

# Bridges to Belonging: Stories of Fatherless Lives

*A story book by* **PROSDOMA**



*Stories authored by UN Volunteers  
Project designed by M N Piki*



# Introduction to *Bridges to Belonging: Stories of Fatherless Lives*

In a world increasingly marked by conflict, climate disasters, and rising poverty, countless children find themselves navigating life's challenges without the guiding presence of their fathers. *Bridges to Belonging* is a poignant collection of stories that sheds light on the profound impact of absent fathers—whether due to war, environmental upheavals, or societal neglect.

This book aims to raise awareness about the realities faced by fatherless children, emphasizing the importance of fathers taking an active role in their children's lives. Through heartfelt narratives, we explore the journeys of those who have been affected by these circumstances, highlighting their resilience, struggles, and dreams.

At PROSDOMA, we are dedicated to supporting the integration and welfare of refugees and immigrants, while promoting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to poverty alleviation, education, health, and equality. This project aligns with SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, and 10, as we believe that storytelling is a powerful tool for raising awareness and fostering sustainable communities.

The stories within these pages are rooted in real experiences, gathered through interviews conducted by UN Volunteers passionate about making a difference. Some names have been changed to protect identities, while others share their truths openly, reminding us of the human spirit's strength.

Join us on this journey of connection and understanding, as we bridge the gaps created by absence and inspire communities to come together for the sake of our children's futures. Let these stories touch your heart and motivate you to become part of the solution. Together, we can create a world where every child feels a sense of belonging.

Mabel N Piki



## Dedication

*This book is dedicated to all children and to everyone who has grown up without a father figure. Your resilience in the face of challenges inspires us all.*

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the talented authors of the stories—Alessandra W. de Macedo, Kristie Shields, and Marzia Saramad. Your skillful interviews and heartfelt writing have brought to life the experiences of those navigating the complexities of fatherlessness.

We also thank all individuals who opened their hearts and shared their experiences, allowing us to pen these narratives for the sake of awareness and hope. Your bravery is an inspiration to many.

A special thanks to the UNV, whose commitment and passion provided a vital platform for organisations to get dedicated volunteers.

We express our deepest appreciation to Mr. Ngeh, CEO of PROSDOMA, for your unwavering support and for believing in the importance of this initiative.

Lastly, we thank all readers who take the time to engage with these stories. May you find inspiration and lessons within these pages that contribute to the welfare of fatherless children and those growing up without a father figure. Together, we can foster a brighter future for all children.

Mabel N Piki



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## *He's Coming on Sunday*

Mateus was 11 when he stopped believing that Sundays were for dads. For years, his mom would say with hope in her voice:

"Your dad said he's coming on Sunday."

And Sunday became a quiet ritual.

He would put on his nicest shirt, fix his hair, and try to hide the anxiety behind a "whatever" face.

But the gate never opened.

His mom's phone would buzz once.

"Mateus, I can't make it today."

She'd sigh. He'd just say:

-"Okay."

Little by little, Mateus realized his dad wasn't coming.

He understood that a name on a birth certificate and a late child support payment don't mean presence.

He understood that the love that should have protected him was made of empty promises, canceled visits, and silences that screamed inside his chest.

Today, Mateus is 14.

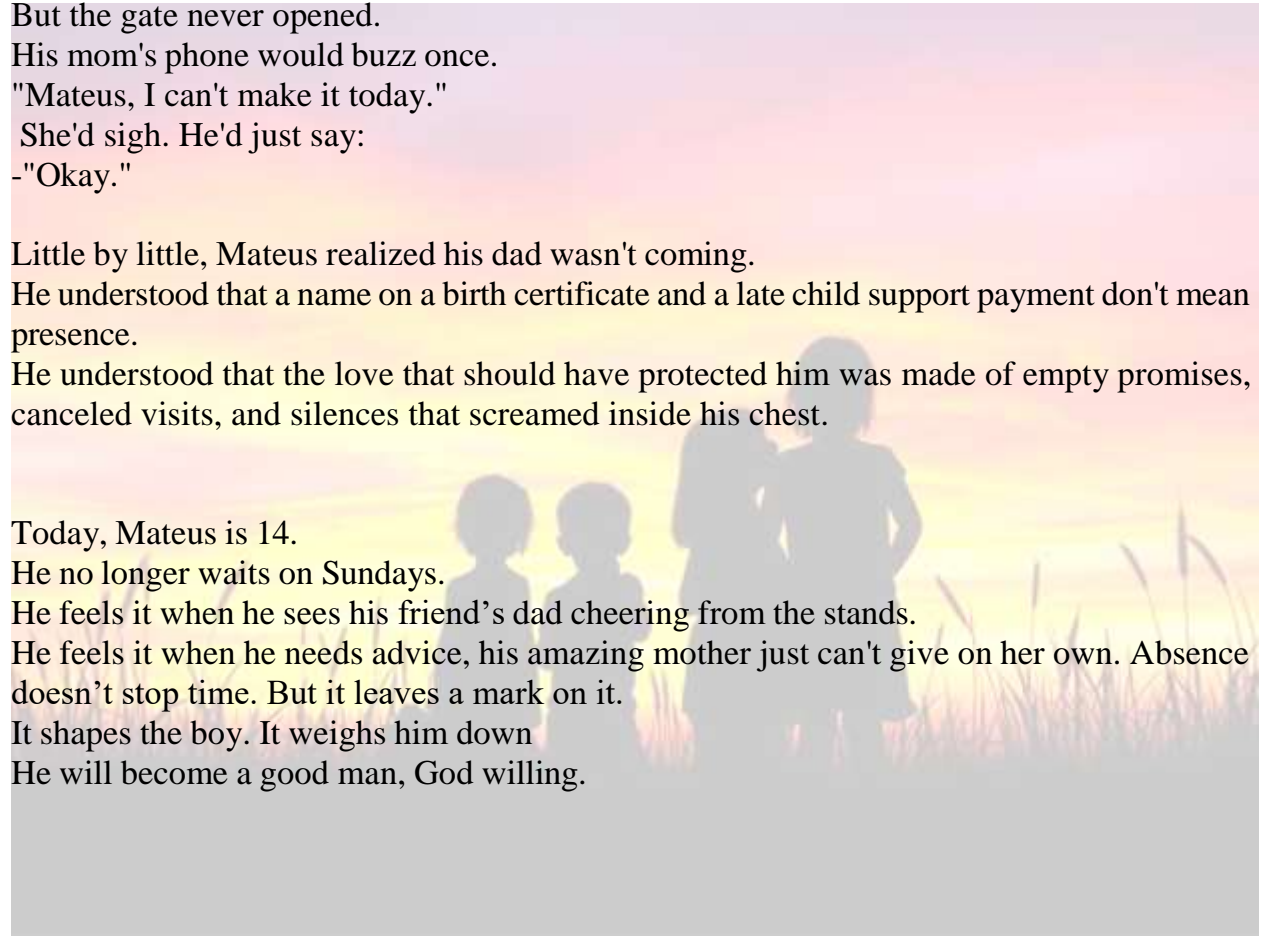
He no longer waits on Sundays.

He feels it when he sees his friend's dad cheering from the stands.

He feels it when he needs advice, his amazing mother just can't give on her own. Absence doesn't stop time. But it leaves a mark on it.

It shapes the boy. It weighs him down

He will become a good man, God willing.



## *The Father Who Never Existed*

M.C.S. grew up hearing that her father “left before he even knew she was coming.” There were no photos. No memories. No letters. No sweet story to tell.

Just an empty space. A forgotten name.

Raised by a single mother, she was surrounded by love, effort, and courage. But that didn't stop her from growing up with questions no one could answer. She used to say she didn't miss him—after all, how can you miss what you've never had?

But deep down, she knew: absence carries weight, even when it's been there from the very beginning. At school, Father's Day felt uncomfortable. In conversations, she avoided the topic. And when she grew up and fell in love, she realized that loving someone was harder than it seemed. She always doubted. Always feared being left behind. With her husband, the relationship was shadowed by the fear of history repeating itself. With her son, the pressure was silent but constant: she had to be everything.

Mother. Father. Safe place. Foundation.

Today, she is a strong woman, but still in the process of healing. Because growing up without a father doesn't end in childhood. The absence shapes the way we see the world, the way we relate, the way we trust. She doesn't blame her mother, who was a giant. But she knows that what we never had also shapes who we become.

And that the absence of a father leaves marks—invisible, but very much alive. All she wants is for other children not to grow up with this silence. For fathers to understand that it's not just about being there at birth. It's about staying, building, loving, and protecting. Because the absence of a father—even one who never existed—leaves too much space for pain.

## ***The Silence of the One Who Should Have Been There***

When SWMC was just seven years old, her father left for good. But in reality, he was absent long before that. A Navy officer, he spent long periods away, stationed far from home. Yet, even when he returned, he never truly arrived. His body occupied the couch, his voice filled the house with orders and arguments, but his eyes never met his children's. His presence was just a space—no affection, no connection.

Home felt like a battlefield. Shattering glass. Screaming. Insults. And her mother's eyes—filled with fear. The man who should have been their protector became the source of insecurity. Her older brother, MWC, only 4.5 years older, became the safe harbor the father never was. He became the reference, the support, the only stable figure in a world that was falling apart too soon.

When their parents divorced, peace finally came. The house became quieter. Safer. No more slamming doors, no more flying objects, no more hidden tears. Did SWMC miss her father? Maybe. But how can you miss something you never truly had? "Sometimes, I didn't even remember he wasn't there..." she confesses. His absence had already become part of the routine. But that didn't make the emptiness any less cruel.

Now, at 13 years old, SWMC understands something that many still fail to see: abandonment is not just physical—it's emotional, and it's destructive. Absent fathers leave invisible scars, wounds that never fully heal.

She wishes her parents knew how much their children miss them. How much they wait, how much they hope for a hug, for a proud glance, for the simplest sign of love.

## ***Between Shadows and Light***

When we think about childhood memories, we often envision laughter and adventures, where fathers are heroes—a guiding light in their children's lives. However, not all childhoods are filled with such warmth. For Z.H., a vibrant young woman who has spent her entire 24 years in a country that feels both home and a stranger, her father's presence often felt more like a storm cloud than a source of sunshine.

From an early age, Z.H. experienced fear in her father's shadow rather than the security she sought. As she grew up, that fear shifted to anger, especially when she realized that the love and support she craved were simply not forthcoming. During our conversation, she reflected on her upbringing with thoughtful pauses, carefully choosing her words. “I want to tell my truth, but I also want to be fair to him,” she shared with a warm smile. “Talking about this brings back a lot of feelings, but it's part of my story.”

Z.H. says, “I am old enough now to have my own income and support my family, but the pain and trauma are still there. When I see a father who is very caring, it reminds me of my own story. I ask myself, what if I had that experience? What if I had that support? Conversely, when I see a dad who isn't caring towards his children, I often wonder what if he and my father had been kinder and more supportive.” She pauses, reflecting on the weight of those thoughts. “The 'what if' questions are always with me, and they never end.”

Being an immigrant added another layer of complexity to her relationship with her father. Living without official documents made her world feel even more precarious. When she needed his support, he often remained distant, refusing to acknowledge her needs. Z.H. recalls one painful moment when she asked him for money to register for a music class, only to be met with silence. Thankfully, her mother stepped in to help, sacrificing her own grocery money to support Z.H.'s passion.

“My experiences have taught me the importance of giving kindness, support, and love to others—everything I didn't have,” she continues. “Sometimes, this giving makes me tired, and people can be intimidated by my desire to be overly supportive and protective.” Now, as a dedicated music teacher, Z.H. pours her heart into nurturing the talents of children at her cozy studio. She creates a welcoming environment where her students feel valued and supported, embodying the encouragement she once missed. “This is not the end of the world, and life goes on,” she adds. “I wish parents would realize that their neglect affects



their children's lives forever. It can break a child over small things or turn them into cold-hearted individuals who repeat the same patterns with others, even with themselves."

Z.H. hopes that every child who has faced similar experiences understands that life doesn't end with what others—or their fathers—offer them. "You have to be kinder to yourself, and you need to ask for help if you need it. That's the only way you can truly heal."

In the rhythm of her teaching, Z.H. discovers healing—a beautiful melody composed of resilience and hope. Her journey reminds us of the profound impact a father's presence can have and how, even in the absence of that love, one can find strength and create a vibrant future. Through music, she not only finds her own voice but also helps others to discover theirs, proving that even in the echoes of silence, we can create a symphony of compassion and understanding.



## *Invisible Dad – Candice Crear*

When her father slipped out of her life, Candice Crear was two years old. She does not remember the last time she saw him—just that as he slowly succumbed to addiction and depression, his visits and phone calls dwindled. “He didn’t know what else to do,” she writes in her autobiography, *Invisible Dad – How to Heal as a Fatherless Daughter*, “so he left.”

She had grown up hearing stories about her father. He was a revered Hollywood hairdresser with a list of celebrity clients - fun, charismatic, charming, and ambitious. She recalls her home being full of love and laughter. On the outside, they were the perfect family – until a series of devastating financial losses following the death of his mother propelled her father into a spiral of addiction that would eventually cost him his family.

During our interview, Candice tells me that as her mother adjusted to being a single parent, she sometimes worked three jobs at a time. My father was gone. My mother was hardly ever home. Candice recalls being raised without any parents at all. As an adult, Candice understands the financial pressures her mother faced at that time. As a child, though, her mother’s unavailability only added to her feelings of loneliness.

It wasn’t until Candice started kindergarten that she noticed other children had fathers who picked them up from school and took them shopping, and went to their school plays. She wondered where her father was and why he wasn’t there for her. This thought would dominate the next twenty years of her life.

Though she remembers her mother showing her “how strong they both could be,” Candice grew tired of what she calls “the disadvantage of being fatherless.” She constantly wondered what her life would be like if her father were still around. Would she have brothers and sisters? Would she live in a different house? Would her mother be home more?

Candice’s mother dismissed her questions. It was better to have no father than a drug-addicted father, she insisted breezily. “She just didn’t understand this missing piece of the puzzle,” Candice wrote in her autobiography.

On the outside, Candice played the role of a scholarly, active, and ambitious high-school student. “If I pretended everything was perfect, I thought I could make it perfect,” she

recalls. Inside, though, she was entering a period of depression and resentment that would cloud the next ten years of her life. These feelings weren't only directed towards her father, she recalls, but also at her mother, who seemed overworked and unavailable.

At fourteen, Candice was molested by an older male student – someone she admired. The assault happened “in plain sight” on a bus at the end of a sports game. She remembers that the perpetrator went on with his day afterwards as if nothing important had happened. The experience accentuated her feelings of vulnerability – and also of worthlessness. “No one was there to protect me,” she wrote in her autobiography. “No one seemed to care.”

In the years that followed, Candice struggled to form healthy relationships, gravitating towards emotionally unavailable, much older men. This is not an uncommon pattern in girls raised without fathers, she told me, yet it is one that is poorly understood. It's easy to imagine how being fatherless impacts boys, Crear says, but the impact on fatherless girls can be less obvious.

“Girls get less grace,” Crear tells me. “When girls learn to act in ways that go against our ideas of how they should act, society is quick to send them away or hide them in other ways.” What we need to do is understand them, she says.

Candice's experience – and the relationships she has forged with thousands of girls growing up in under-resourced situations without a traditional, stable father figure – has convinced her that girls' self-worth and confidence are tightly tied to their “father experiences.” As a society, she says, we have to develop, at multiple levels, strategies to help support fatherless girls as they navigate adolescence and young adulthood.

Even in mainstream America, where 43 percent of children grow up without a father, Crear remembers feeling the shame of being fatherless. Society is full of messages about what the child of a single mother can and can't achieve, she says. Adolescent girls with little family support are especially vulnerable to these messages. If they hear over and over that they are “less than others” because they don't have a father, Crear says, they're going to internalize that.

That's not to say that children growing up without a father can't have manageable and successful lives, Crear says - rather, that we must think about the factors that will help them become who they are meant to be. Since launching her pioneering Fatherless to Fearless program in 2016, Crear has made it her mission to discover what these things are. For

some, including Candice, this healing can be found in faith. For others, it is extended family. Most find healing in a community of people who have also experienced fatherlessness. For Candice Crear, learning to forgive both of her parents was transformative.

Crear managed to transform her own pain into a powerful program that has helped countless others. Another girl might use her power in a different way. There is no “one size fits all,” Crear concludes powerfully - but if we can recognize the unique needs and experiences of fatherless girls, we, meaning parents, educators, community leaders, family members, mentors, and sponsors, can change the paths of lives.





## *In the Shadow of a Father's Absence*

Sometimes, the past can be encapsulated in a single statement when people reflect on their childhood memories: "My father is none of them, neither the bad memories nor the good ones." The rest of these memories are filled with longing, pain, confusion, and challenges stemming from the absence of a father in children's lives. Some children might thrive, while most merely survive amid hardship, pain, and challenges. Many never forget the moments they needed their father, who was absent due to war and, consequently, displacement.

I had the pleasure of meeting W.D. on a cold spring day when everyone was cherishing warm memories. For him, the longing for his father has been a significant part of his story. He lost his dad when he was only four years old, and this loss has influenced many of the challenges he has faced in life. His childhood memories are often tinged with sadness and confusion, but W.D. is navigating through it all with resilience, carrying the impact of his father's absence as he moves forward.

His father served as a soldier and was a commander in the fight for his home country. As a young child, he didn't fully understand the complexities of the world around him; he savored the warmth of his father's love. But that warmth disappeared too soon, leaving a void that would shape his journey for years to come. "After his death, I felt a profound sense of isolation that shaped my entire childhood," he shares, nostalgia and sorrow threading through his words.

In the wake of his father's death, his mother struggled to cope with the challenges they faced. In a heartbreaking decision, she placed him in an orphanage, hoping it would provide a safer environment for him. The memories of being separated from his family still haunt him. "I faced bullying from older kids, which made me retreat into myself; I focused on my studies because it was all I had left," he recalls, demonstrating the resilience of a young soul striving to find his place in a confusing world.

At the orphanage, surrounded by other children who understood his pain, he found refuge in education. "Despite the challenges, the support I received helped me achieve good grades," he fondly reminisces. However, the ache of missing a father lingered. Whenever he saw other kids celebrating with their dads, the loneliness would tug at his heartstrings. "I often found myself going to these events alone, wishing I had someone to depend on," he admits.

This absence became a powerful motivator in his life. As he grew older, he set his sights on a different future. He worked hard in school and pursued higher education, driven by the desire to create a stable life for himself and his future family. “When I became a father myself, I promised I would always be there for my child, wanting to provide the love and support I lacked,” he reflects, filled with determination to break the cycle of absence in his own life.

As he embarked on this journey of fatherhood, he learned to channel his past pain into compassion for others, vowing never to let his children experience the feelings of loss and neglect he endured. “I know firsthand how daunting the absence of a father can be—it can leave a child feeling lost and alone,” he expresses, drawing from his own life experiences.

Along the way, he found happiness in a new relationship that brought fresh smiles and adventures into his life. However, even as he built this new chapter, memories of the past sometimes crept in. “Sometimes I still feel a bit disconnected from those around me, reminded of the things I missed out on,” he shares, reflecting a genuine sense of vulnerability.

Despite the ups and downs, he continued to thrive, eventually carving out a successful career that fulfills his aspirations and supports his family. Even as he navigated the complexities of work, he remained grounded in the lessons learned during his formative years about the importance of family and connection.

"Reconnecting with my past and finding support in wonderful friends and loved ones has been a critical part of my healing journey," he concludes with a warm smile. Throughout his life, he has transformed his hardships into stepping stones, forging a commitment to be a caring and supportive figure for his own child. His story is a heartfelt reminder that even from deep pain, the strength to foster connections, love, and the essence of family can arise.

As he moves forward, he focuses on creating a warm and inviting environment for his child, always mindful of the echoes of absence that shaped him but now filled with the promise of love and hope for the future.

## *Marco Choy Guatemala*

Ana Choy has just finished telling me how her husband's death from cancer at twenty-four forced the family from their comfortable two-story house in a nice residential area to a shack in a slum on the edge of the Guatemala municipal garbage dump. “We foraged for food alongside pigs,” she says. I do not know how to respond to this and am grateful when her five-year-old daughter Maria bounces over with a cup of tiny marshmallows and a bunch of plastic flowers. “Here, Mom,” she says.

Maria was almost four when her family moved here fourteen months earlier. Ana is not sure if her daughter remembers her life in Guatemala. Of course, her son, Marco, remembers everything, she tells me. He was 16 when the family came to America and left behind friends and a sense of community, even if that community didn't always feel safe, when the family fled.

He nods. Entering high school in America, speaking no English was hard for him, he says quietly. Even though his new high school is in a Spanish-speaking part of the city, differences between the dominant Puerto Rican and strong Dominican and Venezuelan populations make it hard for him to find his place. Word has got round that his family were refugees. His expression suggests there is shame in this.

After many members of Ana's family were assassinated, she promised Marco, who was born partially deaf – that she would take him to America. The alternative was moving to the countryside where we had relatives, she explains. They were good, hardworking people, she emphasizes, but I didn't want that life for my son.

Still, she worries that in this new country Marco is disconnected from his culture. “The city's Guatemalan community is tiny,” she explains. “We are it.” Marco stays in touch with relatives back in Guatemala City. “But they don't understand the world he lives in now,” she laments. “They think he has it easy because he is here.”

Many of the kids in Marco's high school are into cars and sports and girls. “These things are natural,” she shrugs. “But Marco doesn't have anyone to teach him those things. No father. No one to teach him how to be a good man. Just me.”

Marco adds quietly that he sometimes feels under a lot of pressure. I imagine what this might feel like for him. In six months' time, he is expected to graduate high school after

only 18 months of instruction in a language he doesn't speak. He then has to find a job in a country famous for its paper ceilings and discriminatory hiring practices. As the man of the house, he feels responsible for helping take care of his mother, uncle, and sister, he says, pausing proudly to acknowledge that his mother is taking courses so she can work as a teacher's aide in the local school.

These pressures are superimposed on a background of loss-of-childhood, of family, and of life, that he is still trying to process. He tells me that he remembers his father's death, and the murders of his grandparents, uncles, and cousins in a gang-related war between groups working different parts of the garbage dump. Ana touches Marco's hand and takes over. "After that, the family went into survival mode," Ana says. "There was no time to feel sad. We were too busy being scared."

It was a hard time for Marco, she says. I nod, understanding that it would be a hard environment for any teenager, let alone a grieving and traumatized boy, to navigate. Four of Marco's teenage years were spent foraging for recyclables to re-sell – and sometimes food to eat – on the Guatemala Municipal Garbage dump. Two more were spent in a police protection program in another town where he felt he didn't belong. "It was not as safe as it sounds," Astrid explains. "To stay safe in a place like that, you have to enter into a relationship with the police force. I was a woman living alone with a child. I was pregnant. I worried that if I didn't keep them happy, they wouldn't protect us." She pauses. "But it was a little better than living under the gangs."

Her son's move to the USA in 2023 was just the last link in a chain of – she pauses, to search for the right word. "Forced displacements?" I suggest. She nods.

Marco is not sure what he would have wanted to be if his education had not been interrupted by his father's death, the violence that followed, and the family's successful application for asylum in the US. "Perhaps a teacher," he reflects thoughtfully. "Now," he shrugs, "it doesn't matter." He will accept any job he is offered once he is done with school, he says.

He looks surprised when I ask him about friendships. "When I have time," he says. "And when I learn English." He pauses. "And when I can drive." In the light coming through the dusty kitchen window he looks suddenly very tired. As he looks around the little kitchen, with its American snacks and white refrigerator, I think to myself that like so many fatherless children, he sounds both much younger – and much older – than his years. His face softens though, when I talk about Ana.



“Somos juntos,” he says with a smile.

Maria starts singing “Somos juntos” to the tune of Jingle Bells as Ana wipes her eyes. “We are together,” she says.



## ***Navigating Heartache, Building Strength***

N.Y. is an inspiring 20-year-old woman who embodies bravery and hard work. As a full-time first-year student studying Business Administration and Accounting, she excels at university despite her busy schedule. Balancing four shifts with her academic responsibilities, she also takes on leadership roles in various youth empowerment groups and volunteers at community events, always eager to lend a helping hand. Her kindness and warm smile make people feel valued and cared for.

However, N.Y. has faced her share of challenges that have shaped her life. I had the privilege of chatting with her about her remarkable journey and how she turned her hardships into a source of inspiration for others, even during her darkest times.

N.Y. attended school in her home country until grade 11, but when circumstances changed there, continuing her education became impossible. After moving to a new country, she repeated grade 11, completed high school, and began her university journey while adapting to a new environment without her father. She faced the profound loss of her dad at just 14 years old. Reflecting on this, she shared, "I always feel like something is missing. I grew up with that feeling, and now, if you ask me how I feel right now, I've kind of gotten used to that feeling. It's hard to remember how I felt before."

Throughout our conversation, N.Y. maintained her smile, though tears sparkled in her eyes as she expressed how much she misses her dad, especially during the transition to a new country without a legal guardian. "When I came here, I was underage and unable to live with my brothers. They asked me why I was alone and told me I needed a legal guardian, which made it challenging for me to adjust," she recalled. "I had to wait for my guardianship process while my friends were able to continue their education."

Taking a moment to collect her thoughts, N.Y. remembered her childhood when her father was alive. "There were times I would be excited about my grades and want to share the good news with someone. It would always be my dad I wanted to call. After he passed, I remember thinking, 'Who am I going to call now?'" The sadness in her voice reflected the depth of her loss.

She continued, "I miss him a lot. When I needed support, my mom was always there for me, but I also had to look out for her." Tragically, N.Y.'s mother passed away about a year and a half after her father.

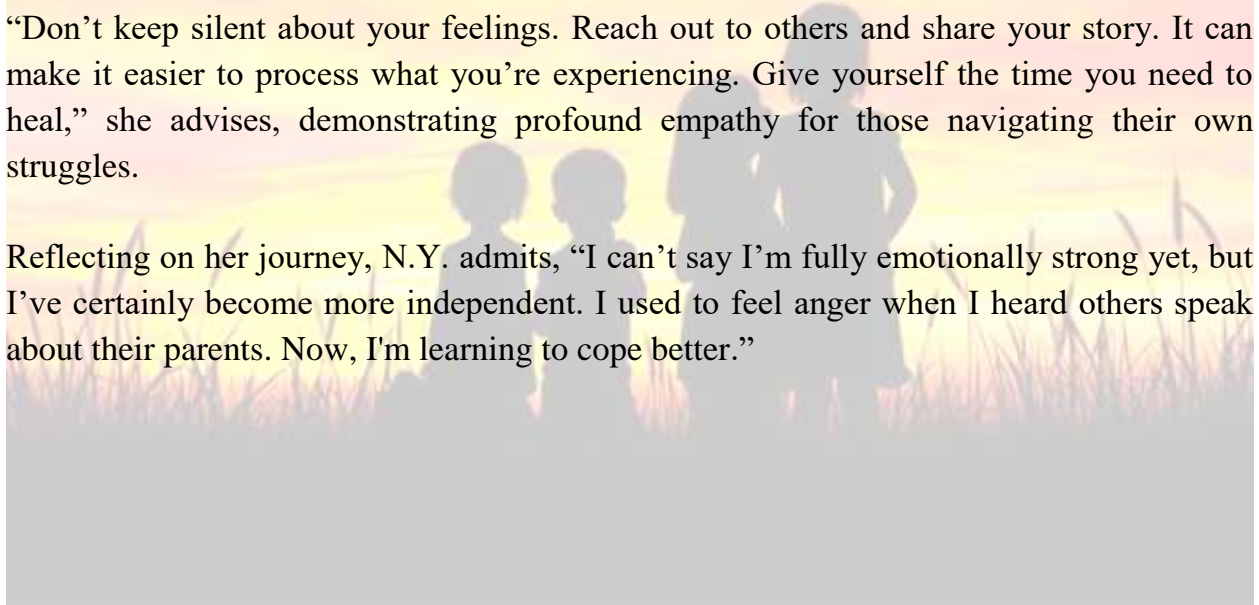
“During that time, my dad meant everything to me. I remember special occasions like Eid when I would see my mom in tears, and I would go over to hug her.”

N.Y. emphasizes the value of her support system. “I’ve been fortunate to have my brothers by my side. We share similar experiences, which help us be there for one another. I believe every family is unique. I was the youngest, and I have my older siblings who continue to support me. But for others, it can be really tough. Imagine a family where younger children don’t have anyone to lean on; they might have to pause their education to help support the family. That can be a heavy burden.”

She connects her experiences to those who have faced parental absence for various reasons. “This kind of loss can happen to anyone, at any stage of life. It might feel like you’re the only one going through this. But if you find yourself in this situation, seek out others who have walked a similar path. Hearing their stories reminds you that you’re not alone.”

“Don’t keep silent about your feelings. Reach out to others and share your story. It can make it easier to process what you’re experiencing. Give yourself the time you need to heal,” she advises, demonstrating profound empathy for those navigating their own struggles.

Reflecting on her journey, N.Y. admits, “I can’t say I’m fully emotionally strong yet, but I’ve certainly become more independent. I used to feel anger when I heard others speak about their parents. Now, I’m learning to cope better.”



## ***Pain and Poetry: The Legacy of a Father's Love***

Farah is a brilliant young Palestinian Canadian poet living in Edmonton, and she has an inspiring story to share. Born in Amman, Jordan, in 1993, she has written five poetry books that blend creativity with messages of self-help and spirituality. Her writing beautifully explores themes like love, courage, and belonging, drawing inspiration from beloved thinkers such as Rumi, Khalil Gibran, Osho, and Eckhart Tolle. As an immigrant and a neurodivergent individual who is highly sensitive, Farah is passionate about inclusion, mental health, and emotional literacy. She dedicates her time to empowering youth and women, especially newcomers and refugees in Canada.

The ocean holds a special place in her heart; it's where she feels most at home and finds her creative spark. Farah's journey is deeply influenced by the loving memories of her father, whom she lost when she was just nine years old. She often remembers their close bond, saying, "My childhood... is like the best time of my life... for me, it's because, like, my dad was in it." Their time together was filled with laughter and joy. "He was one of my favorite people," she shares with a smile, adding, "Obviously, he wasn't perfect, but for me at that time, he was perfect, and he was a fun parent."

The moment she learned about her father's passing is something she holds close to her heart. "I remember asking my mom, 'Is Dad... going to die?'" she recalls, highlighting her strong intuition and special connection with him, as if she sensed something was wrong even before it was said. Farah also reflects on how her father's struggles affected their lives. He had diabetes and wasn't taking care of his health, and he served in Lebanon during the time of the invasion. Farah believes that the emotional toll of witnessing the war could have contributed to her father's heart issues, leading her to think he might have died of heartbreak because of the conflicts he experienced.



After her father's death, life changed significantly for both Farah and her mother. They faced emotional challenges and financial difficulties, but Farah admires her mother's strength. "My mom became a single mother... if she wasn't the incredible woman she is, I wouldn't be here today talking to you." Her mother was a rock during those tough times, and Farah deeply appreciates the sacrifices she made for their family. "Her life stories... are connected to my life," she emphasizes, showing how intertwined their experiences have been.

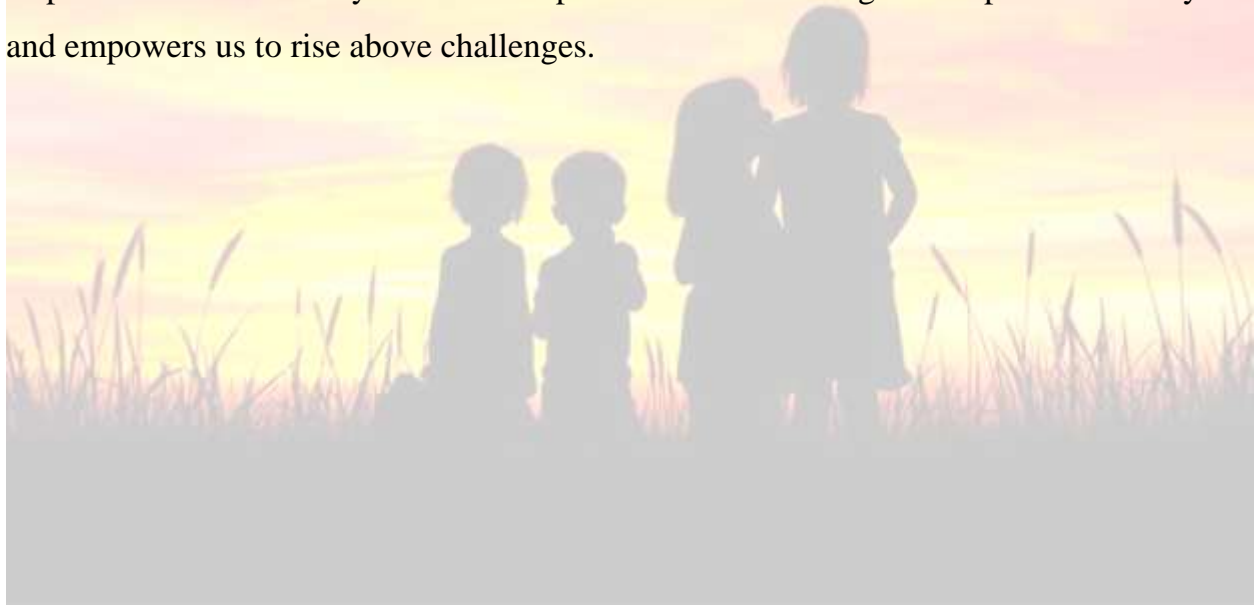
With her father gone, Farah often found herself longing for a sibling, admitting, "The one thing I felt like I've always needed was a sibling." This desire sometimes led her to seek friendships that might fill that void. Despite the ups and downs, she discovered poetry as a source of comfort and strength. "I remember the poem I wrote for my dad... That was the moment that birthed... the seed of self-expression or poetry," she shares. It was a transformative experience that helped her channel her grief into something beautifully creative.

Through her poetry, Farah not only honors her father but also highlights the importance of finding balance in life. She believes that love continues even in the face of loss and that taking care of ourselves is just as important as supporting those we love. Farah teaches us that a father's presence, when nurtured with care, can significantly shape a child's life.

Her work delves into the complex emotions surrounding love and loss. "Sometimes, I just forget about my pain and the grief because it has become a part of who I am," she confides. While navigating her own grief, she emphasizes the importance of acceptance and resilience: "I don't have to like it. I don't have to love it. I don't have to enjoy it. Even when I do, I have to accept it." This accepting mindset is crucial for healing, allowing her to embrace her experiences with open arms.

Ultimately, Farah’s journey is a testament to the lasting influence of loved ones and how their absence can shape who we become. “Sometimes things don't turn out the way you want. It's unfair, but as long as I'm alive, I have to keep moving forward,” she says with determination. Through her words and experiences, she seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the emotional challenges many children face when their parents are absent.

Farah encourages us to connect, celebrate resilience, and find strength in our own stories. By sharing her journey, she creates a warm sense of community among those who have also experienced loss. She reminds us that while grief is a natural part of life, our response to it—our ability to transform pain into art and strength—shapes our identity and empowers us to rise above challenges.



## **God and People are good**

### **Mercy O. – South Sudan**

“Losing their father so young was hard on all the kids,” Mercy begins, “but it was hardest on Florence.” She rubs her hands together as if suddenly cold. “She never got to meet him.”

Mercy was heavily pregnant with her sixth child when her husband died unexpectedly after a brief illness. “My husband was a very good man. I was devastated when he died,” she tells me. “My in-laws said that when a husband died, his property passed to his brother. My brother-in-law had two wives already, and he didn’t treat them well. I said I’d never marry a man like that.”

In response, his family sold her husband’s assets – his barbershop business and modest house – propelling Mercy and her young family into what she remembers as a time of desperate poverty. Mercy glosses quickly over the next three months. At times, she talks so quietly I struggle to catch her words. “My father told me to run from my husband’s people, so I ran. I ran seventy miles with five children,” she says fiercely.

Her eyes close when she talks about reaching the refugee camp just over the Ugandan border where the growing family – including newborn Florence – would stay for the next two years. Later, Mercy would learn that the day they reached the camp, her beloved father had died.

“There was never enough food in the camp. Florence was sick all that first year. I couldn’t get her to eat,” she recalls. “I watched her every second, and I never saw her grow.”

Against the advice of her mother, Mercy moved her family to Kampala, Uganda’s capital city, seven hours by bus from the camp. In the city, there would be doctors for Florence. “I’d gone to school in Uganda for a year when I was in high school,” she explains. “I knew some English and Swahili. I had business ideas. I was a hard worker. My mother said I didn’t stand a chance in the city without a husband. She wanted me to send my kids to live with her father’s aunt in Sudan.” Her eyes flash. “We didn’t talk much after that.”

The first year working in Kampala was tough, Mercy recalls. Six days a week, she worked as a cleaner at a primary school on the edge of the city. “I’d take Florence with me. She never wanted me to leave. She didn’t trust anyone but me. After school, I’d work at Kareri market selling Irish (potatoes) and cassava. She slept on a blanket under the stall.”

For two years, once a month, Mercy made the difficult journey – three buses and a river crossing - back to the Refugee Camp to collect the family’s monthly food rations. It was a torturous eleven hour journey that – with an infant and a cargo of bagged maize and groundnuts - often felt ten times longer. When she was twelve months old, Florence started to suffer seizures. More than once passengers demanded the driver throw Mercy and her daughter off the bus. To this day, Mercy reflects, Florence is scared of buses.

Bit by bit, Mercy managed to save a little money. She was able to buy medicine for Florence and sometimes, fresh vegetables. When the family of six moved from a tiny single room to a larger double room, Florence finally started to walk.

Mercy took a second job selling Tanzanian rice and potatoes in the markets of Kampala. “I built good relationships,” she says with pride. “If I couldn’t sell the Irish for what the seller wanted, I’d sell it cheaper and make up the difference from my own profit. People knew I was a person to be trusted. “

As Mercy built her business reputation, other opportunities blossomed. She met a man whom she felt could take good care of her family. Together they had a child – Mercy’s seventh and his first. They called him Joshua. His family were against the relationship, Mercy recalls. “They said I was too old and had too many children already.

What could he do? In the end you’ve got to respect your parents. We were forced to divorce.” This latest loss hit Florence especially hard, Mercy says. “After Emmanuel left, she hardly ate. Some days it was like she wasn’t even there.”

Through these ups and downs, Mercy never lost sight of her dream. “I told Florence over and over that when she was strong enough, I’d take her to America.”

The family arrived in Newark in February 2024. Mercy shrugs when I ask how she achieved this, as if the details of how a single parent of seven negotiated the complex logistics of emigrating from Sudan to the US via Uganda are too mundane to detail. “Yes, it was complicated,” she shrugs, “but God and people are good.” She explains how, with the help of a local Catholic charity, she was able to find a home to rent and a job. Six of her seven children still live with her and attend school in Newark, New Jersey. Her eldest son, Innocent, recently left high school and moved into his own apartment round the corner from the hospital where Mercy works as a cleaner. Florence is enrolled in grade. The family

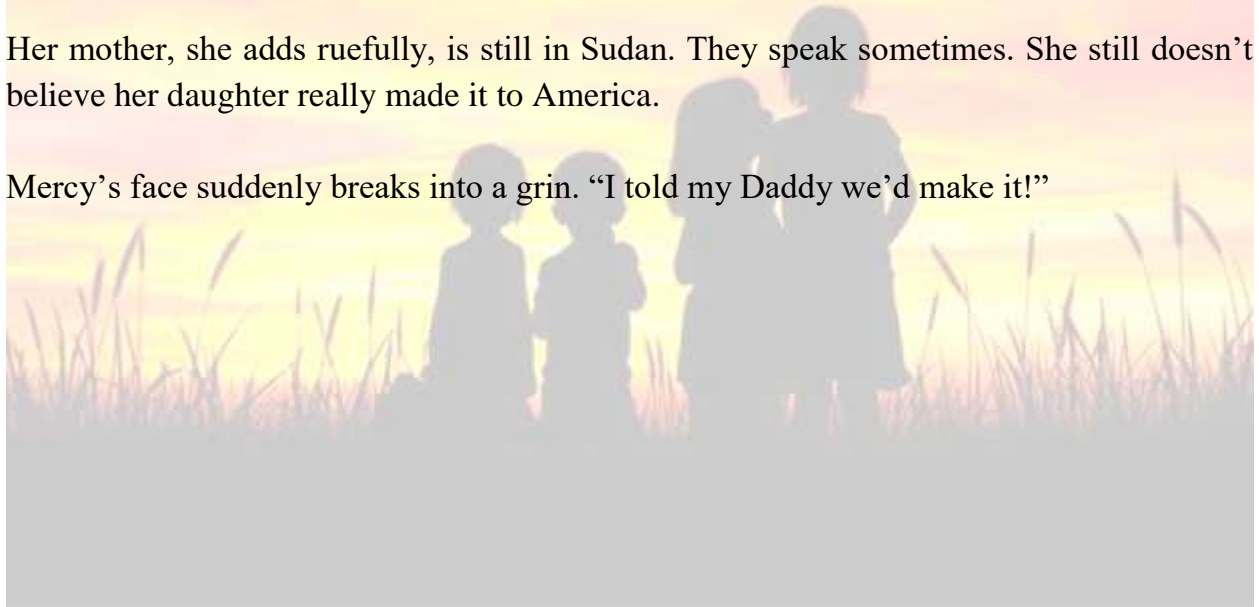


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Asked what aspects of life in the US are hard for the family, Mercy laughs. “Nothing. Nothing is really hard here. I have lived through very hard times. But I wish my sons knew their father and grandfather. They were two inspiring men.”

Her mother, she adds ruefully, is still in Sudan. They speak sometimes. She still doesn’t believe her daughter really made it to America.

Mercy’s face suddenly breaks into a grin. “I told my Daddy we’d make it!”



## **Education is the best protection**

### **Diya P - Pondicherry, India**

As clouds of brightly dressed passengers exited the train, Diya scanned the sea of faces for one that looked familiar. Although she hadn't seen her father in sixteen years, she'd always thought she'd know him when she saw him. Now she wasn't so sure.

It was the final act in a long-running family dispute. Everyone in the community knew the story. At seventeen, Diya's father's marriage had been arranged. Nithya was two years younger than him and came from a hard-working family from the neighboring village. A date was chosen for the wedding, and a dowry price was agreed.

Nithya's mother, who worked alongside her husband in a low-paying factory on the edge of Pondicherry, started selling her jewelry to cover the wedding expenses.

The problems began the day of her parents' wedding, Diya explains quietly. Though a dowry had already been paid, Ari's parents suddenly demanded an additional bride payment. It was an exorbitant amount, far more than Nithya's family could afford. Her parents faced an agonizing choice. They could borrow the money to pay Ari's family, or at the final hour, with guests already arriving, they could cancel their daughter's wedding. The wedding went ahead, but the years that followed were not happy ones. The bitter feud between Nithya's parents, now deeply indebted to an unscrupulous moneylender, and Ari's, bled into the newlyweds' own relationship. Violence within the home became routine. Nithya's family tried to intervene, with little impact. There was even talk of recruiting a lawyer, although—because the dowry system is officially outlawed in India—the family had little legal recourse.

“He beat my mother for the last time the morning I was born,” Diya says quietly. “He never did it again. Mother said he didn't even ask to see me. As soon as he heard she'd had a girl, he left. He took a second wife soon after. I didn't see him again for sixteen years.”

Nithya and Diya moved with Nithya's parents into a straw-roofed hut. During the day, they sold plastic bags full of water to pilgrims traveling to the nearby temples. When the harvest permitted, they sold coconuts and tomatoes. Her mother didn't talk much about Diya's father, who by this time had moved to Calcutta with his new wife and two sons. “I had to piece together bits of information,” Diya says. “He was a farmer. He had finished tenth grade.” She shrugs as if to say that these small bits of information don't add up to much.

“And he didn’t think much of me.”

Despite tremendous obstacles, including nursing her mother through a long and debilitating illness and a fire that nearly destroyed their home, Nithya did everything she could to keep Diya in school. Education was the best protection against the sort of exploitation her family had suffered, she insisted. Even when there was no money to pay her daughter’s school fees, she found people from the community to teach her. She even hired a lawyer in hopes of forcing Ari to contribute to the costs of Diya’s schooling. (He refused, leaving Nithya with hefty legal bills.)

“My mother just kept going,” Diya says. “She just believed that something better would happen. Then one day, she saw a sign looking for women interested in learning tailoring. That was the start of it.”

One thing quickly led to another. After an extensive interview process, Nithya was selected to be an apprentice tailor. The project was based in a neighboring town. “Mother didn’t know anyone there and had no idea where we were going to live, but they showed her this little house and said we could live there for free.” Diya’s eyes shine as she remembers. “They sent me to school and found a sponsor to pay for my tuition and uniform.”

Word eventually got back to Ari that his first wife now had both a home, a trade, and a modest income. “Somehow he got word to Mother that he wanted to meet me,” explains Diya. “I was so excited. I waited all day at the station. The train was late, but I didn’t mind. I’d already waited sixteen years. A bit longer couldn’t hurt.”

She takes a deep breath. “When he finally arrived,” she says carefully, “I didn’t recognize him. He was carrying an envelope. He told me to give it to my mother. That was it. He didn’t want to know anything about me. He hardly even looked at me. The envelope contained a legal form. He wanted to get his hands on my mother’s earnings,” Diya said. “That was all. A lifetime waiting, and it was over in five minutes.”

Life carried on, but with one difference. Diya stopped hoping her father would come back.

Impressed by her grades and work ethic, Diya’s sponsors helped her to attend a local university. In 2022, she graduated from college with a Master’s degree in Physics. The following year, her marriage was arranged—with her consent—to Nirmal, an engineer from Chennai. Now, she and her engineer husband live peacefully in Bangalore. Last year,

the family—Diya, and Nirmal—bought a plot of land close to the nursing home for widows where Diya now works.

“We’re saving to build a house where we can all live together,” Diya explains. “Mum, my husband, and me. I don’t know if I’ll decide to have children. If I do, I’ll teach them what my mum taught me.” *She glances proudly at the framed degree certificate on the wall.* *“Education is the best protection.”*



## **Girls Stick Around**

**Navea P – Baltimore, USA**

Navea was ten when her mother went to prison, leaving her and her sister in the care of their disabled grandma. “My sister said for sure that when mom went to jail, Dad would come find us,” Navea, now twenty, shrugs. “I said if he hadn’t bothered to come see us once in our whole lives, he wasn’t going to look for us now.”

For a long time, Navea didn’t even know her father’s real name. Everyone called him something different – Tall Bob, KP, Sauce. “No one talked about him straight on,” she remembers. “I had to piece together the details.”

He’d grown up in Mexico, on his parents’ corn farm. She didn’t know when he’d first crossed the border into California, just that it was after his parents’ maize crop failed and before his father died. By the time Navea was born, he’d already lived in seven different states. She’s not sure if he ever came back to Baltimore, where he met Navea’s mother, Shania. “He worked on cattle farms out west,” Navea says. “Mom said he sent all the money back to Mexico and didn’t send her anything.”

To Navea, her mother’s six-month prison sentence felt like an eternity. At first, she skipped school every Friday to visit her mother in jail – an experience she remembers being “sad and frightening.” When, after three months, Shania was transferred to a facility in another part of the state, the visits stopped. She remembers drawing a line each night on the wall with a piece of chalk. When she’d drawn a hundred and eighty strokes and her mother still hadn’t come home, a friend suggested she write to her father. She bought a card at the dollar store.

“I got my photo printed in a booth in the mall just so he’d know what I looked like. It was hard to know what to write,” she remembers. “In the end, I just wrote ‘I miss you’ because that’s what I thought I was supposed to say. But how could I miss something I’d never had? Then I realized I didn’t know where to send it. I wrote Tall Bob, Mexico on the envelope.” She looks pensive for a moment. “I guess he never got it.”

In the meantime, Navea was taking care of everyone. “I did all the housework because Grandma couldn’t move much. My Grandpa Shorty’s friends were round all the time. I cleaned after them too. It was cold all the time.”



And noisy.”

It wasn’t just noisy, she adds quietly. “It was scary.” For ten years, Navea had lived with her mother and sister in an attic flat overlooking a children’s park. Now Navea, her sister Lila, Grandma Bette, and Shorty lived in a one-bedroom ground floor apartment on a busy city street. “Grandma slept with a baseball bat under her pillow, but she always said a baseball bat can’t stop a bullet.” For a long time, the girls slept on a mattress in the bathroom. “We were too scared to sleep in any room with a window, in case it got shot out. I started falling asleep in class.”

The rest of that year, Navea waited. “I waited for the mail to come in the morning ‘cause my father had written back, and I waited at night for my mom to call. I didn’t play. I didn’t do homework. I just waited.”

When her mother got out of jail, Navea was sure everything would be better. At first, it was. She moved back into her mother’s attic flat. “Mom started working for this man Mikey. He was fun...colorful. And he had money. He bought me pop and fake nails and took me to get my first braids. When I went out with him and Mama, it was like we were a proper family. It was like I had a dad.”

When Navea turned fourteen, Mikey started coming by after school when her mother was working. “I started staying late at school,” she remembers, “trying to avoid him, but he’d just turn up at school. My teachers thought it was nice he wanted to drive me home safe.” At first, Shania didn’t believe Navea was pregnant. When she saw the positive pregnancy test, she threw her daughter out of the house—despite the fact that Mikey was twenty-eight and Navea only fourteen. Devastated, Navea went back to her grandma’s. “I kept thinking I didn’t want to have my baby in a house with boarded-up windows. And I didn’t want a boy who’d run away like my dad and Mikey. I wanted a girl because girls stick around.”

Seven months later, Navea gave birth to her daughter. She called her Princess Royal. “I thought if I called her Princess she’d feel like one every day,” she explains.

Crushed by the demands of new motherhood and lacking any consistent family support, Navea was forced to drop out of school. “I didn’t mind too much. I had a person who was all mine. I’d never had that.” She takes a deep breath. “But I’d have liked to go to college.” Though the path ahead was not clear, Navea found a way. Once Princess was old enough to go to preschool, Navea enrolled in beauty school and got her cosmetology license. Now

20, she rents a chair at a local hair salon five days a week. On Saturdays, she takes Princess to a park near the small apartment she shares with her cousins. On Sundays, she visits her Grandma, who still lives in the same ground-floor apartment with the boarded-up windows, waiting for her daughter to call.

It has not been easy. Money is still tight. She still sleeps with a baseball bat under her pillow. And she still has never met her father.

Yet, despite everything that has been forcibly taken from her, Navea talks fiercely about her daughter's right to a peaceful childhood. "I know what it's like to have all those questions about where you come from. To feel that stigma," she says. "I can't answer all those questions for Princess. But I can fill the holes, you know? *Let her know who she is without a Dad.*"



## *R.N.: From Invisible Scars to Victory*

From an early age, R.N. learned that the world could be cruel. Her childhood was marked by the absence of a father and a pain no child should ever endure. When she was only five years old, her mother found a new partner. Because R.N. attended school at a different time than her siblings, she often stayed home alone. A concerned neighbor would watch over her to make sure she didn't wander the streets.

But there were days when that protection wasn't there. Days when the man who should have represented safety in her home came home early from work. Days that would leave permanent scars.

Without even understanding the gravity of what was happening, R.N. became a victim of repeated abuse. There was no father to protect her. No one to intervene, to ensure that her childhood remained untouched. In that silent loneliness, she grew up carrying a pain that would take years to fully comprehend.

### *The Invisible Child*

At school, R.N. was a quiet child. On parent-teacher meeting days, while her classmates ran into the arms of their parents, she stared at the empty seat that represented her reality. Her mother, overwhelmed by the responsibility of providing for the family, worked tirelessly and could never attend.

There was no time for conversations, no one to notice the signs, no one to see the little girl who, in silence, was trying to survive the weight of her own pain. Only years later did she come to understand what she had always felt—the absence of a father. If someone had been there to protect her, to make sure no one hurt her, maybe her story would have been different. But the truth was that she had learned, from a very young age, to rely on no one.

### *The Battle against Fear*

Throughout her life, fear never left her side. In relationships, she struggled to open up, haunted by insecurities. And when she became an adult, fate placed yet another obstacle in her path: when she married a foreigner, she needed official documents proving her legal parentage. ***But the name that should have been on her birth certificate did not exist.***

And her father had already passed away, unable to give her the paternal name she needed to marry—but to her, he had never truly been alive in her story.

Even so, life had another challenge in store. Though she never had children of her own, she was forced to become a mother. She raised her younger brother, who, like her, had no father. She cared for him, protected him, and supported him. And when their mother passed away, she legally adopted him, ensuring that he had the family foundation she herself had never had.

### *Overcoming: From Silence to Independence*

Despite all the scars, R.N. never allowed her pain to define who she would become. She began her career as a pharmacy assistant, fighting for financial independence.

While others doubted, she dreamed. Through hard work, resilience, and determination, she became the owner of the very pharmacy where she once worked as an employee. Today, she owns six rental properties, two houses, a car, and a motorcycle.

She built an empire from nothing, and more than material possessions, she built the certainty that her story would not end in pain.

She chose to be different.

She chose to prove that despite the absences, despite the wounds, she was stronger than everything that had been taken from her.

### *A Message to Absent Fathers*

***"A child is forever. Whether they were the result of a brief encounter or a failed marriage, they never asked to come into this world alone. They need protection, presence, and love. The weight of abandonment is too heavy to be placed on a child's shoulders. If there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that a father can change everything—through love or through absence."***

## ***The Invisible Scars of Abandonment: P.S.'s Story***

In the first years of his life, P.S. had a safe and loving world. His father was his best friend, his inseparable companion. Wherever one went, the other followed. The two were a perfect duo, especially when it came to skateboarding.

At the community sports court, P.S.'s father taught him how to balance, how to master tricks, and most importantly, how to get back up after every fall. But more than that, they shared laughter, dreams, and a bond that inspired those around them. Together, they even taught other kids how to skate, forming friendships and creating memories that seemed destined to last forever. It was the kind of love that appeared unbreakable.

But time proved that some promises are not kept, and some absences leave scars that never fade. When P.S. was seven years old, his parents divorced. The separation was difficult, but he still had his safe haven—his father. For a while, things seemed to remain the same.

But before long, everything changed. His father began to drift away. First, it was the postponed visits. Then, the weekends that never happened. Messages were left unanswered. He had a new girlfriend, and with her came old demons. The drugs he had managed to stay away from for four years returned, pulling him back into a destructive cycle. And with that, P.S. was pushed further and further away.

His father's new partner did not want the child around. And, for reasons only he could explain, his father chose to step back rather than fight to stay present. Now, at 13 years old, P.S. has not seen his father in four years. There are no more calls, no visits, no broken promises—only silence. The man who was once his hero vanished, as if he had never been there at all. And with him, he took away the joyful, kind-hearted boy that P.S. used to be. Anger has become his most constant companion. His father's absence left invisible wounds that no one sees, but that scream through his actions. School has turned into a battlefield. Playfulness has been replaced by fights, laughter by clenched fists. His mother, L.S., fights every day to bring back the son she once knew, but the pain of abandonment has transformed him.

Teachers no longer welcome him—he has become the "problem child" in the classroom. Repeated grades, warnings, meetings, judgmental stares. What few understand is that his rage is just a shield for the pain he does not know how to express. He does not know how



to cry out to the world that he misses something he should have never lost. The absence of a father is not just a missing name on a birth certificate. It is a void in one's identity, a burden a child carries without ever choosing to.

***P.S.'s story is the story of countless other children who face rejection without knowing how to process it.*** L.S. remains strong, even when exhausted. She tries to fill the emptiness that, deep down, she knows can never be fully filled. She loves her son with all her heart, but she also feels powerless to take away his pain.

What does this story teach us? ***That a father's presence is not a privilege—it is a right. That children should not be abandoned because of the selfish choices of adults. And that, as a society, we have a duty to look at these children with empathy, offering them and their families the support they need to rebuild what was unfairly taken from them.***



*As we reach the end of Bridges to Belonging: Stories of Fatherless Lives, we want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to you, the reader. Thank you for taking the time to engage with these powerful stories and for allowing the voices of those affected by fatherlessness to resonate in your heart.*

*Your willingness to listen and reflect is vital in raising awareness about the challenges faced by children growing up without a father figure. We hope these narratives have inspired you to take action and foster a sense of community support for those in need.*

*If you wish to explore more stories and learn about our ongoing projects, we invite you to visit the PROSDOMA website. Your journey doesn't have to end here; there are many more voices to hear and stories to share.*

*This book is part of our 2025 initiative aimed at promoting awareness and inspiring change. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of fatherless children and contribute to a brighter future for all.*

*Thank you once again for reading and for being a part of this important conversation.*



#### Meet the authors



Kirsti is a British-Canadian occupational therapist currently living in New York State, America where she is privileged to work with young children with special needs and their wonderful families. Her passions are writing and travel and finding ways to volunteer that combine both of these things.



Marzia Saramad is committed to addressing social and gender issues faced by refugees and immigrants, particularly Afghan women and children. She supports community projects and has collaborated with organizations like UNICEF Afghanistan to enhance gender equality. In addition to her advocacy, she provides interpretation services in various settings to aid communication among diverse groups. Marzia is also involved in storytelling and research to raise awareness of community issues. She holds a master's degree in Critical Gender Studies and a bachelor's degree in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics, focusing on empowering refugees and women.

