Prisoner of My Past: A Memoir
By Colleen Callahan

I’ve often wondered how my Dad explained the disappearance of our Mother, his wife, to his three young children. I was the eldest at four years of age and much too young to remember the day she walked out of our lives never to return. My Father was only twenty-four years old when he found himself a single parent raising three children under the age of four.

I never had the opportunity to ask my Father this question as it only recently has begun to haunt me. My Father suffered a major, life-ending heart attack on the eve of Saint Patrick’s Day in 1980. He was only 39 years old. I remember holding him in my arms as I waited for that haunting siren approaching from the distance; the ambulance that would take us all to the hospital where he would be pronounced dead at 2:35am. I was 18 years old when he passed, turning 19 on the day of his funeral.

Over the years, I’ve heard the details of my mother’s departure. The facts are a bit sketchy. My father was at work, a rookie Deputy Sherriff in Orange County, California. My mother placed a phone call to the dispatch asking that they locate Deputy Callahan and send him to his home. She told dispatch she was leaving the home, and she was leaving the children their alone and unattended. Then she hung up the phone, grabbed her bags, and walked out the front door of our three bedroom suburban home and never came back.

How does a young Father tell his children that they would never see their mother again? What an awful burden for him to carry, I do know one thing for sure; he loved her until the day he died, of this I have no doubt. He was a good man; he did not deserve to be abandoned like that. He raised his three children the best he could, and we never had a day without laughter. He had a sharp wit, a wicked sense of humor and most importantly, he loved his children.

I recall becoming very curious about my ghost of a mother at the age of eleven. I approached my Father with two questions: “What happened to my Mom, and why did she leave us?” My Father replied straight-faced and without hesitation, “She left to join a Hippie Commune where she lives with Hippies and grows vegetables.” Years later, I realized how outlandish and funny this really was; though I believed him at the time. She never did leave us to live in a Hippie Commune and spend her days tending a garden. She left us to be with another man and start another family. I have two half-brothers and one half-sister from that union.

I began to fantasize about my mother. I idolized her, not knowing the truth of her departure. I dressed like I thought she would dress, how I thought a hippie might dress. I had a closet full of gauze skirts, halter tops, and floppy, over-sized straw hats. My long blonde hair grew to the length I envisioned her hair to be. I wanted to be this woman I had never met. I wanted to be her, and I wanted to be free.

This was a time that I began to believe nothing is permanent. It was the beginning of my inability to live in the “now”, as I was
always chasing a dream. I believed that anywhere would be better than where I was. If I could only find my “Fantasy” mother, my life would be perfect. My father had remarried and though their relationship was very off and on, it was as if he introduced the darkest and most dangerous plague into our home. These were not the best of times.

My step-mother was “Miss Palm Springs”, a beauty on the outside and a rattlesnake on the inside. The more she spat and bit, the more I envisioned how perfectly angelic my real mother surly must be. My step-mother had many guilty pleasures: affairs with other men, shopping at Fredericks of Hollywood, and a charming elixir of Vodka and cocaine. We feared her for most of our childhood, and when I say “we”, I include my brother, sister and my father! For me, the fear ended when I was 16 years old. I finally found my voice and stood up to the “Viper”, though it took a little liquid courage to do it.

I had been at a high school Friday-night party, consuming my first Schlitz Malt Tall, a thick dark beer that’s musky scent would send my stomach lurching today. I came home well after my curfew to find the Viper waiting up for me, coiled, and ready to spring. As I walked in the front door, I was immediately struck by her never-ending use of profanity as she came up with some very creative adjectives to describe what she thought of me. Now, if I had not been under the influence of the beer and the false sense of confidence and courage it provided me with, I would have high-tailed it into my bedroom and locked the door. Instead, I met her head-on, matching her descriptive words with some beauties of my own. But what came out of my mouth next would change all of our worlds forever.

Though we all knew my step-mother was engaged in a tawdry affair with a man named Jim, nobody dared confront her, until the night I consumed my first beer. I was locked and loaded, and ready to engage in a war of words, and my words would turn my step-mother’s life upside down. As she continued her barrage of deafening put-downs, I aimed and fired my first round, “Everyone in this house knows you are having an affair. We know his name, and when the phone rings once, we know it’s him.” I re-loaded and continued, “I am sick of you hurting my Dad, I hate you and want you to leave us all alone.” I would have continued, but the next thing I remembered was a closed fist making contact with my face, the Viper had struck, hard.

I didn’t exactly see stars like in the cartoons, but I was stunned at the force of the blow. Within seconds, my younger, scrappy sister was on my step-mother’s back. Like a spider monkey, she attached herself and was pulling at the Viper’s platinum blonde hair. I could hear her screaming, “Don’t you hurt my sister!” I was on the floor watching my step-mother twirl and reach behind her as she failed in her desperate attempts to remove my sister from her back. My sister was small and yet the rage she had within her was nothing our step-mother could contend with. The next thing I felt was a hand on my shoulder, my father’s hand. He picked me up and rushed me into my bedroom. Next, he detached my sister from my step-mother’s back and placed her in the room with me and shut the door.

My sister and I both ran to the closed door and placed our ears against the cold wood trying to make out the words that were being exchanged by the adults. My father was not a man that ever raised his voice, but this night being the exception. Within five
minutes, my step-mother was squealing out of the driveway in reverse; her olive-green station wagon disappearing into the night. I took one look at my sister and said, “Well, I guess it’s no longer a secret, do you think she’s going to her boyfriend’s house?” My sister unclenched her fists; she had a clump of platinum blonde hair intertwined in her fingers. We both watched as the hair floated to the ground. We laughed, cried, and then I threw up all over the floor. I never consumed a Schlitz Malt Tall again!

My father never spoke of that night, just as he never spoke of my real mother. But things had changed, secrets were revealed, and tensions were high. My step-mother returned to our home five days later, we all pretended that what happened didn’t happen. But we knew, she knew, and I could sense her fear. She feared me, and I no longer feared her.

My step-mother and I spent the next couple of years avoiding each other. Though her affair did not end, she did not flaunt it as she once had. I continued to secretly pine for my real mother, never talking about it with my siblings or my father. A storm was brewing, and the winds had changed. The house became cold, and death was knocking on our front door.

If an Irish man is to leave this world, he couldn’t have picked a better day then Saint Patrick’s Day. Bob Callahan departed on March 17th, 1980. The man that had raised three babies on his own was now about to leave three teenagers on their own; he was thirty-nine years old the night he suffered the great heart attack. And in the end, it was just as it had been in the beginning. My father was surrounded by his children: just us and no one else. I held him, and I begged him not to leave. But, death had other plans. I’ve learned that death does not bargain, and it does not care what promises you make. It could care less about your tears or your fears. My father could not speak as his heart was in a vice. He looked at me, and I knew. I told him I loved him. I told him he was the best father in the world. I told him I could not live without him, and then death took him from me. Fade to black. Turn off the siren.

My Father had his sweet revenge in the end. It had been 4 weeks since his passing, and I was in my first year of college, my sister and brother both in high school. We all came home to find an empty house: nothing left but our beds, linens, and three dogs. The Viper had struck again, slithering away with every earthly possession my father owned. She had discovered that the trust funds set up in my father’s name by ancestors from long ago would not end up in her bank account and instead would be inherited by his three children. My father had never allowed her to legally adopt us, for if he had, she would have had complete control of the monies in the trust. I am sure she would have disappeared on that first train to Vegas.

Bring in the angels, God knows we’re due. An attorney friend of my father contacted me upon hearing the story of my step-mother’s leaving. He held my hand as we walked through the court system where I became legal guardian of my brother and sister, secured a rental property where we all could live, thus allowing us all to stay together while they finished high school. I had a part-time job at Grand Tree Furniture, and the owner of the company upon hearing about my father’s passing and my step-mother’s leaving told me to walk the showroom and pick out any and all furniture we needed. He had the furniture delivered to our empty home within twenty-four hours. He refused to take a penny. It was his gift.
Eight weeks after my father's Irish wake, I found myself parentless, the legal guardian of my brother and sister, and standing at the front door of my mother's home in Seattle Washington. My fantasies and dreams of her filling my head, but the fantasy was soon to become a reality.

I knocked softly, terrified and yet ecstatic at the notion I would be looking into my mother's eyes in about two seconds. My sister stood by my side as we waited to hear the footsteps from inside her home fast approaching the door. I watched as the rusty, brass doorknob rotated to the left, not able to take my eyes off the device that would open the door to all of my unanswered questions.

The door slowly opened. I cautiously and shyly moved my eyes from the door handle and looked up. I was looking in a mirror; this stranger looked just like me, I was looking at myself. Standing in front of me was my mother, the mystery, the fantasy—no more.

The illusions I had created in my mind were born of a primeval protective mechanism, an inherent genetic survival technique that saved me from my truth. The truth cannot be denied, and it will tap you on your shoulder relentlessly, whispering in your ear, “Open your eyes and see. Fear not, I must be dealt with.” My Mother was not the angel with wide spread wings I had fantasized about. Though we looked alike, she did not have long, blonde hair flowing down her back. She did not dress in wrap-around gauze skirts or wear over-sized floppy straw hats. She did not have the wings of an Angel. She was a woman who walked out on her three young children and her husband and started a new family. Though we looked similar, we were not the same. Reality is painful, and forgiveness is the cure.

My known world was one of abandonment and endless searching for love and security. I have always been two steps behind or two steps ahead, always fearing connection. I have learned that my survival skills are impressive and that my ability to stay optimistic even during the most challenging times has never wavered. I am a dreamer. I believe in the "Fairy Tale" ending. I am a work in progress, still painting my own canvass.

I have had many symbolic keys in my possession during the course of my life. At different times I have inserted random keys into the lock, in hopes of opening the door that releases me from my past. I have recently discovered a new key. I hold it in my trembling hand, and this key is different. This key has substance; it is stronger than the rest. I gently insert the key into the lock and turn it to the right, nothing. This is where I need my courage. This is the point where I just have to trust in my own powers to unlock this door. I grasp the key a little firmer and turn it to the left, nothing. All of the fears and insecurities flood my heart, and yet something tells me to keep trying. Love must conquer fear. There comes a time when the fear of being trapped behind this cold and lifeless door becomes more unbearable than the risk of opening the door and walking through and into uncharted territory. I cautiously turn the key ever so slightly to the right... “Click”, the most beautiful sound in the world. Will I find the courage to step into the unknown; trusting my instincts, trusting myself? There is no better time than now.