

PHYLIS MANTELLI

# Unmothered

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LIFE WITH A MOM  
Who Couldn't Love Me





# Praise for *Unmothered*

Honest, open, and authentic, Phylis Mantelli gives the reader an in-depth look at motherhood from her vulnerable childhood with her own unstable mother, to adulthood, marriage, and becoming a mother to her own children. In *Unmothered*, the reader will learn how she coped and how God helped her find peace. Mantelli's work shines with strength, determination, and commitment.

—B. J. Taylor, *Guideposts* writer and novelist

With grit and grace, Phylis Mantelli draws you into her journey of mothering while unmothered. Mantelli tends to the parent wound in her readers, while cultivating a deeper appreciation for those we love. She exemplifies how forgiving the unforgiveable and loving the unlovable leads to a prosperous and fulfilling life. Teens, parents, and grandparents alike will encounter healing within their hearts and families after reading this redemptive story.

—Cherie Denna, writer and blogger  
Leader of women's ministries at Life Community Church

This beautiful book is about restoration and how generational curses can be broken. Phylis is honest and vulnerable in her story about her dysfunctional relationship with her mother. She explains how God's love and grace gave her a chance to change the next generation. No matter what your relationship is with your mom, this book will inspire you to break those generational chains that so often bind us.

—Rhonda Velez, writer and counselor  
Cohost of the podcast *24 Carat Conversations with Phylis & Rhonda*

Phylis Mantelli's memoir reads like a movie script. You're quickly turning pages to see what's going to happen next. In a refreshingly honest and vulnerable look into her own demons, Phylis shares her tenuous relationship with a mother looking for love without knowing how to love. Phylis bravely learned that you don't have to repeat the past when you let God guide your future. *Unmothered* is a must read for anyone who struggles with a troubled mother-daughter dynamic. I wish I had read a book like this when my own mother and I were estranged for years. I know Phylis's compassion, insight, and wisdom will encourage many mothers and daughters to let God help them work through their issues, even if there's only one trying.

—Janet Thompson, speaker and author of twenty books, including  
*Everyday Brave: Living Courageously as a Woman of Faith* and  
*Mentoring for All Seasons: Sharing Life Experiences and God's Faithfulness*

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A decorative flourish consisting of a central vertical scroll with a diamond-shaped base, flanked by two symmetrical leaf-like shapes and smaller scrolls, all resting on a horizontal line.

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Who Couldn't Love Me

REDEMPTION   
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The author has tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from her memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, in some instances she has changed the names of individuals and may have changed some identifying characteristics and details, such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence.

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To my grandson, Koston, who makes me believe in future generations.





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# Foreword

**FOR OVER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, I'VE** been ministering to women who have felt oh so broken in a myriad of ways. Due to the nature of my books on sexuality and healthy relationships, it's often a troubled marriage or a pattern of rocky relationships that brings them to me for individual or couple's coaching, and many will attend one of my Women at the Well four-day intensive workshops.

Leading these workshops has revealed an interesting phenomenon. I assumed when I started them almost ten years ago that I would attract lots of women with "daddy issues." Maybe they grew up without a father in the home because of divorce, or their dad was emotionally volatile or physically or sexually abusive, and this caused them to shut down sexually or emotionally or to "look for love in all the wrong places," as the country song declares.

However, almost forty workshops later, I've realized that yes, absent or abusive daddies can do a lot of damage to their daughter's spirit. But the participants with the deepest self-esteem struggles and darkest secrets they're exhausted from trying to hide are often dealing with an entirely different paradigm—they struggle with "mama trauma."

Could there ever be a more important person, a more identity-shaping figure in our lives than our mothers? They carry us in their wombs and labor to bring us into the world. They fill our bellies with enough milk or formula to satiate us and help us grow into independent beings. They teach us how to talk, relate, bond, connect, and the list goes on and on. They are our mirrors for the first two decades of our lives! What we think of ourselves, we glean from what we perceive Mama thinks of us.

But what if Mama's mental/emotional mirror is distorted, like a funhouse mirror that exaggerates certain features and ultimately isn't flattering at all? It can seem like an overwhelming task to view yourself through any lens other than the one Mama held up—a task that many women invest a lifetime of energy attempting to master.

For example, Candace came to a workshop in her midthirties. Her mother struggled with obsessive-compulsive disorder and a severe case of germophobia. "The sight of dirt, spit, snot, blood, or vomit sent Mama reeling with anxiety and fear," Candace explained to the group. "If I had a runny nose, or scraped my knee, or had an upset stomach, I knew better than to expect my mom to do anything about it but freak out and scream at me. So I hid every ailment, hoping she'd be more accepting of me. But I was never clean enough, groomed enough, well enough to earn a place anywhere close to her side. It's like she had an invisible shield of protection around her, and I wasn't welcome inside that circle."

As you can imagine, Candace grew up longing for a loving mother figure and leaned heavily on every strong, accepting female teacher or mentor she could find. Unfortunately, she exhausted some of these women, who viewed her as clingy or codependent, and that has done a number on her self-esteem. Rather than risking rejection in real relationships, she drowns her sorrows with excessive alcohol and pornography. Her nagging insecurities scream, *Will I ever be good enough for anyone to love me?*

Roberta is another “unmothered” soul. She grew up in a home with a revolving door, as there seemed to be a steady flow of men coming in, but always going out too. They’d stay awhile and make promises to take care of her and her mother, but those promises were always broken. When Roberta was in her late teens, she figured out the reason. Behind her mother’s beautiful porcelain-doll face and lustrous brunette hair was a soul tormented by bouts of deep, debilitating depression. She would remain in bed for days without showering or eating much. Roberta would get herself ready for school, make her own breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and take care of most of the household chores. She had little time for socializing with friends and was too embarrassed to bring boyfriends home for fear they would run away like her mother’s boyfriends always did. When Roberta left for college, her mother drank lawn poison and took her own life. Now in her sixties, Roberta has wrestled with this question for over forty years: “Why wasn’t I enough to give my mother a reason to live?”

I’m so grateful to have been given a glimpse into these women’s lives and to have the opportunity to create a group workshop experience for them to ease some of the painful burdens they’ve carried. Often some of these women would ask, “I know you have books on overcoming daddy issues, but do you have one *for me* and my mommy issues?” However, I felt ill equipped to ever attempt such a book in light of the fact that my mom had been a strong, supportive figure in my life.

So imagine my delight when I met Phylis Mantelli and she told me of her vision to write the book you’re holding in your hands. Phylis signed up for my B.L.A.S.T. Mentorship program in 2017, and I’ve been incredibly honored to cheer her on through the process of finalizing this book and getting it ready to minister to the masses who know all too well the sting of rejection from the very people who are supposed to teach us what unconditional love and acceptance should feel like.



Phylis attended a special live event that I hosted for writers and speakers and took the stage to share parts of her personal story that drove her in this direction with her ministry. The audience was captivated by her courage and offered to rally around her efforts to make this message available in book form. I know it's going to have the same effect on you. You're going to fall in love with Phylis, celebrate her courage, cherish her authenticity, and catch the vision that just because a parent fails us doesn't mean that we have to be failure ourselves. Phylis has a phenomenal relationship with her own children, and she is a refreshing reminder that *we* choose our own destiny. *We* determine what legacy we leave behind. *We* can find purpose in our pain, by first allowing God to be the healer of our souls, and then by allowing God to use our story for His glory.

I pray you feel the motherly warmth in these pages, sense sweet hugs in Phylis's words of wisdom, and recognize the love in her heart toward *you*, dear reader. And that you, in turn, are able to love others well as a result of reading this book.

Shannon Ethridge

MA life/relationship coach, speaker and author of twenty-two books, including the million-copy best-selling Every Woman's Battle series

# Acknowledgments

**THERE ARE SO MANY TO** thank on this page—all who helped my dream come true and became an advocate for all the “unmothered.”

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To Laura Wrede, the woman who led me to Mount Hermon—your encouragement to improve my writing skills there led me to finding my writing voice. I will be forever grateful.

To my Mount Hermon forever friends—I love you more than words can say. Special thanks to my mentors over the years: B. J. Taylor, my first mentor/teacher who told me I was a great writer—you were the first one to ever read my work. Janet Thompson, Jeannette Hanscome, and many others too numerous to say—I so appreciate your encouragement. My many friends I met there—Cherie Denna, Jennifer Baker, Penny Penrod, Gabriela Banks, Crystal Hodges Johnson—you have become some of my closest friends and writing advocates.

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To my siblings and dad—we are still standing through all the rough times. My prayer is that we continue to thrive and learn from our past.

To my Savior and eternal Father God, who has generously shown me a straight path through His strength and truth to break the generational chain of family dysfunction.





# Introduction

**YOU SEE IT EVERY DAY:** mothers and daughters at lunch together or shopping at the mall, walking—sometimes hand in hand—laughing, crying, perhaps arguing, or just having a moment. Sometimes those moments become a larger part of life: mothers and daughters take vacations together, start businesses together, or move in next door.

*Is that typical?* I wonder. *Too much? Just enough?* What does a normal relationship between a mother and daughter look like? It took me a long time to answer because my relationship with my mom didn't look like any of that.

Mothers are supposed to be overprotective, always loving, and always there for you—at least that's what the Hallmark cards say. What if you grew up without that kind of mom?

That's my story. I didn't understand normal mother-daughter relationships. My relationship with my mom was different than what I saw in others because it lacked intimacy, involvement, or any concern



for my well-being. I grew up feeling empty, alone, and hurt, and because of it, I wondered, *Am I damaged goods that can never heal?*

Conflicts between mothers and daughters are classic. There are volumes written on the subject. Psychologists have tried to describe why women who share common DNA have relationship challenges. The relationship I had with my mom had many common problems, communication being one of them. She never saw me as an individual with my own passions and goals. I had to agree with her on everything, or I was against her. This was also compounded by her long-term alcohol abuse. Her continuing up-and-down mood swings temporarily subsided when she had a night out drinking. It released the anxiety that stirred within her.

She, however, became my abuser. Not my protector. Not my confidant. Not my shopping buddy or carpool driver or even someone to hug me when I cried. In her drunken state, she put me in harm's way with strangers. Her problems drove us apart. Then through a painful but ultimately liberating journey with a God who loves us, we were brought back together.

Someone once told me a vital step to healing is forgiveness. Could I find it in my heart to forgive this woman who was never available emotionally or physically? How could I overcome the years of neglect and abuse?

From the dark corners of an abusive childhood, God gave me an extraordinary opportunity to learn about patience, grace, and redemption in my own life. I became my mom's caretaker in her final years. Through those years I came away with six life lessons. They have freed me to finally live a life full of joy.

I'm not a therapist (although I confer with them for their expertise when needed). I'm a woman who wants to help others who may not have the kind of a mom they can turn to when they need help. I am a mentor mama who wants to share my journey.

If you find your story somewhere in the pages of this book, you will know that your past doesn't have to define your future, because there is hope and healing and a brighter tomorrow. You deserve the family God has planned for you. This will take some hard work on your part. I have often said, "You can't change generational dysfunction until you change the dysfunction in you."

You have learned some bad habits that may seem normal to you. You have grown up in a faulty environment. If you are ready to make changes so you can move forward, it may mean leaving some old habits behind. It may mean leaving behind some people who aren't healthy for you anymore. If you want to live your best life now, keep reading my story. May my story guide you, and perhaps my struggle, and what I ultimately left behind, will be similar to your story. And I pray that God will speak to you through these pages and lead you to a clear path of a vibrant, blessed, victorious life.



## CHAPTER 1



# Where Is Home?

**I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WOULD** happen when I saw my mom, but I was happy, for a change, because I was walking home with a new friend and neighbor. My older brother, Brian, dragged his feet behind us.

As we strolled to my house, I saw a huge semi-truck parked at the curb. Two men carried out our couch and loaded it onto the truck. Fear rose in me. What was going on? Something bad would happen when I stepped through my front door. That was how it was in our home—always something surprising, and mostly scary.

“Why is there a truck in front of your house?” my new friend asked.

I didn't have an answer.

I left my friend at the curb and ran toward the front door, my brother right behind me, only to stop dead in my tracks when I reached the living room. Every room was empty! My mother gave orders to the men carrying the last items to go into the truck, rushing them as if she were late for a meeting. Her eyes caught mine but quickly darted back to the movers.

Dizzy, I tried to catch my breath. My eight-year-old brain could only handle so much. *Where are we going? Where is our stuff? Where is Daddy? Were we moving far? Was I going to be able to see my friends? Where is my dad?*

I started to drill Mom with questions, but I only made it as far as my first one. “Is Daddy home?”

Mom was now in manic mode as my brother marched up to her. “What is going on?”

My mother looked at us with steely eyes. “We have to hurry. We’re meeting someone at the park!”

Once again I asked, “Where’s Daddy?”

She gritted her teeth. “He’s not here. Now get your stuff and let’s get going.”

I knew I needed to shut up and just follow her. If I didn’t, there would be a slap to the back of my head that would force the quietness back into me.

I took one last look around this wonderful house. It looked even bigger than when filled with furniture. I peeked into my parents’ room. My favorite space was the big bay window. It was where I spent my time daydreaming after school. Where I waited for my daddy to come home after a long trip. But mostly, my nights were spent sitting at the vanity, getting my hair tugged and pin curled each night.

*Mom grabbed a small swirl of my hair and rolled it tight to my head, securing it with two bobby pins crisscrossed on top. “Phylis Ann, I’m going to haul off and give you the biggest spanking of your life if you don’t sit still!”*

*“Mommy, it hurts,” I cried out as the next bobby pin stabbed my head.*

*“It’s not that bad. You are so dramatic. I’m a hairdresser, for goodness’ sake. I did this for a living. Stop being a sissy.”*

*Mom loved to remind me how she used to work in a beauty parlor and knew hair better than me. My perfect hair was her pride and joy and was done up just like the movie star Shirley Temple: reddish-brown ringlets*

*bounced against my cheeks. When the neighbors remarked about my hair, Mom's face glowed through her smile.*

*"Oh, Pat, your little girl looks adorable! Look at that gorgeous head of hair. Every hair in place," the neighbor said, touching my swirled, curly locks.*

*"Thank you! Phylis does have the most beautiful hair. Now if I can just get her to sit still while I'm curling it every night."*

*They laughed, looking down at me.*

*One day I destroyed those curls.*

*It was picture day at school. I wore my red dress with the white collar and blue polka-dot skinny bow tie on the front. As I walked each block closer to the classroom, I tugged at the ends of my hair to loosen those annoying ringlets. I arrived that morning with a lopsided hairdo and a red ribbon dangling by my ear.*

*Weeks later Mom saw the photographs and flipped out. "How could you do this to me? I paid for these already. Now I can't send them out to any of the relatives. You look horrible. I spent hours on your hair, and this is the thanks I get? You did this on purpose!" Mom screamed as she threw the pictures in a drawer, never to be sent out to anyone.*

I endured the worst spanking of my life that day, and I'd run to Mom and Dad's bedroom. It was also my safe spot when Mommy was mad at Daddy. I'd hear them in the kitchen, fighting about how much he was gone for work.

*"Why can't you stay home and find more local driving jobs?" she pleaded through tears.*

*"What do you want me to do?" Dad yelled back. I'm making money so you can live in this nice house."*

*"It's too hard taking care of both kids by myself all the time!" Mom screamed. "There is no one here to talk to at the end of the day. I have had enough child talk to make me throw up. I need adult time."*



I'd escape to their bedroom and listen to the birds chirping. I'd let the sun warm my face and pretend I had a mom and dad who never spoke cruel words to each other.

Although we didn't always have the best of times in this house, there were times my parents were happy together, like when we took road trips to visit Grandma Rose.

Grandma Rose was my favorite person. She spoke mainly Portuguese. She would teach me Portuguese words, and I would help her with her English. She always had homemade Coke popsicles in the freezer. My grandmother would hug me tight when I walked through the door to her home in Merced, California.

*"Pheeliz, come give me big hug, linda menina"* (beautiful little girl).  
*She pulled me close to her chest.*

I loved the comfort of her arms.

I would tuck away those memories in my heart for now. Would I ever see Grandma Rose again? Or Auntie Laura and Uncle Paul?

Mom had two best friends from when she was single. One was Laura, my godmother. A working woman, Auntie Laura had married an older gentleman but had no children. Auntie Laura and Uncle Paul were the parents I pretended were mine. They had a beautiful one-story home that was open and spacious enough for kids to run around and not break anything. There was a big backyard with an even bigger pool for us to swim in during the summer. Not being such a great swimmer, I opted to sit by the pool and dangle my feet in the cool water.

But Auntie Laura's "doll room" launched me into daydreams for hours. The space was reserved for the porcelain dolls she collected from her travels. They were enclosed in wall-to-wall glass cabinets. A Dutch girl, Indian, Spanish, Swedish, each with its own dress. I'd sit on the floor and imagine what they would be like if they were human.

*They would have moms who were kind to them.*

*Mom and Auntie Laura stood by the door and talked about the “good old days” when they were young and single. Mom seemed more relaxed, but her stress boomed loud and clear when she talked about her life.*

*“I wish I would have known how much work it was raising children. I miss having my freedom. And that no-good husband of mine is never home to help. I am just like a single mom.” She crossed her arms with a big sigh.*

*“Oh, Patty girl, you are blessed with these kids.” Auntie Laura glanced my way. “Look at this one. She’s adorable. What I would give to have a little girl.”*

*As I listened to their conversation, I drifted into my own world of how I would live if I were a Dutch girl like this doll. What would it be like to walk in those wooden shoes? I wondered what her country was like. Our last name, Van Winkle, was a Dutch name, so it was possible I had relatives in Holland.*

*Auntie Laura disrupted my thoughts. “Stay for dinner. Paul and I would love to have you all stay.” She hugged my mom as they headed toward the kitchen. Finally, some alone time.*

Now, as the moving men slammed the door to that huge truck, I wondered if I would ever dream in that doll room again?

As my mom bossed the movers around, I meandered from the bedroom to the kitchen, soaking in all the memories. The kitchen was big and always smelled delicious. Today it made me sad to walk in here knowing it would be the last time. An excellent cook, my mother loved making food from scratch. She had to, since only my dad worked and we lived on a strict budget. But my mother had grown up cooking this way. Her homemade bread was just the best thing coming out of the oven! We couldn’t wait to smother it with butter. It dripped all over my fingers. Feeling the warmth of the bread and tasting the sweetness helped soothe the anxiety from my parents’ verbal battles. And the cookies. The scent of warm dough mixed with chocolate would waft through the house. It hit your nose as soon as you walked through the door. I knew it would be a good day if Mom was baking.

There were scary times in this kitchen too. I flashed back to when my mom had lunged at my dad with a knife.

*He grabbed her hand.*

*She missed his body but sliced his shirt open, tearing into his skin.*

*Watching them, I whimpered.*

*"It's okay, honey. Daddy's fine," my father assured me.*

I wandered into the living room. It had been filled with fluffy furniture you could sink into. Lots of antiques (which my mom loved) and tons of knickknacks everywhere (which I hated to dust!). We had to dust every one of them once or twice a week, depending on Mom's mood.

I stood where the TV had been. Mom only allowed us to watch it if she wanted to. Usually Ed Sullivan, Lawrence Welk, or Carol Burnett.

She continually said how she hated having my dad gone and being alone. Many nights she went out drinking at the bars. Since she could walk anywhere in our small town, it was easy for her to take off on any given night. Sometimes she left us alone. Other times she found teenagers or a neighbor she trusted to come watch us for a few hours.

On the nights Mom stayed home, we kids watched her favorite shows, then acted out the characters. Mom looked like Carol Burnett, so Mom imitated her. I loved Tim Conway and Vicki Lawrence. We quoted the funny lines to each other. Our laughter filled the air.

Otherwise, Mom hated TV. A stubborn Portuguese woman, she limited TV watching, and she had no phone or car.

*"I can walk anywhere in this town. Why do I need to spend gas on a car? And a phone? What a stupid box that is. People look ridiculous with a clunky thing attached to their ear. Why can't they go down the street in person to talk if they have something to say?" She was proud of her reasoning.*

She didn't like change. Her life was about hard work and doing things from scratch. Her immaculate house showed it.

I stood in the space in the living room where my dad's favorite flowered chair had sat. I loved sitting on his lap after he came home from a long trip.

*"Who's my favorite girl?" he asked.*

*"Daaaaad, I'm your only girl!" Giggling, I hugged him.*

A drink balancing in one hand, his arms around me, he joked with me and tickled me until I slid to the floor, laughing hysterically.

My dad, Harold, called "Rip" by his friends, was a long-distance truck driver of fresh produce. I was Daddy's girl, and my mother resented this. He would bring my brother and me gifts and surprise us with them, even in the middle of the night—and the disruption of our sleep irritated my mom.

*"Don't you dare wake them up now. I will never get them back to sleep," Mom whispered, loud enough that I could hear her.*

*"I want to see their faces when I give them this." He bolted through the bedroom door, holding a stuffed animal.*

*It wasn't just any stuffed animal—it was the biggest brown bear I had ever seen.*

*"Daddy!" I wiped the sticky gunk from my eyes.*

*"Hey, princess, look what Daddy brought you."*

*He laid the bear on me, and it was taller than I was. I gave it the biggest squeeze and then did the same to my dad.*

*My mom crossed her arms over her chest. She had a strained smile on her face. She tried to be happy, but I didn't think she was. "Okay, okay, that's enough excitement for tonight. Turn the lights out and go to sleep." She stomped out of the room.*

*My dad winked at me and smiled that warm smile of his and shut the door. And then I heard them fighting. Something about my dad never respecting her and how he ruined everything. I hugged my bear.*

*"Back off, Pat. I'm just trying to show my kids I love them."*

Mom's real name was Ida, but she hated that name, so she went by "Pat," as her middle name was Patricia.

When my parents were together, they laughed hard and fought hard. When it turned ugly, screams echoed and fists flew. Then the cops would come and tell my dad to calm down or they would take him in.

When my dad was gone, my mom usually wound up at a bar, which was a weekly habit.

*"Only alcoholics have booze in the house," she rationalized to us as she put on lipstick, preparing to leave.*

*She walked us to a friend's house. I loved going to Mary's. She made us scrumptious homemade tortillas, which I ate till my stomach hurt. Her house was filled with laughter, hugs, and warmth. She showered love on her children, and as Mary tucked us into bed, I pretended she was my mom.*

*Bedtime at my house was brush teeth, brush hair, bedtime story, quick kiss on the cheek or forehead. Mom's good-nights were filled with rushed actions. At Mary's, her good-night kisses were rounded out with a soft cuddle, some tickles and giggles, and a big kiss and a huge hug. Mary's good-nights were filled with love.*

*We were awakened by my mother's voice saying she had to take us home right then. Mary pleaded with her, saying it was cold outside and we shouldn't be walking home this late. She begged my mom to let us stay, but my mother insisted we leave right away.*

*We shivered as we marched to our house. A car sped up behind us, and I turned. It was my dad, who screeched to the curb.*

*He jumped out, screaming at my mom. "I saw you! Don't pretend you didn't see me tonight. What the hell are you doing out, Pat?"*

*She had been caught. She'd thought he would still be away for work, but he had come home early. He grabbed my mom and pushed her to the ground.*

*She turned around and yelled, "Run!"*

*We took off down the street. As we reached the end of the block, I said to my brother, "Where do we go?" We raced back toward Mom, who was running toward us, with Dad right behind her. When he approached me, he*

*picked me up and lifted me in the air. I wasn't sure why, but I was scared, and I screamed.*

*It was the ammunition my mom needed. "See—she doesn't want you!"*

*The look on my father's face tore at my heart. He looked broken. He put me back down on the ground. The neighbors had heard the ruckus and had called the police. My mother, brother, and I were put in the back of a police car. My dad was put in handcuffs. I shook all over my body, which didn't feel like my own.*

*"Stop shaking! Sit still!" My mom grabbed my wobbly knees and held them down.*

*I didn't have control of my body. It felt like it belonged to someone else.*

*My dad went to jail. The three of us spent the night at a motel, for safety. None of us slept.*

Something was broken in our family.

And now I stood here in my childhood home, scared, saying goodbye. We were leaving . . . without my dad.

