

IT COULD ALWAYS BE
WORSE



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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Upbringing

When everything looks bleak in life, no words of affirmation suffice. On the contrary, words of blind optimism just add to the building frustration. When the storms in life lead us to the depths of despair, everything starts to feel meaningless. Our well-wishers try to alleviate this suffering by offering empty condolences: “Everything will be okay,” they say, “It will pass,” or yet the worst, “It could always be worse.”

Among all those hollow phrases, the last one feels the most infuriating. Anyone who has shared my feelings of grief would agree. There is nothing more frustrating than having your awful circumstances compared by merely a possibility. Yet, when we decide to break free from our despairing thoughts, we begin to see the wisdom behind these words. Ultimately, this realization enables us to see beyond ourselves - to empathize with those who have the short end of the stick.

Perhaps the true lesson lies not in simply comparing suffering, but in using it as a catalyst for empathy and compassion. Now I understand that my grief doesn't diminish the pain of others, and their struggles don't invalidate my own. Instead, acknowledging both realities allows me to hold space for my own healing. Having experienced both joy and sorrow throughout my life, I've come to cherish these profound words. So, join me on this journey, and explore the significance of these words together.

Imagine an impatient child complaining, only to be met with the words, “It could always be worse!” That was the reality of my childhood whenever something went wrong. It was my mother's catch phrase, but as right as she was, it always annoyed me. Whenever I got stuck in a

problem, that was the last thing I wanted to hear, but as it happens, these were the only comforting words my mother offered.

As a child, it was frustrating to hear these words. However, they often become a source of comfort for me as an adult. Recently, the one-year anniversary of my husband's death hit me hard. Sadness and depression washed over me, pulling me into a self-pitying spiral. "Why me?" I questioned, replaying the unfairness of it all.

Normally, I don't pay much attention to the news. But as I scrolled through headlines, the relentless images of death and destruction unfolding in Israel and Gaza stopped me cold. A jolt of perspective shot through me. "Snap out of it," I scolded myself. "At least you're not living in a war zone!"

It was a reminder of my mother's favorite saying: "It could always be worse."

Over the years, I've tried to internalize that wisdom, applying it to various life challenges. Sometimes, it brings solace, offering a grounding sense of reality. Other times, it feels dismissive, failing to truly acknowledge the depth of my pain.

Our childhood experiences prepare us for the unfortunate circumstances that life throws our way. Growing up in a small town in a middle-class family, my childhood was relatively uneventful. My childhood unfolded under the steady roof of a house my parents bought from a relative after settling in our town. The walls held the echoes of their sacrifices and hard work. Dad dedicated over 35 years to the same oil company. Mom, juggling part-time work to cover our orthodontic treatments, somehow found the time and skill to stitch magic into my early wardrobe. As I grew, I picked up her needle and thread. My parents' sweat and blood became the foundation for my self-reliance.

After taking up the skill of stitching, I was eager to venture forth. Therefore, I took another step towards my independence in my junior year. Stepping into the local bank for my junior year part-time job was like stepping into a new chapter of freedom. Trading homemade clothes for "readymade" ones felt like a badge of honor. Each purchase was a declaration of my progress. I was no longer "needing" my parents to foot the bill. The thrill of making my own way was intoxicating, even with the occasional hiccups along the road. Like the time I gasped in disbelief when discovering the chunk taken out of my paycheck for "taxes?!" - a financial reality I hadn't quite grasped.

My small-town life felt like a cocoon, but it stifled my burgeoning sense of independence. Two weeks after graduating high school, I spread my wings and flew. The local bank was unable to hire me full-time due to diversity requirements (no offense taken!). There was a bigger town a thirty-minute drive away, and it beckoned with the promise of opportunity.

Acing the interview at a larger bank there, I secured my first full-time job. The tiny apartment I found might not have been spacious, but it was mine. I was proud of my achievements, and I was eager to explore the world further. As I unpacked the boxes, Mary Tyler Moore's anthem echoed in my head: "I'm gonna make it on my own!"

While the apartment itself was small, the possibilities it represented stretched out before me like an endless horizon. However, the reality of financial limitations soon set in. About three months in, I encountered a woman navigating a divorce who needed temporary housing. Seeing an opportunity, I proposed sharing my one-bedroom. "You can use the sofa bed," I suggested, "It will be mutually beneficial."

To my surprise, she agreed. We weren't cramped for space, and she had an affordable haven during a challenging time.

A few months later, fate intervened again. I met a university student whose dorm wasn't quite ready. My apartment, once again, became a temporary solution. Suddenly, our cozy one-bedroom housed three people. The king-size bed became a shared space between two. It wasn't always spacious, but it was never dull.

Our unconventional living arrangement thrived until the watchful eyes of apartment management discovered the truth: three adults in a one-bedroom. Faced with the ultimatum of upgrading to a two-bedroom or eviction, we opted for the former as neither roommate was keen on parting ways. Finding a new apartment and another compatible soul wasn't difficult, and soon, we were settling into a two-bedroom with a fresh face joining our crew.

The transition was smooth. Every night, we would return from work and chill within our shared space. We mingled effortlessly and forged a deeper friendship. However, the increased rent, though split four ways, still left a dent in my finances. While my salary covered the essentials, it offered little room for saving. This reality cast a shadow on my long-held dream of moving to Houston, the vibrant city beckoning just 60 miles away. Without a financial cushion, that dream felt like a distant mirage, but I knew I had to progress one step at a time.

Just as we settled into our comfortable rhythm in the two-bedroom, the winds of change once again shifted the course of our living situation. The dorm of the university student was finally ready, so she embarked on a new chapter, leaving our apartment. Soon after, love blossomed for the divorcee, leading her to her happily ever after with a new partner. This heartwarming development, while bittersweet, left us - myself and the remaining roommate - in a two-bedroom we could barely afford. The financial strain became undeniable, urging me to seek a new solution. The time for another change had arrived.

Just as I felt at a loss, things took a turn once again. A call from my hometown bank, the one I'd worked for part-time, shattered the calm. Apparently, the diversity hiring requirement that had prevented them from offering me the job earlier had been fulfilled, and my door was now open. While the prospect of steady employment was enticing, the thought of returning to my hometown after all my efforts to escape felt like a bitter pill to swallow. But financial realities had a way of making choices stark. With heavy hearts, my parents and I discussed the situation, and I reluctantly accepted the position, knowing it meant moving back home.

Returning wasn't an ideal scenario. The embers of my Houston dream still glowed brightly. I knew this was a temporary step - just a means to an end. With renewed determination, I set my sights on saving every penny I could. My parents understood my aspirations and offered me their residence - a spacious bedroom above their garage. While they refused any rent, I insisted on contributing by taking on household chores and treating them to occasional dinners as a token of my gratitude.

For me, life hasn't been a neatly paved path but a winding road riddled with unexpected detours. Cramming four into a two-bedroom (three in a one-bedroom before that!), learning the hard way about car insurance costs - these weren't just bumps in the road, they were potholes that jolted me awake. But amidst the chaos, I learned. The cramped quarters fostered adaptability, the insurance fiasco drilled responsibility, and each misstep became a stepping stone. Looking back, these "rude awakenings" were blessings in disguise, harsh teachers molding me into a stronger, more self-aware individual. The journey may not always be smooth sailing, but I'm ready to navigate the currents because I know *it could always be worse*.



CHAPTER TWO

Roots and Family Traditions

They say life is a journey, but I prefer to think of it as a garden. Some of us are planted in fertile valleys, bathed in sunshine and fed by gentle streams. Others sprout on rugged cliffs, clinging to windswept rocks and nourished by resilience. It's where we begin, the soil we're born into, that shapes our roots. Family traditions hold within them the potential for vibrant blooms or resilient wildflowers. These are the stories whispered over kitchen tables, the laughter bubbling up from shared holidays, the values woven into the fabric of our being. All of these, big and small, contribute to the unique ecosystem of our lives, shaping our outlook, our values, and ultimately, the fruits we bear. While life throws its fair share of challenges, those sturdy roots, anchored in love and tradition, offer a grounding strength that helps us weather any storm.

When I look back on my past, I can clearly see how my life is hued by my family background. Raised in a devout Christian family nestled deep in the woods, my mother's roots were firmly anchored in faith, hard work, and a fierce love for family. They weren't wealthy, not by any measure, but theirs was a richness measured in a determination to make the most of what they had. There was a simplicity to their life, a resourcefulness born out of necessity, like my grandfather's matter-of-fact comment about indoor plumbing. "Well, we never knew any difference," he'd chuckle, "so when we had to use an outhouse, it wasn't as if we had a choice or knew there was anything better, like indoor plumbing." That spirit of contentment, of making the most of what you have, became a foundation of my own upbringing.

My grandfather wasn't a worrier. Not a wrinkle marred his brow, not even when faced with a warped piece of wood or a stubborn customer. He lived by the philosophy that a calloused hand and a clear head could solve most problems. A carpenter by trade, he built not only the house they lived in but a good chunk of the neighborhood.

However, his true masterpiece, I always believed, wasn't contained within four walls, but unfolded beneath the open sky. His garden was a riot of color and life, bursting with vegetables and fruits that nourished not just their family but the whole community. My grandparent's front yard teemed with red potatoes nestled beneath their foliage, emerald beans snaking up trellises, and plump peas bursting from their pods. At its heart, his pride and joy were watermelons, that he grew himself.

We visited my grandparents twice a year because it was an eight-hour drive that seemed an eternity to my childhood self. Yet, the anticipation only heightened the joy of arrival. The moment we arrived, Grandpa would be there, his booming laugh echoing across the yard before we even stepped out of the car. We'd settle on the porch swing, and he'd pull out a watermelon.

We'd debate, as tradition demanded, "Salt or no salt?" I craved the pure sweetness, while he'd sprinkle a dash.

We'd devour it, juice dripping down our chin. The most fun I had when we would engage in seed-spitting competition. He'd point out the farthest seed he'd spit, my competitiveness would be intensified, and I'd top that with another seed. Those competitions always brought a wave of laughter.

Grandpa's presence was full of love. His hugs were legendary, his arms enveloping me in his bear-like strength, a warmth that seeped deep into my bones. He was a very big man – at least 6'6" and close to 300 lbs. Whenever his booming laughter filled the air, contagious and carefree, I

felt my heart brim with joy. He wasn't a man of many words, but in those shared moments, amidst the sweet flesh of watermelons and the playful spit of seeds, he spoke volumes about the simple pleasures that nourished the soul.

My grandma was equally full of love, if not more. She was always in the kitchen, trying to feed anyone who walked through the door. No one ever walked through her door hungry. It was as if she possessed a sixth sense, knowing exactly who needed a warm meal. Whether it was a neighbor down on their luck or simply a friend dropping by for a chat, her table was always open, her heart even wider.

Her light and fluffy as clouds biscuits were legendary, but her fried catfish was whole another experience. Freshly caught by my grandfather from their own pond, it arrived on the table golden and crisp, the flaky flesh infused with the sweet, earthy aroma of the outdoors. Alongside it, a bunch of fresh vegetables: crisp green beans, sweet peas, and tiny red potatoes, added to the flavors of our delightful meals. Those afternoons spent gathered around the kitchen table, bellies satisfied and hearts filled, were not just meals but also moments of generosity and the pure happiness of sharing.

Beyond Grandma's kind hospitality, I hold onto the enduring wisdom of resourcefulness that she taught me. Waste was a foreign concept in her world. Leftovers were transformed into next day's stew and even the slightest scrap of bread found its way into a pudding or something. "Waste not, want not," she'd say, her voice firm but laced with kindness. It was a phrase that echoed through my childhood and resonated long after I left their home.

My grandmother's lessons didn't just echo in my own life; they resonated deeply with my mother as well. Years later, when she was in a nursing home and I'd stay at her house on weekends, I'd find her fridge dotted

with tiny containers, each holding a single spoonful of mashed potatoes, a scoop of rice, or a few nibbles of cooked vegetables. "Might be the perfect to go with the next meal," she'd explain.

I confess, I adopted the same habit. But unlike my grandmother, my memory proved less reliable. Sometimes, those little containers would languish in the fridge's back, forgotten until mold painted a grim picture on their once-promising contents. Guilt would gnaw at me as I "allowed" myself to toss them, and my grandma's voice would resound persistently in my mind, "Waste not, want not!" I hated wasting food, but hated food poisoning even more! So naturally, I had to learn to strike a balance, of course.

In today's world, the significance of some of these values seems to be fading. However, despite the whirlwind of modern life, where schedules overflow and screens flicker with distractions, the importance of preserving and passing down family traditions transcends the test of time. While circumstances may shift, the core values embedded in these rituals – like resilience, practicality, and the joy of shared experiences – remain timeless. In a world increasingly defined by fleeting trends, these traditions offer a grounding sense of belonging and connection, reminding us of who we are and where we come from. By weaving these cherished practices into our lives, we create shared memories that future generations can inherit and cherish.

After everything I've been through, I realize that my family's love and traditions were the seeds that sprouted into the person I am today. Their resourcefulness became my own, their laughter echoes in my heart, and their spirit of contentment guides me through challenges. From Grandpa's calloused hands and infectious laughter to Grandma's open table and unwavering wisdom, they nurtured not just my body but my soul. Though their physical presence may fade, the values they instilled bloom eternally within me.