

***Little Madhouse on the Prairie:  
A True-Life Story of Overcoming Abuse and Healing the Spirit***

**Excerpt – “The Cellar”**

As I grew older, sometimes my mother would engage my brother in carrying out my punishment. An offense worthy of a serious reprimand, such as “sassing back,” would have harsh repercussions, one of them being locked in the cellar. I would obey my mother’s command to walk into the pantry and wait while my brother opened the cellar door so that I could descend the stairs. I do not remember being upset with my brother for his involvement. I told myself that he was only following orders and he would not harm me on his own. Soon enough I would find out that I was wrong about that.

The pantry was adjacent to the kitchen. Flour, sugar and canned goods lined the wooden shelves, along with purchases from the Watkins Company. The traveling salesman, whom we children fondly called the “Watkins Man,” would stop at the farm monthly, selling the seasonings, spices, baking goods and fruit punch mix he carried in his truck.

The cellar door was in the floor of the pantry. It was about three feet by six feet, and one side of it was hinged to the floor. My mother or brother opened it by pulling up on a large metal ring on the door, then waited while I carefully descended the ladder-like stairs that led from the pantry into the darkness of the cellar.

The cellar was basically a dirt dug-out that provided a cold storage area for canned goods and potatoes. There were no windows. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling and its pull chain dangled from the fixture. It was impossible for a small child like me to reach the chain, so when I was in the cellar, it was absolutely dark. No light seeped in around the edges of the overhead door. It was stark, abject darkness. My brother, or sometimes my younger sister, was given the job of standing on the cellar door so I could not open it from underneath. It would have made no difference if it had not been sealed in this manner; my terror was enough to make me a prisoner. I was five years old when my mother first made me go down to the cellar. Even as I write this, the hairs on the back of my neck rise in a replay of that terror.

In the darkness and silence, I heard the scratching and scurrying of the mice and rats that infested the cellar. At times, I thought I saw their eyes staring at me. Sitting on one of the rungs of the ladder, I would pull my legs up to my chest as tightly as I could. I thought if I didn’t breathe maybe those little demons would not hear me, and they would not bite at my toes. I became an expert at not breathing.

The first time I remember experiencing what I have come to think of as “leaving my body” was in the cellar. I can best describe this as a disassociation of thoughts and emotions from the experience. I was fully awake and aware of what was happening, yet it was as though I was an observer of the event instead of the one experiencing it. My physical senses seemed to be dulled, and although I could still see and hear, I had little feeling or emotion about what was occurring. This technique, which I believe my mind developed as a survival tool, was out of my control. It would automatically take over at times when I experienced extreme pain, terror, or danger. When I “returned” from one of these episodes, I would often still be experiencing the physical pain but have no conscious recollection of any feelings that were associated with the event. As I later came to understand, the emotional aspect of the memory had been deeply buried in my unconscious, where it affected my behavior and my deepest feelings about myself in the most insidious and harmful ways.

When I was in the cellar, and still in my body, I sat on the stairs and had many thoughts about myself. "I was bad." "I was unworthy." "I was unlovable." I never saw my brother or sister being put in the cellar, so I thought there must be something terribly wrong with me. I thought these thoughts, sitting in the dark on the wooden stairs, and I held on to these ideas, even though they were untrue, throughout many of my adult years. The cellar abuse stopped when I was eight, but I continued to abuse myself with my cellar thinking for years to come. The cellar was a perfect representation of the isolation and abandonment I felt as a small child. And having continually experienced this as a youngster, it became very natural for me to find situations and environments that recreated these experiences well into my adult life.