



BRITNEY
SPEARS

THE
WOMAN
IN ME

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THE
WOMAN
IN ME

BRITNEY SPEARS

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For my boys, who are the loves of my life

PROLOGUE

As a little girl I walked for hours alone in the silent woods behind my house in Louisiana, singing songs. Being outside gave me a sense of aliveness and danger. When I was growing up, my mother and father fought constantly. He was an alcoholic. I was usually scared in my home. Outside wasn't necessarily heaven, either, but it was my world. Call it heaven or hell, it was mine.

Before going home, I would follow a path to our neighbors' house, through a landscaped yard and past a swimming pool. They had a rock garden full of small, soft pebbles that would trap the heat and stay warm in a way that felt so good against my skin. I would lie down on those rocks and look up at the sky, feeling the warmth from below and above, thinking: *I can make my own way in life. I can make my dreams come true.*

Lying quietly on those rocks, I felt God.

Raising kids in the South used to be more about respecting your parents and keeping your mouth shut. (Today, the rules have reversed—it's more about respecting the kids.) Disagreeing with a parent was never permitted in my house. No matter how bad it got, there was an understanding to stay mute, and if I didn't, there were consequences.

In the Bible it says your tongue is your sword.

My tongue and my sword were me singing.

My whole childhood, I sang. I sang along with the car radio on the way to dance class. I sang when I was sad. To me, singing was spiritual.

I was born and went to school in McComb, Mississippi, and lived in Kentwood, Louisiana, twenty-five miles away.

Everyone knew everyone in Kentwood. Doors were left unlocked, social lives revolved around church and backyard parties, kids were put in matching outfits, and everyone knew how to shoot a gun. The area's main historic site was Camp Moore, a Confederate training base built by Jefferson Davis. Each year there are Civil War reenactments the weekend before Thanksgiving, and the sight of the people dressed up in military outfits was a reminder that the holiday was coming. I loved that time of year: hot chocolate, the smell of the fireplace in our living room, the colors of the fall leaves on the ground.

We had a little brick house with green-striped wallpaper and wood paneling. As a girl I went to Sonic, rode go-karts, played basketball, and attended a Christian school called Parklane Academy.

The first time I was truly touched and got shivers down my spine was hearing our housekeeper singing in the laundry room. I always did the family laundry and ironing, but when times were better financially, my mom would hire someone to help. The housekeeper sang gospel music, and it was literally an awakening to a whole new world. I'll never forget it.

Ever since then, my longing and passion to sing have grown. Singing is magic. When I sing, I own who I am. I can communicate purely. When you sing you stop using the language of “Hi, how are you...” You’re able to say things that are much more profound. Singing takes me to a mystical place where language doesn’t matter anymore, where anything is possible.

All I wanted was to be taken away from the everyday world and into that realm where I could express myself without thinking. When I was alone with my thoughts, my mind filled with worries and fears. Music stopped the noise, made me feel confident, and took me to a pure place of expressing myself exactly as I wanted to be seen and heard. Singing took me into the presence of the divine. As long as I was singing, I was half outside the world. I’d be playing in the backyard like any kid would, but my thoughts and feelings and hopes were somewhere else.

I worked hard to make things look the way I wanted them to. I took myself very seriously when I shot silly music videos to Mariah Carey songs in my girlfriend’s backyard. By age eight, I thought I was a director. Nobody in my town seemed to be doing stuff like that. But I knew what I wanted to see in the world, and I tried to make it so.

Artists make things and play characters because they want an escape into faraway worlds, and escape was exactly what I needed. I wanted to live inside my dreams, my wonderful fictitious world, and never think about reality if I could help it. Singing bridged reality and fantasy, the world I was living in and the world that I desperately wanted to inhabit.

Tragedy runs in my family. My middle name comes from my father’s mother, Emma Jean Spears, who went by Jean. I’ve seen pictures of her, and I understand why everyone said we look alike. Same blond hair. Same smile. She looked younger than she was.

Her husband—my grandfather June Spears Sr.—was abusive. Jean suffered the loss of a baby when he was only three days old. June sent Jean to Southeast Louisiana Hospital, a by-all-accounts horrible asylum in Mandeville, where she was put on lithium. In 1966, when she was thirty-one, my grandmother Jean shot herself with a shotgun on her infant son’s grave, just over eight years after his death. I can’t imagine the grief that she must have felt.

The way people talk about men like June in the South is to say “Nothing was good enough for him,” that he was “a perfectionist,” that he was “a very involved father.” I would probably put it more harshly than that.

A sports fanatic, June made my father exercise long past exhaustion. Each day when my father finished basketball practice, no matter how tired and hungry he was, he still had to shoot a hundred more baskets before he could come inside.

June was an officer for the Baton Rouge Police Department and he eventually had ten children with three wives. And as far as I can tell, no one has one good word to say about the first fifty years of his life. Even in my family, it was said that the Spears men tended to be bad news, especially in terms of how they treated women.

Jean wasn't the only wife June sent to the mental hospital in Mandeville. He sent his second wife there, too. One of my father's half sisters has said that June sexually abused her starting when she was eleven, until she ran away at sixteen.

My father was thirteen when Jean died on that grave. I know that trauma is part of why my father was how he was with my siblings and me; why, for him, nothing was ever good enough. My father pushed my brother to excel in sports. He drank until he couldn't think anymore. He'd disappear for days at a time. When my father drank, he was extremely mean.

But June softened as he got older. I didn't experience the vicious man who had abused my father and his siblings but rather a grandfather who seemed patient and sweet.

My father's world and my mother's world were completely opposite from each other.

According to my mother, my mom's mom—my grandmother Lilian “Lily” Portell—was from an elegant, sophisticated family in London. She had an exotic air about her that everyone commented on; her mother was British and her father was from the Mediterranean island of Malta. Her uncle was a bookbinder. The whole family played instruments and loved to sing.

During World War II, Lily met an American soldier, my grandfather Barney Bridges, at a dance for the soldiers. He was a driver for the generals and he loved driving fast.

She was disappointed, though, when he brought her with him to America. She'd imagined a life like what she had in London. As she rode to his dairy farm from New Orleans, she looked out the window of Barney's car and was troubled by how empty his world seemed. "Where are all the lights?" she kept asking her new husband.

I sometimes think about Lily riding through the Louisiana countryside, looking out into the night, realizing that her large, vibrant, music-filled life of afternoon teas and London museums was about to become small and hard. Instead of going to the theater or shopping for clothes, she would have to spend her life cooped up in the country, cooking and cleaning and milking cows.

So my grandmother kept to herself, read a ton of books, became obsessed with cleaning, and missed London until the day she died. My family said that Barney didn't want to let Lily go back to London because he thought that if she went, she wouldn't come home.

My mother said Lily was so distracted by her own thoughts that she had a tendency to start clearing the table before everyone was done eating.

All I knew was that my grandmother was beautiful and I loved copying her British accent. Talking in a British accent has always made me happy because it makes me think of her, my fashionable grandmother. I wanted to have manners and a lilting voice just like hers.

Because Lily had money, my mother, Lynne; her brother, Sonny; and her sister, Sandra, grew up with what you might consider money-money, especially for rural Louisiana. Even though they were Protestant, my mom attended Catholic school. She was gorgeous as a teenager, with her black hair worn short. She'd always go to school wearing the highest boots and the tiniest skirts. She hung out with the gay guys in town, who gave her rides on their motorcycles.

My father took an interest in her, as well he might. And probably in part because June made him work so ridiculously hard, my father was unbelievably talented at sports. People would drive for miles just to see him play basketball.

My mom saw him and she said, "Oh, who is this?"

By all accounts, their relationship was born of mutual attraction and a sense of adventure. But the honeymoon was over long before I came along.

When they got married, my parents lived in a small home in Kentwood. My mother was no longer supported by her family, so my parents were very poor. They were young, too—my mom was twenty-one and my father was twenty-three. In 1977, they had my big brother, Bryan. When they left that first small place, they bought a little three-bedroom ranch house.

After Bryan was born, my mom went back to school to become a teacher. My dad, who worked as a welder at oil refineries—hard jobs that would last a month or sometimes three—started to drink heavily, and before too long, that was taking its toll on the family. The way my mom tells it, a couple of years into the marriage, my grandfather Barney, my mom's dad, died in a car accident, and in the aftermath, my dad went on a bender, missing Bryan's first birthday party. When Bryan was a toddler, my father got drunk at a Christmas party and went AWOL on Christmas morning. That time my mother said she'd had enough. She went to stay with Lily. That March of 1980, she filed for divorce. But June and June's new wife begged her to take him back, and she did.

For a while, apparently, everything was calm. My dad stopped welding and started a construction business. Then, after a lot of struggle, he got a gym business going, too. It was called Total Fitness and it transformed some of the men in town, including my uncles, into bodybuilders. He ran it in a detached studio space on our property, next door to the house. An endless string of muscular men streamed in and out of the gym, flexing their muscles in the mirrors under the fluorescent lights.

My dad started doing really well. In our little town he became one of the most well-off men. My family threw big backyard crawfish boils. They had crazy parties, with dancing all night long. (I've always assumed their secret

ingredient for staying up all night was speed, since that was the drug of choice back then.)

My mom opened a daycare center with her sister, my aunt Sandra. To cement their marriage, my parents had a second baby—me. I was born on December 2, 1981. My mother never missed an opportunity to recall that she was in excruciating labor with me for twenty-one hours.

I loved the women in my family. My aunt Sandra, who already had two sons, had a surprise baby at thirty-five: my cousin Laura Lynne. Just a few months apart, Laura Lynne and I were like twins, and we were best friends. Laura Lynne was always like a sister to me, and Sandra was a second mother. She was so proud of me and so encouraging.

And even though my grandmother Jean was gone long before I was born, I was lucky enough to know her mother, my great-grandmother Lexie Pierce. Lexie was *wicked* beautiful, always made up with a white, white face and red, red lipstick. She was a badass, more and more so as she got older. I was told, and had no trouble believing, that she'd been married seven times. Seven! Obviously, she disliked her son-in-law June, but after her daughter Jean died, she stuck around and took care of my father and his siblings, and then her great-grandchildren, too.

Lexie and I were very close. My most vivid and joyful memories of being a little girl are of times spent with her. We'd have sleepovers, just the two of us. At night, we'd go through her makeup cabinet. In the morning, she would make me a huge breakfast. Her best friend, who lived next door, would come over to visit and we'd listen to slow 1950s ballads from Lexie's record collection. During the day, Lexie and I would nap together. I loved nothing more than drifting off to sleep by her side, smelling her face powder and her perfume, listening as her breathing grew deep and regular.

One day, Lexie and I went to rent a movie. As we drove away from the video rental place, she ran into another car, then got stuck in a hole. We couldn't get out. A tow truck had to come rescue us. That accident scared my mother. From then on, I wasn't allowed to hang out with my great-grandmother.

"It wasn't even a bad accident!" I told my mother. I begged to see Lexie. She was my favorite person.

“No, I’m afraid she’s getting senile,” my mom said. “It’s not safe for you to be with her alone anymore.”

After that, I saw her at my house, but I couldn’t get in the car with her or have sleepovers with her ever again. It was a huge loss for me. I didn’t understand how being with someone I loved could be considered dangerous.

At that age, my favorite thing to do besides spending time with Lexie was hiding in cabinets. It became a family joke: “Where’s Britney now?” At my aunt’s house, I always disappeared. Everyone would mount a search for me. Just when they’d start to panic, they’d open a cabinet door and there I’d be.

I must have wanted them to look for me. For years that was my thing—to hide.

Hiding was one way I got attention. I also loved dancing and singing. I sang in the choir of our church, and I took dance classes three nights a week and on Saturdays. Then I added gymnastics classes an hour away in Covington, Louisiana. When it came to dancing and singing and acrobatics, I couldn’t get enough.

At career day in elementary school, I said I was going to be a lawyer, but neighbors and teachers started to say that I was “Broadway bound,” and eventually I embraced my identity as “the little entertainer.”

I was three at my first dance recital and four when I sang my first solo: “What Child Is This?” for a Christmas program at my mother’s daycare.

I wanted to hide, but I also wanted to be seen. Both things could be true. Crouched in the cool darkness of a cabinet, I felt so small I could disappear. But with everyone’s eyes on me, I became something else, someone who could command a room. In white tights, belting out a song, I felt like anything was possible.

“Ms. Lynne! Ms. Lynne!” the boy shouted. He was out of breath, panting at our front door. “You have to come! Come now!”

One day when I was four, I was in the living room of our house, sitting on the couch with my mom on one side and my friend Cindy on the other. Kentwood was like a town in a soap opera—there was *always* drama. Cindy was chattering away to my mom about the latest scandal while I was listening in, trying to follow along, when the door burst open. The boy’s facial expression was enough for me to know something terrifying had happened. My heart dropped.

My mother and I started running. The road had just been repaved and I was barefoot, running on the hot black tar.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” I yelped with every step. I looked down at my feet and saw the tar sticking to them.

Finally, we arrived at the field where my brother, Bryan, had been playing with his neighbor friends. They had been trying to mow down some tall grass with their four-wheelers. This seemed like a fantastic idea to them because they were idiots. Inevitably, they couldn’t see one another through the tall grass and had a head-on collision.

I must have seen everything, heard Bryan hollering in pain, my mother screaming in fear, but I don’t remember any of it. I think God made me black out so I wouldn’t remember the pain and panic, or the sight of my brother’s crushed body.

A helicopter airlifted him to the hospital.

When I visited Bryan days later, he was in a full body cast. From what I could see, he’d broken nearly every bone in his body. And the detail that drove it all home for me, as a kid, was that he had to pee through a hole in the cast.

The other thing I couldn't help but notice was that the whole room was full of toys. My parents were so grateful he'd survived and they felt so bad for him that during his recovery, every day was Christmas. My mom catered to my brother because of guilt. She still defers to him to this day. It's funny how one split second can change a family's dynamics forever.

The accident made me much closer to my brother. Our bond was formed out of my sincere, genuine recognition of his pain. Once he came home from the hospital, I wouldn't leave his side. I slept beside him every night. He couldn't sleep in his own bed because he still had the full body cast. So he had a special bed, and they had to set up a little mattress for me at the foot of it. Sometimes I'd climb into his bed and just hold him.

Once the cast came off, I continued to share a bed with him for years. Even as a very little girl, I knew that—between the accident and how hard our dad was on him—my brother had a difficult life. I wanted to bring him comfort.

Finally, after years of this, my mom told me, "Britney, now you're almost in the sixth grade. You need to start sleeping by yourself!"

I said no.

I was such a baby—I did not want to sleep by myself. But she insisted, and finally I had to give in.

Once I started to stay in my own room, I came to enjoy having my own space, but I remained extremely close to my brother. He loved me. And I loved him so much—for him I felt the most endearing, protective love. I didn't want him ever to be hurt. I'd seen him suffer too much already.

As my brother got better, we became heavily involved with the community. Since it was a small town of just a couple thousand people, everyone came out to support the three main parades a year—Mardi Gras, Fourth of July, Christmas. The whole town looked forward to them. The streets would be lined with people smiling, waving, leaving behind the drama of their lives for a day to have fun watching their neighbors slowly wander by on Highway 38.

One year, a bunch of us kids decided to decorate a golf cart and put it in the Mardi Gras parade. There were probably eight kids in that golf cart—way too many, obviously. There were three on the bench seat, a couple standing on the sides holding on to the little roof, and one or two swinging from the back. It was so heavy that the tires of the cart were almost flat. We all wore nineteenth-century costumes; I can't even remember why. I was sitting on the laps of the

bigger kids up front, waving at everyone. The problem was, with that many kids in a golf cart, and its flat tires, the thing got hard to control, and with the laughing and the waving and the excited energy... Well, we only hit the car ahead of us a *few* times, but that was enough for us to get expelled from the parade.

When my father started drinking heavily again, his businesses started to fail.

The stress of having no money was compounded by the chaos of my father's extreme mood swings. I was particularly scared to get in the car with my dad because he would talk to himself while he was driving. I couldn't understand the words he was saying. He seemed to be in his own world.

I knew even then that my father had reasons for wanting to lose himself in drinking. He was stressed out by work. Now I see even more clearly that he was self-medicating after enduring years of abuse at the hands of his father, June. At the time, though, I had no idea why he was so hard on us, why nothing we did seemed to be quite good enough for him.

The saddest part to me was that what I always wanted was a dad who would love me as I was—somebody who would say, "I just love you. You could do anything right now. I'd still love you with unconditional love."

My dad was reckless, cold, and mean with me, but he was even harder on Bryan. He pushed him so hard to do well in sports that it was cruel. Bryan's life in those years was much rougher than mine because our father put him through the same brutal regimen June had pushed on him. Bryan was forced to do basketball and also football, even though he wasn't built for it.

My dad could also be abusive with my mom, but he was more the type of drinker who would go away for days at a time. To be honest, it was a kindness to us when he went away. I preferred it when he wasn't there.

What made his time at home especially bad was that my mom would argue with him all night long. He was so drunk he couldn't talk. I don't know if he could even hear her. But we could. Bryan and I had to suffer the consequences of her rage, which meant not being able to sleep through the night. Her screaming voice would echo through the house.

I'd storm out into the living room in my nightgown and beg her, "Just feed him and go put him to bed! He's sick!"

She was arguing with this person who wasn't even conscious. But she wouldn't listen. I would go back to bed furious, staring daggers at the ceiling, listening to her yell, cursing her in my heart.

Isn't that awful? He was the one who was drunk. He was the one whose alcoholism had made us so poor. He was the one passed out in the chair. But she was the one who ended up pissing me off the most, because at least in those moments, he was quiet. I was so desperate to sleep, and she wouldn't shut up.

In spite of all the nightly drama, by day my mom made our home a place my friends wanted to come to—at least when my father respected us enough to drink somewhere else. All the kids from the neighborhood came over. Our house was, for lack of a better word, the cool house. We had a high bar with twelve chairs around it. My mom was a typical young Southern mom, often gossiping, always smoking cigarettes with her friends at the bar (she smoked Virginia Slims, the same cigarettes I smoke now) or talking with them on the phone. I was dead to all of them. The older kids would sit on the bar chairs in front of the TV and play video games. I was the youngest one; I didn't know how to play video games, so I always had to fight to get the older kids' attention.

Our house was a zoo. I was always dancing on the coffee table for attention, and my mom was always chasing after Bryan when he was little, jumping over couches trying to catch him so she could spank him after back-talking her.

I was always overly excited, trying to draw the older kids' eyes away from the screen in the living room or to get the adults to stop talking to one another in the kitchen.

"Britney, stop!" my mother would yell. "We have company! Just be nice. Be on good behavior."

But I ignored her. And I would always find a way to get everyone's attention.

I was quiet and small, but when I sang I came alive, and I had taken enough gymnastics classes to be able to move well. When I was five, I entered a local dance competition. My talent was a dance routine done wearing a top hat and twirling a cane. I won. Then my mother started taking me around to contests all over the region. In old photos and videos, I'm wearing the most ridiculous things. In my third-grade musical, I wore a baggy purple T-shirt with a huge purple bow on top of my head that made me look like a Christmas present. It was absolutely horrible.

I worked my way through the talent circuit, winning a regional contest in Baton Rouge. Before too long, my parents set their sights on bigger opportunities than what we could accomplish picking up prizes in school gymnasiums. When they saw an advertisement in the newspaper for an open call for *The All New Mickey Mouse Club*, they suggested we go. We drove eight hours to Atlanta. There were more than two thousand kids there. I had to stand out—especially once we learned, after we arrived, that they were only looking for kids over the age of ten.

When the casting director, a man named Matt Casella, asked me how old I was, I opened my mouth to say “Eight,” then remembered the age-ten cutoff and said: “Nine!” He looked at me skeptically.

For my audition, I sang “Sweet Georgia Brown” while doing a dance routine, adding in some gymnastics flips.

They narrowed the group of thousands from across the country down to a handful of kids, including a beautiful girl from California a few years older than me named Keri Russell.

A girl from Pennsylvania named Christina Aguilera and I were told we hadn't made the cut but that we were talented. Matt said we could probably get on the show once we were a little older and more experienced. He told my

mom that he thought we should go to New York City to work. He recommended we look up an agent he liked who helped young performers get started in the theater.

We didn't go right away. Instead, for about six months, I stayed in Louisiana, and I went to work, waiting tables at Lexie's seafood restaurant, Granny's Seafood and Deli, to help out.

The restaurant had a terrible, fishy smell. Still, the food was amazing—unbelievably good. And it became the new hangout for all the kids. The deli's back room was where my brother and all his friends would get drunk in high school. Meanwhile, out on the floor, at age nine, I was cleaning shellfish and serving plates of food while doing my prissy dancing in my cute little outfits.

My mom sent footage of me to the agent Matt had recommended, Nancy Carson. In the video, I was singing "Shine On, Harvest Moon." It worked: she asked us to come to New York and meet with her.

After I sang for Nancy in her office twenty stories up in a building in Midtown Manhattan, we got back on the Amtrak and headed home. I had been officially signed by a talent agency.

Not long after we got back to Louisiana, my little sister, Jamie Lynn, was born. Laura Lynne and I spent hours playing with her in the playhouse like she was another one of our dolls.

A few days after she came home with the baby, I was getting ready for a dance competition when my mother started acting strangely. She was hand-sewing a rip in my costume, but while working the needle and thread she just up and threw the costume away. She didn't seem to know what she was doing. The costume was a piece of shit, frankly, but I needed it to compete.

"Mama! Why did you throw my costume away?" I said.

Then all of a sudden there was blood. Blood *everywhere*.

Something hadn't been sewn up properly after she gave birth. She was gushing blood. I screamed for my father. "What's wrong with her?" I yelled. "What's wrong with her?"

Daddy rushed in and drove her to the hospital. The whole way, I kept screaming, "Something cannot be wrong with my mom!"

I was nine. To see a river of blood flowing out of your mother would be traumatic for anyone, but for a child at that age, it was terrifying. I had never seen that much blood before.

Once we got to the doctor, they fixed her in what felt to me like two seconds. No one even seemed that concerned. Apparently, postpartum hemorrhage isn't that uncommon. But it lodged in my memory.

At gymnastics class, I'd always check to make sure my mom was on the other side of the window, waiting for me to be done. It was a reflex, something I had to do to feel safe. But one day I did my usual check-in out the window and she wasn't there. I panicked. She'd left. She was gone! Maybe forever! I started crying. I fell to my knees. Seeing me, you'd have thought someone had just died.

My teacher rushed over to comfort me. "Honey, she's going to come back!" she said. "It's okay! She probably just went to Walmart!"

It turned out that my mom had done exactly that: she had gone to Walmart. But it was not okay. I couldn't take her leaving. Seeing how upset I was when she got back, she never left that window during class again. And for the next few years she never left my side.

I was a little girl with big dreams. I wanted to be a star like Madonna, Dolly Parton, or Whitney Houston. I had simpler dreams, too, dreams that seemed even harder to achieve and that felt too ambitious to say out loud: *I want my dad to stop drinking. I want my mom to stop yelling. I want everyone to be okay.*

With my family, anything could go wrong at any time. I had no power there. Only while performing was I truly invincible. Standing in a Manhattan conference room in front of a woman who could make my dreams come true, at least one thing was completely within my control.