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Nobody's Girl

A MEMOIR OF SURVIVING ABUSE
AND FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Virginia Roberts Giuffre



doubleday

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*Part I***DAUGHTER**

“Do you know why this world is as bad as it is? . . . It is because people think only about their own business, and won’t trouble themselves to stand up for the oppressed, nor bring the wrong-doers to light. . . . My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.”

—ANNA SEWELL, *Black Beauty*

ONE

“Baby”

Picture a girl sitting alone on a curb, her face stained with tears. She is fifteen, but so skinny that she appears even younger. She could be pretty, with her blue eyes and long blond hair, but her freckled face is swollen, her throat is bruised, and in her mouth is a taste she will never forget: gunmetal. Bleeding from places she didn't know she could bleed, this girl has been hurt before, but not like this. A gust of wind makes the palm trees above her shudder. She wipes her bloody lip. What would it be like, she wonders, to matter?

Then she sees the stretch limousine. As it glides toward her, black and shiny, the girl catches a glimpse of the driver behind the wheel. Her mind flashes on the limo in Disney's *101 Dalmatians*, the one that Cruella de Vil drives around London, looking for puppies to skin. How many times has she watched that movie? But this isn't a scene from a cartoon. That's kids' stuff, and the girl hasn't felt like a kid in years. This is real life in Miami, Florida. And the girl is me.

Busting out of the juvenile detention facility in Palm Beach County forty-eight hours earlier, I'd been so full of hope. I knew from experience

that I needed to ditch my juvie uniform—a navy polo and khakis—or the cops would pick me up right away. So my first stop had been a Marshalls discount store, where I quickly changed into a new T-shirt and jeans and made a show of returning my prison-issue garb, neatly hung on a hanger, to a rack. Then I exited the store without paying and headed straight for Delray Beach.

I've always been good at talking to strangers. On the sand, I met a stoner dude—way older than me, but with a mellow energy. He was smoking a joint, which he offered to share as we looked out at the Atlantic. When I told him I planned to sleep outside that night, he said I could crash on his couch. I worried that he wanted sex, but I was wrong. When we got to his place, we just smoked some more pot and then he found me a clean towel so I could take a shower. “Please be gone by the morning,” he said before he went to bed. “I go to work early. And please don’t fuck up my house. Do the right thing.”

Not all men are monsters.

The next morning before dawn, I did the right thing, pulling the front door shut with a quiet click. Then I headed for the train station, where I took most of the money I had—a twenty-dollar bill I’d pan-handled from a gas-station attendant—out of my ponytail scrunchie, where I’d hidden it, and bought a one-way ticket to Miami. An hour and a half later, I arrived at the Miami-Dade station, fifty miles south of Palm Beach. I’d run away dozens of times before, but I’d never made it this far.

From the station, I headed east on foot, figuring I was about an hour’s walk from the ocean. Right away, I saw the pink and orange glow of a Dunkin’ Donuts up ahead. Back home in Loxahatchee, I’d often begged for change outside the local Dunkin’, so the sight of its logo—a cheerful steaming coffee cup—felt like a good omen. I went inside and bought two of my favorite chocolate-topped donuts. With

food in my stomach for the first time in days, I walked out feeling confident. I had no place to go, but I'd figure it out, somehow.

I must have been walking for about twenty minutes when a white van pulled over just ahead of me. "Need a lift?" the driver asked, sounding friendly. "I'm going your way." Maybe it was the sugar high, but my guard was down. Besides, it was hot and humid, and the dark-haired driver looked like a skinny shrimp—bigger than me, but not by much. I got in and buckled up. The driver glanced at me, then back at the road. He was probably in his late thirties and dressed as if he worked construction. "I need to make one quick stop," he said. He owed someone money, he said, and needed to pay them back. That's cool, I replied, in a voice I hoped sounded tough. The van turned west, away from the water, then parked in front of a seedy-looking motel. "Come upstairs with me," the construction worker said. "It'll only take a sec." I followed him up, then through a door into a dingy, worn-out room.

He was on me immediately, and I knew right away I had underestimated his strength. He overpowered me and held me down on the bed, one hand around my neck. Then he pulled a gun and put its muzzle into my mouth. He raped me from the front first, then from the back. The only lubrication was the saliva he spit into his palm. He choked me until I lost consciousness, then let me breathe, then choked me again. I imagined myself dead, dumped in a ditch. And then a miracle: the man's cell phone rang, and he released me so he could answer it. "Stay here," my attacker told me. "Try to leave, and I'll find you and kill you." Then he turned back to his phone and stepped outside. I suspected he was going to kill me either way. So I waited until I couldn't hear his voice anymore. Then I ran.

That's how I became this tearstained girl sitting on a curb in an empty beach parking lot. It is dusk when I see the limousine slow to a stop in front of me. The tinted rear passenger window hums as it

opens, revealing the pasty face of a stranger in his sixties. He is heavy-set, balding. I watch his eyes as they roam over my swollen, bruised face and battered body. "Oh, you poor baby," the old man says. His concern sounds genuine. Peering into the car, I see a pretty girl in a short red dress sitting next to him. She smiles at me. The old man wears black slacks and a collared shirt. The men in my family tend toward blue jeans or coveralls. I hope this stranger is different from them in other ways too.

"Come in here so we can take care of you," the old man says, as the girl nods encouragement. I think of my attacker driving around in his white van, his gun in his lap, searching for the girl who got away. I stand up, wobbly. The limo door opens, and the old man slides over to make room for me.

The old man tells the limo driver where to go, then introduces himself. His name is Ron Eppinger, and he runs a modeling agency called Perfect 10, he says. He gestures toward Yana, the girl next to him, who is from the Czech Republic. Would I like to become a model like her? He asks me how old I am, and at first I say sixteen because it sounds better to me, less vulnerable. Eppinger shakes his head; he isn't buying it. So I tell him the truth, that I'm fifteen, which seems to please him. "As long as you never lie to me again, I will take you in," he says. "What does that mean?" I think, but don't ask out loud. Then Eppinger's fleshy face turns sad. He had a daughter once, he says. Susan Marie. She died when she was fifteen, when the driver of a truck she was riding in fell asleep and crashed into a utility pole in Pompano Beach. Eppinger has never gotten over it, he tells me, and for a moment, I feel sorry for him.

That's when he reaches for me and strokes my hair. "If you want," Eppinger says, "I can be your new daddy."

How quickly he does that, twisting the father-daughter bond into something sickening. But I already know that trick, and I want to be-

lieve it doesn't work on me anymore. I don't trust parents—especially fathers. I don't need a daddy, old or new. I just want a break from fending for myself. When you grow up female, danger is everywhere. I've known that for as long as I can remember. Just hours ago, the construction worker in the white van showed me a darker shade of evil. I know I can't go home again. There's no safety there. My whole body aches, inside and out. I have no good options.

The old man, the model, and I order takeout from an oceanfront stand. As we eat—I scarf mine down like an animal—we listen to the waves. Then Eppinger says he wants to take me shopping. We go to a nearby GapKids, and he steers me toward short shorts that don't cover my backside and tops that are way too small. From the look on the saleswoman's face, it's easy to tell what she's thinking: This isn't what most grandfathers buy their granddaughters. Next, we go to a lingerie store where Eppinger seems to be a regular. He picks out G-strings and other lacy things that I've only seen grown women wear in the movies. He holds them up to my newly developed body, leering. Finally, he tells the chauffeur to take us home.

Inside his huge apartment in Key Biscayne, with its sweeping views of Miami across the Rickenbacker Causeway, Eppinger introduces me with a wave of his hand to five other girls, most of them wearing underwear or nothing at all. Only a few speak English. Then, he takes me to a back room—his room. There is a circular bed and a mirrored ceiling. I ask where I can sleep. “With me,” he says.

Part of me feels a familiar dread. Is it too late to get away? But another, bigger part remembers how life was in rehab and in foster care and, worst of all, on the run. Maybe this is the way all men behave? I am tired. I want to feel nothing. The old man calls me “Baby.” I am the youngest girl there, so the nickname sort of fits. I want to become someone new so badly that I accept it. “Baby” is now who I am.

IT'S BREAKFAST TIME, and my kids—ages eleven, fourteen, and fifteen—are tearing around the house, almost late for school. At the sunny end of our kitchen island, I sip a perfect cup of coffee, cherishing the chaos. My husband, Robbie, hands out the lunches he's packed: three healthy snacks and one oversized sandwich. (Robbie's family is from Sicily, and his Italian subs are hard to beat.) My job is to confirm that everyone has their homework, their permission slips, their *gi* uniforms for their after-school martial-arts classes. As Robbie herds them toward the car, I hug my daughter and two sons tight, ignoring how they wriggle to get free. "Hurry up!" Robbie yells. "That bell is about to ring!" Then, impulsively, I decide I want to come too. Though still in my pajamas, I jump in the front passenger seat as Robbie opens our electric security gate, and I marvel that this is my life.

Later, I'll take a Pilates class and make *coq au vin* for dinner, giving Robbie (our family's primary chef) a well-deserved night off. But first I must return to the job of examining what came before. It's no fun, this task I've assigned myself, but it is necessary. Would it be easier to spend my waking hours walking on the beach with Juno, my French bulldog, or taking my daughter, Ellie, shopping for earrings, or getting ready to overdecorate our house for Christmas? (My husband complains every year, but I can't help but go overboard on Christmas.) Yes, it would be easier. And I do all those things too.

But it's finally time, I've decided, to put all the puzzle pieces of my life together. I couldn't do that as a child, which is part of the story. Children don't have the luxury of that kind of reflection. Especially if they are in bad situations as I was, they must focus all their energies on simply trying to survive. In the present, my life is organized around two things: my devotion to my husband and children and my determination to hold my abusers accountable. Part of me would prefer to

start in the here and now, describing the gratitude I feel as I arrange Santa Claus figurines, say, or shiny strands of tinsel. But my past demands an audience. It has been hidden for too long.

So how did I end up in Miami, penniless, battered, and alone, at the age of fifteen? There are so many answers to that question, but if you'd asked me in 1998, unpacking them all would have hurt too much. Instead, I would have offered the shortest explanation. "I ran away," I would have said. "I ran away from Growing Together."