

The Burning Light of Two Stars

A Mother-Daughter Story

SCENES FROM THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR



by LAURA DAVIS



About *The Burning Light of Two Stars*

The *Burning Light of Two Stars: A Mother-Daughter Story* has been more than ten years in development. In my prior books, written over the course of more than thirty years, I've addressed many of the themes I touch on in *The Burning Light of Two Stars*: the impact of sexual abuse on individuals and families, the dynamics of estrangement and the hope of reconciliation, mother-daughter relationships, and parenting, but I have never written with this kind of revealing, intimate, personal voice. In *The Burning Light of Two Stars*, I step out from behind the author curtain and reveal what I like to call "the story behind the story." You'll get to meet the woman behind those other books. As one of my editors for *The Burning Light of Two Stars* told me, "Laura, this isn't the courage to heal; it's the courage to reveal."

Some of the stories in *The Burning Light of Two Stars* were first drafted decades ago. Most have been written and rewritten hundreds of times and some have been written in different genres. Believe it or not, I initially conceived of *The Burning Light of Two Stars* as a play, then as an epistolary book full of letters, and then finally, it found its form in narrative—as memoir.

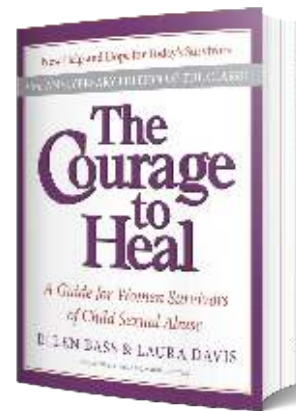
Two years before its publication, the book clocked in at 150,000 words, which was WAY too many words. One of the challenges inherent in writing about your own life is what to leave in and what to take out. A memoir is not the entire story of a life, like an autobiography; it's a slice of a life, life seen through one particular



lens or one particular time period or a particular frame. You can write a memoir that focuses on the year you were in Peace Corps or the summer you first fell in love or your coming of age. You can write a memoir about your relationship to food or a spiritual quest. Memoir can focus on travel or adventure or a time you were in peril. *The Burning Light of Two Stars* is my life story through the lens of my relationship with the most significant and powerful figure in my life—my mother. It's my story, but it's also a mother-daughter story.

Here's the description I wrote for the back jacket:

When she published *The Courage to Heal* in 1988, Laura Davis helped hundreds of thousands of women work through the trauma of having been sexually abused, while simultaneously deepening a painful rift with her own mother. Over the next twenty years, from the safe distance of 3000 miles, Laura and her mother reconciled their volatile relationship. But when her mother moves across the country to entrust Laura with the rest of her life, she brings a faltering mind, a fierce need for independence, and the seeds of a second battle for supremacy between them. As the stresses of caregiving reawaken Laura's rage over past betrayals, her intention to "finally love my mother without reservation" is threatened, and she must learn what it means to be truly open-hearted before it's too late. In this gripping, honest memoir about "two souls who couldn't quit each other," Laura Davis explores the endurance of mother-daughter love, the way memory both protects and betrays us, and the courage it takes to fulfill a promise when ghosts from the past come knocking.



AS I TEACH MY WRITING STUDENTS, I wrote that back jacket copy years before the book was complete, when I was deep in the trenches, not even knowing if I would ever finish drafting it. That paragraph became



my north star—what I wrote toward. Whenever I lost the thread of my story, I just had to go back and read it. And then I'd remember, "Oh, that's what my book is about!"

As I moved into the final rounds of editing the book to make it an acceptable length, I had to cut everything that didn't fall under the umbrella of that back jacket description.

Hence the deleted scenes featured in these pages for your reading pleasure.

I hope you enjoy them, because they're something most readers of the finished book will never see!

Laura Davis

March 2021



I

I included quite a bit more about my father in earlier drafts of The Burning Light of Two Stars, but in the final analysis, I needed to create more momentum, so everything that wasn't absolutely essential to my core story—the 57-year-relationship between me and my mother—had to go. For many drafts, I held on to this particular scene because I've always loved it, but eventually I had to “kill my babies” and let go of all the scenes, sentences, and words the book could live without. This scene, and the several that follow, are a few of the scenes that unfortunately had to go. I'm glad I get to share them here with you.

The events I describe in this first scene took place in June 1980, a pivotal time in my relationship with my father, who left our suburban New Jersey home to drop out, move to California to become a free artist and hippie, nine years before this scene took place.

This scene makes reference to a couple of things you would have already known if you were reading it in context: I was a premature baby who spend the first six weeks of my life in an incubator called an Isolette. My older brother “Paul” is also mentioned in this scene. He left for college the same summer my father split to his new life in California, leaving my mother and me alone.



A MONTH BEFORE MY 24TH BIRTHDAY, my father and I made plans to spend a weekend together at Omland, my cousin Miriam and James' place in the Santa Cruz Mountains, for their annual "Back to the Land" party. Dad drove down from San Francisco and picked me up in Santa Cruz, and the two of us headed deep into the mountains. We drove up a dusty, rutted dirt road, full of crazy turns and drop-offs, the gears whining as Dad downshifted to keep from skidding in the dirt.

When we reached the end of the road, Dad backed onto a dusty shoulder, and we hoisted our backpacks. It was a steep one-third-mile hike straight up the trail to "up top." As we crested the final hill, we were both panting. Miriam greeted us, long hair flowing, wearing a floor-length cotton skirt of many colors, waiting to "water the guests." She hugged us and handed us each a tall glass of water.

Miriam introduced us to the other guests and led us to a bunch of rusty metal chairs perched at the edge of the cliff, overlooking the valley. I gazed at the vast green forest below. An owl hooted and another answered the call. Some guy I'd never seen before lit a joint with a magnifying glass, holding it up to catch the sun. His hand was steady, and it took a few minutes, but the doobie caught fire. He took a long toke and passed it to Dad. He took a drag and passed it to me. Dad picked up a guitar. Soon he was singing *The Titanic* and I tapped out the beat on the weathered arm of the chair. Stared out into the wild. The owl hooted again.

Dad was singing the third verse of *The Grey Goose* when some other guy I'd never met offered us some acid. I knew my father liked psychedelics. I'd dropped acid a dozen times—with friends—never with Dad. Dad said yes and opened his mouth to whatever the next twelve hours would bring. Then the guy held a tab out to me. I considered it, a tiny square of possibility in the palm of his hand. Why not? I slid the tab under my tongue.

I hiked around Omland for the first hour, waiting for the trip to begin. At first, I felt a gentle spinning sensation. The greens became more vibrant. Trees started pulsing, a soft song emanating from their branches,



embracing me. Leaves tinkled like bells. I fell into their rhythm, but then they got louder. Soon they were shouting. An inferno of fierce sensations ricocheted through my body, and I couldn't get them to stop. Everything was repeating and loud, and the pattern was ugly. The world was ugly. I was ugly. And alone.

I'd been alone in that Isolette and now, I always would be. That loneliness grew inside me and filled my entire being. I couldn't stop it. Skin no longer contained me. I was unraveling. I reached for my sister, and for a brief moment, felt her comforting heartbeat across the veil—something I'd craved for so long—but then she was gone.

A crow cawed; death was near. I desperately wanted to come down, but I was still going up. I needed help but couldn't move. Just let me get through this. I promise, I'll never take acid again. I followed my breath for hours. In, out. In, out.

Finally, the trees quieted, until only the wind was singing. The rhythm stilled. My skin held my molecules in place. By the time the ground felt solid beneath me, the sun had transited the sky. I stood. On the dirt path, I heard voices—real ones. The thwack of a knife cutting watermelon. The crow cawed again but this time its call blended naturally into the rhythm of the living, breathing world all around me. I was part of that world. I was going to be okay.

I found Dad alone in the tepee, staring into the woods. The distant chords of a guitar and two voices singing harmony wafted through the trees. The music was sweet, pulsing with a yellow glow, but I fell into its warmth. I was still high around the edges, but my core had returned. Thoughts moved in a line again. Dad was humming, as usual, but his hum was soaring.

No canvas draped the tepee poles that day, just eight carved tree trunks converging toward heaven. Cool white ash filled the central fire pit. A few mats lay scattered around the outside rim. Dad was perched cross-legged on one, wearing his smooth-bottomed moccasins, a pair of faded jeans, and his original Woodstock tee shirt. Small animals scurried through the brush. I plunked down in front of him, crossing my legs in



the dust. The pulsing in my chest quieted as I stared into his familiar face.

His pale blue eyes fixed on mine, his pupils huge. His sing-song voice rolled over me like a light patter of summer rain. “You are so beautiful. I’m so happy to have you as a daughter. Do you know how lucky I am?”

“Yeah, I love you, too.” But then something jagged ripped inside me. A tear in the fabric that kept everything in place. The truth pressed up and threatened to spill out. I could no longer contain it. Yeah, Dad. You know, you are lucky. You have a daughter who has never held you accountable. I never stopped worshipping you, even after you walked out on me. I spent my teenage years bragging about having a hippie father to visit out in California. Jesus. Yes, I know how lucky you are.

The scolding call of a hawk echoed above us. The sound reverberated, pressing into my chest like a flame. Why had I never held Dad responsible?

He beamed at me, face wide open. “I love you so much, Laura.”

I know you do, but I have to tell you some things. Why hadn’t I ever said them? Why wasn’t I saying them now? The answer rose in my chest. Because I couldn’t risk alienating the one parent who had always believed in me.

I slipped off my flip-flops and scuffed my feet in the dusty soil. The truth ignited inside me. Words pressed up from a bottomless place I didn’t know. This was their time. “Dad, I’ve been mad at you for a long time. Your leaving really hurt me. I was 14 years old, at sleep-away camp, and you told me in a fucking letter.” As I spoke, a chasm opened inside me. I tried to jam it shut, but the opening tore wider. I had never cried, not once after Dad left me. I soldered myself shut, but now my fortress was cracking. I was risking everything.

Dad’s face flushed with concern. He moved closer; his callused palms wiped the tears from my cheeks. The trail of his touch lingered long after his hands left my face.

It had taken me years to admit that I was outraged at my father. I’d locked that anger up inside me, just like everything else. But now, we were tripping together, and Dad was listening. He wanted to hear what I had to say. I just had to find the courage to say it. “Dad, you disappeared.



You left a huge mess behind. Paul was gone. You were gone. You left me alone with Mom. You know how she is. How could you?”

That was it. Bingo. It wasn’t that he’d escaped to Big Sur to “find himself.” It wasn’t that he gallivanted around with his hippie friends. It wasn’t the divorce. It was that he’d stopped being my buffer.

Dad listened. His pale blue eyes peered deep into mine. The scar on his nose where he’d been whacked with a board while stocking shelves at his father’s hardware store pulsed. I breathed into my belly. Laughter from nearby guests dappled the waning sunlight. I was still coming down.

The distant sounds of a guitar drifted over us. Goosebumps stippled my skin. I scooted closer. Dad took my hands in his. They were big and warm, just like I remembered. The hands that had carried me. Hands that had cut silkscreens and carved woodcuts. Hands that loved to play the congas. He held my hands and listened. I said everything I needed to say, everything I’d never said before. “Your freedom cost me. And it’s still costing me.”

Dad’s eyes filled like a mountain stream. Unshed tears pressed beneath the surface of his words. “I’m so sorry, Laura. I just couldn’t come back to New Jersey. That life was over for me. And you were the one who paid the price. I never meant to hurt you.”

No one had ever apologized to me before. In our family, there were only radiating fingers of blame. Our eyes caught for a long moment. The father I could trust looked back at me. I breathed his apology into that ripped up place inside me. My jagged edges began to soften, like petals floating to the ground. Dad wrapped his arm around my shoulder. I leaned into his chest and my ragged breaths eased. Leaves rattled above us, like cellophane coming off a gift.

Maybe it was the acid that gave me the courage to speak or maybe it was just time. Whatever it was, I took my father’s apology all the way down to my bones. My anger drained into the earth until all that was left was love. And it stayed that way. It didn’t change when I came down. It didn’t change in the years to come. I swallowed my father’s apology whole and it took root inside of me. That was the day I forgave him. •



II

This is another of my favorite scenes. A story that's lived in me for decades, I've retold and rewritten it dozens of times, starting when I was 16 and published it in my high school literary magazine. Interestingly, a few of the original lines, first penned when I was a teenager, made it all the way into this final version. This was certainly a memorable moment in my life, but it wasn't crucial to the trajectory of my relationship with my mother, so I cut it from the book.

THE SUMMER I TURNED TEN, our family took a camping trip across the country. We left New Jersey as soon as school let out in our white Dodge Dart and camped all the way to California and back.

As soon as we pulled into a new town, my father picked up the local newspaper to learn about nearby events. We asked locals about the best swimming holes. Paul, 14 and eager to connect with his peers, put up wishful notes on bulletin boards at every campground: "Any teenagers want to hang out? Come to campsite number 42."

That summer, we visited Mesa Verde, Grand Canyon, Rocky Mountain National Park, Yosemite and Yellowstone. Paul got to live out his ultimate fantasy—surfing in Redondo Beach. I spent my 10th birthday in San Francisco and two weeks later, scrambled after a lamb at a 10-and-under rodeo in Jackson, Wyoming. We toured a meat packing plant in Minnesota and Mom grossed us out by eating the cold cuts they served at the end of the tour.



All summer long, temperatures soared into the nineties. My parents chain-smoked and we drove with the windows down, thighs plastered to sticky seats. An imaginary line bisected the back of the car: there were no seatbelts to keep us in place. Paul had his side and I had mine. Woe be to me if so much as a finger strayed into his territory.

Everywhere we went that summer, Paul and I swam: in rivers, lakes, inlets, streams, reservoirs, and oceans.

At the end of week one, we pulled into the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee. After we set up camp and gathered kindling, Paul and I ran down to the lake. I practiced my butterfly and my backstroke. We raced and dove and dunked each other.

Suddenly there was a shout from down the beach. The lifeguard stood on a stump, yelling for everyone to come. We ran, dripping, and gathered into a silent crowd. Two boys, age five and eight, had been out on rafts. They drifted out too far and the younger boy had fallen in. He hadn't come back up.

The lifeguard took stock of us, a random group of strangers. "We're going to form a human chain and drag the lake. We're going to walk across the lake until we find him." He gestured to a place midway up his chest. "This is how tall you have to be." That's how tall I was.

We joined hands and entered the water. We walked slowly, cautiously. None of us wanted to be the one to find him. The water got deeper and deeper. I stood on tiptoe, but finally, I could no longer reach the bottom. I took in a mouthful of water and had to drop out of the line.

I ran around to the other side of the lake, and there was the family. The mother was sobbing. The father, pacing. The older boy sat in the doorway of the tent, shivering in a wet suit, staring at the lake. Folks from nearby campsites fanned out in a silent arc. The sun was beating down.

The line of water walkers came closer and closer to us. The man next to Paul motioned below him. The lifeguard dove down, and when he came up, he carried a small wet bundle in his arms. He set the limp body



on the beach and started artificial respiration.

Twenty minutes had passed since the boy had fallen into the lake. His skin looked pasty and grey. His eyes were open. Small insects climbed up his chest and neck.

The boy's father screamed at his older son. "It's your fault. You did it. You killed him!"

The lifeguard kept trying, but it was too late. He stepped back and left the boy alone, lying on the beach, breaded with sand. The bugs crawled into his eyes and nose and mouth. No one brushed them away.

I looked at the boy. Then I looked at the lake. That's when Mom's arms surrounded me. Her fierce voice whispered, "Thank God it wasn't you," and I melted into her embrace.

I could still let her comfort me then. •



III

The final deleted scene is one I wrote to provide context about the home I grew up in and the parents I had. But ultimately, as I cut the stories that weren't crucial, almost all my childhood stories had to go.

WHEN I WAS IN SECOND GRADE, the Negro cleaning lady came into my all-white classroom at Elberon School while we were in our reading groups and whispered something in my teacher's ear.

Mrs. Dennis was my favorite teacher. She taught us to count in Spanish and gave me new books to read every day. But that Friday, her face cracked, and she started to cry. She stepped out into the hall and left us alone without a teacher. Nothing like that had ever happened before.

A few minutes later, our school principal, who wore a baggy suit and jingled coins in his pocket, got on the intercom and said school was being let out early. He didn't say why. Our parents had been called. They'd be coming to pick us up.

Our family lived diagonally across the street from my school. I walked to school, so like every other day, I walked all the way down to the crossing guard at the corner furthest from our house, crossed, then started back on the other side of the street, down the very long block toward home.

It was late fall but there were still lots of leaves on the ground. They were old and brittle and brown—the yellows and oranges and reds were long gone—I crunched those old tired leaves all the way down Park Avenue. Even though I was wearing my wool plaid wrap-around skirt,



the one with the big gold safety pin that held it together, and my navy-blue pea coat with big double-breasted gold buttons, I was still cold. My legs were always cold this time of year. It wasn't fair. Why did only boys get to wear pants to school?

I looked both ways at the corner of Park and Van Court before crossing the street, walking up our front steps, turning the crystal doorknob, and opening our front door. "Mom? MOM?"

"I'm in here." Mom's voice sounded muffled and funny. It was coming from the den. And the TV was on. Why was Mom watching TV in the daytime? She never did that.

Mom was sitting on our old brown couch, the one covered with a Mexican serape, with the big silver radiator behind it. On the tile coffee table in front of her was a big ashtray full of butts, and the New York Times, folded back to the crossword puzzle, every box filled out in ink, not a single cross out or mistake. Mom did the puzzle every day. Always with a pen. At least that was normal.

Make-up was leaking out of the side of Mom's eyes. Little black hatch marks striped the skin under her lashes. "Oh, Laurie," she said. But before I could ask what was happening, Mom shushed me and pointed at the TV, motioning me to sit beside her. I cuddled up next to her. Walter Cronkite was on the TV. That was weird, too—he was usually only on after dinner.

Mom put her arm around me. "President Kennedy has been shot."

I didn't know what to say. But I thought about Caroline. She was just a little younger than me. And John-John. He was still a baby. And the First Lady: Jacqueline Kennedy and her pillbox hat. Mom and Dad had voted for Jack Kennedy. Mom walked the precincts for him. Paul had his campaign button in his campaign button collection. Mom signed people up at the polls for the Democratic party. We were a Kennedy family.

As I pressed my body into Mom's body, we watched what millions of other Americans were watching. This was why school had gotten out early. Why Mrs. Dennis had been crying. What the cleaning lady had whispered in her ear. This was why school had stopped. Why work had



stopped. Why everyone had stopped. It was November 22, 1963, and all of us, the whole country, watched the world change on TV.

Mom and I watched the grainy film of the motorcade over and over. They were talking about something called tru-jeck-to-ree and bullets, and the President was in surgery. President Kennedy was having brain surgery. His brains had leaked out all over the First Lady and all over the car.

A few minutes later, Walter Cronkite came back on TV and told us that the President was dead.

That night, as we sopped up gravy from my favorite dinner—hot dog and bean casserole, made of cut-up hot dogs, Heinz Vegetarian Baked Beans, molasses, watered-down ketchup, and a dab of spicy Gulden's mustard—we had a family meeting. Mom and Dad told us we were going to President Kennedy's funeral in Washington, DC.

I don't remember if we drove or took the bus into Grand Central Station to catch the train from New York, but we were there. We went for two nights and stayed in a cheap hotel. Mom wrote a note excusing me from Sunday school, so I could go President Kennedy's funeral. I saved that note for years. I'd hoped to find it in one of the turquoise boxes, but it never turned up. I'd always been proud of that note. Proud I'd been there. Proud we'd all been there. Our whole family. Dad carried me on his shoulders all night, so I could see the casket in the rotunda with the flag draped over the top.

It wasn't the first time my parents had helped me be part of history. Three months earlier, they'd taken us to DC for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Buses drove in from all over the country and we were on one of them, singing freedom songs with teachers and factory workers, housewives and seamstresses, students and file clerks, all committed to fighting segregation:

If I had a hammer
I'd hammer in the morning
I'd hammer in the evening



All over this land
I'd hammer out danger
I'd hammer out warning
I'd hammer out the love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land

When we stepped off the bus in Washington, it was a hot sticky day. We waded into a sea of people. That's what Mom called it: a sea of people. Hundreds of thousands, she said. I held Mom's hand. I'd never seen so many people in my life: people with skin of every shade, young people, old people, kids like me. People up in trees and perched on fences. Men and women carrying black and white signs: "We Demand Decent Housing Now!" "We Demand Equal Rights Now!" "There is No Halfway House on the Road to Freedom."

All around us people were singing that day's special song, their voices rising up together:

We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
We shall overcome some day.

Mom had packed a picnic and we wandered through the crowd until we found a good spot, right at the edge of the Reflecting Pool. I took off my Keds and tucked my white anklets inside. As I ate my Oreos—first the top, then the cream, then the bottom—and licked the edge of my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, we listened to Mahalia Jackson and Harry Belafonte and Joan Baez. Odetta sang, "Oh Freedom." Then they introduced a new singer, Bobby Dylan. Mrs. Medgar Evers gave a speech. I don't remember it, but Dad told me her husband had been murdered by people who didn't believe in civil rights, and that's why we were there.



By the end of the steamy Washington afternoon, I was tired and hot. But we stayed until the very end. I dangled my feet in the water as Martin Luther King's voice rang out, "I have a dream." I was eight years old, my feet gently kicking the cool water. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!"

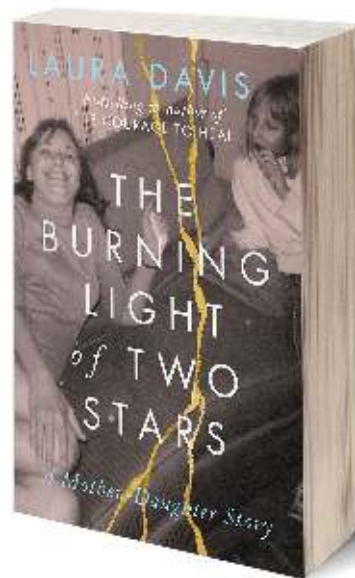
When Dr. King finished speaking, the long day was finally over. I don't know how we found our way back to the bus, but Dad carried me. I fell asleep in Mom's arms to the sound of freedom songs in four-part harmony. I don't recall now if August 28, 1963 was a one ice cream day, but it was so hot, it might have been a two-ice-cream day. But I didn't need an extra ice cream to know the day was special. I could already tell. •

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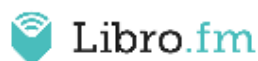
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