Walking Away from Hate

Our Journey through Extremism

by
Jeanette and Lauren Manning

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Authors' Note

Most of the names of those who've passed through our lives before, during and after Lauren's involvement in extremism have been changed to protect privacy. Lauren's late friends Tim and Jan, the staff of Life After Hate, my husband Paul and Paul Fromm are notable exceptions. Each person's memories of this period may differ from ours; this is our memoir and these are our recollections. Our intention is not to vilify or cast blame but rather to show their place within, and impact on, Lauren's journey.

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Introduction

JEANETTE

I didn't set out to raise a skinhead. It just happened.

Okay, it didn't *just* happen. Like most parents, my husband and I had the best of intentions, planning to instill good manners, respect, decency and kindness into both our children. I thought we'd done a fairly good job. But when your last thought before going to sleep is "Will my daughter commit an act of violence against another human being?" you know you've missed something along the way.

There was a time when I worried Lauren—right-wing extremist, skinhead, white supremacist—was capable of violence and racism, the kind that garners front-page headlines, the opening story on the evening news. The sobbing parent crying, "She was a good girl. How could this happen?" could very well have been me.

I knew absolutely nothing about extremism or white supremacy when Lauren first dragged us on this journey. In 2008 I couldn't find articles, groups or forums to help me understand what she was involved in, either in print or online. It wasn't as simple as typing "hate" into a search engine; I really had no clue what I was researching, what keywords to use nor what questions to ask. The police couldn't help either. One constable I contacted told me, "We don't monitor any of the groups operating in and around Toronto."

"Back then, white power groups were probably perceived as a bunch of pissed-off kids," Lauren explains. "Nowadays, it's much

worse. Extremists are something to be afraid of." According to Dr. Barbara Perry, the Director of the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism, there were approximately one hundred right-wing extremist groups in Canada in 2015; as of 2019 that number had risen to nearly three hundred. Six Canadian groups and/or individuals involved in organized hate, including a one-time Toronto mayoral candidate, were banned from Facebook and Instagram early in 2019, and in June of that year the neo-Nazi group Blood & Honour and its military wing, Combat 18, were added to Canada's terror list. The federal government has partnered with non-profit organizations and other countries to identify and remove hate speech from the internet, chiefly under the guidance of Tech Against Terrorism, a UN-based group supporting the tech industry's battle against extremism. Unfortunately, most white supremacists now blend into the mainstream, their Doc Martens, shaved heads and violent rallies replaced by business suits, professional haircuts and carefully coded content.

What I've learned since Lauren's descent into extremism is that recruiting is often done online. Hate music like National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM), Aryan Black Metal and Neo-Nazi Black Metal offers a potent mixture of anger, aggression and hatred while celebrating violence. Extremists also use video games such as World of Warcraft, various social media platforms and dedicated websites to lure new members. One of the best known is Stormfront, an online blog posting "issues of interest to Canadian White Nationalists" since 1995. Forced to shut down briefly in 2017, it soon resumed its promotion of anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial and Islamaphobia.

Recruiters seek out those who will fall under their spell, targeting kids who are bullied, marginalized or from abusive homes. They'll redirect their rage into racism, then use violence to release the resulting hatred. Tony McAleer, author of *The Cure for Hate: A Former White Supremacist's Journey from Violent Extremism to Radical Compassion* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), maintains that childhood

trauma is what drives recruitment, not ideology. Another former recruiter, Christian Picciolini, recounts his own experiences in his book, *White American Youth: My Descent into America's Most Violent Hate Movement—And How I Got Out* (Hachette Books, 2017):

> "It took little skill to spot a teenager with a shitty home life. Somebody without many friends, looking confused or lonely, angry or broke. We would strike up a conversation, find out what they were feeling bad about, and move in with the pitch." (p. 109)

Like alcohol, drug or gambling addiction, hatred is a symptom of a deeper problem, not the problem itself.

But there are positive stories as well. Derek Black, son of the founder of Stormfront and godson of David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, renounced hate in May 2019 and is now committed to being a catalyst for change. He joins Picciolini, McAleer and others who work to provide the compassion and empathy white power members need to walk away from hate. Life After Hate forums and outreach specialists, including Lauren, support "formers"—people who've left or are leaving extremist groups—and their families. Their website, lifeafterhate.org, features stories of those who've successfully exited white power.

This is the story of Lauren's journey from ordinary kid into the world of hate and white supremacist ideology, but it's also the story of a newly-widowed single parent who had to learn the most difficult lesson of all—how to keep the door open.

Writing this book has been a blessing for our family. Lauren and I, having been brutally honest with one another, are closer than we've ever been and she and her brother now coexist as normal siblings, talking easily without the anger and strain that once dominated our lives. It's our hope that, in sharing our story, parents will recognize parts of it as their own, and will be able to steer their children away from extremism before it's too late.

LAUREN

On August 13, 2017, I was tearing down scaffolding at a residential construction site in Toronto and trading dirty jokes with my coworkers when one of them began talking about the previous day's news story.

"You guys hear what happened in Charlottesville? A white supremacist rammed his car into a group of counter-protesters. What a fucking psychopath, man."

I paused for a second, my head and neck prickling, before replying, "I haven't heard anything about it till now."

"Yeah, there was this white supremacist rally in Virginia and a bunch of counter-protesters showed up yelling, 'This shit isn't cool.' Then a skinhead killed one of the female protesters."

I stayed silent, recalling the life I'd walked away from in 2012. I lead a decent, normal life now. I've been working in construction—scaffolding—for several years, earning enough to own a new pickup truck, and now enjoy friendships with people from all walks of life. Quite a contrast from the life I once led—sporting hate-themed tattoos and Doc Marten boots with telltale white laces, living between the streets and youth shelters, my tough image hiding how miserable I really felt. I'm grateful not to have to face constant judgment for poor decisions I made years before. I'm accepted at face value as the person I am today. No one need know about my past unless I choose to tell them. On rare occasions when I need to prove to myself how far I've come, I can call up my skinhead past, examine it in all its tarnished glory and mentally shove it back into the closet.

Later that night, I was upset to read that thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer had been killed during the car attack, while others were severely wounded. Twenty-year-old James Alex Fields Jr. had been arrested and charged with murder and malicious wounding. All the while, white supremacists circulated videos of the incident on the internet, defending him or denying his actions altogether.

I'd been living under a rock for the last few years, not paying attention to current events, but I couldn't pretend I was shocked to hear of the Charlottesville tragedy. Back when I'd advocated for the division of humanity, I'd known many lost and angry souls in search of a life purpose. Their discussions had revolved around violence and what they considered cleverly crafted methods of returning society to an all-white population. Back then, I believed them. I was one of them, totally immersing myself in their culture while desensitizing myself to my emotions. I'd taken their ideology as gospel and would have gladly died for it.

Now I see the danger, not only from the hatred of white supremacy but from the backlash against it in communities across the world. What scares me is knowing first-hand that it only takes one individual to ruin the lives of many.

I logged onto Facebook after reading of Heather's death and sure enough, several friends had posted memes encouraging people to "punch Nazis in the face." The most obvious read, "Nazis are bad." Well, no kidding! What I'd submerged myself in *was* bad. But a punch to the face, angry shouts or acts of aggression wouldn't have changed my mind back then. They would have added fuel to my anger.

I wasted five years of my life preaching white power rhetoric, searching for significance at the expense of innocent people. I could make excuses for myself—I never killed or maliciously wounded anyone—but the truth is, I contributed to and influenced events like this. I'd taken part in senseless actions, burying my humanity deep while living a life of hatred.

Once upon a time, I'd helped further the white supremacist movement.

CHAPTER ONE

A Model Family

LAUREN

I grew up in Whitby, Ontario—we called it "White-by"—a mid-sized town on the shore of Lake Ontario. My dad was a police officer with the Toronto Police Service, a Detective Constable who worked in the Youth Bureau, an investigative branch dealing with at-risk youth and sexual assault against children. He was meticulous in gathering evidence, always wanting to bring the bad guys to justice and caring for the victims like they were his own kids.

My mom was fourteen years younger than my dad. He was already thirty-nine when they married and desperately wanted kids. I was born in 1990, two years after their wedding; twenty months later, my brother joined us. My parents always said they felt fortunate to be able to have my mom stay home with us until I was in school. She worked part-time in a clothing store until I was nine, then returned to land surveying, her occupation before I was born.

We spent much of our childhood isolated from the neighbourhood kids, who might have been a bad influence. We followed a strict routine—wake up, go to school, come home, do homework, go to bed—until eventually my parents reluctantly allowed us to go to the park for an hour after school. When I came home five minutes late once, my dad lost his mind. "I thought you'd been kidnapped! Why are you so late?" I tried not to laugh; it never occurred to me his concern stemmed from his work.

I'd always felt off, like I wasn't comfortable in my own skin, but I had several friends in elementary school. In Grade Four, I made

friends with Aaron, an awkward, sensitive and slightly goofy boy who was being bullied. As we became closer, our moms started scheduling playdates for us. It felt good to have his friendship, to know I could give him a sense of belonging, and I missed him when I transferred to a new school closer to home at the end of that school year. We didn't reconnect again until high school and, in those intervening years, I'm sure he endured a lot more bullying.

There were many mornings when I'd wake up wanting to be someone else. More than anything, I wanted to make friends, be the cool kid. I noticed that class clowns had the most friends, so I figured getting into trouble would get me there. I got my chance one day when my brother and I had to spend an hour after school at our neighbour's daycare until my mom got home from work. I was twelve and this was another house with rules I didn't want to follow, so I wrote, "shit, fuck, damn and hell" on the chalkboard, then said to the younger kids, "Now, class, today we're going to learn how to spell 'fuck.'" When our neighbour saw what I'd done, she lost it. "Wipe that off the board now," she yelled. I'd gained the attention I'd been looking for.

Music has always been a big part of my life. When I took an interest in the clarinet in elementary school, my parents bought me a used instrument and enrolled me in private lessons so I could learn to play it properly. From grades six to eight I played in the school band. Later I auditioned for and was accepted into the Durham Youth Orchestra and won first place in the Oshawa–Whitby Kiwanis Music Festival, with my grandmother, Nana, playing piano accompaniment.

I loved playing for my uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents and welcomed their praise, but I also felt pressured to do better. "We want to see you in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra someday," my grandparents would say, their voices filled with too much optimism. The better I did, the more they expected. "You could be doing better," Poppa, my grandfather, would say. At twelve, the pressure seemed to

come from everyone around me, and I hoped that being proficient at clarinet would keep me in their good books as my marks at school were up and down.

The summer I turned fourteen, my parents enrolled me in the School of Rock, a week-long camp run through the local college and led by musician Dan Clancy of Lighthouse fame. It was aimed at kids ages ten to fifteen who had an interest in songwriting and playing music.

By then I was tired of playing classical music and wanted to try something different but I knew on that first day that I didn't fit in. Most of the other kids played guitar, bass or drums and dressed the rock 'n' roll bit—ripped jeans, band T-shirts, edgy, dyed hair. I wore track pants and baggy T-shirts, my hair pin-straight and short like a boy's.

Hanna, who already had three years of drum lessons behind her, ate lunch with me that day. She asked if I played anything and, looking anywhere but at her, I said, "I've been playing clarinet for a couple of years."

She laughed. "That isn't going to do you any good here. But good to know."

I was given the choice of learning bass or singing in my assigned band. I couldn't do either, so I chose bass. Our band decided to cover the Blink 182 song, "What's My Age Again?" We practised it for the whole week, until none of us ever wanted to hear it again, so that we could perform it for parents and families on the final day. My dad couldn't get the time off work but my mom came to watch, without my grandparents.

"Why aren't Nana and Poppa here? They come to see me play the clarinet."

"They just don't like this type of music," Mom said.

I didn't believe that was the only reason. I figured it had more to do with me personally, that somehow I'd disappointed them.

The experience at School of Rock made me want to switch from clarinet to bass. My parents agreed, buying me a left-handed Squire Precision bass and enrolling me in private lessons just before the start of my first semester of high school. I hoped to make new friends, maybe even start a band, but none of that happened. The girls at my school were thin and dressed in the latest fashions from stores that didn't cater to my size twelve shape, so I wore baggy boy's cargo pants and over-sized tees. The few pounds I'd gained over the summer had cost me most of my fragile self-esteem; I felt ugly and fat and just wanted to hide. My slipping grades sank even further and I started shutting down emotionally.

That was when I discovered the punk rock and metal scenes. The energy, anger and aggression behind the instrumentals resonated with me and the lyrics assured me that outcasts like me mattered, that I could create my own meaning from their songs. This music became my safe haven. I could put on my headphones and block out whatever was going on in my own head.

The first time I heard Nokturnal Mortum, I'd been randomly googling bands and downloaded one of their songs because I liked their Facebook page. They played NSBM music—National Socialist Black Metal—and their growling lyrics, although hard to understand and not that interesting, drew me in. The darker sound was different from what I'd heard elsewhere. Because it was out of the norm, just like I was, it held a certain fascination. This was definitely not mainstream stuff. Most of the songs spoke of "taking back the land that is rightfully ours" and their loud, aggressive I-want-to-beat-someone-up sound left me feeling almost euphoric. Filled with messages of white unity, the lyrics took second place to the music.

I struggled academically, not being one of those students who could retain information from a book. With every report card, there were phone calls to my parents: "Lauren's doing well in art, music and physical education but . . . " My parents would say to me, "Perhaps

you could put as much effort into math and English as you do the fun subjects." It was hard to communicate the reasons behind my struggles, so I started throwing my hands up and saying, "I'm stupid! That's why I'm not doing well in school." They all tried to convince me that wasn't so, but by then I'd allowed so much negative talk into my own head that no one could convince me otherwise.

Things got worse when my grandfather, for whom I'd always been special because I was the first grandchild, began ranting on about higher education. British-born, physically fit, strict and opinionated, Poppa hadn't gone past Grade Ten because of World War II. His elder son had gone to university, my mom had gone to college to study architectural drafting and her other brother had "made something of himself" without any post-secondary education. Yet when I said I thought I'd like to go to college instead of university, his reply was, "You're nothing if you don't go to university."

I had already failed to meet his musical and academic expectations; sports was another disappointment. The year I turned fourteen, in addition to switching from clarinet to bass, I switched from soccer to baseball. Poppa had paid for and attended every single soccer game, as it was his favourite sport, but he wanted nothing to do with baseball. I felt like he'd tossed me aside, like I'd done something wrong. Then he began shaming me for carrying a bit more weight than most other girls my age: "You're not going to get a boyfriend if you look like that" and "We should keep the food away from you." My appearance and ability to get a boyfriend seemed to be all that mattered.

Poppa disliked all visible minorities, Jews and gays, and had no problem sharing his views with my brother and me. As I got older, I realized I didn't dare come forward with my own secret—that I was confused about my own sexuality. It didn't matter what my parents said afterwards, how they tried to downplay his remarks, his repeated rejection of gays made me feel angry and completely alone.

My ideas didn't seem to matter. I once told him Goth kids were

good people and that some of my friends dressed that way just to express themselves. His response was, "No, they aren't good people. They're a bad influence on you." In spite of what my parents said—"Ignore him. He's a bitter old man who'll never change"—it pissed me off. It was like I had no voice.

That same year my mother's family was suddenly torn apart by jealousy and bitterness. I didn't understand much of it but, when Poppa shut all of us out, I felt I was somehow to blame. I was confused and hurt. Nana, a quiet lady who shared my love of music and crafts, visited when she could but that's when it really sunk in that I was no longer someone my grandfather cared about—I'd failed academically, musically, athletically and socially. Family is supposed to love you unconditionally, but suddenly that was not the case.

JEANETTE

I can't count the times I wished for the help of Mary Poppins. During those first weeks at home with my newborn daughter, I struggled to fall in love with her, to feel that rush of emotion portrayed in TV commercials and soap operas. What kind of mother had to work to feel that way about her child? I asked myself constantly. One who was overwhelmed and unsure of herself, that's who. When Lauren was about six weeks old, I called my mother in tears. "She won't stop crying. I'm going to kill her!"

She laughed softly and said, "Put her in her crib for five minutes. Let her cry. And go make yourself a cup of tea."

Sure enough, Lauren settled down and so did I. Shortly afterwards, I experienced that golden moment—I reached into her crib, her shining eyes laughed up at me and I fell head over heels. That was one of the best moments of my life.

My parents were almost as ecstatic at Lauren's birth as her father and

I were. Other than Paul, who proudly carried her around the hospital corridors for the first forty-five minutes of her life, they were the first to see her, to hold her, to bond with her. Living only twenty minutes away, they were the first to volunteer for babysitting or to drop around for a cup of tea. My mom knitted dozens of sweaters, hats and mittens, sewed quilts and crocheted blankets and crib afghans for both kids, while my father, a carpenter by trade, built rocking horses, a cradle and slider chairs for Lauren and her brother. Lauren was the first grandchild, and her brother the only grandson.

Our kids were far down the chain of succession in Paul's family, being eighth and ninth out of twelve grandchildren. His parents were lovely, very gracious towards me and excited when we told them we were expecting, but when Lauren was born they visited for only a short time so my parents could spend time with their first grandchild. I'd hoped they'd come more often as the months wore on but there always seemed to be another grandchild who needed their attention. Paul's mom once said to me, "Your mother does such beautiful knitted work. Mine could never be that good." Try as I might, I couldn't convince her that what was important to us was the love behind the gifts. Eventually, I began to see why Paul kept his family at a distance. As the eldest of six, his mother had leaned on him until he left home in his late teens. He'd always felt responsible for his siblings and his role as adviser and problem-solver inhibited rather than encouraged closeness.

I have a photo of twenty-month-old Lauren, wearing yellow footie pajamas, seated beside her dad on the couch, sharing his chocolate ice cream. I loved watching their routine—one spoonful for dad, one for Lauren—waiting for Paul to double-dip, the gleam of laughter lighting his eyes when Lauren realized she'd been duped. Her knowing look, as if she were aware of his scheme the whole time, speaks volumes about the intelligence she possessed, without hinting at the darker side that would later emerge.

As the children grew, Paul and I began referring to them as "the twins." They were of similar height, were interested in the same toys and TV shows and, when together, behaved as if they were twins. For months we'd sail along in our bubble of joy. Then Lauren would become defiant, challenging and difficult, throwing tantrums and taking advantage of her brother.

"What if I took away your favourite toy? How would you feel?" I'd ask.

"You can't take my toy!"

When a friend was introduced into the mix, Lauren often treated her brother badly, playing only with the friend or outright ignoring him. She seemed to lack the ability to share his feelings, his sadness or hurt, her reply always combative, always about her. Having been spanked as a child, I knew how wrong it was but when Lauren really challenged me, I have to admit I resorted to a few carefully placed smacks on her bum.

Paul laughingly referred to me as the General because, due to his work shifts, I was the primary disciplinarian. He would scold the children on occasion but, because he and Lauren had a wonderfully strong bond, he'd go a little softer on her than I would. I'm sure he felt I was softer on our son for the same reason.

When Lauren was in Grade One, the school offered a parenting course, which I eagerly took part in. At that point, I'd run out of ways to discipline her. She didn't watch much TV so taking it away wasn't a punishment. Yelling or trying to reason with her didn't work—she'd just throw a tantrum. So, when they showed us how to use time-outs, I thought I'd found the holy grail. The only problem was Lauren liked being in her room, so I had to find a place where I could watch her and still have it seem like a punishment.

We were strict parents who tried to instill good manners in our kids, expecting them to be polite to other kids and adults alike, share toys with each other and behave when out in public. One of my

admonitions was, "If you're going to misbehave, make sure it's at home. No temper tantrums in stores, no bad behaviour at friends' houses."

I was mortified when my neighbour told me what Lauren had said and done in front of her daycare kids. We thought it was a bonus not to have to put the children into regular daycare where they might pick up bad habits; we wanted our kids to be people we liked, people we wanted to spend time with, not the mouthy, over-indulged brats we'd run into at the park or mall. Now it was my child who'd misbehaved. "I'm ashamed to have to face our neighbours now. Do you realize how difficult you've made things for us? How am I going to find suitable after-school care if she lets us go?" I could not get Lauren to admit she'd done it. She claimed I was siding with them, that she was the victim, that one of the boys had written those words on the board and blamed her.

I knew from Lauren's defensiveness that she was lying, but I was stuck between what I knew and what I could prove, as I had been with the countless incidents that had come before. Lauren had perfected her ability to lie, along with an outstanding talent for exaggeration and an it-doesn't-matter attitude, in elementary school. I would arrive to see her standing off by herself her, face carefully blank, watching the other kids run around her like she wasn't even there. A visit to her Grade Two class had alerted me to a teacher who barely acknowledged Lauren's presence and the favouritism shown to the popular kids whose parents were the cool ones. It didn't seem to matter how often I volunteered for class trips or craft days—my child was destined to be an outsider because I wasn't one of the "it" parents, the well-dressed moms who gave extravagant gifts at Christmas and year's end, the beautiful ones who chatted easily with teachers about things other than their kids. My heart broke for her.

I often had to remind myself—and Lauren—that while I might not like her behaviour, I still loved her. I'd had a lifetime to learn

the difference and wasn't going to let my children grow up feeling unloved, as I had. My own father hadn't been what I needed and there was no way I was going to parent his way. I knew how deeply it hurt to think your parent, the one person who was supposed to love you no matter what, didn't give a damn about you, or worse, wished you'd never been born.

In my family, my father's rules were law. He made it clear he hadn't wanted me when I was four years old and playfully hid in my closet when he came to say goodbye. Rather than gamely looking for me, he muttered something under his breath and walked out and, from then on, ignored me, looking through me as if I weren't even there. I was the only one of his three children to consistently challenge him, which seemed to give him further licence to treat me with contempt. He put conditions on his family and friends—more than one of his buddies had been cut from his life after disagreeing with him—and I endured many years of his silent treatments. In fact, I'd failed to meet every one of my father's standards, except for providing him with grandchildren.

Music was a big part of our family life. Lauren's dad would play the oldies at home or in the car; my own car was stuffed with CDs and cassette tapes, both mine and those Lauren and her brother enjoyed. Music, for both my kids, provided the same cushion for life's triumphs and tragedies as it had for me—Leo Sayer and Air Supply for broken hearts, Streetheart and AC/DC blasting from car speakers on a Friday night cruise through Oshawa, and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," which said everything I'd felt as a gawky teen.

We were thrilled when Lauren asked for a clarinet, excited as she went from learning notes to playing songs, and happy to have her play for my parents and our families. The Youth Orchestra was a way to introduce her to the importance of playing with others and the Kiwanis Festival was a chance for her to play in front of an audience, to show how far she'd come. We were proud of her but didn't

push, making sure to tell her, "When you stop enjoying it, we'll stop the lessons."

I saw Rock Camp as an opportunity for Lauren to be with kids her own age, to see how music was made and how much work went into her favourite songs. I'd hoped she'd fit in, that the kids would be less preppy than her schoolmates and more accepting. Her dad and I were proud of her for trying something new but I quickly realized she felt like an outsider. We happily agreed to buy her a used bass and lessons afterwards, but nothing could lessen her disappointment when her grandparents failed to show for the final performance. I tried to explain that they had very little patience for anything they didn't like, but Lauren wouldn't accept that it wasn't somehow her fault. She began pulling further into her shell, worrying me more.

From the outside, we were a model family. Behind the scenes, my father peppered us, as he had my entire life, with his opinions and prejudices, freely sharing his intense dislike for Blacks, "Pakis" and immigrants, despite the fact that he himself had emigrated from England in 1954, leaving behind a sister who'd married a Black man and borne four mixed-race children. We'd hear how "goddamned Blacks should go back where they came from" and "immigrants come here wanting handouts. Nobody gave me handouts when I came over."

"How can he hate Blacks but enjoy drinking with Uncle Roy?" I asked my mom time and again.

I had learned at an early age to keep my opinions to myself, and neither Paul nor I challenged him directly out of respect. Instead, we tried to reinforce *our* opinions, *our* views and *our* rules as the only ones Lauren and her brother should pay attention to. After every visit to my parents' house, we'd talk to the kids about what had been said. Then we'd debrief and reassure them they didn't have to do as Poppa wanted. They could do anything, be anything they wanted to be, our love for them wouldn't change.

"Poppa said I have to go to university," Lauren would say.

"Poppa wants everyone to make him look good by doing what he tells them," I'd reply. "You do what you want. If you want to work, that's fine. If you want to go to college, that's good too. As long as you're happy with your life, that's all that matters. It's not up to you to make Poppa happy."

The family split had nothing to do with Lauren. I offered to coordinate a family photo session to celebrate my parents' fiftieth anniversary. My oldest brother, who'd earned a master's degree and whose career had taken him into the hallowed halls of the Ontario government, and his equally accomplished wife, already past child-bearing age when they married, were jealous of the perceived attention we received because we had produced the grandchildren. (My other brother and his wife had two girls but they lived on the west coast and were consequently not as involved.) My sister-in-law believed I was prohibiting their dog from being included in the photo; she sent my mother a letter saying so and listing a number of other grievances. My father decided to side with his son and cut us from his life. Suddenly my children, my husband and I were *persona non grata* at my parents' house. I was hurt that my mother hadn't stood up for me, but she was a loving, quiet, subservient woman who, having been raised by a strict mother who'd treated her as a housemaid, wasn't practised in giving voice to her own opinions. She didn't want to lose either of her children, couldn't deal with the sudden onslaught of malice erupting from all sides and, sadly, had no power to change my father's mind.

Once I worked through the emotional side of things with a great therapist, I was able to see the favour my brother had done us. Perhaps it was too late, but at last Lauren and her brother were free of the stranglehold my father had placed on them. Instead, we were free to enjoy my mom's love, laugh at her crazy sense of humour and experience the profound enjoyment she felt when she was with us. Always

my go-to person when Paul wasn't home and parenting didn't go according to plan, it was a joy to see her blossom while interacting with her grandchildren, to watch my kids grow in her love.

The other cloud over our family life, one that we didn't share with the children, was Paul's myelodysplasia, which was diagnosed when Lauren was only seven. For years he'd blamed being tired on shift work but after his mother's death in 1997 he had a complete physical. We were both shocked to find out he had an incurable illness that could lead to leukemia and shorten his lifespan.