



Thank you for your interest in *Memoir of an Ordinary Person and her journey to an extraordinary life*. This preview is the piece I wrote for a proposed Ted Talk that is in the works. Out of this, many encouraged me to write *Memoir* in the hope that it will inspire others to go for the life of their dreams.

I'd love to hear what you think about this piece. Please send me any feedback to carrie@carriekcwest.com. Thanks again for joining me on my journey!



When I attended the American Film Institute, the writers often said that everyone had a story to tell, but not everyone should tell it. I disagree. I think we should all tell our stories and tell them often. It's the way we connect and discover that we have more in

common than what makes us different. Today, I am sharing my story in the hope that in getting to know me, you'll find someone that might seem so unlike you but is really more like you than you know.

I am an ordinary person. I work, I pay my bills, I wash my dishes and do my laundry. I pay taxes, I have an IRA and I own a home with the bank. I have love in my life, and I have loss and sadness. I also have regrets. Plus, I worry about more things than I can list in these next minutes that we have together. I also love to talk and share stories. Today I want to tell you mine.

When I was born, it was like I landed on a stage that was well into the second act. I didn't know any of the other characters in this play or their motivations. My only rehearsals were those I had while growing in my mother's uterus. But then I was mostly concerned with arms and legs and making sure my heart and lungs were formed enough so that I could live outside of her. Trying to focus on the things I heard around me didn't seem to be that important.

My arrival wasn't met with great fanfare. Like so many of us, our parents had many reasons for bringing children into the world. I was born in the 50s, which means that a lot of people had children because that's what you did. You grew up, went to some amount of school, got married, had children, worked, retired and waited for that final rest.

My mother wasn't any different. She had four kids because that was her role in life. It didn't matter that she had other dreams. Her family let her know in the way that family's let us know, that unless she got married and had children, her life would be a waste. Mom married later than her contemporaries. She was 29 and had my older sister seven months later, a more common occurrence than most people admit, especially in the 50s. But her family never let her forget, in the ways that family's do, that "having to get married" shamed her and them. It affected Mom her entire life, so much so that when she got cancer in her early sixties, her health had deteriorated so profoundly that the doctors didn't understand why she was alive. I knew, though. She was terrified of what she'd find when she left this world. She was agitated, even in a coma. So I found a priest, even though she wasn't Catholic, and had him give her last rites to try to alleviate some of her fears. The next day, she passed away.

My father had his own issues. He was a handsome man that loved the ladies and the bachelor life. He loved to gamble, poker was his game, date around and have fun. He was devoted to his mother and

hated his father for having what he called a “side piece”. Divorce for his parents was out of the question. They were from Italy and very Catholic. And besides, Dad’s mother accepted her husband’s women because that’s what men did. But Grandma Carrie was a hurt and broken woman because of it and my dad was on her side and determined to never marry and do to someone what was done to his mother. My mom was a beautiful woman. When my parents met, the sparks flew. There was passion and fighting and out of it, a lot of break ups and make ups. Mom wanted to show her family that she was “normal” and so pushed for marriage, Dad didn’t like that idea. She tried everything and finally, after months of trying to convince him, became pregnant.

Dad was trapped. But when he met his daughter, my older sister, something awakened in him. He felt such a deep connection and profound love. It changed him. Then mom had a boy and in Dad’s mind, he had it all. The perfect family. He gave up gambling, got a full-time job and bought a three-bedroom house.

It went south shortly after they moved into their new home. Dad’s mother died and he was devastated. He became withdrawn. Mom hated that Dad loved his mother more than he loved her. So she did what she determined would remind him about his happiness with his family. She stopped using her diaphragm and got pregnant. Dad was furious and wanted her to get rid of the baby that was me. They fought and Dad withdrew even further. When I was born, Mom made sure to name me after his mother. I never found out if she did this out of spite or if she thought it would bring him back to her. Either way, it didn’t work. Dad didn’t want anything to do with me. And when Mom realized that my birth didn’t have the desired outcome, she didn’t want me either.

Now, I didn’t have any of this information when I made my appearance on their stage all those years ago. I didn’t know any of these dynamics. I was just hoping for some food and a clean diaper! But the drama of my family’s life unfolded around me, and I observed and absorbed every little thing.

Many people think that babies, especially newborns are blobs of a human without the capacity to understand and take in what people say or do. I disagree. Newborns and infants take in everything around them. Every image, every word is swallowed and analyzed and given a meaning. More often than not, the things we picked up in those first days and months stay with us forever. I wish I had a better example of this, but the best one I have deals with the fact that my mother hated changing my diapers. Especially if I had a poop. Sometimes she wouldn’t change my diaper for days. So rather than sit in the mess, I taught myself to not go to the bathroom. To this day I have an amazing capacity to hold it when I need to pee. The downside is, I have struggled with constipation my entire life. Another example was that Mom didn’t like to breast feed. And while I don’t take issue with women and their choice to breast feed or not, I developed an allergy to milk. My mother decided that since drinking my bottle made me sick and she refused to breast feed, she’d get anything liquid that I would drink. Sometimes that meant only water. When I was a year and a half, I was so hungry that I found some leftover popcorn the family left on the table and swallowed as much as I could. The next day, my stomach was bloated and I was listless. Two days later, the doctor happened to stop by for a house call. He saved my life. He also noticed the shape I was in and started visiting weekly with proper food.

My brother and sister didn’t care much for me either. Especially my sister who saw me as a threat to her special relationship with our dad. She tried to break my arm and make my mother drop me. When that didn’t work, she tried to smother me with a pillow. Fortunately, just laying a pillow over me wasn’t enough to do any damage. My brother, the only male child, held court. He was the more valued one of

the family. He viewed me as another minion to take care of his every whim. Me and my sisters had to clean, make his breakfast and his bed. Us girls were assigned daily chores like dishes, laundry and cleaning, while he lounged around and on occasion hung out with Dad.

By the time I was two years old, my mother tried again to win back her husband and had another child. She thought if she could have a son that would do the trick and get her husband back. She even got a list of names for her son. My younger sister was born four months before my second birthday and this time Mom named the new baby after Dad's sister, a ploy that she was sure would work. It didn't. By this time, Dad was completely withdrawn and uninterested in life. He started gambling again and as soon as the opportunity arose, left his full-time job.

Money was scarce. We lived on whatever money they could put together from any kind of odd jobs. I remember Mom had a yellow lined notepad where she kept a list of all the bills and the amount of money she could pay to each. Meals were pasta and iceberg lettuce. I observed this and at night I would hear my parent's whispered conversations about the bills and mortgage.

I'm telling you this to show you that because of these experiences I created a story about myself and my life around survival.

The concept of 'stories' is a long-held tradition among people. We use stories to build communities and to make order of situations. We use stories to build a framework of who we are. I believe that we create stories that describe who we are in specific situations: My Work Story, My Friend Story, My Student Story, My Girlfriend/Boyfriend Story are just a few examples. Some are one act plays, others are Epics that last for years, even our entire lives. When we are first born, I believe we build a tale that is the overarching story of who we are in life. It's based on everything that happened in the first act of our great play that started when we took our first breath on the stage of our family's drama. I call this, My Life Story. As with all stories, there is a primary theme.

My Life Story's theme was Survival. It was written by me as a child dependent on others for even the most basic needs but because of my family's issues around lack – particularly of money – I didn't have many needs met. At an incredibly young age, I realized that I needed to take of myself. Like I said earlier, children, even babies observe and make decisions about what they see. The truth is that my parents weren't interested in much, probably not even money. But I didn't have that information when I arrived. As I watched, they argued about money constantly and so I connected the dots and decided, if only we had money, all would be ok. When my brother became bored with his paper route I took it over. I was ten. I started babysitting when I was eleven and did any odd job I could to make even a quarter, which back then was real money. I did all this because I was terrified and felt I needed money. Always more money.

As I moved into my Second Act, I watched as Mom and Dad grew more distant and remote in their tired roles. My older sister went to college, but left, got married and had children. My brother enlisted and went to Vietnam. It was just me and my younger sister fending for ourselves. I got into college and became the first one in the family to graduate. I went on to grad school while my younger sister went to Georgetown. My parents thought me and my younger sister were nuts to focus on school when all we really needed were husbands. My brother became a police officer and went to prison for killing a man while he was off duty. It was tragic, but I can't say I was surprised. That was the final straw for Dad. He died of a massive coronary six months after the trial. I always thought losing his son finally made his

heart explode. I was twenty-five and knew that I'd never have the chance to one day win Dad's love. When Dad died, it was my greatest heartbreak and, as I came to understand, the greatest gift of love he ever gave me. As I came to terms with my grief, which by the way took years, I was able to, for the first time, step outside the play I was in and become an observer in the audience. I saw that, over the years, I kept living in the same story of survival which also meant constantly looking for someone to love me and take care of me. I longed for a family that accepted me only to be disappointed, hurt and angry. It was then that I realized that I was not in any way set up to live a fulfilling successful life. I was scattered. I was angry. I was tired of taking care of everyone around me as a way to get their love at best and at the least, so they wouldn't send me away. That's what survival does to you. It makes you focused on everything outside of you, looking for the next bomb that was about to explode. It makes you stockpile anything and everything you can for fear that it's all going to go away if you're not hyper vigilant. It makes you change any and everything about yourself in order to fit in or not be abandoned.

Mostly what I realized was that I was in pain. My emotional pain was buried deep in my psyche and covered over with rage and a tough guy exterior that kept people at bay.

That realization put me on my journey of healing and changing. I looked at My Life Story and took it apart, act by act, scene by scene. My then character was fully developed; I knew my lines by heart. I discovered that instead of writing my story, I took much of my family's story and lived it as my own. Call it familiar or comfortable, call it fear of the unknown. What I learned was that I never developed my own identity and so I lived the only part I was trained to play. My role of "Third Born Middle Child" and "Not Wanted" often reminded me of scripts that had roles called: Miserable Bar Patron or Student in Second Row. My character was an outsider, never feeling accepted or having enough or having a sense of belonging. I learned my part well and played it over and over again, sometimes giving Oscar worthy performances. The only reason I was unhappy and miserable was because I continued to replay that old story. I accepted the energetic patterns of My Family's Play which meant I auditioned for and won the same role in other people's plays.

It was time to change all the actors and get a new script. I decided to take on the starring role in my own play. So when I was in my late 20's I started meditating to calm my mind. I went to personal development workshops to learn about self-improvement. I was cynical and looked for flaws in every topic. I kept at it though and over time I learned about the emotional pain I carried and how it colored everything in my life. I discovered more of my story's underlying plot lines that seemed to come out of the blue only to find that they're just buried deep waiting for their cue to take the stage. I unraveled the gnarly ball of thoughts and feelings that clung to the old script and never let my true self come through. I learned that, in some weird, twisted way, I built a shell of anger and defiance to protect my soft underbelly that was terrified of being hurt and destroyed.

During my journey of healing, I thought all I had to do was fix me or fix "them" and all would be well. The problem was that since Dad died, how could I fix him? No problem! I started dating men that I tried to make my father so that I could fix them. When guys fell in love with me, I wasn't interested. They were too needy or not strong enough to handle me – more story plot points – when in truth I couldn't receive their love. I didn't know how to receive love, and so they had to go. Same with all the other story lines. I worked at any job that paid me well because I needed the money not because it was something I wanted to do with my life. Yet, no matter how much money I made – and at times it was a lot – I was never able to hold onto it, creating car problems, health problems or quitting because the work "didn't

suit me.” I created the same types of situations over and over again so that I could fix myself by fixing them. It didn’t work.

What did work was tossing out the entire story and writing a new one. So that’s what I did. I started at the beginning. And that meant understanding my family’s play that was well underway before I landed on stage. When I learned about my mom and dad and where they were in their life when we all came together, I was able to give up my anger and blame. I looked at them from a new perspective and felt **compassion**. I was able to forgive them and forgive me for all the years I spent trying to fix them – and me – in order to get their love.

I also discovered something remarkable. All the experiences I had, all the heartache all the joys – and yes, there was joy – made me the person I am today. I realized how much strength and courage I had. I understood why advocating for children is a passion of mine. I know that I am committed to being the best person I can be and working on myself is key to that process.

It took years of therapy and meditation that continues today. It also took a commitment to staying conscious of my reactions in all situations. I am not perfect. I slip up and get triggered to this day. But I am no longer devastated and sent into an abyss of despair that was once my resting ground.

Do I wish that my parents would have made the choice to break their patterns of life they absorbed from their parents? Of course. But they didn’t. Holding on to my anger and blame didn’t affect them one bit. They were both long gone having both died when I was in my twenties. The anger and blame kept me in the same prison they were in when I entered the play. I had a choice to make. I could keep trying to change someone – anyone – in order to feel better about myself, or I could see the play for what it was, forgive the cast of characters and change. I made the choice to change and not live my life on auto pilot. I found peace in understanding that while life may not be fair, it is **responsive**. What I mean by that, is if you take actions, if you do something to solve the issues that are getting in your way, life will conform to those actions. Life will support your desire to heal and receive the life you want. I’m living proof of that.

I am now at an age where many people think of retiring. I instead have reinvented myself and feel more alive than ever. I think about a quote that Jeff Bridges made about “Re-Tiring”, meaning he changed the tires and kept on going with new tires on a new path. I’ve done the same. I’ve been in a very loving relationship for the last decade. We own a beautiful home in Santa Barbara and travel whenever we can. I have abundance and love in every part of my life. Most importantly, I’m filled with gratitude – a powerful force for everything in life. I sometimes check in with the old me to keep wrapping her in Love and safety and when I do, I tell her how grateful I am for her tenacity and courage to help me get here. She could have checked out so many times and she stuck it out. The person I was is why I am here today.

I started this talk by saying that I am an ordinary person. I am and I am proud of that fact. And because I am an ordinary person, I know that anyone can do what I did and create the life they want to live. Like everyone I meet, we all have some basic things that we want out of life that we all have in common. We want productive work, we want love in its many forms, we want to provide for our families, we want to feel safe in our communities and we want to know that we are ultimately in this life together, with others in our community and in our country and in our world.

The challenge is that we keep creating that original play to first, fill in the missing pieces and second to get a different outcome. When what we really need to do is throw the story away and write a new one. I hope my story will encourage you to rewrite your life. You deserve happiness and all that you desire. We all do.