

*This is the story of my life in rural America with my incredible dad and my emotionally abusive mother. Beginning in the 1940s, my journey took me on a tempestuous roller coaster ride that lasted into my adulthood, with more than a few bumps along the way. In 2018, I experienced the biggest jolt of all, which was the impetus for this book.*

## **My Father's Daughter**

by Carol Caloro

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# *My Father's Daughter*



CAROL CALORO

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64438-566-1

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64438-567-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2019

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Caloro, Carol

My Father's Daughter by Carol Caloro

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Personal

Memoirs | FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS / Life Stages /

Adolescence | FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS /

Parenting / Single Parent

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019901970

## CHAPTER THREE

Mom's family was different from Dad's but I liked them too, except for one of Mom's brothers. Gram was less of a homebody than Grandma, more adventurous, more outgoing, more social. She even took a trip to Hawaii once, just her and her sister Emily. That impressed me; I didn't know anyone who had ever been to Hawaii, unless they were in the military at the time. It was so far away! I guess if I'd been asked to describe Gram then I would have said she was 'modern,' but of course that would have been the opinion of a girl growing up in a very rural part of the country, many years ago. She and my grandfather didn't own a house; they rented an upstairs apartment with a great screened-in porch off the kitchen. Because it was upstairs, it had a nice view. The man who owned the house, and lived on the other side of it, had honey bees out back. From Gram's porch I could see beyond the trees that lined the driveway and into the field where the bees were buzzing around their hives. Gram always had fresh honeycomb. We would cut off a chunk, put it in our mouths, suck out all the honey and then chew the wax that was left, like gum. I loved to stay at Gram's overnight during the summer so I could sleep on the porch. If I was mad at my mother, I would

sometimes ride my bike to Gram's. Once in the winter I walked there through the snow. I walked the entire way, through fields and over roads, backward. As ridiculous as it sounds now, I thought if my footprints were facing the wrong way my mother wouldn't know where I'd gone. Gram taught me how to play Canasta, and then she taught my sister Patty. I sometimes drove her crazy when we played because I felt compelled to arrange the cards on the table every time it was my turn. They had to be spaced evenly apart, in nice straight rows. "Carol!" she would say. "For heaven's sake, just play!"

My grandfather was movie-star handsome, with thick black wavy hair, but he didn't engage much in conversation. If someone asked him a question, the most they usually got in return was a grumble. I called him 'Grumpy,' a name that only I used. He was a drinker and often away on lengthy fishing trips, which was just fine with Gram because when he was home he was abusive. I never witnessed it, but I heard about it. He was nice to me though, even funny sometimes, and I liked him. He was color-blind, and although neither my mother nor my brother could see red and green properly, I was told Grumpy couldn't see any color at all – only black and white and shades of gray. I delighted in showing him different colored marbles in a big glass bowl that Gram kept on a sideboard in the dining room. One at a time I would pick them up

and he would guess at the color. Of course, he was always wrong and I would laugh every time. I suspect he could see more color than he admitted, but I think he enjoyed amusing me that way. I could also get away with tickling his feet when he was in his big, red recliner watching TV, even though he hated it and it made him jump. But when one of my cousins tried to do it, he yelled at her and told her to stop. "Carol does it," she would protest. "Why don't you holler at her?!" "Because Carol's my favorite." That statement now gives me pause.

Once, when I had the mumps, he sent me a get-well card and wrote on it, "To Mumpy from Grumpy." I still have it. He died of a sudden heart attack when he was sixty years old and I was just two weeks away from giving birth to my first child. He had joked with me that he was not old enough to become a great-grandfather. He never did. One of my sisters, who was still living at home when he died, told me recently that when Mom got the news about his death she fell to her knees on the kitchen floor, completely hysterical and inconsolable. My mother was not an emotional person; I honestly cannot remember ever seeing her cry. If she did show any emotion it was usually anger, displeasure, or jealousy. She was not particularly close to her father. She never had any real conversations with or about him that I was witness to. Occasionally she might mention that he was away on another fishing trip or relay something

she'd heard about an incident at 'Lock 7,' where he worked. The lock was one of many on the Erie Canal system, used to raise or lower vessels from one water level to another. At most, if we were at Gram's and he happened to be home, Mom would talk to him about the weather or tell him something one of us kids had done. Or she would sit in the kitchen with Gram while Grumpy watched TV in the living room or went downstairs to putter around in the garage that was on the ground floor, under their apartment. So why this uncharacteristic outburst, this completely over-the-top reaction to his death? I don't believe it was grief.

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Mom had three brothers and a sister, not counting two who had died as infants. Her youngest brother is just two years older than me and we went to the same school. He was more like a brother to me than an uncle, but I called him 'Uncle Reggie' when I saw him in the hallways, just to piss him off and embarrass him as he walked to class with his friends. I followed him around on his paper route and he didn't seem to mind, but he'd often buy himself an ice cream cone when he got paid, and when I told Gram, she said he had to buy me one too. I don't think that made him particularly happy. Reggie and Patty and I spent a lot of time together. In the winter we would go sledding or ice skating. In the summer we'd all walk down to the dam to go swimming. There was a long rope there that we

could hold on to and swing out over the water, dropping at just the right second. There was also a big pine tree that had been sawed off leaving a platform of sorts on the top. Someone had nailed boards up the side of the tree that we used as a ladder. We'd stand on the platform and jump into the water. Some brave (or crazy) kids would stand on the top of the dam itself, but I never did that. I was afraid of falling off the wrong side. On Halloween, the three of us would take pillow cases and spend hours roaming the entire village. The pillow cases were Reggie's idea; they could hold a lot of loot, and they got so heavy we could barely carry them. Reggie also took me to my first scary movie. It was called "The Fly," and Vincent Price starred in it. After the show I was going to stay overnight at Gram's and sleep on that wonderful porch, but I was so terrified by the movie that I could not stay out there by myself after dark. I still don't like scary movies. When Reggie wasn't with his own friends, he was often challenging me to do things I might not have otherwise done. He was a bit of a dare-devil and I would push myself beyond the limits of common sense by copying him, even though he was older. I developed a derring-do attitude that has followed me all of my life and is probably why I broke a vertebra at the top of Killington trying to ski down a trail I had no business being on, and why, at the age of sixty-two, I celebrated my oldest son's fortieth birthday by jumping out of a plane with him. I have a picture



of Reggie and me, taken just a few years ago on a very large roller coaster. In the photo, I am white-knuckling the grab bars, my eyes squeezed shut, my mouth wide open, screaming with delight. Reggie is sitting next to me, his hands in his lap, eyes looking straight ahead, perfectly calm. He looks like he's sitting at the dinner table, waiting to be served. It's a very funny picture, and remarkably reminiscent of the way we were as kids.

Mom's oldest brother shared Grumpy's love of booze and the two of them would spend long hours together in a bar on Main Street. His oldest daughter often had to walk to the bar to tell her father to come home. That uncle eventually caught his arm in a paper press at the paper mill where he worked. His arm was crushed and useless after that. He wouldn't let the doctors amputate it, so it atrophied and became a thin, lifeless thing that he carried around in a sling. I didn't like him much. He was gruff, intimidating, and sarcastic to me. He and his wife would come over often and play cards with Mom and Dad, but the only reason those visits were fun for me was that their three kids came too. The two oldest were girls with very long, straight blonde hair. I would brush their hair for a long time and sometimes style it into braids or ponytails. I loved that, and so did they. Eventually, my uncle and aunt both committed suicide. She was first and then, after being accused by police of causing her death, he shot himself with his hunting rifle. I'm

sure somebody knows how and why all that happened, but I never did. I was grown then and my parents were away at camp. There were no cellphones; there was no such thing as email. I had to call the man who owned the campground and ask him to have my father call me back so I could tell him he needed to bring Mom home. I left it to Dad to tell Mom that her brother and his wife were both dead.

Rounding out my mother's family were her middle brother and her only sister. The brother and his wife had two boys. A third boy died as an infant, found dead in his crib of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). I was a couple of years older than the boys, and for a short time I was told to go over each day after school to fix them something to eat and 'watch' them until their mother got home from her job as a waitress. It made me mad because I had better things to do than babysit my cousins. By then, they certainly weren't babies, but it felt the same to me.

Mom's sister had eleven kids. Two girls and nine boys. That house was crazy! I loved going there. The oldest boy was one year older than me and the second one was one year younger than me. Those two were not her biological children. Their own mother had committed suicide when they were very young and my aunt became their mother when she married their father. Her last child was born two

days before I gave birth to my second baby, in the same hospital. My family was a little wacky that way. And to make the situation even wackier, without knowing it, we gave our babies the same first and middle names, only in reverse order.

## CHAPTER FOUR

We lived in a small, old, two-story house with three bedrooms that were upstairs and one bathroom that was downstairs. The kitchen was tiny. The bathroom was tiny. Actually, all the rooms were tiny. The gray linoleum on the dining room floor was worn so badly in places that the pattern was gone. The rug in the living room was threadbare and the old furniture was draped with fabric that had been sewn into some sort of 'fitted' cover. Curtains got swapped out twice a year. When the sheer summer curtains came out of storage, Mom would wash them and 'stretch' them on a big, adjustable wooden frame she had set up in the living room. It had tiny nails sticking out of it all the way around to hook the curtains on. As soon as they were dry, they were hung on the windows and the wooden frame went back into the cellar until next year. There were old radiators in most of the rooms, including the living room. Because we often wrestled and tumbled in that room, more than one of my siblings split their heads open on that radiator at one time or another.

There was one phone in our house, attached to the wall, and it rested on a little corner shelf Dad had built at the bottom of the stairway. Anyone who

talked on the phone for longer than a minute or so usually just sat on the stairs. Any phone conversations were within hearing distance of everyone sitting in the living room. As a matter of fact, for a while we still had a 'party line' and had to listen for a second before dialing to make sure our neighbors weren't on the phone. If they were, we had to hang up and wait our turn, and they had to do the same for us. When I became a teenager, there was no more party line, but the phone remained in the same place and I found it annoying that I could not have a private conversation with a friend unless I left the house to see that friend in person.

Upstairs, Patty and I shared a bedroom on the left side of the house. The second bedroom was Mom and Dad's. It was on the right side of the house. Neither of these rooms had a closet. Mom and Dad had a chifforobe in their room for hanging garments, and when we were teenagers, Dad built a small closet in one corner of our bedroom so Patty and I had a place to hang our school clothes. I don't remember what the third bedroom was used for originally, but it was quite small and right in the front of the house, looking out over the front porch and onto the front yard. Eventually, it would be occupied by our only brother. In the back of the house was a small space that seemed fairly useless because you could only get to it by going through Mom and Dad's bedroom, or mine and

Patty's. On one side it had a slanting wall that followed the line of the roof. There was a window in the back, and if you were to climb out the window, you would be on a small, gently sloping roof that covered the back porch. Close to the porch roof was a tree with large, easy-to-climb branches. This was our fire escape plan. Dad made us recite it often: If we were on the second floor and the house was on fire and we could not go down the stairs, we were to go out that window, onto the roof, down the tree, and into the back yard. This little room was used for storage, but would eventually become a cramped, unlikely bedroom for the three youngest girls. The oldest of those three was ten years old when I decided to get married. As soon as she realized that I would be moving out, she could not wait to leave that cramped little room and her two baby sisters behind to take up my space in the bedroom with Patty.

Halfway down the cellar stairs there was a landing and a door that went outside. Our neighbor's driveway ran right along that side (the left side) of our house, and that's where the Freihofer's bakery truck would come one day each week to sell us coffee cakes, doughnuts, and other delicious treats. We'd run out the cellar door to greet him and Mom would usually let us choose what we wanted for the week. But only one thing, so we had to agree. The truck driver let us step right into the truck so we could examine all the possibilities

before we made our decision. Our milk was also delivered directly to our house. The milkman would drive up our driveway, on the right side of the house, to access our back porch. Early in the morning, he would leave the bottles with the little cardboard caps inside the porch door so the milk wouldn't freeze in the winter. Patty and I always tried to get to the bottles first, sometimes even before Mom and Dad got up, so we could remove the caps and use a butter knife to retrieve the cream from the top. It was rich and delicious and silky smooth on our tongues.

We had a 'cold cellar' in the basement, a cool dark room where root vegetables were stored for the winter. Carrots, potatoes, and onions out of Dad's garden would last until next growing season. I liked going down into the cold cellar to dig around in a bushel basket full of dirt to pull out a few potatoes for dinner. They had to be kept cold and out of the light so they wouldn't grow 'eyes' and try to root in the dirt. If that happened, they would get soft and wrinkly and not be very good to eat. Another small room in the cellar contained wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling shelves where jars of canned vegetables and fruits were stored. Mom's wringer washer was down there too, as well as a big utility sink and an old washboard for stubborn stains or extra dirty clothes. Mom once caught her thumb in the washer's wringer and after that her thumbnail always looked like a tiny little washboard.

In the early years, our house was heated with coal. The delivery truck would come and the driver would open the designated basement window, extend the chute that came out of the truck, and proceed to dump a huge pile of shiny black nuggets into a small room in our cellar. The pile went almost up to the ceiling. When the furnace needed coal, Dad would go downstairs and shovel some in. My sister and I would sometimes take a few pieces of coal outside. It was great for writing on sidewalks and the foundations of houses, so we used it to play a game we called 'arrows.' One person would run around our house and several neighboring houses, drawing arrows to indicate which way she was going. The other person had to find her. The neighbors never seemed to mind and eventually the rain would wash away our arrows.

Across the road from our house was a piece of land that was jointly owned by our parents and two of our neighbors. Enough of it was cleared for us to use as a small softball field. We could pitch and hit and catch, but our bases were certainly closer together than those on a regulation field. Patty always pitched right-handed and batted left-handed. I could never figure out how she did that. There was wild asparagus that grew on the field and no matter how often Dad or one of the neighbors went over there to mow, the darn stuff wouldn't die. Eventually they gave up trying to get rid of it and we just ate it instead. Beyond the



cleared field was a hill covered with thick woods. A well-worn path curved its way down to the bottom of the hill where there was a pretty stream. We often went down there and either waded in the water or challenged each other to make it across to the other side by walking on top of the slippery moss-covered rocks. Nobody ever succeeded, and more than once we went home wet, with our knees skinned and bruised. Sometimes I would pack myself a sandwich and go down there alone to just sit and think. The sound of the water rushing over the rocks was peaceful and relaxing. It was one of my favorite places to be.

Our back yard was narrow but very long, and adjoined the back yards of the people who lived on the next street over, including Grandma. It had a big old weeping willow tree that Dad often trimmed so the branches didn't drag on the ground and get wound up in the blades of his lawnmower. It was so pretty. Sometimes in the summer I would put a chair next to its trunk and sit there reading a book. There was also a grape arbor on which Dad grew purple grapes. They had seeds, but we didn't mind. We would hold a grape to our lips and squeeze. The grapes would pop out of their skins and right into our mouths. We discarded the skins and swallowed the rest whole, seeds and all. I can't imagine how many grape seeds we must have consumed in a summer. A cousin once told me with great authority that those seeds were all going

into my appendix and someday it would explode. But, I reasoned, she was just a kid. What did she know?! Our neighbor had an apple tree in his back yard and my sister and I could pass what seemed like a whole afternoon in that tree, sitting as high up as we could go, eating apples, talking and playing silly games. We also played badminton and croquet. And way in the back part of our yard was Dad's garden. I wish I knew how many hours of his life were spent growing food for his family. Not only did he till it by hand every year, and plant the seeds and hoe the rows to keep the weeds down, but he schlepped water in buckets from the house back to the garden if we didn't get enough rain.

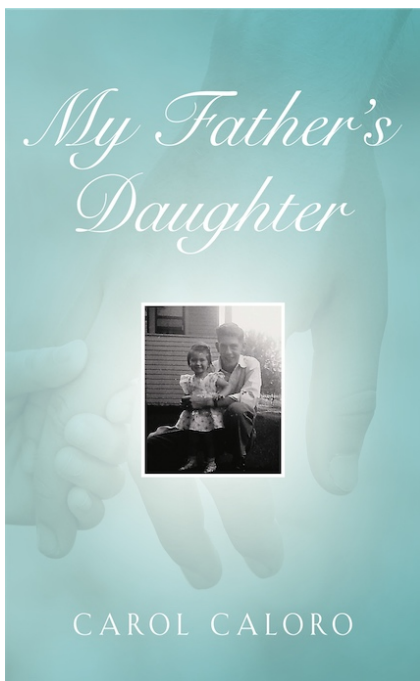
Our well was in the back yard too, close to the house. It was shallow and didn't hold much water, just like everyone else's. Our parents were always afraid of running out of water because that meant the fire department had to come with their big truck and fill up the well, and that cost money. So, we only bathed on Saturdays, in just a few inches of water. I remember sometimes needing to use the bathroom in the morning during the week but having to wait until Dad was finished getting ready for work by washing up in the sink. Sometimes, Patty and I would push aside the cinder block that covered the opening to the well, lie on our stomachs and peer inside. I don't know what we expected to see, but if one of us dropped a pebble,

the ripples would tell us how far down the water was.

We had a nice old front porch that I loved on summer evenings when I needed some quiet time, and a small but pretty front yard. To one side was our long, narrow dirt driveway and just beyond it, bordering our neighbors' yard, was a strip of garden where Dad planted flowers. They were carefully planned so some would bloom in the spring, some in the summer and some in the fall. The early daffodils and tulips were colorful but my favorites were the poppies that always looked perfect just in time for Memorial Day. They weren't exactly orange and they weren't exactly red. They were big, bright, fragile-looking posies that swayed in the breeze and made me happy when I looked at them.

I always looked forward to Memorial Day. It was a day when our whole village came out to see the parade. Each church, community organization, and club spent months in preparation. People walked to their favorite spot along the parade route with their chairs or blankets and took up residence. Those who were lucky enough to live along the route sat on their front porches and invited others to join them. There were wonderful floats, school bands, horses, firetrucks, and police cars. Scouts and youth groups marched and threw candy to the cheering, flag-waving spectators. And of course,

there were the veterans – proud, heads held high, marching in step in the regalia of their various branches of the armed forces. Dad and his brother were always among them, handsome in their uniforms. Mom, who was a member of the VFW Auxiliary, marched too. Patty and I would decorate our bicycles, weaving red, white and blue crepe paper through the spokes and attaching playing cards to the forks of the bikes with clothespins so they would make a clicking sound against the spokes as we rode alongside the parade. One year as Mom marched with the other ladies in their Auxiliary uniforms, she stumbled and fell. I didn't see it happen, but a lot of other people did, and I overheard her talking to Dad later that day. She was very upset because, she said, some people thought she'd been drinking. In fact, she told him, her legs had just suddenly and inexplicably 'turned to rubber' and collapsed underneath her.



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