

My life has been a series of small cuts. Be good, do right, lie effectively. I was consistently ignored, rejected, verbally abused, teased, hated, isolated, and terrorized as a child. My body learned to produce thousands of cells that can detect the electric fields generated by those around it. Growing up, it became so tuned that I could tell the mood of the room from a distance. I learned to shut down, shut up and shut out anything distasteful. And when the truth could no longer be denied, my mother would destroy me. She would say I was “overreacting” or being “too sensitive.” She would discredit me with “Well, that’s how YOU remember it.” The defect was mine.

I was raised on stories of family who fought in every war, settled new frontiers, and proudly used the name of Thornsberry, Geddis, Ott, Hefner. Those around me were respectable, and they would protect that respectability—even from me. A few years ago, I started looking into our ancestry. At first, I followed every member of the male line. I filled in the narrative of my childhood and discovered a normal, flawed family. The truth is that like much of America, we were a family of underage brides, shit throwers, adulterers, drunks, deadbeat dads, illegitimate children, even murderers. One ancestor so offended and disappointed his family that they demanded he change his last name to avoid association. Another had an affair with his sister’s wife, fathering at least one child, and just lately I have learned about a cousin who murdered her mother, dismembered her and threw her down a well. My crimes pale. I dated a black kid in high school. I went to college for academics, not job training. I had premarital sex. I lived with a man before marriage. I have trouble following society’s rules if I don’t understand them. I “whored” my way around the world. I left my husband. I am not materialistic. And the only time my parents hear from me is when I want something.

My parents were Gary and Phyllis Ott and each were unique in their abuse. With my father, it was about control which fit well with my mother’s need to be the victim. My father was paranoid and distrustful—interrogating people while recording every word to be used in future talks. He would catch inconsistencies and label them lies. He was a racist who purposefully put his only child in a high school that was half black to test her resolve. My mother was a talented narcissist. She loved to gaslight every situation so as to cast herself helpless. Not only did she refuse to step between me and my father, she used me to secure her own getaway. Once the fray was over, she would come along and try to soothe me. “Your father loves you, he just doesn’t know how to show it.” For most of my life there has been this disconnect. There was the inside and the outside, the public and the private, the shown and the known.

In the public, the Ott family was healthy and happy. Gary was a successful businessman, family man, Republican, father. My mother Phyllis was the perfect supportive wife, victimized in just the right amount to make those around her protective without being too sympathetic. She wanted the men to champion her and the women to envy her. My parents seemed to have it all, the marriage, the child, the thriving businesses, the tennis trips, the free business trips, the hobbies, the animals, the bright future. In private, my dad didn’t speak to me for a week because I returned his car smelling of French fries. My mother was in my room, on my bed, crying about my father’s coldness, meanness, manipulation. I watched as they ripped up every root, cut off every branch and left me to recycle. They were never mommy and daddy. Mom and dad were used but never as terms of endearment. They were more like identifiers—naming a horse Star for the white star shape on its face.

It was when I had children that I came to understand how little my parents loved me. If they had felt about me the way I felt about my children, they wouldn’t have been able to move me far away from the family who loved me, bury me in responsibilities out on property far from any sort of engagement, torture me for talking to someone of a different race, divorce when I needed to start thinking about college, spend every penny, including a few of mine, on themselves, and worry more about their “reputations” than about my wellbeing. I have come to learn that if you don’t feel loved, it is probably because you are not. It was when my mother would “snap” that she would start dishing out truth. She would tell me that she had never liked me. She would say she loved me. She had to say that.

Sometimes, I wonder if my parents were detached out of fear, fear of having a sick baby, a dead baby. My father’s sister, Lauretta Ott Pankey, had her one day old baby, Kevin W. Pankey, die just six months before I

was born. By the time I was born, William Wayne Geddis, my uncle on my mother's side, and my aunt Lois Grace Laswell had two sick babies. Both were born with Cystic Fibrosis. First, Tamara then Terri. Terri had it worse. A tiny little doll with brownish blonde curls framing a quirky sly smile, she was daddy's little girl. My uncle Bill (William Wayne Geddis) had a boisterous and forceful personality that scared most little girls and children in general. But not Terri. She would stomp her foot and meet his gaze while Tamara would run to Lois and hide behind her skirts. So, it made no sense when Terri was the one who succumbed to the disease before Tamara did. Less than three months before Terri's death, I was born on April 14, 1963.

I was born healthy, and it was Easter Sunday. However, it was also the day the Titanic went down, the president, Abraham Lincoln, was assassinated, and the Black Sunday dust storm destroyed Oklahoma. I began my destruction before I was even born. I ruined my mother's body. At five foot five and 107 pounds soaking wet, my teenage mother had gained enough weight to have a baby of nine pounds and three ounces. In my Baby Memory book, the first comment everyone made was, "She is so big." The weight and my size left stretchmarks all over her body. She would never wear a bikini again. Labor lasted for days and nearly split her in two. Both parents had to give up hopes of college and careers for the time being. My father had to give up the boat and the cars to work two jobs. Living on minimum wage jobs, my parents lived in a little pink trailer parked in my grandparents' driveway.

For the first time, a member of the newest generation was born healthy. There wasn't much time for joy. Terri, the charmed child, the sickly child, died at four years old. Bill and Lois had one sick baby left. She was dying slower than her sister, but she was still dying. So the family revolved around Tamara, and she became the perfect, saintly child. She was tiny and fragile with doe eyes that betrayed every emotion. Long, thick wavy brown hair framed a perky little nose and God's thumbprint on her chin. She loved being doted upon, dressed up, showed off and cuddled. Then there was me, the opposite in every way. I was not fragile. I had dirty blonde hair that curled at the root and stuck straight out on the ends like broken corkscrews. My eyes were a faded hazel color, deep set without any charm. I always felt large and masculine next to her. She was five years older than I was, yet I was the one who was constantly told to leave her alone, "She's tiny, and you might hurt her." I was the baby, but Tamara was the one who was babied.

I didn't fully understand the significance of what happened to Tamara and me until years later. I had my own family, and my four year old son broke his leg skiing in Mt. Shasta. It was bad. It was a spiral break of his femur. He had to have three surgeries and a year of physical therapy. During those days when you realize your child's mortality, you find yourself making every moment they are alive precious. My son, Diego, became the center of attention. He was given anything he wanted and bad behavior was explained away with, "he doesn't feel good." It wasn't until it was over that we realized we had created another Henry the Eighth. But, were we wrong? As a parent, you just want the pain to end, and if a five foot stuffed dinosaur from the children's hospital gift shop will bring even a moment's smile to their face, you go into debt and buy it.

Tamara was spoiled. In a family who made their own clothes, grew their own vegetables, hunted their own meat, and built their own house, store bought goods were a delicacy. Tamara always got store bought presents. I didn't. Tamara was an only child like me, but her parents kept her near extended family and long term friends. Mine didn't.

At a young age, my parents moved us to the small, depressing and depressed town of Oroville in Northern California. It was a highly forgettable place, and it isolated me from friends and family. We eventually moved onto a large piece of property where I was abandoned without human contact or intellectual stimulus. We didn't have the internet or video games, we didn't even have cable television. While she was alive, my grandma did what she could to protect me, taking on the responsibility of raising me. And that was fine by my parents. They had vacations, hobbies and careers to pursue.

With the start of high school, my father suddenly started to take an interest in me. He became obsessed with keeping me chaste. He had teachers and coaches spying on me and reporting back. If he found out that I had

even looked too long in the direction of a black guy, that night was a white knuckle night. My dad would get home from work and order me to sit. I would sit on the huge square floor pillow my mom had made. It had a scrolled pattern in green and gold stripes. During the interrogation, I would grab the corners so tightly that I would lose circulation in my hands. The pain of the dying limb was a distraction. The interrogation would begin. He would dig for information, and I would tread cautiously trying to avoid incriminating myself. How much did he know? How much was he bluffing? It wouldn't end until I confessed my sins and threw myself on his mercy. Sometimes I'd get a, "Since you seem to have learned your lesson, I will not ground you this time." Other times, the night was angry and violent with "nigger lover" being thrown at me like knives. Those nights it was my dignity he was after.

As the days at Las Plumas passed, the atmosphere provided less and less opportunities to breath. My dad, always the life of the party, would tell jokes. "The only way to end the problems between the blacks and whites, is for every white girl to marry a black man. . .except my daughter." And the room would explode in laughs. But not everyone was really laughing, and it wasn't long before that "Ott joke," as it was called, made it to the ears of my classmates. I was picked on, harassed, teased, and even beaten up a few times. Every black student hated me.

And where was my mother? Oh she was always there during the white knuckle nights, watching, horrified, scared, useless. I would try to avoid meeting her eyes so she wouldn't see the pain in them. She was the real enemy in the room. Somehow, in every dangerous situation with my father, she was always the victim.