



## **Inheritance Defined by Silence**

### *Excerpt – From the Prologue*

When my father passed away unexpectedly in 2019, my world shifted. He had always been the anchor, the provider, the protector—the one who kept everything together. And now, the responsibility of caring for my mother fell to me and my two sisters. She was eighty-four, mentally ill, and completely dependent on others to function.

The air was still in the small room she had been staying in at my townhouse, carrying the faint scent of her lotion and the sound of birds chirping outside the window. I folded her clothes into neat piles—sweaters, nightgowns, wraps—each one holding a fragment of her story. Deciding what to take and what to leave behind felt like sorting through the years themselves. With every item I folded, memories I thought I'd buried began to surface.

I watched her as she walked slowly down the hallway with the use of her walker. She looked helpless in a way that pierced me. There were still moments of clarity, but they came and went, fleeting glimpses of the woman she once was, quickly shadowed by confusion or frustration. She voiced her discontent often, reminding me that she wanted to go home. I understood her longing; it was the one place that still felt like hers. Each time she asked, I felt the ache of it too, even as I knew we were doing what was best for her safety and care.

My mother spoke to people who weren't there. I can't remember the first time I realized that wasn't normal. There wasn't one defining moment, just a slow, creeping awareness that something in our house was different. The silence we learned to live in wasn't peaceful. It was heavy, like a secret pressing down on every room.

I remember hearing her voice yelling through the small open side window in our living room. Her words carried down the street as I walked home from school, clear enough for neighbors to hear. It happened more than once—each time leaving me flushed with embarrassment, wishing I could disappear. This, too, became another secret to guard, another silence to keep.

Even now, decades later, I can still hear her voice rising from the living room, talking to herself, sometimes cursing out loud to people who didn't exist. My sisters

and I became experts at pretending not to hear her. We learned to mask our reactions, to carry on as if everything was fine. That's what you do when you grow up in a house where silence is safer than truth.

I thought about the incident with the matching clothes—how my mother had taken my sister and me shopping and bought us identical outfits. I was so young, but I remember the bus ride we took to the swap meet where we sometimes shopped for clothes. It wasn't far, maybe twenty minutes, but I can still picture her clutching the bags, proud of her small purchase. When our father came home, his face hardened. We weren't twins, he said. He told her to return them immediately. She gathered the bags and caught the bus back just as the sun was setting. I didn't care about the clothes; I just wanted her to get home safe. That night, I waited by the window until I saw her walk up the steps. The relief I felt stayed with me for years.

I thought about the time I was hospitalized after overdosing on her medication. I was too young to remember it, but I've been told the story my entire life—how my sister and I got into her pills, how close we came to tragedy, and how my father had to carry us through it. No safety caps. No supervision. Just a house full of young girls trying to survive childhood under a roof shaped by illness. Even without remembering it, the fear of it has always lived in me.

And I thought about my father; how he knelt on the steps of a closed church and promised God he would never leave my mother if their first child was born safely. He kept that promise. For fifty-nine years, he stayed. He loved her. He raised four daughters. He did the best he could.

For a long time, I admired him for that. I still do. But I've also come to understand the other side of that sacrifice. I see how silence and loyalty, even when born of love, can carry generational consequences. We were raised inside a secret. And now, we carry the weight of it. Maybe that's what inheritance really is; not what's left behind, but what we continue to carry.

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