

AUTHOR'S NOTE

IT'S ONLY LOVE THAT GETS YOU THROUGH

RESURFACING THE MEMORIES in this book was like burying my hands in the stones at the bottom of a fishbowl and then shaking them back and forth. All the shit came up. Sometimes, quietly—in cathartic tears as I reread sections to myself or opened an old box of photographs. And other times, explosively—in clashes with my mom over our conflicting memories or sleepless nights spent trying to patch up a wound I'd reopened. To ground myself, I placed a *veladora de la Virgen* on my desk and lit it whenever I sat down to write. Her company helped. As did surrounding myself with some of the photos I've included in this book.

Over the last few years, I've devoted a lot of time to processing the emotional tolls and family dynamics associated with being a First and Only—books, webinars, energy healing—yet I continue to be reminded that while our minds may understand the root of our traumas and want

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to move on, our bodies have much longer memories. They want to protect us. So they get triggered and react in ways we swore we had grown past; they search for closure or remorse we swore we didn't need anymore. If you're anything like me, it can feel pretty demoralizing to catch yourself in an old familiar loop.

"I still bow my head," my mom admitted recently as we lingered on the phone, after an emotional fact-checking call turned confessional.

She shared that during their bleakest years in Mexico—when Abi had six kids under the age of twelve and Abito was always on the road—they had no hot water in their home, a one-room concrete block that regularly had *babosos* (slimy black slugs) creeping up its walls. Abi would bathe my mom in a plastic tub with a bucket, having her bow her head forward like she was in church, as she poured water that had been warmed in a pot on the stove onto the crown of her head.

"You know, even now when I'm in the shower, sometimes I catch myself still bowing my head," my mom told me.

I understood where she was coming from. These days, I also find it frustrating when my own head (figuratively) bows, in its own conditioned ways.

I no longer live in a state of fight or flight, but the Trailblazer Toll and the eight components I've touched on—Invisible Inheritances, the Parentified Child, the Bicultural Balancing Act, Chutes and Social Ladders, the Lonely Hustle, Blindfolded Cliff Jumping, Impostor Syndrome Plus, and Breakaway Guilt—remain woven into the fabric of my

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life. Over the years and along the way, I've gathered knowledge and healing tools, many of which I've referenced in this book. I'm certainly no therapist, trained authority, or trauma expert—and I surely don't have it all figured out—but I share these resources with you here in the hope that one or all of them may ring true for you and be a companion on your journey.

First, I'm including a blank three-generation genogram template. I encourage you to fill one out for your family, despite how much you think you already know about your own Invisible Inheritances. Asking our loved ones to elaborate on family dynamics can bring about difficult conversations but also eye-opening insight. I've also included a key with common emotional relationship symbols, but genograms are meant to be customizable, so feel free to create your own symbols and personalize however makes sense.

The ten-question test for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that I mentioned in chapter three is easy to find online and I'm also including a link below. I didn't consider the physical and emotional effects of childhood experiences for a long time, before understanding their proven connection to our health and well-being. Yet the reality is that more than 60 percent of us experience some form of significant trauma as children, with nearly one in six of us experiencing four or more different types of ACEs, and this toxic stress has consequences. Repressed emotions can actually make you sick. The good news is that our ACE score is only one part of the equation, and there are health strategies

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and mindfulness techniques that can reverse and repair the impact of ACEs. Finding out my own score was revealing but also actionable. Take a moment to learn yours:

- Take the ACE Quiz—And Learn What It Does and Doesn't Mean
 - [npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean)
- Healing and Prevention Resources
 - [numberstory.org/heal-myself/](https://www.numberstory.org/heal-myself/)

Next, here is a list of additional resources I've found to be incredibly valuable:

- Self-Parenting Work
 - “Reparenting in Therapy”
<https://www.verywellmind.com/rep parenting-in-therapy-5226096>
- Somatic Therapy
 - “What Is Somatic Therapy?”
[verywellmind.com/what-is-somatic-therapy-5190064](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-somatic-therapy-5190064)
- Transcendental Meditation
 - Center for Resilience
[davidlynchfoundation.org](https://www.davidlynchfoundation.org)

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- For Anxiety
 - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
“What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)?”
[verywellmind.com/what-is-cognitive-behavior-therapy-2795747](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-cognitive-behavior-therapy-2795747)
 - Exposure Therapy
“What Is Exposure Therapy?”
[verywellmind.com/exposure-therapy-definition-techniques-and-efficacy-5190514](https://www.verywellmind.com/exposure-therapy-definition-techniques-and-efficacy-5190514)
 - Book: *Panic Free: Eliminate Anxiety/Panic Attacks Without Drugs and Take Control of Your Life* by Lynne Freeman, PhD

- Culturally Competent Therapists for POC
 - Latinx Therapy: [latinxtherapy.com](https://www.latinxtherapy.com)
 - Therapy for Black Girls: [therapyforblackgirls.com](https://www.therapyforblackgirls.com)
 - Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation: [borislhensonfoundation.org](https://www.borislhensonfoundation.org)
 - Inclusive Therapists: [inclusivetherapists.com](https://www.inclusivetherapists.com)
 - National Queer & Trans Therapists of Color Network: [nqttcn.com](https://www.nqttcn.com)

Finally, a vital part of my own journey has been to make wellness and healing a priority, as well as to be more intentional about where and with whom I choose to invest my emotional energy. For me, it’s a daily practice of

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choosing peace, again and again. Choosing to rest, spend time in nature, practice mindfulness and prayer, guard my energy, take walks, listen to my body, trust my intuition, let go of unhealthy relationships, and, most importantly, give myself grace. To not try to be a “healing perfectionist” and, instead, to allow myself space to be human.

There’s no doubt that confronting emotions that have been bottled up inside of us, sometimes for decades, can feel destabilizing. Not to mention that doing this work may compel our loved ones to confront their *own* pain, usually unwillingly, which can sometimes lead to resistance and even conflict. It’s okay to feel sad about the lack of understanding and support we sometimes feel from our families about our attempts to heal. Revisiting memories can be daunting and uncomfortable, and there have been times when I wondered if leaving the lid on such an old box might be the smartest choice for all. If I should simply accept the hand I’ve been dealt and the stories I’ve told myself about who I am and what I am capable of.

In the end, it was Abi who showed me an alternative.

It was Christmas morning 1985, when I was six years old and an avid Care Bears fan. In a photo taken on that day, I’m standing in the foreground with my arms at my sides, wearing a gray sweatshirt dress with red trim and white lambs on its skirt. There’s a ragged-looking Christmas tree behind me to the right, decorated with mismatched ornaments, representing both sides of the US–Mexico border. It’s obvious by my posture that I had been directed to “stand in front of the tree” just seconds before. But my face is soft, with a hint of a smile detectable across my lips. I

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remember the feeling I had in that moment as if it were yesterday: complete and unconditional love.

Behind me to the left is the reason why. A life-sized handmade fireplace sits next to the window, extending across the wall behind our Christmas tree. It's made entirely out of cardboard, down to its pretend bricks, some of which have been darkened with "soot" to be realistic. Fluffy silver tinsel lines the mantel, where my red, white, and green stocking has been hung with care. And cherry-red flames, fashioned out of crinkled aluminum foil, roar out of its hearth into our modest living room.

At that time, I had never seen a fireplace in real life. They existed only in the black-and-white Shirley Temple movies Abi and I watched on the nights my mom went out. But those on-screen fireplaces represented a whole new world to me. Every woman I saw near one wore a silky dress and had shiny hair. Every man who leaned on its mantel wore a tailored suit and held a martini glass. I knew fireplaces belonged in houses with tall chimneys and big grassy yards. Families with both mothers and fathers gathered in front of them to open Christmas presents with their children. As far as I was concerned, a fireplace was a prerequisite for the kind of life I wanted.

Abi saw me. She saw the part of me that couldn't yet articulate what I dreamed of but needed the tools to get there all the same. Which is why on Christmas Eve, she stayed up late building me an elaborate fireplace out of cardboard and foil. I'll never forget running into the living room to see what Santa had left and stopping in my tracks. Abi stood off to the side watching as I slowly walked up to

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the fireplace, instinctively holding out my hands to feel the warmth of its flames on my skin. I couldn't believe it. She had taken my deepest wish and willed it into reality.

I learned something critical that day that has been a lifeline throughout my healing journey as a First and Only. Sometimes, despite all the striving or the knowledge we gain, despite our accolades or the partners we have, despite the boundaries we set with our families or how successful we are at rescuing everyone else, security and serenity may still feel like goalposts that keep moving.

Healing work requires us to unnumb ourselves, and it often feels worse before it gets better. But turning to positivity at the expense of our own emotional truth is never the solution. As Abi demonstrated, we're more powerful than we give ourselves credit for. Everything we need to be okay is already inside of us. Radiating from the innermost part of us. There is nothing we've been searching outside of ourselves for that we can't just as easily create. Especially our own peace and healing.

We can be the ones to build it—and to keep rebuilding over and over again—each time it gets knocked down.

With our own hands. Out of cardboard if necessary.

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FIRST GEN ON SPOTIFY

bit.ly/firstgenplaylist

“Fast Car”

Tracy Chapman

“Born on the Bayou”

Creedence Clearwater Revival

“Amor Eterno”

Juan Gabriel

“Keep Their Heads Ringin’”

Dr. Dre

“Crash Into Me”

Dave Matthews Band

“On the Bound”

Fiona Apple

“How to Save a Life”

The Fray

“Everlong”

Foo Fighters

“La Trenza”

Mon Laferte

“It’s Only Love That Gets You Through”

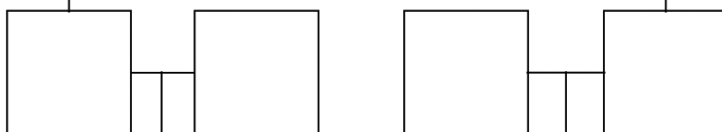
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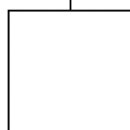
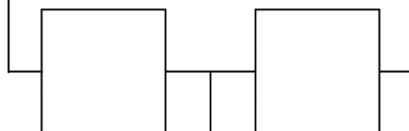
Great-Grandparents



Grandparents



Parents



You

Genogram Emotional Relationship Symbols

