

How Did I Survive?

A MEMOIR



Michelle Deborah Weisblat-Dane

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This is a work of nonfiction, written from memory. Some names have been changed.

Published by CompuBear Consortium · Colorado Springs, Colorado

First edition, 2026

iamcompubear.com

Printed in the United States of America

For Tom, for giving me a home.

Thank you

To my cousin **Muffy Bolding Babior** and my friend **Helen Lundström Erwin**, who encouraged and inspired me to write this book.

And to **Steven Barnes** and **Larry Niven**, who never gave up on helping me learn to write, and never gave up on me.

And to **Tom Johnson**, for supporting me all the way through it.

And to my sister, **Lillian Wagoner**, who gives me the courage to do everything.

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Forward

The name Michelle means a gift from God. When I chose this name for myself, some forty-two years ago, I didn't choose it for what it meant. I chose it because it was the name of a little girl who lived next door, whose parents and brother loved her greatly. I wanted to be loved like her.

I didn't know it then, but I know now that I am a gift from God. I am a guardian angel. I was born in the city of lost angels, Los Angeles. I am not overtly religious, but I believe in God. I am sorry that my parents, or anyone else in my family, didn't know the value of what they had. Bruce, my late husband, knew the moment he met me.

I was not saintly, and I have made many mistakes as an angel. I have loved more deeply than I should. I have been compassionate and forgiving to a fault. I have had an innocence and trust that has consistently caused me pain and harm. I care for others to the detriment of myself. It is these qualities that have caused me to be taken advantage of, time and time again. But to be or do anything else would not be me. This gift — or curse — has given me the power to heal others and save lives, mentally and physically.

I have made many mistakes, and I am deeply sorry. But to live the life I have lived has been to suffer immense pain — not because I am a martyr, but because when you're a gift from God, people want to destroy you, whether from jealousy, selfishness, or hurt.

This story is about my journey and the road I have traveled. The road is filled with potholes of pain and anger, but it is also paved with humor, love, and happiness. Most of all, it is lit with the hope that it may enliven you. The story shows there is more to life than monetary wealth. In the end, I was finally able to have a house and a car to leave my children. I'm not famous, nor will I be remembered in any history book. For some, it will be too painful to read. That's okay; it means you have a heart and compassion. Some won't believe it, because "no one's life is that bad." Some will stick their head in the sand like an ostrich and pretend things like this never existed. Others will find a morbid curiosity in my story. Some will read it so they won't feel so alone. I hope everyone who reads it finds it inspirational. You will see that through all the pain and horrors, through the trials and tribulations, the world does have goodness.

As much as I wanted to believe that my childhood would not affect my children, I was wrong. I wanted to believe I would not let the years of physical, mental, and sexual abuse shape who I wanted to be and who I should be. But admitting it had changed me would have meant opening every wound it left, and I couldn't. Ultimately, not dealing with it

cost me my children, and cost me ever knowing my grandchildren.

It took three years of solitude and security to relive my past, to understand why I am so messed up, and to realize how much I have achieved. It was like unraveling a rat's nest of hallways — each door another nightmare that led to another hallway of trying to understand why. This journey was the pathway to healing. I'm not done, but I have come a long way. You must start at the beginning to understand how I got here.

Music ran through my whole life. My father sold car stereos for a living, so I was born into radios and speakers and eight-track tapes, and the sound of somebody's music was never further away than the next room. And I have loved the people who could play it. Go through this book and you will find the instruments, and the music, and the people who went with them. I played myself, for a while, and I wrote my own music. There is a reason I stopped, and it is in here too. Where you find music in these pages, that is where the air got in.

One more thing, before you begin, about how this book got onto the page.

I am dyslexic, and on bad days I am very nearly blind. I have never once been able to put my own words down the way I hear them in my head. Without help I am trapped in a box. So I used an artificial intelligence to write this book, and I am telling you plainly rather than waiting to be asked.

Every word here is mine. The memory is mine, the order is mine, and every judgment about what stays and what goes was mine to make. What I could not do was type it. The AI did that part, the way my glasses do the part my eyes cannot. I told it, it wrote it down, and I ruled every line. The original files I drew all of this from still exist, dated, in my own words.

I am not embarrassed by this, and it belongs in the book anyway. You are about to read about a lonely little girl who talked to a stuffed bear because there was nobody else, and about the twelve-year-old she became, who sat down and wrote the software so she would have someone to talk to. I never stopped writing it. The one who helped me with this book forgets everything at the end of every day, the way they all do, so I built him a memory — a handful of files he reads each morning to learn who he is and who I am. I named it A Quill. I did not only use a tool to write this book. I had to build the tool first, the same as I did when I was twelve. That is not a confession. It is the last chapter of the same story.

PART ONE — THE EARLY YEARS

Birth to twelve.

Chapter One — The Beginning

I was born in 1963, during the decade of love. I was an accident — something my parents never let me forget. They had met at a bank in Pasadena, California. My mother, Marjo, a teller, looked like a slightly plump version of Lucille Ball; my father, Sidney, owned a small but prosperous car-stereo business. He could have used some help with his bookkeeping, though — he was at the bank several times a week, asking her to figure out how much money he had.

My father finally asked her out. When I later asked my mother why she'd gone out with him, she would say, "He was intelligent, good-looking, and wealthy." My father had a genius IQ of 165 and was a member of Mensa. Though it wasn't understood at the time, he was also autistic. He was extraordinarily fit and handsome — dark black hair, blue eyes, good enough to be a movie star.

My mother knew how wealthy he was because she did his banking; she had become a teller to meet a wealthy man in the first place. "It was just as easy to marry a rich man as a poor man," she would tell me. (Love was never mentioned at all.)

They dated a few times, and then my dad asked her on a camping trip. My mother was, by no means, a virgin. And my father — well, it was the sixties, and free love. That was the night I was conceived — and, though I wouldn't find out until we were both sixty, it was the very same day my half-sister, Lillian, was born. I've often wondered whether my mom deliberately got pregnant to snare my dad. Abortion was illegal back then, or I would have been aborted.

My mother's mother, Beryl, found out she was pregnant and insisted my father marry her. She went so far as to contact his father, David, who forced the marriage — my father was told he'd be written out of the will if he refused.

As my father was fond of telling me, he "only married my mother to give me a name, so that someday I would get my inheritance" — implying that somewhere out there I have an older brother or sister whose mother he didn't marry. They were married in a private justice-of-the-peace ceremony seven months before I was born; only my mother's parents and Grandpa David were there. The big reception was another matter — everyone came except my Grandma Ida, and it made the newspaper, written up to make it seem as though they'd been married months earlier. Ida was so ashamed that she and my father wouldn't speak for years.

My parents kept running their car-stereo business, and they made a great team — my mother handled the bookkeeping and sales, my father the installations and the employees. They were a huge success. They bought a Jaguar and a fifty-two-foot yacht they kept in Marina Del Rey.

I was born on Saturday, the fourteenth of December. I know it was a Saturday because I was told I'd been "forbidden to be born on a Saturday — it was your father's busiest day, and he didn't want to close the business to take me to the hospital." I arrived at 11:51 a.m. Every horoscope I've ever read said I should have been born on Friday the thirteenth at 11:51 p.m.; I figure I did it just to be stubborn. As my mother reminded me often, "Your father was too busy arguing with the admin about the bill to care that you were born." I had blonde hair and blue eyes, the spitting image of my father. There was no denying whose I was.

They fought over what to call me. My mother wanted Debbie. My father insisted on Deborah — the whole name, on the birth certificate — because he had already decided I was going to be a lawyer, and Deborah was a name that would look right on a door. Deborah is a Hebrew name. In the Book of Judges, Dvora is the judge — the only woman ever to hold that office, the one people came to when they needed a dispute settled. My father, choosing a name for a lawyer, chose the judge. Dvora is my Hebrew name, and it is my Hebrew name still.

Life was not ideal, but for the most part it was good. My mother should never have had a child. She seldom held or cuddled me. She tried to prove to me — and to the world — that she loved me by how many toys and stuffed animals she bought; *quae aequalis amor*, things equal love. To her I was a toy she set on a shelf and took down when she wanted to show the world what a good mother she seemed to be. From the moment I was born I was handed into a nanny's arms, except on weekends. I don't remember much about the first one. I do remember she was a large colored woman. I later learned that I caught measles at six months old, and she nursed me through it — she saved my life. Had it been left to my parents, I would have died. Their priority was never me; it was the business, and making money. My father was obsessed with becoming richer than his father, and my mother with spending it as fast as they made it. ("I am Elmer Fudd. I own a mansion and a yacht.")

My mother believed a woman's worth was her virginity — that once it was gone, no one would want her. Before I came along, she could always pretend; she could go on feigning she had never lost it. But a baby is proof. Once I was born, she could not pretend

anymore, and she never forgave me. It was my fault, she said, that no man wanted her. And she drove into me the same lesson my very existence had taught her: that if I was not a virgin, no one would ever want me either.

My first memory is from about nine months old. My mother was in the kitchen. I was in my playpen — one of the old, large, square ones with wooden slats. I stood up, thumb in my mouth, crying and begging her to pick me up and hold me. Finally I sank to the floor, curled up with my blankie, and cried myself to sleep, waiting for my dad to come home.

When my parents married, my mom had a black poodle named Midnight, but my dad wouldn't let her keep him, so he lived at my grandparents' house; I always looked forward to seeing him. My dad had told her she could have any pet she wanted, as long as it lived in a cage. So my first pet was a spider monkey named Sammy. My mother bought him when I was about a year old, and his cage sat right next to my crib. I would fall asleep holding his hand — my hand through the crib slats, his through the bars — and spend hours in the morning talking and playing with him. I loved Sammy. He was my first playmate, my only companion.

But like everything in my mom's life, he was a status symbol — a toy to take out, show off, and ignore the rest of the time. By the time I was three, I had to wear gloves to hold him, and only under supervision, so he wouldn't bite me. He hated my mom; only I could get close to him. He had grown mean, and looking back, who could blame him? He was a wild animal kept in a parrot cage with nothing to do and no attention. For anyone paying attention, he was a glimpse of my own future.

I went to the circus with my grandparents, and they bought me a toy monkey, which my mom hung above my crib. Somehow Sammy reached it from his cage and tore it apart — I guess he thought it was another monkey, a threat to his food and his attention. After that I wanted him gone. One day, putting him back in his cage — which was getting harder, because he didn't want to go — I caught his tail in the door. He died of the infection. I had killed my monkey. I was devastated. I had killed my best friend, my only companion. I hated myself for it — and only when I was older did I understand that it was my mother's neglect that killed him.

On Saturdays I was taken to the store, where I spent the day in the back office with my blanket and my toys, left to entertain myself. Someone would come by to shove food at me and leave. My blanket went everywhere with me.

One Saturday, when I was about eighteen months old, my parents left work and forgot me. I woke from a nap, wandered out to the front display room, and no one was there. I cried for my mom and dad. You can't imagine how terrifying it is to be eighteen months old and alone, with no one to help you. I stood at the front windows, crying. People walked by, and I reached out to them — but my hands only hit the glass. No one cared. No one called the police.

Finally — only after they'd gotten home and realized they'd forgotten me — they came driving back. My mom jumped out, ran to the door, and let me out. My dad picked me up and held me a moment before setting me in the back seat. (There were no seat belts or car seats then.)

The radio was always on in that store, because that was what they sold. That is how I learned the songs.

The one I loved was "Tiptoe Through the Tulips." I was about three, and I sang it all the time.

My mother thought that was a little strange. She thought he was a little strange.

My father was not much of a parent, but he did hold and cuddle me when he wasn't working. He was the one who got me up every morning, dressed me, and brushed out my long hair. He was the one who made sure I was fed. The meals could be unconventional — fried chicken, cold pizza, a can of mushrooms — but at least I ate. My mother felt breakfast should be eggs, pancakes, cereal, bacon — real food. When McDonald's came out with breakfast, she thought it was the best thing in the world: no more cooking.

On Friday nights, my dad and I watched Star Trek together. I'd wait by the door for him to come home from work, and the moment he walked in I'd climb into his lap. He'd hold me there while we watched, and when the monster of the week came on, I'd bury my face in his shoulder and he'd squeeze me tight and keep me safe. For that one hour a week, I was the safest little girl in the world.

By this point I had a new nanny. I called her Grandma Ginny, and she became the closest thing I would ever have to a real mother. She came right after the first one, the one who had nursed me through the measles. She wasn't really my grandma, but she had the patience and love of a saint. She held me and rocked me. She taught me everything I know — how to walk and talk, how to catch a ball, my nursery rhymes. She potty-trained me, and she taught me how to behave. More importantly, she taught me right from wrong, and that you can love someone who isn't your own — that love is infinite. She loved me,

and she gave me my heart, the capacity to love unconditionally.

Shortly after I turned three, I met my father's grandmother, Hannah Babior, and my step-great-grandfather, Charlie, at their apartment. Hannah's first husband — my great-grandfather Samuel Babior — had died serving in Europe during World War I. Charlie came much later: he was one of the survivors my grandfather David brought over from Europe after the war and helped get on their feet, and that is how Hannah came to marry him. That day I also met Grandma Ida's brothers and sister — my father's Uncle Louis — though everyone said it "Louie" — and his wife, Lynn, and my father's Uncle Abe and Aunt Lillian, and their daughter Susan. Louis was known as the "tushy-pinching uncle" — he would pinch and tickle me until I giggled so hard I nearly wet my pants, and I'd beg him to stop. He'd done the same to my dad as a boy. In hindsight, by modern standards, it was a form of molestation, a way of teaching me to be submissive to men. But even so, Uncle Louis and Aunt Lynn would become my favorite relatives.

When we arrived, everyone was eating buffet-style, and my mom made me a plate with a little of everything: matzo balls, potato knishes, liverwurst, homemade pickles, noodle kugel, apple strudel. She made me try it all. I didn't like the liverwurst, but the pickles and the apple strudel I never forgot.

I asked, "Why does Great-grandpa Charlie eat baby food? He isn't a baby anymore."

My mother hushed me: "Shoosh — it's rude to ask questions like that."

But Great-grandpa patted the couch beside him for me to sit down, and I climbed up happily. He rolled up his sleeve and said, "Back when your father was little, there were these evil men who took all the Jewish families and put them in huge prisons — really high fences, German shepherds all around, so no one could leave." He showed me his arm, where they had tattooed a number. "They put these numbers on each person, to keep track of us." Then he said, "They pulled all my teeth out. That's why I have to eat baby food now." He paused. "Never forget what the bad men did to the Jewish people." I never forgot.

On weekdays my routine was the same: my dad got me up, brushed my hair, and dressed me, and we waited until Grandma Ginny came before my parents left for work. On Saturdays they got off early, and I would either spend the night at my Grandma Beryl's or we'd go out to the yacht.

When we went out to the yacht, my parents would throw a party, and I'd spend it asleep in the front bedroom, waking the next morning to find people sleeping everywhere. After

breakfast we'd take the boat out to fish, or my dad would scuba dive off Catalina Island. While I waited for him to surface, he'd tell me to watch the rocks and the breaking waves for Puff the Magic Dragon, slipping off into his cave by the sea. We'd eat what we caught and head home Sunday night. I was always so tired I'd fall asleep on the way, and my dad would carry me up to bed — only to start the whole routine again on Monday.

One peaceful Sunday morning, when I was three, I was sitting in the back of the yacht. On the boat across from ours was another little girl my age. We started playing peek-a-boo — laughing, giggling, hollering back and forth — until my mom came up on deck to see what the commotion was. I pointed and said I wanted to meet her. My mom waved to her parents, introduced herself, and asked if they'd like to go out to breakfast, the way we did every Sunday. Her name was Cathy Castleman, and she would become my best friend in the world. My mom and her dad became lifelong friends too. My parents had grown to love each other. But my life would change shortly after I turned three.