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When I was 5 and in the second grade, rather abruptly my mother quit her editing job at *The New Yorker* so she could stay home and raise my two brothers and me. My father's career in television was taking off, so apparently we didn't really need the money her job was bringing in.

I was really happy about this. It meant that my older brother Marco would no longer have to walk me to school and pick me up to take me home. He was a tyrant ... well, OK, aren't all brothers? His friends would meet us halfway and then I had to deal with not just one obnoxious 8-year-old boy, but three of them.

So you see, I was expecting my life to change for the better. Once I heard the news, I pranced into Marco's room, put my hands on my hips and stuck my tongue out. "I am so glad you and your mean friends won't be walking me to school anymore."

As I turned around to leave his room, he said, "Did you really think mom quit her job so she can walk your sorry butt to school? She isn't even thinking about you. She did that so she can drink in peace."

"Drink what?"

I think Marco realized he'd let his anger get the better of him because he stopped himself from elaborating. "Mom quit her job so she can stay home and finish her novel."

This I understood. Our mother talked a lot about her unrealized dreams and the book that sat there untouched for weeks and months at a time. My father told her it was the least he could do with all she puts up with in the marriage.

Whatever that meant. I would, of course, find out what that meant when I was older.

And just like every day from the time I started going to school, the next day my older brother got me out of bed, made my breakfast, reminded me to brush my teeth, made my lunch and helped me pick out my clothes. As we headed out the door, I stared back at the closed door to my mother's room. "Mom was up late writing again?"

"Yes, and she'll be up late again tomorrow night and the next night. I'll try to be nicer to you on our walk to school."

And he kept his promise.

More and more it was Marco who took care of me. He saw to it my homework was completed and done correctly. He made sure my bed was made in the morning and that I had picked out my clothes for school and had packed my knapsack before we left for school. He made breakfast for my other brother, John, and me every morning and he walked me to school until I was old enough to take myself to school. I was in the seventh grade when this happened and I am not so

sure it was because I was old enough. I think, looking back, it was because my school was in an entirely different direction from his and by walking me to school, it meant he would have been late.

We never talked about why our mother wasn't awake to take care of all these things that defaulted to him. John just withdrew. He went to a different school, he had his own set of friends and he was always prone to bottling things up ... like our mother.

'She Drinks a Lot of Candy'

I am not sure why I was slow to figure out what my older brother had known all along. My mother had missed a parent/teacher conference that had been on the calendar in the kitchen for weeks. The next day I was given a note in a sealed envelope to give to my mother.

She opened it and became enraged. I never liked it when she was angry. I got scared and Marco knew exactly how to pacify her.

In the middle of her rant, he came with a glass that had ice and some tan-colored liquid. She took a sip, then two and it was gone. "Thank you. I feel better."

"Do you want another, Mommy?" Marco asked her.

"Yes, that would be nice. It will help me get dinner started. Later I will write a note to Sarah's schoolteacher to smooth things over."

Later that night I went into Marco's room and asked him why she had missed the appointment and why she got so angry after she read the note. He closed the door and sat me down. He said I was now old enough to know the truth about mom.

Most of what he said made only a bit of sense to me. But I understood enough. Dad wasn't always working late when he didn't come and the liquid in mom's glass was something called bourbon. To me it smelled horrible and to her, as Marco put it, "it was sweeter than any Halloween and Easter candy combined."

"So Mommy drinks candy when she is mad?" I asked him.

"Mom drinks candy when she's happy, she's mad, she's stressed out, when Dad screws up, when someone looks at her funny, when she misses an appointment, when she forgets something, when she wakes up with a headache from drinking too much candy the night before and when she has had too much candy to write her book," Marco explained to me.

"Does she drink a lot of candy?" I asked.

"Yes, she drinks a lot of candy. At least four or five glasses before you get home from school, a couple while she's making dinner and probably more after we go to bed," he told me.

“Is that why you take care of me?” I asked him.

“Yes, and it’s why I’ll continue taking care of you until you’re old enough to take care of yourself. I suggest you start working toward that pretty soon because I won’t always be around. I will go away to college and John is already starting to become interested in candy, too. We can’t rely on him.”

And then it all made sense to me. Once I did realize what was going on, it consumed me. Guilt for not seeing it sooner, anger at my father for allowing it to happen, for having other girlfriends and for not being there for her or us for the majority of my childhood. The belief that I could save her is what dominated my thoughts 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

I graduated from high school when I was 16, just shy of 17. Marco and John had already moved out of the house and were on their own. John was drinking heavily and making a full-time career out of it and Marco was in college.

My godmother and aunt urged me to defer college for a year and immediately start seeing a therapist. It was their belief I could get clarity around the things I had learned to suppress. I think they were also concerned I would do as my mother was doing and as John had by this point already started doing.

There are some apples that *should* fall far from their trees and passing on a legacy of drinking is one of them.

I talked with my therapist, Barbara, about getting my mother into alcoholism treatment. She warned me that if my mother had invested years in her [alcoholism](#), she wouldn’t give it up just because it bothered me.

I had to try, I told Barbara. Barbara made me promise that if I really planned on an [intervention](#), that I do it with her. She said that it wouldn’t work any other way because she had done many interventions in the past. She warned me that it would surely backfire and have unintended consequences.

I am extremely hard-headed. That night after therapy I called my father and told him we had to talk. I told him that his behavior was making Mom drink and I was tired of it. He asked me if I saw her drunk and out of control and when he asked the question, I realized I had never actually seen her drunk. Could Marco have been wrong? I never witnessed her being sloppy, slurring her words or off-balance and I never smelled alcohol on her breath. I had to admit that no, I couldn’t say for certain that she had a drinking problem. She was certainly nothing like our neighbor downstairs who was quite clearly an alcoholic.

“I’ll talk with her,” my father said before he hung up.

Less than an hour later my mother opened my door without asking. In her hand was a garbage bag full of something. As she lifted the bag, it “clanked.”

“Do you know what this is?” I hadn’t.

“It’s empty bottles of booze. Count them. I poured all the alcohol out of each of them. Your father said you told him I’m a drunk. Do you think I’m a drunk?” She paused. “Don’t answer that. If I were, I wouldn’t have had a problem pouring everything down the toilet. Count them.” As she held out the bag for me, her eyes were filled with rage. Her face pooled with sweat and her hands trembled.

I counted 20 bottles, maybe more, I am not sure. “Mom, I think you have a problem with alcohol. Why don’t I help you find a clinic like Uncle William went to?”

“Are you crazy? I don’t have a problem. You have the problem.”

“Me? What problem do I have?” I asked her.

“You went behind my back and talked with *my* husband about something that doesn’t concern you. You interfered with my marriage! I want you out of the house before the day is over tomorrow.”

Well that hadn’t gone so well, had it? I did as she ordered. I moved out and lived with a woman four floors down from ours. I explained what had happened and she said she’d known my mother was an alcoholic for years. She told me there was nothing I could do until she was ready to quit.

How long was I supposed to wait for that to happen? I tried several more times after that to get my mother into therapy and alcohol rehab. Each time was more explosive than the last. I learned to live with having things thrown at me, being slapped and screamed at. Unless I was willing to drag her physically, there was no way I was getting her into rehab.

As it turns out, it never happened. My mother drank until she died at 61 of an aneurysm. Like my other brother, John, who continues to drink to this day, she was a master at withdrawal and secretive behavior. She was quite functional once I was kicked out of the house. She tried to maintain this image that she was fine. But I knew she wasn’t.

Over the years I had learned to stay in therapy and attend Al-Anon meetings. I think I know why my mother drank ... I think. My best bet is that she was stuck in a marriage with someone who gave her the material things she needed but because he had multiple affairs, she was depressed. Like many in her generation, my mother put up with a lot of things I know I wouldn’t. I am not entirely sure about this but I think she had a very unfulfilled life. She had incredible potential as a writer but my guess is that she was depressed and she drank to mask the pain.

I wish I could have done more for her but if there is one thing I have learned it is that people dig their heels in. If she had been willing to look at the root cause — her marriage and my father’s treatment of her — I think she would have had a fighting chance. But she was committed to him.

And so it remains the biggest failure of my life, well, next to being completely unsuccessful at getting my brother John into alcohol rehab. Ironically and quite tragically my older brother,

Marco, who was my main caregiver growing up, became an alcoholic too in his 20s. I have often wondered whether the pressure of having to be a parent at such a young age got to him.

Both are so protective of their drinking that they cut off contact with me several years ago.

I wish this story had a better ending. Not all stories are full of butterflies and rainbows though, and perhaps the only silver lining is that despite the model shown to me by my mother and two brothers, I didn't become an alcoholic myself.