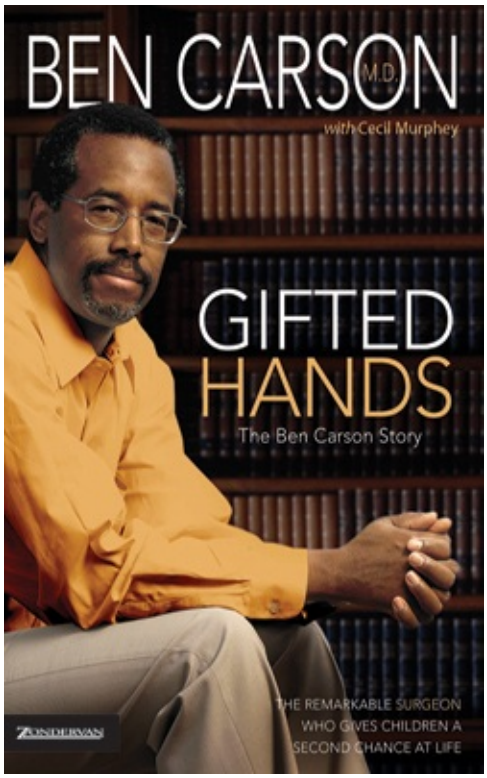
BEN CARSON M.D.
with Cecil Murphey
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The Ben Carson Story
THE REMARKABLE SURGEON WHO GIVES CHILDREN A SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE
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This book
is dedicated to my mother,
SONYA CARSON,
who basically sacrificed her life
to make certain that my brother and I
got a head start.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

“Goodbye, Daddy”

“And your daddy isn't going to live with us anymore.”

“Why not?” I asked again, choking back the tears. I just could not accept the strange finality of my mother's words. “I love my dad!”

“He loves you too, Bennie … but he has to go away. For good.”

“But why? I don't want him to go. I want him to stay here with us.”

“He's got to go—”

“Did I do something to make him want to leave us?”

“Oh, no, Bennie. Absolutely not. Your daddy loves you.”

I burst into tears. “Then make him come back.”

“I can't. I just can't.” Her strong arms held me close, trying to comfort me, to help me stop crying. Gradually my sobs died away, and I calmed down. But as soon as she loosened her hug and let me go, my questions started again.

“Your Daddy did—” Mother paused, and, young as I was, I knew she was trying to find the right words to make me understand what I didn't want to grasp. “Bennie, your daddy did some bad things. Real bad things.”

I swiped my hand across my eyes. “You can forgive him then. Don't let him go.”

“It's more than just forgiving him, Bennie—”

“But I want him to stay here with Curtis and me and you.”

Once again Mother tried to make me understand why Daddy was leaving, but her explanation didn't make a lot of sense to me at 8 years of age. Looking back, I don't know how much of the reason for my father's leaving sank into my understanding. Even what I grasped, I wanted to reject. My heart was broken because Mother said that my father was never coming home again. And I loved him.

Dad was affectionate. He was often away, but when he was home he'd hold me on his lap, happy to play with me whenever I wanted him to. He had great patience with me. I particularly liked to play with the veins on the back of his large hands, because they were so big. I'd push them down and watch them pop back up. “Look! They're back again!” I'd laugh, trying everything within the power of my small hands to make his veins stay down. Dad would sit quietly, letting me play as long as I wanted.

Sometimes he'd say, “Guess you're just not strong enough,” and I'd push even harder. Of course nothing worked, and I'd soon lose interest and play with something else.

Even though Mother said that Daddy had done some bad things, I couldn't think of my father as “bad,” because he'd always been good to my brother, Curtis, and me. Sometimes Dad brought us presents for no

special reason. “Thought you'd like this,” he'd say offhandedly, a twinkle in his dark eyes.

Many afternoons I'd pester my mother or watch the clock until I knew it was time for my dad to come home from work. Then I'd rush outside to wait for him. I'd watch until I saw him walking down our alley. “Daddy! Daddy!” I'd yell, running to meet him. He would scoop me into his arms and carry me into the house.

That stopped in 1959 when I was 8 years old and Daddy left home for good. To my young, hurting heart the future stretched out forever. I couldn't imagine a life without Daddy and didn't know if Curtis, my 10-year-old brother, or I would ever see him again.

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I don't know how long I continued the crying and questioning the day Daddy left; I only know it was the saddest day of my life. And my questions didn't stop with my tears. For weeks I pounded my mother with every possible argument my mind could conceive, trying to find some way to get her to make Daddy come back home.

“How can we get by without Daddy?”

“Why don't you want him to stay?”

“He'll be good. I know he will. Ask Daddy. He won't do bad things again.”

My pleading didn't make any difference. My parents had settled everything before they told Curtis and me.

“Mothers and fathers are supposed to stay together,” I persisted. “They're both supposed to be with their little boys.”

“Yes, Bennie, but sometimes it just doesn't work out right.”

“I still don't see why,” I said. I thought of all the things Dad did with us. For instance, on most Sundays, Dad would take Curtis and me for drives in the car. Usually we visited people, and we'd often stop by to see one family in particular. Daddy would talk with the grown-ups, while my brother and I played with the children. Only later did we learn the truth—my father had another “wife” and other children that we knew nothing about.

I don't know how my mother found out about his double life, for she never burdened Curtis and me with the problem. In fact, now that I'm an adult, my one complaint is that she went out of her way to protect us from knowing how bad things were. We were never allowed to share how deeply she hurt. But then, that was Mother's way of protecting us, thinking she was doing the right thing. And many years later I finally understood what she called his “betrayals with women and drugs.”

Long before Mother knew about the other family, I sensed things weren't right between my parents. My parents didn't argue; instead, my father just walked away. He had been leaving the house more and more and staying away longer and longer. I never knew why.

Yet when Mother told me “Your daddy isn't coming back,” those words broke my heart.

I didn't tell Mother, but every night when I went to bed I prayed, “Dear Lord, help Mother and Dad get back together again.” In my heart I just knew God would help them make up so we could be a happy family. I didn't want them to be apart, and I couldn't imagine facing the future without my father.

But Dad never came home again.

As the days and weeks passed, I learned we could get by without him. We were poorer then, and I could tell Mother worried, although she didn't say much to Curtis or me. As I grew wiser, and certainly by the time I was 11, I realized that the three of us were actually happier than we had been with Dad in the house.

We had peace. No periods of deathly silence filled the house. I no longer froze with fear or huddled in my room, wondering what was happening when Mother and Daddy didn't talk.

That's when I stopped praying for them to get back together. “It's better for them to stay split up,” I said to Curtis. “Isn't it?”

“Yeah, guess so,” he answered. And, like Mother, he didn't say much to me about his own feelings. But I think I knew that he too reluctantly realized that our situation was better without our father.

Trying to remember how I felt in those days after Dad left, I'm not aware of going through stages of anger and resentment. My mother says that the experience pushed Curtis and me into a lot of pain. I don't doubt that his leaving meant a terrible adjustment for both of us boys. Yet I still have no recollection beyond his initial leaving.

Maybe that's how I learned to handle my deep hurt—by forgetting.

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We just don't have the money, Bennie.”

In the months after Dad left, Curtis and I must have heard that statement a hundred times, and, of course, it was true. When we asked for toys or candy, as we'd done before, I soon learned to tell from the expression on Mother's face how deeply it hurt her to deny us. After a while I stopped asking for what I knew we couldn't have anyway.

In a few instances resentment flashed across my mother's face. Then she'd get very calm and explain to us boys that Dad loved us but wouldn't give her any money to support us. I vaguely recall a few times when Mother went to court, trying to get child support from him. Afterward, Dad would send money for a month or two—never the full amount—and he always had a legitimate excuse. “I can't give you all of it this time,” he'd say, “but I'll catch up. I promise.”

Dad never caught up. After a while Mother gave up trying to get any financial help from him.

I was aware that he wouldn't give her money, which made life harder on us. And in my childish love for a dad who had been kind and affectionate, I didn't hold it against him. But at the same time I couldn't understand how he could love us and not want to give us money for food.

One reason I didn't hold any grudges or harsh feelings toward Dad must have been that my mother seldom blamed him—at least not to us or in our hearing. I can hardly think of a time when she spoke against him.

More important than that fact, though, Mother managed to bring a sense of security to our three-member family. While I still missed Dad for a long time, I felt a sense of contentment being with just my mother and my brother because we really did have a happy family.

My mother, a young woman with hardly any education, came from a large family and had many things against her. Yet she pulled off a miracle in her own life, and helped in ours. I can still hear Mother's voice, no matter how bad things were, saying, “Bennie, we're going to be fine.” Those weren't empty words either, for she believed them. And because she believed them, Curtis and I believed them too, and they provided a comforting assurance for me.

Part of Mother's strength came from a deep-seated faith in God and perhaps just as much from her innate ability to inspire Curtis and me to know she meant every word she said. We knew we weren't rich; yet no matter how bad things got for us, we didn't worry about what we'd have to eat or where we'd live.

Our growing up without a father put a heavy burden on my mother. She didn't complain—at least not to us—and she didn't feel sorry for herself. She tried to carry the whole load, and somehow I understood what

she was doing. No matter how many hours she had to be away from us at work, I knew she was doing it for us. That dedication and sacrifice made a profound impression on my life.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “All that I am or ever hope to be, I owe to my mother.” I'm not sure I want to say it quite like that, but my mother, Sonya Carson, was the earliest, strongest, and most impacting force in my life.

It would be impossible to tell about my accomplishments without starting with my mother's influence. For me to tell my story means beginning with hers.

* Blood type changed for privacy.

* Curtis graduated from high school at the height of the war in Viet Nam. In those days the Selective Service used a lottery system to determine who should go into the military service. Curtis's low lottery number assured him that if he waited, the Army would draft him. After completing a year and a half of college, he decided to join the Navy. “I may as well get the branch of service that I want,” he said.

He got into a special program, and the Navy trained him to be a nuclear submarine operator. It was a six-year program (although he did not re-enlist after his four-year stint). He progressed quite well through the ranks and probably would have been at least a captain by now if he had stayed in. However, he decided to go back to college. Today Curtis is an engineer, and I'm still proud of my big brother.

* I made second lieutenant after only three semesters when it usually took at least four, and most ROTC cadets never reached that rank in six semesters.

* In the summer of 1988 Mrs. Whittley sent me a note that started out, “I wonder if you remember me.” I was touched and tickled. Of course I remembered her, as I would have remembered anyone who had been that helpful to me. She said she had seen me on television and read articles about me. She is now retired, living in the South, and she wanted to send me her congratulations.

I was delighted that she remembered me.

* It came as no surprise to me that during her senior year with the Yale Symphony Orchestra, Candy performed in the European premier of the modern opera Mass by the gifted Leonard Bernstein. She actually had a chance to meet him in Vienna.

* I still use the principle of this procedure, but I've done so many of these surgeries and gotten so experienced at finding the hole, I don't need to go through the steps. I know exactly where the foramen ovale is.

* Martin Goines is now an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat) at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore and the chief of the division.

* Lobectomy means actually taking out the frontal lobe, while lobotomy means just cutting some fibers.

* Commonly called Cat Scans for Computerized Tomography, a highly technical, sophisticated computer that allows the X-ray beams to focus at different levels.

† The Magnetic Resonance Imaging doesn't use X-rays but a magnet that excites the protons (microparticles), and the computer then gathers energy signals from these excited protons and transforms the protons into an image.

MRI gives a clear-cut, definite picture of substances inside by reflecting the image based on the excitation of the protons. For instance, protons will be excited in a different degree in water than in bones or muscles or blood.

All protons give off different signals, and the computer then translates them into an image.

* PET (Positron Emission Tomography) uses radioactive substances that can be metabolized by cells and gives off radioactive signals that can be picked up and translated. Just like the magnetic resonance imagery picks up electronic signals, this picks up radioactive signals and translates them into images.

* The position of senior registrar doesn't exist in America but lies somewhere between being a chief resident and a junior faculty member. The senior registrars run the service and work under the consultant. Following the British medical schools, Australia has what they call consultants, who are unquestionably the top men. Under this system, a doctor remains a senior registrar for many years.

A doctor can become a consultant only when the encumbent dies; the government has a fixed number of such positions.

Although they had only four consultants in Western Australia, these men were all extremely good, among the most talented surgeons I've ever seen. Each had his own area of expertise. I benefited from all their little tricks, and they aided me in developing my skills as a neurosurgeon.

† The salary was so attractive because I didn't have to pay exorbitant malpractice insurance. In Australia it was only S200 a year. I know a number of prominent physicians who pay $100,000 to $200,000 a year in America. The difference lies in the fact that in Australia relatively few malpractice cases arise. Australian law forbids lawyers to take malpractice cases on a contingency basis. People who want to sue have to take money from their own pockets. Consequently the only people who sue are those upon whom doctors have made the most terrible mistakes.

* My official title was Assistant Professor of Neurological Surgery, Direction, Division of Pediatric Neurosurgery, the Johns Hopkins University and Hospital.

* The procedure known as *hemispherectomy* was tried as long as 50 years ago by Dr. Walter Dandy, one of the first neurosurgeons at Johns Hopkins. The three biggest names in neurosurgical history are Harvey Cushing, Walter Dandy, and A. Earl Walker, who were, consecutively, the three people in charge of neurosurgery at Hopkins dating back to the late 1800s.

Dandy tried a hemispherectomy on a patient with a tumor, and the patient died. In the 1930s and 1940s a number of people started doing the hemispherectomy. However, the side effects and mortality associated with the surgery were so great that hemispherectomy quickly fell out of favor as a viable surgical option. In the late 1950s the hemispherectomy reemerged as a possible solution for *infantile hemiplegia* associated with seizures. Skilled neurosurgeons started doing the operation again because they now had the sophisticated help of EEGs, and it seemed in a lot of patients that all the abnormal electrical activity was coming from one part of the brain. Although the results of previous hemispherectomies had been poor, surgeons felt they could now do a better job with fewer side effects. So they tried and did at least 300 of the surgeries. But again, the morbidity and mortality turned out to be high. Many patients hemorrhaged to death in the operating room. Others developed hydrocephalus or were left with severe neurological damage and either died or were rendered physically nonfunctional.

In the 1940s, however, a Montreal doctor, Theodore Rasmussen, discovered something new about the rare disease that affected Maranda. He recognized that the disease was confined to one side of the brain, affecting primarily the opposite side of the body (since the left side of the body is controlled mainly by the right side of the brain, and vice versa). It still baffles doctors why the inflammation remains in one hemisphere of the brain and doesn't spread to the other side. Rasmussen, who had long believed that the hemispherectomy was a good procedure, continued to do them when virtually everyone else had stopped.

In 1985 when I first got interested in hemispherectomy, Dr Rasmussen was doing a diminishing number and recorded quite a few problems. I suggest two reasons for the high failure rate. First, the surgeons selected many inappropriate patients for the operation who, consequently, did not do well afterward. Second, the surgeons lacked competence or effective skills. Again the hemispherectomy

fell out of favor. Experts concluded that the operation was probably worse than the disease, so it was wiser and more humane to leave such procedures alone.

Even today no one knows the cause of this disease process, and experts have suggested possible causes: the result of a stroke, a congenital abnormality, a low-grade tumor, or the more common concept, a virus. Dr. John M. Freeman, the director of pediatric neurology at Hopkins, has said, “We're not even sure whether it's caused by a virus, although it leaves footprints like a virus.”

* This is not her real name.

* In 1988 Beth's parents reported to me that she has continued to improve. She was number one in her math class.

Beth has a slight left limp. In common with other hemispherectomies, she has limited peripheral vision on one side because the visual cortex is bilateral—the one side controls vision to the other side. For some reason vision doesn't seem to transfer. The limp has been there in every case.

* For the sake of privacy I have changed his name.

* See Genesis, chapter 22.

* What's ahead for Craig? We expect Craig to get back to his preoperative state. That means that he will be highly functional. As long as I've known him, he has been neurologically impaired. He has tremors, and he still has problems with swallowing that resulted from the devastating neurological effects of the second surgery, in which he almost died.

Unfortunately, Craig will probably have other tumors. But I think the odds of one recurring in the brain stem are small. He is currently working on an MA in pastoral counseling.

* Siamese twins occur once in every 70,000 to 100,000 births; twins joined at the head occur only once in 2 to 2.5 million births. Siamese twins received their name because of the birthplace (Siam) of Chang and Eng (1811–1874) whom P.T. Barnum exhibited across America and Europe.

Most cranio pagus Siamese twins die at birth or shortly afterward. So far as we know, not more than 50 attempts had previously been made to separate such twins. Of those, less than ten operations have resulted in two fully normal children. Aside from the skill of the operating surgeons, the success depends largely on how much and what kind of tissue the babies share. Occipital cranio pugus twins (such as the Binders) had never before been separated with both surviving.

Other Siamese twins joined at the hip or chest had been done successfully. Even so, when any two children are born with their bodies together, an attempt to separate them is an extremely delicate operation with chances of survival normally no greater than fifty-fifty. The twins share certain biosystems and, if damaged, would result in both their deaths.

* On March 6, 1982, Alex Haller and a 21-member Johns Hopkins medical team had performed a successful separation of twin girls born to Carol and Charles Selvaggio of Salisbury, Massachusetts, in a ten-hour operation. Emily and Francesca Selvaggio were joined from the chest to the upper abdomen, sharing an umbilical cord, skin, muscle, and rib cartilage. Haller's team had their major problem with intestinal obstructions.

* Benjamin and Patrick would have to make another 22 trips into the operating room for the complete closure of their scalps. While I did a few of the operations, Dufresne did most of them, including some fancy flaps to cover the back of Benjamin's head.