

Keri DeDeo Memoir

Chapter 1

The first time my mother died, I was 10. It was at the side of I-80 westbound somewhere between Winslow and Flagstaff, Arizona on Thanksgiving Day, 1979. The car slowed and my mom slurred, “I don’t...feel well. I’m going to...pass...out.” She had the mind to remove her foot from the gas before she slumped to the side. I grabbed the wheel and pulled the car over to the highway shoulder. The car rolled to a stop, and I pulled on the emergency break. I shook Mom, yelling her name...trying not to panic. “Mom!” I yelled and shook her harder. “Mom!” She opened her eyes and looked at me through the partial slits of her eyelids. “Tell them carbon monoxide poisoning.” I didn’t know what that was, but I memorized it, and she slumped to the side again.

I leaped out of the car and scanned the highway.

The desert wind blew icy fingers of cold across my face and dried bits of grass flew across the asphalt. Dried grass, tumble weeds, and sand speckled the landscape. I crossed the median as I saw a square shape coming over the hill from the opposite direction: a semi-truck.

I ran through the golden grass to the other side of I-80, waving my arms and screaming “Stop!” over and over.

He slowed, but I didn’t think he’d stop. I jumped up and down getting closer to his lane, my arms flailing like a windmill. I didn’t know how to get him to stop—to understand the situation. I had to get in his lane, his direct line of sight. I waved, jumped, stomped. The thought that he could run me over never occurred to me as I stepped in his lane. He slowed, pulling to the side of the road, the brakes squealing and hissing as the truck finally stopped. His window opened, and I strained my neck up as far as I could. I don’t even think he asked, “What’s wrong?” I just flew into my explanation.

“My mom. She’s sick. Carbon. Monoxide. Poisoning,” I recited. I turned back to the car and pointed. My mom was flat on the road in front of the red Plymouth. Seeing my mom prostrate on the ground in front of the red Arrow, a heap of dark clothing and black curly hair, startled me, and I began running back to her. But the man...I needed the man to follow. He spoke on his CB radio and then slammed his truck door. Looking both ways, he ran to my mother’s side. I stopped

in the median at the side of the road, not wanting to get closer and suddenly, a sense of panic and despair flooded me as I watched this tall stranger pumping his hands on my mother's chest.

The memory of that day comes in snippets: snapshots of moments that terrified and astounded me. More cars stopped to help. A woman with brown hair and a kind face wrapped my mom in a brown, thick, cotton sleeping bag and told me not to worry as police arrived and I was placed in the back of a police car.

The adults had taken over. The scared child surfaced and I remember my chest feeling tight as I tried to be brave. I'm sure I cried, but I don't remember that. I just remember fear, and sitting just inside the back seat of a patrol car, wrapped in a blanket, a police officer kneeled in front of me. I hardly saw her. All I saw were the paramedics working on my mom...an oxygen mask over her mouth. The police officer tried to hide the sight from me as they loaded my mom into the ambulance.

"Is she going to die?" I asked. "Please don't let her die," I sobbed.

"It will be okay," the policewoman said and asked me to tell her again what had happened.

It was Thanksgiving. My step-father was working at the railroad station like he did most holidays, and my mom, her friend Nina, and I were planning a trip to Flagstaff, 60 miles west of Winslow, to spend the day with Rod for a lobster dinner.

Lobster on Thanksgiving had become a special treat years before when my mom was single and dating Rod. That was when we still lived in Flagstaff—before my mom finished her MA in Music Education. It was before my brothers Tory and Tom joined us after spending a few years with my dad in Minnesota. It was before they left again to live with Dad. It was before it was just Mom and me.

Rod owned a trailer house at the edge of Williams, a small hunting community outside of Flagstaff. He owned several hunting dogs who barked at the end of metal chains secured to the front of their flat-roofed houses. At least four floppy-eared dogs with brown and white spots bayed and wagged their tails when we arrived. I was only allowed to pet Daisy—the youngest and kindest of the group. She had black and white spots with tiny brown freckles between the black patches across her back and belly. She was just a puppy, and Tom and I spoiled her by

sneaking her into the house and feeding her dog biscuits and pieces of bread. She would lick my face and plant her muddy paws on my chest and wag all over while I hugged her and scratched behind her ears.

Despite the friendliness of Daisy, Rod repeated often that his dogs were not pets. They were “hunting dogs and had to be treated with respect.” In other words, I had to stay away from them. He worried they would hurt me with their strong bodies and sharp teeth. They didn’t scare me, though with their wagging tails and floppy ears.

In the tiny kitchen at Rod’s house, we set the small, yellow-topped, metal table with white Cornella plates and flimsy silverware, and Rod placed a large gray aluminum pot of water on the stove to boil. I had never seen or eaten lobster before, and Tom told me to listen for their screams as they boiled. I think it was even my mom’s first time eating lobster. As the lobster boiled, we did hear a loud-pitch sound as if they were “screaming.” But it didn’t bother me...I still wanted to eat the creatures.

Eating animals never bothered me. I spent many nights in a shed as my father drained and skinned deer...sometimes this was all the food we had, and he taught me the importance of hunting to feed our family. So, the small sound of “screaming” lobsters did not deter my appetite.

We ate our lobsters with small cups of melted butter and lemon. I’m sure we had side dishes, but I only remember the lobsters and the happiness we had felt on that day.

That was three years before my mother passed out at the side of the highway, and we were looking forward to another lobster Thanksgiving.

That morning at home, we all woke up sick. I had a bad headache, but my mom and Nina felt worse. I stood on the floor heater grate and let the warm air bathe me from the feet up as I waited for Nina to get out of the bathroom. She used the walls and bookshelf to guide her way back to my mother’s room, smiling slightly to me. Usually a pale redhead, she looked almost ashen and a little green. But I was excited to see Rod and have lobster.

I showered and got ready to go, hoping my headache would go away. My mother was ill in her bathroom next door. I could hear her retching as I towel dried my hair. My head still hurt, but the

excitement of our trip kept me going. By the time I was dressed and out of the shower, my mother announced that Nina was gone. Her mother had come to get her. She was too sick to go anywhere.

“Maybe it’s the flu,” she said.

I could see my mom was not well either, but she gathered our things and put them in the Arrow. We were going—sick or not—and I was glad. I missed Rod and our lobster dinners and the dogs. My step dad had a dog, but she was a tiny, tan Chihuahua with bugged-out brown eyes who barked or growled at me when I tried to pick her up. She even bit me a few times. We were not really friends, but still, she tolerated me and allowed me to play with her when Harry wasn’t home.

One time, as we played out in the front yard, I heard a gunshot. A bullet struck the grass a few feet in front of me, just inches from Pancha. I looked at the cars driving by, but had no idea where the bullet came from. I picked her up and we ran inside, not telling anyone what had happened because I knew they wouldn’t believe me. I wasn’t sure if the target had been me or the dog, but after that, I was scared to play in the front yard.

But on Thanksgiving, Pancha would stay home. Harry would be back soon to sleep for the day before his next shift, but we would still be in Flagstaff.

The house we kept with Harry contained two bedrooms with a full dining room and a game room. The walls were lined with fake wood paneling and the carpet in the master bedroom, living room, and dining room was a shaggy, light rusty color—very typical for the 1970’s house. My room was at the front of the house and housed my treasures: my marbled-top, 4-drawer dresser, a trunk for my toys, and my double bed. The room had been carpeted for me—a plush, rose color. It was a large room, and I remember playing horses and building race tracks with my friends.

The house also contained a dark room and a game room. I was not allowed in the dark room. Harry kept it locked, but at times when he was home, he would let me in and show me the sinks, processing trays, and the pictures he developed as an amateur photographer. I was vaguely interested, but mostly, I liked the game room. The same brown paneling that lined the rest of the house lined this room. A large window with a box seat underneath looked out into the small

back yard. A boxy, gray TV was mounted in the corner and swiveled on a metal arm so we could watch it from any spot in the room. Dominating the room, however, was a full-sized pool table. The table could convert to a Ping-Pong table by putting two halves onto the pool table. The cover was stored in the shed outside (also, my make shift tack room). I spent hours playing pool and setting up trick shots. When my brothers visited, this is where we spent our time, and I learned the value of competition. I like to think that I'm still a good pool player, but my friends know the truth. Still, the hours spent in that room provided me with joy and the opportunity to clear a pool table once in my life.

It was in Sweden or Denmark—I can't really remember, but it was during a tour my mother and I took to Scandinavia one summer. That night we stayed in a hotel where a few teenagers were playing pool. The room was crowded, adults sitting along the walls in metal folding chairs. Small children ran about and teenagers played pool. As they finished a game, I asked if I could play, and the oldest blonde girl nodded. She was maybe a year or two older than me. I was 13 at the time, but she was shy—like me, so we did not talk much, but she let me play.

I broke and a ball went into the corner. By my brother Gary's rules, that was a "slop" shot, so I couldn't go again. My opponent, however, refused her turn. So I took another shot. The break had scattered the balls nicely, and several easy shots were available.

Gary's voice whispered in my ear, and I listened as I took a shot and planned the next one, making sure to hit the cue ball just so—allowing it to stop right where I needed it for the next shot. After I shot in several balls, and headed towards what I thought would be a perfect game, one ball just hit the green felt and bounced just shy of the corner pocket.

It was the girl's turn, and she took the cue stick, aimed, and took her shot. The stick glanced off the cue ball as she lifted the stick too fast. Again, I heard Gary's voice: "You have to follow through. Don't be in such a hurry. Place your shot, glide the stick across your fingers, and follow the ball with your stick. Stay there until the cue ball hits its mark. Then, only then, do you lift the stick." The girl had not done that, and the ball barely moved. She groaned and began to hand me the stick. I put the cue ball back to its starting position and motioned for her to take the shot again.

An adult—a man, perhaps her father—gave her some instructions in their native language. He showed her how to glide the stick across her fingers and to hit the ball solidly, not lifting her stick. She took the shot again—straighter this time—but the ball did not go in. She handed me the stick and I shrugged. “Good try,” I said and smiled.

I had five balls left, counting the 8 ball, and I took my time for each shot, measuring and calculating.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but the room seemed silent as I took those five shots. I felt every eye in the room on me, but I managed to block them out as each ball fell into a pocket. I called the 8 ball by pointing to the far corner pocket. The cue stick, slick between my fingers, slid back and forth as I calculated the pressure needed to hit the black ball. I made sure to hit the cue ball just below the center, ensuring it would stop shortly after hitting the ball and avoiding a scratch, which would mean I’d lose the game. With a deep breath, I hit the ball with the stick. The cue ball sputtered forward and clicked on the 8 ball exactly where I wanted. The 8 ball rolled to the corner pocket, slowing down just before reaching the edge. I breathed out, not realizing I’d been holding my breath, and then took another quick breath as the 8 ball seemed to stop.

The cue ball had stopped a few inches from where it struck the 8 ball, so scratching was not a problem. The 8 ball had an 8th of an inch before going in, and it hovered on the green felt, finally teetering into the pocket.

Inside, I jumped for joy and screamed, “Yes!”

Outwardly, however, I smiled, turned to the girl and gave her the pool stick. “Thank you,” I said and walked away. Her mouth was slightly open and the adults in the room smiled at me and nodded their heads. I never played pool that well again, but I never forgot that game, and I always counted it as one of my highest achievements.

For my mother, however, one of my highest achievements was pulling over the car as she passed out at the wheel on that Thanksgiving Day.

By the time the ambulance left with my mother and the scene was clearing away, the truck driver was gone. I had wanted to say thank you, but he had vanished.

My mother was admitted to the hospital, and as I waited to find out what would happen next, I remember seeing Nina's family in the waiting room. Nina had been admitted to the hospital as well, and they were waiting to see how she was going to be. She would be fine after some fluids, but had to stay in the hospital. With nowhere to go, they took me home with them, and I ate Thanksgiving dinner at a huge table in a dark house with strangers.

A few days later, my mom was released from the hospital and she talked of nearly dying. I learned that her heart had stopped at the side of the road and a few times in the ambulance. They had revived her each time, and she came back. "I needed to return for you," she told me, and she called me her hero.

But I wasn't the hero. The trucker—he was the hero. The woman who gave me the sleeping bag—she was the hero. My mother—taking her foot off the gas pedal and telling me her diagnosis before she fainted—she was the hero. Heroes were everywhere that day. My part was tiny compared to those who saved my mother's life more than once.

The theory was that Mom & Nina were more affected because they were closer to the heater, and they slept with the door open. Mom always slept with the bedroom door open so the air from the heater would keep her warm. That floor grate was the only heat for the main house. The add-on rooms had long electric heaters against the walls that clicked when they turned on and running. They were often not on—it was the Arizona desert after all, and it hardly got below freezing in the winter.

Preferring privacy to warmth, I kept my door closed, a sliding accordion plastic door that latched to a magnet on the wall. That flimsy, plastic door kept me safe and relatively free from the dangers of the gas.

The police invaded the house, thinking Harry would be trapped after his railroad shift—sleeping while the deadly gas replaced the air in his lungs. But the house was empty. Harry never accounted for his whereabouts, and investigators reported that the heater had been tampered with. But nothing could be proved. Perhaps my step-father tried to kill us. Perhaps he hadn't. All I know is that we soon moved out.