

SHATTER PROOF

How I Overcame the Shame of Losing
My Parents to Opioid Addiction
(And Found My Sideline Shimmy)

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She's Not Going to Make It

MY MOM DIED JUST BEFORE TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING on Monday, March 24, 2003, while I slept peacefully in my dorm room 500 miles away. The rescue squad transported her body from our two-story brick house deep in the mountains of southwest Virginia to a nearby hospital.

Giles County's emergency services team had gotten to know our home well in the last few months. Working with incongruent information, however, the ambulance driver had gone to the wrong medical facility, so Mom's body had taken a final tour around the countryside for well over an hour after she had passed away.

Once Mom had finally been delivered to the correct location, a dispatcher received yet another phone call concerning our residence. This time, the victim was my dad.

By now, four hours and ten minutes had ticked by since Mom had died, and Deputy Eric Thwaites was speeding down the narrow, two-lane road that wound through Newport, Virginia, to our address on Boars Head Trail.

He reached our gravel driveway on the left and turned in. The car's tires crunched the gravel underneath, and its headlights shone brilliantly between the dark rows of trees on either side of the lane. When Thwaites pulled up to our house, he spotted a dim light inside one window. With no other interior or exterior illumination, the splinters of sunlight cracking over the horizon gave the scene its only real visibility.

Thwaites met fellow deputy Teddy Vaughn outside our family's house. They knocked, then opened the unlocked door and announced their presence. Stillness and silence answered them.

In the kitchen, they found my dad, Butch Sisler, lying prone on the floor. A cursory inspection told them Dad was already dead, but Vaughn called the hospital for instructions anyway. While his colleague was still on the phone, Thwaites heard the ambulance pull into the driveway. He exhaled. The EMTs would take care of Dad's body and start the search for answers to the questions the night had raised.

Privately, Thwaites held his suspicions about what was going on. A seemingly healthy couple had just passed away, with the wife's death preceding the husband's by only a few hours. Thwaites wouldn't share his speculations with Vaughn or anyone else, though. He would wait until the coroner reviewed the facts.

For now, Deputy Thwaites just had to make sure no one else was in our home and that no intruder had invaded our refuge. Using his flashlight, Thwaites inspected each room carefully. The deeper he proceeded into our house, the more he felt like he was walking through a dream. He hadn't been a Giles County sheriff's deputy for long, and he had no training or on-the-job experiences to help him understand the cold scene that now resided within the warm and inviting home.

In the family room, Thwaites opened the drapes. By now, early morning light streamed through the picture windows, and Mom's glass coffee table cut the sun's beam like a prism. The beige sofa and Dad's oversized brown recliner that bookended the coffee table both looked new. A stack of books and an array of carefully arranged decor, however, evoked the cozy, lived-in feeling Mom liked.

Olan Mills photos along with framed snapshots hanging on the walls gave every indication of a family of four who deeply loved each other. *This home is remarkably well kept*, Thwaites thought, a tribute to Mom's precise and orderly ways. This wasn't the kind of house a sheriff's deputy got sent to on a regular basis.

In my parents' master bedroom, however, Deputy Thwaites saw everything he needed to know on the bedside table. Nevertheless, he cracked the door into the bathroom where the tub still held tepid water. From there, he walked through the hallway, peeked into a small office, and then headed upstairs.

First, he checked my brother Allen's bedroom. Four deer heads looked back at him from their final resting places on the wall. NASCAR memorabilia, forest green carpet, and military gear filled the rest of the space around the well-made bed. Nothing seemed out of place.

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Then, Thwaites opened the door to my room and switched on the light. An entire wall adorned with gymnastics trophies and medals confronted him. Pictures of me, first as a young girl and then as a teenager, tall with light blonde hair, were carefully arranged around the bedroom. In one photo, I stood on a podium, hands held high with a gold medal around my neck. In others, I stood smiling with my parents, coaches, or teammates.

Thwaites was right in his assessment of my love for sports—those mementos he discovered in my room were the early seeds for my work today as a sideline reporter for ESPN.

But all that was more than a decade away...

On that dreadful morning at my home in Virginia, Deputy Thwaites closed his eyes in dismay. He prayed for the girl who lived in this room—without even knowing my name—to survive this, to somehow withstand the double tragedy of losing both parents in one night.

That poor little girl with all her trophies and medals, Deputy Thwaites thought as he flipped off the light. She's not going to make it. She'll be shattered.



The Sisler Family (1988)



Our home tucked in the Blue Ridge mountains of Giles County



The medals and trophies that Deputy Thwaites saw in my room the day my parents died.