

Chapter 1



“It all began fifty-five years ago with a smack to the butt. It is that smack that started me down a road of independence, strong will, and an unwavering love of humor. Laughter is my peace.

“I’ve been loved by the right people and crushed by the wrong. It is those lessons I’ve learned that made me who I am today.”

— From Theresa’s Journal

Each family in the neighborhood had its own signature beckoning method for calling their children for supper. Whether it was a harsh whistle from Mr. Caine or the chuck wagon triangle from Mrs. Yen, kids scattered through the streets, running to their perspective houses when their signature sound rang out. Ours was the cowbell. Whether you were down the street at a friend’s, doing homework, or hiding in your room to avoid your chores, when the loud clang of the bell plowed through the neighborhood, you had better be at the dinner table.

Gathering six kids, along with Mom and Dad, made for unpredictable situations with all of us assembled at the dinner

table. Inevitably, one of us was always late, which met the wrath of my mom. I remember one time I came home late and she stood on a step stool by the back door and jumped out at me like Cato from the *Pink Panther*, spanking me with a tennis shoe in front of everyone. Not one of them warned me but rather viewed it as pre-dinner entertainment.

Raised in a staunch Catholic family, my eldest brother led us in prayer to say grace, blessing the food as if he were speaking at an important public event. He always seemed to make it an elaborate recitation, as if auditioning for a part in a play. We held hands until he reached the finale, "Amen," and that is when the antics began.

There was no fooling around or excessive talking allowed. Instead, we exchanged private jokes between us with either eye contact or a swift kick under the table. Mom would glare at each of us, hoping to keep us all in line. Then, the same stern warning would emerge from her. "Eat, and stop all the tee-heeing," she insisted.

Each night at the dinner table seemed to provide us with a new tale. Whether it was vegetable night and my sister, Sophie, storing them in her cheeks like a chipmunk, waiting to make a break for the bathroom to either flush them down the toilet, which would, eventually, turn back up, or chucking them out my eldest sister's, Margaret's, window into the neighbor's trash cans. Either way, dinner was like an Olympic event.

Theresa, too young and too small to pull off any of the stunts, the older siblings always wangled her into taking the blame for them, and she welcomed the mission without hesitation. Over and over, they uttered the same words...

"Tell Dad you did it," they insisted. "He won't spank you."

The Other Side of Cancer

No fool to the capers of the eldest, Dad would spank everyone, no matter what. He figured if you did nothing wrong that time, you must have done something else of which he was unaware.

My brother, James, would raise his hand as if he were winning something. "I'll go first," he proclaimed.

Margaret, our mother hen, would cry a steady stream of tears for each of us as we took our punishment. Dad would hold us by one arm and give us a stern spanking. Our bodies, acting like pendulums, would swing back into his space, allowing him to give the second swat.

Night after night, Mom and Dad repeated the same dinner scenario, trying to get six, independent children to eat what they believed was a "wholesome meal" in front of them, only to have it met with rejection and rebellion.

Margaret would sit for what seemed like an eternity, picking her food apart, looking for pieces of fat she was sure were hiding on her plate. Often, we could hear her boyfriend in the far distance of the house, chucking rocks at her bedroom window so they could canoodle after curfew.

Sophie had an assigned place at the table next to my dad. I marveled at her conviction, holding her ground against eating anything resembling a vegetable. He would force her to eat each bite and watch her as she swallowed. Sophie spent many nights sitting on the hearth of the fireplace to finish her dinner, well after the rest of us finished eating. Dad would hold a vigil on a chair next to the fireplace, giving him a clear view of her, forcing her to eat each bite until her plate was clean.

"You're not leaving that fireplace until all that food is gone," he insisted.

Annette Leeds

Sophie never responded with words. Her stuffed cheeks and stern glare revealing her stubbornness spoke volumes. Hunger never seemed to win; she would rather starve than eat what was in front of her.

The night forged on for hours until she emptied her plate. I was never sure where the food went, but I know she didn't eat it. I thought if they ever sold that house someday, the new owners would, for sure, find lumps of petrified food stuffed in the fireplace chute.

In contrast to her siblings, Phyllis behaved most nights, until it came time to clean up. She was like an undercover spy. We were careful to place discarded food in our napkins, and she oversaw disposing of the evidence without notice.

I, the youngest child, sat close to Mom. Being the baby awarded me special treatment of not having to eat most of the concoctions laid out in front of us. The tense negotiation of "just take one more bite" occurred each evening. Mom would push a small portion toward me, motioning me to eat a little bit, and then taking the rest from my plate.

James, however, was our human garbage disposal, eating anything and everything, including our leftovers, without hesitation. Like a beanpole, he stood six feet tall and maybe weighed one hundred fifty pounds on a good day; always eating a constant stream of food to fill his never-ending hunger. He was an incredible athlete, consuming massive amounts of food most days as if he were heading to the electric chair.

Mom grocery shopped once a week. She would buy everything from breakfast to dinner, with some treats for the evening. On the day she would come home from the store, the milk would disappear and all the cookies would vanish,

The Other Side of Cancer

except for the crumbs, which one could access with a licked finger running across the bottom of the bag.

Mom had some doozy dinners that even made her and Dad cringe. Most notable was the lack of seasoning that might have provided some kind of taste. Often, she would cook the life out of most foods—meat, in particular. She would panfry and cook meat until a hard, charcoal crust covered the once-pink surface. On occasion, she would break out some Belgium family tradition, resembling something you would feed prisoners of war. Masters at the craft of disguising their emotions, Mom and Dad played off the dreadful dishes. I remember an eggplant incident. She insisted the slimy, bitter, lifeless brown gush that sat on each of our plates was healthy for us. We all stared at her, waiting for *her* to take the first bite. She slipped a small piece off her fork and into her mouth. Then, without hesitation, she pushed herself back from the table.

“You don’t have to eat it,” she insisted. “It must be spoiled.”

We glanced at each other with smirks, excited she spared us the dreadful creation. That night, we had Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Our favorite meal, which came around occasionally, was Italian food. Dad is Sicilian and from a very large Italian family. In his house, spaghetti sauce from a jar was a sin. Therefore, my grandmother taught Mom how to make the best sauce and meatballs you could ever imagine, surely able to compete with anyone’s *Nona*. Those nights were probably the only time we were “dysfunctional” at the dinner table, with all of us squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder, passing food around in rapid succession as if it were our last meal.

I remember one night that gave us years of overwhelming laughter. Theresa was always the most innocent at dinner, yet

quite clumsy, which usually involved her knocking over her glass of milk, forcing everyone to frantically push away from our places, hoping not to get wet.

That evening, as usual, the plate of meatballs at the table had been wiped clean. Dad asked Theresa to get him another meatball from the large brewing pot in the kitchen. Without hesitation, she jumped from her chair and headed to the kitchen. She poked her head back into the dining room and uttered, “Extra sauce, too?”

He nodded.

A short time later, she emerged, bobbling the plate in one hand and holding a napkin in the other. Stepping down into the dining room, she tripped. All I heard behind me was, “Whoops!” A sound like hail hitting a window came next. We all turned to view the saucy meatball sailing through the air as it bounced harshly against the popcorn ceiling, dropping to the floor, and continuing its journey across the carpet, coming to an abrupt halt—sauceless and resting next to Dad’s foot. Silence hovered, as we were unsure what was to come next. As the unexpected grin came over his face, we knew his guard was down, something that didn’t happen often. We all chuckled to ourselves, as she gingerly reached for the meatball.

“Let me get you another one,” she demanded. “This one has lint on it.”

As time passed, attendance at dinner began to diminish. All the funny stories were now just memories we spoke about on special occasions or at gatherings. The eldest siblings had moved on with their now-adult lives, whether it was off to the service for my brother or getting married for my sisters, making Theresa and me the last to remain at home with Mom and Dad.

The Other Side of Cancer

Eventually, the time came for Theresa to move on, too. At a young age, she seemed far more driven than the rest of us kids. She used to read all sorts of books for hours at a time. I am not a person who likes to read, so it seemed more like a punishment than a pleasure.

Being close in age, we shared even more great times the other kids weren't around for—the secret stories and inside jokes that only the two of us understood. When we got together as a family, we would play games. Of course, she and I were partners, always beating our elders without much effort.

“You two are such cheaters,” they balked.

That was the furthest from the truth; we just had a bond none of them experienced. Almost like we could read each other's minds or something.

Like with her reading, she was dedicated and ambitious. She moved out at seventeen years old and into her own apartment, never looking back. Even though I felt abandoned when she left me, I knew she was destined for great things. It showed in every ounce of her being. The determination she projected was something I have never seen from any other person in my life. As she got older, her fortitude never wavered.