

Edie Hand

Daughter, Sister, Mother, Actress, Writer, and Entrepreneur

“When one door of happiness closes, another opens.
But often we look so long at the closed door that we
do not see the one that has been opened for us”

- Hellen Keller

My precious grandma, Alice Hood Hacker, was my mom’s mom. I always called her “Grandma Alice.” On her nightstand she kept her Sunday pearls draped over her Bible. I had no idea why anyone would keep their good pearls over their Bible out in the open. When I asked Grandma Alice about them, she said to me, “Edith, the word of the Bible is pure. I was taught that if I directed my pearls over the Bible that it would serve as a reminder that everything we needed was in that book. And that The Word was pure.” She and her sister, Minnie Mae, Elvis Presley’s grandmother, kept up the tradition of the pearls throughout their lives. And I am carrying on the legacy to this day.



Photo by Josh Fogel - joshfogel.com

Grandma Alice and my mother gave me my first strand of pearls along with the book *The Velveteen Rabbit*. They told me, “If you believe in something long enough, it can become real. Even if your pearls are faux, they can be real to you.” Their words and gifts encouraged my imagination. The story of the pearls, and a tea party now and then, created a strong connection between my Grandma Alice and me.

She always told me that I had the power to do hard things if I only had the will and the courage to push through my fears. She taught me about the rides in life, and that sometimes I would be on a road with mudholes and steep curves. But if I stayed focused, I could get around them and make it to the next road. As a child, I had neither an idea how much I would need these tools, nor just how rocky my road would be.

We were not wealthy but lived comfortably growing up in the community of Burnout, Alabama. I was the oldest of the five Blackburn kids. I had three younger brothers, and much later, a sister. My dad seemed to be working all the time. He was just trying to put food on the table and find success in one of his many businesses. My mother was often ill. We called it “bad nerves” back in those days. Today I know it was severe migraine headaches and depression, a condition not well understood at the time. And as a little girl, I could hardly understand. My Grandma Alice would comfort me. She told me, “Edith, your mother loves you but sometimes you have to walk away to get the full picture.” She had the love of a mother, and the commonsense wisdom to understand her daughter’s struggles and encourage her granddaughter.

My mother came from a big working family of twelve. She told me it was the responsibility of the older siblings to care for the younger ones. Not only that but my mother and her siblings had serious chores, picking cotton and milking cows before school. So, I just did what I was told. Mom was sweet in those younger years.

After we got off the school bus, she would have a glass of milk, hot sweet potatoes, and chocolate doodad cookies waiting for my three brothers and me. My mother was fun until her illness changed her. The boys and I were left to be creative with our time after homework. I grew up already being old. I don't remember much time at all just being a little girl.



My father was a mechanical engineer at the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). He would oversee the hauling of tile across the country on several trucks that he owned while managing a country grocery store that he also owned. He had no college degree but worked hard to provide for us. We had the first brick house in Burnout. It had a garage and a laundry room on 40 acres of spacious land. We had horses and riding became our favorite pastime.

My brothers—David, Terry, and Phillip Blackburn—and I would ride them across the pasture. We played Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Gene Autry, or whatever cowboy or cowgirl heroes we were emulating at the time. However, we usually ended up atop an ancient Indian burial mound in the pasture. We would be close enough to hear Rip Dip (Mom) call us to dinner but far enough away we could dream out loud.

As kids, my brothers and I would lay in the tall grass on the Indian mound. I would tell my brothers that one day I would be a famous writer and a movie star. They all would laugh big! David wanted to become a racecar driver. Phillip planned on pursuing music, becoming a singer and songwriter like our uncles and our cousin, Elvis. Terry was always the practical one, revealing his dreams of becoming a builder and architect. Little did I know these rides as kids would be my growing old years with them also.

Being a second mom to my brothers created a special love in me for them. I fully expected to grow old with them, watch them get married, have children, and see them achieve at least some of their lofty goals. God knew I would need all the grit that he had Grandma Alice instilled in me because that was not to be.

When I was a senior in college, David was a freshman in college night school. His day job was at Sunshine pet foods in Red Bay, Alabama. He was working while in school preparing to marry his high school sweetheart, Joanne Hamm.

One night David was planning on going to go see Joanne in her senior play. It had been a long day, so he called to see if I would go with him. I said, "I am so tired." With all of my responsibilities, I was just exhausted. That night David fell asleep at the wheel. He hit a culvert in front of a house. He died at Red Bay hospital in the arms of my Aunt Linda, a nurse, who just happened to be working that night. My mom said I should have been with him. She blamed me for not keeping him awake. I had all kinds of emotions. Grandma Alice was there by my side steadfastly offering comfort. She reminded me, "Sometimes you need to walk away from a difficult situation so that you can find time to grieve." Hard times are sometimes just that. I sure learned that early in life.

David was the first man I ever loved. Having helped raise him and sharing a house near Florence State, I had a bond with him in his short nineteen years. David's death forever changed me. I detached. It was my senior year, but I could not muster the will to finish school and graduate. I could not even talk to my professors. I was a wreck. I detached from life for months. I honestly don't even remember how many. Eventually, I moved forward and relocated to Birmingham to find a new life. Though I had moved, I had not moved on. Deep in my heart, I knew I had not grieved my brother's passing.

I took a position at the UAB Diabetes Clinic in Birmingham, worked at WVTM-TV as a community affairs coordinator, and performed in community theater under Director James Hatcher. I met Lincoln Hand during this season in my life. We dated for a year and were married in a huge ceremony at Shades Mountain Independent Church.

There was hardly any time for romance in college, so Lincoln was my first close male friend. I don't know if I was in love, but he was a man that loved me. He also had a wonderful family. Our families were very different. Mine was more of a working family and Lincoln's had more of a family life. I needed that love and affection. I did fall in love with Lincoln. He was a good man but very gruff. In the second year of marriage, I became very ill with cancer in my right kidney. After I had surgery removing the kidney, they saw I was not recovering well and discovered that I was pregnant. I had to have another surgery and lost the baby. They said we would not be able to have children. We were crushed. But a few years later I had a healthy baby boy, Lincoln Addison Hand.

When Linc was about three, ten years after my brother David passed, I got a call just after midnight that my second brother, Phillip, had died in a car wreck. He was twenty-three years old. This was a particularly bad wreck and they needed someone to identify the body. My mother and father were hysterical and could not go identify him. They asked me to go instead. I agreed to do it. Lincoln asked me if I was sure and offered to go with me. But I said, "No, please stay with Linc. I can do this." That was a mistake. No one should do that by herself. It is a memory burned into my mind. I will never forget it. Another letting go for me.

Soon, I was going back and forth from Alabama and New York, working as an actress on *As the World Turns* for CBS and special advertising projects. Working as much as I was created a wedge in our marriage. Lincoln and I were divorced when Linc was nine years old.

I applied to this season a lesson I learned from Grandma Alice. I needed to take a step back because it can be all too easy to criticize. After the divorce, Lincoln's family did not stay in my life. I did not know how much I would need that family and missed their good sides. I hadn't planned on not having them around anymore. Communication is a beautiful thing. It was a deep wound for me.

God blessed me with good friends in my life. An unexpected friend, and fellow University of North Alabama (UNA) alum, was George Lindsay. A client hired Hand n' Hand to film a commercial with my character, "Pearl," and George playing opposite as his famous character, Goober Pyle. George's good friend Sappo Black introduced us and the rest is history. We shared a sense of humor and I helped him found the George Lindsay Film Festival at UNA. It was a special season in life. I had many other friendships with other folks in the show biz world like Ben Speer of the famous Bill Gather gospel music gatherings and the legendary music publisher Buddy Killen.

I just did not plan on cancer again. I traveled this road alone this time, and it sure changed my attitude. I felt like George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. No matter how hard I worked every plan I had was completely derailed. I closed off and didn't tell anyone about my diagnosis. That was when I found out that my only surviving brother, Terry, had been diagnosed with a brain aneurysm. I snapped out of my darkness and refused to allow my brother to go through this illness alone. Again, I related to George Bailey when he realized that his value was not in what he accomplished but in how he impacted others. The caregiving began. It took away a new world of work and social life for me. Another hard road to travel.

My son Linc was in college at the University of North Alabama for a minute. Instead, he chose to move to Hollywood and test his entertainment skills studying theater and film out there. After twenty years, Linc is now an established and successful working actor. Only now he is married to a talented singer and songwriter, Victoria Renee. They have a home in Burbank, California. They are a continuation of the entertainment legacy of our legendary family.

Terry defied even his doctor's expectations and lived for seven more years. Terry taught me the most about courage. David taught me the most about laughter. And Phillip taught me to seize the moment because tomorrow is promised to no one.

The last ride with my brother is what inspired the song I wrote with the late great Buddy Killen. When I told Buddy the story about my brothers, he said, "We're going to write a song! Your brother's story is the most moving thing I have ever heard." I remembered one of Terry's last requests to me. "Will you tell the Blackburn boys' story? You tell such pretty stories, Edie." I told Buddy I was a storyteller, not a lyricist. Buddy explained, "Well, you put a storyteller and a lyricist together and we'll make a hit." He also told me that he would help me make the movie version of the story. Sadly, Buddy passed away before that dream could be realized. That does not mean that I won't still make this dream come true with a little help from my movie friends. We did produce his last album together. We wrote his last book, *A Country Music Christmas*, together. It included an album in the back with our song, *The Last Christmas Ride*, in it.

I was at Buddy's seventieth birthday party. Everyone who was anyone in country music was at that event. That's when I got the call that Terry was dying. I had promised him I would be there. I went over to Buddy and told him what was going on and that I had to leave. He was such a gracious host he told me to go and be with my family. In many ways, Buddy was like another brother to me. I so appreciated his guidance and patience.

Nashville was two hours away from home. When I got there, I went straight to my brother's bedroom and crawled into his big bed with my sister, Kim, sitting there, offering her continuing loving support even though her heart was breaking.

I held Terry in my arms telling him all the stories of when we were children riding up to the Indian mound and planning our lives. I told him that we were going to let the horses run. His son, David, ran down to the barn to let them out. As the gate opened, the night air was filled with the sound of horses running wild. I said, "Do you hear those horses?" He blinked twice softly. I said, "You're about to take a ride, but I can't go with you. You'll go to that river we've been to so many times as kids running wild and free. This time your horse is going to be white. It's going to have wings. And I know I'll meet you again." Tears streamed down Terry's face. He opened his eyes and looked at me. I said, "I will always love you." He blinked twice. The hospice nurse said, "The room is filling with some kind of mist." My brother looked straight at me, took one last breath, and as the mist left the room, his spirit departed.

I laid my last brother down on his bed. I went outside to the patio to sit and get some fresh air. As I sat there, I felt the touch of three sets of unseen hands on my shoulder and I knew that David, Phillip, and Terry were all together now, safe with their Lord and Savior.

Years later, as I worked on a documentary to honor my brothers and keep a promise to share a sister's love for the Blackburn boys, God gave me the true grit I needed to finally grieve for my brothers. Strength isn't always being tough. I mourned for a month. When I went to edit the documentary, I usually had to wear dark sunglasses. I cried a million tears.

We never know what hard things we may be called upon to do in our lives, or just how tenacious we may have to be just to get through them. In addition to tragically losing my brothers at such early ages and having to say a forever goodbye to others who meant so much to me—Grandma Alice, my mother, my father, Lincoln, and so many more—I have also had to face multiple times one of the most dreaded medical diagnoses there is cancer. These experiences taught me the lesson of perseverance.

The greater joys in my life today are my son and his wife, a renewed relationship with my sister Kim, and a wonderful relationship with her daughters and grandchildren. The joy that my grandnieces and grandnephew—Kyleigh, Beau, and Kadence—bring to me is indescribable. I get to share my love of horseback riding with them, I am their "movie buddy," and I get to see them enjoy their Mimi's farm. Sharing these things with my brothers and now getting to pass on these joys to my grandnieces and grandnephew, I see how God has brought my life full circle.

Like George, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, I realized that my destination in life was not what I had planned. This is my season to flourish and realize my purpose in life. I started like George on

a ride to a different destination but the horse I ended up getting on took me to the right destination after all.

When I look in the mirror today, I see that only when we love who God created us to be, and when we can love our neighbors just as they are, then we can love God. Now that I am old enough to live it, I am young enough to die.

That is one reason I am so proud to be able to bring stories of exceptional women to a wider audience as “women of true grit.” Those decades of owning an advertising agency prepared me for this uplifting project in my third act. My goal is not to exalt or glorify, but to show other women how these remarkable people did what they did and how they accomplished the things for which they are famous. Despite seemingly impossible challenges and obstacles, they persevered. These women are powerful role models, mentors, and examples of what can be done if we simply do not allow life’s rough patches to derail and defeat us. After all, these women’s stories and my story are your stories.

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