

# **Grandma Cheryl's Diaries**

**Cheryl Williams Card**

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Published 2015.

Printed in the United States of America.

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ISBN 978-1-937862-97-8

Library of Congress Control Number 2015943737

Cover design by Amy Nottingham-Martin.

This book was published by BookCrafters, Parker, Colorado.  
[bookcrafters@comcast.net](mailto:bookcrafters@comcast.net)

This book may be ordered from  
[www.bookcrafters.net](http://www.bookcrafters.net)  
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## DEDICATION

*To my adult children and  
to my grandchildren:  
I will always believe in you  
and hold you in my heart.*

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*I am ashes where I once was fire.*  
- Lord Byron

## Chapter 1

# Overview

I remember years ago watching *The Waltons* on television and admiring John Boy's writing. I remember him saying it is presumptuous to be a writer. You presume that someone will want to read your stories. Well, here you are; welcome. One of my reasons for writing this is to try to justify my life, something I have done daily for as long as I can remember. Another is to bring to light and offer for viewing the damage of incest. The third reason is to tell stories from my life that I hope will be interesting, amusing, or important, some for history, some for profundity. Here we go.

I was valedictorian of my high school class, I went to Cornell University on a full merit scholarship, and I earned a Master's from The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. In 1970 I married a young man who planned to become an attorney whom I met at Cornell. I worked while he finished law school and did a clerkship. Then we had two children and I was pregnant with a third. Sounds like a pretty good start on life, right?

Unfortunately, my maternal grandfather sexually molested and abused me beginning in 1949 and continuing to about 1960. I had one sibling, a younger sister with Down Syndrome. It seemed she got all but the perverse attention. I complied without complaint with my grandfather's will for fear of losing my place in the family. I dissociated from those experiences, buried the memories in my subconscious, until 1987 – when I was 40. I survived, part of me

thrived, for years, until it all blew up. Worse, I felt as if the experience was repeated in my third marriage. About the time I was doing well again, I got wiped out. I can see now how many aspects of my life were determined or affected by the soul-murdering experience of incest. And yet, I had a fairly satisfactory life for the first 40 - 50 or so years. I give myself credit for that. And my parents did give me a lot to be thankful for, even if they didn't keep me safe in a very basic way.

Now I'm 68. I have been married and divorced three times. All of my children are well-educated and have made good lives for themselves. I, however, am withdrawn, overweight, lacking the social energy I used to have, lacking much energy at all for that matter. I still have intelligence about things that interest me (which include things that interest my children and grandchildren). The past means more to me than the present or the future. My children will, alas, remember me more as I am now, than as the driven and productive (and slender) woman I used to be. I did a lot of things right and I had a lot of courage. I have a great deal of empathy, I have a gift for nurturing growing spirits, and I welcomed work. I want them to know that—even though now it seems I do very little and am ready to be done with this life.

I am old enough now that while I hopelessly take an occasional stab at justifying my existence, I can much more easily justify my death, and that has become my preoccupation, since the failure of my third marriage and certainly since the death of my mother. Interestingly, I no longer think of suicide because I am severely depressed and I despair, as was the case for many years after the third marriage. Now I consider suicide to be just an option if my life just isn't worth it, if I run out of money, or possibly if the owner of my apartment kicks me out. It is an option, that gives me some ultimate control, an escape, or paradoxically, hope.

From *Visions in Death*, by Nora Roberts, writing as J.D. Robb:

*"Are you ashamed of it?" asked the doctor.*

*Shame? Eve wasn't sure. Was it shame she felt or anger or some nasty brew of both?*

*"You've got to get over it, sometime," Eve replied.*

*"Why?" asked the doctor.*

*Stunned, Eve stared back. "Well, because..."*

*"Overcoming and getting over are two very different things," the doctor continued. "Yes, you should strive to overcome. You've done that. But no, you're not required to get over it, being abused and raped and tortured. You ask too much of yourself."*

*Maybe, Lord, I could show someone else  
What I've been through myself,  
On my way...*  
—Kris Kristofferson

## Chapter 2

# The Beginning

I was born in 1947, after my dad got home from war in the Pacific—a true Baby Boomer. For better or for worse, I was the first born. My parents had been married in 1939. My aunt, a nurse who was present at my birth, told me years later that my father had said the day of my birth was the day he first really loved my mother. Better late than never, I guess. He had a thing about the one who got away.

So I suppose I had things pretty good for a couple years, until April 1949 when my sister was born. I didn't know about sibling rivalry, didn't know I would have an annoying sister who would steal some of the attention. Little did I know how especially annoying this sibling would be. And I certainly didn't know about the mind- and soul-rending things that would begin happening in my little world.

I stayed with my maternal grandparents while my mother was in the hospital giving birth to my sister. While I was there, age two and about three months, they, or at least my grandfather, began sexually abusing me. I expected that when my mother came home from the hospital, things would be back to normal and I would have her attention back. But no, there was all this strange attention given to my sister.

I became the good little helper, fear hidden deep, to keep my place in the family. Lord, what a price I paid for that place,

succumbing to my grandfather's evil attentions for so many years. I even helped take care of my sister. My sister was "Mongoloid," and my father spent the first years of her life driving from home to Buffalo, to Boston, to Philadelphia and back, trying to fix her. I suppose I stayed with my grandparents again. Her heart murmur couldn't be fixed at that time, and her mental shortcomings could never be fixed. My father was a world-class builder and fixer; this was his cross to bear. My mother was a world-class caretaker. My sister was also her cross to bear and she bore it gracefully. They kept her at home for all of her 45 years.

I wasn't born with any physical or mental problems. My acquired problems weren't so conspicuous. They didn't prevent me from living a fairly satisfactory and normal-looking life, at least for the first 40-45 years. And then it all blew up. I'd hidden inside all the things that made me feel dirty and disgusting, and hate myself. My inner child was furious and lost and terrified and in pain, and had been that way for 40 years. It all heaved up and I did my best to deal with it.

In some of the chapters that follow, you will see an extra heading "Cheryl Ann Speaks" and much of the content will be in italics. Early in my therapy, I started sessions by going to a time during the preceding week when I felt more emotion than the event seemed to warrant. My therapist would tell me to feel the feelings I felt then, and then to bring up an image of myself as a child.

I would describe the image and what followed with my adult words but the voice was that of me as a child. After the session I would write down what I had said, what I remembered. That is what you will find in italics headed "Cheryl Ann Speaks."

# *Cheryl Ann Speaks*

## Chapter 3 Lace Curtains

**I** was two years old and I was staying at my grandparents' home while my mother was in the hospital giving birth to my sister. I was walking through my grandmother's dining room which also included an area that served as a hall between the kitchen and living room. I remember that I was looking down at my feet, feeling a primitive pleasure in the rhythm of walking, rather carefree and pleased with myself, like a happy little kid.

But now, for the first time in my memory, this picture moves on. I stay still and look up, with apprehension, at the lace curtains and the dining room windows. The front door is nearby.

My next picture is in that hallway. It seems dark now. I can see the refrigerator that was oddly placed in a corner. I am lying down. My view alternates between being in my little body and looking down from above, as they say people do when they die.

In my body I am twisted or curled up. I am utterly terrified. My face is contorted. I feel some kind of powerful, unpleasant sensation in my chest – perhaps difficulty breathing, perhaps nausea. The difficult breathing gets worse. I'm choking.

Looming over me I see two figures. One, it gradually becomes clear, is my grandfather. The other is smaller. It is wearing a dark coat or jacket and some sort of hat. Part of me believes it's my grandmother. Part of me refuses to believe that and sees a smaller male friend of my grandfather, identity unknown. Part of me believes it's some villain I created to absolve my grandfather.

*I'm sobbing. What's happening? Why? Why me? My body writhes as I relieve the experience and my sobs become choking.*

*This is wrong. Something is bad. I am bad. I have to do what they tell me. I love them. I hate this. I have visions of faces. I see my grandfather's forearms, sleeves rolled up. I see the dark sleeves of the other person. I see what I now know is a squirting penis that seemed then as big as a chimney. I choke. I can't breathe. My throat is full of mucous now as it was full of semen then.*

*Help me, somebody. Help me. I don't know what to do. They're doing something to my bottom. I hurt. I go away. I don't know what this is about. I'm lost. I'm alone. Do I live now? Do I die? What has happened to my world? I hurt. This is wrong... wrong... Help me. I don't know what to do. Please, Mommy, what have I done? I don't know what I've done that's not right. This isn't right. I hurt and I'm afraid. Why is this happening to me?*

*I mustn't tell. I have to deal with this by myself. I crawl away like a little animal. I huddle by that refrigerator. I have to keep all this inside. I mustn't let it show. I must pretend it never happened. I wrap myself in my little skirt as best I can. I don't cry now. I have to behave. But I'm so scared. I don't know what the world is about anymore. I don't know what to do! Oh, God, oh God! I don't know what to do.*

When my daughter was a senior in high school, and soon to be voted Best Thespian for the year, she came to me and asked if they could use one of my journal writings for a play they were putting together called "She Says." I thought it was motivated by a shortage of guys. Not so, my daughter says. In her words:

As I look back from where I am now, I think "She Says" was one of the most profound and perspective-changing experiences I had in high school, although I don't know that I knew that then, so thanks for including it, and for finding a place for it in your story ...

"She Says" was the first play of my senior year and the choice had little to do, I think, with there not being any guys; in fact, I think there was some initial resentment from some of the guys that they could not perform onstage that time around. (They did step up and were an enthusiastic backstage crew.) While it's true that there were often more girls than guys, especially when it came to the musical, I

think what became the driving force behind the piece was to give voices to women's stories and recognize the diversity in perspectives in those stories: across race, socio-economic status, age, and era. (The cast came from all walks of life: purposefully so.) So, I am belaboring a minor point, especially in terms of your story, but it seems to undercut the sense of the project to make the reference frame about men. Also, while there was Emily Dickinson, I don't think Sylvia Plath was in there—we did study them together in English senior year though: Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou—and we closed with Aretha Franklin's "Respect").

So, thank you for your story and I am so glad that including your writing in "She Says" felt important even though it was scary. Telling disturbing stories takes courage, especially those stories that people sweep under the rug and resist engaging with.

I was a little concerned about my daughter acting out "Lace Curtains" at her young age, and even for moments, taking on my victimhood. But she wanted to do it. I have always known her strength. I attended one performance and you could have heard a pin drop. She was huddled on the floor, under a spotlight. A very good narrator set the scene from a lectern. I am still grateful to my daughter for helping others to understand a little bit better, and for accepting this part of me. Today she is a mother of two, creates artful things, and teaches literary subjects at the same university where her husband teaches physics. She is more sensitive to social issues than I am, has a better mind, and "has the best heart."

# *Cheryl Ann Speaks*

## Chapter 4

### The Birdie in the Couch

**D**addy came to visit me while I was at my grandparents' house while Mommy was in the hospital having my sister.

I was sitting on the couch at my grandparents' house. When I bounced on the couch, it squeaked and we said there was a birdie in it. I remember half believing there really was a bird. I'd been waiting to show Daddy!

Then Daddy is gone and the image moves to a neighboring room, my grandparents' bedroom, then to the room next to it that is my bedroom.

There are a big bed and a metal crib in that room. I'm not sure which I sleep in now. I have flashes of being in both. For sure I am on the floor by the crib, hanging onto it, cowering, wanting to get in there to get back to being a smaller baby and more safe.

The figure of my grandfather looms again in the dark room. My face is wrenched with tears, so contorted I could hardly describe the image. My mind shouts, "No, no more. Not again! No! I haven't got over the other time..."

My terror and confusion are all-encompassing. In my mind it seems like the world has blown up. I feel hot. Things are dark and yet it looks like flame. I have a vague but powerful image of a tangle, of bedding and of my little body. I feel so little. I WAS so little. I keep trying to curl up.

I don't know what happened that time. I can't access that and I don't want to. I am overpowered by my sense of fear and hopelessness and helplessness. It fuses with pain. I can't separate pain from helplessness. I

*can't separate pain from all the rest, from the utter confusion. I have great difficulty breathing and I feel enormous tension in my belly. I don't know what to do. This isn't the world I've known. What is going to happen to me?*

*Then he was gone. I hide under the bedding. I'm hot and it's dark but it feels a little safer. I curl up. I cry and cry and cry. Am I going to die now? Where is my mother? Why doesn't she help me?*

## Chapter 5

# 2 Mill Street

**W**hen they were first married, in 1939, Ethel Nenno and Vernon Card lived in a rooming house in Olean, New York, about seventy miles south of Buffalo. The couple had met at their common place of employment, a plumbing and heating wholesaler. Ethel served as a secretary and Vernon as a salesman.

They set about building a house in Westons Mills, part-way between Olean and the Pennsylvania border. Once they had bought their lot, Vern, and Ethel's father, Frank, put up a garage where they stored tools and material and where Ethel fixed beans and franks for supper on a hot plate and then napped on a cot during the evening while the men worked. Vernon had become a member of the Westons Mills Volunteer Fire Department and Ethel of the Firemen's Auxiliary. This was a major community service provider and social organization. For a few beers, Vern used to say, the firemen helped dig the foundation for the house at 2 Mill Street. Now that I think about it, that address might have been 2 Chestnut Street; Mill Street dead-ended on the corner of Chestnut Street which was parallel to the Allegheny River.

Ethel lived in the house with their two cats after Vernon was drafted in 1941. By then she was working for the Ration Board. She weathered a flood of the nearby Allegheny River in 1942, fleeing

uphill to her parents' home in Knapp Creek with the two cats. Vernon returned from the Pacific in 1945, having contracted the parasitic disease schistosomiasis in the Philippines. He recovered. Vern didn't want his house to be flooded again, so he bought a lot up the street that was bigger and higher, and set about building the house where I grew up and where my mother lived for over 50 years, 7 Mill Street.

My father died on Father's Day in 1993; he was 82. My sister died on Mother's Day in 1994; she was 45. And my mother died on Father's Day in 2004; she was 86. My mother remarried in June 1995, while she and her new beau, both 78, were attending my older son's graduation from high school.

I love my parents, even though I haven't entirely forgiven them. I can appreciate the good and colorful things they gave me, especially land memory, and a practical and cozy, if not entirely safe, home. They were both sensible, practical, responsible, resourceful, frugal, good citizens. I can set aside and understand to some extent what they let happen to me. I hold them in my heart and think of them daily. Still, it was their job to keep me safe. What happened to me was not my fault.