



Shattered

Jeff Powitz Heston

*For my wife and children*



1933  
Belle Laskin - age 10

*“You want to be the exception like you wanted to be your mother’s exception, the “Special One.” But I’m not your mother, I’m your therapist. Sometimes I think you don’t see the difference. You want acceptance from me that you felt you didn’t get from her. That’s pretty clear. You want me to love you, warts and all, like you wanted your mother to put aside her religion and accept who you were, even though you went against her beliefs.*

*I know you want to continue therapy, but that would not be good for you. You desperately want me to tell you I care for you so much that I want you to be my friend. I am not going to do that. And you will have to sit with that, the same as you had to sit with missing your mother’s funeral. Your life will not include me. As much as you want it to, it will not. I know that is very painful to hear and hard, if not impossible for you to accept, but you will survive even without getting something you want.”*

*—Sharon, therapist*

On a winter’s day in 1959, when I was six years old, my mother removed all the dinner plates from our kitchen cabinets. With an armload of dishes in hand, she positioned herself in the living room, just inside the front entry. She threw one plate after another at the door, shattering them all until they became a pile of ceramic shards.

This may have been one of the first memories I have of Mom’s anger. We were living in a small split-level in Bellmore, a Long Island suburb we moved to in 1956. The Bellmore neighborhood was a new development—so new that the roads were not yet paved. Rain turned the streets to muck.

My father William, an elementary school teacher in Brooklyn, was supposed to come home directly from work that day. My mom did not yet have her driver’s license. There’s a discrepancy as to the reason Mom wanted Dad home right away. My younger brother Alan remembers that Mom had scheduled an appointment for him to meet with admission officials at a local yeshiva. I recall that I had a doctor’s appointment. After discussing this incident with my siblings some 40 years later we realized that our older brother Steve was also in the room. None of us have memories of the others bearing witness.

Dad forgot about the appointment. Instead of coming straight home from work, he stopped to do some grocery shopping. With no way to contact him, Mom became agitated and cursed him. When that was not enough, she went to the kitchen to collect her ammunition—the dinner plates. I rather liked Dad and was worried that he might open the door at any moment and get a face full of plate. I have no recollection what happened when he arrived home, except he did not get hit with one. Steve remembers Dad saying, as he looked down at the shattered stoneware, “I guess she needed to do that.” Based on today’s clinical terminology for mental illnesses, my mother, Belle Laskin Powitz would likely be diagnosed as bipolar.

## ***Joining our “own kind”***



1962 - 48 Surrey Commons, Lynbrook

By 1960, my parents had four children—Steve (b. 1947), Judee (b. 1949), Jeff (b. 1953), and Alan (b. 1956). Having three sons sleep in the same bedroom and their daughter sleep in a closet-sized room was untenable, especially when the oldest son was unhappy with the arrangement and bullied the others. Add to that anonymous, lightly veiled phone call threats telling my mother “You might be happier living around your own kind”—a warning it was time to *get out of Dodge*. My parents started house-hunting after Thanksgiving that year—around the time when Christmas lights went up. They wanted to live in a neighborhood with as few Christmas lights as possible; short of living in a *shtetl*. They thought counting Christmas decorations was a simple way to gauge the Christian-Judeo resident ratio. In March 1962, we moved to Lynbrook.

Our Tudor-style house, built in 1930, was in the “Yorkshire” section of Lynbrook, on the southeast border of Valley Stream. Street names like Charing Cross, Piccadilly Downs, and our street, Surrey Commons, were “veddy” British sounding, indeed! Because of the proximity to our neighboring village, we were included in Valley Stream’s School District 24. Our new-yet-old house was an adventure—the winding stairways, unfinished basement, and attic were exciting territories to explore.

## **ADHD**

Mom was skilled at coming up with odious nicknames for family members, or demeaning intonations of our actual names. I earned the moniker “Jubilee.” The dictionary definition of jubilee is a “special celebration,” but Mom was not referring to that. “Jubilee” was her derisive nickname for me because of the many times I withdrew into myself and did a “happy dance.” My older brother’s nickname for me was “Jeff-freak.” To process and deal with their hurtful words, I countered the mental abuse with physical activity by running around our backyard—alone. I fantasized about being Superman or driving a car at 200 mph. I did a kind of spastic skipping with facial contortions accompanying an almost orgasmic hyper-focus. And since the cause of my excitement was internal, it appeared my spasms of delight came out of nowhere. The thrill of the fantasy elicited an outpouring of adrenaline that was addictive. Nobody knew what caused me to act so oddly, so freakish. At least once, my mother and my Aunt Ruth stood at the kitchen window, which overlooked our backyard and watched me. Mom sneered in a contemptuous tone, “Look at Jubilee. He runs and makes faces.” When I saw them standing there and staring, I was ashamed and ran to the more secluded side of the house to continue my fantasy in solitude.

I now know that I had ADHD, but back then my behavior was considered “fidgety” at the low end, and “out of control,” at the high end. Kids today are treated with stimulants like Ritalin to control their impulsive behavior. But, at that time, the mid to late sixties, I was given a minty-flavored syrupy liquid sedative, which only made me sleepy.

### ***Gimbels and the Magic Wand***

My father had an inkling of what was going on in my mind; he listened to the many times I exclaimed: “I wish I had a magic wand!” When I was about eight or nine, he sat me down and told me that Gimbels, the department store in the Green Acres Shopping Center, was selling magic wands. They were expensive, so if we could afford one wish with the magic wand, what would it be? I was no dope and said, “An infinity of wishes.” Dad said it didn’t work that way. You couldn’t wish for more wishes, you had to wish for something specific. (He was trying to get to the crux of what he thought would make me happy.) I pushed back with “If it’s really a magic wand, why can’t I wish for an infinity of wishes?” “You just can’t,” he said, adding something about the store not being able to make any money if people had an infinite number of wishes. I wanted to be invulnerable like Superman, and if I could have a second wish, it would be the power to become invisible. I don’t recall how I finally realized that Gimbels wasn’t selling magic wands.

### ***Lashing Out***

My mother continued to lash out at all four kids, and at my dad, too. She hit, using anything that was at hand, swore, and washed my “filthy” mouth with kosher soap. And when soap didn’t work, she upped the ante to Comet—which is also kosher. By the time I was 11, I was taller than Mom and started lashing back. I would instinctively block her hand as it swung in to slap my face, often hurting her arm and causing a bruise. She was strong, but I worked hard at being stronger. I did isometric exercises, push-ups, and lifted weights to build arm strength.

Dad, on occasion, could be as fierce as Mom. One warm day with the windows wide open, Steve was practicing his trombone in the front room of the house. A neighbor from down the block stopped by and demanded that he stop. “That sound is driving me insane!” The un-neighborly man threatened to call the police. There were nine brick steps leading to the front door landing. After the second visit or maybe it was just after the first, when the neighbor rang the doorbell, my father said to my mother, “You’d better get the door. If I do, I’ll push the S.O.B. down the stairs!” But Dad always had just enough self-control to not get violent or use every swear word. The worst word I ever heard him say was “shithead.” That described anyone he was angry at whose beliefs, behavior, and education level were beneath him. He never hit out of anger. When he struck any of us, it was as a last resort.

My brother Steve inherited my mother’s fierce anger, but without the caring sweetness she could also give. When we were kids he would yell, hit, spit, threaten, and menace his siblings on a regular basis. Anytime something at home didn’t go his way, he got loud and violent. I was about eight years old when I had my fill of his torment—I threw a steak knife at him! He jumped out of the way as it stuck to the wall behind where he had been standing. By age 12, I intended to buy a switchblade as self-protection but never did. While performing my “happy dance,” I envisioned myself pushing the release, flicking the blade open, and stabbing him in the gut.

### ***Housekeeping***

Mom’s life was work-intensive, especially by today’s standards. Our washing machine was in the dark, dank basement. It wasn’t long before Mom tired of climbing up and down three flights of stairs to reach the laundry. I cannot recall her ever asking for help, although she was prolific in her admonitions for lack of assistance. This, of course, was very confusing to us because she wouldn’t let us “lift a finger,” even if we wanted to (which we didn’t). Mom did everything for us, well beyond the age when we should have been doing things for ourselves.

We did not own a clothes dryer. They certainly existed, and most people who owned a washer also had a dryer, but Mom wanted nothing to do with fake “outdoor-scented fabric softener.” She wanted our laundry to smell of the real outdoors! We had a clothesline suspended on two pulleys: one mounted on the wall outside the kitchen window, the other across the yard, mounted on the rear of a neighbor’s garage. In the cold Long Island winters of my youth, she would put on a coat before opening the kitchen window and hanging the clothes on the line. There were days when the temperature would drop to below freezing while the clothes were still wet on the line. The wind would blow into the kitchen and ice would crack off the stiffly frozen bed sheets as she pulled them back through the window. Mom gathered the crusted mass into a hamper and hauled it down to the basement where she re-hung the wet laundry on a wooden scissor-style rack—as much as would fit. She would rotate out the laundry as items dried. The house was heated by an oil burning furnace so there was always a slight oily smell down there, which permeated the icy laundry. Our clothes and linens kept the fresh outdoorsy smell one might find downwind of an oil refinery.

Our family didn’t understand or appreciate why Mom put so much effort into making things “just right.” We thought she was doing it to suit herself. That may have been the case, but we never considered that she might be trying to please us. Even when she was at death’s door, she baked brownies and placed apples in the refrigerator with the unbruised side facing out. We had no appreciation. Only scorn.

### ***Conservadox Jews***



1960 - Steve’s Bar Mitzvah  
Mom, Judee, Steve, Dad (back row)  
Alan, Jeff (front row)

Today’s term for my family’s degree of religious observance is “conservadox.” Although we attended a conservative shul, we leaned towards orthodoxy: my parents kept kosher, observed Shabbat, and celebrated all Jewish holidays. When Steve was a college student, he renamed himself Sha”z, a contraction of his Hebrew name “Shlomo Zalman.” Sha”z, a coddled bully, would return home from his Jewish-affiliated university on weekends and torture his siblings. His word on the newly learned intricacies of religion became the rule of law in our home. Mom, who was heretofore the commander and chief of all things godly, assigned authority of such matters to Steve. I was in seventh grade at Valley Stream South High School when this began, and I hated him with a passion—even more than before.

Fortunately for all involved, when Sha"z was 21 years old he moved out of the house and got married. I was 15 years old. But, the residual effects of his zealotry remained in my mother's mind and the home-grown crusade to turn Alan and me into religious nuts continued long after he left home.

### ***Higher Education***



1971 - Jeff at Valley Stream South High School graduation

I graduated from South High School in Valley Stream in 1971. By age 18, I thought my sentence would be up, and Mom would want me out of the house after commencement. I was accepted to SUNY Brockport, but to my amazement and disappointment, Mom wanted me to go to a local college and live at home for four more years! That certainly didn't mesh with my dream of breaking free from parental control. We finally came to an agreement: I would stay home and attend Nassau Community College. After getting my 2-year Associates Degree, I would finish my degree at SUNY Brockport—which is exactly what I did.

Which begs the questions: Why did Mom keep me home those two years? Was it to protect me from me? Or, was my mother a control-freak? What caused my mother to feel so helpless that she needed to take out her frustrations—and she had lots of them—in the harsh ways she did? I know she had dreams of life being bigger than it turned out.

Mom took night classes at Nassau Community and got her Associate degree during the time that I attended. During the day, I used the second family car to commute to school. By then, Mom had been driving for about eight years. When I returned home, she hopped in and drove back to school for night classes. When the yearbook came out in 1973, the year we both graduated, her picture wasn't in it. Her name was listed under "Camera Shy Graduates." I was disappointed. When I asked why she didn't have her picture taken, she explained, "I didn't want to embarrass you by having my picture in the yearbook next to yours." If she had only asked me, I would have told her otherwise. And there we would be, side by side.

### ***The Yom Kippur War, Rapprochement, and Loss***

As events would have it, I am glad I stayed home for my first two years.

In the fall of 1973, as agreed, I started my junior year at SUNY Brockport. I didn't attend college on campus though; I studied abroad at Tel Aviv University. I didn't go to Israel alone. My brother Alan enrolled in the same university as a freshman (he went to summer school at South High to graduate a year earlier). The Yom Kippur

War broke out shortly after our arrival. Mom was very proud of Alan and me for remaining in Israel and helping the war effort, rather than catching the next flight back to the US—as many of the students did.

Mom died on January 10, 1974, while we were in Tel Aviv. The cause of death was cirrhosis of the liver. Ironically, she was a teetotaler. My brother Alan and I missed her funeral and burial because my family followed strict Jewish law. Belle Laskin Powitz was laid to rest within 24 hours of her passing, and we couldn't make it back to New York in time. After the funeral, Dad sat Sha"z and me down and had a conversation that changed the ugly ways we treated each other. "You guys are old enough to get along. It's about time you put the hate you feel towards each other aside. It would have made your mother very happy to know you two have become friends or at least stopped feuding." From that point on, the fighting became a thing of the past, and we have had a civil, albeit lukewarm, relationship ever since.

If I had gone away to college directly after high school, I would have missed the last two years of Mom's life. It was a time of rapprochement. About two years prior to her passing, I remember sitting at the kitchen table doing homework, stoned, as I often was during that time. Mom was ironing laundry, standing about 10 feet away. I saw tears in her eyes. Was she thinking about a life she wished she had? Was she perhaps remembering her older sister, Lillian, who died at age 31? I wish I had asked her because I will never know what was going on in her mind. I was witnessing her soft, gentle side, a side rarely shown. The same side that lovingly showed me the "faces" on the flowers of her pansy garden when I was five, or admired my nature photography when I was 15 or sang to me when I was sick.

### **More Loss**



October 2004  
Sha"z, Judee, Jeff, Alan

My father passed away in November 2004, while I was celebrating Thanksgiving with my wife Aviva's family in Oregon. My siblings, who still adhered to Jewish law, waited until I could make it back to Lynbrook to attend his funeral. My Orthodox family somehow found a loophole in their religious rules and postponed the funeral and burial. My inflexible family found a way to accommodate me this time. I have spoken about this inflexibility many times in my seven years of therapy sessions, along with the observation that even inflexible people can sometimes find it within themselves to accommodate others.

My sister Judee was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in late 2012. Before that time, however, Judee was a lot like me: genuinely good-natured at times but inflexible, especially in her religious beliefs, to the point of being

downright nasty to anyone that challenged her dogma. I am steadfastly anti-religion, while she was of the belief that once we reached adulthood, our family had to carry on the religious traditions of our upbringing. When Alan married a non-Jew, Judee stated, with the conviction of a true zealot, "Your children will be enemies of my children." My wife is half Jewish, so in my sister's eyes, I was considered only half bad. Judee did not RSVP to Alan's or my wedding invites. She attended neither.

In May 2014, Aviva and I attended our daughter Margo's graduation from Johns Hopkins University. After graduation, Margo and Aviva went home, and I met up with three childhood friends—Rich Pincus, Marty Seltzer, and Michael Gartman. The four of us get together annually for some much needed "guy time." All three of my friends graduated William Buck Elementary School and South High, except for Rich, who moved to Arizona after completing eighth grade at South. Marty lives near Baltimore, in Owings Mills, so we planned that year's get together around Margo's graduation. Sha"z also happens to live close by, in Silver Spring.

Sha"z and I had not seen each other since our father's passing, so after some "guy time," I decided to visit my brother. Sensing my unease, Marty and Rich both offered to come along as a buffer, and I gratefully accepted. When we met up with Sha"z, it became obvious that he, like my sister Judee, was suffering from dementia. Dementia coupled with a wholesale hatred of his siblings, especially Judee. During the visit, Marty innocently asked about Judee. Sha"z seemed to be prideful and angry at the same time. His stiffened demeanor was his best effort at controlling his anger. "I hate her. She stole the family pictures." Easing my way into defending her, I remarked, "I took most of the pictures and scanned them. Didn't you receive the disc I sent you?"

Judee passed away in June 2018. Sha"z's hatred for her ran so deep he did not attend her funeral. Shortly after my sister's funeral, I was editing an old story I had written, "The Summer of Pain and Pleasure." It was about the summer our family spent at Jones Beach in 1961—basking in the sun and splashing in the pool and ocean. We enjoyed the pool, but most of all we relished bouncing and body-surfing in the deliciously warm ocean waves, and I wrote:

*"I wasn't a good swimmer and was being pulled into deep water by the undertow. Judee was nearby, swimming around as happy as a dolphin. When she saw me struggling, drowning, she swam over. She put her hands on the back of my shoulders and pushed me toward the shore until I could stand."*

After reading this paragraph, I cried. Judee, only 12 years, saved my life. But, inflexibility as an adult prevented her from attending my wedding or stopping by for a visit while vacationing in Los Angeles.

#### ***Final Session with Sharon—March 2014***

*"Go back to a time when your mother was the 'kind' mother, the one who was gentle and attentive; the mother you wished you had as you got older and rebellious, and she became strident."*

"When I was a young child, I have memories of Mom sitting by my bedside during times of illness. She would sing "Hatikvah" ("The Hope"), Israel's national anthem. She had a sweet and soothing voice."

*"You really liked her to sit and sing to you when you felt sick."*

"Yes. But as I got older my feelings didn't seem to matter much to her. Whenever I expressed boredom or dislike of something, I was always told the same thing: 'Get over it.' That made me angry and hostile."

*“You went from a loving relationship with your mother to a hostile one. But the last two years of her life were better. She appreciated who you were. Since she was going to Nassau Community when you did and saw many other teens to compare you with, she told you that you were ‘a pretty decent guy,’ I think you said.”*

“That’s right. After all the harsh years, I finally had a feeling of being understood by her.”

*“Can you hold on to that feeling? Can you keep the good years you had with her as the norm and look at the harsh years as a kind of glitch in your relationship. Many teenage years are a stressful time between parents and their children. And now its many years since your mother died. You can choose which memories to accentuate and which to fade into the background. When you think of the years you spent with me in therapy, what comes to mind?”*

“At this moment, the first thing that comes to mind is that this is our final session, and you don’t want to have contact with me ever again. And that hurts, the pain is visceral—a punch in the gut. You’ve made it non-negotiable. All else must surrender to your ‘code of ethics.’ I am asking you to please make me the exception to your rule. Allow me into your life.”

*“You have a choice: You can either remember all the good you’ve learned about yourself from therapy, all the ways in which your life has slowly become better; or, you can fixate on the pain you feel right now. Can you focus on the benefits and get past the pain, which is temporary and will pass? Do you think you can do that?”*

“I don’t think so.”

