against his profligate ways, and he defended himself with his usual slurs about my mother’s chronic dissatisfaction; but this time, there was no feasible defense. As my father always did when the argument reached a stalemate, he stormed out of the house in anger.

That was the summer I learned about the facts of life. These were not the details about where babies come from; these were the underlying reasons for the phone calls, the hidden mail, the sheriff deputy’s visit, and the bitter quarrels. My mother told me, matter-of-factly and without rancor, that my father was a compulsive gambler.<sup>1</sup>

His gambling was the reason money dominated every bitter fight between my parents. It was why my mother returned to full-time teaching in the early 1960s, even though she had three young children, ages one-and-a-half, four, and seven, when stay-at-home mothers were the norm. It was the explanation behind her constant complaints that we could have a better standard of living, and it was why she so often started a battle with my father. She paid the bills for our family, and she knew how much money we had—and how much we never saw.

My mother’s teaching income barely kept us afloat. My father taught school, too, and he worked a second job. Theoretically, with two full-time and one part-time income, our household should have enjoyed the lifestyle my mother expected. We could easily have had steady money for school clothes, a family vacation, or furniture payments, but my father’s gambling took away that security. When he was winning and flush with cash, my father’s generosity was virtually

limitless. He spent his money on his family, bought jewelry and new cars for my mother, and planned vacations that I still remember fondly forty-five years later.

He and my mother both loved to travel, and every few months, they would go away on weekends together. Over the course of my growing up years, they took the three of us on extended vacations. We traveled to the 1964 World's Fair, held in Queens, New York. Another year, we went to New York City during Christmas time, and I saw my first Broadway play. We traveled to Canada, where we visited Niagara Falls, witnessed the changing of the guard at the Canadian Parliament building, in Ottawa, and traveled to French-speaking Montreal. Another year, we went to Miami Beach. Trips from Pittsburgh to a week's stay at a cabin in West Virginia's Oglebay Park were common.

In the 1960s, when gasoline was twenty-nine cents a gallon, we would pile into the car on Sunday afternoons in the fall and travel southeast from Pittsburgh to Ligonier, located in Pennsylvania's Laurel Valley, nestled in the Allegheny Mountains, to see the autumn color and eat at a delicious smorgasbord at the Seven Springs resort. My father discovered one of the earliest Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises in southeastern Ohio, and we would take a leisurely drive through the southwestern Pennsylvania and southeastern Ohio countryside to enjoy a bucket of the Colonel's secret recipe.

Even without the issues tied to my father's gambling, my parents' relationship was more like that of Ralph and Alice Kramden than it was of Ozzie and Harriet. My father was a large man built much like the comedian Jackie Gleason, who played Ralph. Both my father and Gleason were Brooklyn natives, and their similar speech patterns and senses of humor reinforced the similarities between my parents and *The Honeymooners*.

My mother and father were two highly intelligent, educated people, and a subtle, competitive undercurrent threaded throughout their relationship their entire lives. Well matched in wills, they always found something to bicker about, but I do not remember them having a bitter or especially ugly argument when we traveled. They were

remarkably alike in so many ways. Three of my four grandparents were immigrants, and my parents represented the first generation of American-born Jews, with all of the pressure to be successful and to fit into American society that burden of birth entailed. Teaching was a natural entry point for those of their generation who did not go into a profession or business.

Their views on childrearing were also the same. Ours was an authoritarian household, or as my mother referred to it, a “benevolent dictatorship.” Even with all of the dysfunction brought on by my father’s gambling, my parents backed each other up when it came to dealing with my sister, brother, and me. We could not play one parent off of the other to get our way.

Despite what was happening in California, with hippies and love-ins, the 1960s was still an era of family secrets and denial. We did not talk about what went on behind the closed door of our homes with our friends. The one or two times a friend and I would venture to compare home lives, it quickly became obvious to me that there was no way to compare. I had one friend who insisted that her parents never argued, so, she had no idea what I was talking about when I ventured to inform her that my parents argued constantly and sometimes harshly. I had a similar experience with another close girlfriend.

The summer after being made aware of my father’s gambling, I entered the eighth grade and became close friends with a girl whose father was an alcoholic. The family’s Catholicism prevented her parents from divorcing, so they continued to live under the same roof, but the parents slept separately. When my friend, whom I’ll call Jo Marie, came to school one day and told me that her father, in an alcohol-driven rage, had attacked her mother with a kitchen knife, my perspective on my parents’ relationship changed rapidly. In all of the verbal violence, there had never been one physical altercation between them.

My father never touched my mother, but his rage was virtually uncontrollable if he caught one of us lying. My brother got the brunt of that anger. Although not excusing the behavior, I can only surmise



that my father was determined to prevent his own duplicitous behaviors from being passed down to his children.

In 1985, I happened upon a slim volume in a seminary library that contained the words “compulsive disorders” in its title. Intrigued, I pulled the book from the shelf and flipped through the pages. There, in black and white, in my thirtieth year, was the description of my father’s behavior.

The details were extracted from the *DSM-III*, the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association. This edition was published in 1980. This was the first time that compulsive gambling had been diagnosed as a mental disorder, and as discussed in a later chapter, that change of designation was important in many ways.

The *DSM-III* defines a pathological gambler as one who is “chronically and progressively unable to resist the impulse to gamble.” At least three of seven possible factors must be present for a diagnosis of compulsive gambling. The three that pertained to my father were:

1. defaults on debts or other financial responsibilities;
2. disrupted family or spouse relationship due to gambling; and
3. necessity for another person to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation.<sup>2</sup>

The book accurately described my father’s behavior, which followed the common win-lose-remorse trajectory of a chronic gambler. Like most addictions, compulsive gambling starts innocently enough. A few low-stakes poker games, small bets on the horses, perhaps a few dollars placed on a point spread for a sporting event. For many, this is merely a fun pastime, with a low level of risk and a few dollars that won’t be missed if the person loses.

However, for individuals who lack sufficient money and who also may have other emotional issues, such as low self-esteem, winning at those small games offers a sense of achievement. The person has come out of the betting event with more money than he had when he went in. He is thrilled, and more importantly, he can now buy things that he had previously had to do without. Money is medicine.

It is tranquilizers and antidepressants, uppers and downers, sedatives and stimulants. Money can energize, get the adrenalin flowing, and make a person feel on top of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Like everything in life, the winning phase does not last forever. A gambler's winning streak can last for years, and likely, in my father's case, it must have, because most research indicates that individuals do not become compulsive gamblers unless they have experienced long-term success in their gambling. That lengthy streak of success is what makes the first big loss so unnerving. The gambler has been feeling omnipotent, and suddenly he is stripped of his sense of power. The natural reaction is to say, "Nobody is going to get the better of me," and so, instead of simply cutting his losses, the gambler doubles down, bets even more, starts acting recklessly and abandons many of the rationales, such as figuring odds and counting cards, which likely contributed to his previous big wins.

As the money dwindles, his feelings shift from the euphoria that accompanied the wins to dejection at the experience of the losses. The gambler now chases his lost money, and lying becomes a way of life. He lies about what has happened to his paycheck, he forges his wife's signature on documents to get loans, and he may put his family's security at stake, as in the case of our nearly having our furniture repossessed in 1967. And, he may ask a child to lie for him, too, as I was asked to tell people my father was not at home when he was sitting in the living room. The compulsive gambler finds a way to take out loans, asks family members to provide him with money, and he may steal from an employer to get the money he needs to replace the money he has lost.

Finally, the gambler hits the desperation phase. Someone, usually a family member, steps forward to provide the money needed to pay off the loans and the loan sharks. For the majority of gamblers, this actually drives them deeper into gambling, often leading to clinical depression or suicide, but in my father's case, it seemed to get him to stop, at least for awhile.<sup>4</sup>

In retrospect, I can overlay these phases atop the rhythms of our family life. Our family vacations, Sunday drives, and new gadgets for

the household and gifts for my mother coincided with his winning. When the losses began to add up, my father became an unapproachable and distant figure. At home, he retreated to the living room to watch sports, especially golf tournaments and football games. If he bet on sports games, he did not have the anger reactions that are supposedly common when the gambler has lost money. My father had majored in physical education in college, and he had a strong interest in physical activities. He had officiated high school football until he reached his mid-thirties, and when he watched a college or professional football game, he would coach teams from his chair and make the call on the play before the referee did. As a parent, he pushed each of us children to be physically active. My brother was a natural at it; I was not. My parents used to tell me that I lacked “hand–eye coordination,” which I now know was the result of an undiagnosed astigmatism that affects my depth perception. However, I was still not excused from being outside. My father would snatch books from my hand and tell me to go outside and play. Irritated at him then, I am, now in my fifties, appreciative of his dogged persistence; it was because of him that I enjoy bicycle riding and know how to swim, my two favorite forms of physical activity.

My memories of my parents’ bitter arguments are certainly connected to the losing and desperation phases of the compulsive gambling cycle, when my father was internally confronting the stark truth that he had accumulated thousands of dollars of debt with no means of repayment. The losing streak is the worst time for family members, because the gambler is tense and anxious. Had my father been a substance abuser or an alcoholic, we would have had visible indicators of his condition. The problem with compulsive gambling is that it provides no comparable, discernible measuring stick. A gambler can have just placed a series of bets with his bookie, walk in the door with a smile on his face, and family members are none the wiser.

Summer 1967 undoubtedly marked the end of the losing phase and the beginning of the desperation phase. My father was simultaneously emotionally withdrawn and constantly angry. He watched a lot of television, and he and my mother had a lot of arguments. To use

her phrase to describe his descent into gambling debt hell, my father had “gone to the crapper.” In addition to keeping our furniture in the house, I suspect she arranged a bailout for him. It was not the first time in their fifteen years of marriage that he had dug the two of them into a financial hole and she had come to his rescue, and it would not be the last time, either.

Albert Moritsky and Shirley Felman first met in summer 1951, when he was a counselor at a boys’ camp and she was a counselor at the neighboring girls’ camp in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains. A slender, six-foot man, with sandy blond hair that curled slightly and laughing blue eyes, my father was head-turning handsome. My mother was neither plain nor a beauty. She had an angular face with high cheekbones, dark brown eyes, and black hair. The one feature that marred her attractiveness was a hooked nose that, unfortunately, was stereotypically witch-like in shape. They played in a ball game together, and my mother remembers my father as someone who was quick with the sarcastic and cutting remark. They made no move to stay in touch.

Each of them was the first in their respective families to be college educated. My father left high school in the middle of eleventh grade to support his family, but he took advantage of the GI Bill following World War II to earn his bachelor’s degree, and later earned, following my parents’ marriage, a master of education degree. My father first taught physical education, but over the course of his career, he gravitated to special education and worked with developmentally disabled children.

My father was what the marketers would call an “innovator”: someone who was interested in trying new things as soon as they came out. We had one of the earliest color televisions, CB radios, trash compactors, and microwave ovens—gadgets that my father was fascinated with and willing to try before they became popular (and the price came down). My father’s innovative spirit also translated into a belief that women were men’s intellectual equals. For all of the other emotional issues that encompassed his gambling, he imparted one essential message to me: “Don’t waste your intelligence.” As I got

older and met other women of my age who had either never attended a four-year college or embarked on any type of career, I found out how critical a father's role is in the development of a girl's self-concept and self-esteem. It is an interesting conundrum that out of the various mixed messages he sent me, sometimes hypercritical, at other times insistent and instructive, the positive messages ultimately were the stronger motivators in my life.

That may be because I witnessed how my father's progressive attitudes benefited my mother, who had earned a bachelor of arts in psychology prior to their marriage, and, even in the midst of the financial turmoil of our lives, eventually earned a master's degree in reading and a doctorate in educational administration. She initially taught social studies and language arts, and eventually developed an interest in teaching reading and in school administration. My father supported my mother's efforts to obtain her graduate degrees, and he worked behind the scenes in the school system where they were both employed to secure her promotions. I can still recall the excitement in his voice when he called to tell me that my mother had been named a school principal. She was in Russia at the time of the announcement, and he reveled in being the bearer of that good news.

A full year after my parents initially met, my mother was returning to her Squirrel Hill home from a shopping trip in East Liberty, Pittsburgh's noted shopping district in the early 1950s. She stopped to get gas, and of the three stations available to her at the intersection of Forbes and Shady avenues, she picked the one where my father was shooting the breeze with a friend. They recognized each other and struck up a conversation. It was, as is often said of presumed "random" encounters, meant to be.

My father followed my mother as she took her shopping companion home and returned the family car to her parents' house on Crombie Street. The reacquainted couple spent the rest of the afternoon together, and when they returned to the Felmans', my mother introduced her new fiancé to her parents. Six months later, on December 21, 1952, my parents wed.<sup>5</sup>

From the various bits and pieces that my mother shared with me over the years, I eventually figured out that my mother did not learn the extent of my father's gambling until after they married. The time to seek a divorce was before there were children, and I have the impression that my mother began to explore that option, likely with the support of her parents. The newlyweds lived with my mother's parents after their wedding, giving my maternal grandparents a close-up view of my father's habits. My father had expressed interest in going to optometry school, but my grandmother discouraged my mother from supporting my father's ambition, because she feared that he would gamble away any money that might have been used to pay tuition. My mother always said that her own mother was a good judge of character, and my grandmother was not especially enamored of her new son-in-law.

Almost a year to the day after my parents' marriage, Annette Silverman Felman was dead from kidney cancer. Tragedies and unexpected events have a way of changing people's intentions. Whatever plans my mother might have put in motion regarding a divorce were now put aside in the grief at the death of her mother. She and my father now had shared loss. His father had died when my father was sixteen, and his mother had died shortly after my parents' marriage, in early 1953.

Four months after my mother's mother died, I was conceived.

The pregnancy caught my mother unawares. My mother had discussed my father's gambling with her obstetrician, and she was honest about her misgivings about expecting a baby. My mother had been diagnosed with a low thyroid condition as a teenager, and she had been on medication ever since to keep it regulated. If she did not want to carry the baby to term, the obstetrician told my mother, all she needed to do was quit taking her thyroid medication. "I made sure I never missed a day the whole time I was pregnant with you," my mother informed me.

At the same time that I was fielding phone calls from creditors for my father, my mother took me into her confidence. She vented her

anger at my father's gambling, and explained that she had spoken to an attorney about divorcing my father. I did not like the arguments my parents were having, but I was not sure how I felt about divorce. Not that I really understood what divorce was. In 1967, divorce was still not a common occurrence among the middle class. And, I was a mere twelve years old, not really knowledgeable enough about anything, and too young to be put in the middle between my parents.

The attorney my mother consulted did not seem especially interested in helping her build a case against my father. According to what she told me at the time, the attorney asked if my father was physically abusive to her. My mother replied "no," apparently thinking it was not germane to mention my father's sometimes extreme physical punishment of his children. From her simple answer, the attorney concluded that my mother would have a difficult time convincing the court that she could be the better parent and that a divorce would give us more stability than we had in our current home life. In the twenty-first century, when attorneys advertise that they handle divorces, it is difficult to understand why my mother would have stopped pursuing a divorce on the advice of one lawyer. However, this was still in the days when divorces were typically pursued under the most egregious situations, or by people with considerable financial resources to buy the legal representation they wanted. Neither scenario fit my mother's situation.

Her efforts were further complicated by the absence of a good understanding of the damage done to family life by compulsive gambling. Furthermore, there was such a veil of secrecy around every family's life that I doubt my mother even had a trusted friend or colleague who could have been a sounding board as she sought a way out of the psychological and financial traumas caused by my father's addiction.

Things somehow leveled out by the end of the year. The phone calls from all the Mr. Smiths stopped. There was no more mail for me to retrieve. The furniture was still in the living room, and the arguments between my parents subsided to their normal back-and-forth sniping.

In 1969, we moved from Pittsburgh to Silver Spring, Maryland. My father had been driving from Pittsburgh to West Liberty, West

Virginia, more than sixty miles each way, where he taught college at West Liberty State. When he was denied tenure because he did not have a doctorate, he sought new employment. The Jewish Home for Retarded Children, now known as the National Home, hired him as its educational director.

I was devastated by the prospect of the move. For the first time in my school life, I had a group of close friends, all of whom were as intellectual and motivated to study as I was. I had my first serious boyfriend, and life was about as good as it got for a young teenager. Now, all of that was about to be snatched from me.

My mother, on the other hand, was enthusiastic about the promise of a new start. She talked about how she had lived in Pittsburgh her entire life, and how excited she was to be able to live somewhere different. She hinted that the change might be enough to break my father of his gambling habit. She assured me that I would make friends easily, as suburban Maryland was a transient area and teens were accustomed to newcomers in their classes.

None of my mother's dreams every fully materialized, not for her nor for me. My father moved to Maryland to start his new job before we officially left Pittsburgh, and I went with him. We moved in January, which is the middle of the school year. He had researched the high schools, and due to the differences between Montgomery County, Maryland schools, which had separate seventh- through ninth-grade junior highs, and Pittsburgh's schools, which were either K-8 or seventh- through twelfth-grade schools, I was in a type of grade limbo. The advanced education program I was part of in Pittsburgh had me enrolled as a ninth grader but taking the subjects common to the tenth-grade curriculum. The Montgomery County school system would not allow me to skip a grade, or a half-grade, in this case. My father located the one high school in Montgomery County, John F. Kennedy High School, that had a ninth grade in which I could be enrolled while taking tenth-grade subjects.

However, before I could be admitted, I had to be interviewed. My father took me to the interview, and gave me a piece of advice



that has proven to be true in many situations throughout my life: “In situations like this, they’ve already made up their minds. They’ve already decided to accept you. They just want to confirm their decision.”

And he was right.

Enrolling me in Kennedy also placed an additional transportation burden on my parents because we lived outside of the school’s bus district. For the next two-and-a-half years, until I graduated, my parents took me to school and picked me up, before and after they went to their own schools, located in another county. My father was the primary transporter during that time, but we did not have any daily discussions, arguments, or bonding. He drove and listened to the all-news radio station; and I listened along with him.

Kennedy had been selected as the incubator for several of the new educational theories of the times, which included removing grade distinctions and offering topics of study outside the traditional curriculum. Some courses were graded as pass–fail or credit only. I thrived in this independent-minded environment, particularly in the area of social studies, where I selected courses by topics every nine weeks and took two social studies classes in my last year of high school—one an independent study where I did my own research.

Socially, Kennedy was lonely and disappointing. Students form most of their friendships by their junior high years. With only one junior high feeding into Kennedy, newcomers had a difficult time finding a way to fit in. My few high school friends were those who came to Kennedy in the tenth grade, or later.

The pass–fail and for-credit-only grading system contributed to a breakdown of discipline and teaching because the reward for hard work was removed. Chemistry was one of the courses classified as pass–fail, and the teacher would take role and then dismiss us. The absence of any oversight by the administration to put a stop to this says a lot about how the school was falling apart as an educational institution.

By the time I reached eleventh grade, at the age of sixteen, I was ready to go to college, so that I could be in an environment where it was acceptable to be a serious student. My mother signed my

application for the University of Maryland–College Park, located just six miles from our Silver Spring home. I was admitted to Maryland’s Honors Program. It was 1971.

And my father still gambled.

He had hit a deeper bottom than he had ever hit before. When I started college that fall, and I left for my dorm room, my father and I were not on speaking terms. It had been a rocky summer between the two of us. As they had in 1967, the phone calls and the bills were occurring with regularity. This time, however, I was not a naïve twelve-year-old unquestioningly doing her father’s bidding. I was tired of being used to lie and dissemble. In a bitter and ugly argument, I informed my father that I would no longer cover for him. He reacted with anger of his own, but I stood my ground—something I don’t think he was expecting. He did not throw me out of the house (which, to his credit, was not something he even suggested), but his way to express his disapproval with someone was to refuse to talk to that person. He would use my brother or sister as an intermediary if he absolutely had to communicate with me. “Tell your sister . . .” was a common phrase in our house that summer. From my perspective, not talking to my father also meant that I did not answer the telephone and lie for him. My father’s “cold shoulder” was, for me, an emotional relief.

Sometime in early October, about six weeks after I had started at Maryland, I got a phone call from my mother at my dorm. My father had visited her in her classroom, after the students were gone for the day. There, in a semiprivate, semipublic place where my mother could not yell or scream, my father unfolded the latest of his gambling debts. The extent of his indebtedness was worse than it had ever been previously, and his only out was to declare bankruptcy. He committed to give up gambling and go to Gamblers Anonymous (GA). My parents turned a new page in their relationship, and my father encouraged me to move out of the dorm and come back home—sweetening the offer with the promise of my own car. Had I not had roommate problems, and had there not been a rash of rapes on campus that fall, I likely would have stayed on campus. But I did not feel safe, and my roommate

locked me out of our room regularly so that she and her boyfriend could have sex, so moving home seemed to be the better alternative.

The atmosphere at home had changed for the better. My parents' relationship was not as strained as it usually was, and, of course, that also carried over into how they treated me. The persistent, underlying tension that was part of our family dynamic slowly disappeared. My father and I made amends, and I watched my parents interact with affectionate behavior and mutual respect that I never recalled seeing previously. My father seemed more present and engaged and less pre-occupied. The year that the two of them attended the GA and the GamAnon (the support group for family members of gamblers) meetings stands out as a relatively placid time in our family's shared history.

It was too good to last.

The first hints of dissatisfaction came as my parents discussed the last GA meetings they had attended. In those years, GA's approach was to insist that the gambler review his behavior at every meeting. This meant a constant rehashing of the same material week after week. The organization's guidelines discouraged discussions about the impact of gambling on the gambler's wife and children.<sup>6</sup> My parents complained to each other about how it seemed as if the group never made any real progress. It was apparent that my parents had become bored. They wanted something more, but there was no other organization where they could go. So, they quit attending the weekly GA meetings.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and without a support group, my parents reverted to their old behaviors over time. In 1976, Atlantic City legalized gambling, and an East Coast Las Vegas was in the making. The New Jersey oceanfront town was a familiar place to a boy from Coney Island and a girl from Pittsburgh. From Maryland, Atlantic City was less than a day's drive, and it offered an easy-to-reach weekend escape, the lure of good entertainment, and the presence of gambling tables. I was surprised that my mother would agree to go there, but by the time they started traveling to Atlantic City, I had moved out of their house and was on my own. I was removed from the inevitable results of those trips.

The specter of my father's gambling hovered over the entirety of my parents' fifty-one-year marriage. Several years after I was married and had children of my own, my father called to tell me that my mother was once again threatening divorce because of his gambling. He sounded contrite, but I knew the scenario well. As gently as I could, I reminded my father that his gambling had always been a source of tension between him and my mother. To my surprise, the idea of my parents divorcing upset me, but I was old enough to realize that they both may have been better off living separate lives. The divorce never happened.

The most memorable telephone call, however, was the one I received when I was in my early forties. "I've been having a conversation with your brother," my father started out, without so much as a greeting. "He tells me that when you were younger, I used to beat you all the time. Is that true?"

"No," I replied, but not at all surprised at my brother's recollections. "But you did take advantage of me and use me to hide your gambling debts from Mother."

My father was silent for the merest glimmer of a second. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I forgive you." And with that, he said good-bye.

It was a long time before I stopped crying after I hung up the telephone. There is absolutely nothing more powerful in the world than the power of forgiveness.

In July 2008, I traveled to New York City, where I obtained a series of family records from the Department of Municipal Archives. The librarians at the 34th Street branch of the New York Public Library assisted me with finding materials on Coney Island during the Depression. I perused back copies of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*. It was an eye-opening trip.

"I've been to New York, and I've learned a lot about Daddy's family," I reported to my mother after my return. "He was really, really poor."