

THE LIFE I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO HAVE



JOHN F. XUEREB

FREE SAMPLE | CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

CHAPTER ONE

The Child in the Rocking Chair

When Life Does Not Give You a Fair Start

*“When my father and my mother forsake me, then
the LORD will take me up.”*

PSALM 27:10 • KING JAMES VERSION

It is difficult to search for your purpose when your first experience of life leaves you believing that nobody wanted you.

I say that as an emotional truth, not as a legal accusation and not because I can go back and read the minds of every person involved. I cannot know what each social worker thought, what every foster family intended or whether someone, somewhere, genuinely believed they were doing the best they could for me. What I do know is how the

beginning of my life felt when I became old enough to look back at it.

It did not feel fair.

Even writing those words creates a conflict inside me. Part of me immediately argues that I should not complain. Other children were born into war, extreme poverty or homelessness. Some never had a warm bed, clean clothes or enough food. I understand that. I have spent years comparing my pain to the pain of people who appeared to have suffered more, as though gratitude required me to remain silent about what happened to me.

But another person's suffering does not erase mine. Pain is not a competition, and perspective should not become a weapon we use against ourselves. I can recognize that others had less and still acknowledge that beginning life unwanted, unprotected and repeatedly displaced left a wound. Both things can be true.

For years, thinking about my beginning had the power to pull me into depression. There were times when life felt so heavy that leaving it seemed easier than trying to find a reason to remain. Given a different set of circumstances, I might have checked out of this world long before anyone ever knew what I could become. When emotion takes control, purpose can be almost impossible to see...especially when the first message you believe life

gave you was that your existence created a problem for everyone else.

I was born in 1966. By the age of three, I had already moved through approximately twelve emergency placements, temporary homes and foster situations. I do not remember most of them. Trauma and early childhood do not leave behind a clean, orderly record. They leave fragments...an image, a room, a feeling, a sentence repeated by someone else. Much of what I know comes from those fragments, from social-service files, from stories I was told and from conversations with people who were there.

The social-service system had a mandate to find homes for children like me. That was necessary work, and I believe some of the people doing it truly cared. I also understand that caring for a child costs money and that foster payments do not automatically mean a family has bad motives. But a government system is still a system. It has caseloads, budgets, procedures and problems that need to be moved from one desk to another. Somewhere inside all of that, I was not simply a child. I was also a file, an expense and a placement that had to be solved.

It is one thing to adopt an animal because you walk into a shelter, see it and decide you want it. No one has to pay you to love the dog you chose. With foster children, the government pays people to bring an unfamiliar child into

their home. There are sensible reasons for that, but from the child's side it can create a painful question: *Do these people want me, or are they being compensated to manage me?*

A three-year-old cannot articulate that question. He can only feel the uncertainty.

My earliest clear memory is of being brought by a social worker to meet another family. It was not yet my home. It felt more like an interview...a chance for them to see me, watch me and decide whether I could fit into the life they already had.

The father was Pat Bradley. His wife was Anne. Their son, Kevin, was around twelve, and their daughter, Donna, was around fifteen. They were all gathered around while I sat in a rocking chair, being looked at and assessed. Nearly sixty years later, I can still return to the feeling of that room.

I felt like a dog in the pound.

That may sound harsh, but it is the most honest description I have. They were looking at me, and a decision was going to be made about whether they would take me into their home. The adults had questions, information and choices. I had none. I did not understand foster care, government responsibility or the history written in the file beside me. I was simply the object at the centre of the conversation.

My social worker must have sensed that I was going to be anxious because she bought me a brand-new Tonka truck, and I remember playing with it on the floor while she spoke with the family. That truck gave my hands somewhere to go while the adults considered my future.

I sometimes wonder what they were watching for. Was I quiet enough? Did I smile? Did I play properly? Did I appear difficult, frightened or strange? What kind of impression can a three-year-old make after twelve disrupted placements? And what could one short meeting possibly reveal about the needs hidden inside that child?

To be fair, the family was also taking a chance. They were being asked to bring a stranger into their home and trust what they had been told about his first three years. They could not know what would emerge later. The problem was that the risk was not equal. They could decide whether to accept me. I could not decide whether to accept them.

Apparently, I made a good enough impression.

The Bradley's became the family with whom I would remain until I was twelve years old. After all the temporary homes, this placement finally lasted. At first, I became something of a novelty...the new little boy brought into a family whose children were already much older.

They were a Catholic family. Pat 50 years of age, Anne, 47. Every Sunday, we went to Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church. Kevin attended the elementary school, and Donna went to Marion High School. Anne was at home during the day, as many mothers and wives were in that time, cleaning, preparing meals and caring for the house. My earliest years there are difficult to recall. I imagine I watched Sesame Street, played with toys and tried, in whatever way a very young child can, to understand the shape of this new life.

Stability on paper, however, does not immediately create security inside a child. A permanent address cannot erase a nervous system that has learned everything is temporary. Being placed in a family does not automatically create the feeling of belonging to one.

At five years old, I entered kindergarten at a public school I remember as Twelfth Avenue School. It soon became apparent to the teachers that I was not learning or behaving in the way they expected. They concluded that I had serious learning difficulties. The language used in those days was blunt and cruel by today's standards. My foster parents were told that I might be '*mentally retarded*.'

Those were the words used then, and I include them because changing the language would change the truth of what that label carried. It was not offered as a gentle

observation. It was a judgment about what they believed I could become.

Instead of moving into Grade One with the other children, I was sent to a school for children considered mentally handicapped, a place known as Maples. I remember doing arts and crafts, creating things and enjoying myself. We learned to read, write and develop basic skills. I spent my school year there.

Looking back, I cannot help wondering what the first school was seeing. Was I incapable of learning, or was I a child whose attention had been trained by instability? Was I intellectually limited, or emotionally overwhelmed? Had anyone considered what repeated moves, unfamiliar adults, physical trauma and the absence of secure attachment might do to the behavior of a five-year-old?

I cannot diagnose the child I was from nearly six decades ago. But I know that children often communicate distress through behavior long before they have the words to explain it. What adults call a problem may sometimes be a child's method of survival.

At the end of my year at Maples, my foster parents and social worker were called in for an assessment. I still remember the conclusion because those words reached somewhere deep inside me, even if I did not yet understand how much I needed them.

*“... Johnny is not mentally challenged at all. As a matter of fact, he is very “**gifted**..!! ”*

Gifted!

One system had looked at me and seen limitation. Someone else took more time, looked more carefully and saw ability. The child had not suddenly changed. The understanding of the child had changed.

That assessment allowed me to attend Our Lady of Mercy elementary school and enter Grade Two the following year. On paper, the mistake had been corrected. But labels do not disappear simply because another professional replaces them with kinder words. Once people teach you to question your *own* mind, part of you may spend a lifetime trying to prove them wrong.

I did not become a ‘*normal*’ child because someone finally called me gifted. I carried *fear, anger, confusion* and behaviors the adults around me were not prepared to understand. The Bradley’s may not have been equipped to care for a child with my history. The schools of that time may not have understood trauma in the way we try to understand it today. And I was certainly unable to explain what was happening inside me.

I became known as a *problem child* before anyone seriously asked what problems the child had been forced to carry.

The change from '*mentally retarded*' to '*gifted*' did not turn my story into a loving Hollywood ending. It did, however, plant something important. It showed me that the first judgment placed upon a human being may be completely wrong. It taught me that what appears on the surface is not always the truth. Most importantly, it showed me how much power exists in the moment when one person looks beyond a label and recognizes what is hidden inside someone else.

THE BUILDING BLOCK

I cannot honestly say that God caused abandonment, negligence or misunderstanding in order to teach me a lesson. I will not turn the failures of human beings into something sacred simply because I survived them. What I do believe is that God can use what He did not approve, and that we can build meaning from experiences that should never have happened.

This beginning became one of the first building blocks of the man I would become. Being misunderstood taught me to look more deeply at other people. Being labelled taught me to question labels. Feeling like an object in someone else's system taught me how important it is to make a person feel seen.

Years later, when clients stood in front of me ashamed of their bodies, afraid of failure or convinced that they were too old, too damaged or too far gone, I rarely saw only what they presented on the surface. I saw the possibility they could not yet see. I understood that the person being called lazy might actually be frightened. The person described as difficult might be protecting a wound. The person who appeared to have no confidence might simply have spent a lifetime being told they had nothing to be confident about.

That insight became part of my coaching long before I had language for it: do not ask only, what is wrong with this person? Ask, what happened to this person...and what might still be waiting inside them?

This building block was not perfectly shaped. Some of what grew from it was strength, compassion and determination. Some of it became defensiveness, distrust of authority and a relentless need to prove my worth. I am not presenting myself as the perfect result of hardship. God knows I am not perfect. Some wounds became wisdom; others

became habits I would spend years trying to recognize and change.

But the lesson remains: a bad beginning is not a final verdict.

You may have been unwanted, mishandled, misunderstood or given a label that entered your mind before you were old enough to challenge it. That history can explain your wounds, but it does not have the right to determine your entire identity. The people assessing you may have had authority, but they did not have complete knowledge of who you were or who you could become.

When I picture that three-year-old boy now, sitting in a rocking chair while strangers considered whether he belonged in their home, I want to reach back through time and tell him something no file could explain:

“... You are not the object in this story. You are the life at the center of it. You are not a problem to be placed. You are a person to be understood. And although your start was not fair, your beginning does not get to decide your ending...”

CHAPTER TWO

Behind Closed Curtains

*The Family Everyone Saw and the Life No One
Questioned*

*“For nothing is secret, that shall not be made
manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be
known and come abroad.”*

LUKE 8:17 · KING JAMES VERSION

By Grade Two, I had become more aware of my surroundings. From the outside, I appeared to be part of a family. I lived in a house with a mother, a father, a brother and, for a time, a sister. We went to church on Sundays. We ate Sunday dinner all together. I attended school, wore a school uniform, played sports and came home to the same address each and every day.

It looked like a family.

Inside that house, however, I was living a hellish existence that remains difficult to explain. Some experiences resist ordinary language because the words sound too small once they leave your mouth. You can describe the rooms, the people and what happened, but you cannot fully recreate the fear of being a little boy who understood that the place called home *was not* safe.

The house was small, with three bedrooms...one downstairs and two upstairs. I shared the downstairs bedroom with their son, Kevin. The rumpus room sat just outside our bedroom door, and the staircase to the upper floor rose beside it. It was the kind of house where everything appeared ordinary from the street, while the truth remained behind closed doors and drawn curtains.

That house had secrets from the basement bedroom all the way to the top of the stairs.

Kevin would have been around sixteen. Looking back, I have wondered whether he resented me for becoming the youngest child in the family or whether something in his own life had left him angry and confused. I cannot know what was happening in his mind, and I will not invent an explanation for him. What I know is what *he did*.

He hurt me physically. He punched me, choked me and sometimes tried to suffocate me. From the outside, someone might have dismissed it as brothers fighting.

Brothers argue. Brothers wrestle. Older brothers sometimes pick on younger ones. But this was not ordinary fighting, and we did not have an ordinary brotherly relationship.

At night, after I had been sent to bed and the rest of the house grew quiet, he would enter the room and force me into sexual acts I did not understand, did not want and could not escape. If I resisted or cried, he would punch me in the stomach as hard as he could, choke me or threaten that worse would happen if I told anyone.

His strongest weapon was not his fist. It was the threat of abandonment.

He told me that if I spoke to mom or dad, they would get rid of me, and I would have no family at all. He knew, whether consciously or instinctively, exactly where my deepest wound was. I had already been moved from home to home. The possibility of being unwanted again felt all too real. So, I stayed silent and endured treatment that no child should ever experience.

I did not understand then that the shame belonged to him, not to me. Children often assume responsibility for what adults and older children do to them. I wondered what I had done, why this was happening and whether saying anything would make everything even worse. Silence did not mean

consent. Silence meant I was frightened and trying to survive.

The secrets in the bedroom were only one part of the house.

My foster father, Pat, drove a truck for the Parks and Recreation Department in New Westminster. He worked hard, came home and sat in the rumpus room outside my bedroom with bottle after bottle of Labatt's beer. He cared deeply about how the house and garden looked. He would cut the grass, trim the hedges and make certain we had one of the best-kept properties in the neighborhood. Then he would return to his chair and drink.

The outside of the house had to be perfect. What happened inside it was nobody else's business.

He rarely ate dinner with us during the week. Anne would leave his meal warming on the stove until he decided he wanted it, usually long after I had gone to bed. From my room, I could hear him talking to himself as the alcohol took over. I could not always understand the words, only the sound of a man sinking deeper into a conversation no one else was part of.

Weekends followed a different rhythm. He drank as usual, but eventually he would rise from his chair, walk to the bottom of the stairs and call upward.

'Anne....!!'

He would repeat her name until she came to the top and told him to be quiet. Before he sat down again, he would complain about something...the dinner he had not eaten, the condition of the house, the children or Anne herself. He called her worthless, useless and no good. Then he would return to his chair, drink another beer and begin the process again.

As the night progressed, he would climb one or two steps before turning back. An hour later, perhaps he would make it farther. The stairs were wooden, with a high ceiling and a hollow space beneath them. He wore heavy Doc Martens, and each step landed with a deep, echoing thud.

To someone else, it might have been nothing more than the sound of boots on wood. To me, it was a countdown.

I knew what would happen when those boots reached the top.

Once he climbed the final step, the violence began. He hit Anne, threw her around and smashed her into things while she screamed. Then, sometimes without warning, he would stop and return downstairs, only to begin the entire ritual again later.

There were times when she screamed my name as though an eight- or nine-year-old boy could come upstairs and save her. I have asked myself whether I would have helped if I could. That question carried guilt for a long time. The truth is that I was a terrified child trapped in a house with a violent adult. I was not equipped to rescue anyone. Freezing in fear was not cowardice. It was the only response my body could find.

This was life in the Bradley home...but even that was not the whole of it.

By Sunday, the family had to make its public appearance. Anne used makeup to cover the marks on her face, and we went to Our Lady of Mercy as though nothing had happened. I often wondered whether the people at church knew. Perhaps some did. Perhaps they recognized the look in her eyes because they had seen it in their own mirrors. I cannot know. What I remember is that no one asked questions in front of me, and the family returned home with its appearance intact.

Sunday dinner restored the performance of normality. Pat came upstairs and sat at the table. We usually ate chicken, mashed potatoes, cabbage and apple pie. Sometimes it was roast beef, roast potatoes and a different pie. Those meals repeated so consistently that they became part of the architecture of my memory.

The same people who had spent the weekend living through terror could sit around a table and pass the potatoes.

That was one of the most confusing lessons of my childhood: normality can return without anything being resolved. A family can walk into church, eat dinner and smile at neighbors while fear remains in every room. Silence can make dysfunction look like peace.

By then, Donna had been thrown out of the house after they found out that she was dating a Jewish young man. Her dad condemned her, called her a whore and removed her from the family. The moral rules inside that house were harshly enforced against some people while the far greater violations committed by others remained hidden.

On Monday mornings, Pat had already left for work and Kevin had gone to school. For the first time since the weekend, Anne was alone with me. The anger, humiliation and pain she had absorbed had to go somewhere.

It came to me.

She would find something wrong with my school uniform. There might be wax on the knees from playing on the classroom floor. My hair might not be brushed properly, or my shirt might be sitting the wrong way. The reason changed, but the result did not.

I remember being slumped between the toilet and the wall while she struck me over the head with an acrylic hand brush. At other times, she used a spoon, a ruler or the washing stick she kept on top of the refrigerator. She hit my legs hard enough to leave welts, then wrote a note excusing me from physical education so no one at school would see them.

There is one Saturday night I need to describe because it reveals something important about the way my mind was already trying to survive. It was a moment of humiliation and pain, but it also became one of my earliest lessons about control. I did not have the language to explain it then. Nearly half a century later, I still return to it.

Saturday night was bath night.

The ritual was almost always the same. After dinner and the dishes, Anne went into the living room to watch her favorite television programs. I sat there until shortly before eight o'clock, when the weekly series, *The Love Boat* was about to begin. Then she told me to get ready for my bath.

By this particular night, I was around twelve years old. I went into the bathroom, removed my clothes and waited for her to come and run the water. While I stood naked in front of the mirror, I raised my arms and performed a front double-biceps pose.

I had been training secretly, and that pose was my private check-in. I was looking for some evidence that the boy in the mirror was becoming stronger. It was not vanity. I was trying to build a body that might one day protect me. In that pose I could imagine strength before I fully possessed it.

At that moment, Anne came around the corner and saw me from the side...completely exposed, arms raised, trying to see the beginnings of the person I hoped to become. She already disapproved of my desire to develop my physique. She rushed into the bathroom, began striking my bottom and shouted, “ I never want to see you doing that ever again!!”

Then she reached for the brush and continued hitting me. Instinctively, I raised my arm to block one of the blows to my head. The hand ended up striking my wrist so hard that the impact hurt her. Her face reddened and she looked close to tears.

For once, in trying to cause me pain, she had caused pain to herself.

I am not proud that her pain gave me satisfaction, but it did. I had become accustomed to being hurt without being able to answer back. In that instant, my body had interrupted the pattern. I had not attacked her. I had simply protected myself, and something inside me registered that I was no longer completely defenseless.

She ran the bath, left the room and returned to The Love Boat. I remained in the tub for the hour. About thirty minutes later, the bubbles had disappeared, the warmth had gone, and the water had turned brown from the dirt accumulated since the previous week's bath. I was cold, alone and thinking.

Something had been ignited in my mind. Perhaps it came from blocking that brush and discovering that her violence did not have to own every part of me. I decided to test myself...not because I understood psychology or the nervous system, but because I desperately needed to know whether there was anything in that house I could control.

I turned on the hot tap. A strong stream of water poured into the bath. I lifted one foot out of the cooling water and placed it beneath the stream. It was intensely hot. My body recognized the heat immediately, but I closed my eyes and gave my mind a different instruction.

This is not burning. It is only a rubber ball bouncing on my foot.

I pictured that ball clearly...rising, falling and touching the same place again and again. I could feel a pounding sensation, which I now imagine was my pulse reacting to the heat, but in my mind, it became the rhythm of the ball. For what felt like nearly two minutes, the burning sensation receded behind the picture I had created.

Eventually my concentration weakened. The heat returned to my awareness, and I turned off the tap. When I looked down, my foot was completely red. The water had not become harmless; my skin showed that plainly. Yet I had changed what occupied my attention, and for those moments I had changed my experience of the pain.

The heat was real. The red skin was real. But so was the power of my mind.

Sitting in that dirty bath, I understood something that never left me: even when I could not control what was being done around me, I could influence what happened within me. I had probably been doing it unconsciously through years of beatings, threats and fear. That night, for the first time, I recognized it as an ability.

I do not tell this story to encourage anyone to burn themselves, disregard an injury or pretend that physical danger is imaginary. My foot was red because the body has limits, and pain often carries information that deserves attention. The discovery was not that I was indestructible. It was that attention, meaning and self-talk could change how I met a difficult experience.

Years later, when training became excruciating and one more repetition seemed impossible, I remembered the bath. When I climbed a steep hill on a bicycle and every part of me demanded that I stop, I remembered the ball

bouncing on my foot. When illness, loss, betrayal or circumstances seemed larger than I was, I returned to the same question: What part of this moment can I still direct?

At twelve, I could not control the house. But I discovered that the house did not control all of me.

Now, at fifty-nine, I understand that lesson differently. Mental strength is not the denial of pain. It is the refusal to let pain become the only voice in the room. I cannot always stop what happens to my body, control another person's choices or command life to follow my plans. I can decide where I place my attention, what meaning I give the moment and what action I take next.

The bouncing ball has followed me through my life as a private metaphor. It reminds me that the mind can magnify suffering, but it can also organize it, redirect it and help us move through it. Sometimes the most powerful question is not, How do I make this disappear? It is, What can I tell myself that allows me to take the next step without surrendering who I am?

That bath did not end the abuse. It gave me the first conscious evidence that something inside me remained mine.

I can recognize now that Anne was herself being abused. I can feel compassion for the terror she lived through

without excusing what she did to me. Being a victim did not give her the right to make a child her victim. Pain may explain why someone becomes violent, but it does not make the violence acceptable.

I was not allowed to be a child in any simple or dependable way. Play was used as a privilege that could be taken away whenever she wanted to punish me. Sometimes I stood at the window and secretly motioned for neighborhood friends to come to the door. When they knocked and asked, ‘Can Johnny come out and play?’ she would often allow it because refusing them might make the neighbors curious.

Once I escaped the house, I could play street hockey, hide-and-seek or whatever the other children were doing. For a little while, I could borrow their normal life.

Inside, punishment could last for hours. She made me constantly write lines such as ‘I must behave’ or ‘I must not tell lies’ or God knows what. But I did it over and, running out of paper to use. That didn’t help me because she would just cup up a brown paper grocery bag and we were still in business. The punishment was not about teaching me. It was about occupying me, controlling me and ensuring that childhood contained as little pleasure as possible.

Christmas and birthdays carried the same uncertainty. I might receive a present and feel the excitement every child

feels, only to be declared bad before the day was over and have it taken away. There was a room in the house where many of my toys disappeared. They still existed, but I was forbidden to touch them.

I began inventing school projects so I could use Popsicle sticks, glue and scraps of material to build something. Creating gave me an excuse to play without calling it play. If it looked educational, perhaps I would be left alone.

All I wanted was what most children take for granted: to read comic books, swim with friends, make things, play games and laugh without wondering what punishment might follow. Good moments existed, but the weight of the bad ones was far greater.

If Kevin was not abusing me in the bedroom, I was listening to violence elsewhere in the house or waiting for Anne's anger to find me. I spent years wishing they were dead, wishing I were dead or imagining some other life in which none of us existed together.

The houses in our neighborhood stood only a few feet apart. Windows were open during warmer weather. People must have heard screaming, shouting and fighting. I would look into the faces of my friends or their parents and wonder what they knew. No one came to the door and changed the course of my life.

That silence taught me something dangerous: people may know that something is wrong and still choose the comfort of minding their own business.

I do not know whether the neighbors understood the full truth. They could not have known what happened in the bedroom. But the violence was too loud for the house to contain completely. What happened behind closed doors leaked through the walls, yet the doors remained closed.

School became the place where I wanted to be.

Most children could not wait for the school day to end. I was anxious for it to begin. At school, there were rules that made sense, adults whose moods were not controlled by alcohol and other children with whom I could feel almost normal. There was physical education, where my energy and athletic ability became strengths instead of problems. There was music, where I discovered I could sing.

I became the lead singer in school productions from approximately Grade Two through Grade Seven. On sports day, I expected to win because I usually did. I ran every race, entered every event and chased every opportunity to be victorious. Baseball, soccer, football and every other sport available to me kept me out of the house and surrounded by friends.

In the house, I was powerless. On the field, I could be excellent.

At home, my voice had to remain silent. In music, my voice was the reason people noticed me.

I did not understand it then, but sport and music were not merely activities. They were survival routes. They gave me identity beyond what was happening to me. They allowed me to experience achievement, recognition and control. For the length of a race, a game or a song, I was not the foster child, the problem child or the frightened boy in the downstairs bedroom.

I was Johnny...and I was good at something.

THE BUILDING BLOCK

I refuse to say that any child needs abuse in order to become strong. God did not need that house to give me a voice, athletic ability or determination. Those gifts were already within me. What the hardship did was make those gifts essential to my survival.

Behind closed curtains, I learned how secrecy protects the person causing harm and isolates the person receiving it. I learned that looking like a family is not the same as being safe. I learned that attending church does not

automatically make a home holy, and that silence should never be mistaken for peace.

I also learned that human beings can be both wounded and wounding. Anne was terrorised by her husband, yet she terrorized me. Her suffering deserves recognition, but it does not erase mine. Understanding where someone's violence comes from can create compassion; it must never become an excuse that removes responsibility.

Some of the building blocks created by those years were valuable. I became sensitive to what people were not saying. I learned to notice the person behind the appearance and to recognize that confidence, aggression, humor and even achievement can hide pain. Later, this helped me connect with clients who looked strong on the outside while quietly falling apart within.

Other building blocks were rougher. I became watchful, distrustful and determined to control my environment. I learned to expect danger even during calm moments. I carried anger, shame and the belief that asking for help might cost me the little security I had. Survival protected the child, but some of those same survival habits complicated the life of the man.

The bath added another building block: the discovery that control is not always the power to change the situation. Sometimes control is the ability to choose how we meet it.

A twelve-year-old boy could not stop the violence in that house, but he could experiment with attention, imagery and meaning. That discovery became part of the mental discipline I later carried into bodybuilding, cycling, coaching and survival.

Even now, at fifty-nine, I think about that rubber ball when circumstances threaten to overwhelm me. I ask what is truly outside my control and what remains mine. I may not control the diagnosis, the injury, the betrayal, another person's decision or the sudden turn a day can take. I can still govern my next thought, my next breath, my next effort and my next honest decision. That is not control over the uncontrollable. It is control over my contribution to it.

The lesson was never that pain is unreal. The lesson was that pain does not automatically get the final word.

School, sport and music showed me something else: one safe space can keep a person's spirit alive. A child may not have the power to escape an entire life, but one teacher, coach, team, stage or friendship can give that child a glimpse of another identity. Those places did not erase the abuse, but they reminded me that the abuse was not all I was.

That understanding eventually became central to my work. The gym could be more than a place to train; it could be a

sanctuary. Coaching could be more than sets, repetitions and food plans; it could be an opportunity to see someone, believe in them and give them a place where effort produced a result they could trust.

The lesson I carry from that house is not that suffering automatically creates strength. Sometimes suffering simply wounds. Strength begins when the secrecy is broken, the shame is returned to the person who caused it and the survivor discovers that there is still something inside them untouched by what happened.

The house taught me to be silent. The stage gave me a voice. The violence taught me fear. Sport introduced me to power. The family made me question whether I belonged anywhere. My gifts gave me the first evidence that I belonged to myself.

Nothing hidden remains hidden forever. Today, I open the curtains...not because I want pity, revenge or attention, but because the truth may reach someone who is still sitting silently in a room, believing that speaking will cost them everything.

If that person is you, hear what the child in me needed to hear: what happened to you is not your shame. Silence may have helped you survive, but you do not owe your silence to the people who harmed you. There

*is still a voice within you, and there is still a place where
the real you can breathe.*