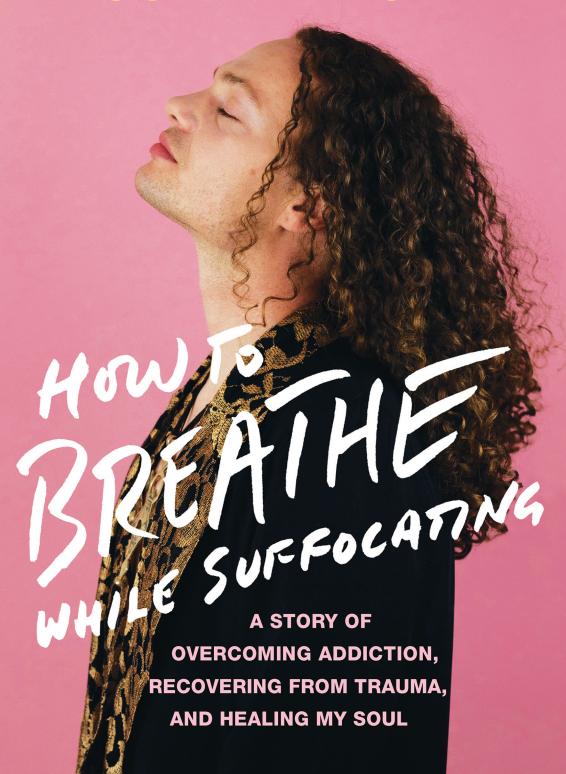
BRUCE W. BRACKETT



HOW TO BREATHE BREATING WHILE SUFFOCATING

BRUCE W. BRACKETT



A STORY OF
OVERCOMING ADDICTION,
RECOVERING FROM TRAUMA,
AND HEALING MY SOUL

WILEY

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Cover Design: Paul Mccarthy Cover Image: © Jenna Hokanson I would like to dedicate this book to you, the reader, in whatever journey you are facing. To the person who is still struggling with their mental health. To those still facing active addictions. To the one who feels lost in the chaos and darkness. Also to the ones who have bravely recovered. I deeply want you to know that you are loved, and are not alone. Keep moving forward, for so much good is coming your way.

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Preface

Have you ever felt like you don't fit the mold? Like an outsider who doesn't belong? Maybe you were bullied for being who you are. Perhaps you felt completely alone. If this sounds familiar, this book is for you.

Chances are that you or someone you know has been through addiction recovery. With eight billion people on the planet and a mind-boggling number afflicted, I can guarantee that you are not alone. This book is for you.

Has your life been shaken by trauma—physically, emotionally, spiritually? Mine has, and the reason I'm sharing my story is to connect with someone who needs it.

You will be meeting me in a very personal way over the coming chapters, so before we begin, let's be clear about who I am not. Though my name is Bruce Wayne Brackett, I am not Batman. I may share a touch of his notoriety (on social media, at least) and I aim to help people in distress. Unlike Batman, I do not have access to a thrilling array of gadgets to banish villains. That being said, we are all survivors. But unlike comic-book heroes, we face adversaries that are often hidden and hard to identify.

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I am also not a supernatural being or some expert in human nature. I cannot explain why bad things happen or why evil exists, and I don't give advice on dealing with harmful people. But I offer hope. I have experienced the beauty of creation and I invite you to take a broader view to see that self-transformation is possible. When something insurmountable occurs, it is important to face it and to keep moving forward.

Finally, I am not Shakespeare. I don't have some deep insight into emotion, behavior, or the collective human condition. I don't try to explain why we do the things we do, or why we have contradictory beliefs, or where our opinions come from. But I can tell you that it is better to be than not to be. You are here. You are breathing. You have the opportunity to banish negativity and to invite positivity into your daily life. You can make the choice to keep moving forward.

_ _ _

So who am I? I was a child born with my fate already sealed. From the perspective of the medical staff who delivered me, it might have made more sense to inscribe my name on a tombstone along with a birth certificate. Given my circumstances, and by all outward assumptions, I was doomed to be a nameless statistic, a hopeless case, quickly discarded and forgotten.

Despite the odds being stacked against me from the very beginning, I continue to conquer all doubt. With each day, and through ever-unfolding challenges, I keep getting up, I keep finding the courage to stand tall—I keep moving forward.

I have had many failures along the way. I believe that failures can be celebrated because they prove that we are *successful at trying!*

As someone who has been affected by many traumatic events, I find a great responsibility lying at my feet. There were so many moments *Preface* xi

when I could have given up, but instead I overcame them. Whether you are trying to overcome, trying to transform, or simply trying to pass through your unique challenges, I hope the message of this book's title resonates with you. Breathe. Keep moving forward!

I offer my story as a source of hope and inspiration, and I tell it with a great passion for you. Whether you are held back by trauma, mental health challenges, or addiction diseases that affect you or your loved ones, you can overcome, transform, and pass through the experience. Simply put, if I was able to, so can you!

All details and stories that you are about to read are true from my own recollection and the memories about me from others who were present at the time. Some names have been changed in order to protect and respect those who chose not to be identified. Everything else is real.

This story is not pretty or easy, and certain passages might trigger some readers. This is a recounting of my personal experience. Most importantly, this is not professional medical advice. If you are experiencing a mental health struggle, addiction, trauma-related issues, or a crisis or emergency, you should immediately reach out to a medical professional or emergency hotline. I have provided a listing of resources in the back of the book.

Your situation is unique. I encourage you to read at your own pace and to find things we have in common. This way, you can connect to the elements that will resonate most with you.

Breathe . . .

Keep moving forward.

It's going to be okay.

1

Born into It and Removed from It

Breathe. You can overcome the cards that you've been dealt.

Breathe. Just because some people let you down doesn't mean that all is lost. There are people who will be with you the entire way to love and support you.

Breathe. I know the weight of your situation might be unbearable without knowing the outcome of what is to be. That's okay; so much good is coming your way if you don't give up.

Breathe. Keep moving forward.

From the very beginning of my life, my mountains to climb were steep. As I was forming in the womb, I had already ingested drugs and alcohol, one of the many "crack babies," as they were known in the media at the time. I was born into a vast nameless social epidemic that was and continues to sweep the nation. Addiction and trauma

don't affect just the people who suffer directly, but also the myriad of individuals and professionals who deal with the repercussions.

I was just moments old when I was rushed into detox from the addictive substances that I never chose to ingest. Days into my journey on this earth, I survived a double hernia operation. So not only was I born in the Rockies with literal mountains before me, but I also faced metaphorical mountains, large and looming from the outset.

Before we start walking in the weeds of my rough beginnings, let's begin with an actual mountain memory from my childhood, one that would come several years after those harrowing first years, one that is alight in happiness and fondness. I was perhaps seven or eight when Glenn, the man I would later come to call my dad, decided to take me and my sister for a hike up Old Baldy mountain outside of a cattle country hamlet known as Twin Bridges, Montana. It was close to 10,000 feet high, in my young mind high enough to touch the sun. That day was filled with fun, excitement, and a palette of new scents and sights: the color of the trees and hidden mountain vistas, the smell of newly emerging foliage and blooms. But even here, as in so much of my life, hid unseen, lurking dangers.

We laughed our way to perhaps halfway up the trail when we were surprised by an unexpected encounter. A grizzly revealed himself from behind a nondescript tree. He was at once terrifying and thrilling to see, and promptly dealt with by Glenn, who had faced such dangers before. He knew what to do to get us through and allow us to keep moving up the path. While we were paralyzed with fear, uncertain and overwhelmed, he assuredly turned, faced the looming grizzly, and made a New Year's celebration's worth of noise to scare it away.

What followed that brush with unexpected danger (and Glenn's courageous, protective, fatherly actions) was the reward of more joyful

memories, more experiences to share. We kept moving forward, up the mountain. After the terror of the grizzly came a fragrant and gorgeous field of wildflowers and then a first for me: the exhilaration of reaching the summit of a mountain. From the summit, the view was majestic. I felt expansive and connected. The mountain no longer seemed impossible. The dangerous grizzlies, while still real and present, were not guaranteed to cause destruction, but were rather just part of this world around me. I could see them in the scale of what they were—big in the moment, but small in comparison to the larger journey, just one moment on the path.

At the top of Old Baldy, we found a pile of rocks where we could sit and rest. We were delighted to discover a forgotten glass jar that had taken up residence between several haphazard rocks. We freed the trapped jar, then wrote our names on scraps of paper and placed them within the jar before hiding it again under the rocks. Still the same jar, but now inscribed with our unique mark. It may still be there as a memento of our time at the mountaintop, or our names may have faded away, but we were there. We made it, and then we continued on.

Now, back to the metaphorical mountains of my early years. Being the only boy and having four older sisters, I would later discover that I was born into one of the worst reported cases of child abuse and neglect that the state of Montana had seen in the early 1990s. Beyond the trauma of that abuse, entering the world under the influence of drugs and alcohol would have a lingering presence that would affect every aspect of my experience for the rest of my life.

My earliest memory of my birth mother, Berna, is cloudy, much like the rings of smoke that perpetually surrounded her. I can remember being mesmerized by an orange glow that would rhythmically increase in intensity and brightness, then subside over and over again. She would breathe in and the tip of the stick in her mouth would grow brighter. She would breathe out and the intensity would retreat. On, off. On, off. She lay in bed and smoke swirled upward. Her cigarettes are my earliest recollection, along with an internal sense of curiosity and haze.

Gillette, Wyoming. March 3, 1991. As usual in the '90s, the month of March was a typically brisk, almost burning type of winter cold. There was snow on the ground and the city of Gillette remained in its quiet hustle. Snow is present for most of the year in that part of the Rocky Mountains. I wonder, on the day I was born, how my biological mother, Berna, might have felt about having yet another child, her fifth. While most of my early memories are of her neglect, there were instances where she showed she cared, in her very Berna way.

There is a snowy day I have been told of, where she put me in the front basket of a snowmobile and drove me through the hills. My sisters and I were playing outside and I fell headfirst off a railing into a snowbank. My sister April yelled for Berna, who came running and found a comical sight, nothing but legs sticking out of the drift and flailing about wildly. She wasted no time pulling me out of the snowbank. We all laughed together.

The mothering instincts were there in some basic form, and so I allow her some grace. Had her own upbringing been different, perhaps she could have been a great caregiver and an invested parent. But that is not her, nor how my story goes. It is not even worth wishing for because it isn't the past that exists.

We bounced around a lot in that first year of my life, likely due in part to Berna's flakiness, but perhaps also to what I imagine was a possible sense of desperation. Though that area of the country was experiencing a drought at the time, I suspect Berna was drowning in a flood of forgotten towns and places, a rotating door of male figures, a variety of jobs, and a healthy dose of freeloading.

We landed in Sheridan, Montana, a quiet town of about 1,000 people. It is nestled in the majestic Rocky Mountains of southwest Montana

in a gorgeous spot called Ruby Valley. The view holds its worth, its ruby treasure, which was not glittering red, but rather golden from the endless grass and hay that were present most of the year. Even though the earth was dry and dusty, the people who surrounded me were wet with liquor and the sweat of sexual encounters.

The Ruby Valley was overflowing with endless boredom and a stunning view of vast farmlands of wheat, corn, potatoes, and livestock. The treasure of the view contrasted with the ever-present smell of manure and, for my mother, infinite traps of drugs and alcohol.

Our small house was at the very entrance of the town, just off a main road. Despite the peeling paint, in my child's mind the house was massive and glorious. There was a decent-sized yard with trees and bushes, even a creek running alongside the property. The unkempt weeds and shrubs were part of the fun. I am told we played in the creek, unsupervised, quite a lot. Unlike the children of today's hawkeyed parents, my sisters and I were not so much trusted as left to our own dealings, with an expectation that we wouldn't drown.

The house was dark, with dark wood paneling and furniture, and curtains that were always sealed closed. I suspect the curtain fabric had started off white but had turned a dull urine-yellow from the endless cigarette smoke. The cancerous haze was so thick that even the paint on the walls had started to absorb the putrid tint.

The entryway led into the living room, which had a furnace for heat. All of the furniture was ancient hand-me-down pieces, a mishmash of brown upholstery and forgettable prints. The kitchen was tucked in a small room toward the front of the house off the living room. The cabinets were usually empty and the refrigerator usually had something rotten in it. Most of the time, a foul smell would emanate from it, reminding us not to expect nourishment. On occasion, we had plain turkey sandwiches; other times we had nothing. Some days, my four sisters and I would share a single uncooked ramen packet.

Our home was filthy and disorganized, with garbage and clothes thrown in such a way that a tornado might have improved things. We did not have a pet, but the neighbors' dogs would welcome themselves in to poop, which would fossilize over time.

It is not my intention to describe Berna as a villain or a monster. She was a human, like each and every one of us. Had she been born into different circumstances or made different choices, life could have been different for all of us.

Berna was a physically beautiful woman with a tremendous smile and huge personality. She was personable, quick to make friends and easy to get along with when her mental health was good. She was talented and artistic. Had she not turned to drugs as a coping mechanism—a route of escape from her abusive father and own traumatic upbringing—she might well have even been a good mother. But she failed to break the cycle of abuse.

She stood about five-foot-seven and was a bit overweight in a way that accentuated her female form. Her hair was chestnut, long and wavy when dried and brushed out, curly when left wet. She was always cloaked in the suffocating smell of smoke, and her cracked lips were festooned with an endless parade of cigarettes.

My sisters are all older. April, the oldest, was around six when I was born, and she had dirty-blonde hair and a reserved, caring way about her. Sammi was five, with dark brown hair and an uncontrolled energy. Quiet, innocent Megan was three or four, with chestnut-brown hair, like Berna. Almost two, little Sonia was always getting into something, and she had dark, russet-red hair. Then I came into the picture, fresh little Bruce, almost always napping on the floor like an afterthought. At almost one year old, I was recovering from surgery, in a blanket on the floor. I am told that I was often left on the floor for nap time,

even while I was also ill with chicken pox! A minor example in a larger pattern.

April, a small child herself, was the one really taking care of all of us. Not knowing much, but knowing that we were dirt poor, two of my sisters learned to steal bread and other odd food items from the local grocery store. We ate what we could, when we could. Malnourishment followed.

Berna didn't have the ability to adequately care for herself, let alone even one child. By the time she was in her mid-20s, she was a single mother to five young children, all with different fathers who were way out of the picture. Without the tools to cope, Berna became a very angry woman who turned to sex, drugs, and alcohol to deal with unresolved abuse and trauma from her own upbringing. The cycle had started to repeat.

Often, Berna would take a long, unannounced road trip with her friends, or go off with a boyfriend or even a complete stranger. She would abandon us at our grandparents' house for days, weeks, or months on end. We were once left for almost an entire year.

We mockingly called Berna's parents' house—our grandparents' home—the Pepto Pad, due to its markedly disturbing color. A trailer among trailers! Despite its creepily cheery exterior, the inside was entombed in even darker paneling than the house in Sheridan. By the time Berna was leaving us for long periods with them, my grandfather, who had abused her, had suffered a stroke. The experience had shaken him and he had changed his ways, so he didn't abuse us like he had Berna. As a consequence of the stroke, his speech was indecipherable, except on two occasions. During one of these, I managed to understand his garbling as "I love you." I said it back. Did I even know what that meant at that time?

My grandmother, a woman who clung fiercely to her religion, also said those words, but I was more interested in the copious supply of ice cream sandwiches she stashed in the freezer. She offered them to us regularly. I may have loved her back then. I definitely loved the ice cream sandwiches!

If Berna couldn't leave us with our grandparents, she would leave us with her friends or ex-boyfriends. That was almost never good. Once, while Berna was away, one of her "friends" agreed to "take care" of us. He locked one of my sisters inside a room with him. The situation was horrifying. We were terrified children, all under nine years old. One of my other sisters, desperately afraid, was brave enough to rattle the doorknob in hopes it would stop the man from his abuse.

The abuse would happen many times—to all of us.

When Berna happened to be home, she was oblivious, usually sleeping throughout the day because she was legitimately tired or simply hungover from the events of the night before. This left us unsupervised most of the time. We learned not to wake her unless it was truly an emergency. If we did, we got hit.

We would often be found by neighbors, naked, playing in the yard, in the creek, or frightfully, in the blind spot on the busy main road that passed just in front of the property line. On several occasions, strangers called the police reporting the naked children playing in the road. If Berna had to get involved, either because neighbors complained, the police stopped by, or one of us got hurt, Berna would beat us.

The beatings had a repetitiveness, if nothing else. Berna would usually beat the bare skin of our legs, backs, or bottoms with a familiar belt or stick. We also learned to watch out for a slap or good old-fashioned punch flying our way for unpredictable or inconsequential reasons.

One morning we were in the backyard during a rather nice and clear spring day. The dandelions that took over our yard were in full bloom, a sea of sunshine yellow. We meticulously picked through the abundance, selecting only the biggest, brightest, finest dandelions to create a gorgeous bouquet for our mother. We carefully took them inside, eager to surprise her. Our childhood intentions were pure and innocent. We simply wanted to give her something we thought was beautiful.

Berna threw them in the garbage, raging about how we had woken her up to give her weeds. She completely missed the meaning of that moment for us.

She always did.

Our relationship with Berna is a paradox. We were very scared of her, yet desperately hungry for her love and affection. We would cling to her in need, while cowering beneath her in fear, awaiting the back of her hand to meet our flesh if we complained of being hungry or because she accused us of being in the way or making a noise she found annoying.

When my sisters were old enough to attend school, they would primarily remain quiet and tend to themselves, when they managed to actually show up. My sisters definitely stood out amongst the other kids, but not for their achievements. Their hair was dirty and their skin was unclean. Their clothes and shoes were a battlefield of holes and they consistently smelled of urine. April acted as our surrogate mother. She made sure we had at least some clothing on, changed our diapers, and helped us with occasional baths.

April was doing all the parenting from the age of six onward.

Teachers at school noticed, almost immediately, that something was not right about our home life and started paying more attention. After far too many reports of minor incidents with peers at school, not being potty trained, and numerous times being caught stealing food, school officials filed a report and a social worker got involved.

The physical evidence was impossible to ignore: bruises covering our bodies, constantly messing ourselves, and always, always being hungry.

Despite this, officials gave Berna a chance to change her ways. She was to sober up, keep a job, improve our living conditions, and stop abusing and neglecting us. But she simply lacked the desire to make any changes.

Some people claim my grandmother made the final call to social services, although she disputed this, perhaps to spare Berna's feelings, or in grief or shame or denial. That call brought the social workers and police officers to the door of our little Sheridan house.

It started as a typical day for us: not enough food but sharing what we had. One of my sisters, who had been playing outside, came running inside saying, "The lady is here. The lady is here."

When Berna saw the social worker with the police officers, she knew that was it. They took her outside, and when she came back in, tears streamed down her face.

Her emotions were on display: sadness, heartbreak, grief, despair. It may have been for us. It may have been for herself. I would like to think it was a combination of both. I had never seen her cry before, and I have never seen it since.

Berna and the social worker began to collect our most essential things, telling us to grab what we wanted. I had virtually no possessions of my own, but I remember vividly running around the house looking for my Batman slippers. I wore them all the time. They had significance because they were mine and because I was