

BOTS

Our GAC reality show finished airing and was not renewed for a second season. Once again, according to Dad, the problem was everyone else's lack of vision.

Gone were the days of sporadic monthly gigs. Our schedule became tightly packed with back-to-back appearances. As the year 2013 ended, Dad heard about an open casting call to find "the next Sound of Music family." Musically inclined kin were encouraged to submit audition videos featuring a song from the classic musical. The winners would be flown to New York City to appear live on the TODAY show. If we claimed the spot, we could secure an even bigger megaphone than our canceled show. We submitted a video and progressed through the ranks until three families remained. The final vote was put to the internet. The results weren't exactly a landslide.

Dad became suspicious. "Look," he said, pointing at one family's number. "Every time we get close, the count jumps. I think they're cheating." We asked how they could possibly be cheating. "Bots," he said. He described programs that were able to repeatedly click on any website button.

A few hours before the deadline, he called us kids to the loft. "I've set up the three desktop computers to keep pace with them," he informed us. "They probably didn't expect me to be able to do what they are doing. But I know my stuff. All you guys have to do is make sure the programs keep voting until the cutoff tonight."

The other family's number did jump funny like Dad said, yet who would care enough about this little competition to cheat their way to the top? It hit me with palpable irony: us. At the last possible second, I saw the two tallest columns shrink by almost a third each and then disappear. An automatic message announced the contest was over. I could have sworn our column had been highest.

We reported to Dad. He seemed pleased. "They didn't even cheat well," he scoffed.

The day we appeared as the winners on the TODAY show, I felt a wave of relief and elation that would develop into a reoccurring pattern over the following years. We would undertake a last-minute task, unprepared, stretched to our limits, Dad at the helm, following a vision only he could see. When the test was over and we survived by the skin of our teeth, I would be grateful we hadn't fallen apart. In those moments, my siblings were like fellow soldiers who had my back in combat; no one else could understand what we'd gone through together.

Not for the first time, America's Got Talent (AGT) reached out to us. Back when we had nine, ten, and eleven kids, they seemed to find us in whatever world we appeared. Their scouts now found our Today show performance and once again asked us to audition. My parents hadn't liked the possibility of losing control of the band due to AGT's contracts, but Dad now seemed convinced he could play according to his own rules and win. He said yes.

My experience on AGT was a blurry tunnel of fantastic chaos. The contestants and crew were friendly and exuberant, bonding through the surreal process. When disagreement cropped up within the family, Mom urged us to embrace a new interpretation of The Hunger Games. "Guys, we are in the arena now. The enemy is out there. We can't be fighting each other." She still chose to see God's will in every open door and continued to pray that our testimonies would bless others.

By the time the live rounds began, we were driving our bus into downtown New York City to film at Radio City Music Hall, then sleeping overnight in our bus bunks on our way to play county fairs in Michigan and Indiana. I felt our audiences shifting. It was wild and a little scary to be recognized by an increasing number of strangers.

We self- released our second official CD and went straight into recording a third. What little time we had at home that summer was spent working in the studio and washing mountains of laundry to repack for the next leg of the tour. If we happened to be free on a rare weekend, we gathered with our home church group who seemed simultaneously happy for our success and wary of fame.

Jair continued to show interest in Maria Martin. Dad gave Jair the green light to spend time getting to know her and her family. Around that same time, I made the mistake of riding in the truck of a young songwriter who'd caught my eye. Dad warned me he would pull out his shotgun if the kid ever came around again, and I dropped him like a hot potato.

After we were eliminated from AGT's quarterfinals, we received a call from the TV channel TLC. They wanted to make us an offer for a brand- new reality show. There was no time to waste. A new show meant the album we were working on should be our most mainstream one yet. Dad wanted me to sing differently. He would listen back to what I had recorded for the day only to shake his head unhappily.

"It's not even close," his voice came biting through the headphones.

We were working on the lead vocal for a love song I'd written. Again and again, he cut me off midphrase. "I just don't believe you. I don't believe what you're saying," he said. "You're not going there." He clenched his fist to his chest. "Sell it to me!"

The printed lyrics turned blurry and began to dance on the page in front of me as I tried again. He yelled and hurled cutting insults. I thought of Mom telling me she wished she could be a robot so she could function without emotions, and work without having the human weaknesses of needing to eat, sleep, or cry. I understood. I wished his words couldn't hurt me, but a hard knot built unbidden in my throat until my voice was choked tight and gave out completely. In disgust, he let me leave the studio, knowing I had passed into a useless state.

I stormed to my room and yanked on my running shoes. Down in the basement, I jumped on the treadmill and began running, the next thing I was supposed to do on the schedule. After a short burst, I slowed to a walk.

I promised myself, *One day, I'll be standing tall and he won't be able to touch me.*

I realized I was rejecting my mother's despair. Not only did I want to keep feeling; I also wanted to fan myself into an inferno of passion. I began singing underneath my shaky breath:

*I'll keep walking down this road I'm on,
knowing you'll be gone,
and I'll be fine*

I stomped my feet with each step and the treadmill shook.

I'll keep going till there's no more fear,

*knowing I'll be here,
and you'll be gone*

At some point, Dad must have realized his overbearing methods were hurting his results. I found it difficult to keep performing while worrying whether there was any throwable object within his reach. For years he'd justified the need to push us all, but he was starting to hit an invisible breaking point, which forced him to change tactics. Jair and even the younger boys were now significant physical opponents. No longer could he preach "might equals right" as a way of guaranteeing his rule. He began to complain, "I don't want to have to be the bad guy all the time." He emphasized we were young adults who needed to take responsibility for our own work. The day would come when he wouldn't be around to tell us what to do. Would we give up on everything we had worked on? Would we get lazy like the rest of society and lose all ground gained?

"You should report on your siblings when they don't do their tasks," he said. "It's your job to keep each other on task. Remember, our team is only as strong as its weakest player." While failure continued to provoke punishments, he tried to spread the responsibility of carrying them out, even going so far as occasionally encouraging us to "beat up" whoever was slacking off.

"When your brother or sister is lazy, they are stealing from you," he insisted.

Dad encouraged Jair to take increasing control of the band, saying we sisters would one day have husbands and children taking our allegiance and attention away from the family business. "But if we continue to train them right, we can have the younger girls come in and take the older girls' spots," he said.

Sometimes he let his dreams run unchecked. "If each of you twelve kids have twelve kids of your own, that's a hundred and forty-four grandkids. I could one day conduct an orchestra of all family members!"

Come autumn, the band had a few days of downtime between gigs in Florida, and our parents decided to book a beach house on an island in the Keys. Mom was understandably tense anytime Dad would have her wear revealing swimsuits, a sure opportunity for him to ridicule her body. Meanwhile, she was expected to plan and administrate a leisurely stay while giving no outward sign of effort or stress.

One evening at the beach house, I planned for dinner, hoping to take something off Mom's plate. By the time she made it to the kitchen to communicate her contrasting plan, I dug in and pointed out I'd already begun my prep. After he became aware of our conflict, Dad scolded Mom, not me, saying she was ruining the atmosphere with her grumbling.

Later, my brother Jedi and I got into an argument. Clashing with my mother made me feel helpless and irritable, and it sent me back to my old habit of relentlessly bossing my younger siblings. When Dad again took my side, Mom stepped in to defend Jedi. Dad ordered her to the bedroom and locked the door behind them, repeating the pattern of countless confrontations.

I stepped outside, trying to escape the cloud of drama, ashamed of my petty attitude. Taking a seat on the porch, I watched the sun lengthen on the endless water until the murmur of the waves brought me some measure of calm. I closed my eyes and heard a thin snap followed by an anguished cry. Confused, I looked back at the house and realized the windows of my parents' bedroom were open. There came

another series of cracks and disturbing whimpers, continuing until their source was unmistakable: the blows were being dealt by my father; the pain was my mother's. Her sobs built to a wail and then fell muffled by what I imagined was a pillow over her face. Voices shrieked inside my head, Stop him! Save her! This is all your fault!

I rushed into the house, first thinking I was going to her rescue, but then I realized I was simply unable to bear the sound of lashes falling on flesh. I turned on the kitchen faucet, grabbed a rag, and set to wiping the island counter furiously. I heard nothing. I saw nothing.

When I next saw my mother's face, there was no forgetting. "Please, Jessie," she begged, "you cannot get me in trouble anymore. He's beating me."

She dressed for a run, her face pale and swollen above her sweatshirt. Four-year-old Jada knew something was wrong and threw herself around Mom's legs in the open doorway, refusing to let her leave. "No, Mommy," she wailed.

Trying to smile, Mom peeled her baby's arms away and passed her to another sibling. "Everything's okay," she said, and fled.

When she didn't come back by dark, Dad became restless, pacing through the living room. She hadn't taken her cell phone. "I'm going to look for her," he said.

Though the island had only one main highway, he couldn't spot her.

She returned hours later, so exhausted she seemed completely empty of everything, mechanical and blank. It looked as if she had finally achieved the robotic programming she had wished for. No one asked where she had gone. We were simply relieved she had come back at all.