A memoir from bestselling author

SCOTT BERKUN

THE GHOST OF MY FATHER

Updated edition with new epilogue

"A sobering, lucid memoir about the uncanny, precarious nature of family, masculinity and childhood."

Kirkus Reviews

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Updated edition, October, 2016.

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Note to readers: This is a work of non-fiction. However, since objective reality is dubious given the limitations of perception and memory, this memoir makes no claim to objective certainty of anything. Some names may have been changed. This book represents the author's story based on his own point of view, enhanced by extended interviews with many of the people who appear in this book.

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Dedicated to my nieces and nephews
and to everyone who wants to understand hard things

"If the world were clear, art would not exist."
– Camus

"Write hard and clear about what hurts."
– Hemingway

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ONE

DOORS AND MEMORIES

When my mother cleaned out my father's car, she found tickets to a movie she'd never seen. They soon separated, and he moved away from our home on the east side of Queens, NYC. I was eight years old when it happened. No one recalls what the movie was, but it's strangely important to me now. If your family fell apart because of a movie, wouldn't that movie's name have significance? But no one remembers. She made other discoveries too – like lipstick on a cigarette and a woman's glove – but curiously, the only fact I recall is the tickets. And while the movie's name has been lost to time, my father's choices changed my family forever. He gave us our first experience of abandonment, of being left behind, and of feeling not good enough to be loved by someone who is supposed to love us the most.

Here and now I've discovered light in the past. I don't linger in my memories to justify sadness in the present.

Instead, I've found something glowing in those old thoughts I don't understand, and I'm compelled to uncover whatever is hiding there. This kind of search demands a return to hard times. There are clues in my past that may make sense only when I've seen them more than once.

I remember sad times during the separation. My mother often hid her despair in the basement, crying alone and smoking hidden cigarettes. My older siblings, Todd and Sarah, struggled as young teens to help her and help themselves. We all hid in our own corners of that house, forced to learn how to nurse our wounds. But I wasn't angry or sad when my father left. I barely knew him. I've realized now, as an adult, that I'm angry his leaving mattered so little in my life. I deserved a father involved enough that his departure, and his return, would mean something. All children deserve this, and I didn't get it. What does that signify for me now? I don't yet know. I have more memories to explore to find an answer.

I can admit for the first time that I come from a broken family. The events of this recent year of 2013, a wild story central to this book, have made this undeniable. Yet for most of my life I defended my family as a matter of principle. We all want to feel pride in our families, and that's what makes dysfunction common. We feel ashamed to criticize our own blood in front of outsiders. And we refuse to let light shine in to our private feel-

ings, afraid of how we'll feel when our truths are revealed. It's a scary thing to know each other for who we are rather than for who we want each other to be.

Maybe I was sad back then, but I certainly didn't know it. I was proud of my family simply because I needed to be someone who was proud of their family. I considered myself happy, happier than my parents or my siblings. I had friends, and I played sports I loved, and that was enough. But maybe my family saw the same sadness in me that I saw in them.

It was only later, in my twenties, that I noticed the effects the sad seed of those early years had planted. Why did I love to argue? Why did I hate to lose? Why did I share so little with people I was close with? After college I moved away and finally had the distance to examine myself, who I really was and why I'd grown up the way I had. I realized becoming an adult demanded I recognize what I needed and hadn't received, or what had been forced upon me that hurt me. All adults in age have feelings about the past they need to explore before they can be adults emotionally. Even if I'd had superhero parents, I'd still have had an imperfect childhood with issues and questions I'd need to explore. A perfect family, if such a thing exists, denies children experience with imperfection, something they will encounter in every relationship they have, including the one they have with themselves.

If I suffer from denial, it's my wishful belief there are facts hidden in my old memories, facts imbued with

powers to explain the unexplainable. My family is an enigma to me, and I don't want it to be. I know magic doesn't exist, but for some things, knowing is not enough. I have faith that even if I fail to explain the past, by trying I will know myself better, an achievement worth the hard work the search demands.

I'm forty-two now, a decade older than my parents were when they separated. I have the life experience to try to understand what they did and why. My mother and father have generously granted intimate conversations, with answers of a kind many people only offer their therapists, if to anyone at all. Who was this other woman? Why, Father, did you leave? Why did you return? Why, Mom, did you take him back three years later? My parents raised a brave child and now endure the curse of an all-too-curious adult, one who happens to write. But my goal is not revenge: my ambition is wisdom. Questions beget questions, and my parents answered them all. That is, all the answers they could remember and the questions I could think to ask.

Some memories we love to share with other people. We tell the stories of how we met a friend or spouse hundreds of times, polishing the details with each telling. Other memories we review privately, again and again, from different angles, at different speeds, and with different questions. They hold a story we compulsively remember, like a reflex of the mind. We don't consciously choose to recall them; instead, they take us

over like a force of nature. Marcel Proust called these involuntary memories. He famously told a story of how one bite of a madeleine cookie transported him to another place and time with an intensity beyond the experience of normal recollections. He believed involuntary memories tell us more about ourselves than the ones we choose to recall.

There is one memory of my father that I've entertained in the theater of my mind many times. One day, during the separation, my father visited the house. I was playing in my room, and as no one else was around, I had to go down the stairs to answer the door. I thought maybe it was my friend Brad who lived across the street or one of my brother Todd's friends who was looking for someone to join in a basketball game. I skipped down the long staircase, crossed the hall, and unlocked the door, pulling it open with my right hand. The white storm door on the outside remained closed, and I looked up through its window to see who was there. I was surprised to see my father's eyes looking down at me.

He was like a god. He was the strongest, smartest, scariest person I knew. I believed then that he knew everything, even though he knew little about me. And with the recent separation, I didn't know if he was on my side or another. It must have been the first time he visited the house since the separation. He didn't smile when he saw me that day. But I wasn't surprised that he didn't smile. He didn't smile often, not back then.

I was the same age then that my nephew Joshua is now. When I look at Joshua, with his sweet smile and bushy hair, I imagine he looks something like what I must have looked like to my father. But unlike my nephew, who is warm with confidence, I was scared that day. I didn't smile when I saw my father. My small hands struggled to open the storm door, the kind with the black air pump that made quiet squeaking sounds when it slowly closed, as if by magic, on its own. I didn't know what to do. Was I supposed to let my father in? What were the rules when a parent moves away? No one had told me. I felt certain I was going to do something wrong, but I had often felt that way around him. He was my father, so I waited for him to offer something, to set the tone or lead the way, but he offered nothing. I said, "What do you want?", as it was the only thing I could think to say. Then I went upstairs to tell my mother he was here. I left my father on the porch, with the sputtering sounds of that storm door, little bursts of air releasing as it closed, slowly shutting him out behind me. After I found my mother, I went back to my room. I didn't see my father again that day, as he left without finding me to say goodbye.

When it happened it meant nothing. I didn't think about it the next day or the next week. As strange as it might have been to greet my father at the door of his own house, it seemed normal then. The innocence of childhood hinges on its lack of context. When we are

young, we don't know how one experience compares to others, since we've had so few of them. It's only when we're older that we can look back and understand what happened. We can project backward how we might have felt if we weren't so innocent. And that day at the door grows in power each time it comes to my mind.

I've learned that moment at the door stands out today in my father's mind too. He told me recently that the very same memory had stuck with him over these decades just like it had with me. He had somehow expected a warm welcome from the family he left and had been disappointed. I can see how it must have been strange to wait on the cement porch of his own home, standing by the white railings, railings he'd paid for and painted himself. But what he has never understood was I looked to him for how to behave. I was the child. I hadn't put him on that side of the door, outside his own house; he had put himself there. And he had put me on the inside of that house, a house without a father, a house of lost people, a house where I'd have to answer the door when my father knocked and confront him at the door to his home. I realize now we were two children at that door, only I was his son.

On occasional Sundays during the separation, my father drove to the house to take me out for the afternoon. Sometimes Todd, the oldest, or Sarah, our middle sister, would come along. But in my memory, inexplicably, it's only the two of us: my father Howard and me. Those

afternoons were the closest we had to a functioning relationship, as broken as it was. Like being sentenced to do community service, we at least had a commitment to show up at a set time and place and honored it. Many children don't get even that much from their fathers, a sad fact I've considered many times. But three years later, when my parents reunited and he moved back in, our outings ended. There was no discussion about it; the offers to do things together stopped coming. I've tried to find other memories, other stories of the two of us sharing something, but there are few to find – just a handful of lost afternoons during difficult years.

The outings were sad affairs: a depressed man in crisis and the confused, quiet little boy I was around him. I have gray memories of miniature golf at the place in Douglaston I'd been to dozens of times for elementary school birthday parties. It seemed so fun to go there with friends, making silly faces to distract each other from our turns, or sharing tips on how to beat the tougher holes, but being there with my father was absent of easy joy. On other days, we went to matinee movies, stopping for pizza on the way there. But since we didn't have any shared interests, these afternoons were filled with silence. There hadn't been much of a relationship before the separation, and even if there had been, separations and divorces strain even the healthiest ones.

I loved baseball at the time, and it was my father's favorite sport, but even that wasn't enough to connect us. We went to one game at Yankee Stadium, but all I recall is my surprise when he yelled from the stands at the umpire. Standing tall in the seat next to me, he cupped his hands over his mouth and screamed with the madness of the crowd. It shocked me to see him yell so intensely about something so distant while I sat so close. I didn't want him to see my fear, so I hid it. I behaved the way I thought I was supposed to and did nothing more. It's no surprise neither of us had fun on these outings. And neither of us knew how to change how it was.

Week after week we'd never address the one true thing we shared: our disappointment. For misery to love company, everyone has to admit they're miserable, which suggests that a person who can't admit to being miserable will always be alone (and always miserable too). That's part of the mystery of my father: I'm not sure he knew then, or now, when he was miserable or not. The tiny little circuit of emotional self-awareness most people have never worked well for him. He couldn't calibrate how these outings should compare to other outings we'd been on before the affair, since few had occurred. The affair, and the separation, was what forced the motivation to make deliberate plans to see me at all.

On the drive back from many of these outings, we'd speed across the Belt Parkway, riding through Brooklyn toward the house in Bay Terrace, Queens. He liked to

drive fast, and I remember the brick overpasses flying overhead and the empty trees of winter hovering over rows of navy blue houses. And I'd stare out the window, watching the world fly by, not saying anything. The filmstrip memory of that drive has played forever in my mind. Endless car rides in silence, but not alone.

When the quiet went on too long, he'd say, almost sweetly, "A penny for your thoughts," to which I never had an answer. I didn't have any thoughts. I didn't know what was going on. I feared asking him a serious question would only make him angry. Keeping quiet was safe. I wasn't in control and had little influence on what was happening. Those car rides linger so strongly in my memory because I was, as all kids are, along for the ride. The helplessness of those car rides echoed the helplessness of being a child in that family.

My father had the sharpest of wits, but he used it to cut people down, especially the people closest to him. Todd once came home from a little league baseball game, and Howard asked him how it went. Todd said, "I got two walks," a respectable but modest achievement. Our father replied, "My grandmother can walk" and said nothing more. My siblings and I all have inventories of these stories, innocent moments transformed into surprise attacks. The implicit message to my brother was you are not good enough, and your father, who is telling you that you are not good enough, is not going to help you become good.

Children can only be victims in these encounters. But as an adult, it's easy to see the wider picture: Why wasn't my father at the game to see for himself? Why wasn't he offering to teach Todd to hit better or looking for something, anything, positive to say to his oldest son? There was plenty of responsibility my father could have taken if he wanted it, but he didn't. He mastered wounding us just enough that we'd leave the conversations as quickly as we could. This was an outcome my father, without fully understanding why, found desirable. He didn't want to give much, or didn't have much to give, and these barbs and jabs were an easy way to ensure the distance remained.

As the youngest, I had the easiest time avoiding him. I benefited from watching how Todd, Sarah, and my mother were wounded by his words. I kept my distance, and if my mother didn't initiate something for me and my father to do together, he rarely did. She'd tell me to go help him paint the front railing or work with him on the car in the garage. When I did, I found him perfectly pleasant. Often he was patient in teaching me what there was to learn, like how to replace a spark plug or use a screwdriver. But he never said much. It didn't seem to matter if I was there or not. I kept quiet, did what was required, and faded away when my tasks were done. That was the pattern I learned during the separation, and I didn't see the need for a better one when the separation ended. I learned not to ask him for advice, not to

ask him for anything. I shared the house with my father, but not my life.

By the time I was a senior in high school, I was desperate to leave Queens and go out into the world on my own. I went away to college and was proud, given the struggles I had, to graduate on time. But my graduation day was depressing, as despite how hard I'd worked to find a job and start my life, I had no real prospects ahead of me. I'd watched many of my friends accept job offers long before graduation. Despite dozens of job interviews, numerous career counseling sessions, and reading many books on finding work, I still had no offers. By June of 1994, I had two choices. I could either move back in with my parents, which I saw as a failure, or I could stay in my girlfriend Jill's apartment, buying time to figure out what I was going to do. It was an easy decision, and I stayed with Jill.

I also decided to ask my father for advice. I wasn't close with my uncles or aunts. I didn't know any adults who I thought could help. I chose my father, as he was the only person in my life who had experience with the working world. It took weeks to work up the courage. I hadn't asked him for advice on anything in years, certainly nothing that made me feel as vulnerable as this did. I felt like a failure and was desperate. I decided to show him my resume the next time I drove home from Jill's Pittsburgh apartment to visit for the weekend.

He was in his office on the first floor of the house, a room that had been Todd's bedroom before he moved out after college. I walked down the stairs, stairs I'd skipped down thousands of times to greet friends at the door or to hang out with my brother. This time was different, and I thought about turning around on every step. I noticed the new fish tank outside his door, with glass three feet wide, filled with quiet little creatures he tended to every day. I looked just past the tank to the front door, and I realized I could just keep going. I didn't have to stop. I could go on out the door and walk away. But I didn't walk away. My desperation for a job outweighed whatever pride I had left in not asking my father for help.

His door was open, and I knocked. I said, "Hey Dad, do you have a minute?" He was at his desk, which faced the door, typing away on his computer. He nodded yes, without taking his eyes off the computer screen. I could see the blue glare of the stock trading program he used reflecting in his glasses. He had a TV behind the computer monitor that always had one of the business networks playing, a stock ticker running across the bottom. He followed that ticker in spare moments when he thought no one noticed his attention wasn't on them, but I usually did. I collected myself and told him why I'd come to talk.

"Could you look at my resume and tell me what you think?" I asked and offered the resume to him.

He reached across the desk and took it from my hand. Without looking up, he began his examination. He shook his head ever so slightly, as if disappointed I'd make mistakes as obvious as he thought they were. In hindsight the resume was in fact quite good. I still have a copy of it.

"Why did you put this here? It should be further down," he said. He added, with an expression of mild distaste like what one would make after drinking an old cup of coffee, "The dates should be on the right, not on the left."

I'd rewritten and revised it hundreds of times during my desperate senior year. I'm sure I had had versions with all of the suggestions he made but had reversed them in the desperate hope young graduates have that the resume holds magical job-finding powers. Of course a resume, at best, only gets you in the door. But I couldn't know that then. Perhaps he could have, but his need to dismiss what I'd shown him was more important.

When I'd handed him the resume, I'd forgotten something about myself I still struggle to remember. Just because I needed his help enough to ask for it didn't change that he was always the first source of doubt in my life. Like putting your hand in the river and expecting not to get wet, bringing ideas to him was certain only to make me feel worse about whatever it was. He was intelligent and creative in finding negative things to say about anything. There was not, and hadn't been, any

mention of how hard I'd been working to find a job. Or how impressive it was to graduate on time, given I'd transferred between three colleges along the way. Perhaps he didn't know any of this, but he didn't ask.

The resume encounter hurt me in an old way, a wound I'd been trying to avoid most of my young life. I felt far worse after talking to him than before, and while sitting there, I realized I'd made a mistake. This was the same man I'd seen do this to everyone in the family, and I was stupid enough to invite more of it on myself.

But when the conversation ended, something new happened, something I didn't expect. For all my life, I'd absorbed those jabs and criticisms. I'd never thought to challenge him, at least not directly. This time a voice inside me spoke up, and I don't know where it came from. I said, "Thanks for the feedback. But did you have to be so mean about it?" It was the first time in my life I'd given him adult commentary on his behavior instead of the passive-aggressive sarcasm of a teenager. It surprised him. He looked at me directly, more directly than he had during the rest of the conversation. This was new, I thought. Something good might happen here.

But then he asked, in his classic fashion: "What do you want me to do? Butter it up for you?"

I sighed, and with that breath, whatever hope I'd had disappeared. He didn't see me as a person with feelings, and I didn't know how to show him otherwise. The old wound, the one I didn't know how to defend, had been

punched again, and this time I'd invited it. I retreated into the familiar loop of feeling weak for asking for help and feeling worse for knowing I was still a failure.

I look back at this memory, as a man of my own, and want to yell at him: "Whose side are you on?" From this vantage point in time, there was no evidence for assuming my father was on mine. I was bright and ambitious, more than my siblings had been at that age, but I was left to figure that out on my own. Like all children, I took the wounds of that day and all days like it to be a reflection of something lacking in myself – something my father wouldn't even care to take the time to explain.

I couldn't know it then, but fathers are our templates for all men. The same unresolved issues and fears I had of my father I had of most men in my life. I never went to office hours or to see tutors in college, even when I desperately needed guidance. I'd tough it out all on my own, making myself sick in the fight to do everything alone. Our bodies pay the price for the emotions we ignore. It's no surprise to me now that I was sick enough to be hospitalized once a year, around final exams, throughout college. It was far more painful to imagine arriving at a professor's desk with only confusion and broken thoughts than any alternative. I didn't want strangers to tear me down the way my father had. I denied it all, a slave to my own invented idea of a man as someone who didn't need help. And I had the hubris of

youth, believing everyone was weak if they didn't want to be as self-reliant as I thought I was.

We all suffer wounds in our childhoods. We do what we have to do to protect ourselves, but we forget when we become adults that the armor made to survive our youth no longer serves us. It's for use in the last war, the struggles of childhood, not the war or the peace of the present and the future. Keeping that armor keeps us immature. We can't grow with it on. Yet removing it is painful. Taking it off means our true selves will be revealed. Revelations divide who we were in the past from who we want to be in the future, and we can't predict where that division will take us. It can put us at odds with our own family and friends, as tribes prefer to stay with patterns of the past. Most people convince themselves that removing their armor is work they don't need to do. And their families, complicit in the same denial, reward the defense of the status quo, ensuring the same wounds, the same armor, and the same ghosts will be passed on to the next generation and the next.

Today I can see, looking back at those early years, how miserable my father was. I feel sad for him. He was younger and far more lost, even on the day I showed him my resume, than I've ever been. He simply had nothing to give to me or anyone else. His own father had given him even less to work with than he was giving me. I imagine my father's life was a disappointment to him. He had imagined an impossible greatness for him-

self in wealth that he never achieved. His refuge for as long as I lived in that house was escape: the escape of work, the escape of the racetrack, and the escape of the blackjack table. What I experienced wasn't aimed directly at me, even though as a child I felt it was. He simply knew no other way to be, and he didn't possess the courage or motivation to find a way. He was unknowingly passing on his worst limitations: to deal privately with his wounds, to put himself first, and to deny and repress the expression of love. Like many young parents, he never noticed that for all of his anger at his own upbringing, he was passing on many of the mistakes his parents had passed on to him.

When I look back at those memories, there's a gift I wish I could give the younger version of me: a handwritten note from the future that says, simply, *This sucks, but it's not you*. I wish my brother, sister, mother, or even a stranger on the street had pulled me aside and whispered, slowly and lovingly, a poem of context into my young ear. Something I might not understand in the moment but that I'd play with in daydreams. But perhaps no poem has this kind of power, as I desperately wanted to be a part of my family, and any secret message that questioned the order of things wouldn't have been believed, at least not at first. But maybe the memory of that message would have helped me connect the dots earlier in life and with less of a price to pay.

There is only one outing with my father during the separation that I recall where Sarah and Todd came along. My father took us to VIP Pizza on Bell Boulevard, one of his favorite places in Bayside. It was on a long row of restaurants and bars, built up around the Long Island Railroad station, a station I'd use years later as a teenager to get to Manhattan when I had the money to upgrade from the local 7 subway train. VIP Pizza was a tiny place, with just a long counter in the front and a handful of tables in the back. It had all the trappings from the NYC pizza place kit: a neon sign out front, a two-level glass case showing the latest pizzas near the cash register, and short Italian-looking men with well-combed hair in white kitchen overalls slinging pizza and sodas all day long.

When our pizza was ready, we went to an empty table and sat down to eat. We'd been there many times before, but this time something was strange. My brother Todd refused to sit down. He stood by the wall near us and looked away into the distance. He leaned on his hands, which were behind him touching the wall: it was like they were handcuffed together, and he was hiding them from view. I, on the other hand, was hungry and excited. I still didn't like cheese and would pull it off the slices before I ate them, to the dismay of most cheese-loving pizza place patrons. But I did it anyway, and my family knew about it and didn't even complain anymore.

Sitting there, waiting to eat, there was nothing on my mind except the pleasure of folding that first slice, imagining the triangled tip flopping just slightly as I put it into my mouth. The crust felt right in my hand, and I held the pizza with a napkin in my palm to catch the grease that slides down when pizza is held properly, something my father had taught me. But when I noticed Todd wasn't sitting down, I was surprised. I couldn't imagine what was wrong. We were a family, mostly together, about to share a meal at a familiar place. We all loved to eat pizza. My brother had seemed fine earlier that day and even in the car on the drive to the restaurant.

My father noticed and asked Todd to sit. Todd refused by silently shaking his head. My father asked him again, pointing to the empty chair, but Todd did not give in. My father stared at Todd for a long moment and then, without another word, he gave up and started eating. Sarah began to eat too. It was just me who was too uncomfortable with Todd's discomfort. When I realized no one else cared, the alarm in me grew louder. It felt awkward to say anything, but I worked up the courage to ask, "Todd, what's wrong?" He didn't answer. He just shook his head at me, tears in his eyes. He shook his head as if to wave me off, to assure me that I shouldn't be worried, but I was. I didn't understand.

I looked to my father and sister who were already eating, and they didn't seem troubled at all. Unsure of my-

self, I tried to follow along with my father and go ahead and eat, but I didn't enjoy that meal. The only thing on my mind was Todd and my confusion. There was a lie at that table, a lie I didn't understand. Was Todd angry at something? Was he wrong for standing? It was an unresolved moment, one of hundreds our family would have. I'd never felt anything like it before, but I'd feel it again many times before I left that house.

Todd never came on another outing. Standing had been his silent protest against my father, a message Howard didn't understand, or worse, didn't care to answer. But my brother had planted a seed for me. The silent drama between his feelings and my father's indifference never resolved itself. Like an act of civil disobedience, his silence spoke louder than any dramatic outburst could have. Todd couldn't have known it then, but I heard the message intended for my father, and it has stayed with me for more than thirty years.

This is the surprise of memory. We don't know what of our experiences today will matter most in our future. We don't know what choices we make will last the longest in the minds of those closest to us. Powerful memories are a surprise, and the past is always alive, bringing different stories from our history back to us depending on what happens in the present.

There are happier memories from my early years, but they're hard to remember now. The reason why is in the summer of 2012 I learned that, at the age of seventy, my

father was having another affair. Thirty years after the first one, my father put his family in crisis again. From the moment I learned the news, my thoughts returned to the sad, tired memories I've shared so far in this book. They hadn't been on my mind often, not for many years. Now they've risen again, like the ghosts of sad creatures that died long ago, haunting me because they want to find peace but can't. The recent news has changed the shape of these recollections so that no matter how I try, they never fit together the way I want them to.

It is curious, perhaps even strange, that the choices of my father would impact me so profoundly at forty years old. It surprised me too. I didn't decide in a moment of deep thought that I should dedicate countless hours to thinking, yet again, about my childhood. I didn't have any rational motivations. I was driven to do it, compelled by some of the oldest feelings I have about who I am. Maybe everyone, no matter how well adjusted, successful, and self-aware, has something about themselves they struggle their whole lives to fully understand. Or maybe life takes an unexpected turn, raising doubts about what had been the solid foundations of the past.

Memory is dubious because the way we perceive the world is dubious. We have blind spots, cognitive biases, and suffer from optical illusions. Our brains invent things to fill the gaps, but we have no awareness of their handiwork. Eyewitness testimony, even testimony given moments after a robbery or a car accident, is highly un-

reliable. And even when it's accurate, each person's attention focuses on different things, noticing and recalling only parts of what happened. Perhaps the reason I remember only the ticket stub my mother found in my father's car is because I've always had a deep love for movies, nostalgia for the printed tickets that grant you admission, and little interest in cigarettes or gloves.

We think of memory as if it were a filmstrip, photographic in detail, but this is a convenient fantasy. Each memory is stored as fragments strewn across different parts of our brains. Every time a memory is recalled, those fragments come together slightly differently. And the only way to remember certain memories is to repeat a condition present when the memory happened, which explains Proust's magical madeleines. This is why the scent of the ocean, or a stroll through an old neighborhood, brings back clear recollections of events that haven't crossed our mind in decades. It's the unifying link that pulls together all of the pieces.

Contrary to our deepest instincts, our memories of specific events change each time we remember them – at least that's what I remember from reading books about memory. Certain details are amplified, while others are diminished. Despite our false confidence that our strongest memories are the most accurate, there's increasing evidence the opposite is true. Abigail Lewis wrote that the past is every bit as unpredictable as the future, and she meant that depending on what happens

to us in the present, surprises surface in the past. The very notion of the past shifts for each of us depending on our present. Some memories come into focus, and others fade away. Our minds add meaning to events that seemed meaningless a decade ago when they occurred, and take meaning away from events that seemed important when they happened. History lives on with us, shifting and twisting through time. And we change the stories in small ways as we tell them, shaping them to fit who we wish we were or who we want to be.

Memory is a kludge, but it's all we have for our thoughts – all we have except for writing. We can write down on any day what happened, and those words will persist exactly as we wrote them in ways we know our memories do not. Keeping a diary might just be the sanest thing we can do. But most of us push on through our days with the false certainty that we know what we think we know. We are all like Leonard Shelby, the main character from the film *Memento*, stumbling through life with misplaced faith in our memories, our minds, and our identities. This notion of memory is important. It will come up many times in this book, so please remember it, if you can.

The meaning of my past changed on an innocent day in the summer of 2012. I was visiting my parents' home in Connecticut, where they'd moved, with my sister, many years earlier. My brother also lived just a few miles away. I'd been visiting all of them once a year, for nearly

twenty years, since I moved away to Seattle after college. My mother had picked me up at Todd's place, and she was going to drive me back to her house so we could have dinner together with my father. It was an ordinary day of me visiting my family, catching up and reconnecting.

I've always felt close to my mother, even when we didn't talk for long stretches of time. Her warmth and ability to share her feelings explain much of who I am, although it took me the better part of my life to recognize this was true. She could laugh and cry about almost anything, finding humor in even the darkest of times, a trait I am proud to share. But like I was with everyone in my family, I often felt at a distance from her. When my parents reunited, I was eleven years old and wanted to become a man, which I defined as not needing my mother for much of anything. I thought that's what a man was: someone who didn't need anyone else, certainly not their mother. Despite my confused masculine ambitions, she was the parent I trusted most and knew best, a beacon of warmth, openness, and positive emotions throughout my childhood.

As we walked to her car, she made a joke about her age. "I better drive, as who knows how much longer you'll trust me with your life."

We both laughed. We sat down and closed the doors, but before she put the car in gear, she grabbed my left hand. She didn't look at me; instead, her attention was

out in the distance through the windshield. She told me she had something important to say. I said, "Sure, I'm happy to listen." She said she wasn't sure who else to talk to. The night before, I'd shared with her and my father some struggles in my own marriage, and she said hearing me talk about it inspired her to now share in kind. "Happy to help if I can," I said, not realizing how much of my world was about to change.

She told me Howard had been acting strange since his return from a recent trip to Australia – a trip he'd taken alone. I was rarely a confidant of either parent, but I'd had many conversations in my life with her that were very personal. Even so, this conversation was unusual. I didn't remember having one that started quite this way, which made me feel good at the time. I told her I was certain this moment was okay. I gave her a loving smile and told her I was genuinely glad to listen and help if I could. I didn't understand what she was trying to say or what was happening, but I wasn't afraid.

Sitting in the car, Mom thanked me for being willing to listen. She told me Howard had been back from Australia for weeks but hadn't shared much about the trip. He hadn't responded to most of her emails while he had been away either. Immediately I imagined he was having another affair. The wheels in my brain went into overdrive with a thousand questions, thoughts, and memories, and I had to concentrate to listen to what she was saying.

As the wheels slowed down in my mind, my heart broke for her. She was still telling me the facts she'd collected, but I know men are simple creatures. There are only so many reasons for silence, even for a man like him. Whatever the truth was, how sad for her to have a partner for fifty years, to share a lifetime together, and then have these doubts haunt her mind. As a family, we had barely survived his first affair, and I couldn't imagine doing it again even though all of us children were now adults. But I kept myself together and listened on. I said simple things. I told her I loved her. I told her I'd help her figure it out.

When she finished, I gave her advice she'd once given me. I told her she needed to figure out who she could lean on. Who was her support team? Who were her true friends? If she was right about my father, she would need to depend on those friends heavily and quickly. The sooner she knew who her real friends were, the better. She was close with her sister and had some friends in Connecticut. I recommended she reach out to them immediately. She liked my advice and cried in that way mothers cry when they feel loved. She thanked me and began to drive us home to their house where Howard was waiting for us. When we fell into silence, I asked a question.

"Are we still going out to dinner with Dad tonight?"

She said, "Of course. Why wouldn't we?"

Why wouldn't we indeed. Apparently this situation was only strange to me. I was along for the ride yet again.

You can read the rest of chapter 1 in the full version of Ghost of My Father , now with a new epilogue, is available on Amazon in print and kindle editions.