

How I Built
and Sold a
\$25 Million
Tech Company
Without Being
an A**hole

Scaling Söul

WITH

* Sharon K. Gillenwater *

Advance Praise for Scaling with Soul

“*Scaling with Soul* isn’t just a story about building a successful business—it’s a captivating journey of adversity and triumph with themes of grit and grace that will resonate with anyone crafting their own success story.”

—HEATHER E. BURNS,
SERIAL SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

“In her candid memoir, Gillenwater shares the remarkable story of her life-changing sale of her company as a bootstrapped entrepreneur. Packed with invaluable insights and hard-won lessons, *Scaling with Soul* is an absolute must-read for any aspiring founder.”

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“In *Scaling with Soul*, Gillenwater delivers a raw and exciting tale of building a startup from scratch with transparency, honesty and integrity. It will have you on the edge of your seat.”

—**NOMIKI PETROLLA,**
FOUNDER OF PDS LAB,
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“Diving into *Scaling With Soul* is like enjoying a gin and tonic on vacation: effervescent, fun, refreshing and gets the job done!”

—**ERICA PARISI,**
FOUNDER OF HIWIRE COSTUMES

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*To my mother, who inspired me.
To my husband, who believed in me.
To my sons, who motivated me.
To my mentors, who counseled me.
And to my friends, who put up with me.*

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Prologue: The Payoff

TWO LOUD CHIMES sounded through the airplane cabin, alerting the passengers and crew that our plane had reached 10,000 feet. Seconds later, the senior flight attendant cheerfully began her PA address, informing everyone that electronic devices were now approved for use. Then she invited us all to sit back, relax and enjoy the flight from Charlotte, North Carolina to San Francisco.

I felt anything but relaxed. Before the attendant could even finish the announcement, I'd grabbed my cell phone, enabled Wi-Fi and checked for messages.

Nothing.

My mind raced. Had something gone wrong? Was the closing delayed—again? Did the buyer back out at the last minute?

I was about to finalize the sale of my company, Boardroom Insiders, for \$25 million. It was a life-changing amount of money. In fact, many at the company—my partner Lee, our shareholders and vested employees—stood to receive substantial payouts. New careers would be forged for our trusted employees as the buyer prepared to scale and expand Boardroom Insiders across the globe.

This moment would transform everything—my future, my dreams, my legacy.

No one would have predicted I'd ever get here—not even me. According to conventional wisdom, I wasn't the type of person to become a successful tech entrepreneur. My parents hadn't gone to college. We never sat around the dinner table talking about business. I had no interest in that world and knew nothing about it. Aside from a failed effort to sell painted flowerpots at the local flea market, I had no track record as an entrepreneur.

Though I lived smack-dab in the center of the entrepreneurial universe, I decidedly did not fit the typical Silicon Valley profile. I wasn't a Harvard or Stanford graduate. The education factories that churn out dealmakers, entrepreneurs and CEOs had passed me by. In fact, I'd accomplished almost nothing of note in my youth. I'd entered grad school at age 28 because I didn't know what else to do.

Even after grad school, I approached my career in the same haphazard and reactive fashion as I had when I was waiting tables in college: I worked for anyone who agreed to hire me. I couldn't articulate my skills and had no clue what I wanted to do, so I felt lucky to be offered anything.

I didn't come from a world where people were strategic and intentional about career decisions. The reality for most of my family was that there were few "careers." When someone needed money, they got a job. They weren't supposed to like it. I was well into my adulthood before I figured out there was another way.

Founding Boardroom Insiders was a tremendous leap of faith—faith that my life and work could have an impact that reached far beyond anything I'd previously thought possible. It represented a change in my worldview—breaking free of the mindset I'd grown up with, casting off the limiting beliefs that kept me from realizing that greater things were within my grasp

—that I not only deserved them but could *create* them, all on my own. And I built the business to mirror that ideal, with employee development as our ensign and outsize principles as our rudder. Over the years, the company had become my second home. The people there were more than just employees. They'd become like family.

For a moment, I regretted my decision to fly home at such a crucial time. But for the third time in as many days, the final transaction had been delayed. I'd been at our South Carolina office for two weeks, working on the sale around the clock. The lawyers, the deal team and the buyer all required a massive amount of paperwork. It didn't matter if I'd already sent the exact same information, in triplicate. Someone would request it again in a different format.

They had questions about every aspect of the business, down to the most minute details. I dutifully answered every single one, even if I sometimes wondered whether the buyer reviewed its own material. Of all the questions asked, my favorite was: "Who is Sharon Gillenwater and what is her role?"

I wanted to scream, "SHE'S THE FUCKING FOUNDER AND CEO!" But this CEO wanted her fucking money so I sucked it up and sent the requested information in a professional manner. But the truth is, I had been asking myself the very same question for years, before Boardroom Insiders came to be. Who was I, where did I fit in and what did I want to contribute?

I'd founded Boardroom Insiders and nurtured it for 14 years, working tirelessly to build and scale the business, even while so many people told me it wouldn't work. My partner, Lee, joined the company a couple of years into the journey. Back then, we could barely afford to pay ourselves—and often we didn't.

With no venture capital, no fancy pedigrees or insider connections, Lee and I were the quintessential bootstrapping

entrepreneurs. It took years of trial and error and diligent effort, but we bootstrapped our way from a tiny, two-person outfit to a respected leader in the digital information space. Together, we had built something extraordinary, and now it felt like the rest of the world was finally recognizing our worth.

But the process of selling a company isn't for the faint of heart. I was exhausted. I'd been wearing the same outfit four days straight because the airline lost my luggage, and I couldn't find a spare moment to go buy a new tee shirt and pants. Lee and I barely had time to eat or sleep. So when the buyer delayed the closing yet again, I decided to fly home the next day and wrap up the deal remotely.

That morning, the deal team assured me the sale would close before I boarded my plane. And then the last of the paperwork *still* wasn't done in time, and I boarded my flight under the gray cloud of another delay. And that's how I found myself 36,000 feet in the air, waiting for the final word on the most improbable and thrilling achievement of my life.

In a happy surprise, the airline had upgraded me to first class. I sat in my plush seat, nervously checking my phone for updates. Still...a big fat nothing. About an hour into the flight, I decided to leave it alone. Maybe it wasn't happening today, just like it hadn't happened five or six other days. With a second glass of champagne in my hand, I reflected on the last two weeks. It seemed endless, this last stretch of the process. Through all our years of struggle and growing the company, I'd never experienced anything so exhausting and stressful. As the champagne took effect, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, bracing for the worst.

And then the phone pinged. I looked down into the crystal ball of my future—the screen of my cellphone—at an incoming text message: a screenshot of my partner, Lee, with about a dozen other people on a Zoom call. As my eyes focused in on the tiny image, I saw that everyone was smiling...giving the

thumbs-up. And then the phone exploded with champagne emoji after champagne emoji after champagne emoji.

The deal was done! Our company had just sold for a staggering \$25 million!

The weight of years of constant work and sacrifice seemed to melt from my shoulders. I felt a mixture of joy, relief, exhaustion and disbelief.

Is this really happening? I kept wondering.

I texted my husband and told him to watch our bank account. We were about \$200,000 in debt to credit card companies and family members. With his support and encouragement, I'd bet everything on Boardroom Insiders—even though it meant putting our own financial future in limbo. My husband and I needed the money from the sale of the company to make ourselves financially whole again. Giddily, I told him to pay off all our debts as soon as the money hit our bank account.

Within minutes, Andrew texted me a screenshot of our bank balance, which now read over \$10 million. Shivers ran through my whole body.

Five minutes after that, he sent me more screenshots: our credit card balances. Some of those cards had had balances of over \$30,000. But now every single one had a zero balance.

I could barely contain myself. I was heading home to a clean financial slate and a dramatically changed life.

I thought about how many other people—employees who'd been so loyal to us and had become like family over the years—were now experiencing this same, uncontainable feeling of elation. Lee and I made sure our vested employees would receive equity from the sale. I imagined the ping of bank alerts ricocheting through the office as everyone saw their balances magically skyrocket.

The rest of the flight home felt surreal. It was hard being stuck on a plane with no one to talk to. I wanted to share the moment with someone, anyone. I wanted to grab the woman

sitting next to me and yell, “GUESS WHAT? I’M RICH!” But I figured that might be a little crass.

Instead, I asked the flight attendant for another glass of champagne and sat back in my first-class seat, quietly celebrating as I looked out the window at a cloudless blue sky, thinking about how quickly everything can change...

It was a full year after that plane ride before I realized how astonishingly rare my achievement was.

Of course, I was aware of the gender imbalance in the C-suite, the tech industry and venture funding. Over two decades, I’d had dozens of meetings with venture capitalists, private equity firms, merger-and-acquisitions bankers and corporate development execs—and been the only woman in attendance. It wasn’t until I came across some data in 2023 that it really hit me how much the odds are stacked against women in business. And it’s not getting much better.

Of the current Fortune 500 companies, women represent only 10.4 percent of CEOs.¹ Women represent only 8.6 percent of all venture capitalists, 8 percent of firm partners (those making the investment decisions and writing checks), and 7 percent of board seats at VC firms—which has a direct impact on the companies funded by venture capital, as fewer than 5 percent have women on their executive teams and only 2.7 percent have a female CEO.² When it comes to funding the next wave of American businesses, venture capitalists funneled just 2.1% of their investment dollars to companies with all-female founders in 2023.³ But...VCs rewarded women *who partnered with men*—the share of venture capital that went to companies with at least one male co-founder increased to 21.7% in 2023, up from 16.5% in 2022.⁴ Although women start businesses at more than twice the rate of men, fewer than 2% of

female business owners ever make it to \$1 million in annual revenue, just one-third the rate of their male peers.⁵

It's no wonder the entrepreneurial stories we hear are almost always told from the perspective of men who create companies worth hundreds of millions and even billions. We rarely hear from women with entrepreneurial dreams who succeed against all odds and create life-changing wealth.

It's time that changed. That's why it's become my mission to make entrepreneurship accessible to everyone, regardless of their background. We now have an opportunity to create our ideal world, where inclusion and access are a birthright—no matter where you're born, or to whom. In this book, you'll be able to trace my steps from a blue-collar world of limiting beliefs that held me in limbo as I struggled to find my way to a successful career, to embracing a new worldview—developing a mindset that helped me break free and believe that success was well within my grasp. As I shrugged off those binds, I not only stood in my power, I empowered everyone around me—by creating a dynamic team to grow the business and cultivating leaders who could stand on their own and create their own success stories.

I know there are more Sharon Gillenwaters out there who can make it to the top, and I'm here to see that they do.

CHAPTER ONE

Blue Collar with a Twist

I GREW up in Ocean Beach, California. This seaside town in San Diego—splendidly depicted in the opening scenes of Cameron Crowe’s *Almost Famous*—was beautiful, gritty and wild. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, the counterculture scene was big in “OB,” as it’s commonly known, and my parents forbade me to walk alone on the main street of Newport Avenue—it was full of smoke shops, dive bars, hippies and vagrants. But even in the safe confines of our backyard, I wasn’t sheltered from the vibe. I must have been about 10 when the frenetic guitar riff of Led Zeppelin’s “Black Dog” came drifting over the fence from the yard next door, like tentacles, one Saturday afternoon. I became transfixed, tiptoeing to the wooden fence and peering through the slats, as I watched my teenage neighbor Tommy and his friends, stoned out of their minds, spinning in circles to the music, eyes closed, their long, tangled hair whirling loose around their bodies.

I felt like I was peering through the looking glass—and it kind of freaked me out. I could tell these kids were out of control, definitely high on something, and that a new era was landing hard in OB, where anything went—and I didn’t want any part of it. I never really gravitated to the beach culture either, though I appreciated the beauty of where I lived. There

were tons of kids on my block, and I had my friends, but I mostly liked to stay inside and read.

Today, my hometown is cleaner, more gentrified and probably less interesting; its four-block commercial strip is home to a Target, family-friendly restaurants and several microbreweries. While dive bars remain and dispensaries have moved in, their patrons tend to be well-heeled hipsters and tourists. Tommy and his friends have long since moved on, as I did. But OB retained some of its rebellious heritage. In 2022, residents celebrated the closure of a Starbucks on Newport Avenue they never wanted in the first place. “People in OB want to keep OB non-corporate,” one resident said.¹

I’m a first-generation Californian. My dad grew up in Forrest City, Arkansas, which sits between Little Rock and Memphis. His parents had six kids and a working farm, but when he was a teenager, the whole place burned down—and they had no insurance. They lost everything, and the entire family moved west—as far west as they could go. A straight shot from Little Rock would have brought them to LA, but somewhere along the way, they veered south and ended up on Interstate 8, which deposits you right at the gateway to Ocean Beach.

Dad was handsome, outgoing, and charismatic—always fun to be around. He was quick with a joke, and his humor would win you over if his charm didn’t. How he went from being a hair stylist in his early days in OB to working at a plating plant for the airlines is a mystery. When he and my mom first met, he was always styling her hair in different ways and applying rinses so she could try out new hair colors.

Mom grew up in Virginia, in extreme poverty. Like my dad, her family lived on a farm, though it was more about subsistence than running a business: her mother slaughtered chickens and hogs, cut firewood and tended the animals and kids, while her dad worked the fields from sun up to sundown. When her mom died of kidney disease when my mother was only 13, she

was put in charge of caring for her four brothers and sisters, including an infant. Her father remarried—to a woman who treated her poorly. How poorly? I'll tell it to you the way my mom told it to me: At 18, she paid a visit to the family doctor, and when he saw the condition she was in, he told her to get out of there as fast as she could and never look back. Emaciated and undernourished, she had weighed in at 95 pounds—her bones protruding through her five-foot-seven frame. To this day, my mother does not discuss the details of that time in her life, nor is she in contact with anyone in her family.

Mom took the doctor's advice and set out on her own. First, she went to Florida to stay with a friend who was a flight attendant. She considered working for the airlines, but an infestation of beastly palmetto bugs in her girlfriend's apartment sent her packing. Traveling by bus to San Diego (which has very few bugs), she moved into the YWCA downtown. There, she met my dad's sister, Mary, who worked at the naval base in Coronado, in human resources, and hired my mom to work in the computer programming department. Computer work was largely clerical back then, and therefore considered suitable "women's work." Mom handled the era's memorable "punch cards," which were fed into computers for data intake: each hole punched into a card represented letters or numbers.

Before too long, Mom's male bosses noticed her work ethic and natural talent and sent her to Los Angeles to train with IBM, the pioneer of both business and personal computing. Mom was overjoyed. She lacked a college education and had had so few opportunities in life so far. This seemed like a really big break—and indeed, it was. She ended up working as a civilian computer programmer for the Navy for the next 30 years, steadily promoted until she was working alongside younger peers with master's degrees.

I admired my mom's professional wardrobe. She wore smart dresses and heels, pantyhose, trendy costume jewelry and some-

times even wigs. I liked the idea that people dressed for the office, and I looked forward to that kind of future for myself. Mom also gave me my first exposure to computers and technology. Sometimes called into the office in the middle of the night or on weekends to “fix a hang,” as she called it, she’d take me with her. I’d play with the discarded punch cards, and she’d make a bed for me on top of a gray, metal, government-issued desk—with blankets and pillows brought from home. My dad worked nights, so she had no choice, but they were special moments I’ll never forget.

My admiration wasn’t limited to mom’s sartorial style. It always impressed me that she worked on sophisticated technology alongside colleagues with advanced degrees even though she had no college education herself. She was one of our nation’s early cybersecurity professionals, detecting and deflecting bugs and worms that could do our nation harm. She didn’t mind working at night or on weekends, or whenever she was needed. She loved her job and her colleagues and enjoyed her work. I imagined a future like that for myself; I figured if she did it, I could too.

She bonded with the few other women in her workplace, and they’d go to lunch and visit each other on weekends. But their bosses were universally men. Once, when my mom applied for a promotion, she was told flat out that the position was a “man’s job” and she wouldn’t be considered. Blatant misogyny was fairly standard in her time, but she harbored no bitterness. I think it was hard for her to recognize: it was just the way things were, and she never let it get under her skin.

Mom sometimes attended tech conferences in San Francisco, such as Oracle’s OpenWorld Conference, where I once tagged along as her plus-one when I was in college. Standing on the expansive lawn of Oracle’s headquarters overlooking San Francisco Bay, I was in awe of the scale of the Bay Area and the opulence of the party, impressed by my mother’s place in this

world, never imagining that decades later, I'd be attending the same events.

Mom retired early, but not because of sexism; it was the corruption she couldn't abide. Serving on an oversight panel that selected technology vendors for lucrative government contracts, she blew the whistle when a panel member's cronyism steered a big contract to the least qualified vendor. When her concerns were brushed aside and the vendor retaliated against her, she resigned in protest. She had wanted to work longer to rack up her pension, but she was 52 and it was a tough time: my dad was fighting cancer, so she didn't need the extra stress or aggravation. When she quit in 1991, she was making around sixty grand a year. Given how hard her youth had been and the fact that she had never gone to college, it was an amazing achievement.

As an only child, I'm pretty sure I was unplanned. My mom wanted to make sure I got the best of everything, and I think she worried that working hampered her ability to manage my upbringing. So she put me in a private elementary school, despite the cost. My grandparents took care of me before and after school. Mom would take me to their apartment before she went to work, and I'd have breakfast with them—always instant oatmeal. Then Grandpa would take me out to the sidewalk, and we'd wait for the school bus.

It was a great little school a few blocks from the beach, and I loved it. Classes were small, and we were taught Spanish every day. The Spanish teacher, Mrs. Diaz, was an elegant older woman from Mexico. She wore bright pink lipstick, poncho-style sweaters and had a dramatic gray streak through her beautifully coiffed dark hair. Mrs. Diaz lived right next door to the school and worked out of a little cottage on our tiny campus, which everyone called "The Spanish Cottage." She filled her classroom with colorful objects (for teaching the names of colors), full place settings (for meal-related vocabulary) and

papier-mâché fruits and vegetables as visual aids. It was foundational for me.

Given that I was in a private school, most of my schoolmates came from wealthy families—or families far more well-off than mine, anyway. One lived in a huge house that spanned two blocks, so they had two completely different addresses—the back door was on one street and the front door on another. I'd never seen anything like it! Every year, that family would host events like mother-daughter teas and a massive Easter egg hunt. My school friends' parents were executives, doctors, lawyers and successful entrepreneurs.

The disparities in our lifestyles made me realize that even though my family was perfectly comfortable and wanted for nothing, we were from the proverbial “other side of the tracks.” And seeing how wealthy people lived turned me into a striver with a dream to cross those tracks.

I loved reading, studying, singing and acting. And I'd sometimes get involved in things my parents found odd—things that were outside their worldview—like joining a rock band and traveling solo to out-of-the-way places. My father just didn't take an interest, but my mom was often the voice of dissent, or at least of caution. It's not that she wasn't supportive; but there was a finite box into which life fit for her, and she couldn't see outside it. She couldn't imagine a bigger life and didn't understand why I would forsake something safe for something risky. My parents' inability to see beyond that box impeded my sense of adventure. I broke out of the box in my own way but was still tethered to it by their beliefs. I was taught never to dream too big, so I wouldn't be disappointed.

Though my mother was the primary breadwinner of our family, that didn't mean my father was progressive. He was a blue-collar guy, and though mom worked a full-time job, he still expected her to do all the cooking, cleaning, shopping and anything having to do with child-rearing. He took the money

she earned and bought run-down apartment buildings, fixing them up to rent. He was happiest puttering around in the garage and cruising around Ocean Beach in his van, checking on his buildings and tenants.

My father had a strong personality, with a knack for calling out stupidity when he saw it. His tenants tended to be a little afraid of him. I should know; I was one of them. I lived in one of his buildings for a time, and while he charged me rent, he did give me a discount. Once I heard him haranguing my neighbor, who was on his third replacement garbage disposal: “You do *know*,” my dad griped, “that you can’t put *rocks* in there!” Dad had no filter.

He fit right in in his adopted town. Looking like any of the other middle-aged hippies on Newport Avenue, he wore only shorts, had longish hair and kept a beard and sideburns. His belief system, however, was more conservative; he could be bigoted and sexist. He’d worked in the plating shop for an airline, dipping massive engine parts into swimming-pool-sized vats of chemicals and sometimes working the night shift. My mom says that a lot of guys who worked in that plant ended up dying of cancer—she believes it’s what killed him. Dad quit his job long before he got sick and started buying properties to rent out—not out of concern for his health but because he could not stand working for anyone else. More than anything, this stemmed from his temperament. He was emotionally volatile, to the point that I wasn’t comfortable bringing friends over to the house. It wasn’t easy being an only child, walking on eggshells. I never knew when his temper was going to flare. I loved my parents and was proud of them both, but given Dad’s unpredictability, I ended up spending most of my childhood in my room reading, or over at friends’ houses.

I was lucky to have several other strong female role models in my family. My dad’s four sisters were all real badasses. I wonder today if their resourcefulness and resilience was rooted

in the loss of the family farm, which led to all of them fleeing Arkansas and starting over. The eldest, Christine, founded and ran her own real estate company in San Antonio. Mary worked her way up from hospital volunteer to hospital executive in Los Angeles. Peggy became a special education teacher and advocate in San Diego. And Betty put herself through college, then worked her way up to chief financial officer of a publicly traded company—all while raising their kids.

Betty and Mary lived not too far from one another in LA. In my early 20s, I loved to drive up and visit them for a few days. They always made time for me, taking me out to nice restaurants in Pasadena and insisting on paying for everything. I loved getting to know my aunts as people, and we always had a great time. Despite having to leave for the office at dawn, Betty was always up for discussing work and politics late into the night over a good bottle of wine. And though she was a single mom, her week revolved primarily around work.

Aunt Betty was tough, had a wicked sense of humor and could dish for hours about workplace “bullshit.” I loved her stories, which always made me laugh. One afternoon, I drove up to LA and used a hidden key to let myself into her house. I kicked off my shoes, opened a bottle of Chardonnay and waited for her to come home. After changing into a stylish sweatsuit, she settled into her fluffy, white down sofa, legs curled under her, white wine in hand.

“You know,” she said, “I was in my office this morning, and this guy came in to complain about *something*, going on and on and *on...blah, blah, blah...*and all I could think about was how I’d had not *one* but *two* unusually large bowel movements before I left the house...” Aunt Betty was one of a kind.

I was lucky to have a working mother and powerhouse aunts as role models. They were a rare breed in those days. My circle of elementary school friends had only one other working mom, who also happened to work in computing at the naval base.

SCALING WITH SOUL

As the years wore on, Dad could get borderline abusive toward my mom sometimes, and it didn't sit well with me. Even as a little kid, I'd call him out, yelling at him when he got out of line. He came and went as he pleased. He stayed out late if he felt like it—doing who knows what. Maybe he was at the bar with friends, or even with another woman. He'd cheated on my mom once before.

One such night, he came home drunk, in a foul mood about something. Mom and I were already asleep, and we woke up to his ranting and swearing.

Bang!

"Son of a bitch! Stupid piece of shit!"

Neither of us paid him any mind. Been here, done this.

As I turned over and tried to go back to sleep, I heard him turning on every faucet in the house, full blast.

You've got to be effing kidding me.

Then the television switched on, and the radio...all full volume, until the entire house was pulsating.

That's it!

I flew out of bed, banging my knee on the dresser. "God damnit!"

First to the bathroom, then the kitchen—I turned everything off—and found him in the living room, still pacing.

"Dad! You've got to be kidding me! What is *wrong* with you?"

He was a mess, drunk and pissed off, looking like a cat that had been left out in the rain—his stained bomber jacket askew on his shoulders, hair a rat's-nest mess.

"Dad! I'm talking to you!"

"What, Sharon—for chrissakes!?! Leave me..." He trailed off, looking at me like he'd never realized I was growing up.

"Why are you doing this? Look at you! This is so stupid! Shame on you!"

And in a flash, his rage turned to tears. He fell back onto the sofa, one hand over his face, the other fighting with his coat.

“I’m sorry, hon, I...” The weeping took his breath. “Oh, shit...”

I crept off to bed as he broke down crying.

I never fully understood his anger. Even now, as an adult, I have a hard time fathoming where his rage came from... though I *can* tell you I inherited his temper. It takes a lot to tick me off, but when somebody does: I’ve heard it ain’t pretty.

After the night of noise, we had more and more confrontations, and they made him cry every time.

One day, I came home from school and found mom warding off another verbal assault, busying herself in the kitchen as he lambasted her with criticism about something or another.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing, honey,” my mom gave me “the look.”

“No, uh-uh.” I shook my head.

I’d seen Dad shuffling off to the living room when I came in, but I was done. I tracked him down, hands on hips.

“Dad, what’s the problem?” I pinned him with my eyes.

His lips moved, but nothing came out of his mouth.

“Why are you yelling at mom? Again?!”

I wasn’t going to let him get away with berating my mother anymore.

“Do you have something to say?”

Again, his lips moved, but all that came out this time was a sob.

I have a thing about justice—if something is wrong, it must be rectified.

The next time he threw a tantrum, I shut it down and cornered my mom.

“Why do you let him get away with this? It’s ridiculous. Why don’t you just tell him off?”

“Sharon, honey, it’s just not worth the aggravation. I let him rant, he gets it out of his system, and life goes on.”

It frustrated me that I had to be the one to put a stop to the madness while she did nothing to stand up to him.

“Well, that’s insane. I can’t stand this anymore!”

Mom would make excuses. Dad had gotten rheumatic fever as a child, which damaged his heart. The doctors predicted he would not survive very far into adulthood—so his four sisters doted on him, spoiling him, she explained.

“Who cares? Why not break the dysfunctional pattern then? You don’t deserve to be treated this way!”

My dad did mellow over time, though I am not sure why. He eventually bought a piece of property in the heart of Ocean Beach that housed a lone cottage, and he used the rest of the lot to build a proper home for my mom and him so they’d have a little view of the beach. And that was where they lived until he died.

I inherited traits from each of my parents: I have my father’s big feelings and my mom’s work ethic. But there was a part of me that was always searching for something more...something different.

My little school by the sea went through sixth grade. So from seventh through 12th grades, I attended The Bishop’s School, a private school 30 minutes up the coast—and a world away, really—in La Jolla, California. Knowing what I know now, I can’t believe my mom pulled it off financially. Bishop’s was the kind of school attended by the superrich—kids of celebrities, socialites, business tycoons and wealthy families from Asia and Latin America. I begged my mom to let me go to Bishop’s because all of my elementary school friends were going. She didn’t bother consulting with my dad—she knew he’d be against it: Why did I have to run with this wealthy crowd? They were wonderful people, and he didn’t even know them, but that’s what he would have said. Maybe he was intimidated by their success and money.

Dad had never been involved in my school life or the deci-

sion-making about my education, which was not unusual for dads of that era. He left it all to my mom, which meant she could do what she wanted and make my dream of staying with my friends come true. Tuition was four grand a year in 1977. I could have gotten financial aid—my grades were good enough to get me a scholarship, and my parents didn't make a lot of money—but it didn't even occur to my mom to apply for it. She was making a good living—why would she ask for help? My family maintained a conservative attitude that such things were handouts, and we didn't take handouts. While she might have thought it ridiculous that I'd go to such an expensive school, she always bent over backward for me. She ended up taking out loans she never told my father about.

On top of paying my tuition, my mother had to find a way to get me there every day. It could take over a half an hour by car and then she would have to double back and drive nearly an hour to work, and there was no bus service. So we had to rely on the kindness of strangers.

The majority of my co-eds were from wealthy families—so wealthy that it was impossible not to see the chasm between our lifestyles. Even so, *no one* was riding to school in a Rolls-Royce...except for my friend Wendy. Wendy's mom owned the Rolls. When she drove it, she'd talk about how much she hated the car, inherited from her wealthy father-in-law. She called it The Pig. But they didn't get rid of it.

The Pig was midnight blue, and riding in it was like floating on a cloud. How do I know? Wendy's mom offered to drive me to school every day! Sitting in the back seat, I stared out the window at the world going by, using the little fold-down tray (just like I was on an airplane). It was made of gorgeous, burlwood— I can still see it in my mind's eye. Everything was made of wood or rich leather, beautifully crafted and polished. The seats were deep and cushy, and the car smelled like the luxury only money can buy.

SCALING WITH SOUL

Not only were people staring at us when we pulled up at school, they were staring at us throughout the entire drive. It was absurd...and a little embarrassing. Imagine you're in seventh grade and you're starting at a brand-new school. You already feel awkward—your hair's greasy, your skin's a mess, you feel ugly—and all you want to do is blend in, or disappear altogether. The last thing you want is to attract attention. Well, there's no escaping attention when you pull up to school in a Rolls every day. I didn't want people knowing I was from “the wrong side of the tracks.” Spending so much time alone as a kid because of my father's volatility, I was already socially awkward, and I didn't want to be pegged as a scholarship kid. But I didn't want to be known as the rich girl either.

Or did I?