

STEPHEN A. SMITH

A portrait of Stephen A. Smith, a man with short dark hair and a goatee, wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a light blue patterned shirt, and a light blue patterned tie. He is resting his chin on his right hand, looking directly at the camera with a thoughtful expression.

**STRAIGHT
SHOOTER**

A MEMOIR OF SECOND
CHANCES AND FIRST TAKES

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STRAIGHT SHOOTER

A MEMOIR OF SECOND
CHANCES AND FIRST TAKES

STEPHEN A. SMITH



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This book would not have been written were it not for the greatest woman I've ever known: Mommy! I shed a tear at least once every day. I miss you so much. But my daughters, Samantha and Nyla, make it easier. They are the reasons I'm guaranteed a smile every single day of my life. And of course, there's always my sister Carmen—my ace. No one roots for me harder, no one supports me more than you, sis. You're my rock. I love you to pieces.

We ride together!

INTRODUCTION

In May 2017, my mother lay in bed inside her house in Queens, New York, dying from colon cancer. She was seventy-six years old.

She'd been through a seven-year battle, rife with operations, chemotherapy, radiation treatments—and diminishing hopes. The cancer had metastasized, spreading to her lungs and, eventually, her brain, and the battle was approaching its end.

During her last months, at least one of my four sisters and I tended to her every day. Yet my mother had only one request as she neared the end: that her husband of fifty-nine years, our father, be at her bedside.

She had never left him, despite the fact that he'd almost never been there for her. My father drank, smoked, womanized, and gambled. He didn't help pay a single bill for the last forty-five years of their marriage.

So even in those final, awful weeks, it didn't surprise any of us that our dad stayed true to his himself: while our mother slowly slid toward the inevitable in an upstairs bedroom inside our childhood home, he remained downstairs, parked in front of the TV, watching baseball games and old Westerns. While she still could, my mother, with assistance from my sisters and me, sometimes made her way down to the living room to be close to him, hoping to steal some of his attention.

Never happened.

His eyes barely left the TV. The only decent thing he did was to stop asking her to get him something from the kitchen.

A month before my mother passed, my sisters—Linda, Arlyne, Abigail, and Carmen—and I sat down with our father at the dining room table to tell him

that his behavior was unacceptable. My sisters said, “Look. She’s in a very bad spot. You need to pay more attention to her.”

My father, a stubborn West Indian, shook his head, looked at them, and replied, “You don’t know her like I do. I know my wife; I know your mother better than you do. It’s all an act. She’s not as sick as you all think.”

There was a brief moment of stunned silence. You could hear a pin drop. Then, from my seat at the opposite end of the table, I looked my father straight in the eye and asked, “What the fuck did you just say?”

Then I stood up, grabbed my chair, walked past my sisters, and sat down right in front of him, my face right in front of his. “Mommy’s sick,” I said, echoing what my sisters had told him. “She’s dying. Her days are numbered.”

Incredibly, only at that moment did he say: “Okay, I got it now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “All four of your daughters just said the same thing, and you said you don’t believe them.”

His response: “They ain’t you. They’re women!”

My sisters shook their heads in utter disgust. Words couldn’t describe how I felt.

My mother died on June 1, 2017, just before midnight. I’d left the house about an hour earlier to go change and clean up at my home in North Jersey. My sister Carmen texted just as I pulled into my driveway. “You need to get back here now. It’s Mom,” she wrote me. I never left my car, just backed out and made the forty-five-minute return drive to Queens.

“Be strong, Steve,” I told myself, imagining what I’d say once I saw her lying there motionless, her eyes closed for the last time, no longer able to smile, laugh, or cry. “I’ll be okay.” I thought the drive would be plenty of time to get my emotions in check. On his last house call, the doctor had told us she didn’t have long left. It was clear she was already transitioning. I thought I had prepared myself for this moment.

But after I parked, before I could even get to the front of the house, I heard cries. I opened the front door and saw my brother-in-law Danny, just sitting in the living room in silence, sadness written all over his face. The same could be

said for my future brother-in-law Darren, Carmen's boyfriend. My nephew Josh was sobbing.

As I saw this, my legs suddenly got heavy and my heart ached. The eleven steps to the upstairs level of my mother's house felt like a mile.

Carmen, Linda, and our aunt Rita were in the bedroom I grew up in, sobbing, their faces soaked with tears. Arlyne was right next to them, crying. I looked to my right, inside my mother's bedroom, and saw Abigail spooning my mother, hugging her tightly as she sobbed quietly.

Mommy was officially gone. And with her, so went a part of me. I started crying and couldn't stop for a long, long time.

Frankly, everyone was thankful that she'd passed before I got there. They knew that seeing her take her last breath was something I could not endure. "Thank God you weren't there for those final moments," Carmen said. "I don't think you would have ever been the same had you been there at that moment." I was never the same anyway.

My dad, however, was unchanged. His attention that night was riveted on the first game of the NBA Finals, between Cleveland and Golden State. The Warriors held an insurmountable lead when my sisters came downstairs to tell him that it wouldn't be much longer, so he finally dragged himself away from the TV set. He sat beside our mother, patted her, and told her everything was going to be okay. Then he got up, went back downstairs, and, with the game over, watched another Western.

My sisters still haven't forgiven him for that.

Ultimately, my mother's passing freed me to write this book. Folks had asked me for years to write a memoir, but I'd always turned them down for one simple reason: my mother made me promise that I wouldn't do so until after she died. I had told her I would have to write the truth about everything, including my father. She did not want anyone to read about that while she was alive.

So I waited. And waited. And waited. And waited. Until it was time. It's time now.

My story is not always an easy one to tell. If fairy tales are what you're looking for, don't bother skimming through these pages. You won't find them here, especially not in those early years.

But if you stick around, you'll find something far more compelling, and inspirational. You'll see how love, belief, perseverance, self-awareness, family, friendships, and mentorship can take you places you've never been. How they all allowed me to see and experience things I'd never even dreamed of—some things I didn't even know existed—and attain levels of success and happiness I once deemed unimaginable because, for so long, imagination itself was a luxury I couldn't afford.

This is the story of Stephen A. Smith—"Stephen A." these days, no last name necessary. It's the unlikely tale of how I came to be who I am. Love me or hate me—it's always one or the other—my story is one about what my world is like and what I've learned along the way.

This is my truth, based on my experiences, and I believe that everyone—from the impoverished and hopeless to the rich and famous—can learn from the story of how this little scrawny Black kid from a cramped, unheated house in the Hollis neighborhood of Queens went on to become one of the most-watched, sometimes most-reviled, but ultimately one of the highest-paid TV sportscasters at the biggest sports network in America.

It's the actual, often improbable, story of a kid who was left back in the fourth grade because he read at a first-grade level. It's the story of a kid who looked on in shame as his father told his mother, "He's just not that smart. He'll never succeed. Just accept that."

It's about a kid motivated by "friends" in the neighborhood incessantly humiliating him with laughter because he was the only one who got left back. It's about a grown man who still remembers each name, each face, each laugh, to this very day, more than four decades later—despite my success and notoriety.

This book is about a boy who endured peer pressure, cruelty, doubts, and bigotry, as well as temptation from the wrong side of the tracks. Yet somehow that boy came out on the other side, in part because of assistance from the very people on the wrong side of the tracks whom he grew up with, as well as a mother's undying love and devotion, and the numerous folks—white and Black, friends and loved ones—who supported him.

It's the story of the white high school teacher who had me pulled off the basketball team my senior year for the pettiest reasons, knowing it could cost me

a basketball scholarship. It's also the story of the Black junior college basketball coach whom I liked even less than the white high school teacher until I grew to appreciate and love that man years later for the lessons he tried to teach me, which I'd been too stubborn to learn. That in itself became its own lesson.

It's the story of the basketball scholarship I eventually got, to Winston-Salem State University, and the father-son relationship I developed with the school's legendary coach, Clarence "Big House" Gaines. And the story of the knee injury that derailed my completely unfounded pro-basketball aspirations, which then led to a professional journalism career—a career that took me from the *Winston-Salem Journal* and the *Greensboro News and Record* in North Carolina to the *New York Daily News* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and then on to TV with CNN/SI (now defunct), Fox Sports, and, finally, to my own show on ESPN.

I've also popped up as "Brick" on *General Hospital* (I'd watched the soap as a kid with my sisters every day after school), as my on-air radio self who gets lit up by Diane (the youngest daughter) on the ABC comedy *Black-ish*, and as a guest host on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*. (Could my own late-night show be next?)

Along the way, I've made friends and enemies. I've been ignorant and immature and have paid a price for that—my shortcomings were made crystal damn clear with my dismissal from ESPN in 2009, months after I became a new father. What followed was a full year of unemployment and a two-year banishment from television.

Every day from 2009 to 2011, I asked myself: What would I do? Where would I end up? Was it all over for me? Was this my legacy? Would failure be my epitaph?

Over the next decade, I went from being unemployed to receiving the largest contract in the history of sports broadcasting (at the time) for an on-air "talent," as we're known. LL Cool J, who grew up in my neighborhood, once wrote a rap song called "From Hollis to Hollywood." The title perfectly sums up my story.

How did I get there? What tactics did I employ? How did I learn to help myself and others along the way?

It's all here.

This is a book about a life filled with chaos and hardships that turned into a successful life worth living. I explain, and own up to, some mistakes.

As I write this, it's 2022. Not long ago I recovered from a hospital stay due to COVID, the effects of which still linger, both physically and in my outlook on life.

If my story happens to help others to live their best lives as well, even better.

Everyone needs somebody's help. Obstacles don't discriminate. We're all in search of motivational tools to enlighten, educate, and arm us with whatever skills are necessary to march forward and prosper.

The fact that for the last thirty years I've worked in sports, and a vast majority of those years have been spent covering the most driven, competitive, and talented athletes in the world, has given me a more enlightened perspective. This perspective allowed me to expand far beyond the world of sports, from social justice issues to entertainment to politics and beyond.

I've spoken to and interviewed people from Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson to Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant. From Allen Iverson, Floyd Mayweather, Diana Taurasi, and Sue Bird, to coaches Larry Brown, Pat Riley, and Doc Rivers. From Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King to Jay-Z, record mogul Jimmy Iovine, former Disney CEO Bob Iger, legendary producer and show creator Jerry Bruckheimer, and current Golden State Warriors owner Joe Lacob. From soap opera stars Maurice Benard and Eric Braeden to movie stars Denzel Washington and Jamie Foxx—and many more.

From these people, I've learned how to maneuver through America's treacherous corporate terrain, how to make and sustain friendships, how to persevere through hard times, how to learn from those hard times, then move forward and listen.

Failure was never an option for me: it was succeed or die trying. But how? Watching my mother work sixteen-hour days, six and seven days a week, left me wondering if work was even worth it. She wasn't ever going to prosper—or even have heat in the house or food in the fridge. She did it solely to survive. Watching her energy and hard work being snatched from her by a husband who barely lifted a finger to help her—or any of us—left me asking myself, “Is this really living?” The answer was simple: “Hell no!” There had to be a better way.

Don't get it twisted: I never blamed my mother for our circumstances. I revered her for adapting and overcoming all the obstacles we faced. Still, I knew I

didn't want the same life, the same hardships. I wanted to travel a different path—both *because* of her and *for* her.

But there's also the flip side: I wanted to make sure I was nothing like my father. Because of him, I've never taken more than three drinks in a week in my life. I've never smoked or done drugs, including marijuana—what I refer to on my shows as “the weeeeeed.” And I've never married, partly because I'm usually on the road for well over half the year, but mainly because I've never wanted to dishonor my marital vows, as he did so flagrantly.

I do have two beautiful daughters, Samantha and Nyla, and they are my world. I toil, struggle, scratch, and claw, all so they can live a life of comfort—so they never have to experience the struggles I experienced too early in life. My mommy drove that home for me when I was just sixteen: “Promise me you'll be responsible. Promise me you'll take care of your family. Promise me you'll never be like your father!”

There was only one answer to a plea like that from a woman like her: “I promise, Mommy! I swear! I promise!”

I've kept that promise, though there have been challenges and slip-ups along the way. But on my worst day, I could never be as bad as my father.

This book is the culmination of all I've learned, from others and from my own experiences. Make no mistake: this is *a ride* you're about to take. That's assuming, of course, that you're about winning the game of life, and that you're about doing whatever it takes to keep standing upright—no matter how many times you get knocked down.

Finally, my story can be told, with Mommy's blessing.

CHAPTER 1

MY DAD WAS NO HERO!

I was born in the Bronx before it began burning, in the fall of 1967, the youngest of six kids. Arriving four years after the next-oldest sibling, my sisters and brother always joked that I was “the mistake.” My mother would have none of it.

“You shut up!” she’d mock-scold them in her sternest West Indian accent. “He was the only one who was *on purpose!*”

I was about a year old when we moved from our apartment in a dilapidated building on Hoe Avenue to a narrow, aluminum-sided single-family house with a leaky roof and postage-stamp yard on 203rd Street in Hollis, Queens, a mostly Black, working-class neighborhood lined with other narrow single-family houses. Fronted by chain-link fences or scraggly hedges, most of the homes had a neat but needs-work-I-can’t-afford look. Hollis didn’t resemble the overcrowded projects in the Bronx, but it had many of the same problems.

Folks in that part of Queens made livings as bus drivers, train conductors, nurses, paralegals. Others sold drugs or stole to buy drugs. No doctors or lawyers—there wasn’t none of that in my neighborhood. Manhattan’s skyline glowed in the distance but still took more than an hour to reach by the Q-2 bus and then the F or E train, most locals’ main mode of transportation. Manhattan to us was a place where people went to work and then rushed back home. You had to have actual money to live there; at the time, you didn’t need much of that to live in Hollis. Planes from nearby JFK International Airport roared overhead, drowning out our hollering while we played football in the streets.

When I got a little older, those planes also drowned out the rappers and break dancers who suddenly sprouted up in parks and on street corners all over the

place. They arrived along with the crack epidemic, hoping to emulate the success of Run-DMC, the neighborhood group turned hip-hop pioneers.

Run-DMC started out in local spots like Hollis Park, Jamaica Park, and Ozone Park, rapping for the DJs who competed there. They quickly put my 'hood (birthplace of such dignitaries as jazz trumpeter Roy Eldridge, New York Governor Mario Cuomo, and civil rights activist Rev. Al Sharpton) on every hip-hop fan's map. Their songs were the soundtrack to our lives: "It's Like That" (released when I was sixteen), "Hollis Crew," "Sucker M.C.'s," "My Adidas," and the novelty hit "Christmas in Hollis" ("It's Christmas time in Hollis Queens / Mom's cooking chicken and collard greens"). To this day, they're still cued up in whatever car I drive—you don't come from Hollis and not have Run-DMC in your library.

They were just dudes who were around. My brother, Basil, was tight with the group's DJ, Jam Master Jay, who grew up right across the street, half a block up. I saw Joey "Run" Simmons all the time when he dated a drop-dead-gorgeous girl on our block named Tonya, and I would also see his brother Russell Simmons, who founded Def Jam Records. LL Cool J grew up just a few blocks from them, at his grandmother's house, on Farmer's Boulevard.

But even in the toughest times, Hollis clung to its urban village roots. Some sections were more tense and dangerous than others. Mothers in the neighborhood—like Mrs. Miller across the street, and Mrs. McKnight (my friend Mark McKnight's mother, known as Mommy Alice) two houses up from mine—kept an eye on everything from what seemed like permanent perches in their front windows and front steps. If you misbehaved, your parents heard about it. These women weren't assigned those roles; it wasn't part of some "neighborhood watch" program. They just cared about the community and made sure everybody did the right thing. As kids, we hated it. Looking back, I appreciate how lucky we were to have these ladies looking out for us.

I had aunts and uncles scattered around the boroughs like branches of some Caribbean social club. They all came from nothing and moved here from the U.S. Virgin Islands in search of something else—in search of more. My parents, Ashley and Janet, did the same. They met as teenagers at the church in St. Thomas that my mother attended every Sunday. My father was one of the guys

who stood outside throwing rocks at the pretty girls when they came out. Apparently, back then that's how you showed your love.

Damn if it didn't work: they got married in 1958, shortly after my mother became pregnant with my oldest sister, Linda. My mother was seventeen, my dad nineteen. They moved to New York in the early 1960s in search of the better life their relatives had sought before them, some with more success than others. Then they had the rest of us: Basil, Arlyne, Abigail, Carmen, and me.

My father eventually found work managing a ServiStar Hardware store on 135th Street in Harlem, next door to the women's-clothing shop owned by my uncle Frankie called the Choice Is Yours. My mother stayed home to raise us kids until my dad checked out, when I was about six (he didn't leave, my mom didn't run him off, he just checked out; we'll get to it in a minute). After that, in the early seventies, my mother went to school to become a nurse, ultimately rising, by the mid-1980s, to assistant head nurse at Queens General Hospital, down the street from St. John's University. She'd also moonlight eight-hour shifts at a nursing home at the end of our block.

Other than sharing Caribbean roots, my parents were opposites. Six feet tall, about two hundred and five pounds, with big hands and rich brown skin, my father was outgoing, the life of the party, a sharp dresser (or so he thought) who wore three-piece suits and shiny shoes and loved to sing and dance to calypso around the house and at family gatherings. He'd been a great athlete, a basketball and baseball player whom the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Yankees, he bragged, once expressed interest in signing when he lived in St. Thomas. He practically glowed. He was the kind of man other kids with overworked, bone-tired parents looked at and said, "Wow, what a great dad you have!"

My mother was pretty, and always pleasant, but also introverted and private. She hated for others to know her business. Her best friend her whole life was her sister, my aunt Rita, who only ever left St. Thomas to come visit my mother. Mommy was about five feet eight inches tall and light-skinned, coming from mixed parents (white mother, Black father). I mostly remember her bustling around the house wearing the plain white blouse and white pants of her nurse's uniform—she worked all the damn time. She was only loud inside our house,

where we six kids, and especially me, had her screaming in her lilting singsong the whole day long.

“Stephen, take out the garbage!”

“Stephen, wash the dishes!”

“Stephen, clean your room!”

Like that.

Our little house in Hollis could get jam-packed. There was only one working bathroom in the Smith residence, and it often didn't work. Same with the shower and sinks. Lots of times hot water wasn't available, or the heat was turned off, because of an unpaid utility bill. The bedrooms were tiny—a touch bigger than a jail cell—but we still doubled and tripled up in bunk beds when we went to sleep. My sister Linda slept in the unfinished attic.

Yet none of that stopped my mom from playing the role of Mother Teresa. She allowed numerous relatives from both sides of the family to crash at our house, sometimes for months, when they hit hard times. As many as a dozen people crammed into the place for weeks on end.

We didn't have much. My four sisters had to share clothing, most of which my mother got from Goodwill. I had three outfits at a time for all of my childhood and into my teens. Breakfast was almost always cereal, with our own version of 2 percent milk: whole milk mixed with tap water, to make it last longer.

The cereal often came out of the box piping hot. In normal homes, the cereal box is put away in a cabinet or on top of the fridge, in clear sight and easy reach of everybody.

Not in my family. Cereals like Honeycomb, Sugar Pops, and Cap'n Crunch were an extravagance, tantamount to a night out on the town ordering filet mignon with a glass of red wine. As a result, we six kids were constantly hiding it from each other.

My preferred hiding spot: behind the dining room radiator. If I didn't stash it there, it wouldn't last twenty-four hours before everybody devoured it and I'd have to wait at least a week or two for my mother to buy another box.

If that behavior sounds like crabs in a bucket, well, hell, it was. We were always hungry. Sometimes we approached what felt like starvation. So no matter

how much we loved one another, love was not always part of the equation when our stomachs moaned and our heads ached because of a lack of food. Overall, we were definitely about family—mess with one of us and you messed with all of us. But when it came to food, it was everybody for him- or herself.

If a fly found its way into one of our bowls, we spooned it out and kept on eating. We didn't run from mice or rats when they were in the vicinity of our meals—they ran from us! At one point, we did a stint on government cheese and bread and were damn grateful for it.

Later on in my life, when I'd moved out and moved on, making a decent living, folks would ask incredulously, as I poured sugar onto almost everything I ate, "How'd you get so addicted to that stuff?" My answer was simple: growing up, we usually had bread but rarely had meat. So for lunch or dinner we'd literally take sugar and spread it over the bread to make *sugar sandwiches*.

My sisters and brother and I suffered. We struggled. The old line "I didn't even know we were poor" didn't apply to us. We always knew we were poor. And it was debilitating as hell.

But our pain didn't emanate solely from the conditions we endured. What made it even more injurious, more scarring, was the reality that things did not have to be that way. Our circumstances were by choice.

My father's choice.

Other fathers in my neighborhood came home once their workday was over. Not mine. Four or five nights a week, my dad just departed from the hardware store and didn't come home for days. He'd leave on a Wednesday, come back home on Sunday. Sometimes he'd change it up and leave on a Thursday instead, but I never, ever saw him on a Friday or Saturday night. I knew something was up, but I was still too young to know what. I'd ask my mother, "Where's Dad?" She never had an answer—until the night she showed me by finally showing herself.

That's when my world shattered and changed forever.

I was about ten. My mother grabbed my hand that day and said simply, "Come with me." We turned at the corner at the end of our street and walked

another half block. She didn't say a word until we stopped in front of the house belonging to my uncle Freddie, my father's older brother.

Once there, Mommy told me to knock on the door and ask for my father. I thought that was strange but did as I was told. I rapped on the door with my little ten-year-old fist and called out to my father's brother, "Is my dad here?"

Nothing happened for a long minute, but I could hear the muffled sound of somebody moving around inside. Suddenly my dad cracked open the door. He stood there and stared at me. He hadn't seen my mother, who was hiding off to the left of me. After glaring at me for another minute, he asked, "What are you doing here? What the hell do you want?" All hell broke loose. My mother burst out, bulldozed past my surprised father into the house, and aimed straight for the woman I would later learn was his mistress.

But suddenly my mother froze in her tracks: the mistress was holding a baby in her arms. Seeing my mother coming at her, the other woman lifted the baby in front of her, using the infant as a shield.

When my mother paused for a split second to make sense of what she was seeing, my father grabbed her, lifted her off her feet—he didn't hit her, he never struck my mother, that was the one thing he ever did right, he knew his children would kill him—and pulled her away. He then snatched me with his free hand and, with one swift movement, tossed us both back outside.

Once we were out there, my dad slammed the door shut and locked it. The sounds rang in my ears like gunshots. My mother, who I'd never seen look so broken, raced back to the door and, with stunned neighbors watching from their yards, pounded on it with her worn-out fists and screamed his middle name, which she always called him—"Basil! Basil!"—all to no avail. He never came back out.

I was devastated. It was the first time I had an inkling of why he didn't come home so many nights and of the reason why my mother wouldn't tell me why. Even as a ten-year-old, I could deduce there was another woman in the picture and that nothing about it was right.

Our neighbor Doris saw my mother and me walking around the corner to my uncle Freddie's house, and she told Carmen and Arlyne to get over there, so they came over—and we all headed back home together. During the short walk,

which seemed to take forever, my sisters focused their anger and disgust on our father's infidelity.

But I couldn't shake a whole different thought: my father had put me and my mother out of the house instead of the other woman. He could have sat us down, told us to wait, taken her home. Something. Anything. Instead, he put us out like yesterday's trash and locked the door.

Until that night, my father was my hero, not because he'd done much that was particularly heroic, but just because he was my dad. I'd always looked at him a certain way, as someone larger than life, someone I'd someday want to be like. He was that dad everyone else told me I was so lucky to have.

Not anymore. From that day forward, my image of him changed. I realized that we—my mother, my four sisters, my brother, and I—were not as important to him as his other family.

And we never would be.

That was the hardest part to accept back then, and it's the hardest part to accept now. My family was not poor because we lacked the funds to live better—my father had a steady job and my mother worked like hell. We were poor because my dad had another family on the side, just ten minutes away, at a house he shared with his mistress. That's where he spent all his money, when he wasn't gambling.

My dad fed his mistress and *her three* kids, not us. He paid *their* mortgage, not ours. He put food in *their* refrigerator, put clothes on *their* backs. He even paid for *her* kids to go to summer camp. He never had anything to offer my mother when it came to *us*.

While we sat around, our stomachs aching and our heads throbbing, he was elsewhere. When it was freezing cold and we had no heat in the house, he was nowhere to be found.

I remember vividly, when I was eight, one of my sisters hovering around the kitchen, visibly fuming. My mother was rummaging through paperwork and working the phone feverishly, sounding more desperate than I'd ever heard her.

Turns out we were on the verge of being evicted, because my father had stolen the house-insurance money out of my mother's dresser drawer and gambled it away playing spades. It was explained to me that failure to pay the insurance bill could lead to foreclosure.

Somehow, my mother handled the matter by the end of that workday, fending off the insurance company until a later date. That evening, once things finally calmed down, my father came waltzing through the front door, drunk, singing and dancing, as usual. When my mother confronted him, he just laughed.

"Relax!" he said cheerfully. "You handled it. I knew you would."

He was right. From 1972 until she retired, Mommy paid all the bills. Most of the financial relief she ever received came from me. My father never paid a bill again, right up until he died, in August 2018.

He never apologized for it, either. Never displayed the slightest remorse or regret.

Never.