

BLOOMING

FINDING GIFTS IN THE
SHIT OF LIFE

CARRINGTON SMITH

*For my mother,
who told me I was braver
than she was.*

*For Stephanie Woodard,
because I'm still here.*

*For my boys:
you taught me how to love
unconditionally.*

*And for those of you fighting
to love yourself:
I am you.*

CONTENTS

Author's Note.....	xi
Why I Wrote This Book	xiii
CHAPTER ONE	
FINDING MY VOICE	1
CHAPTER TWO	
FAMILY LEGACY.....	17
CHAPTER THREE	
DADDY ISSUES	25
CHAPTER FOUR	
COMPARISON KILLS	51
CHAPTER FIVE	
FAMILY REJECTION	55
CHAPTER SIX	
MONEY, MEN & MARRIAGE	63
CHAPTER SEVEN	
DIVORCE	93

CHAPTER EIGHT

CAREER..... 97

CHAPTER NINE

STEPPING INTO THE LIGHT 109

CHAPTER TEN

PROPHET OR SPIRITUAL ASSASSIN?..... 123

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DEMENTIA & DEATH129

CHAPTER TWELVE

LOSING MY BEST FRIEND TO CANCER.....139

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RECOGNIZING EVIL.....145

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS 151

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MY BODY IS NOT NORMAL.....159

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IS HE OUT THERE?167

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DEFINING MOMENTS.....185

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MIDLIFE REDIRECTION 199

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BLOOMING 207

Acknowledgments..... 209

Appendix..... 211

Book Group Questions..... 213

AUTHOR'S NOTE

*"You own everything that happened to you.
Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly
about them, they should have behaved better."*

—ANNE LAMOTT



These are my stories. I share them to the best of my recollection. Others may remember or perceive them differently, for we each bring our own perceptions, mindsets, and filters to every memory. My purpose in writing this book is to discover the gifts in life, not to call out people or hurt anyone. With that in mind, I've changed the names and identifying details of many of the people in this book. Dialogue may not be exact, but it reflects the substance of a conversation as I recall it. Each of these stories describes a moment in time and not the entirety of a person, so I ask that the reader not damn an individual for a moment in time when he or she behaved badly. We all behave badly from time to time, myself included. I choose to forgive those who caused me pain. And I hope that they will do the same.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

*“Memoir is about handing over your life
to someone and saying, this is what I went through,
this is who I am, and maybe you can
learn something from it.”*

—JEANNETTE WALLS



This book was birthed during the pandemic. During the shit-storm of a lifetime, I felt compelled to share how life has taught me to view times like these as full of growth and opportunity. You see, shit is quite literally fertilizer. It provides the nutrients needed for life to flourish and grow. It is in life’s messes, the failures, the difficulties—the shit—that we find what we need to grow and bloom into our greatness.

As I write, millions of people have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives. Everywhere people are struggling with the existential questions: Do I matter? Without a job, what do I base my self-worth on? If I die tomorrow, what will I be remembered for?

Over the twenty years of my career as an executive search professional, I've interviewed thousands of candidates. I've been blessed with an incredible track record. Most candidates stay in their jobs for years and regularly get promoted. What's the secret sauce? I focus on character and values. My favorite question to ask to understand who someone is and what they value is: "We all have moments that define us; can you tell me about a moment that shaped you and how?"

The answers to this question tell me more about a candidate than almost any other. Based on their answers, I discover things like emotional resilience, authenticity, grit, courage, empathy, persistence, wisdom, creativity, integrity, curiosity, passion, self-discipline, perseverance, resourcefulness, reframing, hope, leadership, collaboration, positive attitude, strategic thinking, and problem-solving.

For years, I've lived in fear that someone would turn the question around on me. How would I answer? There have been so many defining moments—many of them raw and ugly. But, after decades of prying into the lives of others, I needed to uncover the answer for myself. Life-altering events, like a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, have a way of pushing you to face those deep truths. This book is my answer to that question.

Thank you to the individuals who have trusted me with their stories. I honor you and your courage to share them with me. To those of you pondering these existential questions, it is my hope that through sharing my story, it will help you to discover your gifts in the shit of life.

CHAPTER ONE

FINDING MY VOICE

*“Owning our story and loving ourselves
through that process is the bravest
thing that we will ever do.”*

—BRENÉ BROWN



It was an October night in 1986. He had been raping me for hours. He left the room to take a break, locking me inside. I did my best to redress myself, but the buttons had been ripped from my shirt. I pulled it tight around me and climbed the ladder to the upper bunk bed. Moving to the farthest corner, I pulled my knees in, wrapping my arms around them and pressing them into my chest. I wanted to disappear. My body hurt. I felt numb—except for the tears I could feel running down my face. The bunk bed was up against a window, giving me a view of the night sky and the yard two stories below. I knew he would come back eventually, and

pondered leaping out of the window. I would likely break some bones, but it would be a relief from this. As I considered this option, I heard the door unlock. Fear ran through my body like ice. I felt my pulse quicken.

“I’m not done with you yet,” he said. He must have taken something while he was out of the room. His eyes were crazy. He looked hungry—for me. I pushed myself farther back into the corner, pulling my knees in closer, trying to disappear completely. He climbed the ladder, picked me up, and carried me down. He ripped my clothes off again. I felt myself tear as he took his pleasure without lubrication. As he penetrated me again and again, I left my body. I dissociated. Later, I learned this was the body’s way of protecting itself during trauma.

A few hours later, he was done. He handed me my clothes and told me I could go. He watched me as I dressed myself. I had large, angry rug burns on the tops of my feet, lower back, and elbows. I left his room and heard him close the door behind me, then lock it. I crept down the hallway to the massive central staircase, hugging the wall as I held my shirt closed. It was dark in the house now and everyone was in bed. I opened the massive front door and stepped into the night. I remember the walk home to my sorority house feeling cold and painful. It hurt to walk. I let myself into the sorority house, quietly climbing the stairs to my room. I stripped naked and made my way to the shower room. Everyone was asleep so I had the shower to myself. I stood under the shower, wincing from pain as the water hit torn skin. I put my pj’s on and found a daybed to curl up on. I didn’t want to risk waking anyone, so I didn’t go into the sleeping dorm (a large room full of bunk beds where all the girls slept). I lay there in the fetal position, tears running

down my face, not sure how to comprehend what just happened. My body was in shock. I didn't sleep. I couldn't.

The next morning, I sought out a sorority sister, Courtney, for advice. I was terrified of getting pregnant and I was terrified someone would find out what had happened to me. You see, two years prior, another girl in a campus sorority, Abigail, had been gang-raped at another fraternity. When she told her story, no one believed her. Instead, she was vilified. She was labeled a slut and got kicked out of her sorority at Washington State University.

I confided in Courtney what had happened. The Tri Deltas and Sigma Nus were doing homecoming together. At WSU, homecoming was a massive celebration. Sororities paired off with fraternities to design and build yard decorations. The best ones won a prize and bragging rights. We participated in our own version of Olympic-type games and attended a series of parties leading up to the big football game. One afternoon, I went over to the Sigma Nu house with a group of Tri Delts to work on the yard decorations. I met a boy I'll call Gregory when I arrived. After working outside for a couple of hours, a few of my sorority sisters and I were invited inside to have a beer. The keg was upstairs, so we climbed the massive wood staircase to the second floor. I was handed a cup of beer and Gregory pulled me into his room. The next thing I remember is the thunderous sound of his door being kicked open. We had an audience now. I could hear shouts and catcalls from a group of guys jostling to see in the room. I realized that I was naked, and that Gregory was on top of me, inside of me. I tried to hide my face. Gregory pulled himself off me, yelling at his fraternity brothers to "get the fuck out." The door had multiple dead bolts, some which required keys. He locked them all before returning to me. He had

raped me for hours, leaving that one time and returning to rape me again. I shared all of this with Courtney. She scrunched up her nose at me. “Are you sure you didn’t want him to have sex with you?” I tried again to explain to her that this wasn’t consensual sex. This was rape. But Abigail’s legacy weighed on her. “Just be really sure,” she warned. “Be careful how you handle this—remember what happened to Abigail.” I felt myself descend into darkness. She hadn’t provided the support that I had hoped for. I was on my own.

I wandered down to the Student Health Center and had them examine me. Observing my torn skin, rug burns, and bruises, the doctor asked me if there was anything I wanted to tell him. I was afraid he would report it to the police, and I would end up like Abigail. So, instead of telling him the truth, I insisted it was just rough sex. I had recently watched a Phil Donahue show where they had discussed a medical breakthrough which they were calling the “morning after pill,” and I asked the doctor if he had heard of it. I didn’t know much about it except that it was intended to be taken shortly after intercourse to prevent pregnancy when no contraception had been used. Pregnancy was my biggest concern. My parents were vehemently pro-life. So much so that I was forced to watch graphic videos of actual abortions, including ultrasound views of different types of abortions as they occurred, and the disposal of the fetuses. Their version of a family movie night. Lucky for me, the doctor at the Student Health Center was familiar. While he didn’t have the actual “morning after pill” because it had not yet been approved by the FDA (it wasn’t until 2001—I was very lucky to have seen that Donahue episode), the doctor said that it was essentially the equivalent of taking about eight birth control pills all at once. The idea was to push your estrogen level way up and then drop it,

causing a period. He said that this was such new science that he had no idea if it could cause cancer or what the adverse reactions might be, other than that it would probably cause nausea. I took the eight birth control pills and swallowed them all at once. It wasn't long before I was puking nonstop.

The following day, the Tri Delts were invited to a mixer with the Sigma Nus at their house. I had been walking around like a zombie, going through the motions of sorority life. As afraid as I was of seeing Gregory again, I was equally afraid that someone would find out what happened to me, and I would get kicked out of my sorority. I was desperate to fit in and didn't want to draw attention to myself by staying behind, so I went with about seventy girls to the Sigma Nu house. The party was in the basement, and as I rounded the corner to enter the room where the party was being held, Gregory was leaning against the wall waiting for me. I stopped cold. I was frozen. He approached me and grabbed my hand. Opening it, he placed my earrings into my hand. Bent and broken, they must have come off during the rape. Stepping back, with his eyes looking at the floor, he said, "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." Those words saved my life. He knew what he had done.

I escaped from the party back to the sorority house as soon as I could. Lying awake in the sleeping dorm, tears flowing freely, I tried to process all that had happened.

The numbness overwhelmed me. Unable to speak to anyone about what had happened, I felt myself slip into darkness. I stopped going to class. I started sleeping all the time. I wasn't bathing. I started calling home and begging them to let me come home. The cost of a flight at that time was fifty dollars. My parents told me that they couldn't afford it and that I would have to wait until

Thanksgiving to come home. Didn't they understand? I was so depressed, I was contemplating suicide. My life wasn't worth fifty dollars? My father insisted that they couldn't afford it and I would have to wait. My depression became so severe, I was called in front of our chapter's "Standards Board." This was a group of the chapter's officers who dealt with people who broke the rules or hurt the sorority's reputation. The Standards Board informed me that I was "getting everyone down," and that I needed "to stop being so depressed" and should "work on being happier." I was devastated. Their "intervention" had the exact opposite effect. They communicated that it was more important to *appear* happy than to deal with the underlying problem. This only made me more depressed.

Somehow, I survived the period from mid-October to Thanksgiving break—I was in a steady decline and an ever-deepening depression. As was our usual form, three of my pledge sisters and I piled into my Honda Civic sedan and headed west from Pullman on Highway 26 toward Seattle. The highway was crowded with all the other kids headed home for break, so we set out early to avoid heavy traffic. The weather wasn't good, so we took note when we saw four Sigma Phi Epsilons speed past us. One of the girls in my car, Kathy, was dating a Sig Ep. She recognized some of the boys, waving at them as they passed. We were rocking out to ABC's "Look of Love" when we began to notice things askew across the highway. Papers were flying by, and then we saw a typewriter in the road. As the Sig Ep's sedan came into view, Kathy started to scream. I turned off the music and slowed the car to a creep. Their car was on the wrong side of the road. There were shards of glass and car parts everywhere. The rear driver's side door was open, and books and papers were strewn across the highway. As we got closer, we could

see the driver's body ejected through the windshield and lying on the hood. Another body was lying outside the car, and a head was partially protruding from the smashed-out rear passenger window. There were several cars stopped, and people were running to and fro. "We need to stop and help," I said. "No," Kathy screamed, "I can't look! I can't look! I know him!!" Sonya and Allison argued that there were other people stopped. I hesitated. Scanning the bloody scene, I knew almost everyone was dead. "Ok, we will go call for help," I acquiesced. (This being before cell phones, calling for help was as important as stopping.) As we drove off, we passed an ambulance headed in their direction about ten miles down the road.

Snow began to fall with increasing intensity as we got closer to Snoqualmie Pass. We were all sobbing and shaking, but we had to get through the mountain pass to get home. My nerves were fried. The roads were unsafe. I wanted to find a place to stop. The girls all just wanted to get home. A chorus of voices commanded that I keep driving. The snow was so thick that I could barely see; a blanket of fluffy white flakes obscured the road from view. The road now matched the surrounding landscape, and we could no longer see where the road and the sky separated. We were experiencing a total whiteout.

We were in the mountain pass now, but the road had become undrivable. We had to stop to put chains on my tires. Four sorority girls trying to put chains on tires in a snowstorm. How many sorority girls did it take? Zero. After about twenty minutes of total confusion, tears, swearing, and frustration, a massive Snowcat with stadium-sized overhead lights appeared on the horizon. Like an angel sent from heaven, a state trooper appeared. He informed us that they had closed the mountain pass behind us. We were the

last car through. The trooper put our chains on in minutes and followed us down the mountain. His massive overhead lights broke through the whiteness and made my stomach drop. We had no idea how close we had been to driving over the edge of the mountain. His lights illuminated cars and semitrucks that had tumbled over the edge and were now getting covered in snow. God was watching out for us. We were the lucky ones. We reached the bottom of the mountain and waved goodbye with sincere gratitude.

We had reached Issaquah, where Sonya lived. I was incapable of driving anymore. It was all too much. I crashed at her house but slept fitfully. I felt like I was slipping on ice...and blood. I would wake up to my legs kicking out, slipping on the sheets. I was spinning, crashing into cars, falling off the mountain. Bodies flying. Papers flying. The typewriter in the road. The body on the hood of the car.

The next morning, we anxiously reached for a newspaper to glean any details from the crash. The four Sig Eps in the sedan were passing and hit another car heading in the opposite direction head-on. Two of the four Sig Eps and the driver of the other car died instantly. A third Sig Ep died en route to the hospital. One Sig Ep survived. I hugged my friends tightly and drove the rest of the way home. I was incredibly shaken, numb, and traumatized by all that transpired over the previous few days and months. So, when I finally arrived home, I was happy to see my parents and get a hug from my mother.

I crawled into bed. Emotionally worn out, I couldn't stop crying. It was all too much—the rape, the lack of support, the car accident. I would fall asleep and jerk awake. My face would be wet with tears. I felt, like my car, my life was spinning out of control. My mother

came in to check on me. It was dark now; night had fallen. I lay in my old antique four-poster bed, the same one from my childhood. I pulled the ancient bed linens to my neck. My mother sat at the foot of the bed, expressing concern over my emotional state. “Now, what is this all about? Why all this *DRAMA* about wanting to kill yourself? Why all the tears? Where has this behavior come from?” my mom inquired. I took a deep breath. My mother had served as the executive director of the Everett Crisis Pregnancy Center. She had told me stories about classmates of mine visiting the center. They were people I knew who had turned to drugs or become strippers and then shown up pregnant. She had counseled all of these people on their options other than abortion. I hoped that she would be there for me as she had been for my classmates. “Mom, I was raped,” I said through sobs. Before I could continue, she stood up, her face red and angry. In a clipped voice, she said, “I am so disappointed in you. We had hoped that you would remain a virgin until you were married.” I was so taken aback by her response. My mouth was wide open, my jaw hanging in dismay. “You must *NEVER* speak of this again, and you must *NEVER* tell your father!” she commanded. I shook my head in fearful assent. If this was her reaction, Lord only knew what he would do if he found out. I hung my head in shame. I told her that I needed some money for a medical issue. I was worried. My mother, exasperated, said, “I will give you some money in the morning, but you are on your own.” She stormed out of the room. I felt so alone and ashamed.

I nestled in my bed, contemplating my recent experiences. I felt untethered. Homeless. Alone. Maybe it was because I looked death in the face the day before and saw close-up the ripple effects of losing someone, but suddenly I didn’t want to die. I also knew

that I didn't want the rape to define me. I had the radio on, and Madonna's song "Live to Tell" was playing. I turned the volume up and reflected on her lyrics. In that moment, I resolved that keeping the rape a secret wouldn't kill me. I just needed to formulate a plan to get past it. I needed to get the fuck out of Dodge. Get the hell out of this crazy town. I needed a fresh start.

The next morning, I sprung it on my parents. I wanted to transfer to a different school. My brother was graduating from Stanford, and I had gone to a state school to help pay for his school. It was my turn. I think the fact that they saw my mood brighten helped my cause. My mother thought it was a great idea. It was early enough. There was still plenty of time to apply. My sorority little sister, Margie, had just returned from visiting the University of Texas at Austin and could not stop raving about it. Good school, warm climate, no snow. Perfect—I was sold. I didn't know a soul there. I wouldn't deal with the rape. I wouldn't talk about it. I would do as I was told. I felt a sense of hope for the first time in weeks. Something to look forward to. A clean slate. A fresh start. Far away. No snow. No rapist.

I transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, and I tried to forget about the rape. I didn't want that event to define me. I honored my mother's wish and kept the rape a secret. What I didn't realize was that by not talking about it, it was owning me. I suffered from poor self-esteem and became promiscuous. My rapist sent me the message that I wasn't worthy of being treated well; I was only worthy of meaningless sex. I kept reliving this experience. I was incapable of forming any meaningful relationships.

Then, in law school, I met Rob. We became close friends and eventually started sleeping together. Because we had been friends

first, the experience felt different. He valued me as a person. As we got closer, I panicked and suddenly lashed out, causing drama to push him away. I broke down. It had been six years since the rape, and, keeping the promise to my mother, I had never spoken about it. I felt that I owed Rob an explanation for my bizarre behavior. I sat down at my computer, and the story poured out of me. The first story that I had ever written about my life. Somehow writing about the rape was easier than talking about it. It felt safer. I found my voice. I could express myself freely through writing without the immediate feedback of someone's biases or judgments. I printed it out and left it in his folder at law school (we didn't have email yet), terrified of what he might think. His response surprised me. He was the first person to handle my rape with compassion. He embraced and accepted me. This was a monumental moment for me. I began to look at myself through a different, kinder lens. I sought out therapy.

Years later, after my second divorce, I was dating a much younger guy. There were still things that might happen in bed that could cause me to go cold or react violently (you put your hand on my throat, and I will punch you). I was trying to explain, so I shared my story of being raped in college. When I finished, he said, "Well, I have zero sympathy for you. You should have known better. Everyone knows about date rape. It's all over the internet!" I wasn't telling him my story to garner sympathy but, rather, to help him understand why I reacted the way that I did sometimes. I shook my head in dismay at his callous response. "First," I told him, "there was no internet when this happened. Second, we didn't even have personal computers yet. Third, we didn't even have Oprah yet. Fourth, this wasn't date rape. There was no date.

This was a predator preying on an unsuspecting victim. Fifth, I didn't ask to be raped. Sixth, we are done." I shook my head in disgust as he sat there in stunned silence, trying to conceive of a world without the internet.

I had been told to shut up and not tell my story. It makes people feel uncomfortable. But the truth is that my power, my secret weapons, my gifts are IN my stories; that is where I discovered the authentic me—where I discovered the gifts, the buried treasure, in all the shit. It is in the debris of life, in the fire, that I found out who I was and what I was made of.

As I was writing this book, I stumbled across Augusten Burroughs's book *This Is How*. In it, he wrote:

What does help the person who has been raped is to chew it up and then spit it the hell out. And by chew it up I mean talk about it, write about it, paint it, make a movie about it, and then be done with it and move on. Because here's the truth about rape: you do not have to be victimized by it forever. You can take this awful, bottomless horror the rapist has inflicted on you, and you can seize it and recycle it into something wonderful and helpful and useful. You can, in this way, transform what was "done" to you into something that was "given" to you in the form of brutally raw material. You can, in other words, accept this hideous thing and embrace it and take complete control of the experience and reshape it as you please. This is not to deny the experience and how devastating it is; it is to accept the experience on the deepest level as your own possession now. An experience that is now part of you. Instead of allowing it to be a tap that drains you, you can force it into duty in service to your creative or intellectual goals.

He was so right. I had just lived this experience.

The rape, as horrible as it was, taught me that I was a survivor. I was not a victim; I was victimized. There is a massive difference. How I viewed that event—the story that I told myself—was critical to my survival. I learned the power of perspective. I was not a victim. I was *victimized*. And in turn, I *survived*. I was a survivor. There is power in being tested and surviving. It's called emotional resilience. I learned that I could navigate the most difficult circumstances. This, in turn, bred a quiet confidence.

In 1997, I turned on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and the guest for that day was Gavin de Becker. They were talking about his most recent book, *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*. I sat mesmerized listening to them talk and then rushed out to Barnes & Noble to buy the book. It is a book that I have read countless times and recommend to people on a regular basis.

In his book, de Becker begins with a client, Kelly, describing her rape. By sharing her story, “Kelly is about to learn that listening to one small survival signal saved her life, just as failing to follow so many others had put her at risk in the first place.” In her story, her subconscious recognized that her rapist’s act of closing a window was incongruous with what he was telling her—that he would leave. De Becker notes, “Since he was dressed and supposedly leaving, he had no other reason to close her window. It was that subtle signal that warned her, but it was fear that gave her the courage to get up without hesitation and follow close behind the man who intended to kill her.” By unearthing this, Kelly “felt a new confidence in herself, knowing she had acted on that signal, knowing she had saved her own life.”

De Becker wrote his book based on the belief that there is a “universal code of violence” and that by teaching people the signals,

they can avoid becoming victims. How did de Becker become an expert in this field? He grew up in a household so violent that he learned to recognize the clues. “Pre-incident indicators are those detectable factors that occur before the outcome being predicted. Stepping on the first rung of a ladder is a significant pre-incident indicator to reaching the top; stepping on the sixth even more so. Since everything a person does is created twice—once in the mind and once in its execution—ideas and impulses are pre-incident indicators for action. The woman’s threats to kill revealed an idea that was one step toward the outcome; her introduction of the gun into the argument with her husband was another, as was its purchase some months earlier.”

Before de Becker was thirteen, he “saw a man shot, saw another beaten and kicked to unconsciousness, saw a friend struck near lethally in the face and head with a steel rod, saw his mother become a heroin addict, saw his sister beaten, and himself was a veteran of beatings.” He learned to make high-stakes predictions to survive. With such a horrible childhood, de Becker could have grown up to become a criminal. Instead, he used his gift—the ability to predict violence—to propel him into a career advising presidents, celebrities, and other VIPs. By owning his story—instead of it owning him—he was able to recognize and capitalize on his gift.

As Brené Brown said in *The Gifts of Imperfection*: “Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”

The reason that I gravitated to de Becker's book was not so much because of the rape—it was his personal story and how he claimed it and used it to propel him through life. Instead of pretending he had a great childhood, he owned his story. He fully embraced it. He explored his darkness, and by recognizing what he had gained from his horrific childhood, found his light. He made his story *serve him* and catapult him to greatness. By owning his story, he has gifted us with the lessons and wisdom he received from it.

Following the wisdom of Brown and de Becker, I'm owning my story. Every gritty, shitty, brutal, ugly aspect of it. I embrace love, belonging, and joy. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.