

LETTING PERSEVERANCE  
FINISH

A MEMOIR

OZALLE TOMS

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Due to triggering content, this book is recommended for a PG-13+ audience.

## ENDORSEMENTS

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Ozalle courageously takes us along with her through her painful life journey of torturous childhood abuse. The consequent impaired, self-abusive behaviors have caused her many heartbreaking losses, intense guilt, and debilitating shame. Miraculously, Ozalle lives up to the title of her memoir, "Letting Perseverance Finish". Her extraordinary strength, integrity and unwavering faith have transformed her life. Her limitless success in her healing, growth, accomplishments and compassionate love have made her a gift to every life that she touches.

— CAROL ANN WARD, MS, LPC, NCC  
CLINICAL DIRECTOR ASSOCIATES IN  
PSYCHOTHERAPY, LLC JANESVILLE, WI

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Being able to recall the many painful experiences of one's life and share it with others, takes a tremendous amount of personal courage. Ozalle begins her book with memories of childhood emotional and physical abuse by adults who were responsible for her protection and parental guidance. With all her personal setbacks, there were always a few helpful and motivating individuals to give her encouragement and inner peace to stay on a positive pathway of life. I am amazed at Ozalle's ability to keep moving forward and forgive those who tried to destroy her will to exist. Ozalle I salute "You" for redefining yourself and taking a stand against abusing children in our society. Your story needed to be told and shared with the world.

— MANUEL A. WILSON SUPERINTENDENT  
EMERITUS INKSTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
INKSTER, MI

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Ozalle Toms' page-turning memoir is a clear-eyed and courageous look back at a life marked by loneliness, trauma, and institutional neglect. But it is

also ultimately a story of hope and faith--of a woman who, despite one unimaginable obstacle after another, finds her way to healing and to herself.

— GREG MICHIE AUTHOR OF HOLLER IF  
YOU HEAR ME [HTTPS://WWW.TCPRESS.  
COM/GREGORY-MICHIE](https://www.tcpres.com/gregory-michie)

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*This book is dedicated to the more than 400,000 children in the  
U.S. living in foster care. I hear you, I see you and I feel you.  
Please know that your past doesn't determine your future but  
faith, resilience, and perseverance.*

## PROLOGUE

*M*any of the events you will read about took place over 30 years ago. In my desire to create the most authentic piece possible, I interviewed several individuals from my past. These individuals included my mother, childhood best friend, family members, ex-husband, and high school classmates. I am particularly grateful to my mother, who participated in over four hours of recorded interviewing time. The first two hours took place face to face, subsequent interviews took place via phone. My mother was happy I asked for her help and was very open to answering questions. There were times during the interviews she would appear remorseful as she talked about events during my childhood. In addition to filling in the gaps of my childhood, these interviews aided me in learning more about my mother's past. I also requested my school records from Detroit Public Schools and Inkster Public Schools. From the state of Michigan, I requested my

mother's criminal records and a family member's death certificate. Here we go!



## LETTING PERSEVERANCE FINISH

*Standing at the top of the stairs, my gaze darted between the open door and my mother. Out of breath and angry, her eyes glowed red. I was buck naked, scared, and beaten. My skin blistered, burned, and seeped blood. My mother, the woman who was supposed to love and protect me, looked at me and said, "Bitch, if you wanna leave, you can leave, but if you stay, I'm gonna kill you." Thinking back on what I had endured the last nine years, I knew without a shadow of a doubt she would kill me. The only thing standing between me and freedom was an open door — so I ran. It was 3:00 in the morning. I was thirteen years old.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Sissy, my grandmother, was a graduate of Cass Technical High School in Detroit, MI. She gave her first three children up for adoption. At a young age (approximately 20), she married my grandfather, Joe, and gave birth to three more children. Apparently, my grandmother left the marital home during her pregnancy with my mom, Joyce, because my grandfather physically abused her. According to the story passed down, a female lover waited to comfort her with open arms. In 1954, at the age of twenty-eight, Sissy delivered her sixth child, my mother, never returning to her abusive husband, who was twenty-one years her senior. My mother would have a relationship with her birth mother throughout the years, but it was a strained one. She never seemed to get over Sissy leaving her at Women's Hospital when she was only ten days old and never taking care of her. Instead, my mother lived in her father's home on Ethel Street with her older brother, Joe Jr. (JJ), and her sister, Marion.

At a gambling house, my grandfather met a lady who

he decided to employ for housekeeping and to care for his children. According to family stories, the previous help would steal from him and didn't tend to the children and house as they were being paid to do. Joe and Marie, the new hire, a beautiful, light-skinned, grey-eyed woman with black curly hair, eventually got married. This was the only woman my mother called Mom, and the only grandmother I would ever know. Joe was a small man in stature and very dark-skinned. His job of working in a foundry made his skin even darker. Much later my mother would say her childhood was "beautiful," with the kids taught to respect their elders and to stay in a child's place.

She grew up in a close-knit community on the southwest side of Detroit. It was a destination for immigrants seeking jobs and lifestyles to help them provide for their families. Not only was the community diverse, it was also known for being inclusive and welcoming. Many of the homes in my mother's neighborhood were built like the home she grew up in: bungalow-style, small, with three bedrooms, one bathroom, a small kitchen, and a basement.

Everyone knew whose kids belonged to whom, and everyone could spank a child who was doing wrong. That child would then get it again when they got home. These folks also knew the neighborhood drunk, the man who was beating and/or cheating on his wife, or anything else worth knowing. It surprised me that my mother described her childhood as "beautiful" because, according to her, on Saturdays her father would line her and her siblings up and whoop them. In addition to their weekly

whooping, they would get a dose of cod liver oil and have to get their chores done. Joe was an uneducated man who worked at Ford Motor Company for forty-five years. This afforded him the ability to take care of his family. He made sure the kids had clothes, school supplies, and allowance. The bills were paid. They always had more than enough food to eat, and all their basic needs were met.

When my mother was seven or eight years old, Joe began calling her a bitch and telling her she would never amount to anything. Marie, her stepmother, would try to defend her, but Joe wouldn't stop. She also recalls around this age, Joe physically attacking Marie in the kitchen, but Marie knocking him out and it never happening again. During her teen years, my mother remembers finding her father in the basement with Dee, a married lady who lived across the street. This would happen often while Marie was at the grocery store. Dee, a small, light-skinned lady who drank a lot, wasn't the only one. Joe engaged in sexual affairs with several women in the neighborhood. My mother, Joyce, despised him for the cheating and his hostile actions towards her.

This set the tone for their relationship, and for the next several years, she would move in and out of the home on Ethel Street, sometimes renting a room, living with friends, and doing whatever was needed. This included, at times, shoplifting, auto theft, and other crimes to fend for herself.

When Joyce was thirteen years old, she met Fay, a married woman who lived on Ethel Street. Although this woman was twenty-five years old, my mother looked up

to her, and they became good friends. Years later, my mother bestowed the honor of this friend being the godmother of my brother and me. My mother went on to graduate from high school in January 1971 at the age of seventeen. This was a big deal for her family. Neither of her siblings or father had attained this accomplishment. Joe's company held his retirement reception the same day, so he refused to attend his daughter's graduation. When telling the story, I could hear the pain in my mother's voice as she recalled the memory of her father not attending her graduation. She later obtained employment with General Motors, working the brake shoes line for about three years.

In 1974, at the age of twenty, my mother went to a 4th of July cookout. The host was a friend of her coworkers. The host's father, Herbert, was also there. He and my mother drank, talked, and just really hit it off. He was recently separated from his second wife. His first wife died from a brain aneurysm. Herbert was twice my mother's age and had eight children, three of whom were within three years of my mother's age. Soon, they became a couple. Their relationship consisted of partying and drinking. My mother talked very fervently about him cooking her breakfast and special meals on many occasions. She talked about how great of a lover he was (*I didn't need to know that*).

Two months later, she was pregnant. She wouldn't discover she was pregnant until she was three-and-a-half months along because she was still having her monthly cycle. She recalls drinking alcohol and throwing up, and attempting to snort cocaine but getting sick. She finally

went to the doctor, and her pregnancy was confirmed. During her pregnancy, she was offered an ultrasound, still a new procedure, but she refused because of the fear it would hurt her baby.

The day she went into labor, her water broke because she was hit in the stomach by someone during a fight—an altercation between her and a female neighbor. A man she was romantically involved with prior to Herbert came to her apartment and threw a brick in her window because she had refused to be involved with him anymore. She ran to a neighbor's apartment, banging on her door and asking her to call the police for help. The neighbor responded with anger, punching her in her stomach. It wasn't until after waking up from a 5-day coma that my mother would come to know she had carried two babies. My brother, Ozell, was born just a few minutes before me, earning the title of oldest. My mother would often refer to me as her unexpected, because I was twin B, and she still does to this day.

Having twin babies wouldn't be the most pertinent event in my mother's life in 1975. She also had a pending court case for auto theft, so her father, Joe, put her out of the house. He allowed my brother and me to stay but later called child protective services, reporting my mother as an unfit parent and stating she was partying and using drugs. As a result, Ozell and I were placed into foster care at the age of six months.

According to my mother, a few months after losing her twin infants to foster care, she was at Joe's home on Ethel Street visiting her sister Marion and her two children, three-year-old Wesley and six-year-old Lovette.

They were all hanging out in the basement, and my aunt Marion was combing Lovette's hair. Joe arrived at the house and had verbal altercations with both of his daughters, calling them bitches and stating he wanted them to leave his house. At some point, Marion went upstairs, with Wesley following behind her. My grandfather followed as well. The altercation escalated, with Joe yelling and screaming at her to leave. My mother said she heard him say, "I am about to shoot this black bitch." She was still downstairs, scared and trying to console Lovette, stuck in a two-room basement without any way to escape. According to my mother, the last thing she heard her father say was, "Where the fuck is my gun?" She was still in the basement with her crying niece when she heard a gunshot and then Marion screaming. My mother says she ran up the stairs, looked at her sister, and then saw her father lying at the side door in a pool of blood. She said Marion handed her the gun and said, "I will help you get the twins." My mother then took the smoking gun — and the prison time.

This is my mother's version of the events of that day. Until the time I interviewed her for this project, I only knew what family members told me, that my mother killed my grandfather. My mother was found guilty of willful killing, meaning there was some intent, and racked up a gun charge. I am still not clear how the court proceedings went or if Marion actually said that my mother did the shooting, but there were three adults in the home at that time. My aunt died several years ago, so the only recent version I have is my mother's. Less than three months passed from the day of the killing to the day

of my mother's conviction. She was sentenced to five-to-fifteen years, including time for the gun charge and for having stolen a car.

Prior to this conviction, she was no stranger to the court system. She'd served ninety days in jail the previous year for an assault-and-battery conviction. According to her, the reason for the assault was a white woman calling her the N-word. She also served ninety days for possession of a stolen car. She served two-and-a-half years of her sentence in the Detroit House of Corrections (DeHoCo) and then was transferred to Huron Valley for her last year. While serving time, she worked in the kitchen as a cook and took pictures of prisoners and their families on visiting days. She was nicknamed "Kool-Aid" by the other inmates because of her reputation for always drinking the sugary, colored drink. While my mother was in prison, my godmother, Fay, would take my brother and me to visit her one or two times per month. Fay would pile us, the twins, and her two children, Ken and April, into her camper for a little over an hour trip to the prison. We were allowed two-hour visits consisting of us sitting on blankets and eating snacks from the vending machine.

During her prison time, my mother only had two fights; neither was initiated by her, so it didn't affect her time. She served less time than her sentence, which enabled her to spend the last days of her own biological mother's life with her. My grandmother Sissy was a severe diabetic who had complications from having her legs amputated. Sissy died one month after my mother got out of prison.