



The Sergeant's Daughter: A Memoir

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The Sergeant's Daughter is a harrowing account of growing up and growing past childhood abuse.

Teresa Shelton's ultimately hopeful memoir, *The Sergeant's Daughter*, is about enduring childhood abuse, as well as adult struggles to break free and build a happier life.

The book opens with a funeral. Shelton, now in her fifties, is poised to eulogize her father, Jon, who was more cruel than loving. She grew up in his household, in which inspections and punishment took the place of hugs and I love you's, and her father's reign of fear continued to give her pause into adulthood. With mourners and her surviving sister, Karen, staring at her, Shelton settles on her only happy childhood memory, choosing to recount how her father would crank up the music and dance with her.

Music is a significant theme in the chronological story that follows; as with the memory of music that saves Shelton from voicing her abuse at the funeral, "squirreling away" song lyrics becomes her means of escape during excruciating episodes of abuse. Chapters are succinct—a salve for the reader, since the abuse they record is harrowing. By the tender age of five, Shelton learned to "keep a close eye on Dad and straighten up the moment his smile [disappears]." In one scene, before delivering a whipping with a brass-buckled green belt, Jon grabbed Shelton's shoulder; she recalls hoping that it wouldn't "pop," as Karen's often did. By age eight, Shelton understood that her mother would never intervene; her father was free to berate, humiliate, and punish his three daughters for any failed "inspection."

Such harrowing moments are balanced by accounts of the kindness of Shelton's extended family, school friends, teachers, and neighbors during their endless moves between army bases. Among other places, the family lived in Kansas, Germany, and Alaska, where people either befriended, empowered, or took the girls under their wings, showing Shelton what normal, loving relationships should entail.

Shelton's silent mother turning a blind eye to the abuse is a recurring source of contention, and Shelton's teenage discovery that her sister Debbie's biological father was a "quiet and kind" man shows why Debbie was picked on the most. Shelton's mother's poems are incorporated into chapters about how her choices and decisions impacted Shelton and her sisters; they suggest a romanticization of the situation, making reconciliation seem all the more impossible.

Characterizations are enriched by the book's dialogue; Shelton's conversations with Jon's parents, his school friend, and Jon himself represent repeated attempts to identify the origins of her father's cruelty, and his sadistic streak is traced to his early childhood, when he committed a heinous act of animal cruelty. It's shown to have escalated toward an offense so bad that he was given an ultimatum: a prison sentence or army service.

There are poignant moments in the memoir, too, including a dream about finding a magic potion to sprinkle over Jon to "transform him into a decent man." The text is measured and unsentimental, though; its tragic accounts result in

emotional depth that goes beyond mere pathos.

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BIANCA BOWERS (April 23, 2020)

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