Since the time my father was six years old, he has owned a pair of cowboy boots and a cowboy hat. In one of the few baby pictures I have of myself, my father is smiling proudly and holding me with one arm, under the brim of a big tan cowboy hat. I am wearing a pink bathing suit with no smile and a raised eyebrow, as if I were already questioning the man’s fashion sense. I can remember this hat being a symbol of embarrassment as I was growing up. The boots were also incredibly dorky but I pretended they didn’t exist and would try not to look at the ground whenever he wore them. Since I always looked up at people and never deflected my eyes to the floor, people mistook this as a sign of confidence. Perhaps if my father had grown up on a ranch or a farm or Texas, I might have forgiven these apparel offenses, but he grew up in Los Angeles with an incredibly stylish father who used to hang with the likes of Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra. My grandfather listened to Big Band Music, dabbled in the Entertainment Industry and was “c-o-o-l” through and through. Where my father developed this identification with cowboys was a mystery to my brother, Shaun, and me.

When I was in high school, my father would blast country music on the way to our school while my brother and I groaned in our beat-up caravan. Being the oldest, I always rode in the front seat and would move the radio dial every time the light turned green. This action would often escalate into radio wars for the entire duration of the trip.

“All the songs are about some guy whining about how he lost his woman and his truck and his dog and now all he has is his booze and his guitar. Cry me a river!” I would complain to my father.
“It sounds like someone is kicking a dog!” he would quip back whenever we were on my rock-n-roll station.

Before we entered the school grounds, we would beg him to change the station for fear that some Garth Brooks crooning might escape through the windows and my brother and I would be held at the mercy of bullies in the senior parking lot. Most times he would turn it off, but every once in a while, he would blast it just as one of us opened the door. My Dad is a jokester at heart, something I admire and loathe equally, yet understand and forgive even more. He is incapable of not cracking a joke after an incredibly tense argument or a blowout fight. His joking is a permanent residue left over from his childhood, and because of this my brother and I have a hard time keeping straight faces when the shit hits the fan in our own relationships.

My Dad is the oldest of eight children: five girls and three boys. His father was tough, immigrant tough, a self-made man who immigrated from Iran (then Persia) to the United States with his father and siblings when he was a boy. My grandfather’s mother had committed suicide, leaving him, his brother and two sisters to deal with their terrifying father. From the little I’ve been told, my great-grandfather deserted his family for weeks at a time starting when my grandfather was just nine years old, leaving the four of them to raise each other. But my grandfather made an incredible life for himself. He was charming, witty. He knew how to dance and how to build a house, how to run a business and how to throw a party with the right jokes for the right crowd. He even knew Judo. He knew any and everything because he knew how to survive.

My grandmother was a farm girl from Missouri (pronounced Miz-er-a). She moved with her family to Los Angeles in the forties and met my grandfather her senior
year. My grandfather told her to date around, but not to go steady with anyone, because he was going to marry her. Shortly after graduation, she became pregnant with my father and they quickly got married. A strict follower of the Roman Catholic faith, my grandmother consulted a priest after her third child. He told her that contraception was a sin. After her fifth child, she consulted him again, and he again told her it would be an offense in the eyes of God. But after her eighth child, my grandmother consulted a doctor and went on the pill. By the time she was thirty she had eight children all under the age of 13.

My father, being the oldest, became the designated nanny in the family. My grandfather worked for Bob Hope and eventually moved into Industrial Real Estate. Both jobs required long hours, business trips and parties. My grandmother began to drink heavily and slipped into a severe addiction to alcohol, which she still struggles with to this day. Last Christmas, she joked about not being able to remember having ever changed a diaper for my Uncle John, the youngest of the eight. In the car ride home, my father erupted with anger.

“That’s because I wouldn’t let her near him! Back then, you pinned diapers with safety pins.” He took a few breaths and then laughed, “But maybe I should have. John is a bit of schmuck. A few pricks might have done him good.”

Growing up, all of my aunts and uncles would revere my father as the man that “saved their childhood.” When his mother was drunk, he would often create elaborate scavenger hunts, epic hide-and-seek games throughout the neighborhood, or Twilight Zone marathons where he would inevitably pop up and scare all the kids at one point during the show. When he got his driver’s license, he became the family chauffeur, the
assistant baseball coach for his two younger brothers, and the watchful eye over his beautiful sisters. Whenever things got tough at home, he would whisk the kids away to the park or to go-kart racing or a John Wayne movie. Perhaps it was during this time when he solidified his cowboy persona.

My grandfather eventually quit his job to spend more time with the family. He invested in a motel and hired his kids as the staff. The girls cleaned the rooms, and the two younger brothers laundered towels and cleaned the grounds. My father was now in college, but would come home and be the night-man for the Front Desk of the Glenn Valley Motor Hotel. My grandmother’s drinking became worse and my grandfather’s anger over it often erupted into fits of rage. By my dad’s junior year of college, my dad snapped, and finally made a decision that stunned everyone. He decided to study abroad for a year in Rome. My Aunt Rose called this event, the “most devastating news of her childhood” and not because my dad was so much fun, but because he was their protector and now the kids would have to deal with their parents on their own.

My whole life, my dad has told Shaun and me stories about his year in Italy, but it wasn’t until about seven years ago that I learned he was fluent in Italian. While I was studying abroad and traveling, my father met me in Rome. Together, we hopped in a cab, and my dad began speaking in Italian to the driver. It was the first time he had been out of the United States in twenty years. I remember wondering if there would ever be a time when he stopped amazing me.

When my father returned from his year abroad, the dynamics had changed. The kids were young adults who had grown up during his year away. They were excited to have their big brother back but there was also an unspoken anger at him for having left
them. My dad continued working for the Motel, now as a manager, and did so for years after college. Even after my grandfather sold the motel, my father stayed on where he worked alongside a man named Duke who later introduced him to my mother.

My mother was the most beautiful woman my father had ever met. For my mother, my father was handsome and the life of the party. Within three months they were talking about engagement. In six months they were engaged and in a year they were married. I came shortly after. The motel was their first home together, as well as mine.

For a year, he tried to become a writer but when nothing panned out he tucked his dream away and started his own business. He may not have been aware of it at the time, but my father was an expert at trying to save people, which would later account for his failed marriage to my mother and the unraveling of his life. But for ten years he turned it into a successful profession. He packed up his cowboy hat and turned in his cowboy boots for a pair of Florsheim shoes and started a job-training program. The program helped people who were homeless or on welfare or just hard on their luck, get off the streets, get their high school diploma and train them for jobs in the hotel industry. My dad provided them with shelter, clothes, food, and bus tokens. All he asked of people was the will to work. To this day, my dad still gets calls on Christmas and Father’s Day from some of the people he helped.

As a child, my father was larger than life. He was the life of the party, a legendary storyteller and the only adult who played with all of the kids on Easter and Christmas. When I was five or six, I remember telling my mother that when I got older, I wanted to marry him and when she left us I suppose I did.
There were a few years where my father was unaware of the extent of my mother’s drinking. She got a doctor to diagnose her with Lyme Disease and Mono, which meant she could be passed out drunk before he got home and he would “let her rest.” It also meant that my brother and I were left at school several times or picked up by her when she shouldn’t have been driving a car. My father lived in complete denial for years until everything exploded one Christmas Eve. She drank almost a gallon of vodka and smashed the nativity scene under the Christmas tree. He begged her not to ruin Christmas for us, never considering that it might have been too late.

For the next year, my father focused on keeping my mother’s drinking a “private matter” and kept it hidden from his entire family. Our childhood became a series of schizophrenic episodes. My mother would get drunk, then angry and they would fight. She would cry, ashamed, and promise she would stop. My father would have us look for all the alcohol hidden in the house and we would dump it out. I remember us cheering as we watched it all disappear down the drain. Then he would take us all out for ice cream to celebrate that Mom was giving up drinking. Inevitably, after we would come home she would furiously break something or spend the night throwing up and sobbing while my dad yelled or comforted her outside the bathroom door.

As my dad kept trying to fix her and to keep the chaos under control, his fear of “the secret” getting out became such an exhausting obsession that when we finally found my mother blacked out on the couch from an attempted suicide, my father went into the kitchen and debated whether he should call for help. In fact none of us acted with a sense of urgency, because for a moment, it seemed that everyone was getting exactly what they
wanted peace. After a few minutes, he called for an ambulance but asked if they could turn the sirens off.

That night he was forced to ask for help and left my brother and me with his sister Gail, so he could spend the night with my mother in the hospital. I stayed up all night and let the secret spill out onto Gail’s bedroom floor.

During that year, the skyrocketing medical bills for the several suicide attempts and melodramatic overdoses that followed that night financially destroyed my father. We lost our home and were forced to move into a one-bedroom apartment he owned in North Hollywood. We were taken out of private school and put into the failing LA Unified Public School System. He put my mother through rehab with the help of Gail and started going to Al-Anon meetings to try to understand what was happening with the guidance of his new Al-Anon sponsor, Tom.

He tried his hardest to keep the family together and to do the right thing. But he was hopelessly in love with my mother and couldn’t let go of her until finally she relapsed and decided to let go of him. To my father’s credit, once she left, he did not chase after her or beg her to come back. When that door shut behind her, a silence that followed that felt something like the end of a storm. There was something tranquil about her departure. For the first time in my dad’s life, he did not have an alcoholic woman at the center of his life. But, this in turn, meant that nothing was at the center and he floundered for two years. Soon my brother and I were going to Gail’s house everyday after school until about ten o’clock at night, while my dad worked late and went to Al-Anon meetings.
Slowly but surely, he reclaimed himself as a man and then a father, and we stopped going to Gail’s so much. He became my soccer coach and my brother’s baseball coach. He cooked dinner or at least tried to cook dinner. At first he would come up with things like, “Pancakes and French Fries.” Eventually he taught himself how to make soggy Fettuccini Alfredo and we would have it about three or four times a week. Then there was the burnt teriyaki salmon and flavorless canned corn. My brother and I tried our best not to hurt his feelings and would scoop down as much as we could bear to eat. Needless to say, we both remained skinny through much of our adolescent years. Eventually I learned to do a little cooking but found that I took after my father in this area. Dinner remained a constant source of struggle and endless jokes for our family. But whenever I am impossibly inconsolable about something, the only thing that helps is a bowl of badly made Fettuccini Alfredo.

My dad became a professional father, which made the loss of my mother something we became grateful for. But, he was losing himself in us and became overbearing and sometimes irrationally strict. On the suggestion of a therapist, he was told that he needed a social life and that conversing with parents at a pizza party after a soccer game did not count. One day, he ripped everything out of the living room closet, which was his personal closet since he slept on the couch. Lo and behold, there was the tan cowboy hat from all those years ago. He found his old boots and dusted them off. The leather was cracked and peeling but they were still standing.

On Tuesday nights, my father began taking country line dance lessons. Two years later, he was the best dancer in the club and was going Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. He began dating and before long, my dad became the eternal bachelor.
It has been seventeen years since my parents divorced and my father never plans on remarrying again. He claims he has too much fun being single. He lives in a two-bedroom townhome, drives a red Mustang, travels all the time and is dating a woman who gives horseback riding lessons. When he asked me what I thought of his girlfriend, I politely responded, “She makes you happy and I think that’s great.”

To which he replied, “Lindsey, I’m happy no matter if I’m with someone or not. I don’t need someone else to be happy.” I can’t find a better sentence that captures my father. He is a happy man who has overcome incredible loss, humiliating defeats and financial ruin three times. Like his own father, he is a survivor but unlike anyone else I have ever known, he possesses a courage that keeps him moving forward, an ability to find laughter in even the darkest times of life, and the confidence to walk New York City in a pair of snakeskin Cowboy boots.

Lindsey Anthony is a playwright, writer, and documentarian. She grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts Dramatic Writing Program in 2003. Her plays have been produced by The Blank Theatre Company and Lone Star Ensemble and in 2008, her feature documentary, *Dear America*, premiered at the Philadelphia Independent Film Festival. She would like to thank Joyce Johnson and her classmates for their guidance and her family for providing her a wealth of stories to write about.