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WOMAN
IN ME

BRITNEY SPEARS



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PROLOGUE

As a little girl I walked for hours alone in the silent woods behind my house in Louisiana, singing songs. Being outside gave me a sense of aliveness and danger. When I was growing up, my mother and father fought constantly. He was an alcoholic. I was usually scared in my home. Outside wasn't necessarily heaven, either, but it was my world. Call it heaven or hell, it was mine.

Before going home, I would follow a path to our neighbors' house, through a landscaped yard and past a swimming pool. They had a rock garden full of small, soft pebbles that would trap the heat and stay warm in a way that felt so good against my skin. I would lie down on those rocks and look up at the sky, feeling the warmth from below and above, thinking: *I can make my own way in life. I can make my dreams come true.*

Lying quietly on those rocks, I felt God.

1

Raising kids in the South used to be more about respecting your parents and keeping your mouth shut. (Today, the rules have reversed—it's more about respecting the kids.) Disagreeing with a parent was never permitted in my house. No matter how bad it got, there was an understanding to stay mute, and if I didn't, there were consequences.

In the Bible it says your tongue is your sword.

My tongue and my sword were me singing.

My whole childhood, I sang. I sang along with the car radio on the way to dance class. I sang when I was sad. To me, singing was spiritual.

I was born and went to school in McComb, Mississippi, and lived in Kentwood, Louisiana, twenty-five miles away.

Everyone knew everyone in Kentwood. Doors were left unlocked, social lives revolved around church and backyard

parties, kids were put in matching outfits, and everyone knew how to shoot a gun. The area's main historic site was Camp Moore, a Confederate training base built by Jefferson Davis. Each year there are Civil War reenactments the weekend before Thanksgiving, and the sight of the people dressed up in military outfits was a reminder that the holiday was coming. I loved that time of year: hot chocolate, the smell of the fireplace in our living room, the colors of the fall leaves on the ground.

We had a little brick house with green-striped wallpaper and wood paneling. As a girl I went to Sonic, rode go-karts, played basketball, and attended a Christian school called Parklane Academy.

The first time I was truly touched and got shivers down my spine was hearing our housekeeper singing in the laundry room. I always did the family laundry and ironing, but when times were better financially, my mom would hire someone to help. The housekeeper sang gospel music, and it was literally an awakening to a whole new world. I'll never forget it.

Ever since then, my longing and passion to sing have grown. Singing is magic. When I sing, I own who I am. I can communicate purely. When you sing you stop using the language of "Hi, how are you . . ." You're able to say things that are much more profound. Singing takes me to a mystical place where language doesn't matter anymore, where anything is possible.

All I wanted was to be taken away from the everyday world

and into that realm where I could express myself without thinking. When I was alone with my thoughts, my mind filled with worries and fears. Music stopped the noise, made me feel confident, and took me to a pure place of expressing myself exactly as I wanted to be seen and heard. Singing took me into the presence of the divine. As long as I was singing, I was half outside the world. I'd be playing in the backyard like any kid would, but my thoughts and feelings and hopes were somewhere else.

I worked hard to make things look the way I wanted them to. I took myself very seriously when I shot silly music videos to Mariah Carey songs in my girlfriend's backyard. By age eight, I thought I was a director. Nobody in my town seemed to be doing stuff like that. But I knew what I wanted to see in the world, and I tried to make it so.

Artists make things and play characters because they want an escape into faraway worlds, and escape was exactly what I needed. I wanted to live inside my dreams, my wonderful fictitious world, and never think about reality if I could help it. Singing bridged reality and fantasy, the world I was living in and the world that I desperately wanted to inhabit.

Tragedy runs in my family. My middle name comes from my father's mother, Emma Jean Spears, who went by Jean. I've seen pictures of her, and I understand why everyone said we look

alike. Same blond hair. Same smile. She looked younger than she was.

Her husband—my grandfather June Spears Sr.—was abusive. Jean suffered the loss of a baby when he was only three days old. June sent Jean to Southeast Louisiana Hospital, a by-all-accounts horrible asylum in Mandeville, where she was put on lithium. In 1966, when she was thirty-one, my grandmother Jean shot herself with a shotgun on her infant son's grave, just over eight years after his death. I can't imagine the grief that she must have felt.

The way people talk about men like June in the South is to say "Nothing was good enough for him," that he was "a perfectionist," that he was "a very involved father." I would probably put it more harshly than that.

A sports fanatic, June made my father exercise long past exhaustion. Each day when my father finished basketball practice, no matter how tired and hungry he was, he still had to shoot a hundred more baskets before he could come inside.

June was an officer for the Baton Rouge Police Department and he eventually had ten children with three wives. And as far as I can tell, no one has one good word to say about the first fifty years of his life. Even in my family, it was said that the Spears men tended to be bad news, especially in terms of how they treated women.

Jean wasn't the only wife June sent to the mental hospital in Mandeville. He sent his second wife there, too. One of my

father's half sisters has said that June sexually abused her starting when she was eleven, until she ran away at sixteen.

My father was thirteen when Jean died on that grave. I know that trauma is part of why my father was how he was with my siblings and me; why, for him, nothing was ever good enough. My father pushed my brother to excel in sports. He drank until he couldn't think anymore. He'd disappear for days at a time. When my father drank, he was extremely mean.

But June softened as he got older. I didn't experience the vicious man who had abused my father and his siblings but rather a grandfather who seemed patient and sweet.

My father's world and my mother's world were completely opposite from each other.

According to my mother, my mom's mom—my grandmother Lilian "Lily" Portell—was from an elegant, sophisticated family in London. She had an exotic air about her that everyone commented on; her mother was British and her father was from the Mediterranean island of Malta. Her uncle was a bookbinder. The whole family played instruments and loved to sing.

During World War II, Lily met an American soldier, my grandfather Barney Bridges, at a dance for the soldiers. He was a driver for the generals and he loved driving fast.

She was disappointed, though, when he brought her with

him to America. She'd imagined a life like what she had in London. As she rode to his dairy farm from New Orleans, she looked out the window of Barney's car and was troubled by how empty his world seemed. "Where are all the lights?" she kept asking her new husband.

I sometimes think about Lily riding through the Louisiana countryside, looking out into the night, realizing that her large, vibrant, music-filled life of afternoon teas and London museums was about to become small and hard. Instead of going to the theater or shopping for clothes, she would have to spend her life cooped up in the country, cooking and cleaning and milking cows.

So my grandmother kept to herself, read a ton of books, became obsessed with cleaning, and missed London until the day she died. My family said that Barney didn't want to let Lily go back to London because he thought that if she went, she wouldn't come home.

My mother said Lily was so distracted by her own thoughts that she had a tendency to start clearing the table before everyone was done eating.

All I knew was that my grandmother was beautiful and I loved copying her British accent. Talking in a British accent has always made me happy because it makes me think of her, my fashionable grandmother. I wanted to have manners and a lilting voice just like hers.

Because Lily had money, my mother, Lynne; her brother,

Sonny; and her sister, Sandra, grew up with what you might consider money-money, especially for rural Louisiana. Even though they were Protestant, my mom attended Catholic school. She was gorgeous as a teenager, with her black hair worn short. She'd always go to school wearing the highest boots and the tiniest skirts. She hung out with the gay guys in town, who gave her rides on their motorcycles.

My father took an interest in her, as well he might. And probably in part because June made him work so ridiculously hard, my father was unbelievably talented at sports. People would drive for miles just to see him play basketball.

My mom saw him and she said, "Oh, who is this?"

By all accounts, their relationship was born of mutual attraction and a sense of adventure. But the honeymoon was over long before I came along.

2

When they got married, my parents lived in a small home in Kentwood. My mother was no longer supported by her family, so my parents were very poor. They were young, too—my mom was twenty-one and my father was twenty-three. In 1977, they had my big brother, Bryan. When they left that first small place, they bought a little three-bedroom ranch house.

After Bryan was born, my mom went back to school to become a teacher. My dad, who worked as a welder at oil refineries—hard jobs that would last a month or sometimes three—started to drink heavily, and before too long, that was taking its toll on the family. The way my mom tells it, a couple of years into the marriage, my grandfather Barney, my mom's dad, died in a car accident, and in the aftermath, my dad went on a bender, missing Bryan's first birthday party. When Bryan was a toddler, my father got drunk at a Christmas party and

went AWOL on Christmas morning. That time my mother said she'd had enough. She went to stay with Lily. That March of 1980, she filed for divorce. But June and June's new wife begged her to take him back, and she did.

For a while, apparently, everything was calm. My dad stopped welding and started a construction business. Then, after a lot of struggle, he got a gym business going, too. It was called Total Fitness and it transformed some of the men in town, including my uncles, into bodybuilders. He ran it in a detached studio space on our property, next door to the house. An endless string of muscular men streamed in and out of the gym, flexing their muscles in the mirrors under the fluorescent lights.

My dad started doing really well. In our little town he became one of the most well-off men. My family threw big backyard crawfish boils. They had crazy parties, with dancing all night long. (I've always assumed their secret ingredient for staying up all night was speed, since that was the drug of choice back then.)

My mom opened a daycare center with her sister, my aunt Sandra. To cement their marriage, my parents had a second baby—me. I was born on December 2, 1981. My mother never missed an opportunity to recall that she was in excruciating labor with me for twenty-one hours.



I loved the women in my family. My aunt Sandra, who already had two sons, had a surprise baby at thirty-five: my cousin Laura Lynne. Just a few months apart, Laura Lynne and I were like twins, and we were best friends. Laura Lynne was always like a sister to me, and Sandra was a second mother. She was so proud of me and so encouraging.

And even though my grandmother Jean was gone long before I was born, I was lucky enough to know her mother, my great-grandmother Lexie Pierce. Lexie was *wicked* beautiful, always made up with a white, white face and red, red lipstick. She was a badass, more and more so as she got older. I was told, and had no trouble believing, that she'd been married seven times. Seven! Obviously, she disliked her son-in-law June, but after her daughter Jean died, she stuck around and took care of my father and his siblings, and then her great-grandchildren, too.

Lexie and I were very close. My most vivid and joyful memories of being a little girl are of times spent with her. We'd have sleepovers, just the two of us. At night, we'd go through her makeup cabinet. In the morning, she would make me a huge breakfast. Her best friend, who lived next door, would come over to visit and we'd listen to slow 1950s ballads from Lexie's record collection. During the day, Lexie and I would nap together. I loved nothing more than drifting off to sleep by her side, smelling her face powder and her perfume, listening as her breathing grew deep and regular.