

# CLOUD PEOPLE

**Hope Beyond the Storms**

**A Memoir by BJ Rae**

---

*"Some people are dark, threatening clouds. When they blow away, life becomes a clear, blue sky. If they surround you, look for umbrellas—those who protect you from the storms." —BJ Rae*

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**FOREWORD BY MARIEL HEMINGWAY**

### PROLOGUE

### PART ONE

- Chapter 1: Surviving Three
- Chapter 2: My Childhood House
- Chapter 3: Poverty and Being Poor
  - Chapter 4: Saved by Sunday
  - Chapter 5: Hidden Riches
  - Chapter 6: Family Skeletons
- Chapter 7: Revenge Revisited

### PART TWO

- Chapter 8: Father
- Chapter 9: Mother
- Chapter 10: Willy
- Chapter 11: Sam
- Chapter 12: Jimmy
  - Chapter 13: Jen
- Chapter 14: Grant and Miriam

### PART THREE

- Chapter 15: Silent Screaming
  - Chapter 16: Aftermath

- Chapter 17: And They All Blew Away

## EPILOGUE

### TIMELINE OF EVENTS

---

## PROLOGUE

The kitchen floor was littered with his empty beer cans. Father was in his usual mood. "Willy, Sam," he growled in his ugly voice we knew too well. "Clean up this damned mess."

Panic made Jimmy and me freeze in the hallway, shrinking ourselves to hopeful invisibility. Our hearts trembled silently as we watched Willy and Sam obey. When Sam picked up a can next to Father's left foot, the cruel man kicked another that bruised Willy's forehead. Father clearly thought this was clever. He raised himself from his chair and threw trash at my frightened brother and sister. Jimmy grabbed my arm with a whispered, "Run, Miriam," and the four of us dashed to the backyard.

Father turned on the outside light and followed us. We squeezed behind the evergreen bushes at the top of the cement stairs leading to the basement, but we weren't fast enough. In just a few paces, he arrived at our green sanctuary, reached around Sam, and grabbed me.

Fearful of falling down the hard steps, I held Raggedy Ann to my chest and tried to sit down. But Father was six feet four inches tall, and—despite being drunk—he was too quick for me. He struck my head with the back of his hand so hard that I rolled backward down the stairs like a bowling ball. I lay at the bottom with my doll, conscious but shaking in jerky motions.

It was my third birthday.

---

## CHAPTER 1: SURVIVING THREE

Father pressed the cold weapon against my forehead. My racing heart stilled as I braced for what would come.

I was accustomed to my parents' predictable and unpredictable anger bouts, but this time was much worse. Even my child's brain knew Father was crazed and irrational.

Both Father's loud roar and its intention made my head throb. "Say goodbye to the fucking problem!"

---

## CHAPTER 4: SAVED BY SUNDAY

I asked Mother why [the cows were different colors]. She said, "Colors tell the milk they give..." In Sunday School the following Sunday, I proudly announced my new knowledge during sharing time, and also said that I want a brown one in my backyard. I was proud to say something nice about my mother. My face beamed.

Mrs. Gamble watched us chattering until we settled down before she spoke again. "That's a funny joke."

Since my mother had explained this in a serious tone, I hadn't realized these things weren't true. I felt embarrassed, and blood rushed to my face. I also told myself to never believe anything Mother said again.

---

## CHAPTER 5: HIDDEN RICHES

Mrs. Pendergrass was curious about me, too. "Who taught you to read?"

"I did."

"I don't see well. Book pages are blurry to me. Would you mind reading more?"

I nodded no, that I wouldn't mind at all.

Mrs. Pendergrass had always let me take a large goody bag home: fried chicken, hamburgers, potatoes, cookies, cake, bread, brownies, and other treats. The goody bags were more exciting to me than the money she gave me—a twenty-dollar bill each time I read to her.

At least Saturdays were no longer hungry days for Willy, Jimmy, and me.

When Grandma and (banker) Mr. Snipes discussed the details (of my new bank account), Grandma told me that only she and I could ever get my money out. Even if Mother found out about it, Mother wouldn't be able to touch it.

When Mr. Snipes asked me if I wanted to make a mark next to Grandma's signature, I surprised him by printing "Miriam." Grandma sat with her back straight and her head high when she handed that paper back to the banker, who said, "Well, well, what a clever girl."

---

## CHAPTER 6: FAMILY SKELETONS

Mr. Davis asked me the same question he had Sam and Jimmy, "What can you tell this court about your brother William?"

At that moment, I knew Mother couldn't hit or yell at me, and I didn't think ahead to what would happen later. "Mother's mean to Willy. Treats him like dirt. He's angry at her mostly."

Mr. Davis said, "That's not what your sister said."

I tried to stand in the witness seat to be taller, but the judge motioned for me to sit. I folded my arms on my chest, and my eyes met Mother's hateful glare. "I won't say what Mother told me to say."

---

## CHAPTER 10: WILLY

Willy wandered into a room next to the library. A large piano with its top propped up by a piece of wood sat in the front corner, and the temptation to touch it overwhelmed him. First, he hummed a song in his head, the theme song from *Love Story*. Then he sat on the bench and fingered the keys. A few minutes later, he played the popular tune. He'd never touched an instrument before and didn't realize that few people could play by ear like he'd just done.

---

## CHAPTER 14: GRANT AND MIRIAM

Mother approached. "Aren't you going to have a last meal with your family before you leave, or are you too good to eat with us now?"

Her snide comment was too much. My anger bubbles rose to the surface, and this time they started to burst. "Mother, you knew I had to be at the college by three o'clock to sign into the dorm today, and I have to drive several hours to get there. But you couldn't bother to return by noon as you promised. So, no, I don't want to stay here and eat with you. You've used me one time too many, and I'm happy to get away from you."

While I finished my speech, she stared with surprise on her face. "Do you remember your favorite lilac bush that died years ago? You blamed us kids for killing it, even physically beat us. The truth is that you destroyed it with your cooking. The night before it died, you left your infamous leftover stew for us to eat for dinner, but it smelled so awful that we couldn't choke down even one bite. Thinking it might do your beloved plant some good, Sam spread it on the ground nearby, and your favorite flowers grew no more."

---

## CHAPTER 15: SILENT SCREAMING

Peter, an older guy I'd refused to go out with, had been hiding behind the evergreens. He sprang to the porch and shoved me to the floor in the foyer.

I tried to get free but wasn't strong enough... His knees dug into my legs. He looked into my eyes, his face just inches from mine. "Too good to go out with me, huh?"

My breath became a panting gasp, and I feared for my life. I tried to scream, but no sound came.

---

## WISDOM FROM THE UMBRELLA PEOPLE

**Grandma:** "No matter what life throws your way, you always come out on top."

**Jimmy:** "Think about how to fix things instead of being scared. So face your fears. Don't run."

**Mrs. Gamble:** "Miriam, never forget that you are very special, no matter what happens at home. You are a gift from heaven, the daughter I never had. I love you, Little Angel."

**Grant:** "You deserve every good thing that comes your way, Miriam."

---

## EPILOGUE

My husband Tom and I sat on the deck in our backyard, watching our three rescue dogs play.

I glanced at the scenery behind our rural home. The glistening mountain peaks celebrated the steep paths I'd climbed to get to this point in my life. The rocks freckling the mountains reminded me of the many hurdles I'd overcome. The tall trees reflected how much I'd grown. The blue, cloudless sky was a perfect dome to canvas the peace and tranquility I now enjoyed.

There were so many days in the past that I thought I was unlucky, but now the darkness and cloud people have all blown away. And I'm glad to be alive.

I touched the pendant around my neck, the one Jimmy gave me so many years ago with the heart and angel wings. Tom commented that I seemed at peace. And I was.

Thanks to numerous umbrella people—and my stubbornness and faith—I've let my past go.