



FROM SUFFERING TO FULFILLMENT

RESILIENCE AND LIBERATION IN A BEAUTIFUL WORLD



by

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DEDICATION

To Gregg II, My Beloved Progeny,

In the intricate tapestry of existence, woven with moments of joy and enduring trials, you are my constant source of light. Born from unwavering love and fortified by unbreakable commitments, you shine like a guiding star, leading those who navigate the uncertain paths of skepticism and ambiguity. Tonight, as I sit in our cherished library, surrounded by the scent of aged manuscripts and well-worn leather, some bearing the marks of my pen, I bask in the warm glow of a Tiffany lamp, nestled in my comfortable, reclining chair.

This lamp, a guardian of wisdom passed down through generations, casts gentle light on the walls. Ethereal shadows dance on the time-worn tapestry below, imprinted with memories of your childhood adventures among the venerable books on our shelves. These fleeting shades, echoes of our joys and sorrows, magnify the brilliance of our triumphs, turning them into beacons on the map of our shared story.

This final manuscript, my last literary journey, transcends the boundaries of ink and parchment. It stands as a living tribute to our shared beliefs, dreams, and quests—a legacy for you to enrich and cherish. It's also a heartfelt offering to the Divine, a hymn of devotion, with each word resonating in harmony: celebrating the eternal teachings of our Sovereign, honoring the sacred bond we've nurtured through countless sacrifices, and illuminating your path to a radiant future.

You, my child, embody resilience—a tapestry woven with curiosity and unwavering vitality. Watching your growth has been like witnessing a rough gemstone evolve into its destined brilliance. Your unique perspective, the lens through which you interpret the world, serves not only as your guide but also as my muse.

In a love that defies description, akin to the holy relationship between the Divine and His Celestial Offspring, I dedicate this timeless chronicle to you. Our hearts beat in perfect harmony, an ineffable symphony of words.

Yet, one final prayer remains—a whispered plea to the heavens—that you, my child, may find eternal peace in the embrace of our King, a love surpassing even the depths of my earthly affection. Picture, if you will, our celestial gathering in a sunlit paradise beyond this life, where golden facades radiate unparalleled splendor. There, you'll find me, hands immersed in a basin of shimmering water, cleansing golden vessels until they reflect the day's first light. In that sacred moment, you'll fully understand your father—an imperfect vessel blessed with divine grace, always striving, yet forever aware that any goodness within me is merely a reflection of Supreme Love.

With boundless affection, transcending earthly boundaries,

Your Dad

INTRODUCTION

Are you ready to embark on a journey marked by profound adversity and extraordinary triumph? Welcome to a narrative where divine grace and human resilience intertwine, creating a tapestry of faith, love, and surprising turns.

Born into a world marred by abuse, neglect, and violence, my story is one of defying odds in both military and civilian life. But this tale is more than a testament to survival; it's a deep dive into how love and faith can light up the darkest paths. What gives these forces their strength? How can they elevate us, regardless of our circumstances?

My hardships were a crucible, teaching lessons so profound they seemed almost divine. In this journey, concepts like love and forgiveness transformed from mere words into life-altering gifts, shaped by the teachings of Jesus. Through these spiritual tools, I discovered that forgiveness isn't just an act—it's a gateway to renewal, capable of healing the deepest wounds.

In my toughest trials, compassion and empathy emerged, qualities often forged in adversity. These challenges, both burdensome and enriching, spurred a calling to make a difference. Was this the influence of Jesus, our ultimate exemplar?

Amidst sorrow and beauty, laughter and joy found their place. These weren't mere emotions but deep lessons, divine moments teaching me to find peace in turmoil.

At my life's core are achievements rooted in love, nurtured by human mentors and divine guidance alike. This love underpins my professional and personal milestones.

Despite my education and achievements, humility remains my guiding principle. It's a reminder that every individual I meet has unique wisdom and a story worthy of respect and attention.

Meet Sam, an ordinary pet who evolved into a symbol of unconditional love, his mere presence guiding me. Could such a companion be anything but divinely ordained?

Then there's the kitten, a small yet profound messenger in a life devoid of parental guidance, leading me toward spiritual enlightenment.

As we delve into this intricate tale, expect a fusion of divine and human elements. This story isn't just a recount of my journey; it's a demonstration of how love and faith can transform daunting challenges into a pursuit of wholeness.

Join us as we meet characters from human and animal realms, each embodying life's greatest lessons. They navigate challenges, undergo transformations, and reflect the intricate beauty of our existence. So, prepare yourself for a journey guided by the divine hand of Jesus, through life's complex yet enlightening paths, towards hope and fulfillment.

CHAPTER ONE

Perched beside a grime-streaked window in our weather-beaten Minnesota home, I clutched an aged locket—my sole inheritance and a symbol of an elusive hope. My eyes fixed on the fractured sidewalk outside, where weeds defiantly thrust through crevices. Anticipation and trepidation tightened their grip as I awaited my father's arrival. Would he storm through the battered entrance, brushing me aside with contempt? Or would he gently knock on the door, our gazes meeting through the soiled glass, a reluctant smile acknowledging his youngest son? Each passing minute amplified the drumbeat of my heart, holding onto the flicker of optimism that refused to die.

Partially concealed by moth-eaten curtains heavy with the suffocating scent of overcooked coffee, stale nicotine, and musty timber, my mother's voice cut through the atmosphere, "If that man is on his way here, the fires of Hell must surely be blazing close behind," she hissed, her voice dripping with scorn and weary surrender. At that moment, the term "damned" hung ominously in the air, adding complexity to my young understanding.

I am Gregg, forever overshadowed by my older brother, Carter—a twelve-year-old giant in both physical strength and emotional resilience. Elsewhere in our decrepit abode, our eight-year-old sister, Lynn,

likely sought refuge in a makeshift haven—a closet padded with frayed blankets—her stifled sobs barely audible.

Carter, a formidable presence with raven hair framing his round face, possessed eyes that echoed our father's merciless gaze. Standing there, fists clenched in unwavering defiance, he was a mirror image of Father, and his presence heralded the impending horrors that awaited us. My dread was so palpable that it felt as though I were swallowing shards of glass.

In contrast, I was slight and frail, hidden behind thick spectacles that magnified my emerald irises, flecked with glints of gold. Next to Carter, my delicate features and slouched posture accentuated my vulnerability, rendering me a fragile figurine in a gallery of steel statues. While Carter exuded stoicism, my anxious energy betrayed an internal struggle—a constant battle between a desperate yearning for approval and the inescapable burden of chronic inadequacy.

Carter was like a smoldering volcano, a volatile force ready to erupt. I longed to emulate his unwavering strength, to absorb even a fraction of his self-assuredness. In a world where the strong preyed on the weak, and elder siblings vacillated between saviors and tyrants, I felt woefully inadequate. My shortcomings were starkly illuminated in the unforgiving contrast—a reality I couldn't evade or reshape.

The locket in my palm became a dual symbol—an anchor tethering me to a harsh reality and a beacon guiding me toward fleeting dreams. As I clutched it, a glimmer of insight unfurled within me: If physical strength eluded me, perhaps I could nurture inner fortitude through hope and heart. This fleeting realization marked the beginning of an inner journey—a precarious odyssey filled with danger and transformative potential.

Our youngest sister, Lynn, affectionately called "Pug Nose" or simply "Pug," embodied fragile innocence. She was the punctuation mark in our mother's turbulent life, a touch of bitter irony considering that Mother had once contemplated naming her "Caboose" to signify her final maternal offering.

Lynn excelled at becoming a ghost, a delicate wraith seeking refuge in hidden corners—closets, under beds, or any nook that offered a semblance of safety. Her slender frame was surrounded by an unruly halo of ebony hair, her face a cherubic canvas crowned by captivating, almond-shaped emerald eyes.

Her emotions were transparent, displayed like a lit billboard. In moments of joy, her tiny mouth formed a perfect circle, tugging her button-like nose downward in an endearing dance, almost concealing it entirely. This movement unleashed a giggly cadence, revealing a row of small, jagged incisors reminiscent of a child's first drawings. Yet, in moments of anxiety or sadness, she retreated into the comforting folds of a frayed blanket, thumb in mouth—a ritualistic shield against nameless fears.

Standing beside Carter, our eyes scanned the desolate tableau of our driveway, a barren space framed by our crumbling home. Carter's posture grew restless, his cerulean eyes fixed intently on the window, each exhaled breath momentarily misting the cold glass in spectral halos.

"Dad's home!" Carter's announcement echoed like an unexpected firework, drawing our mother into the dimly lit living room. Her hair was slicked back, held in place by an ornate band that feigned sophistication, her lips adorned with a glaring shade of red—an armor she assembled solely for Father's sporadic visits. During his absences, such cosmetic veneers were neglected, as if grooming were a practice she engaged in only under duress. Unfortunately, this neglect had spread through our family like a contagious disease.

Jean Ada, the name of the woman who once radiated an exotic charm, now seemed like a distant echo from a bygone era. She was the last surviving elegance in a family of eleven siblings, a name that always struck me as befitting a movie star. I could easily imagine it emblazoned in neon lights on a Hollywood marquee: "Jean Ada, Live Tonight at the Brown Derby." Such a name, paired with her captivating beauty, seemed destined for the silver screen, a natural fit for a glamorous show performer or movie actress.

Mother had the potential to be anything she desired. She could have soared to the heights of earthly fame and celestial acclaim, achieving the dual pinnacle of being a devoted mother and wife while shining brightly in the spotlight. But that potential remained unfulfilled. In her youth, her beauty had the ethereal quality of a mystical American Indian, a magnetic charm often attributed to women from the North, their lives shrouded in the mystery of twilight hues.

Her story began in St. Paul, Minnesota, where her path fatefully intertwined with Father's. Those were the halcyon days, before the relentless grip of alcohol sapped her vitality and before she surrendered her spirit to a torturous cycle of self-destruction. Yet, despite the harsh toll of the years and her growing bitterness, my affection for her never waned. Even now, as I pen this book, I find myself missing her, longing for the glimpses of the movie star she once resembled, and the mother she could have been.

As she lingered in the dim light filtering through grimy windows, her appearance was pitifully transparent. A hint of blush attempted to combat the pallor that veiled her face like a shroud. Her tattered smock, once vibrant, now hung loosely over her skeletal frame, each rib an exclamation mark accentuating her sorrowful story. Stirrup pants, intended to flatter, sagged around her emaciated limbs. Her footwear was a testament to hardship and despair—tattered leather and bulging veins, a map of suffering.

She was a specter, cloaked in the remnants of her former glamour. She adorned her decline with the demeanor of a dethroned beauty queen, yet the overall effect was discordant—a poignant elegy embodied in physical form. I felt a surge of sympathy, tempered by the gnawing dread of Father's impending scrutiny. The once ethereal beauty of Mother had dissipated into a hardened core of unwavering tenacity.

Our perception of Mother resembled a cubist painting—fragmented, deconstructed, and refracted through prisms of intoxicated outbursts and whispered sibling dialogues. She operated on a narcissistic algorithm, her intentions hidden in an impenetrable mist, indecipherable even during the rare moments of

sobriety. We were trapped in the enigmatic labyrinth that was our mother, each encountering a futile venture into an unfathomable abyss with no discernible end.

At ten years old, I was a pawn in her capricious malevolence. Within the walls of our home—a place I associated with impending horrors—a frigid apprehension seeped into my very bones. Even with the knowledge that Carter and Lynn might be within earshot, their presence provided minimal comfort. My early indoctrination had instilled principles of silent endurance in my fledgling psyche—a stoic acceptance in the face of her unpredictable cruelty.

I vividly recall a solitary moment with Mother, the two of us in the bathroom. She sat by the tub, and I was submerged in the icy water, my body curled into a protective ball, as if physical proximity could shield me from the relentless cold. The chill seemed to pierce through my flesh and bones, sending searing pangs deep into my core.

With mechanical precision, Mother's hand moved, pouring a ladle of ice-cold water over my head. My teeth chattered uncontrollably, and I buried my forehead in my knees, desperately trying to suppress a scream that clawed at my vocal cords. Despite my efforts, a suppressed moan escaped a vulnerable note bearing the turmoil that churned within me.

Mother's trembling, tobacco-stained fingers closed around my slender neck, breaking the unspoken agreement of my stoic silence. Hot urine mingled with the icy water, a desperate but futile act of defiance against her suffocating grip. I thrashed like a marlin caught on a fisherman's hook, each convulsion a futile crescendo in a requiem of despair. Finally, her grip loosened. Air rushed back into my lungs, scorching my parched throat as if life itself were being restored. The impending darkness receded, leaving Mother as a fading specter on the fringes of my memory.

When I heard the door of my father's red Thunderbird slam shut, I braced myself for his arrival on the porch. His delay, just minutes after pulling in, likely meant one more cigarette, his nerves frayed, uncertain of what awaited him. Mother's volatility was legendary; anything could ignite her. Father, though far from perfect, often found himself navigating the treacherous terrain she created for all who crossed her path.

Father finally stepped in. Mother, a deliberate statue, stood in the living room's center, directly facing the door. She had positioned herself with precision, ensuring the first thing Father's eyes met, transitioning from the bright sunlight to the room's dimmer light, would be her unwavering stare. Her intention was unmistakable.

Mother's knack for manipulation and gaslighting was formidable, enough to unsettle the innocent and overwhelm the guilty. Her arsenal of cunning words, a sharp mind, and biting wit remained intact, even as her beauty and their love had withered.

Father, with a grunt, acknowledged Carter, who, with evident reluctance, approached for a hug that was just as grudgingly given.

Pug, in stark contrast, radiated joy, bounding into Father's arms with giggles and jubilant sounds, blissfully unaware of the undercurrents of tension. Then there was me, always the last, moving towards Father, embracing him tightly. My chest tightened, tears brimming, my love for him as profound as Mother's was complex.

The moment I hugged him, harboring a fleeting hope for a different outcome, Father uttered something that Mother took the wrong way.

Her demand cut through the air, "Give me some money for cigarettes and food for these kids." Father, barely masking his irritation, asked, "How much?"

"Twenty dollars," Mother declared with a smug, dismissive smile, "and matches, too."

Father's brief, fragile chuckle, like the last dying ember of a once-roaring fire, offered a fleeting glimpse of the familial warmth we so desperately craved. Yet, as swiftly as it appeared, hope was extinguished.

Father's laughter faltered, and Mother's smile vanished, leaving only the cold shadow of an inevitable storm. The air grew thick with unspoken accusations, casting them both as tragic figures, trapped in the roles they could no longer play. With a surge of anger, Father stormed out, leaving us not only without money for cigarettes, food, or matches but also bereft of the anchor his presence provided, however distant it may have been.

In the stillness that followed, Carter and I found solace in our shared tears—a silent, sacred communion of suffering. His gaze lingered on the space where Father had stood as if by sheer will, he could summon him back. "He's not coming back," I whispered, each word heavy with the finality of shattered dreams as if to break the spell of our last, fragile illusion.

"Damn you, Gregg," Carter muttered, his voice thick with the embers of anger, smoldering yet unwilling to ignite fully. I braced myself for the familiar violence that often followed such moments, but he remained motionless—a statue carved from the stone of suppressed dreams and unspoken sorrows.

Father's absences were a mystery, wrapped in the shroud of our collective silence. Whether he sought solace in the arms of a nameless lover or within the dim, alcohol-stained walls of the Alibi Tavern, the truth was a secret he would carry to his grave. And in the quiet corners of our hearts, we both understood this unspoken truth.

Despite the tumultuous relationship with Mother, Father occupied a place of reverence in my mind, a figure almost biblical in his stoicism. It wasn't merely his aloof demeanor or the impenetrable wall he erected around his emotions that commanded my respect; it was his indomitable spirit—an iron will that made giants of us all seem like mere shadows.

For all his emotional distance, he was a man of towering presence, a fortress of resilience that stood unyielding against the storms of life. As I stood bathed in the dying light of day, the world around me dimming into twilight, I felt dwarfed by the sheer force of his existence, as though he were some ancient oak, unbowed by time or the tempests that lashed against him.

The darkness deepened, and as twilight's veil descended over the world, an anonymous neighbor passed by, his figure a ghostly silhouette against the encroaching night. His steps echoed the melancholy rhythm of my own—a spectral dance in the tightening grip of alcohol's embrace. For a brief moment, our eyes met in the dim light, and a silent understanding passed between us, a wordless acknowledgment of shared suffering. "Looks like old Red's making his nightly pilgrimage to the corner shop for his Mad Dog," I observed, each word weighted with the bitter taste of recognition—an unspoken hymn to the relentless cycles of human frailty.

With a sudden intensity, Carter's focus shifted from the empty screen door. "Damn drunks...all of 'em, damned drunks," he spat out, his voice charged with the defiant energy of youthful rebellion. His words reverberated through the thick air, striking chords deep within me, resonating with the unvoiced grievances and silent battles that had been festering in my soul.

In that moment of profound clarity, I felt a wave of serene understanding wash over me as if the dormant seeds of resilience within us both had been suddenly awakened. United by this silent pact, forged in

the crucible of shared suffering, we were bound together—not by blood, but by the unyielding spirit that refused to be broken.

CHAPTER TWO

Our neighborhood was a forgotten enclave, decaying yet a refuge for those with modest means. It stood as a stark symbol of human hardship. Makeshift shacks and dilapidated apartment buildings dotted the landscape. Despite its bleak reputation, my siblings and I affectionately called it home, where at the heart of this challenging place lived our mother.

From my earliest memories, I took on the role of Mother's caregiver. I remained in the shadows, a silent and vigilant presence, always nearby but rarely noticed. Any intrusion into her space led to dire consequences, so I stayed hidden, attuned to her every move, ready to assist at a moment's notice. It was a heavy burden, a disturbing affection.

While Carter and Lynn were affected by their emotions, the scars of abuse left them marked in their ways. They developed strategies to distance themselves from Mother, strategies that eluded me. Even during Mother's furious outbursts, I found brief moments of relief, knowing she was unharmed when she finally slept, however briefly. Yet, I continued my vigilant watch, always checking on her. Each time I discovered her awake, a pang of disappointment gripped me, and I struggled to understand how my siblings could push thoughts of Mother aside with such ease. A simmering resentment began to take root, fueled by their indifference.

Lynn, introspective by nature, sought solace and guidance from our mother, the sole semblance of a parental figure left to us. Yet, her innocent yearning for love and support was met with indifference. Mother had little interest in embracing the role of a nurturer, callously dismissing Lynn's entreaties. In her way, Lynn yearned for stability and solace amid our chaotic world. She clung to Carter and me, her instincts attuned to the awaiting dangers, sensing that the true source of our impending doom resided within the very being meant to protect us—our mother.

In those fleeting moments when Carter's eyes met mine, an unspoken current of remorse passed between us. It was an understanding unvoiced, a shared weight we carried within our tender hearts. This silent exchange encapsulated the ceaseless struggle between life and death that defined our daily existence. Amidst the chaos, Lynn often became obscured, lost in the whirlwind. Carter would do his utmost to shield her from harm, but the limitations imposed by his circumstances sometimes hindered his ability to fulfill the paternal role she so desperately needed. As children thrust prematurely into adulthood's treacherous realm, we grappled with responsibilities far beyond our years, navigating this complex labyrinth without the guidance or tools we needed.

I shouldered the responsibility of caring for Lynn as best I could, striving to provide her with a semblance of protection and stability in the tumultuous environment we called home. In our world of scarcity, I shared whatever meager portions of food I could gather, stealing fleeting moments of relief in hidden corners. I attended to her needs as best I could, even addressing her bodily discomfort when she neglected her well-being, making do with whatever supplies I could scrounge from the bathroom cabinet. It was a feeble and undignified attempt at assuming a parental role in the fractured existence we were enmeshed in. Yet, in our earnest endeavors, we were confronted with the harsh reality—we were woefully

ill-equipped to offer Lynn the care and guidance she truly deserved. Our circumstances had turned us into children burdened by our wounds and traumas, grappling with the weight of relentless abuse and neglect.

The absence of our elder sisters, who had once provided a modest shield of protection, left us untethered in a hostile world, navigating the jagged edges of our broken home while clinging desperately to one another in search of solace and affection amidst the tempest.

Lauren, the eldest among my siblings and the oldest of my two stepsisters, was the first to move out. It made sense since, like the rest of us, she desperately needed to escape this insane asylum of sin. Back when our mother wasn't drinking much at all—a rarity I can count on one hand as an adult now since she's passed—Lauren had it relatively okay.

Mother had been married before but soon remarried Father after her divorce from her second husband. Father, being her third husband, came into the picture not long after her second divorce. You could say it all happened so fast that Mother was actively looking for a husband when my father came along, and he had no idea what was coming, like a train hitting him.

Mother used to speak of an incident involving Lauren. Lauren was dressed in a brand-new outfit, all pure white, with a pretty pinkish pillbox hat. Unfortunately, a passing bird left an unwelcome gift on the hat the same day she wore it for the first time. Lauren was so upset that she never wore the outfit again, even though the hat was professionally cleaned. That was typical of Lauren—difficult and never satisfied. A lot like Mother.

Lauren had married the first man who came along, someone she met in junior college. It was right after graduating from high school with honors. She enrolled in the local community college, and it didn't

take long for her to meet her future husband. Their connection was swift, and she moved out immediately after. I'm sure she was thinking about this even after their first date.

Her departure was just another instance of someone leaving my life in desperation. In her early twenties, she already looked much older than her age. She possessed a slim, tall frame, and it seemed as though she was always brooding about something. Unlike the rest of us, she didn't share the physical characteristics passed down from our common mother. Her hair was platinum blond, kept in a short, practical style. Her appearance was always in line with her meticulously clean clothes, and her unfriendly eyes had a way of making me feel frozen in place whenever she looked at me.

Jessica, the second oldest of my two stepsisters, possessed a pair of striking eyes, a distinctive shade of rich reddish-brown that accentuated their rounded shape and deepened their warm hue. Yet, when alcohol clouded her judgment, her eyes would mirror the vacant gaze of our mother, losing their allure. On certain occasions, she styled her hair in a way that bore an uncanny resemblance to Mother, a connection that felt both eerie and poignant. Alongside these traits, Jessica carried a streak of sharp temperament, yet a tender facet of her personality would occasionally surface. These moments, often accompanied by a few sips of wine, revealed her vulnerability. But as the alcohol continued to flow, irritability would replace tenderness, leading her to explode in anger over trivial matters. Despite the moments of fear she could evoke, my love for Jessica remained unwavering.

I vividly recall a moment from my childhood when I found myself choking on a jawbreaker while playing near our home. Panic surged as I struggled for breath, and in a desperate instinct, I sprinted back toward our house, my vision dimming. There, in our yard, stood Jessica, preparing to depart in her car. Little did I know that this ordinary day would become etched in my memory forever.

Everything changed in an instant as I approached her. I remember her swift reaction, her strong arms wrapping around me as she rushed me into the house and the kitchen. With remarkable composure, she cradled me over the sink, her skilled finger finding its way down my throat and expertly dislodging the candy that was obstructing my airway. As I coughed and fought to regain my breath, tears welled up in my eyes. Jessica held me close, my head resting against her shoulder. Her gentle rocking motion soothed my trembling form. Soft words of reassurance escaped her lips, 'It's okay, baby—it's okay.' At that very moment, loving someone like her felt as natural as breathing. Her presence and quick action had saved me from a terrifying ordeal, and the bond between us deepened in that precious moment of vulnerability.

Ashley, my sister six years my senior, fearlessly stepped in to protect me from Mother's abuse during her stays at home. Her defiance challenged Mother's twisted convictions, reaching a crescendo one fateful evening when Mother's intoxicated rage reached its climax, leading her to assault Ashley. In a stunning display of courage, Ashley seized a knife from the kitchen drawer and pressed it against Mother's throat. This marked the end of Mother's violent attacks against Ashley, and the very next day, Ashley left our home for good. Rebelliousness flowed through Ashley's veins as if it were her birthright to defy the oppressive forces around her. Her unwavering bravery both terrified me and left me in awe. I held a deep admiration for her strength and felt a profound love for her, often losing myself in reveries about her natural beauty. Her thick auburn hair cascaded straight past her shoulders, occasionally held in place by a simple headband. But her most enchanting feature was undoubtedly her eyes—sharp, glinting, and uniquely captivating—one green, the other blue. Her slender nose boasted perfect symmetry, and her mouth held a soft, doll-like quality with full lips. Although she was only sixteen, her youthful frame exuded the grace and poise of a fully grown woman.

Amid our tumultuous home life, Ashley's departure set her on a path that led her face-to-face with the challenges of motherhood. Despite Mother's vehement objections, Ashley displayed remarkable courage by choosing to carry her pregnancy to term and raise the child on her own. Alongside her boyfriend, Ron, they grappled with the weight of this decision alone, devoid of any parental guidance or support.

Mother's response, instead of empathy or understanding, was marked by cruel mockery, as she labeled Ashley a 'whore.' This reaction was twisted and ironic, considering Mother's history. In Mother's warped perspective, Ashley's pregnancy appeared as another act of defiance, as if Ashley intentionally sought to become pregnant to spite her.

The story of Ashley and Ron is profoundly heart-wrenching, a testament to the depths of despair within a world plagued by poverty and dysfunction. In the end, all stories seem to draw from pain and desperation.

Ashley found herself irresistibly drawn to Ron, a young Irishman radiating Celtic charm. Their whirlwind romance swiftly met with life's unpredictability: the advent of parenthood. Ron, towering over most, bore a striking resemblance to the ancient Irish oaks, standing tall and proud as if he had sprung from the very soil of his homeland. His fiery cascade of red hair mirrored the rich palette of autumn, a sight that had unquestionably ensnared Ashley's heart. His face, sculpted with sharp contours and complemented by a rugged jaw, whispered tales of inner resilience and unwavering resolve. And within the depths of his eyes, deep pools of mystery shimmered with a mischievous glint, as if privy to the world's most enchanting tales.

Beneath Ron's lean silhouette, hidden from the casual observer, lay a latent strength, evident in the well-defined cords of his muscles. This lean build spoke not only of athleticism but also of a grace that seemed innate to him. Always with a demeanor that balanced joviality with strength, Ron had a way of enveloping those he cared about in a comforting embrace. His choice of casual summer shorts and tees reflected his unpretentious nature, capturing an aura of relaxed simplicity.

Every movement Ron made seemed to flow with the rhythm of ancient Irish melodies, a testament to the innate elegance and tempo that defined his very essence. His magnetic aura was undeniable, ensnaring the attention and admiration of those fortunate enough to cross his path. His charisma, tempered with a touch of humility, acted as a beacon, drawing individuals to him much like a flame enticing moths. To me, his presence always evoked the same warmth and comfort I associated with my father. Ron, with his perfect amalgamation of charm and unpretentiousness, was undeniably a standout, imprinting lasting memories in the hearts of those who truly knew him.

Ron's approach to fatherhood stood in sharp contrast to what I had observed with my parents. He took to it instinctively, as if guided by an innate compass. This natural flair for parenthood wasn't merely visible; it left an indelible mark on all who observed him. Beyond being a devoted partner to a young Ashley and navigating the complexities of impending parenthood, his patience was nothing short of remarkable. Rare were the moments, if any, where I saw his temper fray. Instead, he radiated an ever-present joy, harmoniously blended with wisdom that brought tranquility, even amidst the stormiest of times. Given Ashley's spirited nature, which often bordered on tempestuousness, Ron's unwavering composure and understanding became all the more commendable.

As they navigated the unpredictable waters of their youth, Ashley became the living testament to Ron's deep and unwavering affection. With his adventurous spirit, he served as the perfect foil for Ashley's unrestrained, daring nature. The convergence of their paths was serendipitous, leading to the unexpected joy of parenthood. It was Ashley's wild and unfettered spirit that irresistibly drew Ron to her, igniting his soul with passion. Yet, love, in its ever-paradoxical nature, meant that the same spirit that enamored him also tested his patience to its limits. Ashley, with her spontaneous flare and fiery nature, often stood in stark contrast to Ron's tranquil demeanor. While she resisted any boundaries, Ron's steadfast nature ensured they weathered both highs and lows, striving for harmony in a relationship rife with passion and challenges.

Ron often set aside hours just to be with me, my brother, and my sister, nurturing bonds that still tug at my heartstrings. Among my most cherished memories are those carefree moments when he'd hoist me skyward, introducing me to the exhilarating sensation of "airplane rides." His method, though uncomplicated, felt enchanting. Grasping one wrist and one ankle, he'd twirl energetically, infusing every spin with pure joy.

Positioned on the patchy brown-green carpet of our backyard, I'd lie flat, eyes twinkling with anticipation. With a gentle touch, Ron would commence the ascent, turning gradually as he lifted me from the ground. It felt as though an invisible force tugged me outward, my small form taking flight with one hand outstretched like a wing. During these ethereal moments, I'd transform into a living airplane, my giggles echoing as I gleefully declared, 'I'm Flying!... I'm Flying!'

What truly set Ron apart in my memories was his extraordinary car, a 1961 Dodge Polara with a Push-Button Automatic transmission—a fusion of technical innovation and captivating design. This remarkable automobile, unlike any vehicle I had ever seen, left an indelible mark on my impressionable mind.

In the subsequent years, I felt compelled to research and uncover the specifics of this remarkable automobile, a testament to its enduring image in my memory. It was a car that spoke volumes about Ron's resourcefulness and resilience. Despite financial constraints, Ron embraced his Dodge Polara with a spirit of optimism and practicality that I deeply admired. While I had to endure old, rusty cars that I wouldn't even consider entering today, he infused his Dodge Polara with a sense of purpose and enthusiasm.

As I reminisced, I recalled the moments of me perched in the backseat, watching Ron adeptly manipulate those innovative controls. Beyond his skillful and safe driving, Ron's connection to this car ran deeper. It wasn't merely a mode of transportation; it was a symbol of his character. The Dodge Polara

mirrored his mature outlook on life, complemented by a deep wellspring of empathy that he carried with him, even behind the wheel.

In the context of Ron's life, this car transcended its role as a mere vehicle; it became a tangible representation of his ability to navigate challenges and make the best of what he had. It stood as a symbol of resilience and optimism, qualities that defined Ron's character as much as they defined his choice in automobiles.

Ron seemed to embody the very essence of characters from ancient Irish tales—a young man with wisdom and depth that transcended his years. His presence in my life was nothing short of extraordinary, and it left an indelible imprint on my heart, one that I will forever cherish in a rich tapestry of warm memories.

It wasn't until years later, during the rewriting process for the new edition of this new book, that I would reconnect with Ron after all these years while researching the real-life characters in my life and the books I had written about them. It was during this process that I stumbled upon a revelation that added a profound layer of understanding to Ron's character. My research unearthed a remarkable and poignant truth about Ron's past—a truth that both devastated and illuminated me. Ron had emerged from a very humble background, and at the tender age of sixteen, armed only with a high school education, he assumed the role of fatherhood. This revelation provided a crucial answer to a fundamental question that had long lingered in my mind: What had made Ron so wise and compassionate at such a young and seemingly naive age?

The revelation that Ron, too, emerged from an abusive and dysfunctional family, where he and his sister endured the horrors inflicted by their stepfather, adds a profound layer of understanding to his character. It became apparent that this poor young man was going through the same harrowing experiences that I had endured for years.

What is most remarkable is that you would never guess Ron came from the same family background as I did, given his unwavering commitment to kindness and integrity. His ability to rise above the cycle of abuse and dysfunction, choosing instead to lead a life marked by compassion and honor, is a testament to his indomitable spirit and the profound impact he had on those lucky enough to know him.

Ron's story serves as an inspirational reminder that one's upbringing does not define their character. Instead, it is the choices they make and the strength they summon in the face of adversity that truly shape their legacy. Ron's legacy is one of unwavering compassion, a testament to the power of the human spirit to transcend even the darkest of circumstances.

Ron's account of his tumultuous upbringing is a heartbreaking narrative of pain and resilience. Growing up in an uneducated and deeply dysfunctional household, he faced the torment of his stepfather's daily abuse, a relentless ordeal that finally forced him to flee the only home he had ever known. This escape, however, left his sister vulnerable to the same horrors – and worse, as she lacked the protection of her brother.

The revelation that Ron's mother either turned a blind eye to the abuse or was unaware of its extent underscores the profound dysfunction that enveloped his family. Her anger and abusive tendencies added to the toxic environment that Ron and his sister endured.

Ron's burden of guilt weighed heavily on his conscience, a constant reminder that he felt he hadn't done enough to protect my siblings and me. This burden spoke volumes about his empathetic and compassionate nature, qualities that defined him in remarkable ways. His empathy was nothing short of biblical in its proportions, a radiant quality that pierced through the darkness of his past.

His inner turmoil mirrored the depth of his empathy, a testament to his caring and selfless character. Ron's ability to feel the pain and suffering of others made him a beacon of hope in our troubled world.

Ron's boundless kindness and remarkable patience, particularly in his interactions with my mother, left an indelible mark on my heart. His unwavering commitment to my well-being, as well as that of my siblings, was a testament to his caring and selfless nature. He went above and beyond to ensure that our needs were met, often taking extra steps to provide comfort and support.

Whether it was ensuring there was food on the table or brightening our days with occasional treats from the store, Ron's consistent acts of kindness and generosity spoke volumes about the depth of his compassion. He embraced the role of a guardian angel in our lives, someone who appeared in our midst, seemingly sent by a higher power, to help us navigate the challenges and hardships that life presented.

The memories of Ron's caring gestures and his unwavering presence in my life serve as a powerful reminder of the impact that one person's kindness and selflessness can have on others. His role as a protector and provider, not just materially but also emotionally, is a testament to the profound difference that love, and compassion can make in the lives of those who are fortunate enough to experience it.

Madison, another sister who was two years younger than Ashley and four years older than me, followed suit by abruptly leaving our home to escape Mother's clutches. Her departure mirrored that of our older siblings, as she sought refuge from the toxic environment we were raised in. In one of their explosive confrontations, Madison hastily packed her belongings and made her escape. While my heart ached as I watched her leave, I understood that asking her to stay would have been unfair. Madison possessed a youthful beauty, often tying her long brown hair into a ponytail. Her petite frame was graced with subtle curves, and her laughter could light up a room. Her dark eyes held a spark of life, and her high cheekbones, reflecting her Native American heritage, added to her allure. She had a unique trait—slightly oversized ears that occasionally peeked through her hair. These pale ears contrasted starkly against her dark locks, making them stand out. Madison's hands, delicate and small, moved with a graceful fluidity reminiscent of a dancer.

I still remember the comforting sensation of her touch when she held me on her lap. Those memories of her gentle caress remained with me, a testament to the love and protection she once offered.

With our older sisters gone and Mother's reign of control unchallenged, our lives continued to deviate from the experiences of most children. However, even amid our struggles, we discovered a source of solace in the form of friendships with a few neighborhood kids. The Jacobson family, residing across the street, consisted of three children close to our age and gender.

In birth order, there was Louis, who, despite a severe speech impediment, possessed the most beautiful and caring of hearts. Then there was Kyle, my closest childhood friend, and the best friend I ever had. He was the same age as me; all three of the Jacobsons were about the same age as my two siblings and me. Lastly, there was the youngest, Susan, who became close friends with Lynn.

Despite the restrictions imposed by Mother's control and my need to stay close to her, those fleeting moments of childhood play with the Jacobsons were deeply craved and cherished. These friendships became beacons of light in our otherwise tumultuous lives, offering a much-needed escape from the chaos that engulfed our home. Although Mother's madness and my need to stay near her limited our interactions with the Jacobsons, the moments we spent with them provided a rare and precious sense of normalcy.

In those brief respites, I found a semblance of stability that was otherwise absent in my life. The joy in these interactions allowed me to momentarily detach from the constant vigilance required at home. These moments, however brief, fostered a budding resilience within me, helping me cope with the overwhelming stress of my everyday existence.

Yet, these cherished moments also highlighted the internal conflict I faced. While I longed for the freedom and joy that came with playing in a safe environment, I was acutely aware of the pull to stay close

to Mother. This tension could be seen as a manifestation of a complex attachment to her—a need to seek her proximity despite the suffocating control she exerted. It was as though I was torn between the desire for independence and the ingrained habit of clinging to what little familiarity I had, even if it was laced with fear and instability.

Engaging with the Jacobsons, even in these limited encounters, subtly shaped my social skills and emotional responses. The contrast between the chaos at home and the tranquility of these moments likely helped me develop a deeper understanding of what "normal" relationships could look like—relationships based on trust, playfulness, and mutual respect. However, the longing for these fleeting experiences also underscored a deep psychological yearning for consistency and safety, which I knew I could not find within the walls of my home.

As I navigated between these two worlds—the chaotic and the calm—I began to experience the early signs of an internal struggle. The security I sought in my mother's presence was constantly at odds with the freedom I tasted during those brief escapes. This dichotomy, as some might suggest, had the potential to sow seeds of confusion about where true safety and security lay, and whether I could ever fully trust in the stability of my relationships.

The school presented an entirely different challenge for us. While most children eagerly anticipated the start of the academic year, my siblings and I braced ourselves for another year of torment. Buried beneath layers of pain were the constant fear and dread of being subjected to the cruelty of our peers.

Our clothing consisted of hand-me-downs from Goodwill or the Salvation Army, never fitting quite right—always too big or too small. Our trousers were patched with remnants from previous owners, worn thin, and stretched to their limits. The fabric carried the scent of stale cigarettes and mothballs, a testament

to its wear and tear. We were walking embodiments of poverty, our unkempt hair and dirt-streaked faces further setting us apart.

Innocent interactions with other children sometimes left me with faint bruises on my skin. Mother, mindful of appearances, restricted her abuse to areas that could be concealed beneath clothing, avoiding visible regions on our arms and legs. The bluish tinge from her grip occasionally lingered, the remnants of her choking held. To mask these marks, Mother would apply flesh-toned makeup. I lived in constant fear of smudging and revealing the dark secrets hidden within our home.

We learned to blend into the background, actively avoiding attention, unable to fathom confessing our pain to a teacher. The fear of retaliation made it inconceivable to reveal the depth of Mother's cruelty. My struggles with bedwetting often left me with the lingering odor of urine, emanating from the damp yellow undergarments clinging to the fabric of my pants. Schoolchildren would point, laugh, and hold their noses as I walked by. My siblings and I became targets for relentless teasing, and our differences and poverty were mercilessly exploited.

In the cafeteria, I would sit facing away from the others, desperately trying to hide the free lunch provided by the state. Hungry and humiliated, I would quickly consume my food, my eyes filled with envy as other children traded snacks—a privilege beyond my reach. Well-intentioned lunch ladies would sometimes collect treats for me, unknowingly highlighting my differences and poverty.

Children would reluctantly offer me their pudding cups and sweet pies, providing a fleeting respite from the bitterness of shame. A colorful array of snacks lay before me, seemingly tempting, yet unable to erase the enduring taste of humiliation.

Pursuing academic excellence took a back seat to the daily struggle for survival. Countless school days were missed, and sometimes Mother's distorted perception blurred the line between seasons, convinced that it was summer when it was time for school. And we, in turn, chose the familiarity of Mother's presence

over the relentless bullying from our peers and the insurmountable challenges of coursework that lay beyond our grasp.

Due to factors beyond our control, we fell significantly behind in essential skills like reading, writing, and arithmetic. Even at the age of ten, simple tasks like telling time and tying my shoelaces eluded me. Desperate to compensate, I resorted to stealing other children's homework from their bags and lockers, painstakingly copying their assignments. Cheating on tests became a grim necessity—without it, failure was inevitable.

My entire life was a carefully constructed web of lies, each strand obscuring the haunting truths they were spun to hide. These lies weren't just falsehoods; they were my sacred scripture, my sanctuary. I venerated them as a devoted follower does a deity, for they were the armor that shielded me from the cruel realities that punctuated my existence.

The school bathroom, a place of cracked tiles and an acrid mix of bleach and teen angst became a hidden chapel where my silent sobs resonated against the confining walls. When those walls felt too close, I retreated to an isolated nook behind the school, shrouded by the heavy arms of ancient oak trees. There, my weeping would sometimes escalate into a physical agony so intense that blood burst from my nose, splattering my shirt in a gruesome palette of reds.

Whenever my mother's hand found my face, or when I caught a glimpse of her tawdry transactions with the faceless men who haunted our home, I found solace in lies. "She only hits me because she bears the blows of my father," I'd rationalize, stitching each word into the fragile quilt that protected my psyche. "Her liaisons are merely a symptom of her loneliness, exacerbated by our grinding poverty."

Even the simple joys of childhood—school events, field trips to museums, or Botanical Gardens—were cruelly out of reach for me. Mother saw no worth in such 'frivolities,' and our coffers were perennially

empty. So, while my classmates thrived in this microcosm of life's richer experiences, I remained an outsider, ensnared by financial limitations and a mother who held the key but never turned the lock.

Indoors, the classroom could be just as forbidding. I recall one agonizing episode when each child was given a pristine porcelain plate and a blank canvas filled with the riotous colors of markers: Royal Blue, Crimson Red, Emerald Green, and Onyx Black. The air buzzed with excitement as my classmates conjured their favorite TV characters and whimsical landscapes upon their plates. For them, each stroke was a testament to uninhibited creativity; for me, each moment was a tightening noose of isolation.

Despite the vibrant markers lying beside me, I was paralyzed by an anguish so profound that even lifting my hand was to try and move a mountain. The very implements of creation became symbols of my inability to break free, to express, to simply exist. An assistant teacher, sensing my struggle, sketched a small figure at the bottom of my plate—a minuscule depiction of Charles Schulz's 'Lucy' from Peanuts.

The next day unveiled the cruel irony of it all. Our plates had been fired in a kiln, the colors now permanently baked, each artwork a lasting testimony to the child who created it. When I saw mine, all that remained was that single, lone figure of Lucy—a stark symbol of my isolation and emotional paralysis.

The plates were more than just artifacts; they were mirrors reflecting the dissonance within me. They became permanent relics, the colors imbued in the porcelain as deeply as my traumas were etched in me. My classmates' vivid images showcased the myriad hues of their lives, while my near-empty plate was a silent scream, testifying to a life lived in the monochrome shades of sorrow.

In the end, that porcelain plate became both an artifact and a prophecy, a symbolic nexus where my internal conflicts, my incapacitating depression, and the unforgiving world outside converged. It was a moment where time seemed to slow, where every suppressed tear and hidden struggle coalesced into a

heavy, palpable tension, leaving me stranded at the crossroads between despair and the glimmering possibility of revelation.

The project's end goal loomed like a storm cloud: a Mother's Day gift. Panic seized me as I snatched the markers, scribbling a hastily conceived pastoral scene. Birds flitted through the sky, flowers bloomed in erratic sprays of color, and a kitten pranced near a humble abode—each stroke tinged with a desperate hope for approval. With tremulous fingers, I added the inscription, “Happy Mother's Day Mom, I Love YOU,” mangling almost every word except for "Mom" and "Love." Careful not to smudge my naive artwork, I handed over this tangible testament of my affection.

Hours later, Mother entered the living room, her grip tightening around the plate as if it were an object of treachery. The colors had smeared into an indistinguishable mess, and her eyes flared with rage as vibrant as the distorted hues. "Why does everything wipe off except this little girl's picture?" she hissed as if I had crafted a labyrinthine plot to deceive her. That was her immediate conclusion, a soul-crushing indicator of the yawning chasm between us. With a swift, cruel motion, she hurled the plate to the ground. It shattered each fragment a splinter of my broken hopes.

After she left the room, I collected the shards, as if gathering scattered pieces of my spirit. The debris went into the trash, a graveyard for broken dreams and misspent love. From then on, my despair deepened into an abyss so all-encompassing that my daily routine became a litany of tears and retching.

The porcelain plate, a microcosm of our fractured relationship, serves as a haunting reminder of the incongruity between intention and perception, between a child's longing for maternal love and a mother's inability to see past her twisted preconceptions. This was a seminal moment, one that galvanized my burgeoning understanding of the gulf between us—a fissure so profound it seemed almost elemental in its permanence. Each shard that met the waste bin carried with it a piece of my lingering hope for connection, leaving behind a heavier, darker form of emptiness.

This constant duality served as the stage for an internal conflict that raged within me—a war with skirmishes fought in the depths of my soul and the recesses of my mind, where a dormant epiphany awaited its moment to surface.

The rhythm of my life became a tragic ballad composed of moments of despair, punctuated by rare interludes when reality broke through my carefully constructed facades. The tension between my genuine self and the character I portrayed in this sad drama of life escalated day by day, each secret and each suppressed tear adding another layer of complexity to the unfolding plot.

I was adrift in a sea of deception, and the waves were growing larger, more menacing, by the day. But in the furthest recesses of my mind, I sensed the approach of a reckoning—a moment of revelation that would either shatter the illusions that held me or bind me to them forever.

With each passing year, lessons became more demanding, and classmates grew increasingly sadistic. Struggling to keep up, we became more fragmented with each grade, our knowledge stagnant and elusive. As each school year drew to a close, my siblings and I collectively breathed a sigh of relief, finding solace in the temporary escape from disgrace. It was a brief respite from feeling branded as stupid, a small relief from countless sleepless nights dreading the return to school. When summer finally arrived, it promised a chance for the shame of the school year to fade away.

During those precious summer months, I no longer had to hide my 'tics' from the cruel schoolchildren. These compulsions ranged from the constant need to expel saliva from my mouth to incessantly touching and re-touching objects. For about six months, I was consumed by a gnawing fear of dying from a heart attack. The fear had its origins in a film we watched at school, featuring a boy who shared my circumstances—parents embroiled in constant conflict, peers rejecting him, and an overwhelming sense of isolation.

In one poignant scene, the boy's parents argued, and later he approached his father, baseball glove in hand, asking him to play catch. His father's rejection struck a chord within me. The film reached its climax when the boy boarded a school bus, asked the driver to stop, and then stepped off. His voice, barely audible and filled with emptiness, echoed the depths of my own emotions. The bus came to a halt, and the boy exited. I caught a glimpse of his Converse high tops before his ankles gave way, and he collapsed silently. Tears filled my eyes as my anxiety intensified. The film fast-forwarded to a scene where a doctor informed the boy's parents that he had died of a broken heart. What struck me was the parents' apparent indifference as they sat apart, their hands unclasped. Their emotional detachment troubled me deeply.

From that day onward, a sense of impending doom took root in me. The boy from the film consumed my thoughts, gradually convincing me that his fate could be mine as well. Fear clung to me like a relentless shadow, and I awaited the moment when I, too, would succumb to a broken heart. To quell my anxiety, I sought constant reassurance that my heart still beat within me. So, I ran. Morning until night, feeling the rhythmic pounding resonate in my chest. Once the palpitations subsided, I would start running again. The worst moments were when I couldn't escape Mother's presence to run outside. In those instances, I would retreat to the bathroom or some hidden corner, pressing my hand against my chest, and focusing intensely until I could detect the faint pulse. It was pure agony, but I endured it, prioritizing Mother's presence over my well-being. The choice between Mother and myself was never a difficult one. Mother always came first.

Life had become a prolonged ordeal of agony and waiting, and hunger was now a constant companion. Food was a rarity, and Mother's authoritative declaration of "The kitchen is now closed" rendered it completely inaccessible. Even if we managed to find something in the kitchen, it would likely be

inedible due to age, mold, or the infestation of roaches. To survive, we resorted to theft from the corner store conveniently located at the end of our block.

The storekeeper, a bitter and rotund Hungarian man with piercing blue eyes that sparkled like blue fire, could easily see through the darkness. His nose bore the scars of past injuries, tilting slightly to the left and raising questions about its functionality. I often wondered how he managed to breathe through it. At first, stealing filled me with panic, freezing me in place and allowing the storekeeper to unleash a barrage of curses, dangerously close to catching me. But over time, I became adept at concealing stolen items under an old hat or within deep pockets, casually walking out of the store as if I owned the place. In winter, a large floppy coat served as a disguise, but such a ruse wouldn't work during the summer months.

Mother's frequent visits to the corner store were driven by her vices—alcohol and cigarettes. The storekeeper's cramped emporium held a chaotic assortment of items, a peculiar microcosm of necessities and desires. He seemed indifferent to the needs of his customers, willing to sell whatever was demanded, no questions asked. He even cashed paychecks and food stamps, circumventing the restrictions on using food stamps for alcohol or cigarettes. With the cash he provided, one could indulge their true desires. Meanwhile, my penchant for thievery persisted, and the storekeeper didn't seem inclined to banish me for the occasional pilfered snack. Perhaps he believed that the money Mother spent in his store outweighed the cost of the occasional missing treat.

Life continued its usual course, but there was one particular instance when I found myself pursued, not by the old Hungarian storekeeper, but by a bread delivery driver. On that fateful day, I didn't just pilfer a loaf; I managed to liberate an entire rack of bread from the back of his delivery truck. The memory of that day remains vivid—the sweet, industrial scent of the freshly tarred and lined parking lot etched in my mind. As soon as I made off with the bread rack, the driver's shouts echoed in my ears. I wasn't merely hungry; I was starved, and by the time I had crossed the street, he was gaining on me. Clutching the unwieldy rack, I

stumbled and dropped it, but he continued to pursue me relentlessly. I sprinted down the sidewalk, my sweat-soaked hair clinging to my scalp, pumping my arms with every ounce of strength. His labored breathing signaled his proximity, and his fingertips brushed the back of my shirt, causing me to release a piercing scream. A surge of newfound energy propelled me forward, leaving him far behind. I dared not glance back until I was almost at the field. The bread was soon snatched away by Carter and his band of hooligans, leaving me with no more than a slice.

The corner store served as a sinister lure for the addicted degenerates of our neighborhood. It boasted an impressive selection of food, but no one ever left that store with groceries. Instead, the usual purchases were alcohol, cigarettes, and, of course, matches. It was at this very corner store where fate intervened in the form of a nasty fall, causing me to tear open my right leg just above the knee. The culprit: sharp and broken clay piping known as 'Tile,' left scattered around the parking lot due to ongoing installation work.

The incident occurred during a seemingly harmless game of tag, and I was left with a deep gash so profound that it revealed the white, fibrous tendons within my muscle tissue. These tendons, tough and cord-like, connect muscles to bones, facilitating movement. Blood gushed profusely from the wound, intensifying the already excruciating pain. Desperation led me to fashion a makeshift tourniquet by tearing away the bottom half of my already ragged shirt.

With the bleeding slowly abating, I limped on my way home. Upon entering the house, I was relieved to find Mother absent from the living room. Swiftly, I made my way to the bathroom, where I resorted to home remedies and basic triage. Everything was grimy, including the ancient medicine bottles my sisters had bought long ago, now coated in a crusty buildup that resisted my efforts to open them. Even the bandages were nothing more than worn-out old T-shirts.

The next morning, as I stirred awake, I could sense trouble brewing. Walking was a daunting task, and my left leg throbbed in rhythm with my racing heart. A fever gripped me, accompanied by bouts of vomiting. Everything around me blurred into a hazy dreamlike state. One moment, I was at home, and the next, I found myself at the doctor's office. I couldn't fathom how one of my sisters or a neighbor had managed to get me there, but one thing was clear—Mother was conspicuously absent.

The doctor's expression hinted at concern, sending a shiver down my spine. He initiated a procedure that intensified my agony. First, a needle plunged into the heart of my wound, delivering a numbing agent. Then, with practiced hands, he massaged the surrounding tissue, coaxing out a vile concoction of green and yellow pus and infection. The sight nearly caused me to lose consciousness.

After this gruesome ordeal, my wound received meticulous cleaning and dressing. A shot of penicillin followed. My leg throbbed with pain, rendering me immobile. I had to be carried or pushed in a grocery basket during our shopping trips. Mother, who had accompanied me, offered only a curt declaration that I was "...stupid."

Before my leg had a chance to heal, Mother and I, for reasons only she comprehended, embarked on a drive. Despite her lack of a valid driver's license, we had a car with no insurance or functional blinkers and lights. Nevertheless, we ventured out on this unusual journey. What made it even stranger was her choice of vehicle—a worn-out station wagon with a rear-facing seat, a relic from the 1970s. These cars were popular family vehicles, often equipped with a third-row seat facing backward, providing additional seating for children.

Mother's attire for this occasion, in contrast to our usual haphazard clothing, puzzled me. However, I obeyed her directive to avoid wearing my nicer clothes. Despite her sobriety that morning, she appeared disoriented. It was just the two of us on this adventure, a temporary respite from my leg's constant pain. I

refrained from complaining, not wanting to disrupt this unexpected day trip. My leg continued to throb, but effective pain relief was a luxury we couldn't afford.

As we left our familiar driveway and ventured onto a main road, our speed remained modest. This road bordered houses on the left and small businesses on the right. To my surprise, I had never known this part of town existed; it was merely a five-minute drive from our home. My limited mobility had kept me from exploring the world outside, and this outing felt like a voyage of discovery.

Mother's face, however, turned pale as she drove, her lips moving as if attempting to form words. She veered the car slightly to the right, slowing down before coming to an abrupt halt. The sudden stop jolted me forward, causing my injured knee to collide painfully with the glove compartment.

Mother remained silent, stepping out of the vehicle, and walking toward an unfamiliar house. I was bewildered, watching her move slowly and unsteadily, balancing herself as she made her way to the porch, knocking on the door. A sense of impending doom stirred in me, a feeling that had plagued me since childhood. It was as if I had been conditioned to expect something dreadful because it invariably occurred. This time was no different.

My intuition proved correct once again. As I continued to watch Mother, her entire body stiffened, her head jerking violently backward, her face turning upward toward the sky. Then, she fell backward. I screamed, "NO!" and leaped from the car in panic, running in the wrong direction and ending up behind a fence. I scaled it quickly and knelt by her side, instinctively checking for injuries. The owner of the house swung open the door, and the smell of breakfast filled the air, making the situation even more surreal.

The police and ambulance arrived, and I found myself in the ambulance, en route to the hospital with Mother. By the time we reached the hospital, I had learned that her sobriety was the reason for this outing and her subsequent collapse. The doctor's first question was about her drinking habits. It was

strange, but it seemed related to her health issues when she didn't consume alcohol. What struck me as even more peculiar was that no one seemed to pay much attention to my injured knee.

Abandoned in the crowded hospital waiting room, I was engulfed by a sense of profound solitude until, after what seemed an eternity, Jessica appeared, nearly an hour and a half later. She navigated Mother's wheelchair through the throng of patients, and together, we embarked on a silent journey back home. Throughout the drive, Mother sat beside us, enveloped in her unreachable world, unresponsive to our presence. That day, it felt as though we had narrowly dodged a looming disaster.

In the midst of our family's tumultuous maze, however, there were fleeting moments of pure, unadulterated joy – stark in their contrast, almost otherworldly. Foremost among these were the times spent ice skating with my brother Carter. The fire station's ice rink, a bastion of winter splendor, became our refuge in the frostbitten landscape. It was there, gliding across the rink's mirror-like surface, that we found a profound sense of peace. Each movement on the ice was an act of liberation, a temporary escape from the relentless grip of our daily struggles. Beneath the benevolent gaze of the winter skies, this icy enclave served as our crucible, a place where the chaos of our lives was momentarily suspended, dissolving into the crisp, cold air.

These moments of joy were fleeting, mere blips in the overwhelming torrent of abuse and chaos that soon reclaimed my attention and dimmed my happiness. Even birthdays, those supposed milestones of childhood joy, became days I could neither look forward to nor allow myself to enjoy. In our home, they passed quietly, uncelebrated, and stark in their simplicity, devoid of the laughter and camaraderie that adorned other children's festivities. The idea of sleepovers was anathema, forever tainted by a past event that ended in a humiliating fiasco.

With little to anticipate, I clung to whatever brief bliss I could find, painfully aware of its transient nature. My heart, a repository of unspoken terrors, remained firmly locked behind the twin guardians of fear and shame, each secret confined to its solitary cell.

CHAPTER THREE

The day had unfolded in its usual manner of unpredictability and hidden tensions. Earlier, as Father made his unexpected return, the air in our home had thickened with unease. His rare visits were always fraught with an undercurrent of apprehension. Today was no different. He and Mother had plans to go out to the bar, leaving us kids to fend for ourselves once again. Before they left, Mother's instructions were terse and laden with warning, 'Find Lynn before I come home, or there will be hell to pay!' Her words echoed ominously in the empty halls of our house.

Lynn, ever the silent shadow in our tumultuous lives, took to hiding whenever the atmosphere at home grew too intense. Her hiding places were confined within the house – she was too scared to venture outside or into the basement. The rest of the house, including the old attic that even I found unnerving, was fair game for her. Mother's command hung heavily in the air as Carter and I set out to find Lynn, choosing first to search outside, against our better judgment. My experiences had taught me early on: that in our unpredictable world, it was best never to assume anything.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Carter and I sought refuge beneath the apple tree's gnarled branches in our backyard. A weathered crate, bearing the faded "SUNKIST" lettering, offered us seats, a

humble relic salvaged from a corner store dumpster. Behind Carter, amid the low-hanging branches, lay a carefully tended mound of earth, cradling the remnants of a life cut short. A makeshift cross, crafted from Popsicle sticks and kite string, marked the spot where Carter's Super-Sonic Slingshot had felled a bird—an accomplishment celebrated with a proud "double high five" from his younger brother.

I hastened my steps, eager to present this avian trophy to my skilled hunter of a brother. However, my excitement dwindled as I approached, witnessing the trembling form of the wounded creature. Its slow, deliberate movements seemed to choreograph a dance of suffering. I couldn't help but sense a silent plea in its beak, a yearning for release. Cradling the injured bird, Carter and I shared tears that mingled with the hues of its deep blue-black feathers. As it shuddered one final time, surrendering to eternal slumber, the weight of its undeniable finality settled upon us. Our morbid curiosity to disturb the grave was silenced by reason, urging us to let the bird rest.

Beneath the apple tree's serene embrace, where the fragrant fusion of apples and lilacs hung in the air, we sat as silent companions. Carter's subtle rocking on the weathered crate seemed to echo the rhythm of our shared thoughts, while I leaned against the sturdy trunk, drawing strength from the tree's unwavering presence. His gaze wandered through the narrow gap between the branches, witnessing the graceful ballet of fading light. Yet, amid this tranquility, my unwavering focus remained fixed upon him. In this momentary respite, we found solace from the tempests that ravaged our lives. However, an unsettling sensation gnawed at the depths of my being—an unyielding feeling that had persisted since the revelation of our family's truth. It remained within me, disquieting and relentless. I wondered if Carter, too, sensed the ominous weight of this undisclosed secret.

This truth, an insidious presence gradually infiltrating my subconscious, threatened to erode my sanity even more than Mother claimed it already had. The origin lay in Carter's act of taking that bird's life. Yes, his tears fell, but there was a deeper turmoil beneath the surface. He began exhibiting traits akin to

Mom and Dad, particularly during bouts of temper. Though the exact nature of this truth eluded me, its unsettling significance remained palpable. I understood that this secret was intertwined with the stirrings within me—a brewing anticipation of an ugly revelation that would haunt my existence until the day Jesus himself would descend to deliver me.

Carter rose from his seat, drawn to the crawl space—an enigmatic portal into the apple tree's sanctuary. Absently, he toyed with a string that dangled from his back pocket. My curiosity stirred, and I couldn't resist asking, my voice gentle with intrigue, "Hey, Carter, what's hanging from your pocket?" His fingers danced with the string, his gaze distant, before he casually responded, "Oh, nothing," tucking it back into his pocket. The string sparked recognition—a memory of similar strings in Father Burrows' Rectory at Saint Alexius Catholic Church, where we occasionally attended Sunday Mass. Father Burrows always carried an air of solemnity when he expounded upon the commandments inscribed on sacred stone tablets. I found myself wondering if Carter was aware of the transgression this string symbolized—a transgression against one of those divine laws. Could it push him to violence if he discovered it? These thoughts swirled as silence settled between us.

"That's all right," I reassured him, my voice maintaining a steady cadence. "I pray a lot."

Carter's response held a sharp edge, betraying his embarrassment. "That's because you're stupid," he retorted, his words landing with minimal impact, his shame coloring his retort.

Years ago, during a time when Mother's essence still held, she planted the apple tree and fragrant lilac bushes in our backyard. Those were the days before her descent into madness and before her grip was consumed by rage. In her once-intact Holy Spirit, she displayed a clarity of purpose, meticulously preparing for my birth into an environment dominated by a bitter Queen.

The cycle of abuse commenced immediately after my birth—a memory etched deeply within. As recounted by one of my elder sisters, Mother's attempt to feed me with scalding hot formula resulted in searing pain flooding my tiny mouth. Startled, she flung the bag across the room, hot milk splattering over both of us. My cries pierced the air, yet she attended to her wounds, leaving me to endure the agony alone. While fleeting moments of Mother's normalcy were sporadically remembered by my sisters, those recollections remained fragmented and unreliable.

Coldness and detachment characterized her demeanor until the day my father left—a turning point that propelled the escalation of physical abuse. The memory of that day, returning from school to Mother's hand striking my face, is etched as the "first hit." At four years old, I yearned to share my joy with Mother, seeking a loving embrace. But her whirlwind reaction delivered a blow, her obliviousness to my pure affection evident as she confronted my heartfelt drawing, created as an expression of love. It remains a heart-wrenching experience, eternally seared into my memory.

In our household, emotions were forbidden, permitted only within the hallowed walls of the church. On those rare occasions when I joined the neighbors for Sunday Mass, I found solace in the back pew, hidden from prying eyes, where I could finally release my suppressed emotions. In these sacred confines, Jesus emerged as a confidant who truly understood me—the one capable of bestowing peace. His presence soothed, akin to the calming sea He traversed. Amidst the turmoil, He remained my sole beacon of solace. However, this realization triggered a bewildering questioning of my sanity.

The brief respite Carter and I had taken underneath the apple tree was coming to an end. "Let's go inside," Carter said, breaking the silence and pulling us from our contemplation. We crossed beneath the extended aluminum awning at the rear of the house, seeking shelter. The rain pelted down like bullets, making the fragile metal supports tremble. I pressed my forehead against them, feeling the vibrations, while

Carter joked that lightning might strike and obliterate me. Our conversations were always filled with laughter in those early years, though even then, there were fleeting shadows in Carter's eyes, hints of storms yet to come.

Despite my futile protests, we eventually reached the back door. A brief glimmer of hope flickered within me as Carter hesitated, but his grip tightened, silently suggesting that we enter through the front door instead—to avoid the basement, a place stained with haunting memories. This decision, seemingly minor, unleashed a torrent of unwelcome memories. As the recollections of Mother's accidental tumbling descent down those darkened basement stairs surged, I was engulfed by fear. The image of her contorted figure, lying motionless, her dentures protruding half-in and half-out of her mouth, pierced my thoughts. I couldn't help but think about how painful it would be if she were awake. I knew I had to take her dentures out before she choked.

The captured expression on Mother's face remained indelibly imprinted in my memory. While I cannot recall the descent itself, I distinctly remember kneeling beside her, waiting for any sign of life. In that heart-stopping moment, I believed I had lost her forever. But miraculously, she emerged with bruises and discomfort, struck on the head but spared from serious harm. It was as if Jesus had interceded, His divine presence palpable. This experience, though seemingly a blessing, paradoxically deepened the spiritual turmoil within me.

As Carter and I embarked on our quest to find Lynn, my heart was a battlefield of conflicting emotions, all revolving around Jesus. It wasn't the Family Bible itself that stirred my deepest fears, but the words within—words that felt like the very breath of God. To me, the Bible was more than a mere collection of divine sayings; it was a vessel of true power, capable of invoking life or delivering death. My

understanding of God's wrath was vivid and visceral, overshadowing any notion of His love, which remained alien to me at that age. I feared Him, feared His punishment for any misstep I might make.

This fear was magnified by the dynamics within my family. My mother's portrayal of Jesus was anything but loving; her words painted a picture of a demanding, distant deity, quick to anger and slow to forgive. My father, on the other hand, seemed to live in a state of deliberate ignorance, avoiding any mention of Jesus as if the very name would bring about calamity. The few times Jesus's name did come up, it was met with a volcanic eruption of anger from my father and a cold, disdainful fury from my mother. She often claimed, with a mix of pride and bitterness, that my understanding of Jesus was shallow, lacking the depth of her perceptions. Her convictions were so strong that they sometimes manifested themselves in verbal assaults, with words meant to wound as deeply as any physical blow.

Yet, despite this maelstrom of fear and familial rejection, my thoughts about Jesus sparked a curiosity that fear alone couldn't quell. These feelings were in stark contrast to my feelings about my parents. Where thoughts of my mother and father brought a sense of resignation, thoughts of Jesus stirred a complex mix of fear, fascination, and an inexplicable yearning. It was a dichotomy that defied easy explanation, hinting at layers of belief and emotion yet to be untangled.

Nevertheless, despite Mother's disdain for Jesus, the family Bible remained untouched within our home. It occupied a space on a chipped coffee table, its legs hastily mended for stability. Adorning its cover was a depiction of Jesus at the tender age of twelve, engaged in a profound discussion with church leaders. An old white Bible, its presence radiated an indescribable power—a force that transcended mere enchantment and emanated pure love. It became my source of solace, a lifeline essential for my survival. Its unblemished presence within our house felt like a divine intervention—an enigma that persisted, impervious

to the violent conflicts that unfolded. Not a single droplet had marred its sacred pages. It lay there, exposed, and vulnerable, yet protected solely by the divine hand of God. Such is the power of Jesus.

Deep within me, I held a belief that I was akin to a germ, utterly inconsequential in the eyes of Jesus. I harbored a conviction that He despised me and that my destiny lay in the fiery depths of hell. Self-criticism became an ingrained habit, transcending circumstances, or the actions of others, as I perpetually placed myself at the nadir of worthiness.

Amidst the chaos of my existence, a profound confusion took root. Why would I matter to Jesus? Yet, deep in my heart, He held the utmost significance. He always had and always would. What bewildered me was that my response to this paradox wasn't one of anger but of sheer confusion.

Standing there, surrounded by the storm of our lives, I would whisper to my family members in a hushed voice, "Hey, I love you. Why are you so consumed by anger? Please, release this fury. I love you."

Those who lived a lie, casting their dark gazes and uttering spiteful words, or choosing a stony silence—I knew not which was worse.

As I journeyed through life, conscious decisions regarding Mother, other individuals, and the circumstances that surrounded me remained elusive. My actions were guided not by a conscious adherence to Jesus's will, but rather by an innate empathy and compassion that spontaneously emerged in response to the unfolding circumstances. It was a natural revelation of my authentic self, perhaps echoing a purpose I might one day embrace in the realm of Heaven, should I be blessed enough to arrive at its gates.

If I could travel back in time and address my boyhood self, there are several messages I would convey: Never let go of those you love, even when their love fails to find you in return. For hearts may

change, and you can be the beacon that awaits their transformation. Learn to trust, even in the face of deceit, and never succumb to the temptation of lies. When these deceivers finally shed their falsehoods, they will find solace in having you as their confidant, the one they seek guidance and support.

Commit yourself to a journey of healing and the pursuit of righteousness, entrusting Jesus with the burdens of your past through sincere repentance. This act of repentance transcends simple forgiveness; it embodies a profound transformation. It signifies a deliberate departure from past errors towards a life in harmony with divine teachings, inviting a heartfelt transformation and guidance from your Heavenly Father with unwavering care. Have faith in Jesus' ability to sculpt your future, wielding His wisdom to unveil and nurture your authentic self, fostering the emergence of an improved version of you.

Savor each delightful moment life presents and draw wisdom from the challenging ones, as these experiences lay the groundwork for a life abundant in joy. Elevate the importance of closeness and connection with your spouse, choosing meaningful interaction over trivial disputes, and aim to be a source of steadfast joy rather than pain. Embrace the essence of deep yearning and permit yourself to feel deeply, understanding that such openness does not weaken you. Above all, hold fast to the belief in endless possibilities within a world brimming with beauty and marvel.

In embracing repentance, we open ourselves to profound change, allowing divine guidance to mold us. This journey of transformation, guided by the care and trust in Jesus, leads to the revelation and nurturing of our true selves, promising a life enriched with joy, deeper connections, and an unwavering appreciation for the wonders around us.

As I reflect upon the enigma that shrouded my life, an unwavering conviction takes root within me—a conviction that this journey embodies "the very reason for my Eternal Salvation." It emerges as a guiding light, leading me down the arduous path of "forgiveness to be forgiven," the unwavering choice of "love over the abyss of hatred," and an unyielding commitment to "give selflessly, rather than grasp

selfishly." These transcendent principles have transcended the realm of mere learning, becoming an intrinsic part of my very being. They blossom as the Divine Fruits—love, joy, peace, forbearance (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—so eloquently articulated in the sacred verses of the Holy Bible (Galatians 5:22-23).

Yet, amidst the tapestry of these profound ideals, a haunting enigma persists—a question that has reverberated through the corridors of time: How could it be conceivable that, in the face of the darkest shadows, enduring harrowing abuse inflicted by my mother and others, I never harbored the flame of anger, never sought retaliation, and never allowed the seed of hatred to find purchase in the soil of my heart? Instead, I held my abusers close, their souls entwined with mine, cherishing them with a love that knew no bounds, and tending to their well-being with a devotion that transcended reason.

It was not a conscious decision, nor a calculated choice; it was an innate, profound, and wholly automatic response that surged from the deepest recesses of my soul.

My commitment remains unwavering, a pledge etched in the very fabric of my being—I shall never turn away anyone, regardless of the transgressions they may inflict upon me. This commitment endures, unwavering, to this very day.

My mother, in her moments of vulnerability, would pose a poignant question, her voice carrying the weight of a turbulent past, "Do you love me, Gregg?" Her voice oscillated between tenderness and the echoes of past pain. Yet, my response remained steadfast. With an enthusiasm that transcended circumstances, I would declare, "Yes!"

Even when Mother's inquiry was tinged with the bitterness of life's hardships, my response remained a constant refrain, though the joy it once conveyed dimmed in the shadow of life's trials. In those fleeting moments when anger momentarily gripped me, the ensuing remorse was profound. I would hasten to make

amends, offering stolen fruit pies as tokens of reconciliation, washing away grievances along with bicycle tires, or extending a simple handshake or embrace, each hug bearing the weight of unspoken emotions.

The question evolved, assuming different forms, yet it always circled back to its fundamental essence: Why, despite the tempestuous storms of abuse, did I never nurture the seed of hatred for my mother? Why did my love and understanding remain unwavering? This enigma became an enduring fascination, captivating my thoughts and emotions for years on end.

I embarked on an exhaustive exploration, delving into academic, religious, philosophical, and metaphorical realms, each avenue an attempt to unravel this perplexing conundrum. I repeatedly posed the same question to myself: How was I able to not only love my mother unconditionally, regardless of the trials she subjected me to, but also become her guardian, protector, provider, and confidant? How could I offer care, nourishment, clothing, bathing, and unwavering support, all while holding onto a love that defied all logic? And the answer, after countless hours of research and introspection, transcending all perspectives, remains singular—perhaps it was the divine presence, a whisper of grace from Jesus Himself.

Even when viewed through the pragmatic lens of life's trials, detached from the realm of faith, one cannot help but marvel. How could a mere human, especially a child bereft of parental guidance and mentorship, be thrust into the crucible of poverty amidst a backdrop of criminality, addiction, alcoholism, and abuse, surrounded by souls consumed by anger and violence, devoid of empathy or compassion—how could such a soul embark upon this extraordinary odyssey? The questions persist, an unending torrent threatening to overwhelm me until I surrender them to Jesus—a curious act that inexplicably soothes. It's akin to saying, "Here, take them, for You alone can bear their weight. Thank You."

My mother's departure from this world came when I was just 32, a tender age for such a profound loss. Her passing signified both a conclusion and an ongoing journey within the enigma that has always defined my life.

Upon deeper reflection, the truth that unfurls transcends the boundaries of human comprehension, exceeding all expectations. It is a tapestry woven with threads of awe and wonder, beyond the grasp of mere mortals. To aptly describe it, one can only invoke the word "Mystifying"; a word that encapsulates the very essence of Our Supreme King. As the age-old adage reverberates, and I utter it with profound reverence and unyielding sincerity, "It was all Him."

In the end, this journey has not only been about the unwavering commitment to forgiveness and love but also a testament to the unfathomable depth of the human spirit and the divine grace that guides it. It is a story that transcends the boundaries of time, a narrative that continues to unfold, reminding us that in the face of darkness, the light of love can shine brighter than we ever imagined.

I will never fully comprehend the depths of my mother's anger and bitterness. Yet, I continue to pray for the day when she will surrender to Jesus, shedding tears of remorse for the pain she inflicted. For in that moment, I know Jesus will envelop her in His loving embrace, bringing forth a transformation that transcends comprehension. It is a testament to the depths of my love for her that, despite all she has done, I remain blessed with the capacity to extend forgiveness. It is a testament to the power of a life anchored in Jesus—the life I strive to share with her. She was simply consumed by anger, nothing more. "That's all, Momma. Your anger consumed you, but if you surrender it to Jesus, it will dissipate, and we can become a family once more... Just let go of that anger." I hope that Mother, too, sensed the possibilities that lay within, and though my attempts to show her this truth were met with resistance and sadness, I held onto the

hope that one day she would comprehend. I find solace in prayer, wishes, and tears, but I have yet to embrace laughter and song with equal fervor.

As I delve into the profound concept of not just love, but 'unconditional love,' my heart and mind consistently journey to a cherished feline friend, a guiding light in my life's narrative. Sam, affectionately called Sambirdio in later chapters, personifies the boundless depths of love and the celestial connection that intertwined our destinies.

I met Sam during my childhood, a time brimming with self-discovery and wonder. His arrival in my life was no mere coincidence; it was a divine gift, a tangible symbol of grace. He entered my world as I was learning life's complex lessons, including the nine divine fruits of the spirit – virtues that stand out as beacons in a world often veiled in conflict.

Sam's appearance was a stroke of fate, a gentle push from destiny. On a day that seemed ordinary, its profound significance hidden, I found Sam. A delicate, newly-born kitten, he lay hidden, overshadowed by his siblings. His situation, if neglected, pointed to a bleak future – a destiny I resolved to change.

In that pivotal moment, looking at the abandoned runt, an unspoken empathy welled up inside me. He reflected on my vulnerabilities and my quiet struggles. He was more than a kitten; he was a mirror to my soul, an opportunity to give and receive limitless love. This encounter transcended mere chance; it was a divine calling, a necessity for my existence.

With a determination that surprised even Saffron, my neighbor, I announced, "He's mine," claiming the unnoticed kitten. This declaration signified the beginning of an extraordinary relationship, a bond crafted from empathy, destined to profoundly impact my life.

Recalling Sambirdio brings to mind a few unique habits I developed soon after witnessing the remarkable transformation of Sam's fur. Initially, he was adorned with a sparse and delicate coat, barely enough to shield his tiny, trembling frame. However, as the weeks passed, there was a striking change. His fur grew denser and softer, a luxurious mantle replacing the fine, short fur with which he was born. This physical evolution was not just a testament to his growth but also seemed to parallel the deepening of our bond.

As I embarked on the arduous journey of feeding him with an eye-dropper, I watched in awe as his fur started to thicken and soften. It remained short, yet its texture became fuzzy, almost like he was surrounded by a halo of static electricity. He looked incredibly endearing during this stage of his kittenhood.

But Sam's fur journey didn't stop there. It continued to evolve as his coat thickened, and I began to see the intricate patterns and tiger stripes forming. By the time he reached 12 weeks, Sam's fur had developed into a soft, velvety texture, and the color pattern became more pronounced and fixed. He had officially entered his 'kitten coat' phase, during which his fur became slightly scruffier before maturing into the sleek coat of an adult cat.

Now, about those quirky habits of mine. When Sam's stripes began to appear, I couldn't resist the urge to playfully interact with him. One peculiar habit involved me holding Sam in front of my face, planting kisses on his tiny head, and, quite amusingly, putting his whole head inside my mouth. When he pulled his head out, it was drenched in my saliva, and Sam's expression was a delightful mix of confusion and comical surprise. Oddly enough, he didn't seem to mind my antics.

Another eccentric habit was my knack for placing Sam on top of my head, sometimes holding onto him, and sometimes letting him perch there independently. Yet, to my amazement, Sam never lost his balance, never slid off, and never attempted to escape. I would proudly stroll about with Sam as my living hat, a truly unusual sight for anyone who happened to witness it.

Amidst the chaos and the nomadic life, we endured during those tumultuous years, there exists one precious memento that defied the odds – a family photograph. This particular photograph captured me holding Sam upon my head, displaying our natural state of affection. It was captured within the humble confines of our living room, and despite our best efforts, our attire bore witness to the constraints of our limited means. Those garments, rescued from the shelves of The Salvation Army or Goodwill, were far from the finest, but in that poignant moment, they became symbols of resilience.

This solitary family photograph captures an ephemeral illusion of unity. At a glance, we seem a tightly-knit group in a rare moment of togetherness. However, under this veneer, a more disturbing story unfolds, a testament to the truth that 'Things are Never What They Seem.' The room, with its modest decor, suggests warmth and comfort, while subtly revealing our lower-middle-class background. A lamp on the right side bathes the scene in a soft, warm light, adding to the ambiance.

On the left is Carter, my brother, older by two years, than our father, masking his discontent with a pretense of satisfaction. Next to him stands our mother, her face marked by a stark, unyielding hardness. Jessica, the younger of our two step-sisters from Mother's second marriage, follows in line. Lauren, the elder step-sister, is notably absent. She had exited our lives long before this photo's moment was frozen in time. Mother seldom mentioned her first husband, as if by ignoring his memory, she could erase the regret that haunted her—a regret stemming from losing the life she once had, epitomized by her days as a high school prom queen, a symbol of lost beauty and promise.

This reluctance to confront the past seems to permeate our family's interactions. Our communication, often loud and angry, seems a defense mechanism, a way to push others away and avoid the painful truths of our existence. In my eyes, it reflects a deeper, more painful truth: for my family, and perhaps others like us, love is a challenge, a complex emotion fraught with vulnerability, while anger is a

simpler, more accessible response. It's a sad realization that love, in its truest form, is overshadowed by the ease of harboring resentment and bitterness.

The identity of the photographer remains shrouded in mystery. With its sepia tones, the photograph encapsulates a peculiar, almost artificial moment—a memory that strikes me as forced and disquieting. Though we are physically close, the discernible emotional distance between us speaks volumes of bonds that never truly formed. It offers a nostalgic yet unsettling view into an era, starkly contrasting with the often idealized recollections of the past.

In the photograph, following Carter, my father, mother, and Jessica, are Ashley and Madison, adding to the familial tableau. In the forefront, there's me, with my beloved tiger kitty, Sambirdio, perched on my head. Despite the turmoil within, I always managed to project an image of love, joy, compassion, and even happiness. But a closer inspection of my eyes would reveal a struggle with deep, internalized anguish. The portrait concludes with Lynn, the youngest sister, her expression one of innocent naivety, blissfully unaware of the challenges that lay ahead.

Years later, as I focused intently on that photograph, it seemed as if I could briefly summon the illusion that everything would eventually find its rightful place—a mirage skillfully woven within the private sanctuary of my thoughts. The image, capturing that fleeting instance, remains a cherished memory, eternally preserved within the depths of my heart.

But if you were to peer closer at our faces in that frame, you'd discover depths hidden beneath the surface. Observe closely, and you'll see that our expressions are a delicate dance between concealing our sorrows and painting on smiles. My true happiness only surfaces when Sam is by my side. And then, there's Mother's face; it's not merely sadness or unhappiness that resides there but a simmering anger, forever lurking beneath her composed exterior. I vividly recall how her mood spiraled out of control on that fateful day when nothing seemed to align with her desires. In those moments, we, her family, bore the brunt of her

inner tempest. It sends a shiver down my spine and instills a profound fear when people fail to see the truth concealed beneath our carefully crafted veneers.

Frequently, when others gaze upon this photograph, their initial response is, 'Oh, what a sweet picture! Look how happy everyone is!' But life's complexities often belie the surface, for I've come to realize that things are seldom as they appear. Reality tends to conform to people's desires, not necessarily to what truly lies beneath.

We had no choice but to feign happiness, for deviating from this facade would inevitably unleash Mother's wrath upon us.

What deepens the significance of this image is that it serves as the only photograph of Sam and me together, symbolizing the unique connection we had. It's also the only family portrait we ever took, serving as a powerful emblem of the singular path we journeyed together.

Throughout my life, Mother's reaction mirrored that of my siblings then and now whenever I attempted to broach the subject of Jesus. Their responses ranged from complete disregard to labeling me as insane or witnessing their sanity crumble before my eyes. Yet, I understand the underlying reason none of my siblings would engage in discussions about Jesus with me—it echoes the same reason why the mention of Jesus elicits discomfort from individuals at large. It is during their moments of sin that they shy away from conversations centered around the one compelling reason to desist. And indeed, it is a reason that carries with it a sense of foreboding.

When I first encountered Jesus, an overwhelming surge of joy and relief flooded my being. He emerged as my beacon of hope, the avenue of escape from the hellish reality that surrounded me. Yet, this profound sense of relief also bore an uncanny sense of familiarity, as if He had been with me since before

my very existence. My heart cataloged an emotion, etching into its fabric the experiences and lessons garnered from that initial encounter. When it came to Jesus, the essence of my being echoed the recurrent rendezvous with the most extraordinary being in the universe.

Life would be far from perfect—fraught with challenges and tribulations that could shake the very core of my being. Yet, amidst the storms that raged around me, I found solace in the simple, unwavering act of clinging to Jesus. The beauty of it all lay in the profound certainty that, when I cast my eyes downward, I would witness His omnipotent hand firmly supporting me, guiding me through the darkest of nights.

I existed beneath His divine power, and in moments of purity and righteousness, it was the most transcendent sensation in the world. The warmth of His presence enveloped me, and I felt invincible, shielded from the trials and tribulations that sought to break me. But, in those agonizing moments when sin-stained my existence, it transformed into torment, a relentless battle within my soul that tested my faith and resolve. The dichotomy between purity and sin, between the embrace of divine grace and the burden of transgression, was a constant struggle, shaping the very essence of my existence.

CHAPTER FOUR

As darkness enveloped us, and with each corner explored and hope fading, the memory of our parents leaving for what seemed an ordinary night out at the bar came rushing back, tinged with a newfound sense of abandonment. Only hours ago, their departure had unwittingly laid the groundwork for the turmoil that ensued—Lynn's vanishing and our desperate search. This realization kindled a brief, fervent wish for their presence, to guide us rather than leave us adrift in this tempest of fear and uncertainty. The quiet of the night, as we made our way back to the now seemingly hollower house, signified not just the end of our search but also the stark beginning of a deeper comprehension of their absence.

"Watch out for broken glass," Carter whispered urgently; visible concern etching lines on his face.

"You're not wearing any shoes."

Had I been more attentive, I would have noticed the remnants of shattered glass, and the marks left behind by whiskey and wine bottles hurled against the house by our mother. The foundation, strewn with fragments of glass, shimmered like diamonds in the afternoon sun. Carter stole a final glance at the backyard while I stood beside the old latch fence, its swing perpetually uneven since the day Father attempted to

install it. Father was never particularly adept at handiwork and combined with his drinking, even the simplest household projects were left unfinished if started at all.

Soon, our mother and father would return from another night of revelry at the Alibi Tavern or Mickey's. If we hadn't located Lynn by then, the situation would have escalated to unimaginable proportions for both my brother and me. They would arrive inebriated and already engaged in heated arguments, and blood would be spilled—copiously. I needed to peer through the kitchen window, so I clambered over the rickety wooden gate and positioned myself on the narrow slat beneath the ledge. It offered the perfect height, but even under my slight weight, it creaked and groaned. The board's edge dug into the soles of my bare feet, eliciting a dull ache that slowly spread up my ankles.

We had already inspected the kitchen before leaving the house, but an inexplicable compulsion drew me to check once more. Gazing through the kitchen window had become a ritual of sorts—a way for me to surreptitiously observe Mother. It provided the optimal vantage point, as I was too diminutive to reach the other windows without assistance. The living room window, though closer to the ground, was habitually concealed behind drawn curtains. And if Mother weren't in the living room, she would invariably be seated at the makeshift kitchen table. The kitchen was where she clandestinely stashed her liquor, and her predictable need for a refill mimicked the ticking of a clock.

I don't recall ever having screens in the windows, but such details never occupied my thoughts. Removing a screen would have only given Mother another pretext to subject me to her wrath as if she required any more. Placing my palms just beneath the upper frame of the window, I exerted pressure. Initially, it remained obstinately immobile. Mustering greater force, I used my legs to augment the effort, which sent searing pain from my feet to my buttocks. There was a popping sound, followed by a hushed creak. The window yielded, sliding open a mere crack, permitting the familiar amalgamation of alcohol and decay to permeate the air.

In the backyard, I could still discern Carter's desperate search for Lynn, entertaining the possibility that she might have slipped outside during our absence. I averted my gaze from the kitchen window and felt a cool breeze brush against my face—a refreshingly sweet sensation. My empty stomach convulsed violently, for I had not eaten since the previous day, and even then, it amounted to a partially moldy piece of bread with the spoiled portions excised, smeared with the remaining syrup. The cool wind caressed my long, unkempt hair, rustling it gently as I closed my eyes.

Carter approached, and I descended from the gate to join him at the entrance. Tears streamed down his cheeks as his face drew near mine. "I can't find her, Gregg. Mom is going to unleash her fury on us."

Our father, a formidable man with an unyielding jaw, never laid a hand on us. However, when it came to our mother, all bets were off. Whenever Father would inflict harm upon her, she reciprocated by subjecting her children to pain. And she reserved the most brutal beatings for me. Perhaps that explained Carter's tears—a reflection of his concern for what would befall me. As we embraced, the cool wind brushed against my face once more. Reluctantly, I disengaged from Carter's embrace and forced a smile.

"We'll find her. She can't have gone far," I asserted, infusing my voice with as much conviction as I could muster in the face of our growing dread.

Carter shook his head, the movement heavy with sorrow. "We've looked everywhere," he replied, his voice tinged with despair.

Silently, we proceeded to the front of the house, making our way to the porch. The external search had concluded, and we needed to investigate the interior once again. Our murmurs, spoken to ourselves and each other, were drowned out by the palpable silence. Carter broached the subject of hiding as well, but soon fell into quietude. And for an ephemeral moment, we believed we heard Lynn's plaintive cries emanating from within the house.

Carter ascended the cracked porch cautiously, with me following closely in his wake. He halted, positioning himself directly in front of the door, his gaze fixated on the illuminated windows of the living room. It was a modest dwelling, and Mother had always insisted, 'This ain't a home... it's a house! It's love that makes it a home!' In that regard, she was correct. This was nothing more than a house.

We turned the doorknob and stepped inside. An unsettling sensation churned within me, causing dizziness and a nauseating ache in my stomach. It felt as though I were trapped in a hazy, nightmarish state, and a dreadful notion slithered towards me: Lynn is deceased, which is why she remains unresponsive. That is why her ears are deaf to our pleas. Swiftly, I dismissed the thought, yet its residue lingered, stiffening the hair on the nape of my neck, while an overwhelming sense of weightlessness washed over me. The more I fought to banish the notion, the more tenaciously it clung. Lynn is dead.

Abruptly, my mind was struck by a bolt of lightning. Without warning, I heard a familiar sound, and a distinct scent permeated the air—a scent I recognized. 'Oh, bother,' I ruminated. The Tick was resurfacing. The Tick manifested whenever I experienced anxiety, compelling me to repeat words and actions until its grip was released, either through completion or the intervention of an alternative distraction. Often, the latter proved to be more distressing than the ramblings or the incessant compulsion to touch and retouch objects. The first time this occurred was after one of my 'daymares.' Merely contemplating the prospect of succumbing to an 'episode,' as Ashley referred to it, banished the specter of Lynn's demise from my mind, assuaging my restlessness and averting a descent into one of my walking nightmares.

This was fortunate, for had I persisted, Carter would have resorted to slapping me across the face to jolt me back to reality.

Inside the threshold, Carter took a few cautious steps toward the kitchen. "Lynn," he called out, desperation and trepidation tanning his voice. "Please, answer me!"

We made her a solemn promise, vowing never to subject her to further teasing if she would only reveal her whereabouts. No more water from the toilet or gum entwined in her hair. *Please, let her be safe*, I implored silently. Perhaps Lynn required gentle coaxing or simply craved greater attention. Being the youngest and relegated to the end of a line of six other siblings must have been arduous. We scarcely contemplated the consequences of our treatment towards her while we all languished in the same wretched abode. Perhaps, in the end, this house had irrevocably shattered her spirit, and she had allowed it to consume her entirely.

And then, in a sudden revelation, it dawned upon me. “The attic!” I exclaimed, my voice resounding throughout the room. Carter recoiled, as though I had struck him in the face.

“Oh, dear! I cannot ascend to that attic in search of her,” I stammered, my voice betraying visible tremors.

Carter's gaze drifted towards the bedroom housing the attic, a dark void looming above the closet, framing the entrance we both regarded as a gateway to damnation. “Not yet at least. But it may become inevitable,” he replied.

Unwittingly, a small stream of hot urine escaped, staining my oversized and long-neglected underwear. It mattered little, for the stains would merely merge with the countless others adorning the fabric's front and rear—each marking a similar incident.

There was no solace to be found within this accursed house. Gaps surrounding windows and doors permitted our gaze to peer outward. Mother had informed us that the house had been condemned, implying that we were not meant to reside there according to the law. She had conveyed this with an air of pride, but it merely left me feeling weary.

The house was an unattractive ranch-style dwelling, a squat and garish structure with a sagging roof that leaked in specific areas. In daylight, its slight lean was discernible, a shimmering reflection of its dilapidated state. The cement steps leading to the front porch were fractured, revealing tiny pebbles concealed beneath the concrete. In the sun's embrace, the house appeared to undergo gradual decay, while from within, no barrier could stave off the chilling wind or the pervasive fear.

Carter inhaled deeply, causing me to startle momentarily and reflexively shift to the opposite side. "Take it easy, Gregg! You nearly caused me to soil myself!"

I chuckled internally, thinking, *'You'd be too late,'* and averted my gaze to hide the flush creeping upon my cheeks.

"Lynn!" Carter called out, his voice reverberating through the house, tinged with fear and desperation. "Lynn! Please, Lynn!"

Still, there was no response. The house remained a hollow, lifeless shell. Then, slicing through the stale air, heavy with the acrid scent of cigarettes, we heard the heart-wrenching sound of a child's sobs. It pierced through the eerie silence, a raw and anguished cry that clawed at our hearts, a cry that could only belong to a soul in profound distress.

CHAPTER FIVE

I had made a solemn vow to me, a pledge to escape this wretched place that had become my prison. Every day I lingered here, the threat of my mother's deadly wrath loomed larger. Her blows would strike harder, her grip on my throat would tighten just a bit too long, and when my lights went out, I would have no one to blame but myself. The weight of this knowledge, these dark secrets of abuse, burdened me. All I desired was to explore the world, to experience the simple joys of telling time by the hands of a clock or tying my shoelaces. I no longer wished to suffer beatings for failing to find her cigarettes or endure the unspeakable acts she forced upon me. I toiled tirelessly, striving to say and do everything right, desperate not to provoke her anger. And yet, even after she slapped me or struck me in the most sensitive of places, I mustered a smile and uttered the words, "I love you, Mommy." It was a painful charade, pretending that it didn't tear me apart to lie beside her afterward. The agony of those moments was unparalleled, but I mastered the art of persuasion. So well, that I began to convince myself it was a choice I willingly made.

During those desperate times, thoughts of suicide first entered my young mind. I devised a plan, not just for my escape but to rescue Carter and Lynn as well. It had to be a straightforward plan, and it started with reaching out to Lauren. Rumor had it she lived in a beautiful house somewhere in Minnesota, and

perhaps she and her husband would extend their kindness to us, offering a haven where we could find solace.

Yet, I couldn't divulge this plan to Carter, Lynn, or anyone else. Carter, known for his vengeful streak, would surely betray me in retaliation. Lynn, always eager to curry favor with Mother, would do the same. Despite these fears, I clung to a sliver of hope, a hope based on information from Jessica—a woman whose excessive drinking often blurred the line between truth and fiction. If clinging to a lie meant surviving another day, shielded from a brutal reality, then so be it. Jessica herself wasn't a viable option for refuge; her life was a maelstrom of its own. With two children and a husband caught in the web of an affair, she was overwhelmed. My only path to freedom, to a life where I could learn and grow, lay in escaping this nightmare.

I resolved to study diligently, immersing myself in the most challenging subjects, holding on until knowledge became an indelible part of my being. At the tender age of ten, I possessed an innate understanding of the importance of survival. Among many things, I learned to always keep a basic First-Aid Kit in the house and to learn everything I could about everything I could. In addition to that, coming from a world where I had zero opportunities, I was going to seize every opportunity I could get – all the food I could eat, all the love I could get, all the fun I could have, and all the knowledge I could acquire. I was already doing pretty well with street sense and wisdom.

Suddenly, Carter's head jerked backward as though he had collided with a low-hanging branch. "Did you hear that?" he exclaimed, barely allowing me a chance to respond before adding, "It sounds like Lynn crying!"

I heard it too. In an instant, my daydreams of escaping this wretched existence vanished from my mind. We cautiously moved toward the source of the sound, taking small steps, pausing to listen for another cry, and bracing ourselves for its arrival. Now, we stood at the intersection of the narrow hallway and the

living room, feeling a chilling breeze that couldn't have originated from inside the house. I surmised that one of the bedrooms lining the hallway must have a broken or open window. Almost every mirror and pane of glass in the house bore cracks and missing fragments, a constant hazard that sliced our bare feet.

"Carter," I hissed urgently, "we need to find Lynn." A heavy silence enveloped us as Carter stood frozen, seemingly lost in thought. Time was slipping through our fingers like grains of sand. Lynn's piercing scream, which had shattered the night's calm, echoed in my mind, fueling my growing fear about what we might discover. Our window of opportunity was rapidly closing; our parents would return by morning. The bars, their usual haunts, would shut down around 3:00 a.m., and that moment was drawing perilously close.

The impending return of our parents sent my heart racing into a frenzied tempo. I pressed a hand against my chest, attempting to quell the frantic fluttering inside. As I waited for Carter to compose himself, a hollow drumming filled my ears, amplifying the silence. The unknown whereabouts of Lynn sent waves of terror through me, and the rapidly unfolding events threatened to engulf me in a tumultuous sea of uncertainty.

Finally, Carter rose, his prolonged silence adding to the palpable tension. In a terse tone, he declared, "Let's go."

We entered the bedroom, the same room where Mother would entertain drunken and married men for a few measly bucks. It was also the room where Carter and I slept, sharing a bed tainted by a history we desperately wished to forget. Our parents were the epitome of hypocrisy, demanding obedience from us while indulging in their vices. Mother painted me as deviant, but she engaged in sordid encounters with the men of our neighborhood, sometimes even in the very bed where I was to rest.

In the bedroom, Carter's cries for Lynn echoed through the house, each plea laden with desperation, yet met only with eerie silence. With each shout, my nerves were on edge, anticipation gnawing at me like a

relentless predator. Carter's voice, a mixture of fear and determination, cut through the stifling atmosphere as he declared, "We have to go up there."

The closet was more like a cramped crawl space, its raised platform a couple of feet above the floor. Inside, Lynn could easily stand, her head only inches from the attic opening. Carter and I had to squat upon entering, but once inside, we could sit somewhat comfortably. Standing upright, we could push open the panel door and ascend into the attic without too much difficulty. A small three-rung stepladder sat nearby, providing the means for Lynn to join us in that dark unknown.

Placing the ladder atop the platform, she would be able to reach the attic, her small body disappearing into the shadows above, much like the fears and mysteries that enveloped our lives at that moment.

"Go up to the attic and look around," Carter urged, his voice laced with a blend of impatience and fear. But courage eluded me. The attic panel, jarringly askew, loomed like a menacing portal. A chilling gust swept down from the attic, laden with a putrid stench that invaded our nostrils. The air around us was a tumultuous dance of warm and cold currents, swirling in an unpredictable, disorienting ballet.

Another bone-jarring bump, closer and more thunderous than before, sent shockwaves through the house. It was followed by a gut-wrenching scream that tore through the stillness. My senses whirled, and I teetered on the precipice of unconsciousness. Just as I began to slip into the abyss of darkness, Lynn's piercing scream shattered the silence once more, unmistakably her voice, a haunting cry that echoed with fear and desperation.

CHAPTER SIX

Carter remained my anchor in that chaotic moment, his grip providing the stability I desperately needed as the piercing screams from the attic grew louder. Despite my struggle to stay conscious, the cries seemed to draw nearer, invading my thoughts.

"Wake up, Gregg!" Carter's urgent shout sent a shiver down my spine, filling me with a sense of impending dread. Exhausted and weakened, I slowly rose, emerging into the attic opening.

Prepared for a nightmarish sight, I was met with an eerie emptiness instead. Carter's voice trembled with anxiety as he asked, "What do you see?"

"Nothing," I replied, silently thankful for whatever unseen force had spared us from the worst.

Within the attic, the pungent scent of decaying wood saturated the air, invading my nostrils with its unpleasant tang. The cramped space was cluttered, obstructing any further exploration. My focus was drawn to an abandoned highchair tucked away in a corner, its frame bearing the scars of neglect. One of its legs teetered precariously, casting an unsettling aura of instability. Suddenly, a rush of cool air surged in from a vent, catching us by surprise.

"What's happening?" Carter's voice echoed his astonishment.

"Just the wind," I reassured him, though my own heart raced.

"Lynn's scream... Is she here?" Carter's impatience was palpable. Before I could respond, the damaged leg of the highchair swung with a creaking protest, colliding with the attic wall. A strangled cry escaped me, and it felt as though the ground had vanished from beneath me. Inadvertently, I kicked Carter in the process, disrupting his balance, and we both tumbled forward, with my face meeting the unyielding wall of the closet in a jarring collision.

Blood welled up in my mouth, the metallic taste all too familiar and unwelcome. Carter's quick reflexes spared me from an even harsher impact, yet the taste lingered, its warmth slowly spreading inside me. In the distance, the rumble of a motorcycle echoed, a common occurrence in our neighborhood; we affectionately called them "Hogs."

"Mom!" I blurted out in panic, my heart racing. "Mom will be back soon!" Carter understood my fear and carefully disentangled us, helping me to my feet. We were on the move again, driven by the urgency of the situation.

Upon reaching the attic's entrance, fear gave way to an unsettling unease. "Lynn! Lynn!" I called out, my voice filled with desperation, but only silence replied. I turned, scanning the attic until I spotted a huddled figure in the corner, weeping.

"Lynn?" I approached cautiously. It was indeed Lynn, trembling in the corner. Trying to sound calm, I urged, "Lynn, come here." She remained still, unresponsive.

Carter's voice held a sense of urgency, "Lynn! Hurry! Mom and Dad are coming!"

Lynn's cries grew louder, her words echoing the terrible accusations Mother had made. "Dad's going to hurt me! Mom said Dad's going to... do awful things to me!"

Lynn's words hit me like a punch to the gut. Our father would never hurt Lynn, but Mother's lies had taken root in her fragile mind. Lynn was shattered, broken by Mother's cruelty. The stories of neighborhood boys assaulting her in her sleep had trapped her in a perpetual state of fear. The arrest of twin brothers who lived nearby had lent some twisted credibility to Mother's tales.

Lynn lived in constant dread, even closing her window during stifling summers. If it weren't for the tales of assault, Mother would destroy Lynn's dolls, subjecting her to a different kind of torment. The remnants of those dolls were discarded in the closet. Lynn would cry herself to sleep, clutching her hands between her legs, trying to escape the horrors that Mother had planted in her young mind.

"Lynn, what did Mom say?" My voice softened as I tried to comfort her.

In ragged breaths, she managed to speak, her voice trembling, "Dad was going to hurt me... down there... cover my mouth." Mother's manipulative words had planted these horrifying thoughts in her head. To Lynn, Mother's words held a horrifying reality. Our father, despite his abandonment, had never hurt any of us, not even Carter and me. The thought of him hurting Lynn was inconceivable, a fragile truth that kept my sanity intact.

Carter pleaded with Lynn; his voice filled with desperation. Lynn's grip loosened, and she began to crawl toward me. Something dropped from her sweater, catching the faint light before disappearing. It was a flashlight. Lynn sobbed as she moved, leaving insulation particles in her wake. Struggling to find words, she murmured about the cold.

We helped her down, our hands briefly touching, and I felt the chill that had taken hold of her. "Look at me, Lynn," I instructed my arms around her waist. Carter and I guided her down, safely to the bedroom floor.

"You're heavier than you look," I said with a relieved smile. Thankful that Lynn was safe, we left the room, eager to escape the closet's darkness.

"Let's wait in the living room," Carter suggested.

Lynn clung to me as we entered, her eyes sharp, "You're bleeding."

"Yeah, blame this guy," Carter teased, his humor lightening the mood. Despite the laughter, Lynn's eyes revealed her distress, silently seeking reassurance. We settled in the living room, anxiety enveloping us as we awaited our parents, agony, and dread taking hold. Carter occupied a chair, while Lynn and I sat on the couch, cautious of Mother's potential wrath.

Through stained curtains, I watched the driveway, hoping to spot our parents' return. Lynn's soft whimpering filled the room, sensing the approaching confrontation. The air was heavy with apprehension. Carter reminded us not to mention the attic incident to Mother.

Outside, a drifting bag danced in the wind, gracefully navigating the empty street. It reminded me of a Holsum Bread bag, and memories of a daring theft resurfaced. The fear of getting caught remained a haunting memory.

Suddenly, a flash of red outside caught my eye, disrupting my thoughts. Lost in my world, I failed to warn Carter and Lynn, leading to their startled jump and a simultaneous scream as the front door crashed open.

Father burst into the room, his grip on Mother's bra strap and the tattered remnants of her dress betraying a mix of anger and desperation. "Here's your mother!" he exclaimed, his voice carrying a mixture of fury and sorrow. We remained frozen, unable to comprehend the distressing scene unfolding before us. The once-vibrant red of Mother's lipstick now appeared smeared, but as I looked closer, I realized it was blood marring her mouth and jaw. Deep red lines intersected on the surface of her cracked false teeth, the

aftermath of a powerful impact. Instead of abandoning her at the bar, Father had brought her home, using this moment to publicly expose what he believed to be her infidelity—a confirmation of every accusation he had thrown at her, labeling her as unfaithful. He pulled her further into the room, her body hanging limply, reminiscent of a marionette whose strings had been severed, held upright solely by his unyielding grasp.

"Your mother tried to seduce every drunk fool at the bar!" Father's words sought to rationalize the violence he had inflicted upon her, even though we all harbored doubts about the validity of his exaggerated claims.

Mother stood there, her gaze vacant, resembling a discarded rag doll. Father finally released his grip on her, forcefully shoving her to the floor. I rushed to her side, but Father's hand yanked me back. "Don't help that woman!" his command was directed at me, his attention fixed on Mother. In the closet by the front door, a long broomstick leaned, its brush conspicuously absent. It was a tool Mother frequently wielded for discipline, a cruel reminder of our upbringing. Swiftly, Carter retrieved it, standing his ground in front of Father despite their noticeable difference in size. "Swing it, boy, and I'll put you down!" Father warned, knocking the stick from Carter's grasp. It clattered onto the floor, rolling beneath the couch.

We were powerless witnesses, unable to summon the police without a phone and knowing that most of our neighbors would turn a blind eye to our distress. Yet, a glimmer of hope remained in Mrs. Jacobson. My silent plea for her intervention hung in the air, uncertainty gnawing at us. We were left with no choice but to rely on Carter's strength to see us through.

"Help your mother, Gregg!" Father's demand was as dismissive as it was commanding, thrown over his shoulder without sparing me a glance. He made to leave, and Carter, propelled by a mix of desperation and rage, attempted to intercept him. But it was as if an invisible barrier—the shock of what we'd just witnessed, a palpable wall of disbelief and fear—halted his advance, sending him stumbling backward in a futile gesture of defiance. Father, seemingly unfazed or perhaps too consumed by his tumult, brushed past

Carter's crumpled form, exiting the house into the night's quiet embrace, his departure marked only by the fading glow of his cigarette.

In the aftermath, as the taillights of Father's car disappeared down the driveway, it left us in silence as profound as the void he'd created. Carter's failed attempt to stop him, that invisible barrier, symbolized not just the physical distance between them but the emotional chasm that had opened up in our family, swallowing any semblance of normalcy we once had. Our mother, a figure of resilience now reduced to silence, her condition a stark testament to the night's horrors, left us grappling with a reality where the barriers we faced weren't just physical, but deeply emotional, the consequences of which we were only beginning to comprehend.

Carter dashed down the street, his strides purposeful as he headed for the nearest payphone, our sole connection to help. He knew to dial "0" for assistance, a lesson learned from past emergencies. Meanwhile, Lynn and I knelt by Mother's side, her life slipping away in front of our eyes. Her face appeared serene as if caught in a deep slumber with her eyes wide open. One socket remained, the other obscured by a makeshift bandage I fashioned from an old, dirty shirt—an acquired skill from past emergencies.

Carter returned shortly after making the call, and soon the pulsating lights of a police car cut through the darkness, casting our shattered world in stark relief. It came to a stop in the driveway, its beacon a flicker of hope in our grim reality. As the officers made their way inside, I remained by Mother's side, gently but desperately shaking her arm, my voice a pleading whisper for her to cling to life. Lynn, kneeling at her feet with tears carving paths down her cheeks, beseeched our mother to return to us, to pull us back from the brink of this nightmare. Yet, our words were powerless to rekindle the extinguished flame of life.

The officers carefully lifted Mother's body onto a stretcher, her vacant eye haunting my memory. We watched as the ambulance sped away, its siren gradually fading into the night. Left behind, abandoned by our parents, we were thrust into a world of uncertainty and darkness.

Amidst the chaos and despair, my thoughts often turned to Jesus. In my heart, I yearned for His presence, His watchful gaze, and His unwavering protection over my family, especially my mother. It was her well-being that dominated my prayers. I had no desire for salvation for myself; it was always about her.

During the darkest hours of the night, when fear clutched my heart, I would lie in bed, sending my prayers skyward. "Jesus," I would whisper, tears streaking down my cheeks, "please watch over my mom. Shield her from the pain and torment that have consumed our lives. Give her the strength to rise above this darkness and find solace in Your loving embrace." My supplications focused solely on her, my existence fading into insignificance.

In my mind's eye, I would envision Jesus, His eyes full of compassion and His arms extended, enveloping my mother with unconditional love. I imagined Him holding her close, whispering words of comfort and reassurance. I hoped that He would guide her through the turmoil of our shattered family, a guiding light through the storm.

Besides my mother, as her life ebbed away, I couldn't help but wonder if Jesus was there with us, witnessing our pain and suffering. Could He see the bruises and scars that marred her fragile body? Could He hear the cries for mercy that remained unanswered? I clung to the hope that He was present, even in those darkest moments, providing a glimmer of solace and protection.

So, as the ambulance carried my mother away, her life hanging by a thread, I offered up one final prayer, "Jesus, please, protect her, save her." This plea echoed from the depths of my soul, transcending my desires, and focusing solely on the woman who had endured so much.

As the police moved through the house, documenting our shattered reality, I stood up, my heart heavy with grief and uncertainty. Lynn held onto me tightly, her tears soaking into my shirt as she sought comfort that felt beyond reach. Carter stood nearby, a mixture of determination and helplessness in his eyes.

Across the street, behind the living room curtains, Mrs. Jacobson stood, awakened by the flashing lights and commotion. Moved to action, she reached for the phone and dialed Jessica's number, a connection forged through years of friendship. Our neighbors had grown accustomed to the frequent visits from the police to our house, but the sight of an ambulance signaled the severity of the situation. Mrs. Jacobson likely assumed that one of us had finally met a tragic end.

Mrs. Jacobson, the one neighbor I trusted, had always been a pillar of unwavering support. She never imposed herself on us, allowing me even to partake in their warm meals. Her kindness extended beyond nourishment; I could count on her to offer a kind word or an extra penny when I needed it most.

Jessica, alerted to the unfolding events, rushed to our house, her determination evident as she entered the chaos that had consumed our lives. Her presence, a familiar face amidst the turmoil, brought a glimmer of hope to our dark reality.

Amidst the despair, the question lingered: Where was Jesus in our darkest hour? Could He see the shattered mirror, the fragments of our family's existence? Could He hear the cries of pain and despair that reverberated through our home? Clinging to my steadfast faith, I filled love notes with prayers and

questions, placing them throughout the house as a means to reach out to the divine in our profound despair. Those love notes became my lifeline, a way to seek solace and guidance in a world that seemed devoid of hope.

In the shroud of darkness that enveloped our world, I clung desperately to the unwavering belief that Jesus was present, His divine ears attuned to my whispered prayers. I envisioned Him watching over my mother, a solitary beacon of hope amidst the suffocating abyss.

As we embarked on this harrowing and uncertain journey, I bore the immense weight of a young boy's yearning. My heart ached with a profound desire for protection and salvation, not just for myself, but above all, for the woman who was my mother. In the midst of the all-encompassing darkness, my faith in Jesus burned as a solitary, unwavering light—a light that guided us through the deepest and most treacherous of shadows.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Upon Jessica's arrival, she was met with a chaotic scene of police cars, flashing lights, and curious neighbors who had gathered like vultures drawn to the scent of a tragedy. Exhaustion had mingled with a strange sense of relief after the paramedics had attended to my mother and taken her to the hospital; the events of the evening were already beginning to blur into a haze. The night's horrors had left me drained, a heavy weight settling on my shoulders, a culmination of years of enduring abuse and suffering.

As I stood there, waiting for Jessica to come in, I found solace in silent prayer, my heart aching for my mother's survival and safety. I pleaded with Jesus, an earnest plea to free us from this nightmarish existence, a promise to beseech Jessica to expedite our escape. The tension in my mind and body had reached a breaking point, my emotions teetering on the precipice of collapse.

At last, when Jessica's car screeched into the driveway, her hasty correction punctuated the stillness of the night with a jarring sound. I could sense her agitation and distraction, her headlights momentarily blinding me as they cut through the darkness. The glaring light from her Cibic Super Oscar Halogen bulbs felt like an intrusion, an abrupt transition that sent me spiraling into a dreamlike state. The brilliance overwhelmed my senses, and the memory that followed was hazy, a gap in my consciousness that led to my

mind seeking refuge in its depths. In the midst of this disorientation, all I remember is fervently praying for my mother's safety before slipping into a void, reawakening later at Jessica's place.

Within this surreal lapse, I faintly recalled a conversation with Sambirdio beneath the shade of the Apple Tree. He was someone who refused company from anyone but me. In this ethereal encounter, I spoke of Jesus coming to our rescue, an impossible hope tethered to the edges of my imagination. Though aware that it was a manifestation of my mind's need for comfort, I found solace in its embrace, a brief reprieve from the harsh reality. I would often speak to Sam after he passed, being just a boy and believing he could hear me. I would construct these elaborate fantasies where Sam and I were together, enjoying a conversation or really good storytelling, or sharing one of those hard-to-come-by delicious Hostess Apple Fruit Pies - both our favorites. But as hungry as we were all the time, any flavor would have been our favorite.

When I awakened at Jessica's, I found myself in a room at her house where I had been put to bed. Suddenly, a jolt shattered my trance, tearing me away from a haunting nightmare and the painful memories of my mother's suffering. My body was drenched in sweat, the realization striking me with a mix of dismay and humiliation—I had wet the bed. A surge of unease washed over me as I strained to catch the muffled voices and footsteps beyond my room.

Panic engulfed me, its cruel grip tightening around my chest and stealing my breath. Darkness swirled in, erasing my surroundings, and trapping me in a suffocating void. Overwhelmed, I leaned over the side of the bed and vomited.

Slowly, a sense of presence returned, and I regained awareness, my mind clearing like fog receding. I focused on the sensation of the mattress beneath me, determined to regain control over my racing heartbeat

and shallow breaths. I forced myself to move, to kneel, and confront the unsettling reality, summoning every ounce of strength to clean up the mess, an act of desperation to regain a semblance of normalcy.

The memory of Jessica's look of disdain as I had thrown up earlier haunted me, a vivid image that compounded my distress. The combined weight of that haunting gaze and the lingering smell in the air threatened to overwhelm me again, but my stomach was empty, unable to produce another wave of nausea. It was an added layer of humiliation, an insult layered onto the injury of an already agonizing situation.

Summoning my resolve, I joined Jessica, Carter, and Lynn in the kitchen, draped in one of Jessica's shirts. Hunger gnawed at our bellies, driving us to devour our food ravenously, our bodies craving sustenance after the emotional turmoil. Afterward, I retreated to a different room to sleep while my soiled clothes were tended to. As sleep finally claimed me, there were no haunting dreams this time, only the respite of oblivion.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the room, Carter's voice gently roused me from a restless slumber. He brought news of Mother's condition at the hospital, and relief washed over me as I realized I had managed to escape another night without the shame of wetting myself. Grateful for this small victory, I hastily dressed and shuffled my way to the kitchen, where Jessica was busy with a bucket that held the remnants of my earlier distress. Her silent acknowledgment hung in the air, and the lingering scent of vomit stung my senses as I walked past the room that had briefly become a testament to my vulnerability.

Deep within the recesses of my being, an unyielding belief in my irreparable brokenness took root. To me, I was little more than "damaged goods." This conviction had taken hold during the formative years of my life, nurtured by my mother's harsh words and my father's callous neglect. The agonizing torment I

endured at the hands of the corner store manager only reinforced these feelings of worthlessness that had become so ingrained.

That manager, an aging and gruff figure who spoke a language my mother identified as Hungarian, had become an unfortunate fixture in our twisted narrative. My mother, in her turbulent way, would unleash her fury upon him, even stooping to theft from his store. But when her actions inevitably caught up with her, his anger was redirected toward me. I can still feel the weight of those chilling moments when he would curse and threaten my very existence, the barrel of his shotgun ominously pointed in my direction, its twin voids reminiscent of Elmer Fudd's cartoonish weapon. But this was no cartoon; it was a terrifying reality that I had to confront.

My feelings toward the man were a mixture of fear and resentment, the latter stemming from his reciprocation of my mother's grudge. I was merely an innocent pawn trapped within a convoluted cycle of animosity. Amid this chaos, it's no wonder that I saw myself as fundamentally flawed, forever marked as damaged goods.

During Mother's time in the hospital, it became painfully evident that she would not press charges against Father, her financial dependence on him taking precedence over her safety. Her injuries, including a fractured skull and a broken jaw, were harsh reminders of her scars, both visible and invisible. The juxtaposition of gratitude for her survival and the knowledge that her maltreatment of me would resume was a bitter pill to swallow.

Living under Jessica's roof provided a temporary haven from Mother's cruelty, but it was apparent that Jessica had little desire for our presence. Our only glimmer of hope rested in the hands of Lauren, our half-sister. If her memory of us was shrouded in uncertainty, there remained a slim chance that she might

extend a helping hand. However, the weight of our past, our battered and bruised selves, felt like an insurmountable barrier.

As we said our goodbyes to Jessica's home and joined her to pick up Mother from the hospital, a sense of trepidation settled over me. I reluctantly climbed into the car, seeking refuge beside Carter, the familiar and comforting presence of my brother. As we embarked on the journey, sleep beckoned, offering a brief escape from the turmoil of reality. In the embrace of slumber, memories of my cherished cat, Sambirdio, danced through my mind. Tears welled up, obscuring my view of the world around me, and by the time we reached the hospital, the wave of nausea had subsided. However, the anxiety of facing Mother loomed large.

Mother, her face unrecognizable due to her injuries, rejected my hesitant attempt at a hug. Carter and Lynn, eager to bridge the gap, enveloped her in their arms. The silence was heavy, her strained voice struggling to make its way through her wired jaw. The sting of her rejection lingered, leaving a trail of uncertainty in its wake.

Once Mother was back home, days turned into nights, and Mother's physical wounds slowly mended, but the gaping emotional chasm between us remained, a chasm brimming with a volatile mix of anger and frustration. Amid this bleakness, a spark of determination ignited within me. I fixed my gaze on a new path forward, one that shimmered with the faint promise of hope.

Lauren, our half-sister, became the focal point of my aspirations—a beacon of potential for a brighter future. Memories of a time when she had been a loving sibling served as fuel for my hope amidst the pervasive darkness that enveloped our lives. In the silence of the night, I made a solemn vow to myself: I would find her, reach out to her, and prove that, despite our fractured state, we were still deserving of love and acceptance.

With a flicker of optimism, I closed my eyes, readying myself to embark on a daunting journey of healing and redemption. As sleep gently enveloped me, I knew that the road ahead would be strewn with obstacles and uncertainties. Yet, for the first time in a long while, a glimmer of hope illuminated the path, guiding me toward the elusive promise of a brighter tomorrow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As the seasons metamorphosed, ushering winter into the blooming embrace of spring, my home remained a crucible—a cauldron of pain, poverty, and abuse. Yet into this turbulent scene sauntered Sam—a fragile kitten imbued with transformative potency, steering my existence towards a life elevated beyond mere survival. The burden of caring for my mother, a task rendered doubly complex by cultural incongruities, had weighed me down profoundly. But the advent of Sam heralded a fresh chapter, and events converged in a destined harmony.

This transformation was far from a solitary journey; I credit it to a higher power. The comforting presence of Jesus acted as my spiritual anchor amidst the turbulent seas of life. The change unfolded not through grand gestures or dramatic turns, but through subtle shifts in emotion—sorrow giving way to smiles, fear dissolving into laughter. In the crucible of my home, a gentler ambiance began to take root; it was still a stark environment, but now softened by the joy that Sam brought into my life. Without Sam's entrance into my world, my understanding of love and my faith in Jesus might have remained unawakened. Sam, the linchpin of my formative years, served as a divine nudge, redirecting the course of my life.

From the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew Sam was destined to be mine. This forsaken runt, hidden in a corner while his siblings basked in their mother's attention, tugged at my heartstrings. His vulnerability called out to me, igniting a bond that felt preordained by fate. When I declared to my neighbor Saffron, "He's mine," I felt a surge of protectiveness over the overlooked feline.

I named him Sambirdio, a moniker inspired by the 1941 film "Casablanca," played on the Jacobsons' TV—the only television in the neighborhood I was permitted to watch. Unlike other neighbors, the Jacobsons welcomed me, providing a rare window to a world beyond our living room, where my mother's frustration with our TV often ended with its screen shattered. Sam's name reflected not just the character Sam's big, beautiful, and sweetly swollen eyes but also his playful nature, especially his delight in chasing birds. Adding "birdio" captured this essence, intertwining my love for him with memories of those film viewings that offered solace and inspiration during my childhood.

This backstory isn't just about naming a pet; it encapsulates a series of relationships and moments that defined my early years. The generosity of the Jacobsons contrasted with the isolation I felt from others, while my mother's actions reflected the tumultuous emotions within our home. Sambirdio, therefore, represents more than a pet—he symbolizes the connection and creativity that sustained me through times of loneliness and misunderstanding.

In the initial weeks, my hands became the vessels of his nourishment, administering milk through an eyedropper. Then occurred a watershed moment: his eyes fluttered open, establishing visual contact with mine. His eyes revealed a world of innocence and curiosity, and I knew that our destinies were intertwined. We exchanged a gaze as I delicately balanced the eyedropper, nurturing him in my arms. Convinced that Sam had imprinted on me, from that juncture, our destinies were irrevocably intertwined.

With the help of Carter and Lynn, we ingeniously fashioned a covert bed for Sam out of an old shoebox, evading Mother's watchful eyes and defying her oppressive presence. We relied on each other for survival. During daylight hours, I kept the precious kitten hidden, acutely aware that my mother's wrath would inevitably descend upon him if she discovered his existence.

But I couldn't bear to witness his suffering. Destiny itself seemed to intervene the moment I persuaded the neighbor girl to relinquish the runt of her cat's litter into my care. It felt as though divine forces were at play, orchestrating this serendipitous union through those vulnerable kittens. I couldn't shake the feeling that Jesus Himself had a hand in this connection.

Sam's enthusiasm mirrored his tenacious will to thrive as if he understood that love and care were powerful healers. As he matured, so did the range of our shared adventures, methodically chronicled in a planner of daily escapades.

Sam's presence infused immeasurable joy into my life that summer. I bore witness to his remarkable transformation from a fragile creature to a vibrant and spirited companion. Together, we rejoiced in every milestone—his tentative first steps, his burgeoning agility, his playful antics. As time progressed, Sam graduated from the eyedropper to lapping up milk from a saucer, a testament to his growing independence.

Our explorations led us to a field nearby, which, through our youthful imagination, morphed into a boundless forest. Here, Sam demonstrated his natural predatory finesse, navigating the tall grass as though he were a born hunter. We'd sing and dance beneath the apple tree, and when finances permitted, indulge in apple pies—each morsel a jubilant tribute to our friendship. Our existences were interwoven in every conceivable manner—from the food we relished to the love that burgeoned between us.

Nightly, Sam nestled close as we surrendered to sleep. On those tearful nights, my tears would cascade onto Sam's feathery fur, absorbed as if he were a living sponge. His silent, unwavering support transcended the limitations of language.

Sam was not just a pet; he was the embodiment of compassionate care, acting as both a guardian angel and a steadfast friend during our shared hardships. My love for him was a beacon of "Joyous Love," starkly contrasting with the "Powerfully Strong yet Intricately Pained Love" I felt for my mother. She was a woman who resisted the idea of me having even a small companion, fully aware of my deep-seated loneliness. This pain was so vividly reflected in my eyes that I began to shun my reflection, a habit persisting to this day. It's with a heavy heart I admit this, reflecting the same reasons that once made me sorrowful as a child.

As the harsh summer sun intensified our shared difficulties, I once again felt the reassuring touch of Jesus's eternal love. Sam, a divine offering, fortified my belief in love and spirituality. Our silent conversations morphed into ethereal exchanges, lifting my spirit toward celestial realms.

In the aftermath of that halcyon period, a poignant emptiness lingers. In the spaces where Sam's reassuring purrs once resided, silence now reigns. Nevertheless, his enduring legacy continues to subtly influence my family and guide me toward a future illuminated by compassion.

In our shared journey, the affectionate moments with Sam were marked by a unique expression of our bond: the "click-smooch." This term was born from the peculiar, clicking wet sound that echoed each time I kissed Sam and pulled away. It became a delightful part of our interaction, a signature of the intimate moments we shared. These "click-smooches" were not just physical expressions of affection but symbols of the deep, spiritual connection we shared, enriching our narrative with a distinctively individualized touch. This sound, a quaint but profound articulation of our bond, underscored the mutual understanding and love that transcended words, embedding a sense of joy and comfort in our companionship.

Harkening back to the first night I spent with my new kitten, I recall it marked the beginning of an enduring and unconditional love, a love that graced me with the extraordinary gift of being loved back. I

made a solemn promise to myself: I would shield this innocent creature from any harm that dared to cross his path.

His presence brought me companionship and solace, a balm for my profound loneliness. Only Jesus could fully grasp the depths of my needs, needs that my mother would not even acknowledge.

My birthday, a time for celebration, was overshadowed by my mother's moody spells and bouts of depression. But Jesus understood. Once again, He demonstrated His unwavering support by gifting me with a companion who would love me unconditionally. Sam's unwavering affection for me became my lifeline, and I returned that love with a fierce and unyielding devotion. Jesus always came through for me.

But Mother's disdain for Sam was palpable, and her threats against his life were frequent. I assumed the role of his guardian, erecting a protective shield around him, warding off her anger and hostility. Sam possessed an uncanny ability to elude her presence, a testament to his cleverness and our unspoken connection.

In search of solace, we found refuge beneath the sanctuary of the apple tree. Sam would nestle into my lap, his fur like velvet beneath my touch. In those precious moments, our bond transcended the physical realm. The troubles of the world faded into insignificance. Sam's unwavering love became my anchor, offering acceptance and a profound sense of belonging in the face of adversity.

Yet, one fateful summer day, as Sam slumbered peacefully on my lap beneath the apple tree, Mother suddenly shattered our sanctuary. To my astonishment, Sam remained undisturbed—an eerie and unsettling observation. Her screams pierced the tranquility, demanding my immediate attention. Through the interlacing branches and leaves of the tree, I could see her flushed, enraged face. With great care, I rose to my feet, cradling Sam in my arms, and navigated through the makeshift doorway of branches. Mother stormed off into the house without holding the door for us. I entered the house, crossing the barren kitchen, a place stripped of warmth and sustenance, and proceeded to the living room.

It was then that my thoughts shifted back to Sam, and I gently laid him down on the couch, becoming aware of his uncharacteristic lack of response to Mother's outburst. Sam would typically become alert and tense whenever she raised her voice, especially if it were directed at me. It was at that moment that I had an unsettling realization: Sam was genuinely ill. The weight of that realization bore down on me like an iron anchor, intensifying the burden I had carried for so long. With Sam now safe beneath the tattered, red blanket on the couch, I summoned the courage to confront Mother. In my mind, I could envision Jesus standing beside me, offering silent solace. Even though I couldn't hear His voice or feel His touch, I held fast to the belief that He was watching over us. In moments of despair, Jesus became my sanctuary, the source of my strength in the face of life's relentless trials. Clinging to the comforting presence of Jesus, I closed my eyes, ready to face whatever lay ahead.

The sanctuary of my mind shattered as Mother's forceful grip tightened around my throat, forcibly yanking me away from the imagined presence of Jesus. Her rage signaled the beginning of a violent confrontation. Struggling for breath, I was reluctantly forced to confront the harsh and painful reality. With my heart heavy, I admitted to the theft of her cigarettes, constructing a fabricated tale to shield Carter from the blame.

In response, Mother's fury manifested in a swift, punishing blow to my face, causing my lip to split. Overwhelmed and defenseless, I crumpled to my knees under the weight of her assault. But before she could strike again, an unexpected and unlikely presence intervened—an old, well-worn Bible adorned with an image of Jesus on its cover.

In a surreal twist, Mother's touch transformed from aggression to an odd tenderness as her hand gently brushed against my bruised cheek. She pressed a kiss to my forehead, abruptly ending the ordeal. Seeking refuge from the tumult, I retreated to the bedroom, where Sam, brought inside by Lynn, awaited me.

Clutching Sam to my chest, I sensed his tiny body trembling, mirroring the quivers that wracked my frame. Tears flowed unchecked down my cheeks as I held him close, searching for any signs of distress. It was with a profound sense of relief that I finally observed his exhausted yawn, assuring me that he was merely sleeping soundly.

Amidst my tears, the distant echoes of Mother's incoherent mutterings drifted in from the living room—an ever-present reminder of the turbulent environment that suffused our lives. Fueled by an unwavering determination to shield Sam from harm, I silently vowed to find a way to provide for him. Our meager existence within the confines of our modest dwelling posed its limitations, but I was resolved to find a solution, even if it meant resorting to surreptitious means to obtain milk and cheese from the corner store.

In the haven of my imagination, embraced by the perpetual presence of Jesus, I found not only refuge but also a steadfast strength to guard Sam, my unwavering ally in a realm enveloped by darkness. United, we ventured through life's tempests, held firm by the conviction that love, in its most tender form, harbors the strength to surpass life's challenges. This love, both delicate and tenacious, bolstered our souls, illuminating our path through the profoundest of tempests.

CHAPTER NINE

The deterioration in Sam's health was indeed swift and heart-wrenching. Within a matter of weeks during that fateful summer, his condition took a visible turn for the worse. His once sturdy frame dwindled, and he was plagued by distressing seizures that seemed to torment his frail body. In our constrained financial situation, seeking veterinary intervention remained an unattainable luxury, even as we witnessed mysterious funds appearing for less critical expenses like alcohol and cigarettes.

However, the crisis didn't limit itself to Sam alone. Strangely, I too began to display the same symptoms as Sam: bewildering episodes of confusion, tremors that shook my body, alternating between bouts of fever and chills, difficulty in consuming and retaining food, relentless sweating, and an unsettling dependence on assistance for even the simplest of tasks.

Sam and I would spend hours on the couch, our lives entangled in the web of our debilitating conditions. I wept silently, careful not to alert Mother to my tears. Sam, with his moist and luminous eyes, met my gaze, as if reassuring me that everything would eventually be all right. Yet, despite his comforting presence, despair threatened to engulf me, and it was as though my world was crumbling around me.

As I watched Sam, overwhelmed by my emotions, tears streamed down my face. Amid my sense of loss and overwhelming fear, Sam's unwavering courage shone through. It was as if he were gently urging me

to remember better days—those carefree times when he would joyously dangle upside-down from Mopsey's shaggy undercoat, causing no distress to either of them.

Mopsey, a curly-haired, medium-sized mutt that bore a striking resemblance to a mix between a sheepdog and a terrier, seemed unperturbed by Sam's playful antics. He strolled casually back and forth before me as I sat on the couch. Each time Mopsey passed, Sam would flash me an unmistakable feline smile, as if sharing a secret joke between them. This duo's routine injected moments of pure joy into my life.

Interestingly, it was Mother who had initiated Mopsey's presence in our lives, much like she did with all the stray animals that found their way into our care. One of her peculiar habits was adopting these animals while she was out indulging in her vices. Carter and Lynn, my siblings, were typically disinterested, often distancing themselves by declaring, "They're Gregg's animals," especially when any responsibility for them arose. But this didn't bother me; the affection these creatures bestowed upon me was returned many times over. Our home transformed into a sanctuary for a diverse array of animals, ranging from ducks and dogs to cats and even a pair of guinea pigs.

A year before, we had another dog named Charlie whose life met a tragic end right before my eyes. A motorcyclist, clad in intimidating leather, raced down our street. The thunderous roar of the motorcycle's exhaust irritated Charlie and also alarmed the neighbors, who frequently rushed out of their homes to shake their fists at the biker. My sisters appeared to be attracted to men of this ilk. Regardless, Charlie took off after the speeding motorcycle and met a fatal collision. The callous biker never paused or looked back. I screamed, but it was futile; it was just Charlie and me in the yard at that moment.

Mother must have heard the commotion; she was usually among those who would curse and gesture rudely at disruptive passersby. She rushed out, her features hardened but her eyes filled with tears, and lifted Charlie's lifeless form. As she walked past me back into the yard, her words were curt: "Get the shovel from

the shed and follow me." The contradiction between her cruelty towards me and her tears for a fallen dog left me bewildered, and I found myself grappling with the enigma of her contradictory behavior.

Once Mother brought them home, her interest in these animals waned almost immediately. I suspected her motives were superficial—perhaps an attempt to project a certain image to the neighbors or to bolster her self-esteem. Regardless, these animals filled a void in my life. Without Sam and the others, I might never have experienced the profound depths of genuine love and compassion, two of the most intricate and transformative emotions that a human can embrace.

In my confined existence, I found solace in Sam's inventive ways of cheering me up. He had a particular stance—a football crouch—where he'd wiggle his hindquarters before launching into a sprint. With his head lowered and eyes locked on me, he'd dash toward me and leap at the last second, narrowly avoiding my head. The soft brush of his fur and his speckled belly would glide past my face, utilizing the reflected image of the Zumbrota Bridge in the wall mirror to bounce back onto the floor. This playful sequence would repeat, each iteration fueling my laughter until my stomach ached.

We took care to indulge in these antics only when Mother was absent; she would never have approved. Amid this distressing time, Sam became my sole source of solace and unwavering devotion. Without him, my existence felt like a slow erosion, exacerbated by the nights spent enduring my mother's abuse.

Praying for Sam's recovery provided me with a modicum of comfort in this bleak landscape. I prayed ceaselessly, day and night, whether Sam was at my side or not. Each passing minute was marked by a blend of tears and prayers as I fervently beseeched a higher power for help. Time seemed to crawl, mirroring Sam's labored breaths, only to suddenly surge forward, triggering panic when he succumbed to convulsions. My nerves frayed alongside Sam's deteriorating condition. It felt as though our fates were intertwined, and as his health worsened, so did mine. I started experiencing trembling and uncontrollable

sweating, mirroring Sam's symptoms. We needed each other desperately, but we were both gravely ill, a fact that only fueled my mother's disdain. In our dire circumstances, the solace of Jesus' salvation was our only glimmer of hope. I intensified my prayers, devoting even more time to seeking divine intervention.

In these moments of shared suffering, however, something unexpected began to take root within me—a small, fragile spark of independence. As I prayed for Sam, I felt a subtle shift within, as if the Holy Spirit was illuminating a path ahead. Though the situation grew increasingly dire, this inner light hinted at a possibility, however distant, of an escape from the darkness that surrounded us.

Before Sam's illness and mine incapacitated us both simultaneously, we spent countless hours under the Apple Tree. There, we prayed and tended to the wounds my mother inflicted upon me. Sometimes, we found solace in tears, gazing at the earth around the tree's mighty trunk. I often imagined that Sam and I would be laid to rest beneath that tree, a place where Jesus would come to collect our souls.

Occasionally, we broke the somber atmosphere with moments of joy, singing and dancing together. One memory that stands out vividly is serenading Sam with a song called "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree (With Anyone Else but Me)." This song held a special significance for Mother in her younger days when she could still sing. I sang it to Sam, and he understood the profound meaning behind the lyrics.

These moments of connection under the Apple Tree were not just about seeking solace; they were about envisioning a different life—a life where the bond Sam and I shared, fortified by faith, hinted at the possibility of breaking free from the chains of our current existence. Beneath that tree, as we sang and prayed, I began to see a glimmer of a future where the love we held for each other might guide us toward a path of freedom and peace.

And so, with each agonizing, lonely day, as the sun waned in the austere twilight, my elongated shadow merged with the others cast by the sun, leaving me as nothing more than a lost shadow, like a 'lost boy.' My small, emaciated figure became ghostly pale and seemed tethered to the tangible world only by these somber thoughts of loneliness and despair.

I often wondered how Jesus could ever find me amidst all this sin, and an even more dreadful thought would strike fear into the center of my tiny heart: What if Jesus doesn't want me, doesn't love me, or doesn't even know me? The fear settled in my stomach, and no matter how hungry I was, I couldn't eat due to the stress and anxiety that fear brought.

Despite the overwhelming despair that sought to engulf me, a subtle shift began to take place within my soul. My connection with Sam and the fervent prayers I offered began to nurture an inner resilience, a quiet strength that whispered against the darkness. This resilience, though faint, reassured me that I was indeed seen, loved, and known by Jesus. It pushed back against the fear, offering a small but steadfast reminder that I was not lost, even amid such profound suffering.

The fractured sidewalk beneath my feet symbolized the shattered nature of my life, with the surrounding neighborhood resembling a tarnished tapestry woven from the remnants of broken liquor bottles and an atmosphere steeped in despair.

"Tickets for Sale! Tickets for Sale!" echoed through the air, my mother's voice cutting through the stillness like a clarion call, a desperate plea in exchange for cash to fuel her vices. Standing beside her, I was a reluctant participant in this clandestine market, where Food Stamps became currency for cigarettes and alcohol. Her grip on my arm, fierce and unyielding, tethered me to her chaotic world, a stark landscape marred by her struggles with addiction and mental health. This scene unfolded under the guise of normalcy, our march not of pride but of survival, a rhythmic cadence that spoke of obedience and despair. "Ready!

Left Foot First! March!" she commanded, our steps a macabre dance to the tune of necessity and compulsion, a reflection of her battles with OCD and the deeper turmoil that plagued her spirit.

Amid this turmoil, we passed by Mrs. Jacobson, our neighbor, who found solace in tending to her small garden—a fragile oasis of beauty in a world otherwise bereft of it. Her flowers served as delicate symbols of resilience, contrasting sharply with my mother's turbulent energy. The palpable tension and duality between these two women sparked an epiphany within me. If hope could bloom in Mrs. Jacobson's garden amidst our fractured world, then perhaps I, too, could navigate a path toward something better.

The contrast between these two women—my mother, consumed by chaos, and Mrs. Jacobson, quietly nurturing life—became a silent inspiration for me. This encounter marked a turning point where the notion of independence and hope, which had been hinted at in my prayers and time with Sam, began to crystallize. I started to see that a different path—one of resilience and faith—might indeed be possible, where I could break free from the chains that bound me.

As the years progressed, my mother's disregard for safety, intensified by her battle with alcoholism and mental illness, painted our lives with strokes of chaos and danger. Her reckless dashes into oncoming traffic became harrowing symbols of the turmoil we endured, a vivid reminder of the bleak destiny I feared was mine by inheritance.

This period marked a transition into a life devoid of familial ties, casting me adrift without roots or direction, amplifying the internal strife that clawed at my being. Surviving this era was more than enduring; it necessitated a keen resolve to break free from a poisonous legacy while recognizing the boundless potential within—a quest for liberation from the past and a leap towards a future uncharted yet full of promise.

The love I shared with Sam, along with the small seeds of hope and independence nurtured by my faith, began to grow stronger in response to my mother's increasing recklessness. This growing inner strength pushed me to hold on, to see beyond the immediate chaos, and to start forging a path to freedom—guided by the Holy Spirit, even as the darkness threatened to overwhelm me. Each step away from my mother and the life she encapsulated became a stride toward my destiny—a destiny not defined by my origins, but by the person I aspired to become.

Ironically, that summer, I fell gravely ill, tormented by intense pain in my upper torso that left me paralyzed from the waist down. Sam and I, bound together by an old blanket, spent countless hours on the loveseat in the living room, drenched in perspiration. On one occasion, Saffron, the neighbor girl who had given me Sam, visited us. Appalled by our emaciated and ailing state, she confronted my mother, but her concern was met with venomous retorts. Tearfully, she left her name and advised seeking veterinary care for Sam while keeping him far from Mother's malevolence.

Throughout this arduous ordeal, Lynn displayed deep concern for both Sam and me. Due to my excessive perspiration, trips to the restroom were infrequent, yet Lynn was there to assist me whenever needed. With one arm dragging along the floor, she supported the other as we maneuvered through the hallway.

Life became an unending succession of monotonous moments, with me firmly anchored on the loveseat, cradling Sam while Mother incessantly complained about my illness. Carter, still a child himself, couldn't offer much assistance and sought solace in distant corners. However, Lynn unwaveringly stood by my side, providing steadfast support.

Then, during one incident, as Lynn helped me down the hallway, Mother suddenly launched a violent attack, ruthlessly kicking my legs. Though I felt no physical pain, the sheer force of the blow

knocked me off balance. She continued her assault while Lynn pleaded for her to stop. Throughout this horrific ordeal, Mother's eyes remained empty, her face devoid of emotion.

One fateful morning, as Sam and I sat beneath the frayed blanket, he stirred but kept his eyes shut. Life appeared to have departed from his tiny body, with his belly no longer rising and falling with each breath. Desperation welled up within me, and I called out Sam's name, but Mother screeched at me to cease bothering with the cat. However, I remained undeterred, driven by the fear of the worst. Lynn ran over to the loveseat to assist me.

Mother suddenly lunged at me with savage aggression, shoving Lynn aside. She stood unsteadily before me, swaying, her face twisted into a menacing smile. Her tone carried a terrible edge as she declared her intention to strangle Sam while I slept, ensuring his life would be extinguished by the time I woke up. I pleaded with her, begging her to reconsider, but my words only served to stoke her anger.

Without warning, Mother attacked, gripping my hair, and yanking me upward before releasing her hold. My legs, robbed of control, collided with the coffee table, causing me to crash onto the unforgiving floor. Throughout the brutal assault, my gaze remained fixed on Sam, who now lay motionless on the loveseat, just inches away from me. Mother's piercing screams filled the air, accompanied by the acrid stench of alcohol in her breath. Finally, her assault came to an end, and with Lynn's compassionate assistance, I was gently lifted back onto the loveseat, my fragile body battered and bruised. Sam was carefully placed back in my lap, damp, and trembling, mirroring my battered state.

My head throbbed with agony, and I noticed tears staining Lynn's face. In a barely audible voice, I reassured her that Sam was safe, drawing him even closer to my trembling stomach. Mother sat nearby, vacillating between moments of emptiness and the potential for more violent outbursts. I couldn't allow her to harm Sam, not when he was frail and in need of my care. He depended on me for his safety and well-being.

As I cradled Sam's delicate paw, feeling the weight of his body against my trembling fingers, an unfamiliar sensation washed over me. It was a profound and unwavering determination to fight for Sam's well-being that kindled this newfound feeling within me.

Father Burrows, the clergyman at St. Alexius, had always spoken of the healing power of Jesus. He believed that Jesus could bring solace and restoration to the ailing. With my mother's health deteriorating rapidly, I turned to prayer, seeking divine intervention and beseeching Jesus for help.

From the depths of my soul, I poured out heartfelt prayers, yearning for a miracle. I implored Jesus to lay His healing hands upon my mother, to bring comfort to her ailing body, and to alleviate her suffering. Every word that escaped my lips was infused with longing, a desperate plea for her well-being.

Father Burrows also emphasized the importance of unwavering belief in the pursuit of healing through Jesus. Mere prayers were not enough; true faith was required to unlock the transformative power of divine intervention. And so, I clung to my belief with unwavering determination. I placed my trust in Jesus, convinced beyond doubt that He possessed the ability to perform miracles and provide the healing my mother desperately needed.

However, as the days stretched on, it seemed like my prayers went unanswered. Doubt began to seep into my thoughts, questioning the effectiveness of my prayers and the reasons behind the silence I encountered. Father Burrows had also shared wisdom about the mysterious ways of divine intervention, which often surpassed human comprehension. Perhaps there were lessons to be learned or personal growth to be gained in the face of adversity. Though it was challenging to accept, I refused to give up hope.

In moments of uncertainty, I sought solace in the knowledge that my beliefs and prayers had not gone unnoticed. Even if the outcome eluded me or seemed delayed, it did not diminish the power of my faith or the depth of my love for my mother. Miracles could manifest in unexpected ways, and the healing process extended beyond the physical realm, encompassing emotional and spiritual facets as well.

I sought solace and guidance from my community of faith, turning to Father Burrows and my fellow believers for support. Through their prayers and shared stories of unwavering faith, they reminded me that even in the face of adversity, our beliefs have the power to sustain us. They encouraged me to persevere in prayer, to hold fast to my faith, and to trust that Jesus, in His divine wisdom, was orchestrating events beyond our immediate understanding.

However, I grappled with the knowledge that revealing the truth about my mother's actions would truly test the depth of their faith. Despite my best efforts to conceal my fear and desperate need for help, I knew there was ample evidence hinting at my plight. Teachers, doctors, nurses, and social workers were aware of my situation, just like the people in my community. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if their faith or some other factor prevented them from extending their aid. Regardless of the underlying reasons, all I yearned for was their swift assistance, hoping they would answer my plea without delay.

And so, I persevered in my prayers, continuing to believe with unwavering conviction, even when the reasons behind my mother's continued suffering eluded me. I held onto the hope that miracles could manifest in unexpected ways and that Jesus, the ultimate healer, would bestow His divine intervention in His own time.

Throughout this arduous journey, I discovered that belief was not a passive act but an active force that demanded perseverance and trust. It was the unwavering faith, the resolute belief in the healing power of Jesus, which sustained me during those trying days. Though the outcome remained uncertain, my belief remained steadfast.

Ultimately, I realized that the healing power of Jesus extended beyond human comprehension. It surpassed mere physical healing, encompassing the healing of our spirits, the strengthening of our faith, and the cultivation of compassion and resilience. Though the reasons eluded me, I continued to place my trust in Jesus, firmly convinced that His divine plan would unfold in ways that surpassed my understanding.

So, I persisted in prayer, my heart aflame with unwavering conviction, clinging to hope as though it were a lifeline in the abyss. With every fiber of my being, I trusted that Jesus was at work, orchestrating divine interventions that transcended the boundaries of my finite understanding. In the depths of my soul, I cradled the conviction that the boundless healing power of Jesus was already in motion, even amidst the fog of uncertainty and the weight of unanswered questions.

For belief, in its purest form, defies the confines of logic and soars beyond the grasp of human comprehension. It is a potent force that carries us through the darkest of times, infusing us with a profound sense of hope and bestowing upon us the strength to endure. And there, on that loveseat, with Sam nestled close to my chest, I found solace in the unshakable belief that Jesus was not only listening but actively responding. He heard the fervent cadence of my pleas, and His healing touch would manifest in ways that transcended the boundaries of my finite understanding.

CHAPTER TEN

As autumn crept closer, a sense of impending shame cast a shadow over me with the start of the school year. The changing scenery beyond my window served as a backdrop to my unease, but it was overshadowed by a sudden ache in the small of my back, awakening a previously numb area. Amidst the discomfort, my attention remained fixed on Sam, nestled in the safety of my arms. Troubling thoughts gradually seeped into my consciousness, gaining clarity, and intertwining with Sam's presence. I tried to divert my gaze, but they persisted, growing more distinct with each passing moment. Hope began to waver, overshadowed by a growing sense of despair.

At that moment, Mother appeared at the end of the dimly lit hallway, her presence charged with anger. "I knew you were pretending, you little troublemaker," she exclaimed with fury. It was then that her words struck me—I was standing. The ability had returned so abruptly and unexpectedly that I hadn't even realized I had risen with Sam in my arms. Mother swiftly advanced towards me, her steps echoing down the short hallway, and she lunged at me. In a desperate attempt to protect Sam, I half-threw, and half-dropped him onto the loveseat, cushioning his fall with the blanket that swathed him. My arms flailed, futilely trying to maintain balance, but my weakened legs betrayed me. I spun around, pulled backward with force, and found myself kneeling, facing the same window that had held my gaze mere moments ago.

From behind, Mother seized a lock of my hair, snapping my head backward. In my peripheral vision, I glimpsed Sam convulsing beneath the blanket. "You faker!" Mother shouted before retreating into the bedroom, likely in search of her drink. Struggling to regain my kneeling position, sharp pains shot through my legs and back. Sam's convulsions ceased, and he lay still, his narrowed eyes and closed mouth resting upon one paw. I watched his belly rise and fall rapidly. The paralysis had faded away, but the pain in my legs served as a constant reminder. Glancing at my hand, blood-stained from grazing the sharp corner of the coffee table, exhaustion washed over me. Although Sam's condition worsened and Mother would soon return, weariness consumed me. With a final glance at my bleeding hand, I succumbed to sleep. The paralysis had finally ceased, just before the start of school, but Sam's condition continued to deteriorate.

Winter arrived, casting its frigid atmosphere upon our humble abode. The utility company had disconnected our heat due to unpaid bills, leaving us to endure the cold. During the fall, the house had been perpetually chilly, but in winter, it transformed into an icy prison, seeping into our very bones. The relentless wind howled, penetrating every crack and crevice. Desperate to ward off the cold, we resorted to stuffing shirts and towels around the windows. Occasionally, Mother would turn on the gas oven, offering a momentary respite as its warm breath hissed and bellowed, and we huddled on the kitchen floor, seeking solace.

One night, seated cross-legged on the loveseat, Sam cradled in my lap, I pulled the blanket tightly around my shoulders. Sam stirred, emitting a wheezing sound that served as a reminder of his frailty. Peering through the small living room window, I observed a fresh dusting of frost adorning the ground, transforming it into a glistening white tapestry. Frost clung to the window, accentuating the chill that lay just beyond. Evening settled in, highlighting the stark contrast between the warmth we shared and the wintry cold outside. The icy Midwestern wind blew, and I began to sing softly, a tune learned from the player piano

in the basement. As I sang, my gaze remained fixed on the window, watching moonlit snowflakes gracefully descend. "Everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go."

The snowfall intensified, forming a small mound of powder at the base of one of the lower panes. It seemed as if the window itself was smiling at me. Mindful of Sam's well-being, I gently removed the blanket from him. My eyes shifted between the window and Sam, searching for any signs of movement, any remnants of the lively spirit he once possessed. In those moments, perhaps it was hope that I sought, even as I knew deep down that his time was drawing to a close. But I wanted to be there with him until the very end.

Winter eventually gave way to spring, with the promise of summer on the horizon. The end of the school year meant I could dedicate myself fully to caring for Sam, hoping for his recovery. He had endured the harsh winter, giving us a glimmer of hope that he would overcome his struggles, just as I had survived another arduous school year. With school out, Sam would no longer be left alone with Mother. Every day, I rushed home, finding him in his familiar spot on the loveseat. I resumed feeding him with an eyedropper, reminiscent of the early days when he was just a newborn. But gradually, his appetite waned, and his convulsions grew more frequent and intense.

On the final day of school, I sprinted home, leaving everything behind, desperate to be with Sam. Bursting through the front door, relieved that school was now in the past, I longed to dedicate every moment to his care. The blanket he usually lay upon was there, but Sam was not. Mother, in her inebriated state, sat on the couch, her gaze filled with discomfort that signaled something was amiss. Trembling, she raised a cup of alcohol to her lips, her voice wavering in tandem with her unsteady hand. Although her illness may have contributed to her unease, my eyes were immediately drawn to the empty blanket, and before she could utter a word, I spoke the painful truth. "Sam's dead." Unable to contain my grief, tears flowed freely, each one a testament to my profound loss. I remember the vacant expression on Mother's

face, her eyes harboring a guilt that outweighed any sense of shame or remorse. There were long pauses between my questions, each met with the same response. "What happened to Sam?" Mother seemed to ponder the question as if it held a different meaning from the previous one, but no answer ever came. She simply continued to stare at the floor, sipping her wine. Then, regaining her composure, she promptly dismissed me from the room, issuing an angry threat. There was an undeniable sense that something dreadful lurked beneath the surface of what happened to Sam, something I would never truly comprehend. The being that had provided me with a glimmer of safety was gone.

Heartbroken, I lay on my bed, my tears flowing uncontrollably like a relentless downpour amid a tumultuous storm. The pain in my chest was a torrent, threatening to drown me in grief. In the depths of my despair, I clung to a fervent prayer, a fragile lifeline that tethered me to the belief that Jesus had taken Sam to heaven, even as I grappled with the agonizing question of why he had to depart just when I needed him most. Trusting in Jesus' unfathomable wisdom became my only refuge, a fragile bridge over the chasm between searing pain and the bewildering silence of His reasons.

My mind transported me back to that sweltering summer when Sam and I became prisoners of our living room couch, trapped by an illness that gripped us mercilessly. I lay there, debilitated and utterly motionless, ensnared by a paralyzing hysteria that seemed to strangle the very essence of my being. Beside me, Sam was drenched in sweat, mirroring my feverish state. We were both ensnared in the clutches of a relentless malady, but it was Sam whose life hung by the thinnest of threads, a thread that threatened to fray and snap without the urgent medical help we so desperately needed.

For endless months, I had been confined to that tattered and torn couch, an unwitting witness to the battlefield where Mother's drunken altercations with others frequently erupted, transforming our living room into a war zone of chaos and conflict. Sam and I clung to each other like shipwreck survivors adrift in a tempest, refusing nourishment as our parched throats could not bear the touch of water. We trembled

uncontrollably, our frail frames ravaged by illness and anxiety, while the tumultuous symphony of discord and strife played out around us.

Beneath the weight of a heavy, tattered blanket saturated with the lingering stench of ill-fated decisions, Sam and I found solace in each other's trembling presence. These memories now surged through my mind like shrapnel, tearing at the fragile fabric of my sanity, and ripping my psyche apart.

The death of Sam would plunge me into a severe and profound depression, one that left me engulfed in absolute loneliness. It was a loneliness so overpowering that I found myself desperate to grasp any semblance of love or affection, even if it meant resorting to pretense and fantasy – a mirage of being loved. Why not? After all, I had been doing this for years with not only Mother, Father, and my siblings but also with Jesus. I loved them all deeply, especially Jesus, but I harbored no belief that any of them loved me in return.

After Sam's passing, I found myself searching for something to fill the void. It was a time when the world seemed to hold its breath, the air thick with a palpable sense of grief. The days were shrouded in a heavy silence, broken only by the occasional chirping of distant birds, a stark contrast to the joyful melodies Sam used to bring into my life. The weather mirrored my emotions, with gray clouds looming overhead, threatening rain, as if the heavens themselves mourned Sam's departure.

At first, it was a discarded but intact walnut I stumbled upon on the ground. The rough texture of the walnut's shell felt cool against my fingertips, a tangible reminder of the world's indifference to my loss. I swiftly picked it up, hastily drew two eyes and a smiling mouth on the outer shell with a dark blue pen, and gave him the name 'Wally.' Wally's existence was short-lived, lasting only about an hour before my hunger got the best of me. As I crushed his shell and devoured the nut inside, the sound of cracking echoed through the empty house, a stark reminder of the silence that had settled in since Sam's absence. With a heavy heart, I wept, now realizing that I had eaten my only friend, and the void felt even emptier.

However, during that same week, fate had a different plan for me. I encountered a wandering, fully grown, feral female cat. She was all white, her fur pristine against the backdrop of a world that had lost its color. I decided to name her 'Ms. Fluffer-Duffer,' a whimsical name that brought a flicker of light to my dimmed heart. I brought her home, hiding her in my bedroom. The room was dimly lit, the curtains drawn to keep out the gloomy world beyond. I improvised a bed for her, laying down soft blankets that still held the warmth of the sun from better days. The scent of dust and age hung in the air, a testament to the passage of time. I prepared a meal, consisting of a bowl of Carnation® Instant Milk and a piece of stale bread I found at the bottom of an almost empty Holsum® Bread bag. The aroma of the bread, though stale, carried a nostalgic comfort. She eagerly devoured the food and drink, giving the impression that she hadn't eaten in a while. I empathized with that feeling all too well, and my heart went out to her.

I covered her with blankets, creating a makeshift nest that cradled her fragile form. As she fell into a deep sleep, the room remained still, save for the faint ticking of a wall clock, a reminder that time marched on even in the face of loss. I lay beside her, my hand resting on her side, feeling the rise and fall of her breath. Concern gnawed at me as I gently rubbed her belly, which felt hard and unusual beneath my touch. The room was filled with a profound silence, broken only by the faint ticking of the clock, as I contemplated the fragility of life.

It was during those moments of quiet introspection that I couldn't help but wonder about the mysteries of fate and the twists it had taken in my life. I thought of Sam and the irreplaceable bond we had shared, and now, Ms. Fluffer-Duffer, who had entered my life unexpectedly. These thoughts swirled in my mind like a tempestuous storm, leaving me feeling adrift in a sea of emotions.

As I left the room for just a few hours, my steps were muffled by the worn carpet, bearing the scars of countless footsteps that had echoed through the years. The dim light cast long shadows along the hallway, a visual metaphor for the uncertainty that had become my constant companion. Upon my return, I

found Ms. Fluffer-Duffer meowing just inside the closed bedroom door. Her plaintive cries cut through the silence, a stark reminder of the responsibility that had unexpectedly fallen into my lap. I feared that my mother would hear her, so I hurriedly opened the door. In my attempt to catch her, Ms. Fluffer-Duffer dashed to the front door, which was wide open most days due to its broken hinges, and escaped.

As I rushed to catch Ms. Fluffer-Duffer, she had vanished by the time I reached the porch, disappearing into the distance beyond my sight. The world outside was bathed in the soft, silvery light of the moon, casting an otherworldly glow over the familiar landscape. The night was filled with the symphony of cicadas, their incessant chirping a reminder that life went on, even in the face of unexpected departures.

Returning to the bedroom, I intended to hide any remnants of the cat so that Mother would remain unaware of her presence. However, what I saw upon entering the room left me utterly astounded. There, scattered all over my sheets, lay a multitude of incredibly delicate and minuscule beings, their eyes tightly closed, and ears folded, rendering them both blind and deaf. They were swathed in a fine, damp layer of fur, their bodies seemingly curled into a fetal position, motionless. The room itself seemed to hold its breath, as if in awe of the miraculous and tragic scene before it.

Confusion gripped me; how had these kittens materialized on my bed, seemingly out of thin air? It was only when I recalled how Ms. Fluffer-Duffer's belly had felt peculiar that I pieced together the puzzle—she must have given birth right here. And with her now absent, I knew that these newborns were entirely dependent on their mother for warmth and nourishment. My thoughts raced as I contemplated the urgency of the situation; I whispered to myself, "I'm going to need another eyedropper." With a growing sense of responsibility, I began inspecting the newborns, fervently searching for their tiny mouths to provide sustenance. However, a disquieting realization settled in my mind—they were not moving, as still as the night.

Their skin was a whiter shade of pale, delicate like thin paper to the touch and cold as ice. The room was filled with the faint scent of their newborn innocence, a fragrance that carried a sense of fragility and hope. When I lifted one of the kittens gently with my finger, it remained unmoving, a silent testament to the fragility of life. As I laid it back down on the bed, it seemed to sit like a stone on the sheets, a stark reminder of the fleeting nature of existence. They were all dead, stillborn.

In that heart-wrenching moment, I couldn't contain the overwhelming grief any longer. I burst into tears, my sobs echoing with deep, guttural moans. With the utmost care, I gathered the lifeless kittens, one by one, into a small paper bag, their fragile forms a painful reminder of their brief existence. Slowly, I made my way outside, my steps heavy with sorrow, and gently buried the entire bag in the earth, a final resting place for these innocent souls. The night was hushed as if the world itself mourned their passing. As I whispered a heartfelt prayer, tears streamed down my cheeks, mingling with the earth beneath my hands.

Returning to the house, I lay down on the bed where the kittens had been discovered, and my grief washed over me once more in relentless waves. The room, now devoid of life, felt like a sanctuary of sorrow. It was in that poignant moment that I made a silent oath to myself—I was leaving this place, this realm of relentless death. The weight of Sam's loss had already been a heavy burden, but the tragedy of these fragile kittens was a pain too profound for my mind to fathom and my heart to endure. Their peaceful slumber was a stark contrast to the turmoil within me. I yearned for a profound sleep, akin to the serene rest those kittens now knew. I longed, more than anything, to find a respite from the never-ending cycle of death. It was a desire for eternal sleep, a chance to finally, once and for all, find solace and be free from the shadow of death that had haunted me relentlessly.

Recollections of Sam walked a precarious tightrope of emotions, often entwined with simmering anger, yet I fought fiercely to preserve the memories of his infectious playfulness. Countless nights were spent in restless agony, straining to grasp his image, daydreaming about the boundless joy he had once

brought into my life. I would close my eyes, summoning every ounce of my being to conjure his tiny face, if only for a fleeting few seconds before it dissolved into the unforgiving void. And in those precious moments, before his image vanished entirely, I captured a glimpse of his face, forever etched in the depths of my heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On a summer evening, bathed in twilight's soft glow, I stood at the entrance of a night church nestled in the city's heart. This sanctuary was not just a place of worship but a haven for seekers and believers alike, united in the quest for transcendence. Beneath the gentle light, I found myself at a crossroads, my heart oscillating between hope and fear, on the brink of transformation.

My journey with the night church marked a path lined with both blessings and trials. The assembly, held in a setting reminiscent of a community hall rather than a grand cathedral, became the backdrop for my world's expansion. It was here, under the fellowship's warm glow and the youthful pastors' fervent sermons, that my once-constricted life began to unfurl.

The invitation from Kyle, accepted by Carter, Lynn, and me, felt like a rare endorsement from my mother, despite her slurred and agitated tone when she said, "Go! Go to your night church!" Fueled by anticipation and the thrill of adventure, we embarked on a journey charged with nervous excitement, unknowingly steering toward our destiny.

This church stood as an anomaly, a radiant beacon amidst the urban sprawl, blurring the lines between the sacred and the secular. The pastors' innovative teaching, using martial arts as a metaphor for

our spiritual battles, left an indelible mark on me. This fusion of physical discipline and spiritual wisdom offered a fresh perspective on strength, discipline, and faith.

As the service approached its climax, the atmosphere buzzed with anticipation. The pastor, holding the microphone, captured the room's focus. "Does anyone here want to be SAVED tonight?" His voice, clear and resonant, cut through the silence, electrifying the space with a palpable sense of divine possibility.

Compelled by an unseen force, I made my way to the altar, each step seeming to lift years of burdens from my shoulders. Amid collective prayer, salvation found me—not just through the pastor's words but within the community's warm embrace. This moment of unity and support sparked a profound realization: true salvation lies not only in leadership but in the strength of our communal bond.

The room, bathed in radiant light, cast a warm glow that dispelled the shadows of anxiety, infusing the air with joy. As I approached the altar, the energy of faith and unity enveloped me, drawing me into a deeper communion. The pastor's prayer, a resonant symphony of forgiveness and redemption, touched my soul, uplifting and humbling me in equal measure.

This light illuminated not just the room but also the inner recesses of my being, inviting a renewal of spirit. Amidst this unity, I felt a deep connection to Jesus, overwhelmed by a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The pastor's earnest words, echoing through the room, spoke directly to me, offering a path to redemption through forgiveness, a journey we embark on together. This simple yet profound message cleared the fog of my thoughts, leaving behind peace and clarity.

This transcendent experience has left an indelible mark on my soul, offering not just solace but also serving as a beacon for my spiritual journey. As the tapestry of life continues to unfold beyond the church's walls, the memory of that embrace with Jesus remains a guiding light through the darker times.

This memory, a steady guide in tumultuous seas, grew stronger with time, illuminating my path back to faith and redemption whenever I found myself lost. In those moments of doubt and confusion, I clung to this memory as a lifeline, a reminder that even in the darkest times, there is always a way back to the light.

The lesson learned that night at church—that Jesus' truth transcends its physical confines to shine in our darkest moments—became my compass, reaffirming the power of faith amidst life's trials. Despite skepticism from others, the conviction born from that night's encounter stood firm, guiding me through doubt and disbelief.

This resilience in the face of adversity became a cornerstone of my character, teaching me that true strength lies in unwavering belief, even when the world seems intent on shaking it. This unwavering faith, more than a memory, became a testament to the transformative power of belief, grounding me amidst life's storms.

Reflecting on this journey, I see it as a manifestation of the universal quest for meaning and a connection to a love that transcends understanding. This interplay between doubt and belief, between straying and returning, encapsulates the essence of my faith journey—a pilgrimage illuminated by the clarity I found in Jesus that night.

The night church, with its embrace of the unconventional, was the crucible of my transformation—a testament to faith's power to reshape our lives and navigate the complexities of existence.

Following my night church revelation, my life shifted. My affection for my mother remained, but I grew increasingly eager to leave behind the ruinous environment. My spiritual journey led me further from her, highlighting the need for change.

Yet, I still ran errands for her, buying cigarettes and alcohol. On one such occasion, driven by hunger, I impulsively took a fruit pie, an act of theft that now weighed heavily on me, especially after my spiritual awakening.

Caught by the store owner for stealing, I faced a punishment that was both severe and physically harmful. His method involved lighting matches and throwing them at me in rapid succession, causing burns that would stick to my skin, an act of discipline that was not only dangerous but deeply scarring, both physically and emotionally. As I walked home, reeling from the pain and the guilt of my actions, I grappled with the conflict between my desperate circumstances and my moral beliefs, whispering apologies to Jesus, feeling His disappointment deeply, yet driven by a hunger that seemed to justify my choices.

Taking refuge in a secluded corner, far from prying eyes on our street, I cautiously unwrapped the stolen food. Every bite provided sustenance yet carried a bittersweet blend of shame and guilt, the heaviness of my transgressions lingering on my taste buds. I forced myself to consume the morsels, feeling the burden of my actions pressing heavily against my chest.

The stolen sustenance temporarily quelled my ravenous hunger, but it failed to ease the guilt that consumed me. In that moment, I confronted the harsh reality of my choices, realizing that true hunger goes beyond the physical—it gnaws at the soul when one's actions betray their values.

"I plead for your forgiveness, Jesus. I implore you for absolution from my sins," I murmured, desperately seeking redemption. Deep down, I knew my actions strayed far from Jesus' teachings, from the love and compassion He embodied. Yet, at that moment, the hunger within me appeared to overshadow everything else.

Upon finishing the stolen food, a lingering sense of guilt settled in my stomach. I felt like a sinner, tarnished and unworthy of forgiveness. But within that guilt, a spark of resilience flickered—a recognition that while I had fallen, I had the strength to seek redemption and make amends. However, within the depths

of my being, a flicker of hope persisted—a belief that redemption remained attainable, even in the darkest of moments.

Exiting the corner store, the burden of my actions bearing down on me, I realized I needed to chart a different course, one aligned with Jesus' teachings, one that offered an escape from the shadows that shrouded my life. The weight of my mistakes was heavy, but within the shadows, a faint glimmer of hope endured—a hope that one day, somehow, I could find forgiveness and redemption.

After finishing the food and heading back, my footsteps guided me homeward, the burning pain in my arms and the unrelenting hunger in my stomach accompanying each step. The familiar ache of guilt and shame became my constant companions, reminding me of how low I had fallen. Yet, each step forward was an act of resilience—a determination to keep moving, despite the weight of my sins and the pain that marked my body and soul.

Approaching our house, a wave of dread washed over me when I spotted an unfamiliar car in the driveway. My mother's erratic pattern of inviting different men into our home since her return from the hospital had left me disheartened. Witnessing her self-destructive behavior over the past year had shattered my hope for a brighter future, leaving me feeling abandoned and alone. But even in my darkest moments, I clung to the belief that I could break free from this cycle, that my future didn't have to mirror the chaos of my present.

With my head held low, I continued past our house, carrying the burden of my choices and yearning for a different life. The sidewalks stretched ahead like cavernous divides, reflecting the moral abyss into which I had descended. But within that abyss, I found a resolve—to fight for a life that aligned with my values, to seek out the stability and love that seemed so elusive. The prospect of witnessing yet another of my mother's encounters with a stranger was unbearable, a betrayal of my innocence and the love and

stability I craved. And yet, this longing for something better fueled my resilience, driving me to imagine a future where I could build the life I deserved, no matter how far away it seemed.

Lost in thought, I made a determined decision to venture further, seeking refuge in the familiar sanctuary of the field at the far end of our street. Gazing up at the darkening clouds above, mirroring the turmoil within me, an ominous sensation settled in. The air turned heavy, and the impending storm mirrored the tempest raging inside me.

With lightning streaking across the sky, illuminating the darkness with its jagged brilliance, I couldn't help but sense the weight of divine judgment upon me. The thunder echoed, a reflection of the turmoil within my soul. As the rain began to pour down, it felt like the tears of a disappointed deity, cleansing away my sins while leaving me vulnerable and exposed.

Taking shelter beneath the protective embrace of a towering oak tree, I curled into a ball as the storm raged around me. At that moment, I questioned my worth and place in the vast tapestry of existence. I recognized the danger of standing near a tree during a lightning storm, much like I understood the moral transgression of theft. Yet, in my desperation, I felt compelled to risk everything, driven by an insatiable hunger that gnawed at my core.

The rain persisted in a relentless downpour that soaked me to the bone. It was as if the storm mirrored the raging turmoil within me, amplifying the chaotic maelstrom that churned relentlessly in my soul. At that moment, I felt infinitesimal, an inconsequential speck utterly dwarfed by the overwhelming fury of nature's wrath.

As the storm gradually relinquished its grip, yielding to a gentle drizzle, I summoned the inner strength to rise and trudge my way back home, momentarily forgetting the half-eaten fruit pie concealed within my pocket. The idea of seeking refuge at Lauren's house felt like a distant dream, an option that had

remained elusive for an entire year, with no tangible progress in sight. However, one undeniable truth pierced through the rain-soaked haze: I could no longer depend on Mother.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Throughout that seemingly endless night after returning home, a cold numbness enshrouded my heart, void of both love and hatred. My thoughts navigated the intricate labyrinth of emotions that once anchored my unwavering commitment to remain by my mother's side. The walls that once entrapped me were now crumbling, and the allure of freedom beckoned, tantalizingly close. For the first time, it felt attainable—like breaking through a newly formed ice crust and emerging into a refreshing pool of water. Exhaustion overwhelmed me, and I surrendered to a deep slumber, my mind awash with dreams of escaping my mother's grasp forever.

The morning light emerged, unleashing a storm of fury from my mother upon discovering the crumpled piece of scratch paper that bore my master plan: "Call Jessica from the corner store. Tell her to get us. Go live with Lauren." I had penned those words over a year ago, finding solace and purpose within them, especially in the absence of Sam.

In my bed, my head still resting on the pillow, my mother's hand struck my nose with a force that sent pain rippling through my body. The taste of blood filled my mouth, causing me to retch and swallow rapidly. The familiar scrap of paper lay in her hand—the very hand that had struck me. Her

words were a muddled torrent of anger, void of coherent meaning, echoing hollower with each utterance.

Mother positioned herself atop me, an unusual ritual since I had never resisted before. She seized my lower lip, yanking it forcefully, and the pain propelled me into a dark abyss. Suddenly, a searing agony engulfed my groin, as if my very testicles were ablaze. Time seemed to stretch, day melding into night, and the world stood motionless. Mother relinquished her grip and departed from the room.

In an abrupt whirlwind, Carter burst into the bedroom, hurrying to my side of the bed. His voice reached me from a distance, feeble and fractured. Huddled in a fetal position, I clung to my throbbing groin, struggling for each breath. Carter's raspy voice reverberated in my ears, yet I remained immobile, suspended between wakefulness and slumber, trapped in the aftermath of torment.

As I gasped for air, Carter seated himself beside me on the bed. Gradually, the ache began to ebb, and my breathing steadied. "I'm fine," I assured Carter. With determined effort, I swung my legs over the bed's edge, momentarily disoriented as the room spun around me. "I'm going for a walk," I declared, grateful for the chance to slip out the front door while Mother occupied herself in the kitchen, pouring another glass of wine or some other concoction. The lingering discomfort in my groin accompanied me as I walked down the street, making my way toward the open field.

The sun's warmth on my skin offered solace. I intended to rest in the field for a while before navigating through the old apartments on the opposite side of the block, avoiding the path leading to my house, en route to the corner store. Thirty cents rested in my pocket, enough to purchase a soda and a fruit pie. A sense of relief washed over me, knowing this time I wouldn't need to steal. Beneath the sheltering canopy of trees, I would indulge in sustenance and find solace in slumber.

Humming the melody of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," I meandered through the field, my fingers grazing the tops of Indian Grass. Upon reaching the lush blades that gave way to taller weeds, I paused, closing my eyes to bask in the sun's caress on my tender nose.

Leaving behind the soft weeds, their faint whispers against my shoes, I advanced toward the reassuring shade of the trees. For the moment, I sought refuge beneath the towering oaks, settling into rest. The sky above painted a beautiful canvas of bluish-white, imparting a sense of serenity amidst the maelstrom of my existence.

The entire day unfolded in the field, interrupted only once when I ventured out to purchase the fruit pie and soda. As dusk approached, a realization dawned upon me—I had spent a significant amount of time apart from Mother without succumbing to panic or anxiety, without rushing back to her side. An unexpected sense of joy swelled within me, a glimmer of hope flickering amidst the darkness.

With the encroaching darkness, I retraced my steps homeward. With every stride, my heart grew colder and more rigid, sensing the impending tempest that awaited me. The chill in the air foretold a reckoning, and the knowledge that Mother had uncovered the note intensified my apprehension. I knew I would pay for my perceived betrayal with more brutalities. Timidly, I walked on the opposite side of the street, attempting to postpone the inevitable.

Drawing nearer to the house, a phantom pain seared through my groin, arresting my movement. Mother sat on the porch, the glow of her cigarette casting a fleeting luminescence. Instinctively, I sensed that she was anticipating my return. My heart pounded with fear, yet I fortified myself for what lay ahead. A passing car provided cover, and I swiftly sidled behind Kyle's house, concealing myself momentarily.

Gathering all my strength, I crossed the street and emerged from the protective darkness. My split lip throbbed, my tongue instinctively probing the raw wound. Mother flicked her cigarette into the yard as I ascended the porch steps. She rose and entered the house, signaling for me to follow.

Waiting until she had shut the screen door, I cautiously turned the knob and stepped inside. The house was immersed in shadow, the only illumination the flickering match Mother ignited to light another cigarette. The glow projected a distorted silhouette of her head onto the wall—a shadow akin to the paper cutout portrait we had crafted in school, now torn to tatters by her disapproval. It had been a gift for Mother's Day.

"Come here," Mother beckoned, extending her hand. I complied, allowing her to guide me down the corridor and into her bedroom. There, she commanded me to undress, to climb onto the bed and slide under the covers—covers tainted with the odor of sex.

Mother mirrored my actions, the metallic springs beneath the mattress creaking beneath her weight. Her unclothed form felt frigid against mine as she pressed herself nearby. "Take off that damn underwear," she murmured.

Shifting to one side, she supported herself on an elbow, facing me. Following her instruction, I pushed my underwear down to my ankles and used my feet to kick them away. Mother continued to smoke her cigarette, its ember fading as she took her final drag. With a forceful gesture, she extinguished it against the headboard, casting us into darkness. In the obscurity, I could hear her exhaling the last tendrils of smoke, mingling with the stifling air.

Her hand found its way to my genitals, enveloping them in a tight grasp. Though her touch was gentler than before, the ache remained, and sickness rose in my throat, choking me. "You're not going to leave Mommy, are you?" she whispered.

Her breath quickened, and in the silence, I found no words to respond. Bound by the darkness, she forced me into a sexual act that seemed to last an eternity, my heart offering an unspoken answer. The molestation had haunted me for years, growing worse as I grew older. My mind could neither comprehend nor justify the horrors that took place in Mother's bed. Reason shattered against a wall of shame and confusion, leaving no room for understanding. Each violation etched a reminder, pushing me closer to the precipice of insanity. Soon, I knew, the trapdoor within my mind would swing open, releasing the horrors I had suppressed for so long.

Deep within my consciousness, I confronted a mirror that didn't show my face, but instead, a twisted image brimming with seething anger. I struggled to look away from this grotesque reflection, yet the rage building up inside me surged like an unstoppable wave. Love, once pure and genuine, had somehow transformed into a darker emotion – hate. This change was fueled by my fading strength, a clock ticking down relentlessly. I knew I had to act soon. I had to escape this nightmarish reality. My only hope lay in convincing Lauren, but time was slipping through my fingers.

The frequency and brutality of sexual acts escalated. Mother's twisted mind convinced her that involving teenage boys from the neighborhood would boost her despicable trade. And so, they came and went, these boys with their particular preferences, more discerning than the usual comely drunks Mother would attract. Struggling to maintain her appeal, her emaciated figure and unkempt appearance prompted her to explore alternative practices that did not involve penetration.

The boys who partook in these vile rituals taunted me as we passed each other on the sidewalk, hurling cruel words about "blow jobs and hand jobs," mocking my mother's limited repertoire. Amidst their jeers, I learned that the price for both acts remained the same.

The molestations increased without reason, except perhaps my advancing age. They escalated beyond Mother's involvement, permeating my world with their repugnance. In those moments, I wondered if Jesus found me as repulsive as I found myself. Self-hatred consumed me. And afterward, as I lay hidden beneath blankets, concealing my sin and fear, I would tremble, fearing that I had become so hideous that Jesus could no longer see me, and without His sight, there would be no salvation from this sickening affliction bestowed upon me by the epitome of evil.

One afternoon, seeking solace beneath the apple tree, enjoying the blissful solitude, the slam of the back door shattered my peace. Peering through the branches, I saw the short, fat man with beady eyes, balding and perpetually sweaty. He approached me, his knowledge of my hiding spot bewildering. And as if in confirmation, Mother's laughter echoed from the open kitchen window.

"You must be Gregg," the man stated, crawling through the foliage on his hands and knees. I instinctively retreated, putting the sturdy trunk between us. Clad in a tight, red-and-white striped shirt that strained against his rotund frame, he resembled a plump candy cane. "Your momma and I want you back in the house," he said, lunging towards me. I wriggled out the other side of the tree, scraping my arms on the rough bark, and fled. Tears streamed down my face as I ran, my sobs blending with the rhythm of my footsteps.

When I deemed it safe to return home, I did so with trepidation. The man was gone, and Mother sat in the grip of her voice, her silence ominous. She did not utter a word, but her intentions were clear. She had sent the man to retrieve me, and I knew why. What remained unknown was the price he had paid her.

That night, as Mother retired to bed and instructed me to stay awake, confusion filled my mind. Tentatively, I obeyed, finding solace in the fact that she didn't demand my presence beside her. An hour later, a soft knock sounded at the door. Approaching the window, I peered outside. It was the candy

cane man, wearing the same striped shirt. Frozen in place, I couldn't escape the inevitable. Sooner or later, I would be forced to give him that for which he had already paid. With trembling hands, I unlocked the door and opened it slowly. He entered, and I realized I hadn't noticed his limp earlier that day.

"Please, mister..." I pleaded, tears streaming down my face.

He leaned in, whispering for me to be silent. Before he closed the door, I stole a glance outside, contemplating escape, but his grip tightened on my shirt, chilling my trembling body. It was cold outside. The night sky sparkled with stars.

With his arm draped over my shoulders, the man led me to the couch. He sat down and removed my underwear, the only garment I wore. Gripping my buttocks, he knelt before me, his mouth enveloping my flaccid penis. I prayed fervently, willing it to remain unresponsive, and my prayers were answered. Yet, it didn't deter him. Pulling out his erect organ, he stroked it with his free hand while his mouth remained on me. I sobbed uncontrollably, my vision blurred by tears, yet I forced myself to remain silent.

Fear and shame overwhelmed me, cascading in waves. Moments later, the man released a stream of ejaculation, hastily wiping it away with his shirt. "Don't cry," were his only words as he swiftly departed, leaving the house in silence.

In the darkness, the house stood still, a thin sliver of light escaping where the curtains met, a spot where Carter and I often stood, yearning for our father's return. The man's saliva still clung cold and wet to my genitals. The weight of embarrassment crushed me, and I wept uncontrollably for several minutes. Summoning the last vestiges of strength, I rose from the couch, pulled on my underwear, and walked down the hallway toward the room I shared with my brother. As I passed Mother's bedroom, on my way to my own, I could hear her laughter echoing hauntingly in the stillness of the night.

As I lay upon this squalid bed, its surface marred by grime and tainted with the unmistakable odor of urine, a peculiar numbness enveloped me, rendering me impervious to physical sensations. The miasma of the filthy stench emanating from the soiled blankets and mattress fails to register within my senses. Even before my head sank into the pillow, tears cascaded down my cheeks, a torrential outpouring of anguish. Overwhelmed by an indescribable sense of self-reproach, I was burdened with a profound shame that seared through the core of my being, an all-consuming inferno that ravaged me from within.

The weight of my transgressions sat heavily on my conscience, yet I struggled to find the courage to seek forgiveness through prayer. The idea of begging for divine absolution felt almost unbearable. There was a belief within me, unsettling and profound, that even Jesus Himself might struggle to comprehend the depths of my wrongdoing and extend His forgiveness. I would not point fingers at anyone else; I carried the weight of this act solely on my shoulders. In the end, I knew only Jesus had the power to rescue me. But at that moment, shame and fear held me captive, making it impossible to form a single plea.

A profound and suffocating dread consumed me, a relentless fear that if Jesus were to cast His gaze upon the recent horrors, both that man and I would be condemned to a grim fate, judged for our shared malevolence in the eyes of God. I was ensnared in an unending battle, torn between an urgent, desperate need to pray and an overwhelming, suffocating inability to do so. In the midst of this excruciating inner turmoil, exhaustion eventually claimed me, and I surrendered to an uneasy slumber, locked in an unrelenting, tormenting struggle with my soul.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Several weeks had passed since that fateful day. As I strolled down the sunlit street, Lynn's delicate frame was nestled under my arm. Carter walked alongside us, a steadfast presence offering unwavering support. Despite the simplicity of our gesture, Lynn's uneasiness remained palpable. Our very touch, it seemed, was deemed forbidden—a rule set in stone by Mother herself.

Beneath the blazing sun, its scorching heat casting a sticky veil over the garish houses of the neighborhood, we moved in quiet contemplation. Our heads were bowed, each step carrying with it a sense of purpose yet uncertainty about our ultimate destination. It was as if the walls were closing in around us, leaving escape as the only viable option.

Amid the turmoil, a glimmer of hope had managed to find its way into my heart. During Jessica's recent visit, I inadvertently overheard a conversation that sparked a newfound sense of possibility—a chance, however slim, for us to break free from our confines.

"Jessica mentioned reaching out to Lauren," I confided to my siblings, the words carrying a weight of both desperation and hope. "Should Mother subject us to further harm, all we need to do is get in touch with Jessica."

Carter's voice, tinged with bitterness, broke the silence. "Given the way things are going, it won't be long before that happens, Jack." His words dripped with cynicism, a testament to the pain we had endured.

Lynn, however, responded with a soft, hopeful giggle, her fingers playfully nudging my arm. In that fleeting moment, I saw a spark of resilience in her eyes—a glint of belief in a better future. "So, what's the game plan?" she inquired, the question laced with a mixture of curiosity and determination. Our steps continued, leading us away from the confines of the house and toward an open field. It was a place I knew I'd miss, but lately, it had become nothing more than a distant memory.

"We'll have to wait for the next opportunity," I replied calmly, holding my plan close to my chest, unable to find the courage to divulge it to them. I aimed to deliberately provoke Mother, a calculated move to stoke her fiery temper. I understood that her anger could become my ally, a means to an end. Amidst her rage, I would seize the chance to slip away to the store and contact Jessica. Even if Mother stumbled upon my note, she would unknowingly play into my hands. Her unrelenting thirst for alcohol and her compulsion to lash out were vulnerabilities I intended to exploit for our liberation. This time, I was determined to turn those very weaknesses into instruments of our freedom.

Before setting my plan in motion, I recognized the necessity of finding a peaceful, secluded spot for prayer—a haven to consult Jesus for guidance on its execution. Nestled under the familiar, comforting canopy of the aged apple tree, I would initiate my process, just as I had done countless times before. I would pose my query to Jesus, "What do I do?" and then I'd drift into contemplation, secure in the knowledge that this method had proven its worth on many occasions. Some might define this as faith, but for me, it embodies practicality—rooted in a blend of experience and trust.

Suddenly, at the end of the block, just before the street gradually curved to the left, Lynn came to a halt. "I don't want to live with Mom anymore," she whispered tearfully.

The strain became too much, and I couldn't contain myself any longer. I lashed out, unable to hold back. "Shut the hell up!" I yelled.

Carter immediately leapt to Lynn's defense. "You shut your mouth, Gregg! I'll kick your ass!" Normally, I would have let it slide, but everything had changed.

"Screw you, fatty!" I retorted, standing my ground.

Carter's blow struck first, landing with force against my shoulder. An electric numbness shot down my arm, yet I summoned the resolve to retaliate. We collided, grappling, and exchanging a flurry of punches, kicks, and even desperate bites, our struggle unfolding amidst the chaos. Meanwhile, Lynn cautiously started her retreat back home.

A surge of determination pushed Carter to disengage from me, his focus shifting to intercept Lynn before she inadvertently unveiled our confrontation to the world, his urgency eclipsing any concern for her safety.

I gathered myself from the ground, waves of pain coursing through my injured arm. I continued walking toward the field and swung my arm gently, attempting to ease the gnawing cramp that had taken hold. The pavement surrendered to the dirt beneath my feet, a familiar and grounding shift. Its presence reassured me that my destination was near. The late afternoon sun cast a radiant, almost otherworldly, glow across the field. Each step I took elicited a guttural grunt, my arm's agony a persistent reminder. Yet, resolve surged within me; a mission awaited fulfillment, and I would not relent.

Just before the edge of the tree line, hidden by the first thicket of oak and maple, I witnessed something that tarnished my once beautiful sanctuary, forever haunting my peace. It surpassed the molestation I endured at the hands of Mother and strangers—it was the most horrific sight I had ever seen.

Her name was Marla, enveloped in the innocence of prepubescence. Long brown hair framed eyes of the same shade. She was a classmate of mine, and I had adored her from the moment I saw her radiant smile on the school playground.

But her smile had vanished. The twin boys from our neighborhood, a few years older than her, had descended into the realm of cruelty, subjecting her to their torment. While she appeared to be going along with their despicable game, the agony etched across her face betrayed her true feelings. I recognized that pain all too intimately; it mirrored what I saw each time I confronted my reflection.

The twins wore shirts but no pants. Marla was completely exposed. They took turns, one holding her upright while the other forced himself between her legs, spreading them wide. Marla emitted soft moans, her gaze fixated on the sky, devoid of any emotion. I didn't run for help—whom could I tell? Who would care? Instead, I crouched low in the grass, a witness to the unfolding horror. I did nothing. I said nothing. I was just a foolish boy.

The initial twin emitted a guttural growl, a noise that mirrored distress, his features contorting in reaction. Their roles reversed, the second twin mirrored the first, but with swifter motions. They hurriedly donned their clothes, their laughter reverberating through the air as they faded from view.

Frozen in place, I watched Marla use a crumpled pair of panties to clean herself. The acid surged up my throat, and I fought the urge to vomit, swallowing repeatedly. She was dressed; her movements were mechanical. She didn't shed a tear. Afterward, she walked straight toward my hiding spot in the tall grass, narrowly missing me by a few feet.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips as she moved past me, seemingly oblivious to my presence. It dawned on me that even if I had stood directly in her path, she likely wouldn't have noticed. With her out of sight, I rose from my hidden spot and retraced my steps back home. The once-magical trees held

no allure for me anymore; they had lost their enchantment. My sanctuary had been violated, robbed of its sanctity.

The apple tree, once a symbol of solace, was now tainted by the sinister desires of a stranger. The grove of trees, where Marla and I had sought refuge, bore the indelible mark of her violation. Sam's absence felt like a weight that bore down on me. Escaping from this nightmarish existence seemed to be the only feasible course of action.

During my journey back, a formation of birds took flight overhead, seeking refuge and tranquility among the fields and trees. A pang of regret pierced through me as I thought of Marla's plight and how her trust had been shattered.

My thoughts then shifted to the buried memories of buried sexual abuse that plagued me, constantly resurfacing. I fought fiercely to suppress them, but they always surged forward in an unstoppable torrent.

Mother, the encounters with others, and the floodgates would open. The stranger's mouth on me. The babysitter, her underwear pooled around her ankles as she knelt, sucking with a force that caused pain.

Frequently, we found ourselves abandoned as Mother immersed herself in her drinking escapades alongside the local denizens who were all too familiar with alcohol's embrace. Yet, it was rare to witness them indulging as voraciously as she did. On occasions when Mother vanished to Mrs. Dowling's – a neighbor who lived nearby – her youngest daughter, Sachi would occasionally grace our home with her presence. She'd assert that Mother had dispatched her to ensure our well-being, but I held a more accurate understanding. It wasn't Mother's concern for us that prompted this gesture; such considerations never entered her mind.

Sachi was probably sixteen or seventeen, plump and fond of wearing cropped shirts that barely covered her breasts, braless, her belly spilling over the waistband of her jeans like a muffin top. In private, Carter confessed he liked her bosom. He would say, "I like their titties. I like them titties a lot."

Sachi would put Lynn to bed, and when Carter grew tired, he would retreat to his room as well. Then Sachi would coax me into staying up, promising to bring me treats from the nearby corner store—an ice cream or a sweet cake. True to her word, she would return with the treat, and I would devour it hastily, afraid she would take it back.

Afterward, Sachi's behavior would change. She would give me a peculiar look, head tilted downward, eyes gazing up. I found it somewhat endearing. She grew quiet, slowly sliding down her pants, and if she was wearing any, her underwear.

I noticed the deep red marks on her stomach, crisscrossing lines caused by tightly fitting pants. They appeared painful. Averting my gaze, both to avoid seeing her nakedness and to be aware of what would come next, I knew the sequence of events all too well.

She would kneel before me, removing my underwear. Usually, I only wore underwear and an old T-shirt. Sometimes she would giggle, but mostly she would take me into her mouth, creating sucking sounds. The pain was overwhelming, but I refused to cry out. If I did, Carter or Lynn might emerge from their rooms. They would witness Sachi's actions and see that I didn't stop her.

More strangers. Faceless men and women. Men's Mother brought home from the bar. Women from the neighborhood who drank with Mother. Thrusting my hand into them as they writhed on their backs, moaning, and laughing simultaneously. Their breasts sagged like their bellies. And Mother always lurked nearby, hidden in another room.

Sometimes she was with a man, sometimes alone, but she always knew when to emerge—after they were done. When it was all over, she would collect her payment. And I witnessed her collecting money from the women too.

Haunted by the specter of Marla, I drew closer to home. But doubt gnawed at me, eroding my confidence that Lauren would indeed provide refuge. A shadow of skepticism crept over me, erasing some of my conviction in the belief that Mother would simply let us depart without a struggle. It wasn't born of affection but rather driven by her spiteful nature. As I approached our house, I could see Mother outside on the porch waiting.

"Gregg, come here!" Mother's stance was one of authority, her hands firmly anchored on her hips. "Were you and Carter at it again?" Her tone oozed with a veneer of self-righteousness. "I won't stand for fighting under this roof!"

For a period that seemed to stretch endlessly, I stood silent, my gaze locked onto the ground while her labored breathing, amplified by dentures, permeated the air. I was bereft of words, trapped in a no-win situation. We had, indeed, been fighting, and any lie would surely crumble under scrutiny. Yet even the truth offered no salvation. And so, I stood there, suspended in time, acutely aware that Mother had settled on her verdict long before my return from the field.

She remained rooted on the porch, hands still on her hips, her focus squarely fixed on me. The daylight waned, casting long shadows. "Step inside this blasted house," she commanded, her pivot leading her into the dim interior.

I trailed behind her, my feet hesitating on the threadbare and grimy square of linoleum, just at the cusp of the threshold. Summoning the last dregs of my courage, I managed to squeak out, "I'm sorry,

Mama. We were just roughhousing." It was an untruth, but panic drove me to utterance, leaving no room for choices.

Lynn huddled on the floor, wrapped in an old winter coat. Carter occupied the couch. Mother stood inches away from me. "Don't you utter another word," Mother growled, grinding her teeth so audibly I could hear the sound. "I'm going to beat you black and blue."

"Mom, no," Lynn whimpered. As Mother lunged for me, I instinctively raised my hands to shield my face, then let them drop to my sides. Life drained from my body, leaving me devoid of the strength to defend myself.

Abruptly, her advance ceased. Carter's anguished scream shattered the air, momentarily arresting Mother in her tracks. The sound diverted her attention, causing her gaze to shift toward him. Carter had reached an age where he no longer yielded. He met Mother's stare, his visage a fusion of fury and heartache. His fists clenched; teeth gritted in defiance. While beads of sweat adorned his temples, they did little to mask his underlying fear.

Mother appeared bewildered as if her confidant had betrayed her—a silent alliance shattered by Carter's audacity. Then, with an air of defeat, Mother slumped onto the couch, urging us to leave. Wordlessly, we complied, filtering through the front door in a somber procession. Relief blanketed me, yet I remained keenly aware that this reprieve was transient at best.

As we approached the sidewalk leading to the porch, the door slammed shut behind us with a resounding bang, locking us out. Despite the summer's heat, an icy shiver coursed through the night. Lynn remained ensconced in her tattered winter coat, its sleeves hanging empty. Carter and Lynn tread barefoot. Together, the three of us stood under the fading orange glow, eyes fixed on the ground, grappling with an uncertain future.

"Let's gather under the back awning," Carter suggested. In silence, we rounded the corner of the house, passing the weathered wooden gate, and found refuge beneath the awning. There, we settled onto worn lawn chairs and a fractured picnic table. Words felt inadequate, rendered superfluous by the weight of our shared experience. We awaited Mother's summons to return if she would grant us that.

Typically, I would have kept a watchful eye through the kitchen window, ensuring Mother didn't ignite the house in flames or attempt self-harm. Yet, an emptiness consumed me at that moment. Although a pang of fear hinted that she might be slicing her wrists even then, weariness outweighed vigilance.

Deep within, I recognized a lingering tether. Despite my realization that life could exist without her, complete detachment eluded me. Eleven years with Mother had woven a bond that was far from easily severed. Love still clung, compelling me to rise, to approach the side window of the house, and peer inward.

I scaled the wooden gate, resting on its surface as I leaned over the small ledge of the window frame. And there, a sight awaited me that chilled me to my core.

Mother occupied a rickety wooden chair, a shotgun laid across her lap. Her gaze appeared vacant, fixated on some distant void, seemingly unaware of my presence. An empty vodka bottle lay discarded beside her on the floor.

With a swift retreat, I withdrew from the window, returning to my spot beneath the awning. Not a word was exchanged between Carter, Lynn, and me. There, we sat, frozen by numbness, grappling with the weight of impending disaster.

Minutes stretched into hours, the shroud of darkness deepening around us. We clustered together under the awning at the back of the house, our collective quietness serving as a soothing salve, fostering solace in our united front. The distant hum of passing cars wove itself into a muted tapestry, an unwitting symphony that remained oblivious to the heartrending tale etching its indelible marks in the confines of our small corner of the world. Sensing a shift in the air, a silent agreement propelled us from the back shelter to the house's front, where vulnerability and hope intertwined more palpably. As the front door creaked open, Mother stumbled onto the porch. Her unsteady gait and flushed face were evident signs of her inebriation. Her slurred words barely formed a coherent plea. "I'm sorry, my darlings," she mumbled. "I didn't mean it. I love you. Please, come inside."

At that moment, I stood there, seemingly frozen, but my spirit blazed with a newfound resolve. It was as if the night church preachers had indeed saved me. Carter and Lynn, seeking comfort and safety, stood close together but avoided physical contact. None of us were comfortable with touch, a legacy of the painful experiences we had endured. I remained alone, my usual stance in life, a position that would persist for years to come.

But my determination to protect my siblings could not be extinguished. The unrelenting cycle of pain and suffering had pushed me to my breaking point, and I was determined to leave this place, taking my brother and sister with me. There was no other choice; I had to do it. Despite the fear and the uncertainty, I couldn't let them suffer any longer. It was a compulsion that had always driven me, no matter how much I had been hurt.

Carter and Lynn began to move, ascending the cracked cement steps and crossing the dilapidated threshold into that wretched house, obeying Mother's unspoken command with wary eyes. I followed suit, trying not to meet Mother's gaze but finding myself locked in her stare. It was another habit I couldn't break, no matter how afraid I was of someone. I never backed down from a stare.

In the silence that surrounded us, something powerful stirred deep within me, subtle but profound. I was no longer a passive victim of my circumstances; I had transformed into a survivor, armed with an unyielding determination to face the uncertain path ahead.

In the days that followed, I was ready to forsake everything I'd ever known. My mind churned with ceaseless planning, tearing at the seams of my young consciousness. I stood on the precipice of the unknown, a glimmer of hope kindling within me, stoked by my unyielding faith in Jesus. I was about to step into an abyss, a journey devoid of maps or certainties about the path ahead. But one truth remained unwavering—I would find freedom, someday.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The following afternoon, seeking refuge from the world, I retreated to the old closet that led to the attic. In the dimness, I applied lotion to my raw skin, wincing as the stinging sensation permeated my being. The thought of hiding in that closet forever, shielded from life's harsh realities, tempted me like a siren's song.

Suddenly, the bedroom stirred with motion, causing me to freeze. My hand was still slick from the lotion, and I clutched myself in fear. Vulnerability washed over me, but terror held me captive, preventing any movement. Through the rickety closet door, I watched as Mother entered the room, dressed in worn underwear, her body bearing the marks of time and hardship. In her grasp, a half-empty bottle hinted at an anticipated presence. Pressed against the closet's far wall, I sought invisibility, my gaze fixed on the unfolding scene.

Soon after, a stranger entered the room. Mother's voice was tense, demanding, "Don't mess with me!" The man's response was slurred, a wad of something shoved into her open hand. Both voices carried the weight of intoxication. Placing the bottle on an old dresser, they collapsed onto the bed together. As she discarded her soiled underwear, tossing it aside without care, I turned my gaze away. The room resonated with the sounds of their intimate encounter, a cacophony I tried to drown out by covering my ears. My head

bowed; I realized I had neglected to pull up my underwear. Paralyzed by fear, my eyes tightly shut, battling a surge of nausea.

"Get off me!" Mother's voice broke the post-coital stillness.

The man's retort, "Filthy whore," accompanied his hasty dressing. Curses exchanged; he exited the room. The slam of the battered front screen door against the house and the revving car engine signaled his departure.

Then, Mother's cry pierced the air, proclaiming, "I've been raped!" Though a hint of falseness lurked in her slurred words, the knowledge of her deception intensified the horror of the witnessed encounter.

I remained immobile, fearing any sound I made might betray me. Discovery in the closet with exposed skin and lotion could lead to merciless beatings and accusations of spying on Mother's intimate act. Anxious minutes stretched into what felt like endless hours until Mother finally left the room. Observing her don her underwear, retrieve the bottle, and stagger away, I listened attentively. Her dressing in the living room exhibited indifference to the potential presence of her children. The sound of her footsteps faded as she moved through the kitchen and out the back door. The scrape of metal against concrete marked her descent into the backyard lawn chair. Nausea surged as I strained my ears, gripped by rising discomfort. And so, I continued to listen.

Quickly pulling up my underwear, I donned a pair of oversized hand-me-down swim trunks. With urgency, I opened the closet door and descended the small platform onto the bedroom floor. A scent of sex and decay lingered in the room, the man's cologne intertwining with Mother's fragrance, a scent impossible to cleanse from my hands. Swiftly, I exited the bedroom, moving towards the front door, away from Mother's presence in the backyard. Near the exit, I slipped on my tennis shoes, leaving the laces untied. An old tank top and sockless feet completed my outfit.

Standing in the front yard, sweltering heat bore down upon me. The distant, melodic jingle of the ice cream truck reached my ears, seemingly now about a block away. My empty stomach protested, yearning for a sweet respite. Kyle set up a sprinkler in the front yard, inviting me with a beckoning gesture. Crossing the street, I embraced the promise of cooling water, soothing my tender skin after the previous night's ordeal. Turning the squeaky water faucet, the hose expanded with a low groan. Thin streams of water hissed into the air, creating an enticing pattern. Anticipating the refreshing jets, Kyle and I readied ourselves to dash through the curtain of water.

Amid our preparation, the ice cream truck rolled down the street, its bells clanging in the air. Mrs. Jacobson surprised us by stepping outside, offering a dollar for Kyle and me to share for ice cream. With flushed faces, and our skin starting to sunburn, we stood among a few other eager children, awaiting our frozen treats at the truck's window. I received an ice cream cone, its flavor slipping from memory.

Abruptly, a passing car struck me as I attempted to savor the treat. My left arm, holding the ice cream, was clipped by the car, causing me to spin like a top. The ice cream flew from my hand, landing a distance away. The sudden impact prompted wails resembling banshee cries. Nearly fainting from the pain, I cradled my swollen arm, which had ballooned to double its size. Amidst my yearning for a fleeting moment of happiness, I disregarded caution after getting my ice cream, rushing into the street without looking. The screeching of tires registered belatedly, as the world spun around me, the searing pain consuming my left arm.

The driver halted, leaping from the car in a frantic rush towards me. He assessed my condition in a panic, apologizing profusely, his eyes scanning the surroundings as if seeking someone. Sobbing, I fled from him, racing towards our house. Mother, standing on the porch, remained motionless as I dashed past her. She barely reacted, allowing me unimpeded entry into the house. Now inside, I heard the driver apologize to Mother outside the front door, then left.

As Mother entered the house, she found me seated on the loveseat, clutching my injured arm, striving to stifle my tears. The sun dipped, casting slanted, purple shadows that evoked a sense of summer tranquility. As I strained to open my fingers, pain surged, inducing writhing, and blinding white light in my mind. I fought the urge to scream, gritting my teeth and inhaling sharply. Tears streamed, tracing paths into my ears, tickling them. Sleep surprisingly overcame me amidst the agonizing pain.

Upon regaining consciousness, Mother sat in a chair nearby, her gaze frigid as she observed me through a haze of cigarette smoke, a glass of wine held aloft in her other hand. Carter and Lynn sat huddled together, their faces etched with concern. Carter spoke first, his words cutting through the fog of pain. "You were hit by a car." A sharp twinge of pain shot through my left arm in confirmation. Lynn echoed his concern, her voice filled with worry. "Gregg, you were hit by a car." Exhaustion tugged at my eyelids, luring me back to the realm of slumber, and I began to drift away.

I descended into a liminal state, caught between wakefulness and dreams, floating through a series of fleeting moments. In one of these intervals, I witnessed Mother rise from her chair. Holding a glass of wine and a cigarette, an unusual sight unfolded as both rested within her left hand, an oddity given her right-handed nature. This peculiarity briefly piqued my curiosity before I once again succumbed to the abyss of sleep.

Falling deeper into that elusive realm, my consciousness wavered, shifting between presence and absence, like a fragile dance of ephemeral sensations. In one such moment, Mother, positioned beside the loveseat, knelt. Her touch, conveyed by her right hand, caressed my leg with an unexpected tenderness. Her gaze locked onto my face, and in that fleeting connection, a complex tapestry of emotions unfolded within me. Suddenly, her focus shifted, her attention redirected toward Carter and Lynn, who remained seated nearby. A command slipped from her lips, urging them to retreat to their beds. They complied, rising from their seats, and offered me a silent farewell in the form of a wave as they passed by. Their figures dwindled

in the distance, fading away, and I drew in a deep breath, the throbbing ache in my left arm a poignant reminder of my harsh reality.

In a tone that feigned reassurance, Mother declared, "Your arm is just bruised," her lips curling into a faint smile. Yet, the smudged lipstick trapped between her teeth bore an eerie resemblance to the hue of blood, casting a disconcerting shadow over her expression. She straightened, her gaze briefly drifting toward the closed bedroom doors as if seeking some guidance from the solitude they offered. After a pregnant pause, she resumed her position beside me, once again kneeling.

Carefully placing her glass on the floor, she proceeded to extinguish her cigarette in the remnants of her wine. The brief, sizzling hiss marked the end of that small ember's existence. Then, in a swift change of demeanor, Mother's cupped hand, the one that had previously held the glass, moved with urgency to cover my mouth. The warmth of her palm clashed with the icy grip of her other hand, now clamped onto my swollen arm with a force that radiated agony. The sensation was overwhelming—an intertwining of searing pain and an eerie stillness, akin to a tempestuous sea suddenly frozen into silence.

Agony fused with an eerie serenity, a calmness that carried an unsettling weight. I hung in time, trapped in an eternal descent into a realm beyond comprehension. The sensation of falling continued an unrelenting waltz with oblivion, until finally, the boundary between existence and nothingness dissolved into obscurity. In that enigmatic void, I ceased to exist.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Over time, our connection with Kyle, Louis, and Alexis dwindled to nearly nothing, despite their proximity just across the street. We rarely saw them, and while a part of me felt the sting of isolation and simmering anger, there was an odd sense of relief in avoiding their inquisitive gazes. Growing older, I became increasingly conscious of my circumstances, and with that awareness came a shroud of shame. This shame gradually transformed into fierce anger, fueled by memories of the abuse that had haunted me, particularly the specter of sexual abuse. These painful recollections, the more I fixated on them, fueled a growing inferno of rage within me, clawing and constricting at the core of my being.

In the shadow of our intertwined pasts, Kyle was more than just an ally—he evolved into the sibling destiny denied me. Against the backdrop of relentless jests from my elder brother Carter, Kyle emerged, glowing like a beacon in twilight. Though we might've matched in stature, in spirit, he transcended, becoming both shield and confidante.

During these transformative years, Kyle, with grace both gentle and profound, illuminated the path to Jesus for me. On a particularly searing summer day, when the sun seemed to blaze with fury, casting stark, ferocious shadows, Kyle and I converged at the edge of my driveway—a spot rendered significant due to my mother's strict boundaries. Her vigilant gaze, unyielding from behind the windowpane, often felt like

an invisible barrier. On this very threshold, a nexus between our worlds, Kyle unraveled the essence of his burgeoning faith.

The dichotomy between our households was stark. The Jacobson's domain stood in poetic contrast: a pristine lawn, an imposing tree reaching skyward (the very one that endured an encounter with our old Blue Station Wagon), flourishing flowerbeds, and impeccably manicured shrubs. This idyllic panorama, unfortunately, became a constant emblem of longing for my mother. As we lingered where worn-out tarmac kissed an earthen trail, Kyle painted vivid tales of our Savior, Jesus—portraying Him as an eternal refuge, unbiased to societal distinctions.

Kyle's revelations resonated deeply, evoking a sensation of reconnecting with a long-lost friend. It was as if Jesus had always been there, yet Kyle's words gave form to my innate connection. Through him, I realized that this understanding was a divine whisper, an echo from the Holy Spirit.

With time, my spiritual journey flourished. The Holy Spirit's presence grew palpable, not just as a philosophical construct but equal to God the Father and God the Son. This awakening marked a pivotal turn in my spiritual odyssey, positioning the Holy Spirit as both refuge and guiding light through life's intricate labyrinth.

In moments of doubt and fear, the Holy Spirit became my anchor, reminding me that resilience is not just about enduring, but about trusting in a higher power to guide me through the labyrinth of life. More than a mere Comforter, the Holy Spirit emerged as a guardian and a steadfast light, a perpetual gentle embrace amidst life's tempests. This unwavering presence taught me that true strength comes from within, fortified by faith and the certainty that, no matter how turbulent the storm, I was never alone.

This divine essence resonated in the harmonious chorus of the Christian collective and was mirrored in prayers seeking unity. Some even posited that the Holy Spirit, with its magnificent prowess, played a pivotal role alongside God the Father and God the Son in sculpting our very existence.

With these revelations as my foundation, my path brightened, leading me towards God's grandeur. It became unequivocally clear that my meeting with Kyle on that sweltering summer day marked the dawn of a profound spiritual voyage, charted by the ever-watchful Holy Spirit.

So, on that transformative afternoon, poised at the crossroads of our destinies, with the silhouette of my childhood home lingering, I passionately called out to Jesus. Although it wasn't apparent to me then, He had always been present, patiently awaiting my invocation. In that profound moment of realization, His boundless grace enveloped me, igniting a resplendent flame within my soul, destined to illuminate my path through life's most enigmatic journeys.

However, as time passed, I began to recognize that beneath the flames of anger, it was fear and intense loneliness that had insidiously taken root within me. True rage wasn't my innate disposition. Instead, beneath the protective armor, my gentle heart longed for the embrace of nostalgia, even before the weight of departing from my dearest childhood friend sank in. The fading friendships were a byproduct of the impending separation, and even my siblings recognized that the people we were leaving behind might vanish from our lives forever. It felt akin to autumn, a season of decay bereft of vibrant foliage. It was like heartache, as though my very soul was shattering into countless fragments without a clear cause.

In those depths of despair, I held onto the belief that Jesus witnessed the festering pain within me, observing my slow erosion from a place of quiet understanding. Jesus had always been my savior, guiding me through myriad trials and tribulations, often sheltering me from perils I wouldn't grasp until much later in life. Yet, when it came to finding solace or seeking happiness, Jesus appeared distant from such human struggles. Why should He concern Himself with our ephemeral emotions? After all, His earthly journey had entailed far more suffering than we could conceive.

Gradually, I realized that Jesus wasn't preoccupied with our fleeting feelings because He had set our sights on loftier destinies. When we allow ourselves to be consumed by transient emotions, when we induce

the same in others, we risk metamorphosing into monsters in our own right. This insight cast light on one of the factors that had transformed my mother into a monstrous figure—her adamant refusal to accept the word "no" from anyone.

As the day of my departure loomed closer, the ache of missing my closest friend grew more pronounced. Yet, I recognized that leaving was an imperative step; staying would have consigned me to a life devoid of new connections. The ceaseless turbulence orchestrated by Mother, her actions tugging at the thread of my existence, left me with no alternative. Survival necessitated severing bonds, even if it meant bidding adieu to the person who had woven happiness into my childhood.

The fading threads of friendship with Kyle, Louis, and Alexis echoed the crumbling state of our household. Their parents forbade them entry into our abode, erasing the warmth that once enveloped our families. Mrs. Jacobson, once a fount of geniality, had transformed into a figure radiating icy detachment towards me, Carter, and Lynn. Mr. Jacobson, too, had forsaken his earlier benevolence, replacing it with an austere and distant demeanor.

Our hope waned, eclipsed by Mother's corrosive presence. Our will to persevere eroded under her relentless oppression. Even Carter, once vibrant, withered before our eyes, his gaunt frame bearing witness to the toll of Mother's maltreatment. We discarded the shroud of poverty, wearing it openly without reservation. Trapped within the confines of a dwelling haunted by a monstrous entity, each passing moment beside her metamorphosed into a fight for survival. Abandoned by the outside world, we confronted the tempest of Mother's rage unaccompanied, ensnared in the clutches of her malevolent and ruinous aura.

As I cast my mind back to those days, it's clear how desperately I yearned for the simplicity of playing with Kyle, to partake in unadulterated moments of joy. Yet even those fleeting instances when

Mother wasn't my tormentor, or I her caretaker, could no longer stave off the deterioration of our faltering camaraderie.

One afternoon, I found myself standing alone in the backyard, beside the flourishing lilac bush. Normally, the sweet scent of the blossoms would have enveloped me with serene calmness. But now, that fragrance invaded like a malevolent force, choking me until my stomach convulsed, expelling its contents onto the grass near the lilac bush. I stared at the mess, a grim understanding dawning within me. The next step was all too evident—I had to provoke another eruption of Mother's wrath.

Nervously, I retched once more, my fingers clutching the cyclone fence that separated our yard from the neighbors. My hope hung by a thread, praying they weren't home to witness this dreadful scene. Another dry heave seized me, and I hunched over, arms folding defensively around my quivering abdomen. With a determined breath, I straightened, letting my arms hang listlessly at my sides. In my front pants pocket, I retrieved two dimes—precious coins saved for the sole purpose of reaching out to Jessica. With newfound resolution, I pivoted and treaded back into the house.

"I'm going to do it," I whispered to the empty air around me, my determination unwavering. "I'm going to push her buttons, and make her furious enough to unleash her wrath." With those words etching a path of resolve in my mind, I stepped back into the house, the weight of my decision heavy on my shoulders. A fleeting hope lingered, a hope that perhaps circumstances or some unforeseen force would intervene, blocking my path. Yet, the house remained silent—no divine interference, no guardian angel. Only Mother and I occupied the living room. Carter and Lynn had retreated from view, leaving the two of us to our own devices.

Seated on the couch, Mother mumbled to herself, a disarray of thoughts echoing in the room. My focus narrowed to her figure as I mustered the remnants of my courage. I spoke, my voice starting as a fragile thread but growing stronger with each word. "Mom, why do you drink?"

The question left my lips, hanging heavy in the air. My mouth felt parched, my breath quivering like leaves in the wind. This time, she heard me. The shift in her demeanor was palpable—the sudden cessation of her mutterings, the intensity of her gaze piercing through me. Panic surged within me, an electric current coursing through my veins. For a fleeting instant, I considered recanting my words, a plea for reprieve lingering on my tongue. But that moment of hesitation vanished like a wisp of smoke. It was too late to retract my inquiry.

"What the hell did you just say?" Her eruption was swift and explosive, a sonic boom of anger that reverberated through the room. Her voice reached an astonishing pitch, a crescendo of disbelief and fury intertwining. The question I had chosen, the question that had materialized in my mind only moments ago, hung between us like a sharpened blade. It was the perfect question, poised to slice through her defenses, to wound more deeply than any other.

"Come here, you little brat!" Mother's voice crackled with rage, a symphony of fury as she lunged at me. In one fluid motion, she cleared the coffee table, her momentum carrying her forward to strike my chest with a force that stole the air from my lungs. The world turned upside down as I crashed backward, my body meeting the unforgiving floor. The impact reverberated through me, leaving me momentarily breathless and disoriented.

Mother's wrath was unrelenting. Straddling my fallen form, she unleashed a torrent of blows upon me, her hands raining down like a tempest. Each slap was a searing imprint of pain, a visceral reminder of her unrestrained anger. Left and right, the blows came, a ceaseless barrage that seemed to warp time itself. Back and forth, the rhythm of her assault became a macabre dance of suffering.

Her nicotine-stained fingers left trails of discomfort, scraping across my cheeks with each strike, a cruel reminder of her dominance. Our faces were drenched in sweat, the salty beads mingling with the acrid scent of fear and agony. It was a battle of wills, a contest between her fury and my endurance, each blow driving me deeper into a realm of pain and desperation.

Fortunately, Carter returned home just in time to witness Mother's assault. He shouted at her to get off me, his voice filled with a harshness that matched his swollen and bloodied nose—a result of Mother's headbutt. Mother resisted, but Carter's determination prevailed as he managed to pull her away, enduring another headbutt in the process. Despite the chaos and pain, his protective instincts fueled his strength.

Seizing the opportunity, I summoned every ounce of resilience within me and struggled to my feet. Adrenaline surged through my veins, overriding the pain that shot through my body. I knew I had to escape, for my own sake and Carter's safety. With shaky legs and a heart pounding like a war drum, I stumbled towards the back door, the echoes of Carter's urgent encouragement urging me forward. His voice was a lifeline, a reminder that I wasn't alone in this battle.

As I burst outside, the scorching sun intensified the pain from the cuts on my face, and my head throbbed relentlessly. Blinking back tears, I gazed towards the corner where the payphone stood, a beacon of potential salvation. Every step felt like a monumental effort, my body protesting with each movement. My vision blurred as tears streamed down my face, mingling with the sweat and blood. I dropped to one knee, gasping for air, the world spinning around me.

Summoning a reserve of determination I didn't know I possessed, I pushed myself up from the ground. My muscles quivered, and my head swam, but my resolve was unyielding. I knew the payphone was my lifeline, my chance to call for help and escape this nightmare. Through the haze of pain and desperation, I steadied myself and, with an unwavering sense of purpose, headed toward the payphone.

Yet, amidst the agony that threatened to consume me, I heard Mother's frenzied footsteps as she burst through the screen door, her voice cutting through the air like a serrated knife. I turned, my heart pounding, just in time to meet her enraged gaze. "Get the fuck back in here!" she screamed, her voice a chilling mix of fury and desperation.

Despite the terror that gripped me, I knew I couldn't turn back. The choice was clear—I had to keep moving, keep running, and find a way to break free from the cycle of abuse that had ensnared us all. Her words propelled me forward, and I sprinted towards the small corner store with all the strength my battered body could muster. The ache in my chest and the throbbing in my head seemed distant as adrenaline coursed through my veins. Mother's threats echoed in my ears, a harsh soundtrack to my desperate escape. I reached the end of our block and stumbled across the street, my tear-filled eyes hindering my vision. Each step felt like a monumental effort, my body protesting with each movement. The world around me blurred into a chaotic whirlwind of fear and determination.

Finally, I arrived at the small parking lot, a sanctuary of sorts, where a bright silver Bell payphone stood. My fingers trembled as I fumbled for the dimes in my pocket. My heart pounded in rhythm with my ragged breaths, and a sinking dread clawed at my gut. The dimes were there, a small glimmer of hope in the chaos. I placed the first dime into the slot, dialing Jessica's number with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. The seconds felt like an eternity as the dial tone echoed in my ear.

She answered, her voice a lifeline of familiarity and comfort amidst the turmoil. But as I opened my mouth to speak, my throat clenched, rendering me mute. The words I so desperately needed to say were trapped, suffocated by the weight of fear and trauma. A lump formed in my throat, and tears welled in my eyes. Each attempt to force out a sound felt like a battle against an invisible force that was determined to keep me silent. Jessica's voice, filled with concern and confusion, pleaded with me to respond, to let her know I was okay.

Despite my efforts, no words escaped my lips. The agony of my struggle was palpable, a silent scream of desperation and pain. After a few heart-wrenching moments that stretched into eternity, Jessica's voice faded as she hung up, leaving me alone with the echoes of my shattered voice and the weight of my unspoken truth. The payphone's receiver dangled in my hand, a symbol of my silenced plea for help, a reminder of the torment that held me captive even in moments of attempted escape.

One dime remained, my final chance. With trembling hands, I inserted it into the slot, each movement an act of sheer willpower. Carefully dialing Jessica's number, I held my breath, my heart pounding against the walls of my chest. Relief washed over me as her voice crackled through the receiver, though irritation laced her tone as she mistook me for a prank caller. My voice trembled as I managed to utter a few broken words, desperation choking each syllable. But then, silence engulfed the line, swallowed by the void, replaced by the cold, mechanical dial tone.

Replacing the phone in its cradle, I felt a mixture of frustration and defeat. My last chance had slipped through my fingers like sand, leaving me with nothing but the echo of my voice and the weight of my unspoken pain. With my heart heavy, I turned away from the payphone and cast my gaze around the parking lot, my eyes landing on the garden hose attached to the building's exterior. It was a lifeline of a different kind, a source of potential relief amidst the chaos.

Summoning the last ounce of strength within me, I stumbled towards the back of the store, where the hose lay coiled. The storekeeper used it to rinse the small asphalt parking lot, a routine task that seemed almost mundane amid my turmoil.

Ignoring the potential consequences, I turned the knob, waiting with bated breath for the water to surge forth from the nozzle. A moment of uncertainty hung in the air, but then, the water flowed, transitioning from warm to cool as it met the open air.

Clutching the hose, I watched as the clear water rushed past, a shimmering stream of solace in a world of pain. Bringing the hose to my lips, I drank greedily, the icy water soothing my parched throat and momentarily numbing the ache within me. With trembling hands, I splashed the cool water onto my battered face, wincing at the initial shock before feeling the relief seep in. Eventually, I turned the faucet clockwise, the water's flow diminishing until it ceased completely.

Releasing the hose, I let it drop to the ground, its clinking sound against the asphalt a muted echo of my struggles. Slowly, I began the arduous journey back home, each step a testament to my resilience in the face of adversity. As I crossed the small square of asphalt that served as the corner store's parking lot, I stopped just short of a line of shrubs. Hidden from view, I peered around, catching a glimpse of Mother still standing on the porch, a figure consumed by anger and determination.

In the distance, I saw Carter and Lynn approaching, their presence a fragile thread of hope in the darkness. They walked towards me, their weary forms a mirror of the pain that had become our lives. As they drew closer, I stepped slightly into view, a silent acknowledgment that I was still standing, still fighting.

Carter's voice broke the silence, his words carrying a mix of exhaustion and concern. "Mom wants you home," he said, his voice weary and worn. His swollen nose and bloodstained chin were testaments to his defiance. I could see the resignation in his eyes, a quiet understanding of the relentless cycle in which we were trapped.

Lynn stood beside him, her tear-streaked face a canvas of raw emotion. Her voice trembled as she spoke, her words a plea infused with desperation. "Tell me we're leaving, Gregg," she implored, her vulnerability laid bare. "Please, tell me!" At that moment, I felt the weight of their hopes and fears, their longing for escape. But the grip of my pain and frustration was too strong, and I lashed out, my words a reflection of my shattered resolve.

"Fuck you!" The words erupted from me, a raw expression of my inner turmoil, a release of the anger that had been building within me for so long. But as the syllables hung in the air, heavy with their weight, a wave of guilt crashed over me, a tidal force that threatened to drown out everything else. Lynn recoiled from my outburst, hurt and bewildered by my sudden lash of words. Yet, even amid my pain, I couldn't ignore the hurt I had caused her.

Still concealed by the veil of shrubbery, the three of us stood together, our shared anguish melding into a chorus of cries. As Jessica's familiar car turned the corner and approached us, the crescendo of our emotions grew louder, a symphony of sorrow that echoed the pain that had etched itself into our lives.

Amidst the tumultuous symphony of emotions, I found myself turning inward, my thoughts reaching out in a desperate prayer. The weight of our collective suffering pressed heavily upon my soul, and in that moment, I clung to my faith as a lifeline. With each breath, with each step towards the corner store, my prayers became more fervent. I poured my heart out to Jesus, my pleas a desperate cry for strength, for deliverance from the unrelenting torment that had haunted us for far too long. Tears mingled with my prayers as I sought solace and guidance from the One I believed could bring light to our darkest moments.

Concealed behind the veil of leaves and branches, I witnessed the scene unfolding before me, my heart aching for the pain etched on the faces of my siblings. As Jessica's car drew nearer, the vibrations of our cries seemed to intertwine with the very air around us, a chaotic harmony that reverberated with the intensity of our shared suffering.

Amid the cacophony of emotions, I continued to pray. I begged for courage, for the strength to endure, for a glimmer of hope to pierce through the darkness. My faith remained steadfast, rooted in the belief that Jesus, in His boundless mercy and compassion, heard our cries and held us close even in our moments of deepest despair.

So, I prayed with a fervor I had never known, my whispered words a desperate plea for guidance, for relief, for a path forward. I knew that the road ahead would be fraught with challenges, but I held onto the hope that Jesus would lead us away from the clutches of our abusive mother, guiding us toward a future where healing and freedom awaited. As I stood there, concealed by the sheltering foliage, I found solace in the unshakable belief that Jesus was present in our pain, a beacon of strength guiding us through the storm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jessica parked the car by the curb, her face etched with determination, and instructed us to meet her at the house. In that single glance, she grasped the gravity of what had unfolded, understanding that it had all begun with Mother. I wiped away the tears and mucus from my face, and together, the three of us embarked on the journey home.

Jessica turned into the driveway while Mother hurried inside the house. We stood there, silently observing as Jessica emerged from her car, moving with purposeful strides, her clenched fists swinging back and forth. A surge of emotions—joy, terror, and sorrow—rushed through me.

I remember cataloging this particular emotion in my mind—a horrible mixture of the deepest, most pointless, irrational, illogical, unreasonable, and useless gut-wrenching feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was so immense that it made me physically full, a sensation unfamiliar due to years of repeated malnutrition. Yet, it felt as if it squeezed out my Holy Spirit, leaving me only with that sickening evil blend of sentiment. The sensation was overwhelming, almost causing me to lose consciousness. As I gazed at Mother, I understood exactly where this feeling originated and why. It was evident that it emanated from Mother, and the reason should have been apparent to me long before now—after enduring twelve long years of torment and torture under her oppressive reign.

The reason was that I was the sole recipient of this feeling, the only one in the entire room experiencing it. A chilling realization struck me: no one else felt the way I did at that moment, not just then, but for as long as I'd lived. A secondary thought crashed into my mind: they had never felt as I did, from the moment I was born. The implications were stark and terrifying. You see, I was genuinely heartbroken, torn apart, on the brink of falling into pieces, afraid that my entire life was slipping away before my eyes. It was as if we were all so irredeemably evil, and it seemed that Jesus despised us. I was also the only one filled with regret over this unfolding tragedy, loving every one of them. I yearned for an immediate reconciliation, willing to forgive and forget if only we could embrace and mend our wounds, promising never to hurt each other again. I fervently prayed for this resolution, aching for it to manifest the moment the idea formed in my mind. I continued praying that prayer relentlessly, only stopping when I heard the car door shut while I remained inside. I couldn't bear the thought of praying for reconciliation if my mother had no part in it. If it came to that, I was at a loss for what to do, and right now, Jesus felt more distant from me than ever. At this moment, it felt as though Jesus had forgotten I even existed.

I had always been labeled as "different," and I recognized it. Even my speech carried an awkwardness because I was always willing to articulate those things people kept hidden. For instance, I would openly express that I was thinking of someone, that I missed them, or that I was sorry. These revelations made them uncomfortable, leading me to believe that my speech was the cause of their unease. But deep down, there was a more profound reason. Deep within them, the ability to feel emotion or compassion had waned. All that remained were those "unrighteous" emotions, the ones not of God but of Satan himself. No wonder their hearts perpetually shattered—Jesus was no longer permitted to mend them. These now reprobate minds no longer desired or sensed a need for Jesus. They no longer felt anything positive; Jesus was certainly out of their emotional reach.

Amid that harrowing scene, a surge of terror and despair gripped my heart as I witnessed Jessica's confrontation with Mother. The intensity of the situation was overwhelming, and my voice seemed to escape me in a desperate plea for mercy.

"Don't Hurt Her!" I screamed, the words a reflection of my inner turmoil and my instinctive need to protect Mother, despite all the pain she had inflicted upon us. My voice was a raw and anguished cry, directed at Jessica but seemingly unheard amidst the chaos.

Mother, on the other hand, sat there in an eerie silence, her demeanor a stark contrast to her usual aggression. She appeared dazed, as if feigning ignorance of the escalating situation, and her silence only added to the surreal and unsettling atmosphere.

I struggled to recall all the profanities and curses that Jessica hurled at Mother, but the memory of their exchange remained vivid in my mind. Each word seemed to cut through the air like a blade, and with each impact, I couldn't help but involuntarily flinch. It was a painful and distressing moment, one that etched itself into my memory with a sense of dread.

Amidst the turmoil, a terrible thought struck me like a bolt of lightning – the thought that I might have unintentionally contributed to Mother's potential harm or even death. The fear and guilt that washed over me in that moment were suffocating. I had embarked on this plan to escape the horrors of our home, thinking that it would save us, but now I faced the horrifying possibility that it could lead to the demise of the person I loved most in the world at that time. The irony was not lost on me. I had once feared that if I stayed too long in that house, Mother's temper would ultimately lead to my demise. Now, it seemed that my desperate attempt to escape had inadvertently placed her life in jeopardy. The weight of this realization bore down on me, and panic threatened to consume me entirely.

Throughout this tumultuous exchange, Mother's behavior remained baffling. Her gaze remained locked onto Jessica's face, and despite the physical confrontation, she offered no resistance. It was a stark

departure from her usual demeanor, where she would fiercely resist even in the presence of our father's formidable authority. At this moment, she appeared both fearful and shockingly apologetic, as if something within her had finally given way, and the well of animosity that had fueled her for years had run dry. It was a disturbing transformation that left me with more questions than answers, adding another layer of complexity to an already tumultuous situation.

Amidst the chaotic and unsettling events unfolding before us, Mother's laughter suddenly erupted, a detached and unsettling sound that sent shivers down our spines. Carter, Lynn, and I stood off to the side, our faces etched with a bewildering blend of confusion and horror. None of us knew how to respond to this bizarre and unexpected outburst, and a deep concern for Mother's well-being washed over me. Her laughter seemed disconnected from the reality of the situation, and it sent a chill down my spine.

A sense of relief cascaded over me when Jessica eventually released her grip on Mother's collar, but just as I thought the ordeal had reached its conclusion, Jessica's hand swung with sudden force, landing a resounding slap across Mother's face. My heart flooded with a desperate plea for compassion and mercy.

And again, I was yelling... "Don't hurt her!" I screamed; my voice filled with an overwhelming desire to shield Mother from harm's way. It was a plea that had echoed countless times before in our tumultuous household, whether it was my father's fury, or the wrath of an angered soul directed at my mother. In those moments, her tempestuous behavior, and the storm of profanities she unleashed often acted as the catalyst, but I remained steadfast in my determination to protect her.

The mandate to honor one's parents, no matter the circumstances, was a fundamental tenet etched into the core of my beliefs. Despite the impossibility of coexisting peacefully under the same roof, shattered by their addictions and violent tendencies, my love for them remained unyielding. My heart was a sanctuary of forgiveness, and my prayers for their redemption were unceasing. I yearned for their salvation, a desire

that transcended the chaos of their existence, carrying them toward celestial redemption. I had even implored Jesus to grant them absolution, a testament to the righteousness that coursed through my veins.

Amid this emotional turmoil, I couldn't help but worry about Jessica's response to my defense of Mother. I feared that she might grow angry and consider leaving us behind. However, her reaction was not what I had expected. Instead, she continued to release her pent-up emotions, finally letting out everything that had been bottled inside her for far too long. Some of the accusations were familiar, words I had already heard from my older sisters before they had stormed out of the house for the last time.

Yet, there were new and deeply disturbing revelations, spoken by Jessica, that I wished I could erase from my memory. These accusations cut deep into my soul, particularly the disclosure that Father had committed unspeakable acts upon Jessica and Lauren and that Mother had allowed these horrors to occur. It brought back memories of the stranger and Mother's unsettling laughter from the room next door, creating a chilling connection that I hadn't fully comprehended until now.

As Jessica urged us to go outside and wait in the car, I once again implored her not to cause harm to Mother. She didn't respond to my plea, but she assured us that she would join us shortly. In heavy silence, my siblings and I left the house, unaware that this moment would mark our final departure from that wretched place.

Carter led the way, followed by Lynn and then me. Throughout the journey to the car, my eyes remained locked on Mother. We descended the crumbling porch steps, engulfed in the sharp scent of gasoline emanating from Jessica's aging car engine that continued to idle. One by one, we climbed into the backseat, my gaze fixated on the vanishing light of day as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with hues of crimson and gold.

In that tense interval, we waited, anticipation mounting, hoping beyond hope that Jessica hadn't resorted to violence against Mother. The minutes dragged on, elongating into what felt like hours, until at

last, Jessica emerged from the house. With a collective sigh of relief, we watched as she settled into the driver's seat, shifted gears, and began to slowly reverse out of the driveway.

Mother stood on the porch, her arms folded, an air of suspicion clouding her expression. It was a moment fraught with tension, yet as we moved away, a transformation overtook Mother's features—a smile of blissful ignorance spread across her face. She raised her arm, waving at us with a sense of unburdened happiness as we pulled away from that house of horrors.

The image of Mother's waving hand, so disconnected from the reality of the situation, etched itself into my memory. It would replay in my mind like an unsettling loop for weeks to come, a symbol of our departure and the complex emotions that accompanied it. Each recurrence brought with it a sense of unease as if she had been transported to a different time and place, utterly oblivious to the gravity of her actions and the consequences that were finally catching up to her. Deep within me, the weight of understanding grew heavier—I couldn't ignore the stark reality that my mother's behavior was a manifestation of her deteriorating mental state. Her persistent refusal to confront her sins and seek redemption led us to this dire outcome. As we drove away, leaving that painful chapter of our lives behind, I couldn't help but wonder what lay ahead on our uncertain journey to a new beginning.

Seated in the back of the car, flanked by Carter and Lynn, I turned my gaze toward the diminishing view outside the rear window. Mother stood on the porch, her figure growing smaller in the distance, yet her waving hand remained discernible. Slowly, I lifted my hand and returned the wave, a bittersweet farewell to the woman who had once been my world. As we rounded the corner, Mother faded from view, but the memory of that fleeting moment lingered—a symbol of our departure and the complex emotions that accompanied it.

Facing forward, my gaze settled on a pair of hand-me-down shoes that engulfed my feet in their oversized embrace. The laces dangled like forgotten tendrils, trailing beyond the well-worn rubber soles. The

sun dipped beneath the horizon, casting deep shadows in its wake, while above, the moon swelled, casting its watchful glow upon the scene. My cheeks still smarted from the pain of Mother's nails, their mark a tangible reminder of the turmoil we had escaped.

Beside me, Lynn's tears flowed silently, mirroring the unspoken grief that enveloped us. Carter stared out the window, his thoughts a labyrinth of emotions that were echoed across his face. I attempted to form words, but my voice faltered, held captive by the weight of my emotions. My throat tightened, parched as a desert. A glance from Jessica through the rearview mirror revealed her mixed feelings—disappointment mingled with a touch of disgust—before her attention returned to the road. And so, we continued our journey to Jessica's place, where a transition to life with Lauren awaited us. Behind us, a chapter of our lives remained open, unfinished. Behind was Mother, solitary.

We drove in silence, each mile serving as a bridge between the life we had escaped and the future we were shaping. Panic clawed at the edges of my consciousness, its icy grip threatening to choke me. The day's events played in a loop in my mind, each scene more vivid and haunting than the last. I replayed my actions, scrutinizing them, and the tears came anew. Jessica pulled over, and I was hauled out of the car, the tears momentarily giving way to retching as the bile surged forth—a visceral manifestation of the chaos within me.

Returning to the car, I shivered uncontrollably, curled into a protective cocoon between Carter and Lynn, a fragile attempt to shield myself from the world outside. An unspoken bond tied us together, forged through the trials of survival. We had fled that house, that past, leaving behind twisted memories and horrors. With an unspoken certainty, we knew we would never return. Our siblingship had become a lifeline, a source of strength that anchored us as we embarked on a new path, unburdened by Mother's presence. The air seemed to soften around us as if exhaling a collective sigh of relief.

Once again, I attempted to speak, my voice still trembling. The taste of bile lingered at the back of my throat, an unwelcome reminder of my earlier distress. We passed by ordinary houses, their inhabitants unaware of the profound transformation occurring within our car. The world continued its steady rhythm, even as our lives had been forever altered. The familiar railway tracks gave way to the highway, our journey carrying us into the vast expanse of the unknown. The windows were down, and the warm breeze caressed our faces, a tender touch that belied the tumultuous emotions churning within us.

The highway unfurled before us like a ribbon of endless possibilities, and Jessica's determination drove us onward. Her foot pressed firmly on the accelerator, a physical embodiment of her yearning to escape this nightmarish ordeal and return home. The moon occasionally peeked through drifting clouds, casting a mosaic of light and shadow upon the winding road. Anxiety continued to coil within me, a restless serpent threatening to devour the remnants of my peace. We raced forward, the road stretching out beneath us.

In the midst of the chaos, uncertainty, and the overwhelming weight of the day's events, a profound question tugged at the corners of my mind. Was Jesus truly answering my desperate prayers, guiding us away from the abyss of our mother's wrath? Or was I, by daring to defy her, spiraling further into the depths of an uncertain future? As this internal struggle raged within me, the car continued its journey, each passing mile akin to a new chapter in an unwritten story.

And then, in a moment that I initially thought was clarity, a stark realization struck me. But it wasn't clarity at all; it was the opposite. It was a deep conflict, a bond I had developed with Mother that was now tearing at my soul, compelling me to return to her. I had always been her caretaker, her protector, and now, as we raced away, I couldn't escape the gnawing fear that she would wither without me. I couldn't let that happen.

As the distance between us and that wretched house grew, the truth became painfully clear. I yearned to go home. Mother needed me. I was caught in a relentless struggle, torn between an intense, conflicted love for her and the excruciating pain it brought. The internal battle was fierce, and I buried my thoughts deep within me, locking them away with monumental effort. I was already drained, my emotional reservoir depleted from hiding my tears.

I knew that one day, I might find a way to reconcile these conflicting emotions, to bridge the gap between love and hate, between good and evil, between Heaven and Hell. But that day was not today, and it felt like it might be an exceedingly long time before I could unravel the intricate web of emotions that bound me to Mother.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The morning light trickled into the unfamiliar room at Jessica's house, casting a feeble glow on my surroundings. The starkness of the room underscored the reality that the life I had once known was now a distant memory. The comfort of familiar scents and sights had been replaced by an unsettling void, emphasizing the depths of the unknown into which I had ventured. A heavy lump lodged itself in my throat, a constricting knot of uncertainty that tightened with each passing moment. The specter of Mother's well-being haunted me, her potential suffering or even demise clinging to my thoughts like a relentless shadow.

The events of the previous night had left us in a state of limbo, suspended between the horrors of our past and the uncertainties of our future. We were like lost souls adrift in an unfamiliar world, our only anchor to reality being the shared experiences that had brought us here. The weight of guilt pressed upon me, a constant reminder of the choices I had made in pursuit of escape. Had I done the right thing, or had I merely exchanged one form of torment for another? The question gnawed at me; a relentless specter that refused to be ignored.

As I slowly rose from the makeshift bed, I took in the room's sparse furnishings—a table, a chair, and a window that offered a glimpse of the outside world. It was a stark contrast to the cluttered chaos of

Mother's house, a reflection of the simplicity that Jessica had sought in her new life. The room felt like a sanctuary, a place where we could begin to heal from the wounds of our past.

The sound of voices drifted in from the adjacent room, a reminder that I was not alone in this new chapter of my life. Carter's deep voice carried a tone of cautious optimism, while Lynn's laughter rang out like a fragile melody. Jessica's presence loomed like a protective shield, a pillar of strength in the face of our shared uncertainty.

As I stepped into the communal area, the warmth of their camaraderie enveloped me. We were a fractured family, bound not by blood but by the shared scars of our past. In each other, we had found a lifeline—a source of support and understanding that transcended the traumas we had endured.

The day stretched out before us, a blank canvas waiting to be painted with the hues of our newfound freedom. But as we ventured into this uncertain future, the specter of Mother's potential fate remained a shadow that threatened to cast a pall over our every step. Our journey was far from over, and the road ahead was fraught with challenges and uncertainties. But for the first time in a long time, we had a choice—a choice to define our path, to forge a future that was not bound by the chains of our past.

I always tried to maintain a positive outlook, even in the face of uncertainty and adversity. As we faced the unknown together, I couldn't help but wonder if, in the midst of our shared struggles, we might also find moments of joy, healing, and redemption. The scars of our past will always be a part of us, but perhaps, in the embrace of our newfound family, we could begin to heal and find a sense of belonging that had long eluded us.

With that thought, I took a tentative step forward, ready to confront the uncertainties of our future, knowing that we would face them together, as a family forged not by blood, but by the unbreakable bonds of survival and love.

However, reality soon set in, and I couldn't deny the harsh truth. My family did not want anything to do with me or with one another. It seemed as though everyone was just trying to get as far away from one another as possible.

The scars of our past, the hatred that had been instilled in us by our parents, ran deep, and it was clear that they would continue to affect us in the most horrible ways. I would come to find that you never leave Hell without Hell leaving with you, and the specter of our painful pasts would continue to haunt us, casting a long shadow over any hope of reconciliation or true family unity.

The events of the previous day surged through my mind, a tumultuous tide of emotions crashing against the shores of my consciousness. Each memory, each choice made, carried the weight of consequence, amplifying the crushing burden of guilt that bore down on me ceaselessly. It felt as though I carried the world's sorrow within me, a heavy stone that refused to be cast aside. The refrain echoed incessantly within my mind—it was my actions, my decisions, which had set this chain of events in motion.

Guilt, like a relentless predator, stalked my every thought, consuming me from within. It whispered accusations in the quiet moments, reminding me of my role in the upheaval that had unfolded. The past, with all its complexities and contradictions, was an unshakable presence in my mind. As I wrestled with the weight of my actions, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a way to find redemption, to rise above the shadows of doubt and guilt that threatened to drown me.

Jessica's voice, a stark contrast to the lingering silence, cut through the air, urging us to rouse ourselves for the challenges that lay ahead. My attempts at gratitude faltered as I met the indifference in their eyes—a reminder of the vast chasm that separated us. In this atmosphere of strained relations, I found myself awaiting Lauren's arrival, clinging to the hope that her presence might bridge the gaps that had so insidiously formed between us.

Retreating to the bedroom, I exchanged my tattered emotions for an equally worn Cub Scout uniform. It was a veneer of strength, a facade to shield the world from the fragility that had taken root within me. In the mirror, I confronted a reflection that bore the weight of my torment, each scar etched upon my soul now visible on my visage. Turning away, I carried the burden of shame and isolation, seeking refuge in a corner as if to melt into the shadows and remain unseen. Gathering the shards of my courage, I stepped out of the bedroom, the act itself a silent declaration of my unwillingness to be confined by my past.

Carter and Lynn joined me in the living room and with their entrance brought fleeting moments of solace to the room's darkness. Carter's gaze fixed on the window, a sentinel searching for a glimmer of salvation in a world that had grown increasingly inhospitable. The footstool, its wheels a soft murmur on the weathered floor, became my anchor—a feeble attempt at grounding myself. Lynn joined Carter, their shared focus on the world beyond the smudged glass. In their presence, I found a fragile sense of belonging, a testament to the fact that we confronted this journey as allies, bound by our shared ordeal. As the dim light cast its hushed glow, a sense of impending doom settled upon us, each breath weighed down by the acrid tang of fear. Beyond those walls, the outside world offered no solace, only the reverberations of our collective pain and the unspoken horrors that awaited us.

Seated together in a tableau of apprehension, the three of us resembled contestants on a high-stakes game show, our eyes locked on the front door. The gnawing sensation of queasiness threatened to overcome me, and I cast my gaze downward, battling the wave of nausea that surged within. The tang of stomach acid lingered momentarily before fading, and I wrested back control of my focus, lifting my eyes once again to the door. The wait felt interminable, each second stretched to an eternity.

Finally, the entrance burst into motion as Lauren, accompanied by her husband and their five-year-old son, stepped urgently into the living room. The room itself seemed to hold its breath, ensnared in a

profound stillness. We all stood in mutual silence, our gazes locked, an unspoken tension filling the space between us. It was no shock to me that Lauren regarded my brother, sister, and me with a visible distaste. Throughout our lives, those from more privileged backgrounds have cast the same scornful looks upon us. While I had grown accustomed to the sting of this particular gaze, it still left its mark each time. The refuge I had found from my mother's torment diminished, eclipsed by the weight of that disdain. It was difficult not to conclude that we served as a stark reminder to Lauren—a reminder of the very things she had sought to escape. Perhaps she had spent the past six years erasing her history, determined to pretend it had never existed.

Struggling to summon a greeting to Lauren, I felt as though my voice had been shackled, my tongue immobilized. The effort to open my mouth wider sent a searing pain through my jaw, forcing an involuntary exclamation to escape my lips. The sound, the first I had uttered, echoed through the air, witnessed by Lauren herself. A wave of shame washed over me, crashing with a force that left me momentarily breathless. Her gaze descended upon me, her dark eyes and graceful cheekbones framed by cascading waves of blond hair. There was an air of pristine radiance about her, as though her skin had been painstakingly scrubbed to perfection.

Finally, Jessica, a presence that had been hovering nearby, interjected, issuing instructions for the three of us to wait outside. Like condemned souls, we shuffled past our two elder sisters and crossed the threshold of the front door. Within moments, we found ourselves situated in the back seats of Lauren's car. Tim, her husband, occupied the driver's seat, his broad shoulders taut and his gaze resolutely fixed ahead. The palpable weight of Tim's silence unsettled me, a creeping sensation that tightened its hold around my heart, threatening to still its rhythm.

Memories of a recurring childhood fear resurfaced—those moments when I would panic at the mere thought of my heart ceasing to beat. I would dash about frantically, desperate to restore its racing

tempo, just to feel that steady, strong, and reassuring ‘lub-dub-thumping’ beneath my touch. Now, as I sat in stillness, I felt split into two halves. One part of me yearned for the promise of this new life, while the other clung fiercely to the familiarity of Mother's presence. The gravity of this choice weighed on me like an immovable stone. I consciously adjusted my posture, mirroring Tim's stance, an attempt to project composure despite the tumult within.

Lauren's farewell gesture to Jessica from the passenger seat drew a fleeting animation across Jessica's face as she stood on the porch, her farewell wave infused with a subtle air of secrecy. I observed this interaction intently, discerning the concealed hints within Jessica's squinting, dark eyes. Fearful that even the slightest movement or breath might prompt Lauren or Tim to alter their decision, I remained perfectly still. Beside me sat Lynn, her arm gently brushing against mine. An immediate sense of solace enveloped me, as it always did whenever I was in her presence. My younger sister, who had provided care and guidance during moments of my semi-paralysis, had become an unwavering pillar of support. Just as I relied on her, she relied on me. The bond we shared was unbreakable, a source of strength amid the turmoil that surrounded us. I often pondered the four siblings who had departed from this world prematurely—two succumbing to illnesses that our family could not afford to treat, and two more lost to accidents that left us reeling in their suddenness. Their brief lives had left only seven of us behind, a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and the depth of our bonds. Yet, in my heart, what truly mattered was Lynn, who stood by me as the embodiment of our family's resilience and love.

Seated together in the car, side by side with Lynn, an overwhelming sense of worry washed over me. The act of straying from Mother, both metaphorically and literally, felt like a decree of impending doom for both of us. And yet, remaining in her oppressive grasp was equally perilous. The past eleven years of my life had been a landscape of unspeakable horrors that I dreaded would forever haunt me.

Lynn had been my steadfast companion through many trials, but not during the most harrowing of moments. In those instances, I would remain silent, the only sounds escaping being the soft, mournful utterances of my anguish. I kept these sounds hidden from Lynn, and after each ordeal, I would retreat to my bed, my pain cloaked in silence.

Beyond the car's windows, the sun climbed higher, casting a warm, golden radiance upon the world. The summer breeze carried with it the joyful sounds of children at play, their laughter and exuberance intertwining with the atmosphere. Now and then, a burst of excited crackling reached our ears, followed by waves of cheerful cheers. The vehicle began to move, transporting us toward the unfamiliar territory that would be our new home. In the front seat, Lauren occupied the space near the passenger door, their only child nestled between her and Tim. He was a beautiful young boy, just five years old, his blond hair echoing his mother's. Observing them together stirred a complex mixture of emotions within me—jealousy and anger intertwined, an intricate knot of conflicted feelings.

The journey unfolded in silence, each passing mile a poignant reminder of the growing chasm between Mother and myself. Loneliness saturated the air, an isolating presence that gnawed at my mind and tugged at my heartstrings. This desolate road was like no other, an excruciating path that seemed to stretch infinitely ahead, tormenting my thoughts, and wrenching my heart. A sense of profound solitude accompanied every inch of the journey, whether moving toward Mother or away from her. The specter of loneliness haunted me relentlessly, a chilling fear that I believed could consume me entirely. It whispered of the loss of my sanity, followed by the embrace of death itself. The somber weight of this realization reverberated through my being, flooding me with a surge of panic, while Lauren's husband guided the car along the winding road.

I was consumed by fears for both Mother and I, desperately hoping that Lauren might sense the depth of my apprehension and offer some form of comfort. Yet, silence lingered between us. There was a mutual understanding that her words were unnecessary. I could discern in her gaze that she saw us as teetering on the edge of mortality, more akin to the realm of death than life. My eyes were swollen and tender from relentless tears, their vibrant hue transformed into shades of blood-red. An unsettling peculiarity seemed to emanate from me, one that was hard to conceal. This oddity, I suspected, was likely the reason she kept her child at a cautious distance from us.

Amidst the drive, a whirlwind of thoughts raced through my mind. Would our new home provide the comfort of a warm and clean bed? Could we hope for regular meals, an everyday luxury that I had often been denied? These worries gnawed at me, a relentless tug-of-war between hope and fear. Yet, alongside these practical concerns, more haunting memories surfaced—the hurried visits to the restroom under Mother's watchful gaze, and the threat of punishment if I couldn't perform bodily functions quickly enough. The profound sense of isolation gripped my heart, while my thoughts were consumed by a frantic concern for Mother. The pieces of this new reality were still settling into place, and the abruptness of it all—the hastily concocted plan, its execution, and our abandonment of Mother—left me grappling for understanding. The worry stretched beyond my well-being; I fretted for my brother and sister as well. It was a gnawing anxiety that extended its reach, enveloping everyone in its grasp. The unease, much like the suffocating loneliness festering within me, swelled until it became an almost unbearable weight.

But within this storm of emotions, a surge of love for Mother emerged. It overwhelmed the fear, flooding my heart with the tender sweetness of a child's love for his mother. Once again, tears welled up in my eyes—swollen and red from ceaseless weeping. If only I could see Mother once more, I thought, I would confess my grave mistake and pledge never to leave her side again. The pull of loneliness clashed with the madness of leaving her, a relentless internal battle. I yearned for the chance to tell Mother that my love

for her was unwavering, that it would endure for eternity. In my mind's eye, I conjured an image of this confession, envisioning it as a catalyst for transformation—a catalyst that would turn her into a different person, a better person, the mother for whom I had always wished. The mere possibility of this change seemed worth any risk, tempting me to plead with Lauren to take me back. But alas, courage eluded me. I couldn't find the strength to admit my change of heart, my desire to return. The potential consequences, both from Mother and Lauren, loomed large, their weight undeniable. Ultimately, the longing to reunite with a loving mother remained a bittersweet fantasy, one that would play out in the recesses of my mind for years to come. It was a potent, cherished fantasy, even in the face of the painful truth that it would forever remain unfulfilled.

Upon our arrival at Lauren's house, there was no need for words to usher us out of the car. We disembarked silently as if following an unspoken script. It was clear that Lauren and her husband held a certain pride in having rescued us from Mother's clutches.

In exchange for our salvation, we were swiftly put to work. Lynn assisted Lauren in tidying the house and preparing a meal, while my brother and I tackled various tasks such as cleaning the car, sweeping the garage, and tending to the garden. Engaging in these chores didn't bother me; they granted me a space to gather my thoughts. Occasionally, I attempted to strike up a conversation with Lauren's husband as we worked side by side. Yet, his responses were curt and distant, as if he harbored an urgent need for escape at any given moment.

The first night in Lauren and Tim's home found me sleeping on the floor. Blankets had been arranged for our bedding, and within moments of settling onto my improvised bed, sleep overcame me. Lauren's husband, amused by my sudden slumber, lifted me by one arm in a playful gesture, showcasing me to his wife. His laughter echoed until he abruptly stopped upon noticing urine seeping from the crotch of my pants, staining the sheets and carpet below. My limp body was released with a thud, and he walked away

in evident disgust. Lauren sternly commanded me to wake up and shower. Upon my return, clad in borrowed shorts that hung far too loose, I found Lauren scrubbing desperately at the urine-soaked carpet, donning rubber gloves as if to shield herself from the mess. In the mere instant of arriving, I had managed to tarnish my reputation, extinguishing any hopes of earning the love and respect of Lauren and Tim.

The following day proved no better than the previous night. Summer had dawned, and to my bewilderment, a meeting with a lawyer was scheduled. A child custody hearing was on the horizon, as Mother sought to regain custody of her three children. Lauren and the attorney outlined the plan—prove Mother unfit. While I didn't entirely grasp the weight of being deemed "unfit," the term carried an aura of danger and darkness for all of us. The impending task was to testify against Mother in a court of law. But before that, the attorney would question us. This notion invoked a fresh wave of fear, as I would be required to lay bare everything. It was a daunting prospect I couldn't muster the strength for. In the face of these challenges, the thought of turning to Jesus for solace never occurred to me. The shame held me back. Consequently, I felt utterly isolated in the midst of this grim situation that had befallen us. It was an impossible topic to broach; the fear of losing my sanity loomed large. My deliberate strategy was to speak solely of physical abuse, dire living conditions, neglect, and hunger. I would focus on these aspects, while intentionally omitting any mention of the darker truths that lay beneath the surface.

From the moment I embarked on conversations with the attorney, I struggled under the weight of my inadequacy to appear persuasive while intentionally omitting certain unsettling details. My primary dread lay in the possibility that failing to disclose everything would result in our return to Mother's clutches. Yet, the very thought of revealing the darkest aspects of our history filled me with unbearable shame.

Over weeks, the attorney meticulously picked apart our stories, jotting down notes on several thick yellow pads. He intended to unearth any potential weaknesses, any chink in our armor that could inadvertently give Mother an advantage in the upcoming court proceedings. Each dialogue session with the

attorney meant surrendering another fragment of the life that remained within me. The tranquility I had found in aimless wanderings around the neighborhood during those summer days was swiftly obliterated by the relentless questioning. The attorney's demeanor was unyielding, and with each inquiry, I felt myself crumbling. He would pause briefly, gathering his thoughts, before pressing on with his intense line of questioning.

Meanwhile, in the background, Lauren's presence was palpable—a silent observer, a vigilant overseer, a figure who seemingly took pleasure in this endeavor. For her, it was an opportunity to exact revenge on the very woman who had given birth to her—a vendetta that had festered for years.

The constant dread that Lauren, Tim, and the attorney might eventually uncover the full scope of my experiences and use them to their advantage loomed large. I was acutely aware of the potential for them to exploit that knowledge, to strip me of any sense of worth, if not to render me even more abject. This fear pierced through my heart like gunshot wounds every time I sensed the attorney's suspicions edging closer to the hidden truths.

The promising new life I had envisioned felt like a distant mirage. The hours of my days were devoured by relentless conversations with the attorney, and within the margins of his yellow pads, I saw my existence fading away. Words of hope and faith seemed elusive, replaced by the haunting echoes of past abuses that I was forced to relive day in and day out. My most fervent wish was for this ordeal to cease, for the torment to finally abate.

However, with every session spent with the attorney, a peculiar and disconcerting impulse began to grip me—an unsettling urge to inflict harm upon myself and those around me. Loneliness had always been a familiar companion, but this newfound surge of rage was a foreign sensation. Even when subjected to my mother's physical assaults, I had never experienced anger in response. Yet, that summer, a transformation was taking place within me, and it was far from positive. I realized that I was at a crossroads, where I could

either succumb to the darkness brewing within or fight to reclaim the light that had once guided me. A change was unfurling deep within my soul, one that quickened my heartbeat and threatened to consume me entirely. I found myself shifting from being a mere observer to becoming an active participant in a cycle of anger and despair that I had never imagined. In a haunting twist of fate, I felt the shadows of my mother and father, their traits, and their legacies, intertwining with my own identity. But even as I recognized these shadows, I knew that I had the power to choose a different path—to break free from the legacies of pain and forge a new identity grounded in resilience and hope.

Meanwhile, the summer was not entirely defined by these dark changes. While the meetings with the lawyer drained us, an avenue of respite opened up as Lauren introduced us to the enchanting world of reading. Yet, beneath her intentions lay a profound dichotomy—she sought to shield her illiterate siblings from the shadow of shame, inspired by her ascent from poverty to knowledge. Her interactions with the learned and diligent had reshaped her aspirations, and she could not bear the thought of her siblings remaining uneducated. Lauren's resilience became a beacon for me, showing me that knowledge could be a path to liberation, a way to rise above the shadows of our past.

It mattered little to me whether Lauren and Tim's intentions were noble or not when extending a helping hand. Whether it was to polish their reputation, satisfy a prideful power trip, or merely bask in self-satisfaction, I remained unaffected by their motives. What truly resonated with me was the simple fact of being nourished, clothed, sheltered, or guided to a public library. Within those pages, a whole new world unfurled—a realm where the veils shrouding life's mysteries were lifted, and truths hidden in the shadows were brought into the luminous realm of understanding.

The journey into the world of reading swung open the doors to reveal the hidden secrets that lay dormant beneath the surface. These secrets had held us captive, their weight pressing down, breeding despair, and perpetuating a sense of bondage that shadowed our lives. A mission was born within me—a

mission of unearthing these concealed truths, of casting a brilliant light upon them until they lost their grip, no longer capable of chaining us to desolation. A yearning ignited—an unquenchable thirst to confront these enigmas, dismantle their power, and unveil the solutions that would enable me to breathe more freely, to traverse each day with renewed strength.

The attorney's office was the backdrop for the decisive moments before the courtroom ordeal. Carter and Lynn, my steadfast companions on this tumultuous journey, stood by my side. Their presence provided a fragile sense of unity in the face of impending confrontation. We exchanged glances, our unspoken support a lifeline that tethered us together amidst the storm. Their stories, interwoven with mine, painted a tapestry of resilience—Carter, with his quiet strength, had been a beacon of hope in moments of despair. Lynn's unwavering optimism, even in our darkest hours, reminded us of the light beyond the darkness. I recalled the day we all met the attorney for the first time, under circumstances that now seemed a lifetime ago, their loyalty unwavering from the start.

As the attorney briefed me one last time, his words carried a weighty significance. The gravity of what lay ahead—facing Mother in court, dissecting the fabric of our fractured relationship under the law's unforgiving gaze—loomed large. Our bond, once rooted in love, had frayed into tangled threads of longing and uncertainty. This encounter presented a crossroads: a chance for reconciliation or a deepening of wounds that time had failed to heal. My heart already knew the outcome would not be reconciliation. In our family, hate and grudges lingered until death, each passing marked by the poison of unresolved anger.

I drew a slow, deliberate breath, grounding myself in the present moment—a technique I'd learned to stave off the rising tide of anxiety. This was not just a test of legal truths but of the resilience I had painstakingly built over years of hardship. Yet, with each breath, doubt crept in, insidious and unyielding.

Why would Jesus help someone as filthy and despicable as me? The outcome seemed ever uncertain, never within my control. This was a battle not just with my mother, family, and the uncaring systems of the world, but with the demons of my past and present. The ghosts of my childhood whispered doubts, but I knew I had to muster every ounce of strength to face not just the legal judgment, but the deeper reckoning within myself.

The courthouse door swung open, ushering us into a realm where architectural beauty masked the harsh realities of the legal battles fought within. Its grand arch, a testament to Romanesque Revival elegance, stood in stark contrast to the somber proceedings it housed. Each step toward the entryway, elevated above the mundane by a flight of stairs, felt like an ascent into a sanctuary that promised justice but often delivered heartache. The irony of such splendor serving as the backdrop for the unraveling of lives was not lost on me—a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between beauty and tragedy. Yet, I wondered if this time, beauty might shield me, offering a semblance of solace in the face of the ugliness that awaited inside. For a fleeting moment, I entertained the fragile hope that within these walls, justice might align with healing.

Inside, the scent of polished wood and leather filled the air, a sharp contrast to the emotional turmoil churning within me. This was the stage where my life's narrative would unfold—a setting both grand and intimidating—where truths would be laid bare, and the past and future would collide. I steadied myself, recalling the resilience techniques I'd honed: focusing on the present, reframing my thoughts, and holding onto the strength that had brought me this far. The ghosts of my past, once threatening to overwhelm, now lingered on the periphery, as if waiting to see how this new chapter would unfold. This was my moment to reclaim control, to assert the agency I had fought so hard to regain. The juxtaposition of the courthouse's serene elegance against the chaos of human emotion underscored the complexity of seeking justice amidst personal upheaval.

As we followed the attorney, the hallway lined with hearing rooms led us unmistakably to our destination: the room where I would testify against Mother. The tremble in my hands betrayed the calm I sought to project, a physical manifestation of my inner turmoil. Despite my efforts, the anxiety and anticipation were palpable, vibrating through my veins. I clenched and unclenched my fists, praying silently and with desperation—a small act of self-regulation that helped channel my nervous energy into something tangible, something I could control. I reminded myself that this ordeal would soon be over, that I would soon be back in the safety of my new room, far from the chaos. I had survived many difficult times before, and this too would pass, though belief in my own words felt elusive. Each tremor was a testament to the battles I had already fought and lost, not just against others, but within myself.

Upon entering the courtroom, my gaze immediately found Mother's figure, mere feet away, casting a shadow over the room. The sight of her—exhausted, her eyes shadowed with the weight of our shared history—stirred a complex *mélange* of empathy, sorrow, and an indefinable ache within me. I tried to understand what she was going through but was too afraid to look too deep within her psyche. Her eyes told me all I needed to know—that no matter how many times I had saved her life and held her while she wept, we were now on opposite sides of this divide. The faint scent of mildew on her clothes, a stark reminder of our neglected past, permeated the air, intertwining with my senses, anchoring me once more in the reality of the moment. I realized that this moment was not just about the law, but about facing the truth of our lives, acknowledging the brokenness, and deciding whether we could ever find a way to piece it back together. The answer that came was sudden and harsh, as if from another place: “No.”

The courtroom, with all its formality, had become a place not just for judgment but for reckoning, where the fractured pieces of our lives might either be mended or forever remain as shards.

The bailiff's call snapped me back to the present as the judge entered the room. "All rise!" echoed the bailiff's command; a collective movement ensued, chairs creaking and shifting as we stood in unison.

"Be seated!" came the subsequent command, marking our return to our seats, accompanied by the chorus of creaking furniture settling back into silence.

The judge's voice, cold and authoritative, resonated through the room as he read through the essential legal statements into the microphone. Amid the formal proceedings, the mention of my name prompted an involuntary, broken cry to escape my lips—a sound that seemed to capture the weight of the moment. Time seemed to stretch and contract as I awaited my turn.

Eventually, I approached the elevated bench where the judge presided, guided by the bailiff to the designated chair. As I took my place, the resounding pound of the judge's gavel marked the beginning of my testimony—a moment that would unravel painful truths from within the confines of my wooden cage. The words that would spill from my lips, laden with raw truth, held a certain ugliness that mirrored the scars within—truths that, though undeniable, would lay bare the depth of our fractured relationship.

Seated in the wooden chair, an overwhelming sense of entrapment enveloped me. The atmosphere was charged with palpable tension, a silent battle waged amidst the weight of our collective past. Mother, isolated yet imposing behind her long wooden table, mirrored the attorneys' postures. Her grip on a writing pad marked a transition from professional interrogation to something far more personal and piercing, a shift that signaled the depth of the scrutiny I was about to face.

This courtroom, a crucible of truth and judgment, stood poised to bear witness to the most painful chapters of our shared history. As I braced myself for the questioning, the complexities of our relationship—the years of neglect and the pursuit of justice—converged, setting the stage for a confrontation that would either bridge the gap between us or cement the fracture that time had carved.

The attorney hired by Lauren and Tim initiated his questioning, and I found myself navigating a labyrinth of memories and emotions. Each inquiry probed the depths of my past, unearthing the painful experiences that had shaped my life. I spoke of the physical abuse, the neglect, the hunger, and the squalor

in which we had lived. These were the truths I had chosen to reveal, the aspects of our shared history deemed fit for the courtroom's scrutiny, laid bare in a setting where every word carried the weight of judgment.

As the attorney's questions continued, I couldn't help but steal glances at Mother. Her face, a portrait of determination and resolve, was a canvas of emotions that defied simple interpretation. I pondered whether there was regret in her eyes, or if they merely reflected the turbulence of our shared journey. The truth remained shrouded, buried beneath layers of history and pain that no courtroom could easily unearth.

The courtroom drama unfolded with a sense of inevitability, each moment intensifying the emotional stakes. The attorney's relentless pursuit of truth clashed with Mother's determined countenance, each waiting for the other to reveal a chink in their armor. Every word spoken, every question posed, edged us closer to the heart of the matter—the pivotal question of Mother's fitness to regain custody of her children. It was a question laden with profound implications for all of us, determining the trajectory of our lives henceforth.

In the wreckage of what was once a solid foundation of my duty towards her, now shattered and strewn at my feet, she stood—a figure fully aware of the perceived betrayal. Her solitary presence underscored the vast break between us, marking a rift deeper than the day's legal proceedings could capture. The attorney's probing questions were but a prelude to a deeper conflict, setting the stage for a revelation of truths and a confrontation that extended far beyond the confines of legal scrutiny.

From her perspective, my mother, armed with a yellow notepad and pencil, steeled herself for what was to come. She was poised to craft a narrative framing me in deceit, a shift from legal inquiries to a personal, emotionally charged onslaught.

As the attorney hired by Tim and Lauren concluded, it was now Mother's turn to cross-examine me. Her methodical questioning, punctuated by moments of notetaking, blurred the lines between genuine scrutiny and theatrical performance. The true nature of her scribbling—whether authentic analysis or mere showmanship—remained a mystery.

Her relentless interrogation felt like a protracted battle, each question and accusation meticulously designed to chip away at my resolve. The courtroom, a place already heavy with haunting memories, transformed into the stage for our devastating confrontation. Her strategy unfolded with calculated precision; each move aimed at eroding my spirit.

In these moments, she personified conviction, her portrayal of me as dishonest progressively gaining traction. The irony of our battle, waged in a place meant for justice yet feeling devoid of it, was starkly apparent.

Brief pauses in her questioning allowed me fleeting moments of recovery, only for her to resume with renewed vigor. Her sharp and fluent presentation, unexpectedly articulate and devoid of any hesitation, caught me off guard, rendering me vulnerable. My attempt to maintain composure gave way to stammering and tears, the moment's intensity amplified by the blinding courtroom lights.

Her demanding voice, cutting through the tense atmosphere, insisted on truth over lies. A sharp pang of guilt engulfed me, prompting tearful apologies and a desperate plea for her understanding.

The judge's intervention momentarily cut through the tension, urging concise responses to the unyielding barrage of questions. My mother's voice became a distant blur, her words lost amidst the turmoil of my thoughts. Suddenly, she slammed her notepad down, her chilling voice slicing through the ensuing silence. Each question posed felt like an unbearable weight, her gaze piercing and unsettlingly close. Her eyes, sharp and calculating, seemed poised to strike at the heart of my defenses.

As she pressed on, the distance between us seemed to diminish, not in a sense of reconciliation, but in revealing the depth of my vulnerability against her smug satisfaction. Her cryptic words wove a future devoid of deceit, a stark declaration that left no room for ambiguity. Standing there, arms folded, she presented herself as an antithesis to the chaotic figure etched into my memories. This composed, sober version of her stood in sharp contrast to the loving, normal mother I had longed for in my dreams.

The interrogation stretched on, each question sharpening the contrast between the woman before me and the disheveled figure from my past. A surge of defiance rose within me, a fleeting hope of reclaiming some ground, but her intense gaze swiftly quelled any protests. By the day's end, I was left emotionally drained, reduced to a shell by her relentless pursuit. She painted me as the architect of unforgivable cruelty, her composed yet aggressive demeanor lending a chilling credence to her narrative.

When it was finally Father's attorney's turn, his detached questioning seemed to add another layer of weight to an already burdensome day. My every response, even the most measured, seemed to betray the inner turmoil swirling within me.

In a fleeting moment, a glint of light caught Mother's eyes, revealing a whisper of violence in her gaze. Though the exact question escapes me, my simple "Yes" seemed to amplify, echoing across the courtroom, fulfilling her unspoken demands. Her intensity in that moment captured the gravity of our confrontation, a poignant reminder of the deep breach that had formed between us.

She remained motionless, her hands clasped tightly beneath the table, a stark contrast to my struggle to maintain composure, my heartbeat a thunderous echo in the charged silence. The testimony required brevity that necessitated the omission of the harrowing details leading to this moment, each word a calculated choice under the weight of scrutiny. With each passing second, the intensity in Mother's eyes seemed to magnify, her silent accusations piercing through me. An unspoken fear gnawed at my core,

haunted by the possibility that she might reveal truths best left shrouded in silence. Her anger, a constant shadow, left me trembling, the air thick with the threat of her crossing a line that could shatter the fragile veneer of civility, potentially spelling my doom.

After Father's attorney concluded his emotionless interrogation, Mother resumed her questioning. On the precipice of exposing a chilling truth, she abruptly halted, as if wrestling with her impulses. The tension between us was palpable, a silent acknowledgment of the horrors both of us preferred to keep veiled. A fleeting vulnerability crossed her face, a crack in her armor that threatened to submerge us both in a sea of shared shame. Yet, as quickly as it appeared, she masked her inner turmoil, her facade momentarily faltering before she regained her composed exterior.

Her eyes at that moment were windows to a soul yearning for absolution, conveying a desperate plea to rewrite the narrative that had led us to this courtroom. Yet, as she teetered on the edge of unveiling a profound truth, a discernible shift occurred in her questioning. Whether it was my pleading look that gave her pause, or the realization that delving too deep into the truth might unravel her as well, remained unclear. Despite this moment of hesitation, the cunning that defined Mother persisted. Her determination to weave a tapestry of innocence around her past actions was evident, showcasing a resolve that remained unyielded by the complexities of our shared history.

The interrogation merged into a maelstrom of distress, each question and subsequent answer dissolving into the vast sea of my anguish. Nausea gnawed at the edges of my composure as tears and the looming darkness began to blur my vision. Mother's demeanor oscillated between horror and a semblance of recognition, witnessing my unraveling, her voice climbing towards hysteria.

In this whirlwind of turmoil, I sought divine solace, silently begging for an intervention to halt the relentless barrage. Internally, I implored, "Momma, please stop. Please," these words morphed into a mantra that echoed my deep-seated longing for the maternal affection that had been conspicuously absent since my

childhood. Despite a fleeting display of care during a solitary Social Services inspection years ago, genuine warmth remained a foreign concept. Now, all that lingered was a desperate yearning for relief from her unyielding interrogation.

My responses dwindled to involuntary moans, puzzling the judge and eliciting requests for clarification. My disheveled appearance, particularly my unkempt hair—a direct result of Mother's inexplicable restrictions—served as a testament to her pervasive control over the minutiae of my existence.

Her demeanor, punctuated by calculated pauses and penetrating questions, mirrored that of a predator on the hunt. Amidst the engulfing darkness, the thought of succumbing to unconsciousness presented itself as a momentary reprieve.

Yet, as her questioning reached a crescendo, I found myself gasping for air, my ability to articulate coherent responses vanishing. The oppressive weight of her words bore down on me, my throat constricting and lips trembling under the sheer force of the emotional onslaught. The courtroom's reality dimmed as I clung to the fraying edges of consciousness, teetering on the brink of the welcoming darkness.

Brushing the hair from my face, I confronted my accuser with tear-clouded eyes, overwhelmed by a deluge of emotions. In this raw moment of vulnerability, my open weeping stood as a testament to defiance against Mother's relentless pursuit.

Unexpectedly, Father's mirrored response, his tears reflecting my own, bridged the vast expanse and silence that had long defined our relationship. The withdrawal of his attorney marked a poignant chapter in our collective narrative, leaving a lasting imprint on all present.

The judge's declaration signified the conclusion of my testimony, a moment carrying biblical resonance. Yet, unlike the definitive finality of Christ's words, I was left enveloped in a profound sense of isolation.

Reflecting on the trial's complexity, I recognized the courtroom as a crucible where conflicting emotions and narratives clashed. Despite laying bare my truth in a vulnerable and honest testimony, the outcome rested in the hands of the court, with the power to shape our future. The subsequent revelation of our status as Wards of the State underscored a profound abandonment, extinguishing any lingering hope of adoption. This verdict, cementing our perceived undesirability, compounded the day's sorrows, solidifying my solitude.

As Mother made her way to confront me, then abruptly halted, her departure was marked by a final, poignant glance that lingered in the air between us. I stood, a tumult of complex emotions swirling within, yet found my voice reduced to mere sobs. Stepping down from the witness stand, profound exhaustion enveloped me, the cumulative weight of the past and the looming uncertainty of the future pressing heavily upon my shoulders.

Mother was gone now, her once-imposing presence dissolving into a fleeting memory within the vast, empty expanse of the courtroom. As the door closed behind her, a stark realization washed over me—this parting was definitive, a silent seal on the chapters of our shared history we would never revisit.

The bailiff's hand ushered me from the courtroom, dragging me down a long, sterile corridor to another holding room. I stood by a solitary window, a mute witness to a world that moved on without me. Tears carved paths down my cheeks, a silent but unyielding testament to the crushing sorrow and isolation that swallowed me whole. The silence, heavy and oppressive, was broken only by the sound of my weeping, a sound that echoed the desolation in my heart.

In that stillness, the weight of my testimony pressed down on me with a force that threatened to shatter my soul—years of pain, of unspeakable anguish, surged forth, drowning me in a torrent of emotions too powerful to contain. It was a release, but it was also an exhaustion so profound that it left me hollow. In that private moment, I surrendered—not in defeat, but in a desperate attempt to survive the storm within

me. I realized resilience sometimes demands that we allow ourselves to break, grieve, and let go if only to gather the strength to face another day.

As the tears fell, unbidden yet freeing, I stood there in silent contemplation, waiting. Within that quietude, I found a sliver of solace in the realization that I had courageously shared my truth, laying bare the wounds of the past for all to see. The painful chapter that had loomed so large over my life was finally, mercifully, drawing to a close.

This moment of reflection was not just about the end of a courtroom battle; it was a pivotal point in my narrative. There, by the window, as I watched the tears trace their paths down my cheeks, I understood that this was not merely the conclusion of a legal ordeal but the beginning of a new chapter in my own story. A chapter where the burden of untold truths no longer weighed me down, and where the possibility of healing and moving forward seemed not just a distant dream, but a tangible reality.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As we journeyed home from the court hearing, the car was enveloped in Lauren's palpable elation, her celebration marking what she viewed as a decisive victory over Mother. Her spirit, jubilant and infectious, filled the space around us, forming a stark contrast to the tempest of emotions that raged silently within me. I found myself wrestling with a fear that teetered on the edge of overwhelming my self-control, a battle I masked behind a carefully maintained facade. Yet, beneath this veneer of calm, a persistent doubt gnawed at me—the worry that Mother might have noticed the faint scent of urine, an involuntary mark of my distress, which betrayed the intensity of my inner turmoil.

The memory of that day in the courthouse holding room is etched into my mind, a scar that time can never erase. The silence was suffocating, amplifying the anxiety that clawed at my chest as I awaited my turn to testify. The attorney's words, meant to prepare me, slipped away like sand through my fingers as Mother's whispered threats echoed in my ears, a haunting refrain that tightened the noose around my resolve. The crisis loomed like a shadow, dark and inescapable, pressing down on me until I could barely breathe.

The thought of refusing to testify ignited a terror that coursed through my veins, a visceral fear of the consequences that such a decision would unleash. My hands clenched into fists, nails biting into flesh, the

pain a sharp reminder of what was at stake. This pain mirrored the danger that lay ahead, a tangible symbol of the war raging within me—a battle between fear and the desperate need to survive, to push forward, even as the darkness threatened to consume me whole.

In the weeks leading up to the court case, I had painstakingly constructed scenarios in my mind, devising explanations I could offer Lauren in hopes of articulating the gravity of my situation. Yet, when faced with the opportunity at the courthouse, the words I had rehearsed so meticulously became trapped in my throat, stifled by a crippling fear. The thought of revealing to Lauren the full extent of my fear and the overpowering influence of Mother's strength carried the risk of inciting her anger, a reaction that could potentially see me thrust back under Mother's dominion. Consequently, silence became my sanctuary.

Finding the words to express my torment was impossible, even if I could have summoned the courage to speak to them. Admitting the truth to Lauren required a strength I did not possess, a courage that seemed beyond my reach. The hearing progressed like a relentless tide, indifferent to my suffering, unstoppable in its course. In that courtroom, I was brutally reminded that no savior would come; no one would rescue me from the shadows of my past that loomed so large, ready to engulf me at any moment.

I was trapped in a web of memories, each thread woven from the darkest moments of my life, each one refusing to be forgotten. The hours spent recounting the horrors to the attorney only served to embed them deeper into my soul—acts of molestation, prostitution, and the most depraved forms of exploitation imaginable. These memories, with their unbearable weight, gnawed at the edges of my sanity, threatening to tear down the fragile defenses I had built. This internal battle was a testament to the horrific struggle of those who have faced unimaginable trauma. Resilience, I realized, was not merely about surviving—it was about waging a daily war to reclaim even a fragment of the self that had been stolen.

On that day, under the oppressive shadow of the courtroom, I found myself entertaining a drastic escape—an extreme measure driven by the desperate need to avoid the excruciating pain of exposing the gruesome reality. These memories, akin to spectral entities lying in wait, threatened to erupt from the depths of my consciousness at the slightest invocation of "abuse." The mere thought of bringing these buried horrors to light filled me with a dread so overwhelming that it manifested as restless nights and a constant turmoil churning within me, rendering peace an elusive shadow.

The contemplation of feigning amnesia before stepping into the courtroom was a measure of last resort, a testament to the dire straits I found myself in. This thought, radical in its essence, was the embodiment of a deep-seated instinct for self-preservation, a bid to protect my already fragile psyche from the unbearable weight of revisiting past horrors. This internal conflict—a fierce tug-of-war between the pressing demand for justice and an intense desire to shield me from the chasm of my traumas—underscored every moment leading up to the trial.

Lauren stood unaware of the precipice upon which I teetered, the unspoken decision to retract my testimony against Mother hanging over me like a sword. The memory of her, eyes ablaze with a fierce determination, is seared into my mind. She was ready to dismantle the authoritarian grip Mother held over us, driven by an unyielding resolve. Yet, the enormity of what she sought to achieve, the immense burden she carried, remained a distant fog in my consciousness, a dream half-forgotten.

As we drove home, Lauren's exuberance filled the car, starkly contrasting the exhaustion that had settled over me like a shroud. The house loomed before us, its landscape meticulously crafted, each blade of grass and every manicured shrub a testament to the facade Lauren and Tim had built. But beneath this perfection lay the chaos within me, which their careful exterior only served to underscore. Their dedication to appearances became a mirror to my struggle, the relentless effort to maintain a semblance of normalcy in

a world where my inner turmoil threatened to tear me apart. In this context, resilience was not just survival—it was the art of maintaining the mask, of navigating a world that demanded outward calm while the storm raged within.

In the aftermath of the court's ordeal, profound fatigue had taken root in me, severing any residual ties I felt towards Mother. It was difficult to imagine how the memories, deeply buried yet ever-present, would continue to linger. They rested in the recesses of my mind like a dormant volcano, ominously silent yet ready to erupt at the slightest provocation—be it a familiar sound, an unexpected scent, or some unforeseen event. Positioned on the brink, these memories threatened to unleash a deluge of pain, confusion, and fury too potent to contain, awaiting only the catalyst that would fracture my composure and dredge up the shadows I had desperately tried to conceal.

Now, I stood as a boy, shouldering burdens that seem misaligned with my tender age. Each aspect of my existence felt prematurely weathered, my physical form too delicate for my eleven years, marked by a fragility that belied my youth. This frailty cast me as vulnerable, seemingly beckoning exploitation from those who might prey on perceived weakness. Resistance, an unfamiliar territory, was replaced by acquiescence, my survival hinging on resigned compliance that stripped me of self-determination. Yet, within this surrender, I discovered an unexpected resilience—a silent fortitude born from the relinquishment of control.

The comforting presence of Sambirdio, my once constant companion, now receded into the periphery of my world. What remained is a palpable emptiness, an echo of the void that has entrenched itself deep within my being, a reflection of the profound disconnection from the innocence and carefreeness that once defined me.

With a bowed head and lethargic steps, I dutifully carried out the tasks assigned to me by Lauren and Tim. All the while, the ghostly presence of Mother loomed in the recesses of my mind, a specter that refused

to be banished. As the ordinary activities of a pre-adolescent world unfolded around me, I remained untouched by their allure, my existence reduced to a shadow cast on the margins of life.

Television was a rare privilege, doled out for an hour each day, and the neighborhood offered no solace from my solitude. So, I turned to books, those silent companions that offered escape but reminded me of my limitations. I would sit for hours alone, wrestling with words that sometimes seemed more like hieroglyphics than a language I could understand. Slowly, painstakingly, I would piece together sentences and paragraphs, fighting for each fragment of meaning. Yet, even in this pursuit, the books I read were for children much younger than me. Each page was a brutal reminder of how far behind I had fallen, of the shame that clung to me like a shadow, a constant reminder that I was no longer a child yet had not indeed grown.

But this pursuit of literacy, tinged as it was with shame, was also a declaration of defiance. Each word I mastered was a small victory, a step toward reclaiming the mind and future that had been denied to me. It was a slow, painful process, but it was mine—a testament to a resilience that refused to be crushed, a quiet rebellion against the forces that had sought to stunt my growth and keep me trapped in a world of darkness.

A week or two had passed since the custody hearing, and with the gradual waning of summer's warmth giving way to cooler breezes, the prospect of autumn loomed. Lauren's husband, an avid hunter, had eagerly promised to take both my brother and me along for a hunting trip. However, my heart recoiled at the mere thought of being in his presence. The idea of him brandishing a firearm filled me with an overwhelming sense of dread. The days were now marked not only by the impending hunting expedition but also by the daily array of household tasks assigned to Carter, Lynn, and me. The chores ranged from mundane duties to meticulously tending to one of Tim's most cherished possessions—his prized motorcycle.

On one occasion, after cleaning his motorcycle, I heard Lauren's voice from the kitchen, sharp and taut with restrained anger. "Did you and Carter mess with Tim's motorcycle?" Her words, delivered with a clenched jaw, carried an edge that cut through the air, unsettling in its cold precision.

Though seemingly trivial, this brief exchange carried a weight that was far from insignificant. Lauren's controlled anger reminded me of the delicate balance I constantly navigated—between appeasing those around me and shielding myself from their unpredictable emotions. This balancing act was a survival strategy and a necessary skill honed in an environment where emotional volatility could erupt into violence without warning. Each moment like this was a reminder of the razor's edge on which I lived, a testament to the resilience required to survive and manage the delicate dance of keeping others' anger at bay while guarding my fragile sense of self.

Tim's entrance was abrupt, and his presence caused me to jump. Even Lauren took a visible step back from me. "Carter, get over here!" Tim's booming voice summoned my brother.

"What did you two do to my bike?" Tim's question reverberated; its impact was accompanied by his fist slamming into the refrigerator.

"We didn't do anything!" I protested while Carter remained silent, his eyes wide with fear. Tim's anger was a storm, its intensity brewing even before he stepped inside, expressed through kicked chairs and pounded walls. Carter and I stood there, suspended in a tense silence—waiting for the physical punishment that seemed inevitable.

But on that day, Tim's wrath remained non-physical. It was the kitchen that bore the brunt of his fury, his words laced with venom. He hadn't laid a hand on us, choosing instead to unleash his rage upon the space. "Don't you dare touch my motorcycle again! You boys are morons, and you've screwed it up!" With those words, he stormed out of the kitchen, leaving to inspect his beloved bike.

Lauren swiftly dismissed us from the kitchen, urging us to continue with the rest of our chores. We complied eagerly. Out of earshot, I whispered to Carter, "Well, at least his motorcycle is clean." A suppressed chuckle escaped both of us. It was a strange sensation that enveloped me, a hint of newfound confidence. The remark had sprung from an unfamiliar place within me—a place that felt empowering. It was as though, in a small way, I was pushing back. Testing the boundaries of this uncharted reservoir of strength, I announced to Carter as I strode out the front door, "Forget it." Carter's response was simple: "Yeah. Forget it."

Despite this burgeoning sense of self-assurance, the sound of Lauren and Tim's voices still evoked a deep-seated fear within me. Even as I found myself growing stronger, I remained wary of talking back or challenging them in any way. Tim's words sometimes elicited a low whimper that would escape my lips—an involuntary response I wasn't even conscious of until Lynn pointed it out one day. Both Tim and Lauren had a look that could stop me dead in my tracks. Unfortunately, that look was all too frequent, stifling any sense of liberation. They were agitated, and it was painfully clear to my siblings and me that we were seen as unwelcome guests. I attempted to care for them as I had attempted to care for Mother. Yet, just like Mother, their attentiveness was absent or preoccupied. It's possible they were simply overwhelmed, juggling the challenges posed by three imperfect children like us alongside the needs of their child. However, it was difficult not to ponder how they managed to find love and time for their child while seemingly running short when it came to us.

As summer came to an end and the new school year loomed ahead, I threw myself headfirst into reading. The fear of inadequacy fueled my determination. It was staggering! My progress seemed to stall at the level of Dr. Seuss's books, yet I would soon be expected to read at a seventh-grade level. And reading was just the tip of the iceberg—my mathematical skills were pitifully inadequate, and the multiplication tables might as well have been an insurmountable mountain.

The absence of presentable school attire led Lauren to embark on a shopping expedition with Carter, Lynn, and me. However, her remarks were consistently veiled with reminders of the money she was expending on us. We were tasked with selecting three complete outfits each—trousers, socks, shirts, and a pair of shoes. Navigating the realm of clothing shopping was a foreign experience for my siblings and me. The notion of "sizes" was an unfamiliar concept, leaving us befuddled. Lauren, growing impatient, hastily snatched whatever garments she deemed suitable, thrusting them into our arms. Juggling the bundle of new clothing and clutching a pair of shoes, we made our way to the checkout counter, a trio of lost souls adrift in the shopping sea.

At that moment, I stood rooted in silence, the rhythmic pounding of the register keys the only sound punctuating the air, each keystroke causing me to flinch involuntarily. Then, a particular expression flickered across Lauren's face, one that sent a chill down my spine—a look of disdain, a term I didn't fully grasp but felt its weight, nonetheless. When the cashier announced the total due, I was left speechless and stunned. In all my time with Mother, she had never invested such a considerable amount in her children. Guilt washed over me, and Lauren expertly capitalized on that guilt. It was effective.

Amid the preexisting fear that gripped me, the burden of earning everything that Lauren and Tim provided became an additional weight on my shoulders. As always, I shouldered that burden dutifully. The phrase "Forget it" remained beyond my grasp, a fleeting concept. It offered a momentary solace, but I remained bound to the relentless pursuit of proving myself worthy of love and acceptance.

With the commencement of the school year, my world contracted to the corridors of the local educational institution—a sanctuary offering a brief escape from the turmoil of home life, albeit only for a few hours daily. However, even within those walls, my inadequacies could not be escaped. The murmurs of fellow students reverberated in my ears, their judgments a constant reminder of my status as an outsider—a flawed being striving desperately to fit in.

In the sea of faces, some held pity for me, some held mockery, and others exhibited indifference. The latter I found preferable, for it granted me a respite from the sting of judgment. The teachers, too, had their opinions. Some classified me as slow, while others tagged me as a troublemaker. Their words engraved themselves in my psyche, shaping my self-perception.

Beyond the classroom, solitude became a persistent companion, shadowing my every step. I watched my peers interact, their laughter and camaraderie a distant longing. I yearned to be part of it all, yet the divide seemed impassable. An outsider peering in, forever fated to be an oddity. Despite my earnest attempts to mimic their behavior, to mirror their laughter, the gap between us remained unbridgeable.

As days segued into weeks and weeks flowed into months, I found myself ensnared in an unyielding cycle of desolation. The memories of my time with Mother gradually receded, supplanted by the stark reality of my current existence. The notion that breaking free from her clutches would grant me liberation had proven to be an illusory hope; instead, it had merely ushered in a different form of captivity.

Lauren and Tim's unspoken resentment toward us was tangible, a sentiment that permeated their carefully constructed veneer, casting a pall over every interaction. We were a weight, a ceaseless reminder of their obligation to provide for us. Thus, we lived on the fringes of their consciousness—hardly acknowledged, rarely heard, and frequently overlooked.

Within the confines of our residence, an undercurrent of tension perpetually simmered, poised to erupt at any given moment. Tim's explosive anger loomed as an omnipresent threat, lingering around corners like a gathering storm. The resonance of his footsteps, laden with fury, sent shivers coursing down my spine, and I learned to brace myself for the tempest that was sure to follow. At times, his wrath was directed at us—the unwanted stepchildren—and at other times, it was unleashed upon his son. Yet, regardless of the target,

the aftermath remained consistent—a deluge of cruelty that left us bruised and shattered, both physically and emotionally.

The pervasive existence of abuse in our world is an undeniably tragic reality, and witnessing its repercussions on individuals and families is profoundly disheartening. The prevalence of broken and dysfunctional homes often seems to surpass those untouched by such trials, making it rare to encounter someone unscathed by these hardships. Amid my family's turmoil and strife, I often felt like an outlier. While they harbored a rage, I was characterized by profound sorrow and remorse. It was through my limited understanding of God's presence and the influence of those with a deeper connection to Him that I derived strength. This strength was bestowed by God Himself through the Holy Spirit, often referred to as our "Helper."

The Holy Spirit, often symbolized as the Fire of God, stands as a formidable and transformative presence. The vivid imagery of fire emanating from the throne, as described in the book of Revelation, conveys the divine essence and grandeur of God. This portrayal encapsulates His magnificence and omnipotence. The passage paints a scene of lightning flashes, resonating thunderclaps, and the radiance of seven blazing lamps, symbolizing the seven spirits of God. These evocative depictions provide us with a glimpse into the awe-inspiring nature of God's celestial domain.

Moreover, the passage emphasizes the distinct role of Jesus in establishing a bridge between humanity and God the Father. Jesus declared Himself as the exclusive conduit—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—underscoring that no avenue exists to the Father except through Him. Through faith in Jesus, we discover communion with God and embrace His truth and vitality. In my journey, it is Jesus who has fortified me with the resolve and valor to confront life's trials. Simultaneously, a wellspring of compassion has flourished within me.

Through the prism of my experience, I perceive Jesus as the one who, with unbounded compassion, shoulders the immense burden of my grief. This is vividly illustrated by the evocative image of smoke spiraling upwards from the ashes of a pyre composed of sin and despair. This smoke, rising gracefully into the expanse, symbolizes my tribulations being lifted and scattered into the void, dissolving seamlessly into the vastness of the heavens. In place of these afflictions, He bestows upon me His sacred blaze—a profound testament to divine endorsement. This sacrosanct fire emerges as a luminous beacon of spiritual rebirth, casting light upon my journey and imbuing me with renewed vigor and unwavering resolve. This remarkable transformation from smoke to flame epitomizes a crucial metamorphosis: from a condition of burden to one of celestial sanction by the ‘Most High.’ It marks a spiritual pilgrimage from the shackles of past constraints to embracing a transformative force that guides my path. This journey, illuminated by divine light, charts a course through the wilderness of despair to the promised land of spiritual fulfillment, where every step is sanctified by His presence, leading me towards a horizon of unimagined possibilities.

Observing instances of unkindness among individuals, particularly within families, who should exemplify solace and affection for one another, has always weighed heavily on my heart. The contemplation of my siblings' impending solitude and susceptibility when they no longer possess each other's support remains a persistent concern. I frequently ponder the potential hardships that might arise and prepare myself emotionally and mentally for the most formidable scenarios. While this heightened awareness can be overwhelming, it concurrently functions as a method of preparedness, enabling me to navigate the uncertainties with resilience.

Within the confines of my family, eruptions of violent anger over seemingly inconsequential matters were a recurrent theme. However, the wounds inflicted by hurtful words in those moments of anger often cut far deeper than physical blows. The reverberations of those words endure, causing a pain that seems impervious to healing.

Given the choice, I would willingly endure physical suffering over enduring gaslighting, deceit, or being subjected to hurtful epithets. These verbal assaults burrow into the recesses of my mind and heart, and in prayer to Jesus, I beseech Him to expunge these unsightly words from my thoughts and mend the wounds they have left behind.

My prayers are a frequent plea for Jesus to cleanse my mind and heart of the scars inflicted by hurtful words. May He imbue me with the resilience to transcend the agony they have wrought and find solace in healing and renewal. May His strength empower me to extend forgiveness and love, even when confronted with such cruelty. I implore Him to guide me along a path of compassion and empathy towards others so that I might disrupt the cycle of pain and provide comfort to those in dire need.

Even Lauren, with her moments of unkindness, wasn't immune to cruelty. Her words, like razor-sharp blades, sliced deeply, leaving wounds that festered long after the initial sting had subsided. A skilled manipulator, she had mastered the art of twisting our words and actions to her advantage. Gaslighting became her preferred strategy, corroding our sense of reality and sowing seeds of doubt about our sanity. We learned not to question her, for the repercussions were swift and severe.

Amid the overwhelming challenges that engulfed my life, my thoughts found solace and refuge in Jesus. He emerged as a beacon of hope in the enveloping darkness. Throughout each day, I intertwined thoughts of Jesus into my every moment, seeking a connection that brought comfort and strength. I created acronyms based on His name, crafting short phrases that encapsulated my prayers and aspirations. For instance, "Jesus, please help me learn to read," condensed into [JPHMLTR], became a small ritual to anchor myself to His presence. This practice served as a subtle tic, a method of tethering myself to Jesus and drawing strength from His constant companionship.

In a world perpetually steeped in fear, Jesus became my steadfast companion. His name was an ever-present mantra etched into my thoughts. When faced with trepidation and uncertainty, I instinctively turned

to Jesus, seeking His guidance, protection, and tranquility. He became my sanctuary, the refuge I sought when the world's tumult felt overwhelming. My thoughts of Jesus acted as a reassuring whisper, reminding me of His abiding presence and the hope that emanated from it.

Amid the disarray and brutality, we clung to the vestiges of love that still lingered. Carter, Lynn, and I forged an unspoken pact—an implicit commitment to safeguard and uplift one another in whatever capacity we could. We evolved into lifelines for each other, offering solace and companionship amid the chaos surrounding us.

As the passage of time etched its mark, the luminance of our spirits began to dim. The gravity of our circumstances bore down on us, threatening to extinguish the last vestiges of hope. Gradually, we mastered the art of donning masks, concealing our agony behind practiced smiles and feigned enthusiasm. We withdrew further into ourselves, constructing intricate barriers of self-preservation, unwilling to reveal the depth of our suffering to the world.

However, moments of solace emerged within the shadows—brief glimpses of light piercing through the prevailing gloom. During these moments, we clung to the belief that circumstances could transform, that a realm existed beyond the boundaries of our current reality—a place where we might be acknowledged, cherished, and loved for our authentic selves. This belief in transformation, in a brighter future, fueled our determination to persevere, inspiring us to keep moving forward despite the darkness that surrounded us.

And so, we held on steadfastly, our souls weathered by the storms we endured as we navigated the treacherous currents of a youth overshadowed by neglect and cruelty. We were innocent souls adrift in a world that appeared to have forsaken us, yet our determination remained unshaken.

Amid the darkness, we grasped the significance of our voices, the weight of our narratives deserving recognition. Our unwavering belief held that our stories possessed value and deserved to be shared with the world. With this steadfast conviction, we dared to envision a future where the echoes of the disregarded would resonate with steadfast strength and indomitable resilience. This belief in the power of our stories, in their ability to inspire and bring about change, empowered us to continue our journey with courage and determination.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Merely two weeks before the school year's end, only a single year stood between me and my escape from the confines of junior high. While it offered a slight improvement over elementary school, I remained trapped in the throes of pre-pubescent ridicule. The looming specter of high school filled me with trepidation. The impending finals were on the horizon, a series of daunting exams that would condense an entire year's knowledge into a single ordeal. With seven exams ahead, I was certain of my failure in each. My studying efforts were valiant, but my limited reading skills made success seem like an unattainable dream.

Lauren and Tim, my guardians, incessantly emphasized the importance of avoiding failure in my subjects. They claimed to have invested considerable time and effort in shaping me, and the prospect of failure was considered a letdown. One day, while I was immersed in my studies, Lauren burst into my room abruptly, burdening me with the fear of repeating the 7th grade if I didn't succeed. Her words struck a deep, ominous chord within me, exploiting my vulnerability. "You're not putting in enough effort," she accused, inflicting terror upon me despite my belief that I was already giving my utmost.

In the background, I could hear Tim's complaints about the television, which only added to my distress. My throat constricted, releasing involuntary sounds that embarrassed me. As soon as Lauren left, shutting the door behind her, I allowed myself to cry. Clutching my throat, a mixture of fear and sorrow

tapped around my heart. I felt profoundly powerless, akin to an exhausted child. "I am so weary," I thought. "Utterly exhausted, ineffectual, and unintelligent." I attempted to persist with my studies, but the weight of fear bore down on me so heavily that I had to revisit my textbooks and class notes repeatedly. I tried to summon thoughts of the apple tree, which had once offered shelter from the snow and wind, with Mother just a few steps away in the house. The memory was bittersweet, and it brought a lump to my throat.

Determinedly, I strained to absorb the material, subjecting myself to frequent self-quizzes, yet my mind seemed to betray me. The harder I tried to recall, the more the knowledge slipped through my grasp. The sensation of my inadequacy gnawed at me, and I knew I would reinforce it when I inevitably failed my exams. The only solace was that my grades wouldn't be read aloud in front of my classmates. The books and notes before me sprawled chaotically across the table, while an untouched pile of additional books loomed beside them, exacerbating my sense of despondency. Gazing at them was a stark reminder of the emotions I experienced when Mother would belittle me during her violent outbursts. "You'll never achieve anything," her words would cut through me. "You are a waste of my time. A pathetic little failure. Worthless. Hopeless. A burden I should have eliminated from the start."

I pored over the frenzied scribbles in my notebooks in the comforting embrace of my desk lamp's warm glow. Beside me, a towering stack of untouched textbooks loomed, a stark reminder of the knowledge I was expected to master. My reserves of determination were nearly depleted, but sheer necessity fueled me to press on. The spark of accomplishment had waned, been concealed, or perhaps lulled into slumber by Lauren's constant warnings of impending failure. Over the next few hours, I dragged myself through the mountain of study materials, preparing as best I could for the final exams. As the hour grew late, my body began to demand rest. But I persisted, a testament to the resilience that can be summoned in the face of adversity.

Before retiring for the night, I always engaged in prayer. I would kneel beside my bed, gently resting my elbows on the mattress, my hands clasped together with my right hand gracefully folded over the left. This visual representation was conceived during one of my many tics—a symbol of the triumph of good over evil. The prominence of my right hand held particular significance, representing the presence of Jesus that I sought to uphold steadfastly.

There were moments when my tic would drive Lynn to the brink of exasperation. Our daily walks to school offered a prime example of this. If, by chance, my left hand happened to contact something last, an overwhelming compulsion would seize me—forcing me to retrace my steps and touch the object once more, this time with my "righteous" right hand. I would dash an entire city block's length, briefly touch the item with my right hand, and then hasten my steps to catch up with Lynn. Throughout these episodes, Lynn remained patient, stationed in the same spot until I returned. My prayers were a ceaseless ritual, unceasing in their flow, seeking solace and a reprieve from the overwhelming grip of my tics.

On a particular occasion, Lauren intruded upon one of my private moments of prayer. Lauren possessed an uncanny knack for invading my space without the courtesy of a knock, heedless of my repeated pleas for personal boundaries. Her disregard for my privacy induced a mix of anger and shame, especially as I was transitioning into adolescence. However, this instance was different. Instead of launching into one of her tirades, she seemed utterly bewildered. Then, her bewilderment metamorphosed into something palpable – fear. It was not my first encounter with such reactions from people when the subject of Jesus or the Church entered the conversation.

These instances of fear and anger that people exhibited in response to my faith etched themselves deeply into my memory. The potent emotions my beliefs could stir in others left an indelible mark on my awareness. Right from the outset, anger and fear had been entwined in my life's narrative. It felt as if nearly everyone I knew was touched by a pervasive sense of fear, me included. But here's the enigma of my anger:

it flared up swiftly, burning with intensity, yet it often extinguished itself just as rapidly, sometimes before anyone else even discerned my emotional state. Should my anger ever escalate to its boiling point—a rarity—my intentions are never malicious. If harm is unintentionally inflicted, a surge of remorse courses through me, driving me to the edge of physical illness. The pangs of guilt are profound. For me, rage is a concept difficult to grasp, its purpose elusive. Anger appears to yield no constructive outcomes, leaving little in its wake except a desire to evade its recurrence—a sentiment shared by those who have experienced it firsthand.

My family, in stark contrast, appears to struggle with containing their anger. This anger reveals itself in the most harrowing of manners, both internally and externally, leading down a path of destruction that often culminates in tragic outcomes. It's a situation that gnaws at me; I yearn for them to uncover a way to manage this overwhelming anger. Yet, deep down, I recognize that even my prayers to Jesus for intervention cannot compel them to change. This dilemma is rooted in the notion of Free Will, a concept that sometimes feels exasperatingly complex. As the adage on the streets of my hometown goes, "Free Will: A Complex Conundrum." We all find ourselves shaped by the decisions we make, and regrettably, it appears that a pervasive sense of indifference has taken root. The ability to experience emotions profoundly seems to have dissipated into thin air. There are moments when I find myself wondering if humanity's emotional landscape was different before my existence. Were people more attuned to their emotions then? These contemplations plague my thoughts, leaving behind an unsettling premonition that things might continue to deteriorate until the end of my days.

If this grim outlook does indeed hold, if life is destined to descend further into chaos, then I can only hope that it aligns with some grand design of Jesus. Perhaps He intended for life's challenges to follow such a course, and in response, I've endeavored to demonstrate my utmost resilience amid this turbulence. Yet, there are instances when it feels as though Jesus remains distant, almost a million miles away, an

ethereal entity beyond reach. In those moments, a perplexing question arises: Is this separation intentional? These are the times of profound agony when I find myself engulfed in a sense of abandonment and disconnection, struggling to navigate through the abyss of uncertainty.

Throughout this profound journey, I am locked in a continuous struggle with the formidable forces of anger, fear, and an unyielding desire for transformation within my family. The very purpose of anger remains a puzzle to me, an enigma that I yearn to unravel, all while nurturing a profound aspiration for a world illuminated by the light of understanding and compassion. While navigating these tumultuous emotions, I find sanctuary in the notion that my trials and tribulations might catalyze change. Though riddled with challenges, the path ahead holds no power to dissuade my unwavering determination to persevere while remaining resolute in my beliefs. This determination to persevere, to continue the journey despite the obstacles, is a source of encouragement and hope, both for me and for those who may be facing similar struggles.

After my prayers, I slept restlessly that night, anticipating the exams the next day. Nightmarish specters materialized in the realm of dreams, carrying the haunting aroma of Mother's extravagance intertwined with the vile blend of strangers' sweat and cologne.

Awakened by the blaring tones of my alarm, I roused myself from slumber, donned my attire, and cast a fleeting glance upon the notes awaiting my study for the day's inaugural examination. Those meticulously penned words seemed alien to me as if I had never encountered their utterance from the lips of an instructor or etched them into existence.

Throwing all that I required into my trusty book bag, I emerged from the confines of my chamber and offered a cursory salutation to Lauren. Our interactions followed a prescribed pattern—she would impart the instructions for the day and underscore the chores that demanded attention upon my return from school. With summer on the horizon, her familiar refrain echoed, warning us against the temptation of

idleness. "You kids won't while away the summer," she reiterated, her admonition resonating as the season approached. The realm of chores was an unceasing domain within the household of Lauren and Tim, a sphere that persisted even when the tangible tasks dwindled. A placid inertia gripped Tim, who would often recline in his seat, pipe in hand, and bestow orders upon the household staff. Lauren, however, was ceaselessly occupied, her pursuits a relentless cadence of haste and vexation, her voice a constant stream of complaints that echoed throughout the bustling household.

As I hastened my steps to reach the awaiting bus, Lauren's well wishes for my impending exams floated through the air. "Good luck!" Her cheery exclamation echoed, yet beneath the surface veneer of her words and gestures, a perceptible undercurrent of insincerity lingered. Despite the outward display, I couldn't shake the innate sense that her words were hollow, concealing ulterior motives. It was evident that her true desires ran contrary to the façade she presented. Rather than wishing me success, she secretly harbored hopes for my failure, an outcome that would seamlessly align with her preconceived notions. In her narrative, I, an inconspicuous figure in her world, existed to embody failure, as if it were an art form that I had masterfully perfected. Thus far, I had dutifully adhered to the script society had written for me. Applause, I supposed, was in order.

I boarded the bus, securing a seat towards the rear. The arrival of summer had ushered in warmth, perhaps a tad too much warmth for comfort. With a courteous smile directed at my seatmate, I settled into my own space, allowing my gaze to descend to my shoes. The once-thrilling feat of tying shoelaces had now transitioned into an ordinary routine, and its novelty long faded.

Occasionally, my attention would drift to those around me, and sometimes, my gaze would inadvertently settle on a girl who happened to be seated nearby. Their hair, kissed by the sun's gentle rays, seemed to possess a mesmerizing allure. As their tresses cascaded over their shoulders, an air of enchantment enveloped these scenes. The delicate way they gathered their hair, separating it into

shimmering strands and then meticulously weaving it into a plate, never ceased to amaze me. A sense of adoration and reverence stirred within me, kindling a fascination that I dared not openly acknowledge. These innocent yet subtly provocative moments would occasionally prompt a curious sensation in the depths of my being, leading me to swiftly redirect my gaze, lest my thoughts wander into untamed territories.

Stepping off the bus, a familiar face awaited me – my one friend from that year, Greg C. "Hi, Gregg!" he greeted me cheerfully, and I reciprocated with a warm, "Hi, Greg!" Despite the subtle difference in our names' spellings, we often found delight in the shared similarity. Greg was always there, stationed near the lineup of big yellow school buses, both in the morning and afternoon. His presence, a constant in my routine, offered a comfort I had rarely known. No one had waited for me before in such a genuine manner. While Lynn had stood by me, our interactions were often steeped in anxiety and doubt.

Greg, or Gregory in formal terms, surpassed me in intelligence and athleticism, yet his demeanor never made me feel lesser. An accomplished musician hailing from a well-off family, his father's history as a former Naval Flight Officer and his mother's German origins made for a unique backstory. Greg and his sister were both adopted, unrelated by blood, yet bonded by kinship. With an enviable home life, good looks, intellect, and an array of talents, Greg's choice to befriend someone like me remained a pleasant mystery.

"Are you prepared for finals?" Greg's confidence shone through his inquiry.

"Not at all," I admitted with candor, a hint of resignation accompanying my words.

Although we shared only a handful of classes, woodshop being one of them, Greg's skillful craftsmanship stood in stark contrast to my struggles in the subject. While I grappled with failing grades, Greg's artistic flair effortlessly translated into exquisite creations. Faced with challenges, I found solace in

Greg's willingness to extend a helping hand. "Well, good luck!" Greg's laughter underscored his well-wishing. "You are too!" I replied, even though he scarcely needed luck.

"See you at lunch," he announced before dashing off, setting out to attain what would undoubtedly be his first "A" of the day, to be followed by six more. My academic fate took a different turn – each class barely scraped by with a passing grade.

Greg's mention of lunch stirred a sense of apprehension within me. Alongside the academic woes loomed the specter of bullies and the imminent ordeal of another assault. The lunch break had grown into a twisted ritual, with every tormentor in junior high gleefully participating. I had unwittingly garnered a reputation as an easy target, a reputation that bestowed upon me the derisive moniker "Weak Te-Te." I mustered courage, imploring the woodshop teacher for permission to dine indoors, shielded from the courtyard's constant harassment. Despite revealing the unending bullying and assaults, my request was dismissed, the teacher's denial echoing indifference to my plight. Curiously, my revelation seemed to irk him further, prompting him to thunder, "Get out there with the rest of the kids!" Reluctantly, I obeyed, bracing myself for another painful encounter.

The first day of finals brought with it a trio of exams, two scheduled before the lunch break. Predictably, I faltered with ease, succumbing to failure's grip. The burden of my shortcomings and the looming dread of what awaited me outside the classroom grew almost unbearable. Seeking refuge, I retreated to the boys' bathroom, hoping to find a brief respite from the onslaught of emotions. Nestled within the confines of a stall, feet resting on the toilet, I embarked on my silent lunchtime solitude.

However, my sanctuary was abruptly disrupted by an insistent pounding on the stall door. The woodshop teacher's stern voice pierced through the door, instructing me to exit the restroom and proceed to the annex. My escape attempt wasn't a novel strategy, and he had grown wise to the trick. With a mixture

of embarrassment and resignation, I emerged from the stall and found myself back in the courtyard. As a lamb led to the slaughter, the beatings commenced almost immediately. Greg, despite his best efforts to intervene on my behalf, was met with fear-induced hesitation. There was an occasion when he attempted to shield me, only to receive a blow to his abdomen, extinguishing any future acts of bravery on his part. Yet, his courage, however short-lived, remained an unspoken testament to our bond.

The boys assembled in a sinister line, each taking their turn to push and shove me. At times, one would crouch behind my legs, while another propelled me forward with force, causing me to collide with the ground. My head would collide with the unforgiving earth, igniting a display of stars and dancing white dots reminiscent of those I had seen when Mother unleashed her wrath upon me. The boys mirrored Mother's cruelty, inflicting pain without reason beyond their sadistic amusement. Amidst the torment, I caught a fleeting glimmer of something within the eyes of a girl I once held affection for – a girl I still cared about. Her gaze bore the weight of pity and sorrow as she bore witness to my humiliation.

Perhaps it was the culmination of years of abuse, or perhaps a surge of dormant strength was awakening within me. Slowly, I extracted myself from the dirt, locking eyes with the boy who had pushed me down. It was a moment of silent defiance, a quiet challenge hurled at them. "Fuck you, cocksucker," I uttered, my words aimed not solely at the instigator but directed at the collective assembly. The tone was conversational, devoid of theatricality or a surge of heightened emotion. The words carried a simple yet undeniable challenge, and I swept my gaze across the assembled group, making it clear that the sentiment extended to all. No grand spectacle unfolded, and no explosion of emotions occurred – only a casual intonation that harbored an effective challenge. With that proclamation, I had cast the gauntlet, daring them to respond, and there was no turning back from the stance I had taken.

"And fuck your mothers too," I appended with the same measured tone, the words flowing out as casually as any commonplace greeting. It was a phrase that had a knack for getting a rise out of bullies, as

insults about one's mother were bound to provoke a reaction. The boy closest to me seemed to grapple with the weight of the moment, his expression shifting between confusion and discomfort as if his brain were struggling to process the sudden shift in dynamics.

As he wrestled with his thoughts, another boy seized the opportunity to lunge at me. Swiftly sidestepping his advance, I watched as he stumbled forward, granting me a brief window to retaliate. My clenched fist met his ear with force, producing a sickening, wet sound. Blood trickled down from his injured ear, mingling with the dirt on his neck and vanishing into the collar of his shirt. In an unsettling juxtaposition of a smile and tears, I found myself simultaneously triumphant and emotional. The impact of one of the punches I had taken earlier left my cheek numb, rendering me unable to discern the dampness of the tears on that side of my face. The boy clutched his injured ear, letting out cries of pain. Laughter had transformed into excited exclamations and murmurs.

Amid this chaotic scene, the woodshop teacher appeared, a sudden authoritative presence amidst the turmoil. For the first time, he acknowledged my existence, a stark contrast to the times when my pleas for refuge had fallen on deaf ears. He seized my arm and guided me toward the school building. Before I knew it, I found myself seated in front of the vice principal's desk. The journey through the halls had blurred into a haze, my emotions still turbulent from the encounter.

The vice principal regarded me over his glasses, a folder filled with papers sprawled before him. His gaze barely left the documents as he remarked, "You're failing your classes." His glances held traces of disappointment, signifying his view of me. A secretary, aptly nicknamed "Jugs" by the students due to her notable bust, sat beside the desk, dutifully taking notes. When the vice principal finally raised his gaze to meet mine, his crossed eyes, magnified by his glasses, gave him an oddly insect-like appearance. His cheeks flushed with anger, reflecting his indignation. "Fighting results in a mandatory three-day suspension," he

declared firmly, his defiance evident. "And for each of those three days, you will receive an 'E' in all your classes."

The vice principal's grasp of the situation was less than comprehensive. He pored over my file, adorned with a multitude of "E's," failing to realize that whether the next three days were spent within or outside the school walls, my final grades would remain no higher than "D's." I struggled to conceal my inner thoughts, fighting to keep them hidden from view. The surge of adrenaline from the fight had subsided, replaced by the vice principal's chastisement.

Glancing around, I noted the woodshop teacher's absence, a detail that had eluded my attention before. Defeat washed over me, dragging my spirits down as I sat there. The courage that had flickered within me during the courtyard altercation was now extinguished, leaving behind a residue of panic and docility. My aim was survival, and education was the means.

I didn't believe I had done anything wrong, but I knew I had to pretend that I did. I had honed the art of pretense, understanding that my survival depended on it. Though the fear of failure was genuine, I forced myself to apologize to the vice principal. What began as an apology evolved into pleading, my tears joining the chorus. The glint of determination mingled with vulnerability in my eyes must have triggered a shift within the vice principal. The three-day suspension was scaled down to a one-hour study hall before and after school.

It was an opportunity to salvage my grades, concluding the year with "D's" instead of "E's." Though I yearned to declare that I had done nothing wrong, I held back the urge. Survival was paramount, and I understood that pretense was my lifeline. Though the punishment left a bitter taste, it presented a chance to strive for better academic standing. As I contemplated this, the realization slowly washed over me: this was the result of standing up for myself. The endeavor seemed excessive; the risk too great. This train of thought only deepened the well of loneliness and fear within me.

Lauren strode into the vice principal's office, her expression a blend of smug satisfaction and disapproval. She reveled in the ammunition my actions had provided her, her emotions transparent across her features. Customary exchanges took place, and Lauren and I departed. She didn't waste any time launching into a reprimanding lecture.

"You've let us down, Gregg," she intoned. "But, more importantly, you've let yourself down." This was her favorite refrain, a line that once held more power than it does now. It was the same lecture, the same rhetoric. "Tim and I have invested so much in you kids," she would assert. "We held out hope that you'd change your ways and make us proud. This is a disgrace." Her words stung, but what wounded me more was her reluctance to meet my gaze while she spoke. It was as though I wasn't even worthy of her direct attention.

"You honestly don't want to make it, Gregg," Lauren's voice continued, delivering one of her favored phrases. This one cut the deepest, for making it was precisely what I yearned for. The sight and sound of her, her words cascading like a waterfall of judgment, echoed the emotions I had felt during the altercation with the bully.

We arrived home, and Lauren instructed me to wait in my room until Tim returned. When she turned off the car's engine, her trembling hand caught my attention. Shortly thereafter, Tim arrived and received his briefing from Lauren. With that, he barged into my room. "I heard you got into a fight today," he declared sternly.

"Yes," I answered.

"Did you emerge victorious, or did you end up on the losing side?"

"I won."

"You're grounded. If I catch you fighting again, you'll be in even bigger trouble." What Tim couldn't fathom, what he could not understand, was that the most distressing part of my day had involved resorting to swearing and, worse yet, resorting to violence. At that moment, I had unwittingly taken on the characteristics of my abusers—the very traits I loathed and feared the most. This realization rattled me to my core, for I recognized that this same force of violent anger was responsible for tearing apart my family, my school, my community, and the world itself. All I wanted was to sever myself from this destructive energy.

The experience left me profoundly shaken, an unsettling blend of conflicting emotions swirling within me. Guilt coiled around the peculiar satisfaction I had derived from the encounter, leaving me feeling foolish and undeserving. It was as though my self-esteem, confidence, and integrity had all been stripped away. This internal turmoil confounded me. After all, I had proudly proclaimed to Tim that "I won." So, why did that moment of victory feel like the most monumental failure? There was a nagging sense that Jesus, in His boundless wisdom, held the key to the answer. And perhaps that's why an overwhelming sense of despair was beginning to take hold.

Tim's monologue concluded there. Bewildered and plagued by a queasy sensation in my stomach, I returned to my studies. The following day at school, after the obligatory hour of study hall in the morning, I found myself on the receiving end of a mix of congratulations from fellow students and scolding from teachers. The refrain remained the same—the way I had disappointed them, their expectation that I could do better. I frequently wondered where they had unearthed the belief that I possessed the potential to achieve anything worthwhile. Keeping to myself, I navigated through the week without any further confrontations.

As my final class concluded, the teacher's voice, clear and gentle, floated above the cacophony of chatter and nervous energy. This particular teacher, my English instructor, had kidney failure and underwent

dialysis thrice weekly, yet he never missed a day of teaching. His enlarged arm lumps, a testament to his ailment, stood as a visible reminder of his struggles. He challenged me to read and exhibited patience when my grasp of the lessons faltered. It was his kindness and patience that kindled a spark within me. When he spoke, he directed his gaze at me, momentarily casting aside the shadow of my solitude. In those moments, his words leaned into the classroom as though he were endeavoring to etch the lessons into our hearts. To me, he embodied faith. He was a beacon of beauty.

As the bell chimed, we queued up to shake his hand one by one, making our exit from the classroom. However, before I could follow suit, he detained me and withdrew a slim, folded piece of paper from his pocket. As he did, a transformation washed over his features, momentarily eclipsing his illness as he radiated the innocence of a young boy. Extending the folded paper to me, he offered a faint, frail smile and said, "A few reading recommendations for the summer." I expressed my gratitude, not yet grasping the profound depth of compassion underlying this gesture. It wasn't until later that I learned he had passed away that same summer.

Wending my way through the corridor, en route to my locker, I took care to safeguard the piece of paper tucked securely within my pocket. Amidst the bustling crowd, I harbored a fear of losing this list of books recommended by my English teacher. It was an extraordinary gift, among the most thoughtful I had ever received. Laughter reverberated around me as students animatedly discussed their summer plans. When a peer unexpectedly wished me a pleasant summer, my response quivered. Kindness, though unfamiliar and wondrous, was never lost on me.

As evening descended, a bubble of eager anticipation swelled within me. With a sense of reverence, I delicately unfolded a scrap of paper I'd kept safeguarded in my pocket. The moment was ripe—I was about to unveil the list. On that neatly transcribed parchment, five book titles beckoned, their names etched in a

font that evoked the gravitas of scholarly handwriting. These books were vessels, each a profound narrative in its own right:

"The Cross and the Switchblade" by David Wilkerson: Published in the seminal year of 1963—a year that also marks my birth—this autobiographical masterpiece traces the transformative odyssey of David Wilkerson. His mission to reach disaffected youth and gang members in New York City's labyrinthine streets is a compelling testament to the enduring power of Christ's love and faith under duress. This temporal connection imbues me with a sense of destiny, a sentiment that provokes deep emotional resonance.

"The Hiding Place" by Corrie Ten Boom: With its debut in 1971 and its persistent echo in 1975, this memoir is a timeless artifact. It recounts the wartime heroics of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian woman who risked it all to save Jewish lives. Imprisoned for her audacity, Ten Boom's faith remains her steadfast companion even in the bleakest of moments.

"My Side of the Mountain" by Jean Craighead George: A compelling odyssey of youth and survival. Sam Gibley, its youthful protagonist, undertakes a daring adventure into the untamed wilderness, navigating the elements with courage and aplomb.

"Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen: A companion tale of survival, this book casts us into Brian's perilous journey. Stranded alone after a plane crash, Brian's tale emphasizes the virtues of resourcefulness and self-reliance, sketching the indelible human spirit.

"The Book of Revelation": Serving as the climactic finale to the Holy Bible, this eschatological tour de force presents a vivid tableau of the ultimate showdown between the forces of good and evil. It prophesies a New World—one radiant with hope and divine rejuvenation. In the tempestuous times we navigate today, times that eerily mimic the apocalyptic scenes described, I find myself drawn to its pages with increasing frequency. Astonishingly, this book was suggested reading during my formative years—a

boy, then unaware of the gravitas this text would assume in his later life. This retrospective realization sends chills down my spine, hinting at a foreshadowing so precise, it feels prophetic.

As I immersed myself in these works, it became evident why my teacher had recommended them. Each one embodied themes of sacrifice, courage, and most profoundly, love—themes that reverberated with the spirit of "My Jesus." It was as though a celestial hand guided me deeper into a universe beyond ink and paper, signaling that my journey had only just commenced.

Reading them felt like listening to a soft serenade emanating from an old Victrola. While I was physically alone, a celestial presence—my King—accompanied me. A voice whispered that despite my flaws and doubts, I was known, and that was enough. Each book served as a reminder that the path ahead would be strewn with trials, tainted by my past wrongs and life's inherent cruelties. Yet, within such adversity lay the promise of transformative wisdom.

The saying, "All the world's secrets are answered in books," reverberated in my consciousness. However, I discerned that such a tenet could be fulfilled only within the sacred pages of the Holy Bible. Beyond it, lay a wealth of human knowledge, and insights into the labyrinthine facets of life. I recognized that the pursuit of wisdom is a celestial odyssey, commencing with one's first breath and, if graced by Heaven's embrace, continuing into eternity.

Many of the books I've journeyed through were not handed to me on a syllabus nor suggested by a well-meaning mentor. Instead, they were serendipitous finds in the sacred aisles of my neighborhood library.

There, among the sentinel-like shelves guarding countless stories, one tome felt destined for me. Its name, elusive as a half-forgotten dream, has been lost to time. Perhaps it nestled quietly in the embrace of obscurity, finding a sanctuary in the public domain through a stranger's kindness.

Yet, this unassuming book bore the intense fire of faith in Jesus, challenging the very notions of belief. The narrative carried me to a wilderness, both hauntingly beautiful and perilous, where a father and son walked side by side. Their shared laughter and dreams were silenced when the son, fragile and burning with fever, succumbed to an illness that eluded the father's tender care.

The wild's symphony of rustling leaves and distant animal cries filled the vast expanse. A moon, luminescent and watchful, painted the night with silvery hues and haunting shadows, their ballet hinting at the mysteries of the dark. Amidst this, the father's heart throbbed with a cocktail of dread and hope.

Then, a benevolent stranger materialized as if the cosmos conspired in their favor. His kind eyes held an otherworldly wisdom. "Allow me," he murmured, preparing a humble bowl of soup. The sickly boy, his strength waning, managed a few sips, guided by this enigmatic guardian. Silently, the father's prayers ascended, weaving into the night, pleading with Jesus.

After the last drop of soup, the father, voice thick with emotion, ventured, "Will he... survive?" The stranger's response was neither comfort nor despair but a challenge. "Would your faith waver if he were taken from you?" The world seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the father's response. Caught between his boundless love for his son and unwavering faith in the divine, he whispered a choked, "Yes." The stranger, with a knowing smile that held a universe of understanding, vanished, leaving the father to grapple with the weight of his confession.

As the curtain of night deepened, so did the father's introspection. He battled his demons, confronting the very nature of his faith. Was it a beacon in the storm, or was he merely clinging to a fragile hope? For me, this narrative mirrored my dilemmas. The wilderness, an emblem of life's unpredictable terrain, and the ever-watchful moon symbolized hope's delicate dance with despair.

I too have felt that gnawing doubt, which sinking fear, mainly when my mother's well-being hung in the balance. Would my faith hold if the unimaginable occurred? The thought still sends cold shivers down my spine, reminding me of the complexities of belief.

Dawn's golden embrace revealed the miracle—the son, rejuvenated, beaming with life, calling out joyfully to his father. At that moment, a profound truth dawned upon the father. His faith was not merely a testament to his devotion but an intricate tapestry of love, sacrifice, and undying hope. Their journey through the daunting wilderness had metamorphosed into a pilgrimage of soulful revelations.

And as the sun ascended, casting away the remnants of the night, the duo, bound by an unbreakable bond of love and faith, ventured forth, their spirits buoyed by the miraculous and the promise of a brighter morrow.

That night, I fervently turned to Jesus in prayer, imploring His guidance to help me absorb the knowledge within the books bestowed upon me by my teacher. Often, reading these books triggered vivid flashbacks of my mother and memories of the past.

These intrusive recollections made it difficult for me to concentrate, compelling me to repeatedly read the same passages. Hatred seemed to intensify every facet of my existence, complicating even the simplest of tasks.

Sleep remained elusive, and in my desperation for relief, I turned to prayer. Seeking to anchor the newfound knowledge I had gained, I mentally retraced the intricate narratives of the stories I had read, akin to rewinding an old movie reel. Gradually, exhaustion enveloped me, and I surrendered to a profound slumber.

As the morning sunbathed the world in its radiant glow, I roused from slumber, greeted by an overwhelming sense of foreboding that enveloped me. It was as though a weighty cloud had descended upon the dawn, casting a somber shadow over my spirit.

As I prepared myself for the day ahead, my sister, Lauren, casually interjected with a sarcastic tone, "So, do you anticipate any greater success this year?" She munched on her breakfast as she spoke. My response emerged with raw honesty, "Likely not, but I shall endeavor to give my best."

My sincerity remained palpable, a constant that persisted regardless of its potential implications. I had learned through experience that falsehoods only exacerbated the situation. Observing the dejection etched upon my countenance, Lauren appeared to derive a modicum of solace and perhaps even a glimmer of gratification. This modest triumph seemed sufficient to propel me onward, even in the face of the inevitable challenges that lay ahead.

It is a confounding reality that some individuals find a perverse joy in the failures and struggles of others. These feelings signify a deeply unsettling influence, shaped by a mix of psychological and external factors. Their profound and disquieting effect on the human psyche underscores the complex nature of such attitudes. This inclination to derive pleasure from the hardships of others might indeed bear shades of a darker influence, casting shadows upon the innate compassion and empathy that should be at the core of human interactions.

With my breakfast scarcely tasted, I embarked on my journey to school. Upon my arrival, a tidal wave of fear overwhelmed me, culminating in an intense panic attack. The surroundings intensified as if every person in the school were shouting at the top of their lungs, their voices echoing incessantly in my ears. Even the fluorescent lights appeared harsher and more blinding than ever before.

A torn poster promoting the JV football team hung crookedly on one of the brick walls, its crudely painted depiction of an American Indian, who went by the name of Chief Tecumseh, after whom both the

Junior HS and HS were named, gazing back at me. Chief Tecumseh was a true American hero, and I was awestruck by his bravery on the battlefield, wondering if I could ever be as brave as him. His eyes were dark, his skin brownish, with a fierce look and war paint. It was amazing to see the headdress and battle gear. But right then and there, I was no brave Indian Chief; I was not even a “Brave Indian,” but just a scared little boy. I could never understand where all this fear came from and why it came on so suddenly. For others, the poster heralded a festive occasion, yet it stirred no happiness within me. Rather, it casts a long shadow of doubt over my academic achievements, prompting me to doubt my advancement to the subsequent grade. Emotionally, I felt as though I trailed far behind my peers, and the school itself felt like an arena of chaos and desolation.

Years of enduring abuse in every conceivable form had arrested my growth, rendering a formidable mountain of challenges before me. My nights were haunted by nightmares and panic attacks, chilling my blood within the solitary confines of my bed. Moreover, the world around me seemed to communicate in an incomprehensible language, leaving me struggling to decipher its messages. As the approach of summer loomed, these intense emotions and fears only escalated in magnitude. On some days, the future shimmered invitingly on the horizon—a glimmer of hope beckoning forth. Yet on others, if I dared to pause and reflect, the specter of horrors threatened to engulf me. I found myself ensnared in a liminal space, suspended between the aftermath of unspeakable abuse—particularly the torment of molestations and rapes I endured—and the unyielding resilience demanded to forge ahead. Much like a shark in constant motion, I knew I had to continue propelling myself forward unrelentingly, lest I be consumed by the abyss of my anguish.

As the hallways gradually emptied, leading us toward the waiting circle of buses that would carry us home for the last time that academic year, a sense of solace settled within me. The realization that I could now engage with my studies at a pace dictated by my learning rhythm provided a welcome relief. No longer

shackled by the weight of stringent academic performance, the dawn of a new day presented a multitude of opportunities, all stemming from my unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Guided by the fear of inheriting the traits of my parents, I pressed forward, channeling this trepidation into a driving force. Simultaneously, the prospect of attaining recognition and acceptance through academic accomplishment fueled my long-sought pursuit of euphoria.

Yet, despite the loftiness of my aspirations during the day, the nights were often marred by the intrusion of nightmares. Awakened, my body drenched in sweat and tears tracing their path down my cheeks, I would instinctively curl into a protective ball, clutching myself in a gesture of self-preservation. Swathed in blankets, my fragile form would become ensnared in these nightly visions of horror. At times, the nightmares were so hauntingly vivid that my distress would find a voice in audible cries, my heart racing as I feared that Lauren or Tim might have overheard my cries of terror.

This quest for personal sanctity was a driving factor behind my fervent desire to possess a room of my own—a haven where I could recline in stillness, attuned to the rhythm of my breath, seeking tranquility amid the chaos of my mind. And within this cocoon of solitude, I could whisper prayers to a seemingly empty room, a respite from the clamor of the outside world.

The loneliness that pervaded my school year rendered me vulnerable, a state that some seized upon by masquerading as friends, only to reveal their true intentions by subjecting me to ridicule once they had deceived me. At twelve, my mental and emotional terrain was still imprinted with childhood innocence, a vulnerability that made me prone to the complexities of a frequently bewildering world. Carrying the burdens of exhaustion, profound loneliness, and weakness to others' influences, I continued to strive for equilibrium and move forward.

Ultimately, I settled into a seat at the back of the bus, a place shunned by most due to its association with those deemed outcasts. Yet, the allure of isolation held a certain appeal for me. It was in that corner

that I would drift into the realm of fantasy, occasionally traversing into the terrain of memories entwined with my mother. Amidst the tumult of my thoughts, I often contemplated the seemingly improbable act of leaving her behind, despite the overwhelming abyss of despair and paralyzing fear that frequently engulfed me.

As the bus distanced itself from the school edifice, a compelling urge to turn back swept over me, accompanied by a surge of emotions threatening to break free in tears. My mind was a whirlwind of countless thoughts, a maelstrom I fought valiantly to contain. Despite my physical fragility, there resided within me a steadfast belief that the more I immersed myself in the realm of knowledge, the more robust my being would become. Learning served as the beacon that illuminated the paths of my thoughts, granting me access to a wellspring of light that I could draw upon.

Even as I remained attuned to my present surroundings, I couldn't escape the fact that only a few months had transpired since I parted ways with my mother. Yet her voice, her call, lingered within me like an indelible echo. It was a presence that steadfastly clung to my consciousness, a haunting reminder that I carried with me perpetually, a testament to the enduring bond between a mother and her child.

Before long, the school bus arrived at my designated stop, signaling the onset of my first day of summer vacation. A sense of uncertainty hung in the air as I contemplated how to navigate this new chapter. The landscape of my life was transforming, both subtle and striking. My voice sounded unfamiliar to me when it escaped my lips, and my body was in the throes of changes that felt foreign and unsettling. On occasion, I'd find myself involuntarily clenching my fists and trembling, as if some internal force waged a silent battle within me. It was a struggle that remained hidden beneath the surface, a conflict unfolding beneath the veneer of my daily life.

I had journeyed from one desolate realm to another, and while there had been marginal improvements in terms of sustenance, shelter, and clothing, the core of my existence remained relatively unchanged since my time with Mother. Despite the physical alterations, my emotional landscape was marked by continuity. However, the events of that particular day would soon pale in comparison to what awaited me upon my return to the home I shared with Lauren and Tim.

The state of our dwelling was a sight to behold, and not in a favorable sense. The house bore the telltale signs of neglect, most notably manifesting in a small but conspicuous black patch marring the gray wood. The task at hand was to address this issue—a task that called for the application of creosote, a dense tar substance utilized to seal and protect the exterior of the house. And so, with the arrival of summer, this became my inaugural chore, marking the commencement of a season defined by both labor and reflection.

Summoning a deep breath, I treaded toward the house, my fingers pressing into my palms with a mixture of trepidation and frustration. Adjusting the weight of the backpack containing my books from one shoulder to the other, a fierce anger smoldered within me. All I yearned for was the solitude to immerse myself in reading; the prospect of painting the house held no appeal for me.

I had scarcely set foot inside when Tim's voice reverberated through the air, each word a booming command that pierced the silence, "Change your clothes and get to work! No lazing around this summer!"

"Hey, Lynn, lend a hand in the kitchen!" Lauren's directive followed in rapid succession.

"Gregg, Carter, get yourselves out there and start painting!" Tim's voice chimed in again, accompanied by derisive laughter. Tim and Lauren were on the verge of leaving for a brief errand, and before departing, they aimed to ensure our industriousness. It was a tactic meant to preempt any potential shirking of responsibility. This marked our second home in just a few months, a consequence of Lauren's work as a realtor that necessitated frequent moves. Between the ages of eleven and sixteen, we would experience a succession of five different homes—an intricate cycle encompassing purchase, renovation,

habitation, sale, and a fresh start. The constant upending of our living situation was a source of great disdain for me, as I struggled to find my bearings amidst the ever-shifting surroundings.

Little did I grasp then that my feelings of aversion toward perpetual change would soon be overshadowed by an even deeper loathing—a sentiment reserved for the formidable task of handling tar. Carter and I embarked on the arduous chore of applying creosote to the house, flinging the thick substance onto the surface in uneven smears. In a matter of moments, the significance of the last day of school had slipped from my thoughts. Enveloped in a state of tedium, I was oblivious to the passage of time. Seemingly propelled by a mixture of boredom and determination, Carter ascended a ladder, perching himself on the roof and surveying the expanse of the subdivision.

"Look, Gregg! I can see Caroline's house from here!" Carter's voice brimmed with exhilaration. Caroline, our babysitter, played a role not so much in supervising us—myself, Lynn, and Carter—but rather in assuaging Lauren and Tim's concerns that we might inadvertently bring about calamity in their absence, even if only for a couple of hours. Caroline had elicited a fascination within me—a fascination stemming from her air of mystique, her chestnut brown curly hair and matching eyes, her statuesque frame, perpetually sun-kissed skin, and an air of allure that defied description. The scent of perfumed soap clung to her smooth skin, but it was her full, soft, crimson lips that held me spellbound. On the rare occasions when she permitted me a parting kiss, I would linger, savoring the taste of her lips, a moment of bittersweet ecstasy.

Aware that Tim's return loomed and determined to evade his reprimand, I labored with renewed energy, resolved to complete the task promptly and escape its grip. Frustration, however, would soon get the better of me. In a surge of exasperation, I seized a half-filled bucket of creosote and exerted forceful pressure, causing the tar substance to erupt from the container, bounce off of the house's surface, and splatter directly onto my face and hair.

"Carter! Carter, it's burning!" My frantic voice pierced the air.

"It's burning!" Carter's response echoed mine. Swiftly, he descended the ladder, urgently grasping my form and leading me inside the house. My eyelids were sealed shut by the viscous creosote, while the substance had begun to sear my face and scalp. My eyes felt as though they were ablaze as well. Carter guided me through the house, a sightless guide for my sightless self. Gradually, he steered me to the bathroom sink, where he swiftly commenced shattering the vials of solvent that accompanied each can of creosote. One after another, he poured the solvent into my eyes, its effect evident as it promptly dissolved the tar residue binding my eyelids shut. I was granted the sight of Carter's outstretched hands, and with determination, he guided my head beneath the stream of running water, entreating me, "Open your eyes, Gregg! Open them and let the water cleanse your sight!"

It was a struggle, but progress was palpable. The sting in my eyes began to wane, yet the sensation of burning persisted on my face and scalp. I could discern the worry etched onto Carter's face, his eyes shimmering like stars. He radiated genuine concern.

"Are you okay, Gregg?" Carter's voice was tinged with genuine apprehension.

"No," I managed to croak, tears mingling with the creosote on my face. Amid the commotion, the calls of my name from within the house went unnoticed. Tim and Lauren had returned and were met with the sight of a splattered creosote aftermath, an oily expanse staining the yard. Tim burst into the bathroom, his voice demanding an explanation for the chaos that had unfolded.

"What the hell happened?" Tim's tone was accusatory.

"Gregg got creosote on him," Carter explained.

"How the hell did that even happen?" Tim's response was laced with irritation, followed by his usual refrain, "Are you an idiot?"

There was little merit in responding to Tim's inquiries. My actions had been heedless, an unwise rush to complete the task at hand. My primary concern, however, was the prospect of losing my vision. The creosote's searing effect felt as though it were rending my skull apart and flaying my skin. The sight of Carter and Tim surveying the scene only escalated my anxiety. Their expressions were a mixture of astonishment and uncertainty, and their inability to swiftly assess the situation fueled my distress.

Eventually, Tim concluded that I needed medical attention. Amidst his decision, he emitted a jovial chuckle that sent shivers down my spine. Tim's amusement was a source of terror, an aspect of his personality that never failed to unnerve me.

"Lauren!" Tim's voice rang out. "We need to take your genius of a brother to the doctor's!"

During the drive, I felt the solidification of my hair, each strand fused into a mass resembling dark, razor-edged spikes. Coupled with the layer of creosote smeared across my face and forehead, I must have looked like a disheveled and manic punk rocker. A memory surfaced of a children's book I had read not long ago—a tale involving a tar-covered entity cast into a thicket of thorns. The narrative had been one of the many stories I devoured during that initial summer with Lauren and Tim. I sought refuge in the book's meaning, attempting to distract myself from the deeper recesses of my mind that remained fraught with anticipation, fearing the inevitable loss of my sight.

After a swift examination that left the doctor puzzled, he prescribed a solution to cleanse the tar from my hair and a salve for my skin. My eyes were rinsed again, using a solution that stung nearly as much as the creosote itself. The solution for my scalp had an unexpected side effect: it bleached my auburn hair, transforming it into a shade of blonde that rendered me nearly unrecognizable. Returning home, I hastened to the bathroom to assess the aftermath. My reflection presented a visage that was pale, worn, and unsettling. The overwhelming feeling of unattractiveness that perpetually haunted me had intensified, inflicting fresh anguish upon my already fractured self-esteem. Overwhelmed by loneliness, I wept in silence

before the bathroom mirror, unable to confront my reflection without a surge of disgust. At least I had been spared from blindness, a debt I owed to Carter's trembling hands as he poured the solution into my eyes.

"Thank you for this, Carter," my heart brimmed with gratitude, an unspoken expression of thanks to Jesus for sparing my vision, preserving my hair, and safeguarding the remnants of my once appealing face. The gravity of the situation had dawned on me, and I understood the precarious edge I had skirted, the potential damage narrowly averted. Tears of relief mingled with the lingering sting on my skin, and deep within, I clung to my faith, drawing solace from the belief that a higher power had intervened, providing a glimmer of light, a beacon of hope even in the bleakest moments.

In the ensuing weeks, I withdrew into myself. The embarrassment I felt hindered my interactions with the other kids in the neighborhood. I refrained from inviting my friend Greg over until my hair had regained its natural hue. The instinct to survive surged within me, propelling me to study with heightened fervor, to devote increasing hours to books and the challenges of basic math. The more I learned, the greater my self-assurance grew. It unfurled within me like a new kind of melody, eliciting a racing heartbeat of excitement and infusing my spirit with joy.

In the summer before my eighth-grade year, I encountered another boy who would swiftly become one of my closest friends—Bruce, two years my junior. Bruce was soft-spoken and reserved, seldom uttering a word; when he did, his voice was a gentle rasp. His tranquil blue eyes harbored a tenderness that allowed me to experience a form of innocent affection that existed between two young boys. With Greg and Bruce alongside me, I was now fortified by two best friends, and our bond was unbreakable.

Together, the trio of us—Carter, Lynn, and myself—opted to join a Judo club at our local YMCA. The inspiration for this choice stemmed from Lauren, my sister, who had initially enrolled. This was not the first instance in which I had taken advantage of Lauren's undertakings for my gain, a skillful maneuver

executed in stealth. Yet, beneath the veneer of my adept manipulation lay a persistent sense of self-disgust. Even in instances that were ostensibly positive and virtuous, such as enrolling in the Judo club, I remained burdened by the weight of guilt.

Guilt was a perennial companion, a shadow lurking beneath the surface, a reminder that honesty often triumphed over deceit and that the consequences of falsehood were often harsher than confronting the truth. From an early age, I had discovered that lying to Mother yielded inevitable beatings. However, if I summoned the courage to speak the truth, the retribution inflicted upon me would intensify. It was an agonizing dichotomy, ensnared between the repulsion towards lying and the dread of the painful consequences that awaited truthfulness.

At times, I questioned whether this internal conflict was linked to my connection with Jesus. The struggle between truth and falsehood ran counter to the person I aspired to become. Deep within, there existed a longing to better myself, yet the unrelenting presence of someone who consistently belittled and devalued me had etched feelings of worthlessness into my very core. This relentless mistreatment cast a pall of isolation and sorrow over my heart.

The advent of Judo infused us with exhilaration, an enthusiasm that transcended the sport itself. It provided an outlet to combat without repercussions, in stark contrast to the penalties I had suffered after confronting the boy in the schoolyard. Judo fueled a latent violence within me, a violence that thrived amid the prevailing darkness. Each match became an arena where I fought with increasing intensity, eclipsing my prior performances. Medals were not just objects; they symbolized triumph, a coveted mark of victory. But more than anything, they represented a means of inflicting pain. Amid these competitions, I unleashed a primal roar that morphed into a scream with each grapple.

The act of tossing another boy and witnessing his body collide with the mat ignited a sense of dominance within me, awakening a smoldering anger that fanned into a roaring blaze. The rage was

intoxicating, and to my astonishment, fighting came naturally to me. Like Carter, I embodied a potent force, a ticking time bomb.

Clutching onto the achievements I had managed to attain, both in my academic pursuits and in the realm of athletics, I continued to reach for greater heights. Each success acted as a catalyst, further fueling my drive to outdo myself, a weighty burden as I endeavored to distance myself from the ashes of my past. With fervor, I propelled myself forward, seeking glimmers of progress within the chaos of my raw struggle, grappling with the remnants of the life I had left behind. I clung to life's promises, fervently searching for a flicker of vitality amidst the shadows.

Despite my determined efforts, the specter of past anguish refused to dissipate. Within the recesses of my mind, Mother's voice echoed, a soft but chilling whisper branding me as worthless. Most days, the path ahead seemed motionless, devoid of discernible progress. Whether it was the dynamic lectures from Lauren and Tim, the aloof presence of the social worker arranged for me and my siblings, or the omnipresence of Mother's memory, my journey was plagued by stagnation. And then there were the flashbacks of unfamiliar faces lurking in the shadows, waiting to impose their brand of horror upon me, haggling over my value as if I were a commodity.

Amidst this turmoil, I found solace in my insatiable curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Books became my companions, guiding me through diverse worlds and perspectives that transcended the limitations of my immediate surroundings. My voracious appetite for reading became a lifeline, a means of escape from the confines of my circumstances. The stories I devoured transported me to realms far beyond my reality, offering comfort and respite from the weight that often bore down on me. In these moments, literature and faith became my refuge, offering a comforting embrace in the midst of turmoil.

My bond with Greg and Bruce remained unwavering, providing a steadfast support network that bolstered me through the trials of adolescence. In their company, I found an affirmation of my worth, a

reminder that I was not defined solely by the shadows of my past. Together, we shared moments of joy, dreams of a brighter future, and the camaraderie that can only be forged through shared experiences. Through their friendship, I discovered the power of companionship, a shield against the harshness of the world.

Despite the lingering scars and the challenges ahead, I clung to a fragile ember of hope, determined to rise above the adversity that had marked my journey thus far. The path before me was unpredictable, fraught with pitfalls and uncertainties, but I was resolved to forge my destiny, to transcend the pain that had once bound me. My identity was not defined by the tragedies I endured but by the resilience with which I faced them. And so, with my gaze fixed on the horizon, I pressed forward, embracing the challenges and victories that awaited me on the uncharted road ahead.

What kept the ember of life's flame alive within me was a small treasure tucked away deep in my heart—a folded piece of paper adorned with a meticulously penned list of book titles. This was a gift from a compassionate English teacher nearing the end of his journey. It stood as a testament that within the chaos of my existence, there was someone who cared, someone who envisioned more for me than exploitation, someone who retained command over their faculties, both mental and emotional. This teacher was someone who spoke without slurred words or unsteady steps. In the disarray surrounding me, this individual emerged as a beacon of goodness—a glimmer of humanity untouched by the hostility that plagued my life. My determination to rise above adversity was a source of empowerment, a reminder that I had the strength to shape my destiny.

It occurred to me that I hadn't succumbed to death in years past; rather, I had been brought to the brink by the malicious intentions of others. They had wielded an arsenal of weapons, cleverly veiling their actions behind the curtains of my shame, crafting the perfect alibi. But I refused to yield to the darkness that

threatened to engulf me. I could not, and would not, become like them. Even in my tender youth, before the age of thirteen, I grasped the essence of love and, consequently, the essence of life itself.

As I devoted that summer to preparing for the challenges that eighth grade would bring, I began to unravel the essence of existence. It was encapsulated within that folded piece of paper—not just the titles of the books suggested by a kind-hearted individual, but also the effort taken to inscribe those words, infusing them with genuine care and placing their hope in me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tim's sudden outburst of rage was indeed a familiar occurrence, a hysterical storm that often swept through his temperament without warning. His quick fuse was well-known to anyone who had the misfortune of crossing his path, and on this particular day, I found myself ensnared in the tempestuous wake of his anger. The sight of what unfolded before my eyes left me temporarily bereft of words as if time itself had frozen to capture the shocking tableau.

In that heart-stopping moment, the stark contrast between Tim's violent actions and my stunned silence was undeniable. It was as though the world had momentarily shifted, slowing down to emphasize the gravity of the situation. With a sense of urgency that matched the perilous circumstances, he violently snatched Matilda, who had swiftly become my loyal protector and cherished German Shorthair companion. Affectionately known as 'Mattie,' she was a hunting dog of remarkable skill and had grown to be an inseparable part of my life.

The sequence of events unfolded rapidly, like scenes from a dramatic film. While innocently playing, Bruce had veered perilously close to Mattie, and in those heart-pounding seconds, it felt as if the universe held its breath. Mattie, in her unwavering loyalty, had misinterpreted Bruce's actions as a threat to me, and

with a sudden snap, she lunged at his face. It was a gesture born from her protective instincts, an attempt to shield me from perceived harm during our playful wrestle in the living room.

As I watched in astonishment, the tableau took a more alarming turn. I saw Mattie's agile body, propelled through the air, her sleek gray-black fur and distinctive markings accentuating the dramatic movement. Then, my gaze shifted to Tim, whose eyes had widened in shock and alarm. In a swift, almost instinctive motion, he lunged toward Mattie, his strong arms reaching out to grab her by the scruff of the neck. With a forceful motion, he flung her into the air and away from Bruce, the abruptness of the action shocking me to the core. In an instant, my heart broke for both Mattie and Bruce, who now carried the weight of guilt for inadvertently causing harm to my beloved canine companion.

Mattie was officially Tim's loyal companion, but as far as my heart was concerned, she had become my companion too. I had formed a close bond with Mattie, considering her not just Tim's dog, but my own. My heart had always held a soft spot for animals, and they, in turn, seemed to reciprocate the affection I showered upon them.

In the presence of Mattie's unwavering loyalty and gentle spirit, I found a reassuring protector, much like Sam had been. In moments of lightheartedness, I would sweep her into my arms and twirl around, serenading her with the same untroubled happiness that Sam and I had shared. Pressing my lips against her velvety cheek, I could feel the warmth of her presence enveloping me, reminiscent of a comforting embrace.

Together, we faced the thrills of horror films, drawing strength from each other during those spine-tingling scenes. Exploring the neighborhood and venturing into the captivating woods, Mattie and I crafted memories brimming with laughter and discovery. She had evolved from being just a loyal companion to a guardian, a kindred spirit who shielded me from harm, akin to Sam. Through Mattie's unwavering companionship, I gleaned the wisdom that love, and bravery had the power to mend even the most

profound scars. In her, I discovered a confidante who grasped my anxieties and offered solace, infusing my existence with love that defied limitations.

Oftentimes, Mattie would keep a watchful eye over my slumber, surveying the area around the bed before eventually settling down beside me. Many nights, I'd drift off holding her close, feeling the rhythm of her delicate ribcage as it gently rose and fell beneath her silky coat.

Bruce and I had been engaged in light-hearted play, but Mattie perceived his actions as a threat when she caught wind of my hearty laughter. Our antics came to an abrupt halt as Mattie froze, her gaze laser-focused on Bruce. A low growl rumbled from her throat, and then, in a swift motion that caught us all off guard, she lunged at Bruce, her gleaming white teeth aimed at his face.

Tim, positioned nearby as an impromptu referee, reacted swiftly. He intervened by gripping Mattie's collar firmly. She emitted a distressed yelp and guttural sounds, while I protested vehemently, begging Tim to release her. Yet, my pleas went unanswered as he dragged her towards the garage, confining her within a dog crate. From inside the house, I could faintly discern her coughing and the strained noises that accompanied her captivity.

"Stay away from her!" Tim's command reverberated as he returned to the living room. Anxiety clenched my heart as the sounds from Mattie faded, leaving me with an unsettling silence. The abrupt stillness stoked my fear that she might have met an untimely fate due to asphyxiation in the confines of the garage.

As the night grew darker and Tim and Lauren slumbered soundly, I stealthily made my way into the adjacent garage. Mattie lay within the crate, her spirit resilient despite the ordeal. Upon seeing me, her bobbed tail wagged tentatively, and I unlatched the door with caution. Embracing her gently, my fingers

threaded through her velvety coat. A bittersweet realization washed over me – it was time to say goodbye. An intuition whispered that Mattie's time by my side was drawing to a close.

Much like Sam before her, Mattie's unwavering courage led her to endure unjust retribution. Her instinctive act of shielding me during a seemingly innocuous game had landed her in a cruel predicament. I watched helplessly as Tim forcibly separated us, the echoes of her cries reverberating in my ears. Witnessing Mattie's unjust punishment was a poignant reminder that those who shielded me from harm often bore the brunt of the consequences. Just as Sam had suffered for his loyalty, Mattie, too, faced a similar fate.

It felt like a recurring pattern, a tragic cycle where those who cared for me were punished for their compassion. The weight of this realization was heavy – a burden to carry, knowing that love and protection could incur such harshness.

Though Mattie acted out of protection for me, she had bitten Bruce during our wrestling match in the living room. Viewing this as the last straw, Tim decided to remove her from our home, choosing to send her to the pound. This decision served as a harsh reminder of my seemingly inevitable fate: the inability to retain those I love, echoing a recurring theme of loneliness destined to shadow my life. As the day of Mattie's departure neared, the familiar ache of loss intensified, evoking the sorrow I felt with Sambirdio's absence, stirring a deep-seated grief as I braced myself to say goodbye to another faithful companion.

I understood the necessity of concealing my distress from Tim, aware that he might respond with anger if he saw my deep empathy for Mattie's plight. Yet, how could I suppress such intense emotions? Mattie's only intention had been to shield me, offering unwavering loyalty and protection. Despite her innocence, this gesture had been deemed an offense by those around us.

As the impending day drew near, I found myself retreating to the corners of solitude, desperately concealing the tears that threatened to breach the walls I'd built. The prospect of losing Mattie, another

cherished presence torn from the tapestry of my life, weighed heavily on my heart. It was as if the hands of fate conspired to snatch away every solace and source of love that had graced my existence.

In those quiet moments, I clung fervently to memories of Sambirdio, how his warm embrace lifted me, how I twirled him around in a dance, infusing joy into the mundane. He was more than a friend; he was family. But now, with Mattie's impending departure casting a shadow, a haunting echo resonated within me—history, it seemed, was destined to repeat itself.

Yet, shrouded in sorrow, I found refuge in the thought of Jesus, the precursor of solace who comprehended the anguish churning within me. In Him, I unearthed a place of safety where my heart's tumultuous symphony found a conductor, a wellspring of strength in despair.

When the day of parting finally arrived, and I stood witness as Mattie embarked on her journey, my heart clenched under the weight of loss. Life's scales tipped toward cruelty, the guardians of our sanctuaries too often bearing the brunt of adversity. But as I grieved, I held fast to the certainty that Mattie's absence wouldn't sever the threads of love we had woven.

In the face of life's stormy sea, I clung to the teachings of Jesus, finding solace in the unwavering resilience of love transcending physical bounds. Even in Mattie's absence, the echo of her care and protection would forever resonate within me.

And so, with a symphony of grief and determination, I reemerged onto the stage of life, clutching the memories of affection in my heart's embrace. Amid the mournful symphony of loss, Jesus stood unwavering, arms extended, offering solace and understanding—a lighthouse in a world beset by uncertainty.

The gnawing fear as I glanced at the calendar was a stark reminder of the impending specter of school. That summer, I was submerged in the rigors of academia, wrestling with rudimentary math problems, a prisoner in the solitary confines to which I had grown accustomed. Compliance was a shield fashioned from terror—a trembling submission to the figures controlling my narrative.

Amid the tapestry of peers, I found allies in Greg and Bruce, yet Bruce's youth relegated him to a different realm. Hence, Greg remained my singular confidant. As the school year approached, I etched a vow into my heart: no turmoil at school, no retaliation, even if the tormentors sought to provoke me. Their intimidation had waned in the aftermath of my solitary act of defiance. Still, the dread of academic struggle, of public humiliation, lingered like a shadow in the recesses of my mind.

The incendiary memory of humiliation—a primal emotional imprint—hovered, an orchestra of cracking needles in my mind. It resounded in sharp crescendos each time my eyes met the gaze of those who looked down upon me. Often, it was Mother, occasionally accompanied by a man whose features were obscured by a wild beard. His familiarity was chilling, his voice and gaze unmistakably recognizable.

His fingers alighted on me with an air of predatory curiosity, his touch grazing my forehead, a remnant of the scratch Mother had left. His attention was superficial, and I remained a silent supplicant, shackled by fear. His presence was a formidable gale, a harbinger of discomfort, his intent unmistakably unsettling. The innocent memory of spinning in a chair with Carter and Lynn was marred by the disorienting whirl that accompanied his touch. The sequence of events leading to this moment was a fractured mosaic. His touch was icy and invasive, his presence an unwelcome specter.

Within the stillness of the house, the disquieting echoes of his actions pervaded. The tears welled, stifled, but broke free regardless. His focus remained oblivious to my distress, consumed in his dark preoccupations. The silence was punctuated by the chilling soundscape of his endeavors. I withheld the

sobs, though they surged with a vengeance. His audacity knew no bounds, heedless to the turmoil that his actions wrought. With each passing moment, the torment of being ensnared by these strangers, or by Mother's hand, loomed inescapable. Even in fear's shadow, sometimes I felt nothing more than an enveloping numbness.

In those harrowing instances, I felt as if I was teetering on the precipice of madness. My mind grappled with the inconceivable malevolence that unfolded before me, a world shattered into fragmented shards of bewilderment. My young heart was unprepared to fathom such cruelty, and I yearned for the protective embrace of ignorance, dreading the day when I would be forced to fully grasp the weight of such maleficence.

The memory of those chilling encounters etched itself deep into my soul, a relentless specter haunting my every step, a constant reminder of the twisted darkness that humanity could manifest. A silent witness, the moon outside had cast its luminescence through the smudged glass, a spectator to both moments of exultation and despair. Neither it, nor the stars adorning the expanse, offered solace. They stood impartial, their presence devoid of prejudice or judgment. Yet, within the moon's muted glow, a question arose: did the moon, too, love and loathe me? Its ever-present vigil seemed to reflect the dichotomy of my existence, a harmony of tenderness and torment. The moon, like my life, bore witness to all, a steadfast companion amid the complex interplay of emotions. It was a presence that had witnessed my joy and anguish, and I found refuge in its unwavering gaze, a silent companion that paralleled my journey through affection and affliction.

My pulse quickened as I slid into the bed I shared with Carter, navigating the space cautiously so as not to disturb his slumber. A chasm separated our bodies, the touch of his skin foreign to me. Suddenly, a rustling arose from Mother's bed, jolting my senses.

Her door, previously shut, now ajar. Framed by the moon's soft light that seeped through her window, she stood there—a spectral silhouette, and then she was gone. In that instant, an insidious notion enveloped me: would Mother's touch draw me closer with beckoning fingers? The image of her, illuminated by moonlight, was eerie, her whispered words forming an incantation, a haunting refrain. Within the bed, I felt a surge of cold fear, rolling onto my side to distance myself from Carter, retreating to the precipice of the mattress. Tomorrow, Mother would unleash her fury for the transgressions of the strangers. Her accusations would brand me, labeling me as the architect of perversion. And I would absorb her verdict, her words an indictment of my existence. She was Mother—the arbiter of all truths, the definer of all rules. In her eyes, the strangers' sins were mine to carry, their crimes a reflection of my corrupt nature.

A storm of emotions raged within me under the impartial gaze of the moon and stars. I was intimately familiar with the sting of humiliation, its taste a bitter familiarity on my tongue. Yet, despite it all, my affinity for the moon remained, a testament to my resilience in the face of adversity.

While my past continued to haunt me in memory, the present inflicted new and ugly wounds. A few weeks before the school year began, Tim decreed that my brother and I attend a funeral—a sorrowful event that left me grappling with a torrent of emotions. The departed was a youth of tender years, the victim of a motorcycle's capricious dance with fate. Tim regarded this as a potent lesson, an opportunity to impart the perils of recklessness. I, however, wondered if there were gentler ways to convey such wisdom.

As I stood among the sea of mourners, a surge of emotions overwhelmed me, and my heart was gripped by fear. These past dozen years have been an unending battle, a clash against torment that has left deep scars on my psyche. The presence of death revealed a vulnerability within me, underscoring life's fragility and the fear of losing loved ones. Memories intertwined with the anticipation of what lay ahead, creating inner turmoil.

Amidst this storm, I sought refuge in Jesus, my compass in the chaos of my heart. His presence provided a sanctuary where my grief could surface, a harbor for my troubled soul. On the brink of despair, I turned to Him, my plea carried on tearful breaths, seeking solace and strength. I shared my fears, doubts, and pain with Him, casting my voice into the void within my heart.

The weight of my words mingled with the scent of lilies, the heavy fragrance of loss hanging in the air. In those vulnerable moments, I found comfort, trusting that He heard my cries amid life's tumultuous noise. I yearned for His embrace, reassurance that He saw the deep wounds within me and that His love could mend my fractured spirit.

In life's labyrinth, where shadows of adversity loom large and dark, Jesus was my unwavering foundation. Through the storms, His love illuminated my path like a guiding star, steering me through the intricate twists and turns. Drawing strength from His enduring presence, a resilient spark ignited within me, fueling a deep grit at the heart of the storm.

In this vulnerable state, Jesus was no longer a distant deity but an anchor, grounding me in the tumultuous seas of grief and trauma. His arms became a refuge, a shield against confusion and despair. I clung to His love, confident that the burden of anguish could be lightened within His embrace and the dark clouds would part to reveal hope. This unwavering faith in Jesus is a beacon of hope in life's darkest moments, a testament to the resilience that can be found in the depths of heartache.

The boy lay in the coffin, his youthful face untouched by time yet marked by profound experiences. Suddenly, I heard an older man, who appeared to be in his sixties, speak tearfully to another man at the funeral. In a weak and helpless whisper, he barely managed to say, "He was my nephew, a bright spark in our family," before breaking into heavy sobs. The other man quickly held him and walked him from the parlor.

Adding to the heartbreak was the look of the boy in the coffin. Heavy makeup had artificially aged his features, giving him the semblance of a fully lived life. His shoulders bore the weight of untold stories, and his eyes—once vibrant with the promise of youth—now reflected a soul weathered by life’s harsh trials.

Gazing upon him, I felt the weight of his loss. A deep sadness filled my heart as I realized he would never again feel the gentle caress of the breeze, share laughter with friends, or bask in the warmth of his young life. His form emitted an ethereal glow in the dimly lit parlor, a melancholic luminescence that defied earthly boundaries. His pallid skin clung tightly to his bones, tension drawing lines of fragility across his features. Above his right eye, a crimson scar marred his forehead, the tragic remnant of an accident that had robbed him of his future.

In the funeral parlor, surrounded by grieving adults, I stood close enough to hear the devastated father recount the tragic cause of his son’s death: a severe head wound from an accident leading to irreversible brain trauma. Despite the mortician’s meticulous efforts, the scar remained visible just above the orbital bone—a stark, haunting reminder of the trauma. This scar, a cruel mark of fate, was a constant visual echo of the accident that changed our lives forever. From a distance, the unnatural contour of his forehead, marked by the protruding scar, was distinctly visible. The father’s words, heavy with grief, echoed through the solemn room as he recounted how an officer at the scene had fought desperately to clear the blood from the boy’s lungs as he gasped for breath.

Standing beside me in the soft light filtering through a stained-glass window, the boy’s mother was a poignant embodiment of profound loss. Her silhouette, etched against the glowing backdrop, was a stark reminder of the tragedy that had befallen her family. Her fingers, filled with love and sorrow, caressed the fabric of his suit, its folds far too large for his small frame. In this quiet communion, a disturbing thought whispered—an unsettling question: would Mother weep for me with such ardor, were I gone?

The woman's hands, filled with aching tenderness, traced the contours of her son's face, her touch a poignant blend of heartbreak and affection. Tears flowed freely, a torrent of grief mingling with the afternoon sunlight's quiet illumination. Beside her, her husband enveloped her in a consoling embrace, his stoic façade crumbling under the weight of shared pain. Their shared vulnerability eroded my emotional defenses, and my tears welled up in response.

As they clung to each other in their profound anguish, the scene underscored life's fragility. The boy's absence would cast a perpetual shadow over their lives, an enduring presence in their daily routines. Witnessing their mourning, I confronted my vulnerabilities; my heart lay exposed amid the intricate tapestry of their grief. The lesson life had imprinted upon me—a curriculum of scars and unforgettable memories—deepened in the wake of this funeral. It underscored life's stark duality: the transient nature of our existence and the lasting impressions we leave behind. The boy's visage, a poignant reminder of life's delicate beauty, remained forever etched in my memory. His death, though tragic, taught me the value of life and the importance of cherishing every moment.

Upon our return home, the suffocating mantle of grief lifted, replaced by the mundane rhythms of existence. I went outside to complete one of my chores: mowing the lawn. Under the scorching rays of the summer sun, a disorienting lightheadedness settled over me, threatening to plunge me into unconsciousness. Strangely, the sweat that formed on my skin was icy, a chilling contrast to the searing heat around me. Anger and sadness surged through me within this paradoxical realm of temperature and emotion, intensifying under the relentless sun's gaze. Tim's callous action ultimately imparted a lesson, though the delivery lacked compassion.

As night descended and I surrendered to the realm of dreams, the haunting specter of the deceased boy invaded my subconscious. In the shadowy recesses of my nightmare, he materialized before me, his lifeless form extending beyond the confines of his coffin. His voice, a haunting murmur devoid of

intelligible words, sent shivers coursing through my spine. The scar above his right eye pulsed ominously, the stitches that held it together seeming to strain against the force of his spectral presence, accentuating the horror of his abrupt end.

Within that nightmarish tapestry, the true lesson of the funeral crystallized with undeniable clarity: I harbored an unwavering aversion to any future encounters with death's solemn procession. The fear and dread that accompanied me to the cemetery now swelled within my dream, overwhelming me beneath the suffocating weight of mortality's inevitability. The trauma woven into the fabric of that funeral had seeped into my subconscious, nurturing a profound apprehension toward facing grief and mortality once more.

As I jolted awake, drenched in a clammy sweat and trembling, my fingers sought the tenuous tether of comfort that remained. Amid my turmoil, I yearned for Jesus to envelop me in His tender embrace, to alleviate the burden of my nightmares, and to kindle a glimmer of hope amid my apprehensions. His presence, in this moment of vulnerability, transformed into a sanctuary—a steadfast rock amid the tumultuous waves of my mind.

In the aftermath of that haunting dream, I was starkly confronted with the fragility of our existence. Although Tim's intentions had not been benevolent, the ordeal taught a profound lesson. I had glimpsed the dark revelations that death brings, and its lasting impact was deeply ingrained in my young heart. From that moment on, my faith was solidified; I embraced Jesus as my protector, my unwavering source of strength amidst the enigmatic challenges of life.

As life progressed, I carried the weight of that nightmarish vision—a relentless reminder of life's inherent vulnerability. Yet, even as fear and apprehension lingered, Jesus illuminated my path forward. He guided me towards a future rich with solace and healing, providing the steadfast assurance of His presence to dispel the shadows cast by life's uncertainties.

My brother and I continued to navigate life's labyrinth, the echoes of the funeral's somber refrain lingering within us. In the ensuing weeks, I found myself seeking solace in the pages of my books, the comforting embrace of imagination, a welcome escape from reality's more daunting facets.

In the realm of stories, I could transcend the constraints of my circumstances, soaring on the wings of creativity. Characters became my companions, their struggles and triumphs a mirror to my own experiences. With each page turned, I discovered a refuge from life's adversities, a sanctuary where the boundaries of reality could be transcended.

Yet, amidst the tapestry of fiction, my thoughts often returned to the boy whose life was extinguished too soon. His memory was a prism through which I contemplated the delicate balance between existence and absence. I wondered about the lives he would never live, the dreams he would never chase, and the stories he would never tell.

As I ventured forth on my journey, his memory served as a poignant reminder and a solemn tribute to the fleeting nature of youth and the swift, unpredictable shifts in life's script. He was a testament to the importance of cherishing each fleeting moment, a *memento mori* that urged me to live with intention and seize the opportunities that lay before me.

Embarking on the journey through the 8th grade, I bore the weight of past humiliations, my 7th-grade struggles still fresh in memory. Greg's well-meaning encouragement to enroll in more advanced courses found me hesitant and resistant, keenly aware of my perceived limitations. Opting for more basic classes, I grappled to keep pace, yet a glimmer of progress ignited a slow-burning ember of confidence. My grades began a gradual ascent, bolstered by my unwavering commitment to Judo—a sport that bestowed upon me victories and a potent boost to my self-esteem.

In the distinctive world of Judo, one tournament stood apart—a competition where fate alone decided the matchups, disregarding age, weight, and experience, and considering only gender. To my astonishment, I found myself pitted against a seasoned master, a Shodan black belt, and a dojo sensei. Despite our differences in age, weight, and experience, the mat became our shared domain. As I bowed to him, a nervous chuckle broke from me—an effort to veil my apprehension. He returned the bow with calm assurance. At the referee's signal, 'Hajime!' echoed through the air, and our match commenced.

I was flung about the mat with relentless force, my opponent effortlessly accumulating point after point with merciless precision. The audience's enthusiasm waned, replaced by jeers and laughter. Yet, amidst the despair, an unexpected opportunity arose. The master turned his back to me, a gesture of dismissive boredom. Seizing this fleeting chance, I surged forward with a Hane-Goshi maneuver, accompanied by a fierce Okuri-Ashi-Harai.

This combination involved a forceful pull, an impactful kick to his knee, and a final throw that harnessed our combined weight. He toppled backward, his hands and forearms hitting the mat in an instinctual attempt to break his fall. Surprisingly, the referee's voice rang out, declaring me the victor with an emphatic 'Ippon!' As we exchanged bows, I couldn't suppress the triumphant grin that graced my lips—even Tim's reproachful label of it being a 'cowardly move' couldn't dull my elation. It wasn't until the safety of the locker room that I retorted under my breath to Tim's disapproval, my words a defiant whisper: "Take a step back and kiss me...!"

Amidst the strides of progress and accomplishments, my victories remained tinged with a bittersweet overtone—every step forward was marred by the acerbic taunts of Lauren and Tim. The better I performed, the more their scorn intensified. Although my grades showed marked improvement, they still fell short of the average among my peers. I delved into my studies with unwavering determination, spending hours grappling with single math problems or engrossed in textbooks after school, striving to keep pace

with the rest. My commitment to learning materialized as a disciplined routine: an hour before school, and at least five hours after. With this newfound regimen, my learning curve catapulted skyward. Gradually, I grew more self-reliant, requiring less assistance from the dictionary or thesaurus. True to my promise, I remained committed to avoiding trouble, my efforts evident in my actions.

My closest encounter with rebellion was partaking in sporadic rock-throwing contests during school lunch breaks. It resembled a makeshift game of 'Army,' reimagined with stones as our weapons. This dangerous diversion took place in a park adjacent to the school, a venue of reckless pummeling with stones as ammunition. Our juvenile exploits, however, were brought to an abrupt halt when I witnessed a boy succumbing to the impact of a stone against his forehead, rendering him unconscious. We scattered in panic, leaving him sprawled on the ground. The aftermath of that incident remained shrouded in mystery—I never learned who discovered him or whether anyone dared to report it. The only lasting testament was a swelling lump above his eye, a stark reminder of the consequences our heedless actions could yield. This sight served as a stark deterrent, enough to dissuade me from participating in such reckless endeavors again.

Even in the face of the ferocious retaliation I had faced the previous year, the same tormentors persisted in their bullying. My mild disposition and steadfast refusal to engage in their provocations might have made them underestimate me. However, it went beyond that—these bullies could discern that, despite my proficiency in combat, I abhorred it. Each altercation left me hollow and ill, alone, and vulnerable figure, particularly after confrontations that were more verbal than physical. The harsh words I wielded, mirroring the severity of my parents' language, were a painful echo that I despised.

One particular evening, as I contemplated the looming possibility of suspension and the potential unraveling of my academic progress, I grappled with the puzzling force that had seized me. The haunting specter of becoming like my parents loomed larger with each passing day. The aging process seemed to intensify a sense of intrinsic guilt within me. Strangely, the harder I fought to escape my past, the tighter its

grasp seemed to become. The aftermath of the abuse I had suffered materialized as anxiety, and recurrent flashbacks that fractured my concentration. The unrelenting barrage from those who sought to harm me, coupled with the weight of my traumatic history, conspired to erode the joy that my achievements could have sparked. Each success seemed to bear an accompanying curse, preventing me from savoring it. Determined to evade the humiliation of failure, I immersed myself wholeheartedly in my studies, though an undercurrent of dread gnawed at me, feeding my unease.

In this maelstrom of emotions, my friend Greg played a pivotal role, coaxing me to partake in school dances. It was within this social whirl that I detected the subtle metamorphosis taking place within me. Physical maturity was asserting itself, and a nascent interest in girls began to bloom. It was an anxiety-inducing terrain, each attempt to ask a girl to dance accompanied by a fluttering heart and more often than not, a crushing rejection. Yet, I refused to allow these setbacks to quash my spirit; I persisted, determined to overcome the barriers of insecurity.

Amidst the sea of rejections, there emerged rare moments of elation—times when a girl accepted my invitation to dance. As we swayed to the rhythm of a slow melody, the sensation of her soft skin against mine and the gentle contours of her form awakened unfamiliar sensations within me. It was a delicate tapestry woven of emotion and physicality, a dance that required the concealment of my reactions, a respectable distance maintained to veil my inner turmoil.

These feelings were entirely novel, my first taste of a sensual pleasure starkly contrasting the dark, agonizing memories that my past held. My experiences with my mother and the strangers she had exposed me to had been forced and repugnant, lacking any semblance of consent. In contrast, these burgeoning sensations were tender and consensual, kindling a sense of affinity that felt reciprocated by the girls I danced with. Dismissed by many as mere 'puppy love,' these feelings held a profound significance for me. They were a tangible manifestation of a belief that, if only fleetingly, I was deserving of someone's affection and

love. Amidst the maelstrom of my life's challenges, love had found a way to bloom, albeit briefly and with a purity untouched by the darkness that had thus far pervaded my existence.

Navigating the ebbs and flows of 8th grade, I maneuvered through academic obstacles and sporadic confrontations with bullies. Despite the hurdles, the year passed with a sense of quiet triumph. In these experiences with girls, I found a glimmer of hope—a reminder that even within the shadows, moments of connection and joy could be cultivated.

I dedicated myself with renewed vigor to my studies, adhering dutifully to Lauren and Tim's demands. Yet, a sudden development cast an unexpected shadow over my academic pursuits, unearthing haunting echoes of my past. Lauren and Tim had decided to foster two boys, aged 7 and 9.

The younger boy, Mike, bore no physical resemblance to his elder brother, Steve. With a mop of inky black hair and deep, obsidian eyes, Mike exuded an air of quiet intensity. His gaze held a mixture of fear and latent danger as if he were a caged creature yearning for liberation. When he did manage to speak, his words were extracted with laborious effort, bearing an unsettling, mechanical quality—a vestige of some long-forgotten machinery.

In stark contrast, Steve embodied the polar opposite. Blonde curls crowned his head, and his fair complexion had a slight plumpness. He radiated sociability, his ceaseless chatter serving as a stark counterpoint to Mike's inscrutable silence. Steve's presence cast a spotlight on the pronounced differences between the two foster siblings.

Both boys, along with their twelve-year-old sister, carried the scars of unspeakable harm inflicted by their parents. Paralleling my traumatic past, their family structure mirrored ours—a triad of two boys and a girl, all victimized by the same cycle of cruelty. They, too, had become subjects of the foster care system, just like my siblings and me, navigating the labyrinthine corridors of uncertainty and displacement.

Within the hushed whispers of our shared foster home, we occasionally caught glimpses of the fractured fragments of their past, but the true scope of their suffering remained veiled, obscured by layers of pain and trauma. The silence that enshrouded their history fueled our imagination, sparking conjectures about the horrors they had endured. Their arrival in Lauren and Tim's household, much like our own, was shrouded in obscurity—a testament to the unspeakable turmoil they had been snatched from.

It was a chilling reminder that the world could wield cruelty without mercy, inflicting unimaginable torment upon the most innocent. The mirroring of their familial structure served as a painful reminder that suffering wasn't confined to the boundaries of our own lives. Our shared experiences united us in a manner that transcended words. Amidst the darkness, we found solace in one another's presence, knowing that we weren't alone in our struggles. In each other's company, we discovered an oasis of understanding, a sanctuary against the stormy backdrop of our respective pasts.

As the days unfurled, the silent understanding between us burgeoned a connection that surpassed the limits of language. We had each traversed through the unfathomable, and while the specifics of our stories might diverge, the pain we bore was a common thread that bound us together. Despite the mystery that shrouded their history, we derived comfort from knowing that we had allies in this shared journey. Together, we forged a pathway toward healing, an alliance dedicated to overcoming the scars that the past had etched into our souls.

One poignant truth came to light when Steve entrusted me with a glimpse of the physical evidence of the brutal belt beatings he had endured. The sight stirred a nauseating recognition in my gut, a stark familiarity that echoed my traumatic memories. Amidst the heartache of my past, I grieved anew for Steve's suffering. Yet, despite the horrors he had endured, Steve appeared to maintain a veneer of buoyancy, a stark juxtaposition to Mike's enigmatic aura. Mike often took refuge in corners of the house, his presence filling me with a peculiar blend of apprehension and empathy. The addition of these foster siblings presented a

dynamic shift, rendering our household even more crowded and imbuing it with an added layer of tension. Mike, in particular, served as a haunting reminder of my past, resurrecting the ghosts of guilt and shame that had dogged my footsteps.

Several months later, both boys were returned to the foster care system. The reasons behind their departure remained opaque, a puzzle whose pieces I never managed to assemble. Their exit, however, was an immense relief for me, and I took pains to be absent from the household when the social worker arrived to collect them.

The bond forged between Steve and me during those fleeting months remained etched in my memory. Our shared experiences of pain and survival profoundly connected us. It was as though we carried the weight of each other's scars, a silent testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Steve's ability to maintain a semblance of positivity in the face of adversity left an indelible mark on my outlook, inspiring me to find strength even in the darkest of times.

Mike's enigmatic presence, on the other hand, continued to haunt my thoughts. His silent suffering resonated with my past, a reflection of the torment I had once endured. I couldn't help but wonder about the demons that haunted him, the unspoken horrors that had stolen his voice and left him in the shadows of our home. In his quietude, I saw a mirror to my struggles with guilt and shame, a reminder that healing was a complex journey that unfolded differently for each of us.

As the years passed, the memory of Steve and Mike remained a poignant chapter in my life—a testament to the enduring impact of shared trauma and the resilience of the human spirit. Their departure had brought a sense of relief, but it had also left an indelible void, a reminder of the fragile nature of the connections we forge amid adversity. In their absence, I carried their stories with me, a reminder of the importance of empathy, understanding, and the power of human connection.

The summer months faded into memory, replaced by the steady rhythm of life. My survival instinct blazed within me, fueling a potent yearning for renewal and transformation. The identity I had begun to forge as a student was taking root, my presence acknowledged within the realm of academia. Rather than feeling like a caged creature, I found myself welcomed into the fold of popular peers. Slowly, I began to internalize the notion that I wasn't the irredeemable wretch that Mother had so vehemently labeled me. I was not a being wholly consumed by malice or worthlessness.

Amidst the flashes of pain that occasionally resurfaced, the momentum of this newly charted life surged forth, infused with an electrifying anticipation for the future. I started to believe that having faith in myself was not a far-fetched notion. This faith, in turn, sparked a sense of elation, a soaring sensation that defied the chains of my past.

Remarkably, I concluded my 8th-grade year with B's and C's—undeniable evidence of the strides I had made. This marked improvement was particularly striking when you consider that only a year prior, I was grappling with tasks as basic as reading, telling time, and tying my shoelaces. In the span of a few short months, I had transformed from a neophyte to a contender. With high school looming on the horizon, I sensed the promise of normalcy within my grasp. The fires of my passion for learning burned brightly, infusing me with a desire to excel further. As I reflected on the transformation that a mere year had wrought, I couldn't help but speculate about the possibilities that lay ahead in the coming years. It wasn't a process of erasing my past; instead, it was a journey of distancing from it, relegating those painful memories to a distant corner of my mind. The more I embraced this path, the more I embraced the belief that better things were destined for me.

The disparaging words of Lauren and Tim, and the relentless bullying from my schoolmates, might have cast shadows over my journey, but these clouds couldn't obscure my fervor for knowledge. I was determined not to let their negativity dictate my worth or my trajectory. The series of setbacks and

disappointments that had peppered my life served only to fuel my resolve to ascend above my circumstances. As the haze of my experiences started to lift, I began to discern that beneath the layers of suffering, there lay a burning desire for self-discovery—a yearning for something greater.

Yet, despite the tempestuous path I had treaded, an intricate and conflicting love for my mother endured within me. Our relationship, deeply enmeshed in a tapestry of pain and resentment, was a riddle I couldn't solve. It was as if love and bitterness were woven into a singular thread, a fusion I struggled to unravel.

In the midst of the tumult, I clung to the belief that my journey held deeper significance. The power of love, even in its most convoluted form, resonated within me. It was a force that urged me onward, encouraging me to forge a path of healing and transformation—both for myself and for those whose lives intersected with mine. Love had the potential to mend and reshape, even in the wake of the most harrowing experiences.

As I continued to navigate the path of learning and growth, I embraced the complexity of my emotions. I allowed myself to experience both the pain and the love that coexisted within me. The journey ahead was a formidable one, but I was prepared to confront it with renewed purpose and a heart that still held onto love, even in the face of adversity.

As the months slipped through my fingers, the fervency of my yearning for my mother began to wane. She transformed from a looming figure into a distant memory, relegated to the recesses of my mind. It was as though I had finally managed to shake off the lingering hold she had on me, casting it into the oblivion of the past.

Tim occasionally attempted to forge connections with us, although his efforts were often perfunctory rather than paternal. These moments seemed driven more by restlessness than genuine paternal care. Amidst the chaos, I often yearned for Tim to see me as a son, as he did his children. This longing

persisted for the first couple of years we were under their care, but it has now dissipated rapidly. One such endeavor involved Tim introducing my brother and me to the world of motorcycling. Over the summer, we toiled away at odd jobs, saving enough to procure two used dirt bikes. Countless hours were spent traversing a nearby gravel pit, our makeshift arena. Tim also endeavored to teach us motorcycle maintenance—a skill that eluded my grasp but resonated naturally with Carter. His mechanical prowess was evident, his aptitude for understanding the inner workings of machinery setting him apart. While academics might not have been his strong suit, his ability to master mechanics was undeniable.

In the dwindling days before the commencement of the school year, I found myself ensconced in the garage, endeavoring to change the rear tire of my motorcycle. Unbeknownst to me, my efforts resulted in an error—I inadvertently installed the tire backward. As I puzzled over my predicament, Tim entered the garage, his gaze alighting on my handiwork. In the span of a moment, he was engulfed by a violent wave of anger.

It struck me as bewildering how vehemently people could react to the smallest of errors. It seemed as though everything I did was under intense scrutiny, and the consequences of even the most minor slip-ups loomed disproportionately. Tim's explosive outburst served as a stark reminder of the volatile atmosphere that enveloped my existence, where a trivial mistake could unleash a tempest of wrath.

These moments of rage highlighted a stark dissonance between the behaviors exhibited by those around me and the ideals I had come to associate with Jesus. There was a jarring disconnect between their actions and the compassionate, forgiving, and understanding figure that Jesus represented to me. It became increasingly evident that the individuals in my life were devoid of the qualities that I had come to attribute to Jesus—an absence of empathy, a dearth of patience, a deficiency in the art of forgiveness.

Spending time in the company of these individuals was far from enjoyable. The negativity and anger that emanated from them weighed heavily on my shoulders, leaving little room for laughter or happiness.

Life felt like a precarious balancing act, where a single misstep could trigger a catastrophic fall. The constant fear of falling out of favor with those around me was exhausting, and it felt as though, no matter how much effort I put forth, the shadows of their anger were always looming, ready to engulf me.

Even amidst the darkness, I clung to the notion that I was part of a larger narrative—a story driven by ideals of compassion, love, and understanding. My faith in this narrative was unshakable, and it was this steadfast belief that sustained me even when the world around me seemed intent on snuffing out every glimmer of light.

In the midst of this environment, a tapestry woven with threads of tension, my heart yearned for those fleeting moments of tranquility and respite. I hungered for the presence of individuals who could extend kindness and empathy, individuals capable of peering beneath the surface and recognizing the private battles I waged within. All I longed for was a flicker of understanding, a mere hint of empathy, to remind me that my efforts were seen, valued, and acknowledged. The struggle to comprehend why Tim and Lauren failed to recognize my earnest endeavors often left me bewildered. I couldn't fathom why my dedication to improvement remained invisible to them.

My capacity to perceive when others were grappling with loneliness and striving to do their best was almost innate—a trait woven into the very fabric of my being. When I encountered such individuals, my heart swelled, and my spirit resonated with theirs. The empathy I felt in those moments transcended words, painting my world with hues of compassion and shared humanity. Yet, amidst this understanding and compassion that I so readily offered to others, I grappled with the painful paradox that Tim and Lauren, the figures closest to me, seemed unable to extend the same kindness.

Still, amid this void, I knew I had to fortify an inner strength, a resilience that would carry me through the turbulence. The belief in a future sanctuary—a haven where love, understanding, and compassion flowed freely—became an anchor of hope, grounding me in the certainty that such a place

could exist. A place where empathy wasn't an anomaly, but the foundation upon which relationships were built. This dream of a sanctuary wasn't just a distant fantasy; it was a vision of a future where I would find my rightful place, where my efforts would be met with acknowledgment, where my struggles would be met with empathy, and where my journey would be illuminated by the warmth of understanding.

"You've got the wheel on backward, Gregg!" Tim's voice cut through the air like a blade, laden with frustration. "I taught you better than that!" His assertion rang hollow, as he had never actually taken the time to teach me how to change a motorcycle tire. At that moment, I stood rooted to the spot, immobilized as Tim's anger gathered momentum. It was as though I had suddenly been thrust into the eye of a tempest that was his fury.

With an abruptness that left me reeling, Tim's fist connected with my face in a punishing blow. I emitted a soft, involuntary whimper as the force of the blow caused me to stagger, my body contacting his parked truck. A warm sensation spread through my pants, leaving an unmistakable stain on the fabric. Without sparing a glance, Tim pivoted on his heel and retreated into the house, leaving me alone in the cavernous expanse of the garage. It was in that solitary moment that the last remnants of my control over my bladder slipped away, a telltale sign of my fear and vulnerability.

In the aftermath of that punch, a tidal wave of self-reproach and shame crashed over me. As I traversed the distance to the mudroom inside the house, my vision was speckled with pinpricks of white. Each step was laden with anxiety, and I stumbled my way into the bathroom, where I hunched over the toilet and retched uncontrollably. The indistinct murmur of Tim's conversation with Lauren reached my ears from a distance, like the echo of a distant storm. In a desperate bid to drown out the sound and the chaos it represented, I pressed my hands against my ears and continued to retch, the violence of the act serving as a physical manifestation of the turmoil that raged within me.

In the midst of this tumultuous environment, my emotional well-being, already shaped by the contorted contours of trauma, reached a breaking point when Tim's fist, fueled by rage, struck me for something as trivial as my lack of knowledge about changing a motorcycle tire. The shattering impact went beyond the physical pain; it fractured the remnants of my desire to seek Tim's approval or appease his demands. At that moment, it was as though the fragments of my self-worth were scattered to the winds, and the bruises on my spirit far outweighed those on my body.

While the physical wound from Tim's fist was painful, it was the reverberating echoes within my mind that cut the deepest. His blow was like a trigger, releasing a torrent of memories and emotions that harkened back to the unrelenting cyclone of trauma that had long defined my existence. My mother's actions during those formative years had left indelible scars, carving their marks into the fabric of my psyche. Despite my efforts to move forward, their grip remained steadfast, constantly pulling me back into the vortex of pain.

This cyclone of abuse was an inescapable force, a tempest that refused to relent. Regardless of how much I yearned for a glimpse of normalcy or the promise of freedom, its intensity only intensified, engulfing me in its destructive might. Each blow, each cruel word, was like another gust of wind, propelling the cyclone forward with an unrelenting ferocity.

As I navigated the tumultuous sea of my existence, my resilience became worn thin, and the once-bright glimmers of hope began to fade. My inner resolve wavered, and I found myself struggling to retain any semblance of strength. The pain and fear were all-encompassing, leaving me feeling ensnared and suffocated in their grasp. The yearning for a way out, for safety and liberation, persisted, but the prospect of such an escape seemed more like a distant fantasy than a tangible reality.

Yet, amidst the chaos, I clung to the smallest shards of hope, grasping onto them like a lifeline. I recognized that I couldn't let the cyclone completely consume me, that somewhere within my battered soul,

there still existed the ember of strength and resilience waiting to be ignited. But at that particular moment, lying on the ground after Tim's assault, I felt defeated and diminished. The shadow of the boy I once was—a child seeking love and acceptance—felt as though it was slipping away, consumed by the relentless storm. Despite the odds, I resolved to hold on, to keep fighting, even if it meant facing the fury of the cyclone alone. Deep within me, I knew that even amidst the most ferocious storm, a glimmer of light would persist, a beacon of hope that refused to be extinguished. And I clung to that hope, fiercely determined to survive, and find my way.

As the summer unfolded, signaling the transition to high school, I began to fragment into distinct personas. One side of me resembled a fearful boy, a facade presented to Lauren and Tim—a mask concealing the turmoil beneath. The other side exuded confidence, the face I projected to the outside world—a front that Tim and Lauren struggled to accept as if my newfound self-assuredness were a disruption to their expectations.

A sense of profound loneliness had taken root within me at an early age, perhaps as early as four. This weighty burden clung to me relentlessly, casting a pervasive shadow that seemed inseparable from my being. Amid the backdrop of human cruelty and the horrors of my abusers' actions, I often found myself revisiting those dark moments, ensnared by the grip of their worst deeds.

Initially, we entered Lauren and Tim's home with a glimmer of hope, seeking refuge from the storms that had defined our lives. Yet, that fleeting sense of hope swiftly faded, replaced by the harsh reality of navigating each day, fearful of triggering their accusations or anger. It became an exhausting battle, maneuvering through an emotional minefield and tiptoeing around their unpredictable outbursts.

In their presence, the slightest misstep had the potential to ignite an explosive reaction, leaving me trembling with dread. Even the most innocuous actions or a simple mistake could escalate into a storm of

aggression. Their child's words, spoken innocently, were twisted into weapons that they wielded against me, each verbal blow accompanied by a physical one. The very act of living felt like walking a tightrope, each step laden with the potential to plunge me into an abyss of anguish.

Despite the ceaseless turmoil, I clung to the tiniest pinpricks of hope that pierced through the darkness like stars in a midnight sky. I held on to moments of connection, brief interludes of comfort that reminded me that I wasn't alone. Amid this emotional tempest, I clung to these fragments of solace, believing that one day, somewhere beyond this tumultuous landscape, a place existed where love, acceptance, and understanding awaited. Until then, I carried the weight of hope, determined to survive the storm, and find my way to the shores of a sanctuary where the warmth of belonging would eclipse the darkness of loneliness. This resilience in the face of grief is a testament to the human spirit's ability to endure and overcome.

I lived moment to moment, aware of the simmering violence waiting to erupt. One day, Tim backed his truck out of the garage, forgetting to close the driver's side door. The door collided with the frame, shattering the window and mirror, nearly tearing it from its hinges. My brother and I, both bystanders in the garage, were instantly scapegoated for not preventing the mishap. The aftermath saw Tim's fury manifesting not only in his physical assault but also in his destructive rampage inside the house, demolishing what remained of his gun cabinet.

Lauren's glare in response to my inquiry about the incident etched guilt into my conscience. It was a guilt I hadn't deserved, yet one I wore as if it were a cloak of condemnation. In her eyes, Carter's, and mine, it was always our fault—our very existence seemed to be an offense. "Go outside!" Lauren's command was delivered through gritted teeth, her anger palpable.

Amid the chaos of the moment, Carter's muttering echoed in my ears. "What an idiot." His words reverberated with a mixture of frustration and resentment. My lips formed the same thought, a silent agreement. "What a stupid, damn fool."

As the heavy silence settled around us, my fists clenched, embodying the anger I had suppressed. The incident, seemingly trivial, was emblematic of the larger environment—a world where any action, no matter how innocent, could trigger an onslaught of fury. Tim's volatility was like a ticking time bomb, a constant threat that loomed over our heads. Within the confines of Lauren and Tim's house, fear and aggression were the prevailing forces, overshadowing any semblance of safety or stability.

Tim's presence in the garage was an enigma—a man immersed in the meticulous ritual of sweeping, cleaning, and muttering to himself. The significance of his muttered words remained shrouded in mystery, an unsolved puzzle I dared not unravel. My role in this domain was often relegated to menial tasks assigned by Tim, moments where I found myself caught in his orbit of seemingly random actions. While his efforts might have been intended as a bonding experience, for me, it was merely monotony, a reminder of the chasm between us.

The absence of a loving parent or mentor nearly led to dire consequences for me—without Jesus, I believe my life would have ended. One day, after Tim and Lauren went out with friends and left us alone in the house, I recklessly took Lauren's new Camaro without permission for a brief joyride. As I cautiously pulled the car into the garage, unknowingly vulnerable, Lynn stood near Tim's meticulously organized workbench. As the front tires smoothly ascended the slight ledge from the driveway to the garage floor, a moment of hesitation from the rear tires triggered a surge of panic within me. In a frantic response, I stomped on the accelerator, propelling the car forward with terrifying speed. By the grace of Jesus, I managed to slam on the brakes just in time, stopping inches from Lynn and the workbench. The shock of

nearly causing a fatal accident enveloped me, leaving me drenched in cold sweat and overwhelmed with waves of terror and guilt.

To this day, I am profoundly grateful for that divine intervention. Time and again, I have skirted disaster only to be pulled back at the last moment. Despite this, I wrestle with why I was spared, often feeling unworthy of such grace. Only Lynn and I knew of that day's peril, a secret that has since burrowed deep into our shared memories, binding us with a new, unspoken understanding of our fragile existence.

As hours turned into a haunting vigil, the incident morphed into a silent specter, a secret hauntingly shared between Lynn and me. Fearful of the repercussions, we buried our guilt beneath a veneer of normalcy, masking the churning turmoil beneath. Each passing moment magnified the weight of the incident, reminding us of the fragile tightrope we walked in our cyclonic lives.

By evening, I was utterly drained, overwhelmed by a strange malaise and a tension that had escalated to an unbearable crescendo. Unable to contain the stress any longer, I vomited, releasing the pent-up turmoil. In that moment of vulnerability, I turned to prayer, thanking Jesus for sparing Lynn's life—and my own. I couldn't fathom living with the consequences of my actions. It was just one of many times in my life that Jesus had intervened, and reflecting on this, I felt a profound mix of love and guilt: love for Jesus' saving grace and guilt for doubting my worthiness of such divine mercy.

Ensuring Lauren and Tim were asleep, I stole into the night. Emptying the waste can, rinsing it with a hose, and erasing any trace of my earlier sickness became a cleansing ritual. This desperate attempt to purge the entrenched guilt and fear was my silent plea for redemption. The haunting thought of harming Lynn, the one who genuinely cared for me, refused to relent, robbing me of any semblance of peace. Among all the agonizing moments that had led me here, this day stood out as uniquely harrowing—a chilling realization that I had nearly destroyed something precious.

Perpetual exhaustion had become my constant companion, a state of being that I had grown accustomed to. My face, etched with worry, told the story of the turmoil that brewed within me. The remainder of that summer passed with my head hung low, my senses heightened to a constant state of alertness. I performed the endless list of chores Lauren meticulously assigned; each task scribbled onto a piece of paper pinned to the kitchen corkboard. Another summer, another relocation to yet another house—each move marked by a real estate bargain secured through the exploitation of cheap labor.

In my relentless struggle to suppress the escalating panic and anxiety, my voice lacked any trace of bitterness or resentment when I spoke—it was replaced by unwavering obedience. My efforts to remain unseen in public, to disappear into the background, became second nature. Alone, I buried myself in my books, seeking refuge in the realm of academia. I remained emotionally detached, and numb, save for the occasional victory in my studies or sports. My existence was defined by survival—a constant state of autopilot.

Within this journey haunted by the scars of my past, I carried with me a few enduring tics—quirks that served as constant reminders of the trauma I had endured. The obsessive spitting, the compulsion to touch and retouch objects – they bore witness to the battles I fought within myself. These quirks left me feeling defeated and ashamed as if the trauma still had me ensnared in its grip.

Every day, I wrestled with these involuntary gestures, struggling to suppress them and maintain a façade of normalcy. Revealing these compulsions was not an option; the fear of judgment and unwanted attention loomed large. So, I became an adept pretender, masking these quirks behind a veneer of control. But the effort it took to conceal them weighed on me, an invisible burden that I carried alone.

While I had conquered bedwetting, the nightmares that had tormented my sleep still held me captive. Night after night, I was ensnared in a web of terror, reliving the traumas as if they were unfolding

anew. These nightmares became my unrelenting adversary, robbing me of the rest and peace I so desperately needed.

In the quiet darkness of the night, I grappled with memories that haunted me, confronting the fear and pain etched into my soul. I yearned for respite from the nightmares, a reprieve from the horrors that invaded my dreams. Yet, they persisted, determined to keep me tethered to the past, reminding me of the wounds deep within me. Still, amidst the darkness, I clung to the belief that healing and solace were attainable. I hoped that the nightmares would eventually release their grip and that the tics and quirks would disappear, replaced by a newfound sense of calm and strength. While the path ahead was uncertain and laden with challenges, I resolved to keep moving forward and fighting for a future where the shadows of my troubled past would finally be dispelled. This journey towards healing is a beacon of hope, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming grief.

Despite my attempts at stealth, I was well aware that Lauren and Tim saw through my veneer. My vulnerability was transparent, a trail for them to follow. The occasional derogatory labels like "dummy" or "loser" from Tim were familiar echoes, hardly affecting me anymore. At twelve years old, introspection and self-examination were beyond my grasp. What could a twelve-year-old possibly understand about the complexities of the mind?

As summer waned and a new school year dawned, I devoted my remaining energy to academic pursuits and sports. Starting with a mere few blocks of running, my determination transformed those blocks into miles. And with each stride, my passion for pushing myself further took root. There was no deceit in the pursuit of knowledge or the act of running. These were endeavors where effort directly correlated with reward, and most importantly, the fruits of my labor were mine to cherish.

The mental challenges I faced while grappling with complex concepts or intricate math problems mirrored the physical exertion of running a daunting marathon. My mind sprinted to keep pace with the

demand for understanding, inducing the same sharp pang in my side that physical running did. I furrowed my brows; my lips contorted in concentration as I wrestled with the complexities.

Despite the discomfort and frustration, surrender was not an option. I recognized that perseverance was the key to success and that overcoming obstacles demanded resilience. Each mental roadblock became a temporary impediment, a step toward eventual comprehension. Like a runner crossing the finish line, I knew that with determination, I would reach my goal. The journey might be demanding, but the reward of knowledge and understanding was well worth the effort.

Immersed in the challenge, I delved deeper into the scholarly world, employing diverse strategies to unravel complex concepts. Each minor victory, such as [specific example], ignited a surge of satisfaction and pride, reinforcing my belief in my ability to tackle intellectual obstacles. These achievements transcended mere personal milestones; they represented my relentless pursuit of growth and understanding.

During these moments of success, I felt the exhilarating thrill of mental expansion, a joy akin to unraveling mysteries that once seemed impossible. The quest for knowledge became more than just an academic exercise; it was a transformative journey that profoundly shaped my mind and character, significantly impacting my journey.

However, amidst this personal progress, a disconcerting transformation was unfolding within the confines of my home. The fulfillment of basic needs—food, water, and shelter—was no longer sufficient to maintain the fragile equilibrium. Signs of an impending crisis were becoming all too evident, indicating that Lauren and Tim's patience with my siblings and me was wearing dangerously thin.

Carter's escalating rebelliousness had become the unsettling norm in our household. In every heated exchange, his eyes blazed with an intense blue, growing even brighter with each challenge he posed to Lauren and Tim. The shifting dynamics at home were reflected in Carter's actions, as he became entangled with a crowd known for drug use—a development that deeply troubled Lauren and Tim. With his decision

to grow out his hair, their distress escalated further. Carter was evolving, and as he matured, he increasingly fit the mold of a troublemaker.

This unease deepened in me as Carter privately shared his plans to confront Tim. His descriptions oscillated between dark humor and genuine intent, leaving me unsettled. Those conversations with Carter were burdensome, and I held my breath, hoping that he would never act upon those intentions. Despite the ambivalence I felt towards Tim and Lauren, I held no desire to see anyone suffer, even those who had caused us pain.

When I was thirteen, I discovered that I occupied a distinct and somewhat isolated space among my peers. While my two-year-old brother, Carter, was embarking on the unpredictable journey of teenage romance, I remained disinterested and disconnected from such pursuits. In contrast to Carter's youthful infatuation with matters of the heart, my excitement stemmed from achieving exceptional grades, striving for a spot on the varsity team, and relishing the praise of my teachers. I sought solace in the challenges presented by intellectual pursuits and athletic accomplishments. These pursuits, which often left me in the company of textbooks and sports equipment, were my true companions during those formative years. My motivations were fueled by an unwavering yearning for personal growth and excellence, a drive that often set me apart from my peers. It felt as if I inhabited a separate realm altogether, one where my priorities were firmly centered on academic achievement and athletic success.

Living in a world where my definition of enjoyment diverged significantly from the norm could be isolating. While my classmates embarked on the typical adventures of adolescence, I sought solace in the relentless pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement. Their passions held little sway over me, and they struggled to grasp the depth of my pursuits.

Though I may have been isolated in my focus, I had unwavering faith that this unique journey was worth every moment of dedication and effort.

A chance encounter provided a stark illustration of the divide between Carter's activities and my own. I encountered him and his girlfriend in an intimate situation on the floor. As they scrambled to cover themselves upon noticing my presence, I was amused and bewildered by the scene. Carter had been bested in a playful wrestling match by his petite girlfriend—a sight that left me both entertained and puzzled by their actions, and this moment served to highlight the vast disparity between their world of romantic exploration and my realm of academic and athletic engagement.

This sense of disconnection often led me into challenging situations where I felt like an outsider, struggling to navigate an unfamiliar landscape. Yet, despite these difficulties, I remained steadfast in my passions, finding fulfillment in the journey that was uniquely mine.

As I approached fourteen, it became clear that my direction was distinctly personal—and this realization was not just acceptable; it was empowering. I wholeheartedly embraced my individuality, understanding that my passions and pursuits would guide me toward a life of purpose and significance. Even when the world occasionally left me bewildered, I firmly believed that staying true to myself would unlock my most profound potential. Thus, I forged ahead, unwavering in my commitment to learning and personal growth, knowing that my unconventional path was worth following.

However, the confusion I experienced extended beyond mere enjoyment. It enveloped my understanding of my place in the world, my unique motivations, and the challenges that came with them. My life seemed destined for a different trajectory than my peers, a journey marked by obstacles. Yet, I understood that this distinct course was mine to navigate on my terms.

Amidst the turbulence that defined my existence, there was a ray of brightness: Caroline, our babysitter. Her affectionate gestures, like a kiss on the cheek, triggered a rush of gratitude down my spine, accompanied by an overwhelming sense of appreciation.

While some might dismiss these sentiments as juvenile or insignificant, I remained impervious to such judgments. Caroline's acknowledgment was the only one that held meaning for me, and she recognized it. The expressions that accompanied our interactions, especially our kisses, hinted at the possibility that she might have experienced similar sentiments.

While I contemplated my feelings for Caroline, a newfound self-awareness began to take root. I recognized that my young heart might misinterpret emotions and that my fondness for her could be a product of youthful innocence. After all, she was four years my senior, making any notion of romance seem far-fetched and irrational.

Yet, even as I acknowledged the potential naiveté of my emotions, I refused to extinguish the flame of affection that burned within me. From a distance, I continued to hold her in high regard, savoring every interaction and cherishing each moment spent in her company. My intention was not to solicit reciprocation or initiate a romantic liaison but rather to embrace the joy and comfort that her presence brought into my life.

I understood the boundaries and realities of our situation, but this didn't necessitate suppressing my emotions entirely. Instead, I chose to nurture them, treating them like delicate flowers, allowing them to inspire and bring hope. Whatever the future held, I found contentment in the organic progression of events, free from the pressures of hastening or forcing a particular outcome.

Caroline had become a significant figure in my life, symbolizing compassion and care in a world that often felt harsh and unforgiving. Even if our paths diverged or circumstances shifted, the impact she had

made on my heart would endure. Her presence had taught me that within life's challenges, pockets of love and light could emerge to alleviate even the heaviest burdens.

Thus, I embraced this small spark of affection, treasuring it as a reminder that goodness existed in the world and was worth safeguarding. In my youthful heart, I found solace in the warmth of her smiles and the comfort of her companionship. And during those moments, I allowed myself to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, love could transcend age and circumstance, even if only temporarily.

Ultimately, whether our connection remained a cherished memory or blossomed into something deeper, I understood that Caroline had left an enduring imprint on my life. As I navigated the complexities of my past and present, I clung to the hope she had kindled—the hope that love, in all its forms, could serve as a guiding light on my journey of healing and self-discovery.

The onset of ninth grade cast an air of uncertainty, shadowing my days. I woke each morning with a sense of suspicion, never letting my guard down, ready to confront whatever trials awaited. There was a fire within me, an unwavering resolve born from the challenges I had faced. Each day became a battlefield, and I advanced with determination to conquer all that came my way.

Gone were the days of frivolous emotions; I had little patience for trivial matters that once occupied my thoughts. Life's lessons had sharpened me, causing me to shed anything that hindered my progress. It was as though I were being forged in the crucible of experience, transformed into a figure of greater strength and resolve than I had ever envisioned. The passive boy was fading, replaced by a resolute young man, steadfast in my pursuit of personal development.

With each step, I felt myself becoming tougher and more resilient. Vulnerability was a luxury I couldn't afford. I became more guarded, shielding myself from the pains and letdowns that lay in wait.

Naivety had no place in my world; I moved through life with a vigilant gaze, cautious of those who might seek to exploit or undermine me.

I carried the weight of my past—a heavy burden that constantly reminded me of the battles I had fought. My young heart had matured beyond its years, its innocence replaced by an iron will to withstand failure at any cost.

Yet, amidst the toughness and resolve, a glimmer of hope persisted. I knew that even in this unforgiving world, there were moments of kindness and light that could penetrate the darkness. I clung to that hope, believing that no matter the challenges I faced, a path to triumph remained. This belief fueled my forward movement, regardless of how daunting the journey appeared.

As I stepped into this new chapter of my life, I did so with unwavering determination and an unwillingness to yield. The lessons of resilience I had learned became a suit of armor I wore proudly. With my gaze fixed on the horizon, I embraced the challenges that lay ahead, fully aware that each stride brought me closer to the person I was destined to become.

Walking towards the school on the first day of ninth grade, I held on to my faith in Jesus as my refuge in the tumultuous world. I silently sought strength and guidance through prayer, finding solace in the assurance that He was by my side. Amidst the bustling hallways, the weight of stares and whispers from other students pressed upon me, but I carried myself with confidence, finding reassurance in the belief that Jesus saw me for who I truly was.

In those moments, stories of how Jesus had comforted and protected His followers came to mind, instilling hope that He would extend the same care to me. The chaos of my surroundings seemed to fade as I focused on His presence within me. His love acted as a shield against animosity, reminding me that I was never truly alone.

Though my heart raced with nervousness, a sense of calm overcame me. Jesus was my sanctuary, guiding me through the challenges of high school and beyond. His teachings gave me the courage to face judgmental glances and hushed conversations, knowing that His love held more weight than the opinions of my peers. I felt a connection to a force greater than myself, one that provided comfort. No longer was I merely a victim; instead, I saw myself as a vessel for Jesus' love and strength. His example of compassion and forgiveness urged me to meet antagonism with empathy and kindness

Upon reaching my first class, I took a deep breath and silently expressed gratitude to Jesus for being my refuge and support. While the hallways might remain daunting, and the path ahead could be challenging, I held on to His teachings and love, confident that I would find the strength to navigate it all. Guided by my faith, I embraced the day, ready to confront whatever challenges emerged, secure in the knowledge that Jesus would be with me every step of the way.

After my first class concluded, we were released to go to the next class. I got up from my seat and began to leave the room. From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of one of the boys who had made my life difficult for the past two years. Despite the anger that surged within me, I quelled it. It wasn't the time to let emotions rule me, especially not on the first day of school. I had learned that retaliating only led to more trouble.

As I passed him, our eyes met briefly, and in that fleeting moment, I sensed a surge of power within me. It was as though he knew, deep down, that I wouldn't yield this time. A spark of confidence ignited within me.

Adjusting my bag on my shoulder, I joined the stream of students making their way to the next class. I was prepared to face this new school year with purpose and resilience. No longer would I cower or shy away from confrontation. I had endured enough and was prepared to stand my ground. Though I felt the

weight of my past experiences, it was a burden that had molded me into the person I am now. Rather than allowing it to weigh me down, I used it to fuel my determination and solidify my resolve. I knew the path ahead wouldn't be easy, but I was ready to confront every challenge it brought.

This was a chance to redefine myself and rise above the pain and torment I had faced. I was eager to face the world with newfound strength, understanding that education was my shield and my ticket to a brighter future.

Throughout the school day, I encountered moments of uncertainty and doubt. It wasn't always simple, and there were instances when my determination wavered. Yet, through prayer and reflection, I found the resilience to persevere. Jesus' support filled me with a courage I hadn't known before. In those moments, I drew strength from my faith in Jesus, leaning on His unwavering love.

In the weeks that followed, I found my footing in this new approach to life. I no longer allowed myself to be shackled by the opinions of those who aimed to bring me down. Instead, I clung to Jesus' teachings, responding to negativity with understanding and grace.

Mother, Father, and my siblings tried so hard to desensitize me from all things righteous or good, but I girded my loins, like Job of old, and fought back like a warrior. This phrase, 'gird thy loins,' appears several times in the Bible, both literally and figuratively. It means to prepare oneself for something difficult, challenging, or dangerous.

The phrase comes from the ancient practice of tucking one's long tunic under a belt or knot to allow more freedom of movement. This was done by men who were about to engage in battle, travel, running, or hard labor. For example, God tells Job in Job 38:3 (KJV): 'Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee and answer thou me.'

The phrase is also used metaphorically to refer to spiritual readiness and strength. For example, in 1 Peter 1:13 (KJV), the apostle Peter exhorts the believers: 'Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.'

Empowered by Jesus' unwavering presence, I embraced the challenges of high school with both determination and grace. The hallways, once daunting, transformed into spaces of learning and growth. His love acted as a shield against negativity, enabling me to focus on my studies and personal development.

Reflecting on the journey that led me here, I marveled at the transformation that had taken place within me. Emerging from a place of darkness, I had become a warrior of faith, armed with the teachings of Jesus, and fortified by His love. I began to learn 'How to See' and quickly learned why I had such a great deal of respect and love for mathematics.

We must learn how to see. But what does that mean? It means that 'Everything Connects to Everything Else.' Imagine seeing the world as you would be seen or observed by a Grand and Perfect Father of Creation, the Savior of the World, who is preparing you for an Elite Royal Family destined to reign in Heaven and on Earth eternally. This profound relationship with 'The Divine' is rooted in frequency—a frequency pure in love, sent out by the Holy Spirit to all who seek Repentance for their sins and ask to be cleansed by The Great Redeemer, The Second Adam, The First Born of the Dead—Jesus Christ.

Mathematics is often hailed as the language of the universe and referred to in the Bible as a means of understanding creation, serving as a universal tongue (Proverbs 8:27; Romans 1:20). Within the sacred texts, we find parallels between mathematical concepts and divine wisdom. Geometry and Music, both of which hold divine significance, are intertwined in the fabric of creation. One might ponder if music, with its harmonious patterns, is the geometry to our ears—a symphony of proportions. The melodies we experience with our eyes are the mathematical harmonies of our vision. In this beautiful geometric scope, everything is interconnected and woven into the fabric of God (1 Corinthians 14:33; Colossians 1:17).

And so, as I learned to ‘See’—the pattern became clear to me that throughout all the trials and tribulations, Jesus bore the weight, carrying me through the darkest moments and illuminating my path with hope and strength. If I clung to His teachings and sought His guidance, I held firm in my belief that I could conquer whatever life presented.

With Jesus as my unwavering ally, I looked to the future with hope and enthusiasm. I understood that no matter the challenges that lay ahead, I wouldn't face them alone. His love shielded me, and His presence guided me forward.

Thus, fortified with courage and accompanied by Jesus, I embarked on this new chapter of my life. I was ready to triumph, fully aware that my faith had transformed me from a victim into a victorious warrior. The challenges that lay ahead no longer appeared insurmountable, for I had discovered strength in my unwavering faith, and with Jesus by my side, there was no obstacle I could not overcome.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

That's the trick, Gregg!" the wrestling coach bellowed with sheer delight, his excitement contagious. "He doesn't stand a chance!" he exclaimed to me as I pinned my opponent's shoulders to the mat. Making the junior varsity wrestling team meant the world to me, and at that moment, it felt like I had achieved the impossible.

"It's all up to you, Gregg! Let's go! All the way now!" The coach's excitement escalated; his belly pressed against the mat as he raised his arm in anticipation. And then he shouted, "Pinned!" The coach leaped to his feet, grabbed my wrist, and triumphantly held it high in the air. "Welcome to JV!" he proclaimed. "You've earned your spot on the team!"

"Yes, that's the trick," I thought. Just like Carter and I used to say, "That's the way you do things downtown."

A mix of anger and happiness surged within me as I made the team. When I excitedly shared the news with Tim, his response was far from enthusiastic. "It's still not varsity," he commented, attempting to belittle my accomplishment. Since the beginning of my ninth-grade year, I knew that balancing AP courses and sports would be a challenge, but I didn't care about making it to varsity.

"You can't handle AP courses, Gregg," scolded Lauren. "You can barely keep up with your regular classes." Tim, always strategic with his words, simply stated, "You're too dumb." Maybe they were both right, but I wouldn't know unless I tried.

Encounters like these with Tim, where negative comments were all he had to offer, had become all too familiar. They call it "par for the course" when dealing with people, but I could never understand why it had to be this way. Couldn't Tim have easily said something like, "Wow! Great job, Gregg!" or "That's a wonderful first step on your way to varsity!"? Anything positive would have been better than the verbal abuse I had grown accustomed to.

It was clear that people like Tim needed a significant wake-up call when it came to learning how to behave decently. Unfortunately, this doesn't come easily for some individuals, and some never learn. They only worsen with age until one day, when they're on their deathbeds, it's too late. Everyone acts as if they'll live forever and never have to confront the damage they've caused with their hateful and negative words, all because of a dark heart or something even worse.

As I faced these challenges, I found myself relying more and more on Jesus, as the number of humans I could trust and depend on was dwindling rapidly. Yet, sometimes, Jesus felt a million miles away, seemingly on vacation. I despised myself for such thoughts, considering what He had done for me. I felt ashamed, adding to the already mounting emotions burdening my breaking psyche and heart. And that's the crux of it all: "Grief" – which was all there seemed to be, and nothing more.

As the demands of my high-level courses grew, I found myself waking up earlier and studying longer at night. I made a conscious choice to prioritize my studies over teaming up with Bruce or Greg. Despite the demanding schedule, I managed to complete the JV wrestling season with an impressive record of 11-2.

Intramural basketball kindled my interest, but it was short-lived when I asked Tim to drive me to a game. I wouldn't have asked him in the first place, but Lauren instructed me to wake him up when it was time to leave while she was out selling a house. Reluctantly, he got dressed and drove me to the game, complaining incessantly about his job the entire way there. On the journey back, he berated me for my poor performance. That incident marked the end of intramural basketball once and for all.

Despite the challenges, I continued to excel in my studies. I maintained a good academic standing and decided to try out for the varsity track team. Cutting seemed like an improbable feat, but my love for running motivated me to give it a shot. It felt invigorating to channel my entire being into something physical. Running, in its simplicity, appealed to me on a profound level, and I would push myself until my lungs burned. To my surprise, I secured a spot on the varsity track team as a sprinter, and the coach even suggested I would excel in longer distances if I developed my endurance. However, I wanted to stick with sprinting. I possessed a slender build and a natural inclination for speed. Besides, sprinting held the allure of glory for me. I had an innate understanding of running, a skill I had honed for as long as I could remember.

Despite Tim and Lauren's disapproval, they didn't put up much resistance as long as I fulfilled my chores and maintained good grades. The endless cycle of chores felt overwhelming at times, with tasks like weeding the garden, mowing the lawn, painting, shoveling, sweeping, and scrubbing. Whenever Carter and I missed a spot while mowing the lawn, Tim would react with frustration, grabbing us by the back of our necks and pointing out the overlooked patch. Even though the missing area was small, Tim's reaction made it seem monumental. He had a way of instilling fear in both Carter and me.

It wasn't just Tim's demand for perfection in chores that bothered me; it was the absence of lightheartedness in the house. Lauren and Tim were always on edge, and their high-strung nature made Carter, Lynn, and me incredibly nervous. If we dared to laugh or joke at the dinner table, Tim would pound

his fists on our heads, causing pain and discomfort. No fooling around was allowed. Just do as you're told, and even then, it felt like a gamble.

Carter seemed to lack the same outlets for expression through school and sports that I had. Although Lynn didn't excel academically, she was a remarkable athlete, particularly in track. However, Carter didn't share the same enthusiasm for sports overall, which drove a deeper wedge between us.

One day, when I returned home from school, I discovered that Carter had run away to live with Father. It wasn't entirely unexpected, but I was still taken aback by the fact that Father had allowed Carter to stay with him. Tim informed me of this, revealing that Carter had called from a payphone to break the news. Carter's departure was rooted in his pursuit of freedom. He had already been experimenting with drugs and alcohol before we left Mother, and these troubling habits followed him to Lauren and Tim's home. When faced with the rules and regulations of their house, Carter grew increasingly agitated.

In contrast to our time with Mother, where there were no established family values or ground rules, living with Lauren and Tim introduced us to a structured environment. The transition was smoother for me, as I yearned for stability and guidance. I had never received a formal or informal education in life skills, emotional management, critical thinking, or compassion—qualities I deemed righteous and holy. However, despite the structure provided by Lauren and Tim, our new surroundings were still rife with drugs, alcohol, and lustful temptations. The ease of access to these vices, given the crowds we spent time together with and the fact that Lauren and Tim often left us alone, made it understandable why Carter struggled.

On several occasions, when Carter and I found ourselves alone at Lauren and Tim's, I earnestly spoke to him about getting his life on track and abandoning drug use. Despite my efforts, the allure of the substances and the freedom to indulge in them without constant supervision proved too strong for him. Lauren and Tim tried to guide him by setting rules and expectations. They caught him using drugs and

grounded him multiple times, hoping to steer him away from his destructive path. Despite their efforts, our guardians' attempts to guide him were met with resistance, and Carter remained rebellious.

Carter's decision to live with Father was rooted in his belief that our dad would offer him an environment free from scrutiny, given that our father was still immersed in a life of women and alcohol himself. Carter made his choice abruptly, never saying goodbye to anyone, not even me. He simply hopped on his motorcycle and dialed our father's number from a local payphone. I was taken aback by how Carter had acquired our father's unlisted phone number, a relic from the time when phone books were still a thing.

I remember that Tim and Lauren were more upset about Carter's audacity in taking the motorcycle, even though I recall him paying Tim for it. The whole situation reeked of adolescent rebellion and a lack of a divine foundation to guide us. It felt like we were floundering, pretending to live a normal life without any righteous direction or understanding of our actions.

Carter left all of this chaos behind to head into an even more uncertain future with Father, who had never shown him any affection, only irritated disdain. Despite this, I knew Carter secretly hoped that our father would take him in and love him like a son, although history had shown otherwise.

All I could do was receive the news from Lauren and Tim, who made sure to display their disgust and shame regarding Carter's actions while pretending they had always been trying to 'help the poor boy' in their way. It became increasingly difficult not to scream at them and end this theatrical display of compassion. Tim eventually retrieved the motorcycle after Carter called him to inform him of his whereabouts and our father's impending arrival. Tim, being wary of our father, wasted no time in grabbing the motorcycle from the phone booth and making a hasty exit before our father arrived. Tim's temper and his knack for making others feel small and foolish were well-known, and I'm sure he didn't miss the opportunity to belittle Carter further.

This was the environment in which I was raised, a tumultuous existence that I lived through. Compassion and empathy were foreign concepts in our household. No one ever uttered the words, 'Let's talk this out.' Instead, it was a relentless battle of wits and an unwavering commitment to 'the principle of it all' that fueled their wicked tongues and twisted minds, leading them to say and do the most hurtful things, especially during moments of crisis. It was then that true feelings emerged, revealing just how little we meant to each other.

Every day, I witnessed and heard this lack of compassion, and at times, all I could do was retreat outdoors with one of our animals. When Mattie was still with us, I'd go outside and sit with her, or I'd find one of the beagles Tim owned for hunting that he kept in a pen. The lightbulb was my favorite beagle; he had a small white spot in the middle of his brown fur on top of his head that resembled a perfect little light bulb. I would hold these animals close and weep quietly. No one ever knew about these moments, and if they did, they would assume something was wrong with me and leave me alone.

I hid because I couldn't bear to witness the absence of compassion and empathy when others saw me cry. I also understood that my tears bothered people, especially those who were responsible for the abuse I endured.

The last time I had seen Father was shortly after the court hearing when he and Mother came together to see Carter, Lynn, and me. Witnessing them together without animosity, not trying to tear each other apart, left me stunned. Lauren had mentioned their visit in advance, so I spent the entire day hiding, uncertain of their arrival time. My heart skipped a beat as I secretly observed Father knocking on the front door, while Mother sat motionless in the car, staring straight ahead. There was a brief exchange between Father and Tim before Father returned to the car and said something to Mother. Then they drove away. It was a moment of strange juxtaposition—a glimpse of civility amid chaos.

A flicker of bravery sparked within me at that moment, but not enough to see Mother and Father again. Tim later told me that Carter couldn't handle seeing them together and the emotional turmoil it caused, which led him to live with Father. The tension and unresolved feelings from their tumultuous relationship were too much for Carter to bear. "He's going to amount to nothing," Tim lamented. In her usual dramatic fashion, Lauren would later claim that Carter was a failure from the start. Both Lauren and Tim made sure to use his departure as a reminder that Lynn and I were not yet out of the woods. Failure was still an option. "You could still end up like your mother," Lauren would say. Such words fueled my anger and determination. They made me strive harder and made me stronger.

While the thought of Lynn and me being alone weighed heavily on my mind, the foster boys were gone, and now Carter had left as well. This realization served as a constant reminder that our days were numbered. I never felt comfortable or welcomed in that household, but then again, I had never experienced such feelings anywhere. Countless nights were spent lying awake, anticipating the moment when Lauren and Tim would decide it was time for me to leave. Until the days of planning my escape from Mother, I had always felt the same way—unwanted.

I took a job as a busboy at a nearby restaurant known to the locals as "The Buffet," thanks to my friend Greg's suggestion who was already employed there. Greg also worked at another one of the owner's restaurants called "The Sole," which specialized in fish and chips. It wasn't about the money, as everything I earned went to Lauren and Tim. It was simply an opportunity to spend time with Greg and escape the confines of the house. The Buffet specialized in roast beef, au gratin potatoes, and blueberry pie. Spending time with Greg and getting out of the house felt good, and "feeling good" was always so hard to come by. With academics, track, chores, and now the Buffet job, I kept myself busy and being occupied helped me forget my painful past.

If I could have found words to express my feelings at that time, I would have communicated a fervent desire to leave my mother behind. I yearned to banish thoughts of her from my mind, to keep anxiety and panic attacks at bay.

One summer day, an unexpected visit from my mother and father shattered the tranquility of our home. Lauren hadn't even mentioned their arrival. My mother brought gifts – old paintings she'd created years ago in oil and watercolor – and wanted me to have them. Lauren discarded them, claiming they might be infested with cockroach eggs, and insisted they not remain within our walls. The paintings reeked of the old house and its painful memories, especially my mother's attempts at art fueled by alcohol. Their presence was a constant reminder of my tumultuous past with her. Running from that life had become my coping mechanism, a way to maintain equilibrium.

The time I spent with Greg and Bruce was a cherished refuge. Occasionally, Lauren and Tim would arrange camping trips for us, joined by Bruce's parents. Two cars laden with gear, we embarked on journeys northward, immersing ourselves in the grandeur of nature. We, the "three musketeers," as we'd playfully call ourselves, would explore the wilderness on foot or ride our motorcycles through the dense woods. Although Greg didn't always join us, the trips where he did come along were special.

The thrill intensified when Bruce rode pillion on my motorcycle, and together, we'd race through the woods, leaving Carter and Bruce's brother Doug far behind. We ventured so deep that the engine's roar eventually faded to a distant hum. Having Bruce by my side provided comfort, yet an odd sensation persisted – a feeling that his presence was ephemeral. Certain individuals possess an innate purity and kindness, making their transient nature all the more palpable. Still, Bruce was like a cherished companion, a brother I'd never had and never would. Feeling secure with him was paramount. My affection for him was

deep and sincere, and when he held on to me, sometimes resting his head against my back as we rode, I was enveloped in a profound sense of safety.

Once, while navigating the woods on our motorcycles, I glimpsed a clearing and instinctively steered toward it. Just before reaching the edge, we halted and dismounted. Peering over the precipice, we were met with a hundred-foot drop onto jagged rocks below. Had I not braked in time, a tragic fate awaited us, our lives extinguished against the unyielding stone.

"Holy Shit!" Bruce exclaimed.

"We would have been pulverized!" I replied.

Gazing into the abyss that nearly became our end, laughter welled up. It was liberating not to care, just two friends sharing unadulterated camaraderie, two souls unburdened by the world's weight. At that instant, I recognized the depth of our connection, and I was certain I could never lose him.

As the outdoor track season concluded, autumn arrived, heralding hunting season. Bruce's participation brought an added dimension of enjoyment to our excursions. However, more often than not, it was only Tim, Carter, and me on our hunting expeditions. With Carter's absence, it was now just Tim and me. The previous year, before Carter left, the three of us had ventured north to hunt snowshoe rabbits. During one escapade, Carter and I became separated from Tim in the dense underbrush, our cries echoing in the forest as fear gripped us. When Tim finally located us, he was annoyed, labeling us "Two Dumb Losers" before resuming his solitary journey. From then on, we stayed close and minimized noise during our hunts.

During a subsequent hunting trip, I experienced my first successful kill – a snowshoe rabbit. Tim believed Carter and I weren't ready for a larger game like deer, so we focused on hunting squirrels, birds,

and rabbits. The beagles would go into a frenzy when we approached the scent of a rabbit. Those beagles were my friends, and when Tim was absent, I'd playfully hook them up to a skateboard and let them pull me around the neighborhood.

Spotting the rabbit as it bounded over a snow-covered crest toward the baying hounds, I didn't hesitate. I cocked the hammer of my single-shot Ithaca 4/10 and waited for the perfect moment. As the rabbit approached, panic momentarily clouded my judgment, and I fired prematurely. My initial assumption was that I'd missed, but to my astonishment, the rabbit came to rest right before me. It seemed almost imploring, its foot mutilated, a thin strip of fur trailing behind it. Witnessing its suffering was agonizing, and I acted swiftly, reloading, and aiming once more. The report rang out, and the rabbit's life ended, leaving behind fragmented remnants on the snowy canvas.

Life persisted, with my dedication to academics and athletics unwavering. I shared moments with friends Greg and Bruce, who served as steadfast companions during these transformative years. Nonetheless, an enduring sense of solitude and the weight of secrets I bore remained. My family, particularly my now vanished brother Carter, continued to influence my thoughts and emotions.

Carter's absence had become a forbidden topic, a subject left untouched at the behest of Tim and Lauren. They maintained their control by minimizing Carter's worth, subtly reinforcing the fact that he fell short of their expectations. I pondered what might have occurred if Carter had confronted Tim directly as he had often threatened to do, and the possible outcome made me shudder.

As for me, my strength, both physical and emotional, propelled me forward. I had grown adept at navigating the harsh environment I called home, one rife with manipulation and abuse. Tim's icy demeanor, sharp gazes, and calculating behavior rendered me vulnerable in his presence, unable to match his devious tactics.

My strategy differed from Carter's streetwise approach. I relied on academic prowess and athletic achievements, employing these as my weapons against adversity. I aspired for a life where Tim and Lauren no longer wielded power over me, where their influence was diminished, and where I could shield my sister Lynn from Tim's advances.

This chapter of my life was a balance between asserting my independence and enduring a toxic atmosphere. Lynn and I remained captives in an emotionally abusive environment, an existence far removed from our mother's grasp yet trapped in a household of turmoil. Our hearts yearned for love and acceptance, but all we encountered was pain and hardship.

Despite the trials, I pursued excellence fervently. Academics and athletics became my sanctuaries, spaces where I could prove my worth and transcend the cruelty. Every accomplishment was a triumphant shout against Lauren and Tim's oppressive grasp, an affirmation of my intrinsic value beyond their maltreatment.

I thrived academically, achieved acclaim in Judo, and earned a coveted spot on the varsity track team. These accomplishments were symbolic of my resilience, a refusal to be confined by the adversity that life had thrust upon me. With determination as my driving force, I pursued my aspirations with unrelenting fervor.

This trajectory wasn't without its obstacles. Tim and Lauren's behavior toward me became increasingly distant and enigmatic. They radiated an air of caution and discomfort, leaving me baffled. My conduct hadn't changed, and their response perplexed me. Perhaps my growing independence unsettled them, or perhaps they sensed my determination to carve my path. Regardless, their attitude cast an unsettling shadow on my life, exacerbating the turmoil with which I was already grappling.

Despite the complexities, my memories of a tumultuous past and the quest for a brighter future endured. Scars from abuse and neglect remained, and the nightmares continued. Each day was a struggle to suppress traumatic experiences, focus on the present, and envision a future free from the pain of the past.

Tim and Lauren's glares reminded us of their resentment. I clung to the hope that one day they might recognize the suffering they had caused, that they might extend an olive branch of empathy. Yet, that moment of reconciliation never arrived. Instead, we remained the scapegoats for their shortcomings, shouldering blame dutifully.

But the journey to liberation was arduous. Emotional scars ran deep, and the fear of repercussions and the unknown sometimes left me paralyzed. Still, a glimmer of determination burned within me, a flicker of hope that whispered of a future where I could break free from their grasp. That glimmer was my beacon, guiding me toward a life unburdened by their influence.

The vivid memories of my mother's abuse continued to torment me, invading my dreams with nightmarish intensity. The recollections of her explosive anger and the physical pain she inflicted were etched into my mind, a haunting reminder of the darkness that once consumed my existence.

Running became my sanctuary, an escape from the harsh realities that had shaped my past. It was a way for me to seize control of my destiny, a proclamation to the world that my identity was not limited by the abuse I had endured. While the shadows of my history lingered, the canvas of my future was mine to paint, and I was resolved to create a brighter masterpiece.

Each stride I took along that half-mile road near Tim and Lauren's current house symbolized more than just physical exertion; it was a manifestation of my journey toward autonomy and self-discovery. As I raced down that familiar path, a rush of empowerment and freedom surged through me, as though I could outpace the specters of my past and leave them behind in the dust.

With every footfall, I felt myself growing stronger—mentally, physically, and emotionally. My unwavering commitment to excel in both my studies and my athleticism propelled me onward, illuminating a path toward a future filled with promise.

Though my history was marred by pain and darkness, I refused to succumb to their grip. Instead, I harnessed them as fuel, propelling me toward a life liberated from the shackles of abuse. I ran with purpose, inching closer to a reality where happiness and fulfillment were not distant dreams but tangible realities.

In tandem with my academic and athletic achievements, a newfound sense of confidence and determination bloomed within me. The fear of lagging academically gradually dissipated, replaced by a resolute pursuit of knowledge and understanding. What was once a struggle—reading—transformed into a source of joy, a gateway to expanding my horizons.

The summer before my sophomore year beckoned with aspirations and goals. My sights were set on the upcoming track season, with an ambitious aim to secure a spot on the team once again, coupled with the desire to win medals. The prospect of adorning my varsity jacket with further accolades—known humorously as a "pussy coat" among friends—filled me with anticipation. Amidst it all, my love for reading remained a steadfast companion, driving me to explore diverse subjects and broaden my intellectual horizons.

While the specter of my mother's abuse still cast its shadow, I was gradually learning to detach myself emotionally from her. The love I had once felt had morphed into a repulsion, and I began to understand that my nightmares were not punishments for my departure, but rather manifestations of my escape. Though emotional struggles continued to punctuate my journey, I concealed my torment from others, including my sister Lynn, finding solace in my academic achievements and prowess in sports.

In the realm of relationships, my feelings toward girls remained complex. While I experienced fleeting attractions, I hesitated to plunge headlong into romantic connections as fervently as my peers. My past traumas and emotional barricades rendered it challenging to fully open myself up to another person. Yet, I embraced the innocent thrill of kissing and handholding; experiences tinged with the electric excitement of success on the track.

After races, the euphoria of victory often led to moments spent with admiring girls who cheered us on. Their smiles and encouraging words provided a sense of validation and belonging. In these post-race gatherings, the adrenaline from competing mingled with the newfound attention, making the simple acts of kissing and handholding feel even more thrilling. The combination of athletic achievement and youthful romance created an intoxicating mix that, for brief moments, allowed me to forget my past and savor the present.

With each step through my teenage years, my dedication to academics and athletics offered a compass of purpose. These pursuits guided me as I forged a path toward a better future, even as I grappled with the emotional imprints of my past.

As my interest in girls continued to develop, I found myself observing Lynn's companions during sleepovers, and my curiosity was piqued. A particular girl named Barb captured my attention, and during a sleepover, I mustered the courage to invite her into my room when the others were asleep. In that moment of genuine curiosity, we shared a kiss, and the simple act kindled a spark of joy and elation. Her presence, the warmth of her touch, and the gentle connection between us introduced me to a new realm of vulnerability and tenderness.

Yet, my wariness around Lauren and Tim deepened. Their behaviors grew increasingly perplexing, their actions replete with an inexplicable emptiness. Despite my achievements in academics and athletics,

they maintained their distance, engaging in superficial conversations at best. The unease born from their peculiar behavior became a palpable undercurrent, a tension that filled the air.

In my quest to evade the stifling atmosphere at home, I seized the opportunity to attend a two-week summer Judo camp. At the International Shotokan Judo Training Facility, I found solace in the rhythm of physical exertion, gaining newfound confidence in the process. I even mustered the courage to share kisses with a few girls, infusing my life with thrilling moments of sincere discovery.

My sophomore year commenced on a triumphant note—I was crowned the Ohio State Camp Shotokan Judo champion and secured my place on the varsity track team. The challenges of advanced courses appeared more conquerable, and this surge in self-assurance bolstered my belief in the viability of a college education.

Amid these triumphs, my history of trauma and the complexities of relationships remained steadfast in their influence. There were moments when emotional detachment still prevailed, and love and intimacy felt like enigmas. The bustling realm of academics, sports, and part-time work offered respite from the past, yet the scars it had left behind were etched deep within me.

As I traversed my sophomore year, I carried within me a fusion of hope and the lingering weight of my past. Uncertain of what lay ahead, I anchored myself in my determination.

With the combination of academic responsibilities, rigorous track practices, and the demands of my job at the restaurant, a sense of exhaustion and busyness became my companions. Paradoxically, I found comfort in this busyness—it granted me respite from the haunting nightmares that had plagued me. And I craved the nourishment of "positive reinforcement," the affirmations I received from teachers and coaches that acted as potent motivators. This wellspring of encouragement became something I was unwilling to relinquish. Thus, I toiled with renewed vigor, steadfastly determined to shine both in my academics and on the track. Ahead of me, there lay only two paths—triumph or defeat. The fight for a life of meaning hinged

on my success. Those who had once held me captive were gradually slipping into the shadows. I poured my energy into work, studies, and track, and whenever possible, I embraced the fellowship of my true companions—Greg and Bruce. Yet, beneath the surface of my achievements, I still grappled with an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

Solitude is a realm distinct from loneliness, for it signifies a conscious choice to be alone, while loneliness stems from a lack of support. The latter festers into a vicious cycle of isolation and vulnerability, spiraling deeper into itself. Although the presence of potential allies persists, they often choose to withhold their assistance, their justifications often bordering on excuses.

In stark contrast, nature quietly imparts a lesson without uttering a single word. Its teachings unfold in landscapes devoid of cathedrals, where only the earth's grounding energy and the songs of birds reverberate through the trees. Ants labor to build their hills, clouds drift leisurely above, animals tread gently on dry twigs nearby, delicate flower petals pirouette like snowflakes, and the scent of pine needles perfumes the air—a divine sermon composed billions of years ago. These elements render all else insignificant. When I am given even a small amount of time to quietly observe the natural world of God's creations, it's as though I've imbibed a secret elixir that awakens me, while those around me continue to slumber in their distressing dreams. Despite my loneliness, moments spent in nature recharged my spirit, helping me cope with the daily pain inflicted by both the past and the present.

In my heart, I held a fervent hope that my family—my parents, siblings, even those caught in the web of addiction and negativity—would eventually recognize the damage that had clouded their lives. The destructive forces of substance abuse, hatred, jealousy, greed, and remorse had left their mark, and I yearned for them to awaken to their redemption. Yet, my efforts to expose the corrosive impact of their choices fell

on deaf ears. I had believed that confronting the past, as I did, would mend their fractured hearts, extinguish their vices, and usher in a positive change. Unfortunately, this vision remained unrealized.

I was convinced that by remembering and confronting the past, the cycle of their quarrels and the hardness of their hearts would be shattered, and even the most avaricious souls would kneel before their better angels. But reality proved stubbornly resistant to transformation.

Amid my solitude, I ached to return to a realm I missed deeply—a place beneath the apple tree, where my only friend once rested upon my knee. There, beneath the crisscross patterns of branches, the blue sky pierced through, and the sun bestowed a fading smile as the wind wiped away my tears. I was a child in hiding, my strength waning from both battles and celebrations, a forsaken soul on Earth. Yet, in Jesus, my "true King," I found refuge.

In the unfolding narrative of my life, the transition from the simplicity of youth to the complexities of adulthood was mirrored by the stark imagery of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse from the Book of Revelation. These harbingers—mounted on horses of white, red, black, and pale—came to symbolize critical phases of my existence: Conquest, War, Famine, and Death. Each phase, defined by its unique challenges and transformations, resonated deeply with the upheavals I experienced personally.

As time passed, I grew from a boy into a restless young man. The songs of birds, once the soundtrack of a serene childhood, persisted, yet transformed, continuing to resonate around me. Against this backdrop, the thunderous advance of the horsemen shattered this tranquility, their grimaces marking both man and beast as they replaced serenity with a palpable tension. The earth trembled under the weight of their hooves, mirroring the instability each new stage introduced into my life. Their relentless march, impervious to any pleas for mercy, echoed those moments when my calls for help seemed to disappear, unheard, and disregarded.

Yet, after their passage, a profound stillness ensued. This quietude spoke volumes about the calm and introspection I found following life's storms. The dust that settled hinted at new beginnings, suggesting that the challenges I had faced were not mere obstacles but vital components in shaping a more resilient, contemplative self.

The Four Horsemen, as depicted in the scriptural context of the Book of Revelation, highlight the inevitable connection between divine prophecy and human experience. In Christian eschatology, these figures represent not just agents of destruction but also bearers of the necessary change that ushers in renewal. To me, they stood as poignant reminders that periods of great adversity could lead to equally substantial growth. Each rider, distinct in their apocalypse, underscored the significant impacts of conquest, conflict, scarcity, and endings, each paving the way for new chapters in my life.

"I possess a haven, a realm untouched by others, where existence is solitary. In my isolated haven, I find respite, untarnished by refusal. In this realm, no dissenting voice exists, for none reside there—save for me and the unwavering presence of Jesus, irrespective of His endorsement."

In the solitude of my private retreat, a place shielded from the clamor of the outside world, I find a profound sense of peace. This sanctuary, free from the discord and dissent of everyday life, offers a pristine environment where the concept of rejection is rendered meaningless. Here, I am never truly alone; I am accompanied by the presence of Jesus. His support for my spiritual journey, though not fixed, provides a deep and enduring comfort.

The term "unfixed" aptly describes the dynamic nature of my relationship with Jesus. Unlike a traditional endorsement, His support is not a static, guaranteed approval but rather an evolving presence that responds to the fluctuations of my faith and the experiences that shape my spiritual life. This recognition that divine closeness can vary—shaped by personal doubts, struggles, and growth—offers a more nuanced understanding of divine support.

In this context, Jesus' presence in my life represents a comforting constancy, though the form and intensity of His support are unpredictable. It mirrors a realistic and personal faith experience where divine support is not merely a formal, one-time validation but an ongoing, evolving engagement.

Thus, in the confines of my sanctuary, the reassurance I draw from Jesus' presence is not lessened by the absence of a permanent endorsement. Rather, it underscores the beauty of a faith journey that is deeply personal and vibrantly alive, fostered by an intimate and reassuring relationship with the divine that transcends rigid expectations and acknowledges the complex realities of spiritual growth.

As I traversed my sophomore year, there were junctures when the weight of secrets and burdens unshared, became a burden unto itself. The pang of betraying Mother in my escape gnawed at my conscience, a persistent ache that accompanied the relief of survival. My connection with Carter dwindled to silence, and his name became a forbidden utterance within our home. Meanwhile, the aura surrounding Lauren and Tim grew more convoluted, their actions more enigmatic. However, I remained impervious to their behavior. My triumphs—academic and athletic—testified to my capacity to transcend their doubts.

Life followed its rhythm—school, work, track practice, and fleeting moments of camaraderie with Bruce and Greg. As my confidence expanded, my achievements became my refuge. The academic struggles Lynn faced, particularly in mathematics and reading comprehension, bore heavily on my heart, and I became resolute in my commitment to bolster her journey. Together, we stood united against the odds.

High school's demands were an ordeal on their own, intensified by the torment and mockery perpetuated by Tim and Lauren. Adding to the complexity, Lauren's business ventures often seemed dubious, leading us from one residence to another. The cycle of property acquisition and relocation was unceasing.

In the face of these challenges, I resolved not to surrender to Lauren and Tim's malicious intent. I recognized the potency of resilience and the boundless power of knowledge to propel me forward. Their venomous actions wouldn't halt my progress.

As time passed, another layer of struggle was revealed—their actions' impact on our family dynamics. Tim and Lauren's ceaseless quest for property acquisition meant that Carter, once a valuable laborer, was now unavailable to contribute to our home renovations. His absence placed an additional burden on Lynn and me, as we were now expected to take on more of the physical labor required to maintain and improve the properties. Tasks that Carter would have helped with—painting, landscaping, and heavy lifting—now fell squarely on our shoulders, increasing our workload and adding to the strain of our already demanding lives.

As I battled through the difficulties of high school and the uncertainty that accompanied our perpetual moves, I held onto the belief that knowledge and determination would illuminate my path. Though this phase of life was arduous, I was prepared to navigate its trials, assured that each lesson learned would sculpt the person I was destined to become. With every setback, I clung to the certainty that my spirit was invincible and that every trial would merely forge me into a stronger being.

Ultimately, I was determined to demonstrate—to both me and the world—that no obstacle was insurmountable. High school was but a chapter in the grand narrative of existence, a phase I was willing to embrace despite its difficulties. My aspirations soared higher than the hateful words or duplicitous schemes that sought to shroud my path. Driven by the unyielding power of knowledge and a spirit that knew no defeat, I was resolute in my pursuit of a brighter tomorrow.

Lauren's latest real estate deal meant we were moving again to a new house. As we prepared to depart from the dwelling that had been both a sanctuary and a source of dread, anticipation swelled within me, knowing I'd miss the space I cherished most—my "Enchanted Dwelling Place." This was a basement

room in our existing house that had become my own space now that Carter was gone. More than just a metaphorical haven, it was a meticulously crafted realm of solitude and peace nestled within the confines of our home. Here, amid sacred stillness, I stood alone with my thoughts, comforted by the unwavering presence of Jesus, who offered His support unconditionally, regardless of my deeds or misgivings. Prayer became a constant companion, whether I was beginning my homework, deep in study for an exam, or reflecting on my day.

Surrounded by my protective collection of books, including cherished Reader's Digest compilations and heartfelt short stories, this space was my true sanctuary. It was a refuge where I could focus on my studies and engage in prayer, free from mockery or disturbance.

My basement room, untouched by the invasive scrutiny of Lauren and Tim, shielded me from the harsh realities of life. Yet, the tranquility of this sanctum was disrupted when a collection of cassette tapes, co-crafted with Carter, Lynn, and me, inadvertently fell into Lauren's hands. These tapes contained recordings of our conversations, music we enjoyed, and moments of laughter that provided solace in our tumultuous lives.

When Lauren discovered the tapes, she was furious, interpreting their content as a sign of rebellion and disrespect. She confronted me with accusations, her anger spilling over into punitive measures. My private space, once a haven, was invaded by her wrath. The tapes were confiscated, and I was subjected to increased scrutiny and stricter rules. My study time was curtailed, and my movements within the house were closely monitored, stripping away the semblance of freedom I had cherished.

The ensuing repercussions imposed new limitations that constricted my sacred space, dimming the light of my enthusiasm. My sanctuary was no longer a place of solace but a reminder of the fragility of my peace. The sense of betrayal and the loss of autonomy weighed heavily on me, transforming my cherished refuge into a battleground for control and resilience.

Resolved to cherish my last moments in this dwelling of enchantment and dread, I embarked on a reflective run through the woods near our home. Guided by a narrow trail, I scaled a rugged ridge, launching into a full-throttle sprint that electrified my being—an outpouring of pent-up energy. But as exhaustion crept in, my stride faltered; I stumbled forward, colliding grotesquely with the decomposing remains of a deer. Collapsing against a tree, I was overcome by a wave of uncontrollable vomiting, the taste of decay hauntingly lingering in my mouth. The sanctity of these enchanted woods was now marred, and it was time to bid them farewell.

In the face of these trials, I remained committed to aiding Lynn in preparing our new residence yet yearning for the refuge of personal space. The shadow of Lauren's vigilant gaze loomed large, stifling my exploration of my sexuality and comprehension of my desires. Each day was a step toward the unknown, yet I clung to the hope that a new "Enchanted Dwelling Place" would once again rise as a bastion of solace and freedom from the burdens that lay beyond its ethereal borders.

Our next dwelling would become the fourth I had inhabited within three years, and it would mark a turning point in my relationship with Lauren and Tim. This residence, a ranch-style house acquired through foreclosure and hailed as a "steal," symbolized a new beginning. Upon our arrival, the previous occupants were in hurried packing, their eyes welled with tears. An invisible barrier kept me from meeting their gaze as if their sorrow could seep into my soul. Lauren, a sentinel of disapproval, presided over their departure, her critical stare suffocating their spirits. This oppressive weight was distressingly familiar.

As the women's possessions were loaded onto a truck and they drove away, the house remained, a hollow shell laden with the remnants of another life. Yet, within these walls, a fresh start awaited—an opportunity to escape the toxic atmosphere that had plagued us for too long. My sister Lynn and I stood at

the threshold of new beginnings, poised to carve our paths, and etch our unique stories onto the canvas of life.

The subsequent chapter of my journey was primed to unfold, and I confronted it with an unwavering resolve to weave a narrative of strength, evolution, and victory. The wisdom and knowledge gifted to me by Jesus served as a beacon, lighting my way through the labyrinthine journey thus far. I understood that this luminescence would continue to guide me as I ventured into the uncharted territory ahead.

As my junior year drew near, I reflected upon my sophomore year with a sense of accomplishment. Triumphs such as clinching victory in the Ohio State Camp Shotokan Judo championship and solidifying my position on the varsity track team stood as significant milestones. Academically, my pursuit of excellence in AP courses bore fruit, and the contours of my ambition to attend college began to take shape.

Yet, an intangible sensation eluded my grasp. An amalgam of hope and uncertainty blurred my thoughts, casting shadows upon the path that stretched before me. Nevertheless, my resolve remained unshaken. The battle for a brighter tomorrow had only just commenced, and I was poised to confront any obstacle that dared cross my path. Empowered by the beacon of knowledge, I was prepared to navigate the challenges that lay ahead with unwavering determination.

On a summer evening, a decision as simple as playing a game of night tennis with my friend Greg after our restaurant shift marked the catalyst for a series of events that would shatter the tenuous stability I had built. Earlier that day, I had obtained Lauren's rare permission to play tennis with Greg, despite her peculiar behavior. Yet, the true reasons behind her actions remained concealed until I returned home that very night.

There she was, Lauren, waiting for me with an air of detachment that took my breath away. Her expression was void of emotion, cold and distant. The dim light cast her face in sharp relief, emphasizing

her stern features. As she rose from her seat, unaffected by the gravity of the situation, my heart raced with apprehension. Her movements were precise, almost mechanical as if she were trying to distance herself from what was about to happen.

My brother-in-law Tim remained cowering in their bedroom, leaving me to confront Lauren alone. He had always had a way of instilling fear while behaving like a coward. But today, it was Lauren who rendered the final blow. Her words were spoken swiftly and softly, delivering a crushing revelation — I was to leave by the next morning. I was being sent to live with my other stepsister, Jessica, and her family. The news hit me like a physical force, and I felt a lump rise in my throat as I struggled to comprehend the enormity of it all.

I had been with Lauren and Tim for four years now, and although my grades were horrible when I arrived and I could not read or write, the improvement in my performance was drastic. Yet this did nothing to change Lauren and Tim's minds. Years later I would come to believe that the reason for my departure was most likely financial, but also stemmed from a deep-seated unrighteousness within their dark hearts. It was more than darkness — it was a real and tangible thing I saw that manifested in people when abusing and accusing me. It was alive and aware, a demon as far as my broken heart knew and believed. This demon was back, determined to make me suffer even more. I had experienced four easier years when living with Tim and Lauren compared to the previous eleven of my life, and now it seemed that evil would not allow this to go unpunished. What else could it be?

Again, my flesh and blood now stood to ruin all the work I had put into improving myself. Lauren and Tim did not explain why they were kicking me out, and if they knew the reason, it was insane. If they didn't know, it was the usual numb, buzzing emptiness of soulless individuals that I had been burdened with since birth.

Lauren stood before me in the kitchen as the gravity of her proclamation set in on me. I glanced at the clock on the wall, its ticking suddenly unbearably loud. The room seemed to close in around me, the air thick with unspoken words and unexpressed emotions. Lauren's demeanor remained unchanged, her eyes not meeting mine as she continued, "Pack your things tonight. Jessica will be expecting you tomorrow." I bet Lauren felt she had accomplished something that night when I returned home and was admonished for simply improving my grades, working a job, and hanging out with good and decent friends. I will never understand evil, nor do I ever want to.

Lauren's indifference and absence of empathy echoed the behavior of our shared past, invoking a surge of fear within me. I felt paralyzed, stricken by the looming uncertainty. Scouring my memories for any hint of wrongdoing, I found none. Tears of pain and anger welled up as I pleaded desperately for compassion. Lauren's actions, her stillness, and her inexplicable decision weighed upon me like a heavy shroud.

As Lauren continued to speak, I battled to suppress a fiery rage, reigning it in, sitting in respectful silence as I hoped for a glimmer of clemency. Amidst the storm of thoughts and emotions, it dawned on me that her decree was final. Once more, I was ensnared in a cycle of despair that mirrored the trials of my past. Struggling to control my indignation and conceal my anguish, I sensed an undercurrent of self-loathing within me.

Lauren continued to assert that this was for the best, withholding any justification. I began to implore Lauren once more, my pleas soaked in desperation, but her resolve remained unwavering. My path of learning and self-discovery, the life I had forged, now felt threatened with abrupt termination.

In the span of mere moments, I had looked into Lauren's eyes and understood the futility of altering her decision. She had transformed into someone consumed by her trials and inner turmoil. Her gaunt cheeks and vacant gray eyes portrayed a woman burdened by fear, devoid of the strength to fight. Her

visage became a testament to the absence of justice, in a world where fairness was coveted by children above all else. Despite her hardened exterior, over the past couple of years, I had seen fleeting moments of kindness in Lauren, such as when she would quietly check on Lynn or leave small treats for us when we performed well in school. These rare acts hinted at a capacity for compassion buried deep within her.

Yet, beneath her current mask of resolve, a flicker of compassion seemed to stir within her as she must have sensed the pain etched across my face and recognized the devastation that her decision would surely wreak. In a cowardly act, she struck me from behind—a blow I had anticipated since the day our mother was forced from the very home I was now being evicted from. In the presence of Lauren, I had always been powerless.

My mind raced with questions. What had I done wrong? Why was I being sent away? The uncertainty gnawed at me; a wave of anger mixed with helplessness. I wanted to demand answers, to make her see the injustice of it all, but the words caught my throat.

Her gaze, cold and unfeeling, communicated her conviction before she turned away, vanishing into her bedroom. In that solitary moment, I felt like nothing more than a discarded rag doll, slumped over a chair. I, who had overcome adversity and carved out a path of progress, was now reduced to this. My body slackened, and I retreated to my room, collapsing onto my bed, overcome by a torrent of tears.

Despite the turbulent swirl of resentment, I was wary of displaying my emotions to anyone, especially those who had subjected me to torment, except when it came to positive emotions. I had long since learned that positive emotions could mitigate pain inflicted by others, whereas negative ones only invite further abuse. This wasn't about shame, whether my emotions were positive or negative. I relished hugs, and uttering "Sorry" was a less daunting alternative to conflict. It wasn't about evading confrontation—it was about acknowledging wrongdoing and expressing remorse when warranted. That's how it should work. However, the likes of Tim and Lauren, much like my parents and siblings, were

incapable of such displays. They were fundamentally fractured beings. They lied, cheated, and pilfered without remorse, wearing their transgressions as badges of honor. Despite my love for them, they were profoundly troubled.

Within my basement bedroom, a space I had grown fond of, where life finally seemed to fall into place, I found myself grappling with an onslaught of emotions that threatened to engulf me. For the first time, I had found my rhythm when living with Lauren and Tim. The greasy-haired outsider had morphed into someone different, someone who felt moments of bliss. But the joy was ephemeral. A flood of memories now resurfaced from all the years of being reviled, bullied, abused, shunned, and terrified. These memories were always accompanied by panic attacks and an ever-present dread of death. I recalled pulling my mother from the bathtub and preventing my father from placing a rifle in his mouth. I remembered hunger gnawing at my insides, scavenging for food with my stomach twisted in acid, enduring my mother's beatings, and nursing her through her vulnerable moments. It wasn't meant to be like this. While living with Lauren and Tim, I had finally found solace in the temporary refuge offered by the basement, an escape from tribulations, but now it felt as if it was all slipping through my fingers. The feeling was familiar, reminiscent of the day I left Mother behind at 1360 Crestwood. Then, as now, I believed myself at fault. My heart broke, while sirens wailed in my head. Anxiety clawed at me mercilessly, and darkness loomed.

Amidst my despair, I turned to Jesus, falling to my knees beside my bed, imploring Him to intervene, to alter the course of fate. I hoped that come morning, Lauren and Tim would have a change of heart. My concern for their well-being surpassed my own, my faith unwavering that they would recognize the error in their ways. Yet, as I beseeched, Jesus felt distant, and a tempest of panic and desolation consumed me. It was as if my life were set to unravel further, plunging me back into the abyss I had once fled. The darkness seemed to overwhelm me, doubt corroding my thoughts. Could it be that due to my sins,

there was no God, no Jesus, no Kingdom— only Earth and Hell? Perhaps, my transgressions had rendered me undeserving of Heaven.

The sensation of bearing blame once again overwhelmed me, inaugurating a renewed cycle of self-destruction. The rationales behind such decisions always defied logic—when something lacks coherence, it often conceals deception, and I was ensnared by the familiar sensation of an aching void, a fusion of torment and pure agony. I longed to wipe away my tears, yet the impulse to let them flow held sway. My prayers were directed toward Jesus, an appeal for salvation akin to the past, although an undercurrent of guilt surged within me. It felt as if my reliance on Him was ceaseless, and the weight of my sins emerged as the harbinger of my suffering. In those moments of despair, Heaven appeared distant, an unattainable haven. Exhaustion, a relentless companion, finally claimed me, and I surrendered to sleep, recognizing that the coming morning would be reminiscent of reliving history, akin to the day I departed from Mother.

The following morning marked the beginning of a new chapter as I gathered my belongings and ascended the staircase. Tim, a master of evasion, occupied a seat at the kitchen table, his avoidance of eye contact palpable. His unwillingness to confront the repercussions of his actions was evident, though a glimmer of optimism sparked within me, fueled by the faint prospect that Lauren and Tim might have undergone an overnight transformation. This optimism, however, was abruptly shattered when Tim, still sidestepping eye contact, extended his hand to shake mine. His words, bereft of genuine sympathy, fell flat as he mumbled, "Good luck, Gregg." Returning the handshake, I felt the briskness of the gesture, and Tim promptly retreated from the kitchen.

Lauren, embodying her signature efficiency and ruthlessness, divulged that our departure was imminent. My hopes for an overnight change of heart disintegrated, and I contemplated the possibility of Lauren eagerly resuming her activities within the house, rearranging my former room, or meticulously vacuuming the floors with a sense of unsettling satisfaction. She spoke hurriedly, her voice betraying

suppressed emotions, yet steadfastly avoiding direct eye contact. Anxiously glancing at her wristwatch, she made her impatience palpable.

As the departure moment drew near, I mustered the courage to grasp Lauren's hand on my own, briefly squeezing it in a gesture of connection. Fighting back tears, I found myself compelled to express my remorse, my voice tinged with sorrow as I murmured, "I'm sorry for whatever transgression I may have committed. I'm committed to improvement, and I offer my promise to that effect."

Lauren promptly withdrew her hand from mine, casting a dismissive glance and unconsciously wiping her hand on her slacks. The sight of her casual dismissal fueled a surge of anger within me, causing me to fixate my gaze on her with intensity. "You've brought this upon yourself, Gregg," she shot back, presenting a feeble justification that evaded my comprehension. It was yet another reason shrouded in ambiguity.

"Please, enlighten me. What action of mine has led to this outcome?"

My query was met with a fleeting meeting of our eyes, her composed countenance cutting through me with a sharpness reminiscent of a blade. Through clenched teeth, her words slipped out, "Just get in the car."

Before departing the house, however, Lauren meticulously inspected my luggage, her scrutiny a measure to ensure that I hadn't included anything not rightfully mine. Almost everything I owned was stripped away, leaving me with only a meager assortment of clothing. After four years, my belongings were reduced to a humble collection that could be comfortably accommodated within a single grocery bag. A sound emanated from a distant room, momentarily startling both Lauren and me. Tim's impatient shout urged us to hasten our departure. Lauren's complexion flushed, and her voice quivered once again as she directed me towards the door, a hint of embarrassment evident.

Before stepping out, I inquired if I could bid farewell to Lynn, an appeal that Lauren swiftly denied. It became apparent to me that she had instructed Lynn to remain sequestered within her room until I was gone. "Lynn has been through enough, don't you think?" Lauren's words bore a hint of reproach directed at me. In silence, I concurred, recognizing a reality that far exceeded Lauren's grasp.

"I'm truly sorry it has to come to this, Gregg," Lauren offered in response to my plea to see Lynn. Her statement functioned as a deflection, effectively shifting the focus. It was also abundantly clear that she was determined to evade even the slightest fraction of accountability. From another room, Tim's voice erupted again, commanding us to expedite our departure, a grim chuckle accompanying his directive. The arrangements for my new living situation had likely been premeditated for weeks, with behind-the-scenes negotiations culminating in my residence with Jessica. I wouldn't be surprised if monetary transactions had taken place during the orchestration of this agreement.

During the drive to Jessica's residence, Lauren embarked on an unrelenting monologue, each word assaulting my brain. Her speeches, brimming with self-righteousness, had transformed into an agonizing ordeal that felt akin to the sensation of being punctured by a thousand needles. She persistently extolled the virtues of the ceaseless pursuit of excellence and unwavering perseverance in the face of adversity, even under the weight of the disheartening circumstances I found myself in. Given the context, absorbing her words of encouragement felt like an insurmountable task. It was reminiscent of an executioner offering parting advice to a condemned soul, a final twist of the knife.

Inevitably, Lauren seized the opportunity to remind me of her consistent efforts, implying that I had somehow fallen short of her expectations. She seemed to believe that my achievements were lacking, despite my progress. Internally, I thought sarcastically that instead of striving for academic and athletic excellence, I should have embraced a life of vice, indulging in drugs and theft to fulfill my desires.

Her words weighed heavily on me, prompting a question that had long haunted me: "What have I done to deserve this fate?" The question hung in the air, a plea for understanding and meaning. For a fleeting moment, it seemed as if Lauren might dismiss it, her talent for prolonged disregard well-practiced. I allowed her to believe that this was my penance for perceived transgressions.

Just as hope for a response was waning, she finally replied, albeit with a cryptic and brief phrase that left me further confounded: "You know what you did." A primal scream clawed at the edges of my consciousness, but I stifled it, embracing silence for the remainder of the journey. My gaze fixed upon the passing cars beyond the window, my emotional flood restrained behind a dam of resolve.

As life unfolded thus far, I found myself inadvertently providing sustenance to the most hateful and malevolent individuals, as if they were manufactured on an assembly line in a factory of human-to-demon transformation. Their relentless appetite for innocence seemed unquenchable as if they were cursed zombies fueled by the consumption of the blameless.

Upon arrival, Lauren and Jessica engaged in a discreet conversation, their words shrouded in privacy. I couldn't help but wonder if Jessica was aware that Lauren referred to her as a tramp behind her back. Lauren appeared noticeably eager to depart as swiftly as possible now that the heartless act had been executed. If I had possessed foreknowledge of the impending days, perhaps I would have contemplated defying Lauren while she conversed with Jessica. However, on a fundamental level, I recognized that such an act would likely have yielded no substantial change. In my perception, Lauren was already an entity devoid of any meaningful connection to me.

As Lauren settled into her car and skillfully navigated out of the driveway, I remained in the yard, a profound sense of astonishment surging through me. To my utter surprise, just as she was about to depart, Lauren leaned out of the car window and shouted, "Keep up the good work, Gregg!" I held my gaze fixed on her until her vehicle disappeared around the bend, leaving me standing there, enveloped in solitude.

Jessica had already retreated indoors, leaving me alone with my thoughts. A cemetery stood a few houses away to my left, and in that poignant moment, a realization washed over me like a gentle tide: this marked the dawn of what it felt like to forge a new beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Standing in Jessica's front yard, a whirlwind of emotions swirled within me as I tried to make sense of the abandonment I was once again facing. Confusion and hurt tugged at my heart, leaving me wrestling with the unfairness of being rejected despite my unwavering obedience, trustworthiness, and dedication to excel. It was a baffling scenario; if I were in trouble or grappling with addiction, I could have understood the decision, but this situation made no sense at all. Strangely, it seemed as though my very presence challenged their belief in the possibility of survival following years of enduring abuse.

Near Jessica's home, a chilling cry pierced the air—it wasn't Jessica's voice I heard, but rather my mother's. The sound sent shivers down my spine. When I finally entered Jessica's house, I was met with an unsettling scene in the kitchen. Dirty dishes littered the sink, and pots and pans were strewn about haphazardly, adding to the disarray. Jessica hurried toward me and grabbed my wrists with an uncomfortably tight grip. She spoke in a low, guttural tone that signaled her discontentment with the situation. My heart groaned with anguish, and I clenched my fists, dreading the impending moment when I would have to meet Jessica's eyes and see the disdain, I was sure they held for me.

As Jessica stood grasping me in the kitchen, her words took an unexpected turn, triggering anger within me. "Lauren couldn't handle you, but you won't get away with any nonsense with me," she hissed.

I was utterly perplexed by her accusations, as I had always strived to be a responsible and respectful individual. Confusion lingered in the air as I swayed on my feet, still trying to understand what Lauren had possibly told her.

Jessica's grip on my wrists only intensified; I noticed the wildness in her eyes and the way she panted like a cornered animal. It was as though the earnest intention of passing on essential information had given way to a maddened frenzy, leaving me to believe that she might lash out at any moment. In that instance, I could see the turmoil in her eyes, the palpable tension that gripped her throat, and the tumultuous rise and fall of her breath. She was overwhelmed by a combination of rage, grief, and fear—a sudden realization that she was responsible for raising an adolescent.

I stood there in silence, my expression as cold as the linoleum beneath my feet, not knowing how to respond. Jessica persisted, her voice strained and agitated, making it clear that I was expected to conform to her expectations. Despite my confusion, she continued to speak, and it became evident that Lauren had painted a distorted picture of me, one that didn't align with reality. My contribution to Lauren and Tim's lives had been rooted in affection and non-material successes earned through dedication and hard work. It seemed as though they saw me as a rival, a representation of the growth from child to man that they couldn't achieve. I was rejected, and Jessica's words were a confirmation of that fact. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if my achievements had triggered this decision—a form of punishment, orchestrated by the misguided and pitiable.

The fact that secret discussions had taken place regarding my life left me deeply unsettled, especially since I hadn't been consulted or informed. I was thrust into a new situation without warning, without any say in the matter. The details that had been worked out directly affected my life, and the deceit that

underpinned this arrangement was now glaringly apparent. They had disregarded the consequences of their actions, taking what they could get in the moment without considering the impact on my future. It felt as though I would have to claw and fight all over again to secure my survival in this new environment, and it had already begun within moments of Lauren's departure.

As I stood there, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, revealing an ugly truth that I couldn't ignore. The decision to uproot my life, force me to change schools, and abandon everything familiar had been carefully orchestrated by those who claimed to care about me. Lauren, Jessica, my siblings, and even tracing back to my parents, all had a hand in this unsettling plan.

It was a heartbreaking realization that the very people who should have nurtured and protected me had transformed into my tormentors. My heart grappled with a maelstrom of emotions—anger, betrayal, confusion—as I tried to comprehend the depth of their brutality.

The more I contemplated it, the clearer it became that they were not simply misguided or acting out of desperation. This was not a case of misunderstanding or miscommunication. This was a calculated act of cruelty and betrayal, carefully orchestrated to inflict pain upon me.

My family's actions had stripped them of any claim to mercy or understanding. Unlike those who might have acted out of ignorance, they knew exactly what they were doing. They were fully aware of the pain they were causing, and their intentions were anything but innocent.

Coming to terms with this reality was a harsh and painful process. The shattered trust and the realization that those who should have been my pillars of support had turned against me left an indelible mark on my soul. The darkness that had overtaken my family tainted every memory, every interaction, and every bond. The joy and love I had once believed in now felt like a cruel facade.

Amidst the turmoil and confusion, a part of me yearned to unearth some justification, a thread of reasoning that could help me make sense of their unfathomable actions. Yet, the more I examined their choices, the more elusive any understanding became. Their decisions defied logic and compassion, leaving me adrift in a sea of tumultuous emotions.

In the wake of this stark revelation, even the familiar words "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do" seemed to lose their relevance. There was no naivety in their actions; they were fully aware of the malevolence they were perpetrating. Forgiveness felt like an insurmountable mountain, as the wounds they had inflicted ran deep and wide.

As I stood exposed, Jessica's anger cut into my very soul. At that moment, I longed for compassion and warmth, a glimmer of hope that I had finally found a haven of acceptance. Instead, I was met with a cold, harsh reality—her words, delivered with a quiet intensity, felt like a thousand knives piercing through my heart. The dream of being embraced and cared for disintegrated into a sense of condemnation. My heart ached to express gratitude for taking me in, but her bitterness left me speechless. I clenched my fists, struggling to contain the storm of emotions that surged within me. Amidst the tempest of rage and disillusionment, a seed of doubt took root— somehow, I couldn't escape the feeling that this was all my fault. I felt like a fraud, even though I knew in my core that I had done nothing to deserve such treatment.

During moments like these, my family members' animosity felt tangible, a suffocating cloud that smothered any flicker of hope for reconciliation. They projected their wrath onto me, believing that I was angry at them, but in reality, I was just profoundly sad. It pained me to see the reflection of their hatred in their eyes, to realize how much they despised me while I still clung to affection for them.

As Jessica continued with her tirade, I sensed that I had awakened a familiar anger in her, much like the anger I had often seen in my mother's eyes. I knew what would come next—the storm was about to unleash its fury.

Her rage surged like a maelstrom, her words striking me with an intensity that turned my face into a furnace. I fought to stand my ground, to steady myself against the onslaught, but I felt like a helpless child caught in the commotion.

The pain and animosity in her eyes mirrored what I had encountered countless times before, and the same old fear that had haunted me since childhood returned. I felt defenseless, unable to shield myself, as memories of past abuse resurfaced, amplifying the agony of the present moment.

My hands hung limply by my sides, no longer clenched, as if surrendering to the flood of emotions crashing over me. As the onslaught persisted, I struggled to suppress tears, determined not to reveal my pain. Yet, in that instant, I was once again a young boy, quivering and sobbing, powerless against the brutality of the world.

The chaos in the room mirrored the chaos in my heart, and the sense of helplessness overwhelmed me. I longed for a refuge of love and acceptance, a sanctuary to heal the wounds that still festered from the past.

Instead, I found myself in an unyielding torrent of anger and resentment, leaving me battered and fractured, adrift in a sea of anguish and yearning. The internal battle raged on, while I clung to the hope that I would someday find the serenity and peace my heart so desperately craved.

Retreating from the confrontation, I stumbled out of the room, making my way out of the house into the open yard. Jessica's shouts still reverberated in the air, but the anger within me had subsided, replaced by a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. As I stood among the neighboring houses, the fading light of the day painted my tear-blurred vision. Grief and despair surged within me, and my faith seemed distant and unattainable.

As I stood there, alone in Jessica's front yard, I couldn't help but feel the weight of my siblings' actions. They had torn apart the very fabric of our family, leaving me isolated and abandoned once more. It was a realization that cut deep, leaving scars that would forever remind me of the cruelty that humans were capable of inflicting upon one another.

I soon learned that within the household, there was Jessica, her husband, their son, and their daughter, as well as two foster girls. Mary, one of the foster girls, stood out with her dark, lustrous hair, captivating blue eyes, and shy demeanor which intrigued me. She possessed an aura of mystery that drew me in. Deane, the other foster girl, exuded confidence and had platinum blonde hair that contrasted with her athletic build. Both foster girls added a unique dynamic to the family, but it was clear that the household was far from an idyllic environment.

Now that I was living at Jessica's, I was surprised to find Carter coming to visit, although he wasn't there to see me. Carter's presence at Jessica's house was a reminder of the troubled environment that had become my new reality. His engagement in drug and alcohol abuse was a stark contrast to the life I once knew, and it both fascinated and disgusted me. As I observed him partaking in these destructive behaviors at Jessica's kitchen table, I couldn't help but feel a sense of detachment from the scene. It was as if I were watching a play unfold, each character performing their roles in a tragedy I couldn't escape.

Seeing Carter in this state was a harsh reminder of the fragility of our lives and the paths we could be forced down. The once strong and protective figure I had looked up to now seemed broken and lost, his actions driven by pain and despair. I felt a profound sadness and helplessness, knowing there was little I could do to change the situation.

Despite the turmoil, there was a part of me that still held onto hope. I longed for a connection, a way to reach out to Carter and pull him back from the edge. But the distance between us, both physical and

emotional, seemed insurmountable. I watched in silence, my heart heavy with the weight of our shared struggles and the uncertain future that lay ahead.

Carter had been entangled in the web of substance abuse for years, starting with smoking and drinking at a young age. It was a downward spiral that had only deepened over time. He displayed no shame in indulging in these activities in front of my siblings and me; it was as though no one cared, and I felt powerless to intervene. His apparent lack of concern for the consequences of his actions was disheartening, as if he had given himself *carte blanche* to consume whatever substances he desired, without thought for the toll they were taking on his mind and body.

As I watched, the telltale signs of excessive drug and alcohol use were evident in Carter's eyes—once bright blue and alert, they now seemed dull and clouded, a faded reflection of the young man he used to be. His reckless indulgence painted a picture of someone who had lost his way, a tragic transformation fueled by his own decisions.

At that moment, a thought surfaced: what if Carter channeled even a fraction of the drive, he exerted in pursuing these fleeting moments of relief into his studies or personal growth? The potential he possessed was undeniable, but it seemed squandered in the haze of drug-induced escapism. It was a sad testament to the destructive power of addiction and the wasted potential that often accompanied it.

In my mind's eye, I imagined an alternate reality where Carter harnessed his energy and resolve for a more meaningful purpose. I pictured him pursuing academic excellence with the same fervor he put into handling the bong, transforming his life in a positive direction.

As I continued to observe him, a feeling of disappointment washed over me—not just for Carter, but for the larger environment we were immersed in. The normalization of drugs and escapism overshadowed the potential for growth and self-improvement, perpetuating a cycle of stagnation and despair.

It was a moment of deep introspection, a contemplation of the choices we make and the paths we follow in life. Carter's example served as a stark reminder of the importance of direction and purpose, and how easy it is to succumb to habits that hinder self-improvement.

In a world teeming with distractions and temptations, the commitment to academic and personal growth can indeed become a daunting challenge. Carter's actions stood as a stark warning, a cautionary tale that urged me to remain resolute, to resist the allure of instant gratification, and to pursue my ambitions with unwavering determination.

As I observed Carter take another hit from the bong, releasing a cloud of smoke that dissipated into the air, I made a silent vow to myself. I promised to stay focused on my journey, embrace the trials, and seek growth rather than fleeting relief. Ultimately, our chosen path defines who we become and the legacy we leave behind.

Carter, exhaling a thick plume of smoke, began to cough, his hand muffling the sound. Smoke enveloped him, some slipping through his fingers, and he grinned through the haze, proclaiming, "Damn, I'm so high!" His words seemed like an attempt to impress those around him, a display of bravado that only underscored the hollowness of his choices.

At that moment, as I witnessed Carter's drug-induced reality colliding with my own, I couldn't help but feel a profound aversion to his lifestyle. The bong, filled with marijuana, circulated among those presents, but when it reached me, I politely declined. Carter's attempts to shame me into participation rolled off me like water off a duck's back. His insults, his attempts to belittle me, couldn't sway my resolve to remain true to myself.

A recent altercation with some kids at school, its aftermath still lingering in my body's soreness and my mind's unease, fueled my desire to avoid further trouble. The cycle of violence and drugs that

surrounded me held no appeal. Despite Carter's persistence and threats, I stood my ground, unwavering in my refusal to succumb to the allure of temporary escape.

I excused myself, seeking sanctuary in my bedroom—a space that once exuded comfort and familiarity. Upon entering, the pungent scent of alcohol and weed lingered in the air, serving as a poignant reminder of the toxic environment I now inhabited. The room that had once been a refuge of normalcy, filled with homework, running, track, chores, and the companionship of my beagles, Mattie, and my memories of Sam, now felt like a distant memory.

Within my private bedroom at Tim and Lauren's after Carter left, I had once found solace and purpose. It was a sanctuary where I could focus on my studies, tend to my chores, and find peace in the companionship of my beagles. Yet now, I stand worlds apart from that sense of tranquility.

The actions of others—family members who had betrayed me, and peers who had attacked me—had all contributed to the hostile environment I now found myself in. Each choice, each betrayal, had pushed me further from the comfort and safety I once knew.

During these thoughts, my mind turned to the concept of cosmic rebellion—a rebellion in Heaven that had set the stage for all conflicts and struggles on Earth. In the grand scheme of that celestial battle, my challenges and conflicts felt small, yet their impact on my life was profound and tangible. This perspective, while overwhelming, also provided a strange sense of solace. It reminded me that my struggles were part of a larger narrative, and that, in some way, I was not alone in facing these trials.

In this moment of reflection, I resolved to rise above the darkness that surrounded me. I yearned to reconnect with the essence of who I once was, to rediscover my path of light and purpose. Despite the chaos and allure of escapism, I clung to the hope of redemption and transformation.

The path ahead remained uncertain, but at that moment, I held onto the belief that even amid the chaos, there was room for growth, compassion, and the rekindling of the human spirit.

Amid an environment saturated with drugs and violence, my attempts to caution my siblings about the repercussions of their choices were dismissed as the ramblings of a nerd and a prude. Ironically, despite my involvement in local bands that brought me in contact with drugs and alcohol, I had managed to remain uninterested in these vices. Self-control was a rarity in my surroundings, and even though I had experienced my fair share of fights, I still felt the weight of guilt and wrongdoing.

Living at Jessica's brought me back to a constant state of misery. The intense arguments that erupted between Jessica and her husband acted as triggers, resurrecting memories of my abusive past and leaving me paralyzed by fear. The heart-wrenching cries of my niece and nephew during these confrontations resurfaced my childhood pleas for the violence to cease. I felt a sense of shame for my inability to shield them from harm, and I longed to retreat to a place of invisibility where no one could reach me.

During the day, I would try to stay out of their way, keeping to myself as much as possible. But the nights were the worst. The shouting and crashing noises would escalate, shaking me to my core. Each argument tore open old wounds, making it impossible to find any peace. It was during these moments of chaos that I realized I needed an escape, a way to find some semblance of sanity amidst the turmoil.

So, it became a regular habit of mine to sneak out at night unbeknownst to Jessica and her husband—it was a release from the tremendous abuse and tension that flooded the house. Once liberated from the confines of that tumultuous household, I would flee, propelled by a sense of purpose, towards the town. The chilly night air was a soothing remedy, giving me a respite from the stifling environment I had grown accustomed to.

As I walked through the quiet streets, I felt a sense of freedom that was otherwise elusive. The serene silence of the night contrasted sharply with the chaos I left behind. It was during these nocturnal

escapes that I could reflect on my life, my choices, and the path that lay ahead. The distant glow of streetlights and the occasional rustle of leaves in the breeze provided a comforting backdrop as I wandered, seeking solace in the calm and quiet of the night.

These night-time excursions became my lifeline, a way to reclaim a piece of myself that the relentless tension at Jessica's house threatened to erase. Each step I took away from that house was a step towards healing, even if just for a few precious hours. The nighttime became my sanctuary, a place where I could breathe freely and dream of a better future.

Reflecting on the events that had brought me here, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the darkness that seemed to permeate the world. It was as if terrible people reveled in their terrible actions, perpetuating a cycle of pain and suffering. Amidst the chaos and temptations, the potential for goodness and compassion seemed to wither.

My heart longed for change—a transformation where drugs, alcohol, and violence would cease to reign. The idea of moving away to escape this reality seemed distant; I was fixated on surviving within this unforgiving environment. My attempts to mend my ways often fell short, as frustration and anger toward the world led me down the path of sin again and again. These sins were not just the obvious wrongdoings of stealing or lying, but also the internal battles I faced—harboring resentment, succumbing to despair, and lashing out in moments of helplessness. Despite the formidable challenges, my love for books became a steadfast anchor, providing me solace and meaning in a world that frequently defied understanding.

Reading allowed me to escape into different worlds, and to live vicariously through characters who overcame their struggles. Books offered lessons and insights that I clung to desperately, hoping to apply to my own life. Through literature, I found a sense of purpose and a glimmer of hope that one day, I too could

rise above my circumstances. The wisdom found in those pages became a guiding light, helping me navigate the darkness that often threatened to consume me.

Yet, even within the embrace of the night, the heaviness of my heart persisted. The echoes of familial discord and the sense of abandonment were inescapable companions, trailing me amid my desperate wanderings. The darkness could shield me from the world's prying eyes, but it couldn't shield me from the wounds that had been etched into my soul.

Within these stolen hours, I yearned for a connection beyond myself. I sought a purpose, a glimmer of hope that could guide me through the tumultuous journey ahead. The moon and stars became my silent guardians, and the cool breeze whispered fragments of solace and comfort.

As the night pressed on, I would invariably return home, ascending through the window to a bedroom permeated by the scent of alcohol and marijuana. The weight of my circumstances would descend upon me once more, a stark reminder of the reality I could not evade.

These nightly journeys were not merely desperate attempts to elude my circumstances; they were a testament to my resilience, a declaration that my spirit refused to be defeated. In those quiet moments, I discovered strength—an oasis in the shadows, a beacon of hope that guided me onward.

I consciously chose to avoid the pitfalls that ensnared individuals like Carter, understanding the ruinous path his choices had led him and others down. Such groups, often comprised of people who felt discarded by society, provided a false sense of comfort. They offered solace in shared dysfunction—whether it was through substance abuse, reckless behavior, or mutual disdain for the world around them. Usually, those steeped in their misery had no shortage of anger, which often festered and erupted in destructive ways.

However, I never allowed anger to consume me. Despite the hardships I faced, I was committed to maintaining my sense of contentment. I knew that allowing anger to take root would only perpetuate the cycle of dysfunction and pain that I so desperately wanted to escape. Instead, I focused on finding moments of peace and joy, no matter how fleeting, to sustain me. My love for books, my solitary nighttime walks, and the quiet strength I discovered within myself became my anchors in a turbulent world.

Conversely, my siblings and others seemed to be consumed by their growing anger. Day by day, their resentment intensified, driving them to inflict pain on others as a form of self-preservation. My mother, in particular, appeared driven by a need for attention and acceptance, regardless of whether it was positive or negative. Regrettably, her pursuit of validation led to the destruction of relationships, marriages, and ultimately, her own life, without yielding any lasting power or fulfillment.

Within my family, rage was escalating, yet I steadfastly refused to allow it to take root within me. I had managed to escape this toxic environment once before, but circumstances had forced me to return, leaving me feeling helpless and disheartened—having known only that for the first 11 years of my life. After being kicked out of Lauren and Tim's without warning and placed now in Jessica's home, it was akin to living with my mother all over again. Jessica's home was eerily reminiscent of our mother's house. The constant yelling, the chaos, and the underlying tension brought back painful memories of my early years, making it feel as though I had never truly escaped.

Engaging in heated disputes with anyone felt akin to being enveloped by a noxious cloud of death, and I bore the burden of atoning for the sins of others. The toxic atmosphere was suffocating, leaving me struggling to find any sense of normalcy or peace. The days at Jessica's house were a relentless reminder of the instability and dysfunction I had hoped to leave behind.

As the summer days slipped away, my life seemed to dissolve into a bleak existence within Jessica's tumultuous home. I felt like a discarded weed, uprooted, and abandoned to wither away among the compost

of life's hardships. Every morning, I would slip away, seeking refuge outside those stifling walls, not returning until night cast its shadow upon the world. The tranquility of those hours granted me a semblance of peace, a temporary escape from the chaos that was my constant companion.

In those moments, I was often drawn to the school or town library, where books became my refuge. Between the pages, I discovered solace and respite, an escape from the harsh reality that threatened to consume me. As I immersed myself in the stories and knowledge within those pages, I found a glimmer of hope and a reminder that there was more to life than the turmoil surrounding me.

Within the library's serene confines, memories of my childhood days emerged—the days after I left my mother's home, when I was allowed to be a curious child, navigating the vast ocean of knowledge spread before me. Back then, the world held boundless potential, and the future seemed to overflow with limitless opportunities. Yet as time flowed on, nostalgia and solitude descended upon me, a weighty cloak I could not easily cast off.

Even on the ostensibly better days, a sense of desolation persisted. Amidst the chaos and agony, I clung to the hope that something greater lay beyond the confines of my troubled present. There were times in moments of introspection, when thoughts of Jesus and the divine filled my mind, prompting me to ponder whether God had reserved the best for a time yet to come.

Perhaps, I contemplated, there existed a moment of homecoming, a juncture where every lesson was absorbed, and the trials of life had been endured. A time when we would find ourselves enfolded in unconditional love and understanding, where each wound would be mended, and every tear would be dried. It was a thread of hope, a belief in a brighter future, which sustained me, even in the depths of darkness.

I held onto the notion that my struggles were part of a grander design, a celestial blueprint I could not yet fully grasp. And so, I pressed on, seeking refuge in the written word, within the libraries that dot our world, and in the distant promise of a divine homecoming.

In my solitude, I stumbled upon a quiet strength, the sort that had been gently tucked away within me since I was no taller than a thimble. This faith, a curious little thing, had a knack for slipping past all the dreadful trials and tribulations, shining like a small but steadfast lantern, casting a warm glow amidst the deepest shadows. With each turn of a book's well-worn page, I clung to the comforting belief that, someday, the world would kindly shuffle its pieces into place, and I would find myself in a snug little corner where belonging and serenity curled up together like two old friends.

But solitude, my dear, is a tricky companion. It isn't always as peaceful as it seems. There were times when it felt like I was trapped in a terrible storm, tossed about by waves of sorrow and despair, with no wise owl or kindly mentor to show me the way.

One evening, after returning to an empty house, the weight of loneliness settled over me like a thick, suffocating fog. Feeling adrift and utterly lost, I wandered into Jessica's bedroom, hoping that, just maybe, I might find a bit of solace in the familiar, comforting space.

There, my gaze fell upon a nickel-plated .357 Magnum gun, and as I gripped it, an almost malevolent strength seemed to seize me. My mind teemed with bitter thoughts about my existence, my captors, and the sequence of events that had propelled me to this juncture. The sheer weight of these emotions proved overwhelming, compelling me to write them all down on a slip of paper and stow it in my shirt pocket.

Handling the gun, I loaded the bullets into its chamber, acutely aware of its heft and ominous presence. Before Jessica's dressing mirror, my reflection confronted me—a youth holding a weapon. My hands appeared diminutive against the firearm's form, and my visage reflected a pensive and anguished demeanor.

As the possibility of the final act lingered, a whirlwind of thoughts stormed my mind. Recollections of those who had exploited my affection, bestowing upon me naught but sorrow, flooded my consciousness. I comprehended that my death would fail to transform them or their actions; they would inevitably angle for sympathy, reverting to their roles as victims. And within that moment, I began to weigh my choices with deliberate consideration.

Amid that bleak juncture, when despair threatened to engulf me, a distinct transformation occurred within me. A decision materialized that defied all rationale. I lowered the gun from my temple, methodically unloading it, and returned it to its drawer along with the ammunition. The decision to continue living was not solely driven by valor or logic; it felt as though an external force had interceded, guiding both my hand and my heart.

In the heart of this darkness, a glimmer of hope kindled—a spark unyielding in the face of adversity. It seemed as though Jesus Himself had extended His hand to save me from the chasm of my despair. Why I had been granted this second opportunity, this unforeseen reprieve, was beyond my comprehension. Nevertheless, I recognized an intrinsic purpose, an intention that defied my understanding.

When clasping the gun, I felt the weight of my agony and suffering, the burden of a life that appeared too overwhelming to bear. Yet, amidst that abyss, a divine presence enveloped me—a love that transcended the mortal realm. It was as though Jesus had embraced me, shielding me from the engulfing darkness and illuminating the truth that I was not alone.

The reasons for His decision to spare me might forever remain inscrutable. A query that would persist within the depths of my soul, a mystery destined to accompany me throughout my journey. But in that instant, I perceived a glimmer of purpose, an inkling that my life harbored profound significance and that a path, albeit obscured, lay ahead.

This divine intervention, this touch of grace, fortified me with the strength to persevere and confront the trials looming in my future with renewed determination. It felt as though I had been bequeathed a second lease on life, and I was determined to exploit it fully. Though my past left indelible scars, I was now gifted with an opportunity, a chance to transcend the shadows and locate my trajectory toward the light.

In the subsequent days, I grappled with the questions that haunted me. Why had I been granted this reprieve while countless others endured suffering? What purpose lay behind my existence in this tumultuous world? Yet, even as these uncertainties persistently intruded, I retained the conviction that there was a rationale woven into it all—a divine design that lay beyond my immediate grasp.

The experience left an indelible mark on my psyche—a profound sense of gratitude and an embrace of a force greater than myself. The memory of that moment would forever resonate, a reminder of the delicate thread that connects existence and cessation, and the bewildering avenues through which hope can emerge from the depths of despair.

And so, with a heart aglow with both awe and humility, I welcomed this second chance at life, aware that it had been granted for a reason—a reason that would gradually unveil itself over time, under the watchful gaze of faith. As I moved forward, I clung to the belief that I was not traversing this path alone, that an unseen but ever-present hand was guiding me toward an enigmatic destiny.

As time passed, I pondered the fate of that slip of paper. It had disappeared from my pocket, and fear coursed through me at the thought of its discovery—my deepest, darkest secrets exposed to the world in my moment of desperation. It was clear that, if found, my family members would exploit it to denigrate and ridicule me, adding another layer of shame to the existing trove of information. However, an epiphany overtook me—I was no longer at their mercy. They no longer held the power to hurt me as they once did. Still, fully liberating myself would require time and perseverance. A lengthy and arduous journey lay ahead

before I could truly extricate myself from their grip and shed the fear they held over me. Nevertheless, I sensed this apprehension swiftly dissipating, replaced by a newfound understanding: my true reverence, awe, and affection were reserved for my King, Yehoshua. He is the benevolent Master in whom I entrusted myself and found sanctuary.

I committed to channeling my anxieties toward this compassionate shepherd, distancing myself from those who falsely masqueraded as my protectors, siblings, intimates, and confidants. Within my heart, I recognized that these individuals did not hold these roles deeply. They were remnants of the past, while Jesus symbolized light and direction—a guiding force that had rescued me before, and in Him, I had unwavering faith that He would do so again.

Even as I continued to witness the recurring patterns of dysfunction within my family, a chilling realization crystallized—these troubles transcended human frailty, delving into more sinister and obscure territory. Evidence of wickedness became apparent in their sly deeds, hurtful words, and destructive actions. It was as though a malevolent entity had infiltrated their hearts, compelling them to perpetuate a cycle of harm and agony.

In such moments, the absence of God's comforting presence was palpable, leaving behind a void of doubt and judgment. Love, which should have been a beacon of solace and assurance, was overshadowed by the overwhelming negativity that surrounded me.

I yearned for genuine affection, for a soul that would truly perceive and embrace me, but instead, all I encountered were hearts shrouded in darkness and emptiness.

This sense of hostility wasn't confined to the boundaries of my hometown; rather, it seemed to saturate the very atmosphere around me, a relentless tempest that spared no one. Wherever I looked, there were shattered spirits consumed by resentment, perpetuating agony upon others. It was a jarring reality to confront, compelling me to question how such pervasive darkness could persist in our world.

Amidst this shadowy landscape, I pressed against many hearts, seeking the smallest hint of compassion or empathy. Yet, it felt akin to swimming against an unyielding current, striving to find someone who could pierce through the veneer of anger and connect genuinely with the essence of my being. This journey was no easy undertaking; it was an ongoing struggle against the waves of despondency and cynicism.

Despite the darkness that seemed to trail me, I clung steadfastly to the belief that love, and goodness must surely reside somewhere, even if they were hidden from view. I refused to surrender to the pervasive negativity, steadfast in my determination to hold onto the hope that there existed light beyond the darkness, hearts untouched by hatred.

And then, there was Mary. Amid the darkness that had gripped my life, Mary emerged as a beacon shining bright. Her presence was a testament to the power of love to transcend even the most profound of hardships.

In those tender moments when she drew me close, our hearts converged in a way that transcended words. Her eyes, like radiant stars, penetrated the depths of my soul, revealing layers of emotion I had long kept hidden. In her presence, I felt a profound sense of recognition and acceptance, as if she had unlocked the hidden chambers of my heart.

Mary was transformative, a soothing balm to my wounded spirit. She possessed a unique blend of qualities—humor, warmth, and care—that wrapped around me like a protective cocoon. With her, I found refuge, a gentleness that had eluded me for so long. It was as if she had rediscovered a part of me that had been buried beneath the weight of pain and turmoil and softly coaxed it back into the realm of light.

In Mary's company, I discovered a softness that washed away the hardness I had developed over the years. She became my sanctuary, a source of solace and serenity in a world that often felt chaotic and hostile.

Our connection was a reminder that even amidst life's storms, there could be moments of deep unity and love that had the power to heal the deepest of wounds and illuminate the path toward renewal.

Together, we shared a moment of intimate connection that transcended the physical realm. It was a rare and exceptional love, one that existed solely between us. Our hands entwined with tender grace, each finger threading emotions, intertwining our hearts in a bond that surpassed the turmoil around us.

Our lips brushed against one another, a delicate caress laden with unspoken words and unvoiced promises. Beyond a mere kiss, it was an unspoken agreement—a tacit understanding of the depth of our connection. In that fleeting moment, we surrendered, embracing the vulnerability of our souls, and discovering solace and serenity within each other's embrace.

In Mary's presence, I found a haven—a sanctuary where I could shed the burdens of the world and reveal my true self.

Deep within, I understood that our time together might not be everlasting, and I had conveyed a lie when I vowed that we would never be apart. However, it was a lie that brought comfort to us both. Mary comprehended the stark reality of our situation, yet she also recognized the uniqueness and significance of our bond. In life, sometimes the friend who utters soothing falsehoods becomes the one on whom you can genuinely rely—and Mary filled that role for me wholeheartedly. She offered reassurance, declaring that all would be well, and that harm would not befall us. These were the gentle deceptions we needed to hear and exchange.

"There's something about you, Gregg," she'd say, a soft smile gracing her lips. "And for you," Mary would whisper, "I would wait an eternity." Our hands would clasp as we drifted into sleep. In those serene moments, as I watched her shut her bright blue eyes, tears of contentment trickling down her cheeks, I briefly believed in the potential of an everlasting connection with her.

Even within the realm of passion and love that we shared, there were instances of sorrow and trepidation. Mary's tears weren't solely those of joy, but rather the foreboding that soon I would have to depart. The incessant conflicts between Jessica and me were escalating, and her husband's ominous threats added to the turmoil. Mary would weep, imploring for the ceaseless strife to end—a pure and loyal spirit caught in the maelstrom of our turbulent lives.

In the presence of Mary, I felt like a thief, clandestinely capturing moments of joy and tenderness amid the enveloping darkness that engulfed us. There were instances when she would break down, her vulnerability reminding me of a fragile child. Strangely, witnessing her pain would elicit a faint smile, despite the tumultuous circumstances.

Yet, these moments of respite were fleeting, and I found myself repeatedly dragged back into the heart of contentious disputes and animosity between Jessica, her husband, and me. Even with Mary's love, the profound loneliness that had gripped me for so long still retained its hold.

During one of these heated arguments, the situation escalated dangerously. Jessica's husband lunged at me, his powerful hands closing around my throat, choking the life out of me. The world turned inky black as I fought to resist, but my struggles were futile. Collapsing to the floor, gasping for breath, he must have relinquished his grip. Amidst the chaos, I found myself clutching a knife, a weapon whose acquisition I couldn't even recall. Rising to my feet, a combination of stumbling and crawling, I propelled myself toward the exit.

The night air was pregnant with tension as I staggered out of the house, my heart a relentless drumbeat in my chest. The echoes of the violent confrontation lingered in my mind, leaving me dazed and struggling for breath. My throat stung from the vice-like grip that had severed my air supply—an agonizing reminder of the peril I had narrowly escaped.

As I fled into the darkness, the knife remained unwittingly clenched in my trembling hand. I struggled to comprehend how such a perilous weapon had ended up in my possession, and its mere sight intensified the confusion and fear coursing through me.

The woods adjacent to the factory near Jessica's home provided momentary refuge—a space where, during happier times, I had etched the names "Mary + Gregg" into an ancient oak tree. Now, that tree stood as a silent sentinel, bearing witness to the tumult that had encroached upon our lives, symbolizing the innocence lost amid the shadows.

With every step, my thoughts raced, attempting to decipher the events that had unfurled. The hostility and aggression within Jessica's household had escalated to precarious levels, and I felt akin to a defenseless pawn ensnared in a perilous game. The fear that had stalked me since childhood had resurfaced, leaving me vulnerable and exposed.

I questioned how I had become ensnared within this treacherous predicament, ensnared by individuals seemingly consumed by darkness and rage. It was as though an aura of malevolence had shrouded our lives, ensnaring me in its suffocating grip.

Within the woods' shadows, the weight of my solitude and despair bore down upon me. The world appeared to be shrinking, and it felt as though I were sinking beneath the waves of turbulence and torment. I yearned for an avenue of escape, a sanctuary of safety and tranquility. However, the prospect of such seemed an unattainable dream.

As I wandered through the night, a gnawing suspicion emerged—an inkling of something ominous lurking beneath the surface. This was not mere dysfunction or discord; it was evidence of something more sinister. Malevolence manifested in actions and words, leaving me feeling estranged from my own family.

In that crucible of desperation and dread, I questioned the very presence of a benevolent higher power. It seemed as though the guiding hand of the Divine was absent, leaving me to navigate this dark and treacherous path alone. Love and virtue appeared to have receded, replaced by anger and desolation.

The night's hours stretched on, and I continued to flee, uncertain of my destination or purpose. The agony in my throat mirrored the agony in my heart, and I yearned for respite from the torment that enveloped me.

Amidst the shadowy abyss, the memory of brighter times with Mary shimmered as a distant star, imparting a glimmer of hope amid the cacophony. Her gentle presence had once served as a sanctuary, a wellspring of affection. However, even that sanctuary proved incapable of shielding me from the unforgiving realities that we faced.

Within the woods, I sensed overwhelming isolation and vulnerability, as if the world had conspired against me. I stood as a young boy, thrust into a realm of agony and obscurity, grappling to endure.

The night advanced, and I discovered refuge within the shadows, concealing myself from the upheaval and hostility that had become customary. The burden of my solitude and despair burgeoned with every passing instant, leaving me yearning for release from the shadows and a glimmer of illumination amidst the tempest.

In the depths of that desolation, I felt the world closing in on me as if it had conspired to strip away every vestige of security and comfort. The cold night air, once a source of solace, now seemed to pierce through my very soul, a cruel reminder of my vulnerability.

I had been reduced to the most primal of emotions—fear, despair, and loneliness. The future, once filled with dreams and possibilities, had transformed into a foreboding abyss. Starting school under such

circumstances loomed as an insurmountable challenge, a cruel twist of fate that threatened to crush my spirit.

With my head bowed, tears flowed freely as if they were the only outlet for the overwhelming emotions that coursed through me. Each tear carried with it a fragment of my shattered hope, a reminder of the pain that had become my constant companion.

Even in the very darkest of dark places, where shadows stretched long and deep, there flickered a tiny glimmer of hope—a delicate little flame that simply refused to go out, no matter how much the darkness tried. This was no ordinary flame; it was the spark of resilience, the same bright little light that had seen me through all sorts of muddles and troubles before. I clung to it as tightly as I could, determined, with all my might, to find a way forward, no matter how twisty or bumpy the path might be.

As the tears trickled down my face like little rivers, I made a quiet promise to myself—a promise whispered so softly it was almost secret. I promised that I wouldn't let the big, scary darkness gobble me up. No, I would stand tall and brave, and I would look for even the tiniest glimmers of light, those little specks of hope that could lead me out of the never-ending night.

In that lonely, echoey moment, I found something I didn't even know I had—a wellspring of strength, hidden deep down inside, waiting patiently for just the right moment. This strength had been there all along, shaped by all the hard things I'd been through, nourished by the sadness, and kept alive by that stubborn little flicker of hope. And this strength, well, it wasn't just mine—it was a gift from my faith, a gift from Jesus and the Holy Spirit, who filled me with the courage to keep going. With every tear that fell, I reminded myself that I could do this, that I would find a way out of the shadows, and into the light that I knew was waiting, just beyond.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I had managed to snatch only a few hours of sleep before the biting cold roused me from my restless slumber. Dawn was approaching, and with no alternative havens in sight, I found myself inexorably drawn back to Jessica's residence. Despite the looming storm that undoubtedly awaited my return, it stood as my sole sanctuary in these chaotic moments.

Amid the depths of my despair, I wrestled with the alluring prospect of seeking out a pay phone to reach my father. Desperation, mingled with the knowledge that Carter had chosen to reside with him, fueled a growing notion that perhaps I too could find a haven within his dwelling.

I attempted to convince myself that the challenges I faced were distinct from those Carter grappled with. In my desperate hope for acceptance, I imagined Father would embrace me. But reality's unforgiving weight quickly descended, shattering my optimism. This was the same father who had abandoned us, who had subjected our mother to unspeakable violence. Throughout the years, he hadn't made even the slightest attempt to reach out to me or my siblings. Amidst whispers of rumors, it became apparent that Carter's time with Father was short-lived, as he vanished once again to find refuge with Ashley.

Returning to Jessica's house was a source of dread, yet an innate instinct pushed me not to turn away. Basic survival needs—food, water, shelter—superseded my apprehension. Jessica wasted no time

launching into a scathing lecture, accompanied by her usual guilt-trip tactics. For weeks, I maintained a low profile, eagerly anticipating the start of school. A concerted effort was made to avoid Jessica and her husband, and during this period, solace was sought in the embrace of books, abandoning my former habit of sneaking out and seeking refuge in the pages instead.

Among the challenges I faced, my relationship with Mary became a beacon of joy and a glimpse into a better future. Her elation at my return brought a ray of hope. Yet, the storm that had haunted me for so long loomed persistently. Desolation lay behind me, while ahead, a barrage of tormenting and hateful thoughts raged in my mind, an unending symphony of suffering.

Internally, nightmares and panic surged like relentless demons, frequently drawing my thoughts toward the gun concealed in Jessica's bureau. I understood that beneath any inclination to self-harm lurked a sinister presence, rubbing its unholy hands together with a bitter smirk. It felt as if malevolence itself sought to hurt Jesus by picking us off one by one. A sense of being targeted clung to me. To navigate this harsh world, I resolved to ascend "upward" rather than merely forward. While the world propelled itself ahead, I clung to the belief that God's guidance led upward.

Armed with determination, I endeavored to divert my focus from the precipice of self-destructive thoughts. Academics and running became my refuge. With my lungs aflame, I relentlessly pushed myself while running, finding solace in the rhythmic drumming of my feet. When away from the track, I sought sanctuary in my bedroom or the local library, losing myself to books to escape the harshness of reality. Each passing second seemed like it could be my last, leading me to live in perpetual trepidation, praying and hoping for the best. I waged a fierce battle against the encroaching darkness of depression, aware that it could devour me more swiftly than a nickel-plated .357 Magnum.

Finally, the first day of school arrived, marking my third high school endeavor, accompanied by a surge of apprehension about potential failure. Despite the anxiety, I clung to optimism and hope, convinced

that the acceptance I had diligently worked for at my previous school would follow me here. After all, I had concluded my sophomore year with honors, a testament to my achievements. With this optimistic mindset, I entered the new, smaller high school, expecting smooth academic and athletic sailing.

Unfortunately, as life often reminds us, assumptions can lead us astray, and I was swiftly proven wrong on both fronts.

Days passed, ushering in my sixteenth birthday without fanfare or celebration. Another year elapsed amidst the solitude and trials that defined my journey. Yet, I clung fervently to the flickering ember of hope, unyielding in my resolve to overcome the challenges in my path.

As I sat listening to the school counselor, my gaunt face broke into a feeble smile. Despite my efforts, the overwhelming sensation of being a child burdened with expectations of success persisted. My former academic achievements had placed me in advanced courses, a circumstance that should have brought joy. However, the constant turmoil at home between my sister and her husband left me with few serene corners to study.

The seemingly simple task of preparing for school became daunting as I grappled with the difficulties posed by the broken environment I was thrust into once again, coupled with the familiar mental and emotional strife that accompanied it. The limited alternatives for a new home presented a harsh dilemma: endure abuse within the confines of family or confront comparable mistreatment in a shelter or boys' home.

As the first semester advanced, I found myself failing most of my classes. Attempting to revert to previous study habits proved futile. The burden of tumultuous home life, inadequate nutrition, constant negativity, fights, depression, and anxiety rendered everything insurmountable. Doubt took root, and I began to question if Jesus would ever offer salvation, wondering if it was already too late. The challenges loomed colossal, and it felt as though hope was slipping through my fingers.

Life's harshness had left me battered, trapped within a somber and joyless world. Yet, amidst the abyss, I fiercely safeguarded the joy that nestled in my heart. They couldn't drive me to madness or strip away my spirit. Despite losing Mary to someone who deemed me too young for commitment, I sought solace in a series of transient romances. However, it was akin to puppy love—tainted and hollow. Deep down, I recognized their lack of genuine affection for me, and this superficial connection felt like a grievous sin.

Occasionally, within these relationships, discussions about love and eternity took on a somber tone, yet I couldn't dispel the notion that these were merely words exchanged by young souls, an attempt to convince ourselves of true love. Despite the trials, hope remained my ally, a fervent prayer that something better awaited beyond this trying phase.

Deciding to join the track team, I found myself making the final cut, securing a place in the sprint A-team as one of the premier runners. It felt like a modest triumph against the backdrop of overwhelming setbacks in academics and other spheres. Every endeavor to better I seemed to conclude in disappointment. Yet, the desire for a glimmer of hope endured, though emptiness seemed to fill every corner.

Enduring the ceaseless struggle against hunger and exhaustion made concentrating on school and giving my best in sports an uphill battle. Still, surrender was not an option. The determination to run faster burned within me. It became the one facet where I felt capable of excelling, despite the chaos that enveloped other aspects of my life. Running became my escape, a brief reprieve from the burdens and agony that weighed me down.

A short distance from Jessica's dwelling stood a cemetery, its solemn grounds a canvas of stone gardens etched with names of individuals and families who lay eternally. Within this expanse, a towering statue of Jesus stood. The precise words on the accompanying plaque eluded me, but the ritual I had developed over time remained vivid—I would kiss the statue's feet each time I passed by while running. To

some, it might seem peculiar, but for me, it provided solace. It symbolized my acknowledgment of Jesus' presence and a plea for Him to recognize my attempts to connect in the best way possible. I harbored no illusion that I met His expectations, yet my faith held firm, an unwavering bond, even in these moments.

Battling school failures and grappling with the demands of the track team, I was engulfed by an ever-present and foreboding thunder of the catastrophe that my life had become. A forceful onslaught had left me fractured, ashamed, and torn apart, like a mighty blade cleaving through me. The voices that echoed were only bent on extinguishing the glimmer of hope within me. Sadness and despair thrived, spreading through every crevice of my being.

Nothing came effortlessly, not even the desire to learn or choose the righteous path. The world seemed rife with wickedness at every turn. Violence was ready to erupt at a moment's notice, as readily accessible as drugs and alcohol. The world's incessant urging was for me to hasten my surrender, to succumb as everyone else did.

Daily, I found myself embroiled in battles with anxiety, depression, panic, and the overwhelming stress that accompanies a childhood bereft of parents who truly knew Jesus. If I had to encapsulate it in a single sentence, that would be it. The absence of Jesus in my parents' lives had repercussions that were evident in my struggles.

My boyish and innocent outward appearance often left people taken aback. I was the quiet, almost shy individual in the crowd, my gaze avoiding the eyes of those who might unleash their barrage of ugly words upon me. My long, curly hair draped over my face, concealing much of it, and my slender frame gave me a somewhat girlish appearance. While other kids immersed themselves in fashion scenes, I stuck to my style, donning the same clothes day after day. To me, and even to others, I felt like a mere construct rather than a naturally born individual. It was as though we were all being programmed to conform to some predetermined pattern, and I bristled against it. The sense of control over everyone was palpable, a

simmering anger that erupted into the conflicts they directed at each other. I didn't sense a connection to any family or even to this planet. The people around me were harsh, spiteful, and irrational, driven by a desire for confrontation.

In their minds, empathy and compassion held no place, and Jesus was nothing more than a distant concept, irrelevant and uncool—a mere jest. I, too, was often regarded similarly, yet their misjudgment of me as my own King didn't bother me. I was resolute in my determination not to succumb to the vices of addiction, abuse, or defeat. None of those traits resonated with who I was at my core. There was something divine that still kindled within me, even though it was growing increasingly difficult to hold onto.

Despite the vast landscape of potential failures that life had confined me within, my grasp on salvation remained unyielding. It was akin to a candle burning steadfastly through a small window, and the future pivoted on whether that candle could continue to illuminate the darkness.

The environment in which I lived, where brutality lurked around every corner, was profoundly unsettling. It seemed that someone within my sphere was always teetering on the edge of a violent eruption, triggered by the most unpredictable factors. On this particular day, Jessica's husband found his ire, and I became his target.

Following a day of school, Jessica's husband unleashed a bitter tirade, and both he and Jessica spiraled into escalating aggravation. He stormed out of the room in a fit of rage, the slamming doors a crescendo of his frustration aimed at me. Abruptly, he returned to the kitchen, where I sat at the table, and launched an ambush from behind. The force of his strike sent both the chair and me crashing to the floor. He yanked me up, flinging me over the fallen chair, my body colliding with the refrigerator, its door springing open.

Throughout this horrifying ordeal, I found myself bereft of protection. Jessica stood idly by, neither intervening nor offering a shred of compassion or concern. Her husband dragged me onto the porch, and

the two of us became entangled in a fierce, violent struggle. As a sixteen-year-old, I was more than prepared to hold my ground, unyielding in the face of a grown man's aggression. The skirmish was as brief as it was intense, possibly halted by his reluctance to involve the authorities in his inebriated state or by his physical limitations. My aim wasn't to retaliate with strikes but rather to deflect and evade his assaults. After a time, Jessica's voice finally pierced the chaos, commanding her husband to retreat indoors, an order he begrudgingly obeyed. Yet, she never stepped outside to intervene or offer solace to me.

The void of protection and empathy that defined this environment made it all the more arduous to cope with the turmoil consuming me. I felt stranded in a world brimming with anger, violence, and an absence of helping hands.

In the aftermath of this distressing confrontation, I returned to find Jessica and her husband in their bedroom, the sense of isolation bearing down on me. Climbing the stairs, I retreated into my bed, overwhelmed by a tidal wave of emptiness and a yearning for someone who would genuinely listen, offer a consoling touch, and see me with empathy before I succumbed to the madness suffusing my surroundings.

The door to the realm of soul assassins seemed to harbor an opportunity, but the key to unlocking it remained elusive. My efforts to mend the profound wound in my soul, inflicted by the desolation of both past and present, often seemed to amplify my agony rather than heal it. Many doors in my life felt securely nailed shut, obstructing my path toward the better life that had felt within reach just a few months prior. While I was prepared to shoulder the troubles fueled by Jessica and her husband, it became evident that I was fundamentally alone in this world.

Throughout my life, I endured a forced nomadic existence, constantly moving from one place to another due to relentless abuse. Each transition was marked by anger, bitterness, and resentment from both those I left and those I went to. It was a continuous journey of instability and fear, with each new place bringing fresh challenges and deeper wounds.

Memories of a tumultuous past haunted me, yet I held on to the hope of a brighter future. Scars from abuse and neglect lingered, and nightmares were my nightly companions. Each day was a battle to suppress traumatic memories, focus on the present, and envision a future untouched by the pain of the past.

In this life of constant upheaval, I lacked the guidance, mentors, and loving Christian support that many take for granted. There were no wise, nurturing figures to help me navigate the dark waters of my experiences. Instead, I found solace and strength in my faith. As it is written in Hebrews 11, faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. My faith in Jesus became my anchor, sustaining me through the harshest storms of life. From childhood through adulthood, anguish was my constant companion, but Jesus was always with me, providing a glimmer of hope and a source of resilience.

Moments of connection and brief interludes of comfort reminded me that I wasn't alone. Yet, these fleeting moments were scarce in a life dominated by profound loneliness. The weight of solitude was my constant companion, more suffocating than any physical abuse I endured.

Loneliness was the worst part of my existence, an aching void that gnawed at my soul. I often fantasized about how things might be if I were ever so blessed and forgiven of my sins to finally live with Jesus forever and ever. In these dreams, I imagined walking with Him and talking long hours late into the night, finding solace in His presence. I would try so much to make Jesus laugh heartily, cherishing the sound of His joy. I longed to know everything about Him and to become His best friend, the friend I never had in my earthly life.

My days were marked by an incessant yearning for true companionship, a friend who would stand by me in times of danger or need. This deep-seated loneliness tore me apart, isolating me from the world and making every day a struggle against the shadows that sought to engulf me.

Despite this, during the emotional storm, I held on to fragments of solace, believing that somewhere beyond this chaotic landscape, a place existed where love, acceptance, and understanding awaited. In my

darkest moments, the hope of eternal friendship with Jesus was my anchor. His presence, imagined in the stillness of my mind, was a sanctuary where I could pour out my heart and feel utterly understood.

The thought of living in a world without loneliness, embraced by the love and companionship of Jesus, was a beacon that guided me through the darkest nights. It was this hope, this dream of divine friendship, which sustained me and gave me the strength to endure. The prospect of walking beside Him, sharing in His wisdom, and basking in His love was the ultimate solace that kept the despair at bay.

Yes, it is the loneliness that tears me apart, but the dream of Jesus's companionship stitched my shattered heart back together, one hopeful thread at a time.

During and after instances of abuse, I drew on the divine fruits granted to me by Jesus. These spiritual gifts—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—helped me manage the anger and resentment directed at me. They prevented me from turning these negative emotions back on my abusers. Through deep introspection, I examined my sins and shortcomings, focusing on what might keep me from the New Earth and Heaven. This process was not just a coping mechanism but a transformative journey. By acknowledging my flaws and seeking forgiveness, I found the strength to forgive others.

My journey toward forgiveness began with a deep desire to be free from pain and suffering. I realized that focusing on my sins and recognizing my weaknesses made it easier to see myself as no better than those who sinned against me. This logical and rational understanding—that I am a sinner, even worse than my abusers—allowed me to release my anger and resentment. I trusted Jesus to judge, believing that He orchestrates all things for good. This shift in perspective not only helped me to forgive but also brought a profound sense of peace.

Trusting Jesus' plan has been crucial in my journey. It has taught me that forgiveness and understanding are powerful paths to dealing with anger and resentment. Even in the darkest times, this faith-based approach has offered a way to heal and move forward.

By sharing this perspective, I hope to provide insight and hope to those who might not know me, showing them how I managed to survive and find solace through unwavering faith in Jesus. By weaving these experiences together, I hope to paint a vivid picture of the path from suffering to fulfillment – which is a journey marked by deep introspection, unwavering faith, and the courage to forgive both oneself and others. Through these elements, I found a way to transcend the pain of my past and move toward a future filled with hope and promise.

The burden of solitude weighed heavily, becoming an encompassing shroud. Were it not for Jesus, I feared I might descend into madness. As night fell, and I cried myself into an uneasy sleep, I recognized that come the next morning, Jessica and perhaps her husband would be present, yet their hearts would remain impervious to words. The dawn of the new day marked a resolve within me to escape definitively. Regret gnawed at me, leaving my niece and nephew behind, but the necessity of safeguarding my well-being prompted me to carve a new path.

Although leaving my niece and nephew was a bitter farewell, I couldn't dismiss the relief that accompanied escaping the perpetual conflict that marked Jessica and her husband's existence. Their disputes escalated into violent clashes, and I trembled in fear, as memories of my abusive history resurfaced. Helpless and petrified, I would retreat to my room, unable to protect my niece and nephew from the chaos. Like me, they were too young to grasp the turmoil—mere four and six years of age.

Their cries during these battles only exacerbated my distress, their innocent voices a poignant reflection of my past pleas for respite from my parents' conflicts. Despite my feelings of inadequacy, I was

powerless to shield them from the turmoil. All I could do was bear silent witness, yearning to retreat somewhere they couldn't find me.

And so, before anyone else stirred within the house, a decision coalesced. With a subdued sob, I turned my back on Jessica's dwelling, stepping onto the uneven pavement, and clutching a paper bag against me. Inside that bag resided my worldly possessions—among them, a photograph, a cherished relic from happier times.

The photograph captured a moment frozen in time; a snapshot taken in one of those old bowling alley photo booths. It had yielded a strip of images, but now only one remained. I preserved my favorite, having given the others to Mary. In that photograph, she radiated a captivating beauty. Even in grayscale, the intensity of her piercing blue eyes was vivid in my mind's eye. Turning the photograph over, my eyes traced the word she had penned on the back: "Forever."

It served as a poignant reminder of the love we had shared, an evocative remnant of moments past. As I prepared to embark on my new journey, that love and the promise of "forever" lingered in my heart. I faced an uncertain path, carrying the hope that somewhere, even amid darkness, a flicker of light still endured.

Guided only by a thin strand of hope, I found myself on the doorstep of a girl's home that I had met at school. She was one of three sisters residing with their mother. Despite her distinctive features, a well-defined cleft palate, and a lip distorted by circumstance, she exuded an undeniable charm. Alongside her sisters, she emanated a unique beauty, and her spirit radiated swgentleness that offered a glimmer of companionship amid the shadows.

The initial encounter with Ms. Marais, the mother of the three sisters, remains etched vividly in my memory. A feeling deep within me warned that I wouldn't linger here for long; still, she extended kindness and showed me to a spare room. Utter exhaustion enveloped me as soon as I lay down. The familiar fires within my mind roared, plunging me into a swirling panic of incoherent thoughts and babble. My hair was disheveled, and the lingering scent of urine left me acutely self-conscious. Upon meeting Ms. Marais, I sensed her scrutinizing appraisal, and I was certain she caught the faint whiff of urine in the air. Her suggestion that I take a shower was heeded, but the only pants left to me were the ones I'd been wearing, still tainted with that unwanted odor.

Ms. Marais would frequently remind me that my sojourn under her roof was merely temporary, urging me to find employment. Following her advice, I secured a job with ease, a favor extended by a classmate named Mike. Mike, a compact figure with sinewy strength, and a varsity wrestler sporting an impressive physique, facilitated my entry into the workforce. The position he arranged for me was part-time labor at a nearby dairy farm.

Within the confines of Ms. Marais' household, cohabitation with her three daughters felt relatively harmonious. My days swirled with labor on the local dairy farm, a dedication to my studies, and participation in track. The demands of my schedule left little room for social interaction, and I largely kept to myself.

My duties on the dairy farm primarily consisted of shoveling cow manure—a gritty, honest form of labor. The farmer's wife would generously prepare lunch for Mike and me, a cherished meal that often stood as my sole sustenance for the day. With a voracious appetite, I would devour her offerings until my stomach ached. However, gnawing guilt accompanied each bite, a reminder that the Marais family's budget was stretched thin, sustained solely by a solitary income.

Amid toil on the farm, Mike and I engaged in light-hearted conversations typical of teenage boys—school, girls, and other mundane matters. Mike, a standout athlete, and a varsity wrestler, already bore the distinction of being an All-American at the age of sixteen in two sports. Amid my chores, his words registered only at a superficial level, my focus consumed by tasks like scraping dung or loading hay into bins for grazing cows during milking.

But beneath the surface of Mike's demeanor, unsettling patterns emerged. At times, he would inexplicably unleash his aggression upon the cows, pounding them with his fists or contorting their tails until cartilage snapped loudly in the open barn. The pitiable creatures would emit mournful cries, and witnessing such brutality weighed heavily on my heart. I would interject, shouting at Mike to cease.

Each incident of animal abuse ignited a familiar fire within me, a visceral pain in my head. I implored Mike to desist, my voice marked by a plea rather than a threat. Though I urged him to treat the cows with compassion, he shrugged off my concerns, labeling them as hollow threats. He reminded me that he had facilitated my employment, urging me to keep silent about his behavior.

The tension between us simmered after such encounters, returning us to the routine of our shared tasks. We understood that such incidents weren't worth jeopardizing our friendship or exacerbating an already challenging work environment.

The farm sprawled across vast expanses of wheat and cornfields, the dairy section occupying the center—the space where my efforts were concentrated. Amidst the bovines, I sought solace in conversations with myself. The sound of my voice was a calming presence, soothing my nerves and punctuating the monotony. My words often flowed softly, addressing the cows, or pondering aloud if Jesus gazed upon me from above, considering my existence. I would occasionally recite a line from a poem or song lyric.

My self-conversations maintained an undertone of gentleness and sweetness, much like a calming whisper. I would stroke the cows tenderly, observing their tranquil chewing as their lower jaws swayed rhythmically from side to side.

When the farmer was within the confines of his dwelling, I would linger at the edge of the wheat field, lost in the panorama of colors. Beneath the stretched canvas of the sky, the wheat field conjured memories of a scene from a book I had read—Henry David Thoreau's "Walden." The imagery he painted in his prose, depicting the landscape of a wheat field beneath a thick, low sky with hues reminiscent of blue and purple granite, mirrored what unfolded before my eyes. The sky seemed on the brink of crumbling, a weighty embrace that threatened to engulf the wheat below. Trapped between earth and sky in this narrow expanse, the image resonated with my existence, imprisoned between these horizons. With each passing day, the sensation of being ensnared deepened, amplifying the profound sense of confinement that held me in its grip.

Amid this shroud of uncertainty and the feverish haze of despair, my path ahead remained obscured. Dwelling among unfamiliar faces and subsisting on the farmer's wife's meals, my days unfolded in the company of cows and the lingering scent of their manure—a sensory cocktail of the mundane. The scars left by enduring abuse had tainted the once-bright aspects of existence, casting a shadow of destruction over the joys that once existed, tarnished by the hurtful words and deeds of those who had lost their way.

Time pressed on, its relentless march echoing the persistence of my struggle. An enduring question reverberated: Would this bleak reality eternally define my existence? The memories of books I once devoured resurfaced, bearing their beautiful and positive words that once sowed the seeds of hope, painting portraits of a brighter time and a realm beyond the confines of Earth. Yet, the weight of my turmoil clouded my ability to grasp these notions fully. Dating had devolved into a cacophony of chaos—a cycle of meeting individuals, navigating through turbulent dramas, and culminating in nights marred by loneliness.

Initially conceived as a distraction, dating couldn't prevent the emergence of genuine emotions for certain girls. Nevertheless, I maintained a cautious distance, resolute in keeping them at bay. Their growing affection kindled an apprehension within me, hindering my ability to fully unfurl the petals of my heart. The chilling remembrance of past rejection haunted my thoughts, and despite my attempts to welcome someone into my inner realm, the ache of desperation coupled with a profound fear of being wounded anew left me yearning for an escape.

Amidst the ongoing toil of the dairy farm, a semblance of camaraderie existed between Mike and me. As we navigated the challenges and hurdles, Mike's jubilant cries cut through the air, his exuberance palpable as he executed a daring maneuver known as "shit skating." Though decidedly ludicrous, it yielded a peculiar amusement—an idea we had conjured together. Sporting rubber boots, we would seize the tails of dairy cows and allow them to tow us across the slick terrain of manure. Despite the inherent grossness of the venture, I couldn't resist being drawn into the spectacle, embracing solace in the sheer absurdity of the moment.

As Mike whizzed by, his excitement took a sudden downturn as he lost his balance, resulting in a face-first plunge into a mound of cow dung. It was a spectacle that managed to straddle both disgust and hilarity, with his ensuing gagging indicating an unfortunate sampling of the unsavory substance. Yet, Mike's resilience was swift; he quickly recovered, seizing the tail of another bovine participant, and resuming the "shit skating" escapade with a rekindled zeal.

Captured by the whimsy of the moment, I, too, succumbed to the temptation, and before I knew it, I was sliding and slipping through the expanse of cow manure. The unexpected blend of compromised equilibrium, disorienting speed, and the repugnant odor left me oscillating between fits of laughter and waves of nausea. The barn's sanctum beckoned, and I managed to muster my remaining strength to navigate

my way inside. Collapsing onto a hayloft, I sought solace in the respite from the chaos that defined life on the farm.

The mirth subsided as the sound of impending footsteps signaled the farmer's approach. A formidable figure, his visage bore an aura of grizzled severity, his eyes simmering with an intensity that could hardly be ignored. His ire was directed squarely at us, an accusation resonating with the belief that we had brought harm to his bovine companions. A palpable threat hung in the air, his words carrying an ominous undertone that hinted at retribution. Rising to the occasion, I felt an upsurge of determination, a readiness to defend myself if the need arose.

The farmer's wrath seemed to focus disproportionately on me, laying blame upon my shoulders for the incident. It was as if I, the outsider, had become the convenient scapegoat in his eyes. A heavy realization settled within me—dismissal was imminent. Mike, grounded within the farm's fabric, would likely retain his position.

Overwhelmed by a sense of shame and defeat, I opted against a physical confrontation. Instead, I chose the path of acquiescence, slipping past the farmer with downcast eyes and making my way to the barn's exit. The burden of rejection intertwined with the weight of another setback bore down heavily as I embarked on the long trek—a five-mile journey—back to the Marais' abode. My life had come to mirror a relentless cycle of disappointment and abandonment, leaving me to wonder whether I would ever unearth a haven where I could authentically belong.

In the wake of a disheartening work debacle, my voice steadied as I mustered the courage to communicate my job loss to Ms. Marais—a discourse laden with emotional weight. Graced with the olfactory aftermath of cow excrement and a veneer of sweat, I approached the Marais residence, and after a resolute knock, Ms. Marais answered. The ensuing altercation's words were rendered a mere backdrop, their

significance overshadowed by my deeper realization that bereft of financial means and assuming the sole male role within the household, the time had come for me to depart.

My entrance marked the initiation of a swift packing endeavor. The youngest, Marais daughter offered her assistance in laundering my soiled garments, but urgency prevailed, relegating the attire to a bag in a damp, unwashed state. Gathering my modest belongings, I was ushered out, the crystalline realization surfacing that reliance on the benevolence of others was no longer tenable without the capacity to sustain myself. Fueled by a sense of despondency and moral dilemma, I set forth toward Mike's residence, seeking a semblance of solace.

Upon my arrival, Mike's cajoling managed to sway his parents into extending their hospitality for a brief spell. As the sequence of events leading to my dismissal unraveled in conversation, Mike's response leaned less towards sympathy and more towards the stereotypical disposition of a sixteen-year-old navigating a world where the lines between good and evil had undergone an enigmatic switch. His counsel encompassed the assertion that I should have cultivated connections with all three Marais sisters when I had the chance—advice that, while lacking empathy, was rooted in his youthful perspective. Fueled by a reservoir of pent-up frustration, I finally landed a punch I had long harbored, catching Mike off guard and prompting an involuntary cry of pain. However, his resilience prevailed, as he rapidly recovered and stood once more.

Beneath his veneer of toughness, Mike exhibited a lack of fear towards me. Instead, he appeared to perceive my vulnerability, loneliness, and trepidation. As the fading light of the day enveloped us in his parent's backyard, a sense of unspoken sentiment appeared to swirl within Mike's eyes, his silence resonating with a message he chose not to verbalize. Ultimately, Mike emerged as a steadfast ally, offering me shelter and a much-needed sense of companionship during a juncture marked by turmoil and adversity.

During my time at Mike's, it wasn't exactly a blessing, but more of a peculiar twist of fate that brought Darla into my life—a fellow student at our school. At first, I mistook it for love, but in truth, it was more like a playful trick of the heart—a burst of fizz and pop, like a bottle of soda shaken and ready to overflow. It sparkled and shimmered, catching my attention with a bright, fleeting charm. It tugged at my heartstrings with a mischievous pull, only to vanish as quickly as it had appeared.

As a young sixteen-year-old, adrift in a sea of loneliness and despair, I learned this lesson the hard way. Darla was the worst possible girl for a boy like me to meet—biblically speaking, of course. But in the worldly sense, she was a dream come true, or rather, a fantasy right out of a glossy magazine. Far from anything holy or righteous, Darla was the kind of girl who made you forget all about the straight and narrow path. Jesus, I would later realize, would have been a much better—and far safer—companion. But at that tender age, I was young, impulsive, and desperate—the perfect recipe for disaster, and Darla was that disaster waiting to happen.

Meeting her forced me to grow up faster than I ever thought possible, though losing my youth was never much of a concern—I'd never truly had a childhood to begin with. Darla was a sweet mistake, bitter-sweet perhaps, but one that made me a better man in the end. Of course, at the time, I had no idea that her impact would linger, shaping me long after she was gone. I wouldn't fully understand this until 29 years later when she tragically lost her life in a road accident while riding her Harley Davidson—a motorcycle as wild and untamable as she was. That was Darla through and through: wild, beautiful, and with a heart of gold. Although, if I'm honest, I could have done without the wild part. For sure.

One fine day, when the winds of change seemed to be gently nudging me along, I found myself stepping into Darla's classroom. And there she was, a picture of radiant confidence, her eyes twinkling with playful mischief. She wasted no time in teasing me about a former girlfriend of mine—a girl who had once

been a runner-up in the Ms. Teen USA pageant. Now, that relationship had been as brief and fleeting as a summer breeze, hardly worth a second thought, but it just so happened that Darla knew the girl.

But it wasn't the teasing that caught my attention. No, it was something far more captivating—Darla herself. She had a natural allure, the kind that draws you in without even trying. Her face, as sweet and delicate as a China doll, was lit up with an animated expression as she mischievously called out my name. It was as if she held some delightful secret just behind that smile.

I did my best to shrug off her teasing, standing tall and firmly stating that I was unattached, though I could see in her eyes that she wasn't entirely convinced. Then, with a glint of curiosity in her gaze, she asked me, rather boldly, if I might be interested in her. And in that moment, something stirred within me—an unspoken vow, a silent promise that I would pursue whatever it was that shimmered between us.

With that, I turned to leave the room, but not without a final pang of curiosity that tugged at me. I simply had to know her name. So, I stopped, looked back, and asked. With a smile that was both tantalizing and mysterious, she responded, "Find out." And just like that, she left me intrigued, eager to peel back the layers of this enigmatic girl who had so effortlessly drawn me into her orbit.

Later that very evening, Darla took me to her abode in her father's aged yet cherished Lincoln automobile, a possession she proudly owned. She spoke animatedly about the vehicle's remarkable specifications, despite some of the technical intricacies eluding my understanding. Nevertheless, her confidence and allure behind the wheel captivated me. As she rested her hand on my leg while navigating the dirt road with spirited velocity, a warm current of sensation enveloped me, confirming that there was something truly special about her.

Nestled deep within the woods, Darla's dwelling was a sanctuary of solitude. She seemed to relish the notion of living removed from the watchful eyes of the world. Her laughter resonated with the spirit of carefree abandon, and I found its infectiousness impossible to resist. Our journey continued, and as our

connection deepened, I mustered the courage to reach out and touch her hand. The electrifying bond that surged between us was undeniable, a silent conversation of emotions and unspoken understandings. In our discourse, she casually mentioned Britney, the girl I had been romantically involved with before. It was clear that Darla held no high regard for Britney, and I confirmed that she had parted ways with me. In the process, I realized that my feelings for Britney had faded as swiftly as they had arisen, leaving behind nothing more than a poignant reminder that teenage relationships are fleeting, mere moments that slip through our fingers.

As Darla's home loomed closer on the horizon, a disconcerting sensation crept into my consciousness. Initially, I brushed it off as ordinary nervousness, a natural response to the unfamiliarity of the situation. However, with each passing moment, it became increasingly apparent that something far more ominous was unfolding. What had started as a subtle discomfort soon escalated into an insistent, throbbing ailment. By the following morning, I found myself ensnared in the suffocating grip of a severe bout of pneumonia. Fever coursed through my body, and my awareness faded in and out like a distant echo. Despite the agony that tore through my chest with each breath, Darla's parents displayed remarkable compassion. They diligently tended to my needs and provided the necessary medication.

The physical torment blended with the weight of uncertainty, intensifying the emotional whirlwind that had engulfed me. During solitary moments, when my emotions threatened to overwhelm me, tears flowed freely. I grappled with the shadowy contours of an uncertain future, haunted by the specter of what lay ahead.

Darla, with her ever-present warmth and gentle touch, became my anchor when the seas of life grew stormy, and each breath felt like a struggle against the waves. Her smile, like the first rays of sunshine after a long, stormy night, offered me solace in those dark hours. She was more than just a companion; she was my lifeline, her belief in my recovery a glowing lantern that guided me through the fog.

As the days and weeks drifted by, blurred by feverish dreams and discomfort, Darla remained by my side. Her family, too, wrapped me in their care like a cozy blanket on a chilly night. Slowly, with each breath that came just a little easier, I began to pull myself free from pneumonia's stubborn grip. Each small victory—each breath that wasn't quite so labored—felt like a tiny step back toward the land of the living.

During those quiet moments of recovery, as I lay in bed contemplating the fragility of life, I found myself marveling at the delicate beauty of the connections we forge in the face of adversity. My health, like a withered plant finally finding its roots again, began to improve. And as I regained my strength, so too did my bond with Darla grow—our love story, born in the shadow of uncertainty, blossomed like a resilient flower, pushing its way through the cracks in a concrete sidewalk, defying the odds with its delicate strength.

Darla, with her vibrant spirit and unwavering support, had become the bright star in my night sky, the beacon that kept me on course even when all seemed lost. And so, as I lay in that remote cabin in the woods, slowly recovering from the sickness that had held me captive, I couldn't help but marvel at the twist of fate that had brought Darla into my life. She was more than just a love interest—she was a guardian angel, a reminder that even in the harshest winters, there could be moments of profound beauty, where love and connection bloom against all odds.

Our love story, with all its ups and downs, was a testament to the strength of the human spirit, and the incredible, transformative power of love that refuses to be extinguished, even in the face of life's greatest challenges.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Fully recovered from the illness that had kept me out of circulation for several days, my strength returned, and my love for Darla grew stronger. In the nearby woods, Darla and I lost ourselves in boundless play, savoring each fleeting moment we shared. By nightfall, we would perch in her room, indulging in delectable treats while an old transistor radio serenaded us with tunes, positioned close to her bedside. The local rock station's melodious strains of beloved eighties rock ballads filled the air, and the song "Babe" by Styx consistently prompted bouts of gleeful laughter. However, beneath the surface mirth, I sensed that the sands of time were trickling through our grasp. Darla's parents conveyed unspoken messages through their gazes—messages that resonated with the clear recognition that our current arrangement was far from sustainable. As much as my heart yearned to prolong our togetherness, I was cognizant that clinging to it blindly would be unwise. A dawning awareness underscored my consciousness—the precious hours we had together were numbered, and this reality gripped me with a poignant ache.

At seventeen, Darla stood a year ahead of me in life's chronicles, her experiences seemingly more abundant. While we weren't each other's inaugural loves, our connection held a significance that transcended past relationships. When night descended and Darla's brown braid cascaded loosely, we would huddle

together, the braid gradually coming undone. Those intimate hours allowed us to share whispered confessions, secrets that bound us in trust. As I cradled her, I wove words into promises of a shared future—a home where we would carve out a life together. Yet, beneath my words, a truth gnawed at me—I was a sixteen-year-old fractured by life's unrelenting trials, an unreliable vessel for sustaining these dreams. The pervasive fear of losing all that held value haunted me, a sentiment rooted in painful experiences.

These spoken assurances became an anchor of sorts, a lifeline of deceit I clung to, even as I understood their fragile nature. The promises were stakes driven into the soil of my hopes, stakes that I hoped could eventually stabilize into the reality I craved.

Within the cocoon of Darla's room, as the moon cast its gentle glow, I held her near, my chest constricted by guilt. The words I uttered became a blurred boundary between truth and falsehood. Despite my attempts to impart authenticity to my declarations, a gnawing fear of abandonment remained, etched deep within me like an indelible scar. The distinction between a lie and a promise blurred as desperation urged me to believe that fragments of these lies could morph into the truths, we both longed for.

Had I been wiser, I might have perceived the folly of our situation, yet my youth painted everything in vivid hues of possibility. Amid the tender moonlight, Darla's whisper— "We'll make it, Gregg"—hung in the air like a fragile promise. My chest, marked by the shadow of recent illness, throbbed as a visceral reminder of my frailty, mirrored by the doubt of our impending separation. Though my legs had regained their strength for walking, my heart remained shrouded in a fog of uncertainty, unsure of the course our intertwined lives would trace.

As my convalescence gathered momentum, I found myself wandering the corridors of my tumultuous past, a past riddled with upheaval and resilience. Through introspection, an unwavering motif emerged—a recurring exodus from every haven I had encountered. Yet, beneath this recurring theme, a

more disheartening realization surfaced—the caregivers of yore, those who had ushered me out their doors, had never reached out or sought to find me once I departed. It was as if I ceased to exist, dissolved from their realm of concern. This revelation sat heavily upon my soul, a weight I couldn't fathom bearing witness to. The isolation, rather than bestowing detachment, left me feeling exposed and defenseless, a lamb surrounded by wolves. Stripped of my spiritual armor, I felt adrift, a lost soul yearning for the guiding light of faith.

As the calendar pages turned, the daylight and darkness engaged in a dance of dwindling intervals, though the broader season remained unchanging. Despite these gradual shifts over time, my focus remained anchored in the present – within a loving home, where sustenance was ample, and the ardor of a young heart burned brightly. Life had woven its threads into a rhythm of comforting regularity, displacing the constant discord with the welcome embrace of tranquility.

Days transformed into patterns, as I threw myself into track practice, buried myself in rigorous study sessions, and pursued the passion that was running through my veins. The sight of Darla in the stands during my races served as an unyielding wellspring of inspiration. Amidst the charged atmosphere of the race, my anticipation built an expectant energy that lingered until the moment the starting gun's crack pierced the atmosphere.

With the gunshot's resounding echo still hanging in the air, my legs propelled me from the starting blocks, propelling me into the lead. Eager teammates egged us on, their enthusiasm evident. Around the bend of the 400m race, I cast a swift glance over my shoulder, the audience's cheers merging into an indistinct roar. And in that fleeting instant, I spotted Darla amidst the spectators, front row, and fully engaged in the race unfolding before her eyes.

Her presence ignited a surge of vitality within me, a renewed determination to give my all. I surged forward, channeling every ounce of energy into the race, pushing myself beyond the limits of ordinary

endurance. My strides lengthened, and I pounded the track with fierce determination, an unwavering pursuit of victory. Each push of my legs felt like I was pouring my heart into the race, my spikes digging into the rubber track as if seeking to extract every ounce of energy from it. Competing held an allure that transcended mere victory—it was a rush of life, a surge of vitality that momentarily eclipsed the shadows that had haunted my past.

Crossing the finish line, I inhaled deeply, my chest heaving from the strain. A sense of elation washed over me, a gratitude for the strength and opportunity to partake in the race. The effort left me breathless, my heart throbbing in time with my labored breaths. It wasn't just about winning—it was the sensation of propelling oneself forward, of racing toward a moment of euphoria, knowing that such moments were transient yet exhilarating.

Amidst this newfound stability, my mind stirred with the disquieting reality that our time together was rapidly drawing to a close. I detected an undercurrent of unease within Darla's household, a sensation that extended beyond superficial appearances. Despite my detachment from my impending departure, I had an inkling that change was on the horizon. My life's narrative had etched within me a familiarity with the fleeting nature of all that was cherished.

As I continued to rise early for track practice, immerse myself in my studies, and rekindle my passion for running, the date of my departure loomed closer. At the age of sixteen, still ensnared in the confines of the state's guardianship, Darla's parents were left with no alternative but to alert Social Services to my presence within their home. Yet, this impending transition remained a topic shrouded in silence; the knowledge was concealed, shared only between those who wished to shield Darla from the approaching storm of emotions.

One day, after the final school bell had rung, as I returned to Darla's, I noticed a car parked near the cabin. A disconsolate heaviness weighed upon me the instant my gaze landed on the emblem emblazoned

on the side of the car – an emblem that bore the initials DSS, an abbreviation for the Department of Social Services. My heart sunk, a tidal wave of dread crashing upon my shores, as I approached the door with an unsteady breath, bracing myself for the forthcoming news that would splinter the fleeting stability I had embraced.

Inside, it was Darla's mother who voiced the first words, her voice tender and laced with empathy. A thought crossed my mind—a realization that Darla was indeed blessed with caring parents. But even within her mother's compassionate gaze, I could discern the harbinger of change, the precursor to yet another upending of my existence.

"Gregg, we're so sorry, but it would be best if you left," Darla's mother uttered with a hint of sorrow, her own eyes awash with lament. As her words settled over me, a flood of emotion threatened to engulf my composure. Beside her, Darla hastened toward me, enfolding her arms around my waist as if to anchor me against the impending tide that sought to sweep me away. She tugged me gently, drawing me towards the door, a fervent attempt to halt the inexorable.

Leaving Darla's house was to abandon a sanctuary, a fleeting glimpse of stability in my otherwise tumultuous life. As we stepped out, the chill of the outside world echoed the sudden coldness enveloping my heart. Darla's arms tightened briefly around me—a silent apology interwoven with her palpable sadness. It was a brisk goodbye, the air laden with a finality that chilled the lungs like winter. I stepped into the social worker's car, the door closing with a soft but definitive thud—a sound that delineated the end of one chapter and the hesitant onset of another, unknown.

The drive to the new foster home unfolded in silence, each turn distancing me further from what had felt like a potential home. Outside, the scenery blurred into a mosaic of suburban life that passed by with indifference. Inside the car, I sat enveloped in quiet contemplation, Darla's last, desperate embrace replaying in my mind, her whispered "Be brave" resonating as a mantra. The social worker attempted to

pierce the silence with assurances and platitudes, yet his words seemed to float around me, barely skimming the surface of my roiling thoughts.

When pulling up to the new house, apprehension tightened its hold on me. The building loomed imposingly, its windows resembling watchful eyes and the front door a gaping mouth ready to swallow me whole. It was larger than Darla's, with a neatly trimmed lawn and a swing dangling from an old oak tree in the front yard—hallmarks of normalcy that felt utterly alien to me. I hesitated at the threshold, overwhelmed by the weight of countless similar entries, each one a stark reminder of my transient life.

As we stepped inside the house, a wave of warmth enveloped us. The air was permeated with the rich scent of freshly baked bread, a comforting aroma that sharply contrasted with the turmoil brewing within me. The social worker presented me as though I were an exhibit to be scrutinized, a specimen on display for potential approval.

"Gregg, this is Mrs. Holloway," the social worker announced.

"Nice to meet you," I muttered, my gaze fixed on the floor.

"Gregg, dear," Mrs. Holloway greeted me with a cordiality that masked her underlying sense of ownership. "We're thrilled to have you join our home."

Her tone was pleasant, but underneath it, I detected a subtle edge—an implicit assertion of her role as the caretaker of my destiny. As we toured the house, I observed its meticulously organized spaces and the comfortably lived-in atmosphere. The room designated as mine was adorned with trinkets and a bedspread that seemed designed to mimic the ambiance of a child's room. Then, I was introduced to Nate, a boy just a year younger than me. We connected instantly.

Nate's presence in my life quickly became a beacon of resilience, a vivid embodiment of a spirit that refused to be crushed, even by the cruelest twists of fate. At just seven or eight years old, still cloaked in

the innocence of childhood, Nate endured a horrific ordeal. Coerced by older neighborhood bullies, he ventured into a perilous electrical substation to retrieve a football. Enclosed by high fences and laden with danger, it was no place for a child, especially one who couldn't read the dire warnings plastered on every sign. His desire for acceptance drove him to scale the fence, and tragically while reaching for the ball, his hand contacted a transformer, unleashing a fierce electrical current that ravaged his young body. He emerged from that day with third-degree burns over a third of his body, his face forever altered, and one leg significantly impaired.

Despite the severe physical and emotional scars that marked his body and soul, Nate's spirit remained remarkably intact. His patience and gentleness were nothing short of miraculous, considering he held no resentment toward those whose negligence had altered his life so drastically. Nate's profound bravery and enduring strength were not merely testaments to his resilience but also sources of deep inspiration for me, stirring feelings of immense admiration and love for his unyielding courage and kindness.

Nate's perseverance, alongside his endearing nature, cemented his place as a pivotal character in my life's narrative. His story is a testament to the human spirit's immense capacity to transcend adversity. As we spent time wandering the expansive countryside surrounding the Holloway residence, our friendship deepened. Each step Nate took, though hindered by his injuries, resonated with a profound determination, starkly contrasting with the buoyancy of his unconquerable spirit. He always looked ahead to the horizon of possibilities, never dwelling on the shadows of his past tragedies. This perspective inspired me to let go of the heavy chains of resentment that had long constricted my heart, urging me to embrace the future with a renewed sense of hope and resilience.

As the Holloways opened their hearts to me, our shared vulnerabilities began to weave a fabric of genuine connection. The stability I found in their home was a stark contrast to the chaotic tumult of my

previous life, yet memories of those darker days lingered like ghosts on the periphery of my new reality. Nate and I, in our shared space of understanding and acceptance, vowed to break free from the shackles of our pasts. As the seasons changed, so did the landscape of our lives, each of us learning to embrace our unique selves, to find strength in our vulnerabilities, and to support one another through the myriad challenges life through our way.

In the quiet solitude of the Holloway residence at night, I often found myself reflecting on the transformative journey that had brought me here. Each day served as a testament to resilience and hope, reinforcing my steadfast belief that despite the hurdles and heartbreaks, there was a path ahead leading to a brighter, more fulfilling future. The constancy of Nate's friendship and the unwavering support of the Holloway family became the anchors that kept me grounded. Nate's example of relentless determination inspired me daily, motivating me to push beyond the painful memories of betrayal and to strive toward personal excellence and healing.

In those days, I found myself grappling with a delicate balance between faith and doubt, a struggle that seemed to echo the very tension of existence itself. The fear of the Lord was a profound force within me, as was my love for Him, each pulling with equal intensity, like the tides upon the shore. It was as though, in one fleeting moment, He might regard me with a faint, distant approval, and then, in the next, turn away as if indifferent to my presence. Such was the nature of my spiritual toil—a journey marked by uncertainty and introspection.

Nate, however, was a steady light amidst this inner turmoil. He was like a beacon in the dense forest of our lives, reminding us that our pasts, though marked by shadows, were not the entirety of our existence. They were but the first few lines in the story of our lives, the prelude to the greater narrative that would be written through our actions, through the courage and kindness we might yet summon. His

presence was a quiet encouragement, a call to embrace the possibility of growth and transformation, which is the essence of human resilience. Together, we walked forward, not with haste but with a deliberate and hopeful step, trusting that we might rise above the origins from which we sprang and build a legacy of strength, compassion, and acceptance, which does not inquire or judge.

But then there was Darla. Ah, Darla. One day, as I walked from the foster home to the town, my heart buoyant with the thought of seeing her, I found her—not awaiting me but in the company of another. My heart, in that instant, seemed to contract within me, as if gripped by some unseen hand. The pain of rejection was acute, a sharpness that penetrated to the very core of my being, unsettling the calm I had so carefully cultivated.

Not long after finding Darla with another boy, I attempted to visit Lynn. To discover that Lynn's current home with Lauren and Tim was merely four miles from the Holloways' home seemed like an intertwining of fates both unpredictable and unfortunate.

Upon discovering Lynn's whereabouts through a classmate at my new high school, old fears were reignited, manifesting as a palpable lump in my throat. The thought of confronting Lauren and Tim once more was laden with dread, rendering sleep elusive and suffocating as if the air was in short supply. But love, the fierce bond I held for Lynn, eclipsed my anxieties. After all, she was my baby sister, and thoughts of her had never faded in our time apart. When Lauren had cast me out, I hadn't been given the chance to say my goodbyes to Lynn. But despite the fractured circumstances, my heart held firm to the knowledge that she still cared for me.

As I neared Lauren and Tim's house at the end of the gravel path, anxiety cascaded over me in waves. The scent of animals in the air transported me back to the days of working on the dairy farm with the Marais family, evoking memories of Sue. As I would soon find out, this encounter would be yet another

rendezvous with individuals who seemed to inhabit a realm far removed from reality's shores. The reality was devastating and surreal.

I stood before the door, hesitating, gripping me momentarily before I rapped my knuckles against it. Lauren answered her silence a heavy presence as she reluctantly met my gaze. Arms folded; her voice emerged in a mechanical cadence as she inquired coldly about my presence. Nervousness tinted my response, "I'd like to see Lynn if that's okay?" I was acutely aware of her scrutiny, her gaze undoubtedly catching the telltale signs of fatigue in my bloodshot eyes.

I kept my battered hand, injured in an altercation with Darla's new boyfriend, concealed within my pocket, hoping to avoid any complications from my recent scuffle. My goal was clear—to prevent any grounds for Lauren to reject my request based on recent fighting. But my attempt to conceal the truth was short-lived, as her attention shifted abruptly when Lynn emerged from behind her, excitement dancing in her eyes as she rushed past Lauren to embrace me.

Lauren's authoritative stance crumbled, Lynn's uncontrollable joy overpowering her. She instructed Lynn to remain near the porch, the front door slamming shut with a resounding echo. Lynn's voice carried over, "Bo Bo!" as she held me tightly, her words an outpouring of affection, "I missed you!" My voice, laden with emotion, responded, "I missed you too, Pug," invoking the affectionate nicknames we had for each other.

Lauren's stern directive and the door's resounding slam did little to diminish our connection. Lynn and I moved a few steps from the house, perching on an aged wooden fence that skirted the farm. Conversation flowed gently, avoiding the jagged edges of painful history. We spoke of where I was staying, exchanging stories that painted a positive facade to shield Lynn from the weight of our shared hardships.

As we conversed, Lynn's gaze drifted to the horizon, and her voice lowered as she disclosed her feelings of entrapment. Lauren's ever-present intrusion invaded her privacy, transforming the most innocent

matters into melodramatic confrontations. Each day seemed to herald a new battle, an unending cycle that mirrored my own past experiences. Yet, what Lauren failed to realize was that surrendering to her pride would only lead to destruction. The path to redemption lay in abandoning her ego and seeking redemption through repentance. But pride, that destructive force, held her in its thrall, rendering her incapable of relinquishing control. Her need to dominate and emerge victorious stood as an unbreachable barrier between her and salvation.

Lauren's excessive pride manifested in her unwarranted surveillance, twisting innocuous discoveries into grotesque allegations. In one such instance, her intrusive search yielded a love note within Lynn's dresser drawer. Rather than recognizing it for what it was, Lauren distorted its nature, inflating it into something unrecognizable. As Lynn recounted the incident, we both attempted to deflect the tension with a laugh, but the unease grew steadily. Lauren and Tim were morphing into entities as ominous as our parents if not more so, their manipulation extending far beyond the physical realm into the caverns of psychology. Their actions and demeanor mirrored an unsettling blend of darkness and cunning, invoking comparisons to malevolent forces. Their behavior was a sinister dance of deceit, a reflection of minds unmoored from reason and restrained by no moral boundaries. It was as though they embodied the essence of malicious spirits, their actions defying the constraints of human morality. This grim disintegration seemed to herald an apocalyptic battle, one that ripped at the fabric of their humanity, tearing away their very essence and sending the Holy Spirit fleeing back to heaven for refuge.

Amid our conversation, my sister and I sat on that weathered wooden fence, held captive by an azure sky overhead. Moments later, from a field adjacent to the barn, a column of smoke rose, a thin sentinel reaching toward the heavens. "Tim's burning leaves," Lynn murmured, her voice a tender whisper. It conjured memories of another incident involving Tim and fire. I remembered a time when he stood atop a mound of twigs, dousing them in kerosene. As a sudden spark ignited a flame near his foot, his bug-eyed

expression had been a tableau of shock and fear. Carter and I could only watch, witnesses to this spectacle of foolishness. Carter later succinctly summarized the episode, labeling Tim a "Dumbass," his mimicry of Tim's dash from the flaming woodpile eliciting uproarious laughter. The memory remained etched in my mind; a rare occurrence of enjoyment shared with my siblings.

As I prepared to share this memory with Lynn, aiming to extract a smile from her, the moment slipped through my grasp. Tim's arrival interrupted our reverie, his steps drawing him closer with the swagger of false authority. Lauren had forewarned him of my presence, and his demeanor reflected a displeasure that wasn't easily concealed. The atmosphere grew taut with his approach, his words sharp as he drawled, "Whatcha doin' here, boy?" Despite the rapid drumming of my heart, I maintained my composure, my focus firmly on Lynn. "Just wanted to see Lynn," I replied, a sheepishness softening my tone. "I'm living a few miles away," I added, a touch of defensiveness creeping in. Tim's retort was curt, "Yeah, in a foster home."

His remark hung in the air, laden with inscrutability, a trademark of Tim's psychopathic disposition. It was impossible to decipher, even for him, I surmised. Tim's vitriol persisted, "That's too close," his voice dripping with disdain as if I were his appointed adversary. At sixteen, I recognized how individuals with fragile egos and wavering self-worth often fabricated conflicts where none existed, ensnaring unsuspecting victims in their web of mind games. Tim's barrage continued, branding me with accusations of dwelling in a boys' home and having been expelled from school. It took all my restraint to muster a response, "You must be thinking of Carter." I hadn't intended to cast Carter in a negative light, but it was the first retort that materialized. My only desire was to pacify Tim and carve out some moments with Lynn, alone.

Tim paused; his displeasure evident in the furrow of his brow before his gaze shifted towards the house. "You two can sit on the porch where we can keep an eye on, ya," he decreed, his authority faltering. There was no reason to protest, no purpose in challenging his command. Lynn and I descended from the

fence, Tim's earlier warning about its fragility echoing in my ears. We positioned ourselves on the porch, a wry smile exchanged between us, a silent acknowledgment that Lauren was likely lurking in the shadows, observing our every movement.

Lynn and I shared a moment of muted connection, fully aware that Lauren was eavesdropping, intently focused on deciphering our words. Before our conversation could truly take flight, Tim reappeared, rounding the corner of the house, and mounting the porch steps. His hand hovered over the doorknob before he stopped, a smug grin curving his lips. I felt a disquieting ripple of apprehension, the suspicion that I might be ordered to depart immediately. Tim remained silent, a peculiar smirk dancing across his features before he retreated inside. We could hear his mutterings within, a symphony of discontent resonating through the walls. The sound sent a shiver of horror coursing through me, yet I masked my unease for Lynn's sake. A sob caught in her throat, her gaze finding mine. Before I could console her, Tim reemerged, his tone firm as he instructed me to leave. The smug wonderment from earlier had transmuted into a maelstrom of rage and vindication. I stared at Tim, contemplation warring with my desire to unleash the torrent of words I had long held back. But then I remembered Lynn, beside me, fragile and vulnerable. I chose silence over confrontation. A hurried hug was exchanged, and I left, for there was no wisdom in prolonging the agony of our parting.

As I walked along the roadside, a hand shielding my eyes from passing vehicles, tears flowed freely. The weight of reality pressed upon me, and everything felt unreal, like a fevered dream. And then, it was as if the nightmare continued, as Tim's car emerged from the distance, careening towards me. I watched, almost in slow motion, as he swung the car door open, rage in his eyes, and shouted accusations. "You little bastard!" his voice thundered; a hurricane of anger unleashed upon me. My heart raced, and my mind whirred, struggling to comprehend the fury before me. It was a confrontation with madness.

In his tirade, Tim accused me of being a threat to Lynn, an intruder, a tormentor. He warned me to stay away, then abruptly climbed back into the car, slamming the door shut before speeding away. The gravel-laden road bore witness to his departure, stinging my skin like a barrage of hostile arrows. As the dust settled and the echoes of his departure faded, I found myself standing there, a tumultuous storm of emotion swirling within me.

The journey back to the foster home was a haze of disbelief and turmoil. Four miles felt like an insurmountable distance, each step carrying the weight of a shattered connection. As I crossed the threshold of the farmhouse gate, the urge to sprint back and hold Lynn one last time surged within me. But the specter of Tim's wrath, the potential for his unhinged anger held me in place. And so, I walked on, tears mingling with raindrops as I navigated the solitary path before me. Hope seemed distant, reality warped—a haunting symphony of isolation and heartache.

In the weeks that followed, I was like a vessel adrift on the tempestuous seas of my own emotions—overcome by confusion that seemed to know no bounds, by a heartbreak that appeared as vast as the ocean, and by a loss that was both intimate and profound.

Then, one night, when the world outside lay in an almost unnatural stillness, I quietly opened the window of my small room. Some plastic encased the window from the exterior; not understanding its purpose, I pushed through it to reach the outside.

For a moment, I stood there on the threshold, suspended between defiance and a deep, sorrowful yearning that swirled around me like the autumn wind, rustling the last leaves from the trees. My fingers gripped the familiar roughness of the trellis, and I descended, not merely from a window, but from a place of safety into the unknown. This act of descent was more than a simple escape; it was a declaration of my

intent to reclaim some measure of control in a world that had suddenly become unpredictable and harsh, a world where I could no longer find solace in the familiar.

Soon after my feet touched the ground, the cool night air brushed against my face, offering a fleeting moment of comfort. Yet, as I wandered into the darkness, a harsh truth dawned on me—there was no real refuge in recklessness, no solace in the shadows of the night. Each step was haunted by the piercing sting of Darla's betrayal. She, who had been my compass in the bewildering maze of foster care, had shattered our promises, her words dissolving into echoes of a love that turned out to be nothing more than a mirage.

I found myself at the edge of a nearby park, a place where Darla and I had once shared laughter and dreams, now transformed into a stark landscape of my solitude. Sitting on the cold bench, the reality of her infidelity enveloped me like the night's chill—it wasn't just the act itself, but the crumbling of the trust I had naively built around us. Darla had been with another boy, a fact that splintered every memory, every moment we had shared into fragments of betrayal.

The pain was a relentless companion, a shadow that stretched long into the night. No amount of distance I put between myself and the Holloway residence could sever the ties of that agony. Eventually, the futility of my escape settled in, heavy and unyielding. With a deep, weary sigh, I retraced my steps home, each one a reluctant acknowledgment of the need to confront reality and eventually heal.

As I made my way back to the Holloways, the starkness of my situation enveloped me. The road to recovery from such deep emotional wounds would be fraught with challenges, yet I knew I had to traverse it. The resilience that had carried me through the tumultuous waves of my life so far would now need to support me as I faced this new trial. Darla's betrayal was a bitter lesson in vulnerability and strength.

I resolved to find a way forward; the scars of the past were etched into my heart, but they did not define me. I was a survivor, a testament to the enduring human spirit. And with each step I took, I moved one step closer to discovering the person I was meant to become.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Upon my return, the farmer awaited me like a watchful predator, ready to pounce. Deep down, I acknowledged that I deserved whatever consequences were to follow. I had violated his property and shown a lack of respect for his home. Despite growing up without the guidance of good and decent parents, there was an innate knowledge within me, a sense of right and wrong, a testament to the teachings of Our Lord.

As I approached the once-charming farmhouse, only a block away from my current position, memories of my childhood echoed in my mind, recalling the words of Fr. Burrows, the old Catholic Priest. He had once remarked that God's Commandments were woven into our very hearts. This image struck me profoundly, as I imagined a divine act of love, with God holding me tenderly, gently sewing those Holy words into my infant chest with a golden needle.

Contemplating this divine act of care, I comprehended the profound weight of these words that urged us to 'obey' and seek redemption and transformation before our earthly journey's end. They guided us toward our sole path to salvation – Repentance. Deep within me, a magnificent tapestry unfurled, where mortal flesh veiled a profound truth. The human heart, meticulously crafted, carried the mark of God's

touch, interweaving strands of hope and eternal assurance. The Commandments of Our Lord dwelled within its sanctum, engraved in the everlasting script that surpassed the boundaries of time itself.

The intricacies of the heart's design appeared theoretical, almost trivial. Regret pressed heavily upon me; a weight born of my transgression against this man's property. The depth of my remorse grew as I realized that the man to whom I had shown disrespect had in turn displayed kindness and a godly demeanor. As I neared the house and caught a glimpse of his face through the kitchen window, I observed him seated beneath the warm glow of the dining table light, lost in contemplation as he stared into a cup of coffee. In that fleeting moment, his countenance appeared far removed from godliness, yet I recognized the fallacy of judging solely by appearances. Though his gaze never met mine, I resolved to enter the house.

As I crossed the threshold, the farmer raised his head with deliberate slowness, his words emerging as a gruff murmur tinged with restrained anger, as if battling to temper his temper. The surge of relief I experienced was swift, realizing he had chosen to forgo physical aggression. Yet, even as he spoke, a peculiar wish arose within me—that he had indeed resorted to a physical reprimand instead.

"You busted out my damn window!" he bellowed, eschewing any form of address by name. The truth was, since my arrival, he had never directly conversed with me nor uttered my name. Beyond a curt and formal greeting upon my initial arrival, he had maintained an unwavering silence, entrusting the daily affairs of the household to his wife while he tended to the demands of the farm. I couldn't fault him for feeling baffled and incensed; my actions mirrored the wild and disrespectful behavior exhibited by my unruly siblings. I found out then from the farmer that the plastic I had pushed through when leaving was a seal installed to protect the home from winter weather.

Casting a glance outside through the very same kitchen window I had peered through earlier, I noted the modest yellow light bulb crowning the peak of the immense barn doors, casting a feeble illumination. It was sufficient to reveal the contours of the field and the dim silhouettes of two horses, seemingly in repose.

For a fleeting moment, I found myself ensnared by the notion of being a horse, a whimsical idea that momentarily transported my thoughts from the entanglement of emotions surrounding Darla.

The weight of my folly and shame bore down upon me, amplified by the realization of how profoundly I had disappointed the farmer. My actions had wounded him to the core, and the tide of remorse that surged within me threatened to engulf all reason.

His wife tactfully withdrew from the kitchen, providing an unspoken invitation for the impending conversation to be held in private. Thus, it was a solitary exchange between my foster father and me, our gazes locked in a battle of emotions. The tangible aura of his anger enveloped us both, and I could sense that this night marked the inevitable prelude to my swift dismissal. My blunder had transformed into a yardstick of judgment, quantifying the gravity of my transgressions as I grappled with the looming specter of homelessness—an outcome entirely the result of my recklessness.

"I had just gone and weather-proofed 'em, and that costs money, boy!" The farmer's voice reverberated with a blend of frustration and authority, his eyes intense, a deep blue that held its silent storm. Yet, it was how he pronounced that last word, "boy," that bore an almost physical weight, lodging itself within me like a twisting screw. I anticipated what would follow, and my expectations proved accurate, as the words I dreaded unfurled: "You'll be leaving here tomorrow." The declaration struck like a final verdict, leaving me momentarily devoid of words, a mere spectator as I brushed past the old man and ascended the staircase to the room shared with Nate.

As I entered the room, Nate was perched on his bed, a mask of concern etched onto his features. In a swift, almost cinematic sequence, memories surged forth, replaying moments of our camaraderie. A flashback transported me to the initial weeks when, on a whim, I sang along to an old country western record playing on Nate's turntable. It was a small act, yet it marked a departure from my typical guardedness, an unprecedented display of vulnerability. Nate's applause resonated like the roar of an audience in a real

concert hall, and in that instant, I felt a sense of acceptance and camaraderie. However, our shared moment was abruptly silenced by the farmer's stern command from below, a reminder that apart from Nate, no one else in the household embraced me.

Things had changed drastically since then, and both of us knew now that the time we had was dissipating by the moment. As sleep gradually overtook me, I could still hear Nate's quiet sobs, a poignant echo of his vulnerability that night. The weight of the uncertain future bore down on our hearts, intertwining our fates with a bittersweet thread of shared experience.

The dawn arrived, casting an ashen light upon the morning. With it came the inevitable, the representative from the Department of Social Services was scheduled to appear. I could picture his arrival in the cramped Chevrolet Citation four-door, bearing the emblem of his office on both sides. Sitting down to breakfast, I tried to focus on the meal, but anxiety gnawed at me, aware that my impending departure was imminent. A knock on the door signaled his arrival, but the farmer's wife encouraged me to finish eating before addressing the visitor. This act of kindness, unexpected yet appreciated, offered a glimpse of warmth in an otherwise cold farewell.

With breakfast consumed, though my appetite was absent, the time had come. The social worker stood before me, a familiar face from my earlier entrance into this household. Nate lingered nearby, his disfigured visage betraying his inner turmoil.

The social worker's words pierced the air like a verdict: "You'll be leaving, but not until tomorrow." The delay sparked agitation among my foster parents, who had anticipated my departure that very morning. The reason for this postponement was unforeseen by us both—my biological father had agreed to take me in, but he required an extra day to prepare.

The foster mother remained stoic; the legal documents clutched in the farmer's hand-painted a somber portrait of their stance. Though her lips remained sealed, her stoicism held a heavy weight of

unspoken sentiments. She embodied the archetype of a traditional wife, her gestures and demeanor a reflection of her role. A forced smile accompanied her farewell, laden with a wish for a different outcome, a touch of the sincerity that had long remained hidden.

"Tomorrow morning," the social worker confirmed, solidifying the timeline of my departure.

The uncertainty of my impending future loomed large, and I couldn't help but question, "Where will I go?"

His reply held a mix of intrigue and apprehension, "Your father's."

As he mused, his hands framed his face, deep in thought, explaining that contact had been established with my father weeks earlier, and he had agreed to take me in. The revelation stirred a maelstrom of emotions within me, a blend of anticipation and anxiety. The realization that my biological father was willing to claim me was both heartening and bewildering, questioned why he had remained absent until now.

Conflicting feelings swirled, as delight at the prospect of being with my father clashed with the disconcerting realization that his newfound acceptance had come belatedly. Unanswered questions lingered, challenging my understanding of his motivations. Nate's tear-filled gaze sought mine, a wordless query that resonated with the uncertainty we both faced. Without the need for spoken confirmation, we understood that the irreversible had transpired.

Astonishment painted my expression as reality settled in. My gaze shifted from the social worker to the window, where raindrops cascaded in tandem with the storm within me. The weight of irony and the relief of unexpected change intertwined in my psyche, an intricate dance of emotions entwined with the basic tenets of right and wrong.

As the day marched forward, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a subdued glow upon the fading landscape. A knock at my bedroom door broke the silence, and the foster mother entered, a bearer of unexpected news. My sister Lauren awaited me in her car outside. Her presence was surprising; it had been a month since I had last seen her and Tim. Memories of my previous visit resurfaced, a visit that had not ended well, leaving me hoping it would be the last time our paths crossed. Today's unexpected encounter ignited a suspicion that this might be a retaliatory gesture, retribution for our previous contentious meeting. Predictability defined Lauren's actions, a characteristic resonance between her behavior and that of our unstable mother.

Descending the stairs and crossing the threshold, I approached her parked car. She sat motionless, an enigmatic figure behind the wheel. Sliding into the passenger seat, I inquired about our destination and met with an unsettling silence as she stared ahead, her gaze fixed on some distant horizon. The weight of her words descended like a torrent, her voice a cascade of sharp-edged stones, each one cutting into my soul with ruthless precision.

"Gregg, you're destined for nothing," her declaration commenced, her words akin to a barrage of verbal arrows, each one aimed to wound. She dismantled any remnants of hope, dissecting my aspirations and leaving them in tatters. Her words were acid, corroding my sense of self and potential, her disappointment a palpable presence in the car.

She continued her verbal onslaught, lamenting my failures and predicting a future that seemed bleak and insurmountable. Every utterance was a dagger, her harsh assessment penetrating deep, inflicting wounds that bled emotional turmoil. Yet, I refused to give her the satisfaction of witnessing my pain.

Her face bore a curious pleasure, an unsettling glee that emanated from her eyes, an aspect she seemed entirely unaware of. Finally stepping out of the car, I left her presence, finding solace in the rain that mirrored my inner tempest. It veiled the tears streaming down my face as I retreated into the house.

Once, I had believed Lauren to be unhinged, but after our exchange in the car, our understanding shifted. She wasn't simply insane; she was a psychopath, devoid of empathy, relishing in the pain she inflicted upon others. There was a twisted pleasure in her demeanor, a chilling satisfaction that resonated with the darkest corners of her psyche. At that moment, it struck me that her pride mirrored that of Lucifer, the Father of Lies. This pride, evident since our childhood, has now revealed its true source.

Long before Lauren evicted me harshly from her home, I had sensed that she was grappling with deeper issues. Her demeanor was consistently somber, a perpetual storm cloud hanging over her. Emotions danced within her like wildfire, and her behavior was marked by volatility. She seemed ensnared within the confines of her narcissism, a solitary figure lost in the labyrinth of her thoughts. An unsettling disconnection from the world surrounded her, rendering her a restless wanderer within her psyche.

Feeling utterly exhausted from the conversation with Lauren, with a potent blend of anger and discomfort coursing through my veins, I ascended the porch stairs of the foster home. As I made my way into the shared bedroom with Nate, him seated on his bed, his gaze a mosaic of emotions. A slight flush adorned his cheeks, the surge of electricity from the transformer leaving its mark. His eyes, a shade of blue deeper than the sky, seemed to hold a universe of unspoken words. In the aftermath of the tumultuous encounter, I commenced the task of packing my belongings, the process swift, lasting mere minutes. We remained engulfed in silence, two souls grappling for the right words that remained stubbornly elusive.

That night, as I lay beneath my covers, wrestling with the attempt to succumb to sleep, the initial excitement of reconnecting with Father dwindled to a distant ember. Instead, an enduring sensation of past rejection overshadowed me. Father had turned away from his children, from me, during my formative years. Now, I was poised to reside with a father who had abandoned me on multiple occasions before. The

realization cast a pall of dread and abandonment upon my heart. I shivered under the cover of darkness, disappointment seeping into every crevice.

For years, the gulf between Father and me had remained unbridgeable, a silence that now hung heavy. And yet, he had inexplicably agreed to have me live with him. The enigma of this sudden shift left me pondering what lay on the horizon. I turned away from Nate, a futile attempt to veil my tears. He understood my trepidation, his silent presence a reassurance amidst my turmoil. He knew my fear, yet he never voiced a complaint.

As slumber beckoned, a cascade of nightmares greeted me. Amidst the chaotic dreamscapes, I found solace in Nate's ethereal presence, his essence a guiding light even within the realm of dreams. And, if by some miraculous turn of events, I ever found myself within the embrace of Heaven—a possibility I had never granted credence to—I hoped to encounter Nate there. In that sacred realm, I would extend my apologies for leaving him behind.

Morning arrived, casting its illumination upon the foster home. But this morning was different—there was an air of detachment. The foster parents, fixtures around the breakfast table, appeared indifferent. No breakfast was offered, and no warmth was extended. Yet, Nate remained steadfast at my side, his quiet presence a beacon of solidarity as I gathered my belongings. As I descended the stairs, Nate accompanied me, a testament to his unwavering companionship. He walked with me like a faithful guardian, and my heart swelled with gratitude for his quiet loyalty.

At the landing, the social worker stood, waiting by the door. His countenance was adorned with a warm smile, and I bid my farewells to the foster parents. I shook my foster father's hand, gratitude conveyed in that brief touch, though his silence remained unbroken. Suddenly, Nate surged forward, crossing the room with determination, extending his hand toward me in a gesture of camaraderie. Our eyes brimmed

with unshed tears as we embraced one another tightly. I felt the roughness of his injured cheek against mine, a reminder of the battles we had faced together.

As we separated, I whispered to Nate, "Look on your bed." His countenance transformed; a cascade of joy evident as he executed a small hop. Stepping towards the exit, I departed from the one true friend I had known for the past few months. As I walked away, the ache of leaving him behind gnawed in my heart. On his bed, I had left two of my cherished Judo medals, tokens of triumph that he deserved more than anyone. Nate, forever nurturing dreams of athletic greatness, embodied resilience and determination despite his adversities.

I held within me a steadfast belief that Nate possessed a hidden treasure, a brilliant spark nestled beneath the layers of his outward struggles. His deep, azure eyes, like the wide-open sky on a clear summer's day, shimmered with the fire of ambition and a quiet resolve that hinted at mountains yet to be climbed. I hoped, with all my heart, that beneath his unconventional exterior, he would one day rise above the clouds of doubt and uncertainty and discover the greatness lying quietly within his soul.

For you see, there was something truly special about Nate—an innocence that came from a heart so pure, the kind of unworldliness only seen by those who cared to look closely enough. It wasn't just about the surface; it was about the heart beating steadily beneath, filled with love and compassion, qualities often hidden from those who judge too quickly. And so, I wished and wished, like one might upon the brightest star, that Nate would come to realize this himself. That he would be lifted by the kindness and understanding of those who saw him for who he truly was—a diamond in the rough, waiting to shine.

As our journey carried us away from the foster home, the social worker engaged in casual conversation. He moved with a slight limp, a cane lending him support, his hair and beard now graced with strands of gray. There was a quality about his demeanor that conjured imagery from a Hemingway novel—a

sense of contemplative wisdom. An expression of puzzlement colored his features as he posed a question, his tone laced with curiosity. "Are you sure about living with your father?" he inquired. I hesitated briefly, then offered my reply, a sentiment laden with a weight of uncertainty. "No, but I don't have anywhere else to go." The prospect of another foster home bore heavily on my mind, yet residing with Father—a man who had abandoned me to my mother's wrath, who had never intervened to rescue me—loomed as a daunting proposition.

Despite it all, I still carried a deep love for Father, akin to the love I held for my mother. This love was a sanctuary, a sacred space untainted by shame. It was one of the rare aspects of my life I embraced without reservation. I yearned to gather the courage to utter the words, "I love you, Dad, but I'm so afraid of you." However, such vulnerability eluded me, my heart quailing at the thought of shattering that delicate balance. And so, the fear would remain cloaked, hidden deep within me—a secret shared only with Jesus, like so many others.

Our journey led us to a restaurant parking lot, a meeting point for Father. As we neared our destination, the air hung heavy with anticipation, the storm of anxiety raging within me. Finally, we arrived, and there he was—Father, seated in his car. With a nervous resolve, I traversed the distance from the social worker's vehicle to where Father awaited. A brief conversation unfolded between him and the social worker; their expressions impenetrable.

In the front passenger seat, Marie, Father's new girlfriend, exuded a sympathetic smile. Her words, delivered with a gentle southern accent, carried a soothing balm. "Don't be scared, nothing's gonna harm you. You're with your people now." Her kindness offered a glimmer of solace amidst my trepidation.

I settled into the backseat of Father's car, their conversation a distant murmur. Marie's presence, a beacon of compassion, radiated a sliver of hope amid my unease. As Father assumed the driver's seat and

ignited the engine, he posed a question, his voice a mix of concern and familiarity. "Are you hungry?" I summoned the courage to decline, the restlessness within me rendering the act of eating nearly impossible.

Our journey towards the unknown unfurled, a heavy silence enveloping us. It was the first question I dared to voice since our reunion, a question burdened with unspoken fears. "Where's my room?" I inquired, seeking reassurance amidst the uncertainty.

Father's reply landed with a mixture of kindness and logistical practicality. "You'll sleep in our room until we move into a bigger house." An undercurrent of guilt flowed through me—an intrusion into their lives, an imposition on their intimacy.

Marie, a guardian angel in human form, embodied mercy and compassion. Her tall, graceful figure complemented her ebony tresses, her warm brown eyes exuding empathy. Her hands moved with gentle elegance as she spoke, her aura a haven of comfort. The melodic cadence of her Southern accent lent a soothing touch to our new chapter.

Contrastingly, Father seemed a figure hewn from rough edges, a man whose gruff exterior belied complexities within. A storm brewed behind his eyes, a tempest that would, in time, wreak havoc on those around him. As I unpacked my scant belongings, arranging them meticulously in the bureau near Father's bed, a feeling of unease settled over me. He lingered in the bedroom doorway, his scrutiny a weight upon me, before finally breaking the silence.

"We need to enroll you in school," he stated, his voice reverberating with authority. His next words landed with a thud, charged with a history known only to us. "You're not going to screw up like your brother did."

I was acutely aware of my brother's brief stint living with Father, an interlude that had ended in him fleeing to Ashley's care. My gaze locked with Father's momentarily, the weight of unspoken truths hanging between us. And then, with a pivot and a retreating step, he departed.

This would mark my fourth high school within a mere span of three years, a testament to the tumultuous trajectory of my life. The decision to leave my previous school midway through the semester had cleaved my junior year in two, further complicating my academic journey. As I strained to discern Father's fading footsteps, a sigh of exasperation escaped my lips, the mounting frustration evident even in my breath.

The next day beckoned with a task that would shape my immediate future—I was to register for the new school. However, that night, as I lay in bed, a nauseating wave washed over me, carrying with it a foreboding sense of unease. Anticipation mingled with trepidation as I contemplated the challenges that awaited me. Father's words about moving to a new house and the promise of my room held a glimmer of hope, but the prospect of another relocation weighed heavily on my mind. How many times had I shifted abode since leaving Mother's care? At least six or seven times, a whirlwind of upheaval marked my existence. Lying there, gnawing anxiety took root in my thoughts. A disconcerting feeling, a shadow of discomfort, clung to me like a persistent ghost. Then again, it had always been this way.

The act of enrolling at the new school the next day unfolded uneventfully, yet the shock of its colossal size couldn't be ignored. Classified as AAA, it dwarfed any educational institution I had previously encountered. Its sprawling grounds boasted an Olympic-sized track that piqued my curiosity, though the notion of joining the track team hadn't yet coalesced into serious consideration.

Father's words carried a message, veiled in his characteristic brusque manner. He asserted that, with enough determination, I could conceivably graduate. However, these words, issued from a man who had abandoned his own family, held a tenuous grip on my attention. As we drove away from the school, a casual

conversation ensued about the classes I had chosen. I disclosed my enrollment in all college preparatory courses, a choice promptly dismissed by Father, who regarded it as a futile endeavor since, in his estimation, college lay beyond my future. Instead, he steered me toward the path of a military career.

I chose silence, withholding any immediate response, and together we continued our journey in wordless companionship. Yet, beneath the surface, Father's eyes bore a muted shimmer, as though wrestling with words unspoken, hovering perpetually on the cusp of articulation. It struck me how he could willingly leave behind his wife and children. The notion of separation had nearly sundered my heart as a child, and comprehending how anyone could simply "fall out of love" eluded me. Love, to my understanding, was an enduring force—a commitment that persevered rather than dwindled into nothingness.

Father and I, despite sharing blood ties, remained disparate entities. His presence in the house was now a rarity, his commitments, and pursuits seemingly distant from our shared life. Marie's voice occasionally echoed a sentiment I'd heard before that Father used to be more present before my arrival. Open and authentic communication proved elusive in all the homes I had inhabited. The inability to confront truth seemed to be a universal thread, and my insistence on embracing it marked me as an unwelcome source of discomfort. I had forgiven Father, understanding the complexities that drove his actions, but it appeared he believed my memory was faulty or my feelings had dissolved.

In truth, the memories of those harrowing moments persisted, and the emotions associated with them remained undiminished. They continued to course through me, resounding as if the events were unfolding anew. Yet, Father's acknowledgment of this seemed improbable. To engage in a genuine dialogue, to address the significance of the past abuse, required a vulnerability that he was unwilling or unable to muster. The weight of this truth gnawed at me—knowing that this potential for resolution was both rare and fleeting. Amid this turmoil, Jesus became my refuge, my steadfast companion, imparting the strength to

navigate these turbulent waters. The world around me felt transient, and flawed, an inhospitable realm bereft of unadulterated joy.

If I could utter a single message to my father, it would be this: "The torment you inflicted lingers, not merely as a memory but as a present experience." For those agonizing moments, those wounds were not echoes from the past; they were tangible, an ongoing ordeal. Yet, my father's likely response would be to dismiss my perspective, to label me as "unhinged." His penchant for denial and avoidance stood as barriers to truth.

Weeks meandered past, and the contours of the new house and school began to take shape in my life. However, the tendrils of anxiety and fear remained steadfast, intertwining with my existence like an inescapable shadow. These emotions, insidious and unrelenting, whispered sinister prophecies of my inevitable downfall. Their persistence seemed unjust, and within their grip, I clung to the belief that someday, somehow, clarity would emerge, and a savior might emerge from the shadows to rescue me.

While Father focused on constructing a new life with Marie, my focus shifted towards surmounting the chaos and violence that had seeped into my reality since my time with Lauren and Tim. The sense of sanctity that had once accompanied my classroom pursuits had waned, now replaced by an unyielding resolve to learn and flourish despite the adversity.

Amidst the tumult, education became my sanctuary, a haven where I could reclaim what had been lost or stolen. The classrooms offered a respite from the tempestuous environment, a place where my spirit could breathe and thrive.

Yet, the storm had left its mark on my language, veering it towards vulgarity that repulsed even me. Amid this turbulence, however, my affection for Jesus and the written word remained untarnished. My words might have become crude, but my inner yearning remained untainted—a longing for liberation from my turmoil.

Frequent reprimands from teachers and coaches became the norm, suspension loomed as a perpetual threat, while their hypocrisies gilded their admonishments. In these moments, I couldn't help but evoke the biblical tale of Isaiah, who, upon witnessing a vision of God, was consumed by his unworthiness. An angel then purified Isaiah's lips with a coal from the altar, an act of preparation for his prophetic calling (Isaiah 6:1-13). Though I couldn't liken myself to a prophet, the imagery resonated—a broken soul seeking solace amidst the malevolence of life.

Education emerged as a portal to escape, a conduit through which I might reclaim what was mine. My love for learning persisted even amidst the turbulence, a flame that refused to extinguish. Yet, my environment had imprinted me with darkness that spawned demons, one of which was the specter of promiscuity. It played the role of both a curse and a blessing—an avenue for attention and affection, but also a descent into a chasm of transient connections. The initial exhilaration and validation gradually yielded to emptiness and dissatisfaction.

As I embraced the world of dating, I was ensnared in a whirlwind of passion that tested my spiritual foundation. The pangs of loneliness and the hunger for affection drove me towards physical liaisons. Guilt and shame were frequent companions, yet the cycle persisted. My spiritual immaturity, compounded by the lack of a virtuous male mentor, fueled this turmoil, and the cycle of promiscuity thrived.

Nevertheless, my love for learning and the realm of education became conduits for channeling my emotions. Books became beacons of my redemption, summoning the best within me. Even amidst the chaos, a love untainted coursed through my veins, preventing me from inflicting irreparable harm on others. I might shatter hearts, but causing lasting damage to another's soul was inconceivable. The inclination to harm remained alien to me; my nature was disinclined toward cruelty.

As my journey continued, the realization dawned that my tether to Jesus was an unwavering lifeline amid darkness and confusion. My spiritual path lacked formal structure or mentors, but my reliance on Jesus served as a cornerstone, sustaining me through periods of desolation and solitude.

Shortly after moving in with Father, a matter necessitating attention arose—a visit to the Department of Social Services to terminate his child support obligations. This decision radiated satisfaction on Father's part, yet the implications reverberated within me.

As Father engaged with the social worker, I sat in a modest diner nested within the municipal building. A window offered a glimpse of the Child Welfare Offices, the waiting room observable through a pane of glass. Parents navigated the space, bearing grim countenances and embroiled in battles. Perched on a stool, I witnessed a tableau of familial discord unfold.

Disputes erupted between mothers and fathers, their children unwitting pawns in this larger game. I bore witness to the familiar countenances of despair etched onto innocent faces, caught in the crossfire of parental enmity. These young souls found themselves enmeshed in a conflict they could neither understand nor ameliorate, while their parents succumbed to animus. The scene was a poignant testament to the suffering imposed by fractured families, a stark portrait of the havoc wrought upon the lives of the innocent.

Complying with Father's instruction, I pursued my education diligently, returning home without delay and minimizing my presence. I retreated to my room, dedicating hours to my studies with the resolve to transmute my ailing grades into triumphs. Consulting with the school counselor revealed the stark decline

in my academic performance. Meanwhile, Father's nocturnal work schedule granted us moments of tranquility, though I couldn't help but ponder if it were a strategic choice rather than a coincidence.

The track season had already commenced when I arrived, denying me the chance to participate. My days at school were spent in relative solitude, as I navigated the currents of my thoughts. The allure of promiscuity, however, beckoned with a compelling force. Strangely, I found myself veering away from those who offered kindness and commitment, even though they might have provided the loyalty I secretly yearned for. Betrayal and deception had etched their marks on my psyche, leaving me doubtful of the possibility of genuine allegiance. Trust had proven a double-edged sword, inflicting its share of pain, and sowing seeds of skepticism about the authenticity of others.

My spiritual education remained scant, a fact that led me to repeatedly gravitate towards unsuitable partners. The pattern of attraction seemed almost deliberate as if a subconscious yearning for self-destructive patterns fueled my choices.

Among these ill-fated connections was Kim, a girl who bore the mantle of homecoming queen. From the outset, Kim carried an air of risk, a tempestuous allure that ensnared me. She moved through the hallways with a commanding presence, a magnet for interest from all corners. Initially, I took her attention as a stroke of luck, though over time, I recognized the gradual erosion of my sense of self. I was losing my identity within the confines of our relationship. I clung to the belief that she loved me, yet the certainty of falsehood simmered beneath the surface.

The ties between Kim and me grew, ensnaring me in her maelstrom of desires and demands. Her high-maintenance nature thrived on drama and chaos, ensnaring me in a web where I relinquished control over my actions and needs. The conviction that she cared for me persisted, despite the undercurrent of falsehood that refused to abate.

Once again, I had fallen for the wrong person, a pattern as relentless as it was disheartening. It seemed as though I was unable to extricate myself from these toxic relationships, ensnared by a history of abuse that had shattered my self-esteem. The remnants of my traumatic past left me vulnerable, willing to accept any semblance of affection or attention, even if it bore harm.

My confidence lay tattered, an affectionate gesture from a pretty girl capable of swaying even my convictions. My flaws were conspicuous, and Kim seemed to regard me as a plaything, a tool to fulfill her desires. I was willing to do whatever it took to please her, even at the cost of relinquishing my agency.

Amidst my fervent efforts, Kim's displays of affection remained sporadic. The dynamics mirrored those of my relationship with my mother—a cycle alternating between self-disdain and fleeting contentment. Despite the absence of reciprocity, I clung to any shred of kindness she offered, a narrative that blended with my self-perception, resonating with my destiny.

My interactions with Father since moving in had been consistently uneasy, a sentiment that led him to eventually purchase my first car. My desire for a heartfelt connection with him was met with discomfort on his part, as any attempts at sincere conversations would be swiftly derailed by embarrassment, eventually devolving into anger. This echoed a pattern set by my mother and siblings, wherein shame transformed into fury, producing hurtful tirades. Despite this, I knew that I could never harbor the emotions and desires that had fueled these outbursts.

Upon completing my driver's education, Father and I embarked on a journey to acquire my first car, a 1974 Pinto. It was far from a glamorous sight, its aesthetics uninspiring, yet my fondness for it ran deep. It didn't possess the ability to race down highways at exhilarating speeds, yet it held a purpose that resonated with me. Held together by hanger wire and rope, featuring an AM radio as its sole technological

enhancement, its imperfections did little to deter my attachment. This modest vehicle granted me independence and freedom, two priceless gifts that transformed my outlook.

The acquisition of the car, a transaction totaling USD 700, was marked by a begrudging handover. I watched as the stack of seven one-hundred-dollar bills was pried from Father's grip by the owner of "ABCAB Motors," accompanied by grunts of exertion. With the car in my possession, Father was absolved of the duty of chauffeuring me around, an outcome he likely deemed a worthwhile expenditure to unburden himself.

Steadfast determination powered my academic pursuits, and I managed to conclude the final semester of my junior year with a commendable C average. In light of my tumultuous history, this achievement allowed me to move forward into my senior year, offering the prospect of graduation. The conclusion of the school year coincided with my employment at a local restaurant. This time, I opted to retain the money I earned for my benefit.

A transformation stirred within me, birthing a young man characterized by a disposition of joy and an abiding love for Jesus. My attraction to the world of learning endured the sanctuary of my haven. Between shifts and solitary runs, I retreated to the confines of my room, immersing myself in the pages of books. In the presence of the Lord and amidst the written word, I found respite. These two steadfast allies remained untouched by betrayal, the wellspring of knowledge within the books fostering emotions ranging from laughter to tears.

Knowledge was more than a mere commodity; it was a lifeline. The wisdom gleaned from the printed pages fortified my self-worth, cementing my existence, and cultivating hope in the prospect of forthcoming blessings.

Summer enveloped my surroundings, and I found solace in the pages of my books while cocooned in the tranquility of my room. Suddenly, a jarring thud, accompanied by the cacophony of a collision against the wall adjacent to my room, shattered the peace. The inebriated cadence of Father's voice reached my ears, and my heart plummeted. He was administering a brutal beating to Marie, her anguished pleas for cessation echoing through the air.

Without pause for contemplation, I swung my bedroom door open and thrust into a distressing tableau. Father had Marie pinned, his weight bearing down upon her frail form. She gasped for air; her features contorted in pain. Summoning all the strength I could muster, I pushed and pulled, aiming to dislodge Father from her. Yet, he seemed an immovable pillar, fueled by rage, a force unyielding to my efforts.

A curious sort of heroism stirred within me, a determination that transcended the physical realm. Recognizing the futility of trying to pry Father from Marie, I elevated myself above him and directed a powerful, downward punch to the side of his face. The impact prompted him to release Marie and roll away. Wheezing and choking, she crawled towards the safety of the bedroom, sealing herself within and locking the door.

Father regained his footing, lunging towards me, but I managed to evade the trajectory of his heavy fist, narrowly evading a potentially devastating blow. His 'bowling ball size fist' collided with the trailer's paneling, leaving a gaping hole in its wake. My gaze fell upon the other patched fissures in the walls, silent witnesses to fractured homes and turbulent lives. Had I not anticipated Father's assault, I might well have been rendered unconscious.

I retreated, watching as Father's grumblings subsided into a stupor as he collapsed onto the living room couch, eventually succumbing to slumber. Marie emerged from the bedroom, her visage marked by weariness beyond her years, a husky cough escaping her lips. In that fraught instant, the realization

crystallized that Father's capacity for change was virtually nonexistent, his animosity towards Marie and me running deep. Self-loathing appeared to fuel his vitriol, as his resentment towards us was an extension of the resentment he harbored for himself. Any semblance of a genuine bond between Father and me was illusory, a mirage dispelled by the light of truth.

In the tremulous aftermath, an epiphany ignited within me. This was the crossroads where I had to make a choice: either submit to being an embodiment of my past or rise above the shadows cast by abuse. The echoes of dysfunction and torment were ever-present, yet I recognized my agency in shaping my destiny. The abuse that had carved its scars into my being would no longer wield dominion over me. This pivotal moment marked the division between a life defined by victimhood and one fueled by determination.

In the subsequent weeks, I sought solace in the embrace of books and the refuge of Jesus. These became my bastions, offering sanctuary from the tempestuous currents that churned around me. Through the marriage of faith and learning, a glimmer of hope emerged, piercing the darkness with a feeble light.

The scars of my past were like the knots in a well-worn tree, each one telling a story of hardship and endurance. They were a part of me, as much as the color of my eyes or the shape of my hands. These marks, etched deep by life's harsh lessons, were reminders of nights spent trembling in fear and days cast in the long shadow of despair. But even as a child, there was something inside me that refused to let those scars define where I was headed. I held on to a slender thread of hope, believing that somehow, I could forge a different path—one not marred by the pain that had been my constant companion.

School became the place where I fought my hardest battles. It was there, in those hallowed halls, that I worked not just to prove my worth to others, but to convince myself that I was deserving of love, respect, and perhaps, a chance at redemption. In this struggle, two things kept me going: an insatiable hunger for the written word, which became my refuge, and a faith that was both a comfort and a burden.

That faith, like a steady beacon in the dark, led me through the rough waters of a world that often seemed too cruel to bear.

Indeed, my life was far from the idyllic vista that graced the covers of fairy-tale books. The phantoms of my past still loomed, casting elongated shadows that seemed to dance menacingly on the walls of my consciousness. Yet, I had undergone a metamorphosis. I was no longer the fractured youth set adrift on turbulent seas without a compass. I had unearthed my voice, found my *raison d'être*, and fortified my resilience.

With each page turned, new worlds unfurled before me—verdant landscapes of thought, untraveled roads leading to healing, and fresh vantages that shifted the paradigm of my reality. My academic journey became an excavation of a future that had always felt tantalizingly close, yet perpetually elusive—a life unshackled from the manacles of yesteryears.

The road stretching before me was neither straight nor devoid of stumbling blocks. It twisted and turned, fraught with trials that would test the limits of my spirit. Yet, I faced this uncertain terrain with courage rejuvenated, heart ablaze. The odyssey toward redemption and healing would be arduous, a pilgrimage demanding every ounce of my being. And yet, armed with an unwavering faith and an iron will, I knew I would walk it.

For the first time, a glimmer of hope ignited deep within the core of my existence. It was as if I had struck flint to steel within my soul, sparking a sacred promise, a covenant with myself to fight—not merely for the breath in my lungs, but for a life imbued with purpose and significance.

In the quiet sanctuary of introspection, I came to a revelatory understanding: I was more than the algebraic sum of my experiences. I wasn't simply a survivor clinging to the raft of existence; I was a warrior, an ardent seeker of verities, and a tireless crusader for love. With each dawn that broke, this newfound truth

radiated ever brighter, a flame that devoured the remnants of my darkness, illuminating a path to a destiny I had barely dared to envision.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The remainder of the day following the tumultuous incident with my father was surrendered to the embrace of an exhausted slumber. The weight of my emotions had left me drained, and as Marie offered her attempts at solace, I retreated to the confines of my room, allowing the night to weave its tapestry of hours. However, my respite was fleeting, interrupted by the muffled sounds of Marie's sorrowful cries, which pierced through the haze of drowsiness.

Before stepping out of bed, I retraced the events of the preceding day, mentally navigating the sequence of events. Marie's cries, as they resounded through living space, triggered my instinctive reaction. My first assumption was that Father had subjected Marie to yet another onslaught of harm, and I had slumbered through the entire ordeal. The resonance of her sobs painted a mournful melody that traversed the narrow hallway, inscribing its presence on my senses. I also found myself questioning Father's whereabouts.

Summoning my courage, I abandoned the comfort of my bed and ventured into the living room, where Marie sat, her hands shielding her face. Unaware of my presence initially, she stiffened as my voice pierced the silence, an attempt to offer solace to the charged atmosphere.

"What's weighing on you?" I inquired gently, aiming to provide a source of comfort. My words caught her off guard, and her efforts to hide her tears revealed her vulnerability.

"Your father is gone. He left me for another woman," Marie disclosed, her words tumbling out in haste before she hurriedly retreated to the room that had once been theirs together.

We had occupied the new house for a mere three weeks, and there were no overt signs of Father's involvement with another woman. Secrecy was his *modus operandi* in such matters, leaving no breadcrumbs to follow. Conversations had offered no hints, and there were no telltale signs—only an enigmatic veil shrouding his inner thoughts. Soon after, Marie emerged from her refuge, a façade of composure veiling the storm within.

"You can stay here for a few days, but eventually, you'll need to find another place," she conveyed, her tone measured and detached. Her statement didn't catch me off guard; somewhere deep within, I had braced for this outcome. My presence undoubtedly served as a relentless reminder of Father's existence.

In the early hours of the morning, the world was cloaked in darkness beyond my window, and a sense of being watched roused me from slumber. My attention was drawn to my bedroom's entrance, where Father stood, his inebriated state evident in his swaying posture. The hallway light cast him in sharp relief, a looming silhouette radiating a commanding presence.

"Get up and come with me," he commanded, then exited the house, waiting for me in his idling car. Meanwhile, Marie remained sequestered in her room, undoubtedly privy to Father's presence. Swiftly, I gathered my sparse belongings, left the house, and settled into the passenger seat of the car, already idling in the driveway. The subsequent drive was enveloped in a disconcerting silence, leaving me to speculate about our destination.

Around thirty minutes later, the car pulled to a stop at the entrance of a trailer park. A sign boldly proclaimed, "No Motorcycles Allowed." Father parked the car and stepped out, while I followed suit, walking behind him as we entered one of the trailers lined up in neat rows along a narrow asphalt path.

Upon entering, I encountered a woman emerging from a compact kitchen, its separation from the living area insufficient to create a barrier. Her eyes held a mesmerizing fusion of blue with intermittent splashes of brown, giving them an oddly intense quality.

Accepting that this woman, Becky, was my father's romantic partner was like swallowing a bitter pill that simply wouldn't go down. Their connection felt uneasy as if stitched together by threads of desperation that didn't quite match. Becky had a way about her—sharp and sour, like a lemon left too long in the sun, growing more bitter with each passing moment. From the very first night, it was clear I was not welcome in their home. Her disapproval was as thick as the fog on a cold morning, pushing me further into the shadows until I found myself teetering on the edge of homelessness—a place I never imagined I'd find myself again.

Not long after I had settled into the uneasy rhythm of living with Father and Becky, Father vanished once more—this time to another state, leaving me behind. He claimed it was for work, but the truth was wrapped up in secrets he was too ashamed to reveal. His departure felt like a quiet betrayal as if he believed that offering me a temporary roof could somehow make up for years of neglect. But his escape was far from noble. It was a selfish retreat, a disappearing act that left behind nothing but heartache.

Amidst the chaos, trying to understand why my father did what he did felt like chasing shadows. Despite the pain he had caused—pain that words could scarcely capture—my love for him endured, defying all logic. My emotions were like a stormy sea, as I struggled to reconcile the love I felt with the wounds he had inflicted. It was as if I was adrift on an endless ocean, with no shore in sight, trying to make sense of a relationship that had always been tangled in confusion.

Father's departure wasn't marked by the dramatic farewells one might expect in such tales. No, he vanished quietly, like a ghost slipping away in the dead of night. He tiptoed through the trailer, careful not to disturb the stillness that hung in the air.

When I finally emerged from my room, searching for some sign of him, I was met only by Becky. Her face was cold and unfeeling, revealing nothing. With the warmth of a winter's breeze, she informed me that Father had left for good and that I was to leave her home as well.

Her words were as icy as the summer sun that streamed through the windows, filling the room with a light that felt almost mocking in its brightness. In that moment, I longed for the wide-open spaces beyond the trailer's walls, where I could run free and lose myself in the embrace of sunlight before the shadows swallowed it whole. I stepped outside, my heart a whirlwind of emotions, unsure of what to do next.

As hours passed and the sky darkened, a storm swept in, veiling the brilliance of the sun beneath a shroud of heavy, gray clouds. The horizon transformed into an abyss of darkness, mirroring the tempest raging within me. Seeking refuge, I nestled within the cramped confines of a makeshift rocket on a nearby playground. The relentless rhythm of rain on the thin metal roof mirrored the ceaseless pattern of my thoughts, leaving me drenched and trembling, both in body and soul.

Becky's proclamation that my stay would be brief triggered a bitter exchange between us. The weight of imminent eviction had long accompanied me on my journey, an unrelenting shadow that clung to my every step. I couldn't help but contrast my experiences of rejection with the trivial worries of high school girls, realizing the incongruity of their fears compared to the harsh realities I faced. Rejection had been a constant companion since my birth, a symphony of indifference that echoed through every facet of my existence.

Furthermore, the echoes of my father's promiscuity, and his liaisons with women, including Becky, reverberated deeply within me. Parallels between his actions and my own began to surface as if fate had woven a cruel thread of unfortunate destiny through both of us. The shadows of fornication and a tempestuous temper lingered, traits shared between Father and me, forging a connection that was both unsettling and undeniable.

In the weeks leading up to my near-suicidal contemplation within the cramped confines of the playground rocket ship, I had stepped in to shield Becky from my father's violent outbursts. However, her memory of my actions seemed to have vanished, overshadowed by apathy and indifference.

The weight of the realization that my acts of rescue and compassion had transformed into burdens pressed down heavily upon me. It appeared that my attempts to save lives were destined to culminate in rejection and a growing desire for my annihilation. This pattern, like an unyielding echo, repeated itself—a cycle where kindness morphed into an unbearable burden for those I sought to assist, leaving me with a heart fragmented by ingratitude and rejection. The futility of my kindness resounded a haunting echo reverberating through the chambers of my wounded heart.

During one particularly violent episode, I grappled with the urge to retaliate against my father. In a moment of agonizing restraint, I managed to quell the tempest that surged within me, preventing physical conflict from erupting. Eventually, he relinquished his grip and departed, only to return that night in a drunken stupor.

A week elapsed before another incident unfolded. Returning from the library, I stumbled upon Father seated in my room, the barrel of a rifle pressed against his lips, a finger resting upon the trigger, while the butt of the weapon met the floor. My actions were deliberate as I disarmed him, taking possession of the rifle. He remained silent; eyes fixed upon the ground.

Then, as if the episode had not occurred, he lay down and slipped into slumber. The haunting memory of that encounter lingered, the rifle's loaded chamber and the absent safety serving as a grim reminder of the fragile balance between life and death.

The experience of witnessing the lives I had safeguarded spiraling into ingratitude and rejection was truly heartrending. Despite having come to their rescue, saving them from perilous situations, their response was to discard me and even wish for my downfall. It felt as though my well-intentioned benevolence had transformed into a heavy yoke, burdening those I had tried to help. The cycle persisted, an unyielding refrain of rejection and ingratitude echoing across different times and circumstances

Equally disheartening was the perception that divine intervention remained stagnant, unaffected by the suffering endured by the innocent. The question of justice cast a long shadow over my thoughts, an enigma that begged for resolution. Why did suffering persist, unrelenting despite the presence of divine providence? The yearning for respite, for an end to the ceaseless cycle, became overwhelming—a longing for the embrace of a place that could genuinely be called home.

Desperate to find a place to stay, I reached out to my older sister, Ashley, who lived nearby with her new boyfriend, Jerry. But even that simple task felt like trying to navigate a maze. A lock on the phone dialer kept me from making calls, isolating me even further from any potential help. The cupboards and fridge were bound with bike wires, denying me even the smallest comforts—a cruel echo of Mother's old tactics. It was a harsh reminder that cruelty often wears different faces but is driven by the same dark impulses. The bitter truth that evil doesn't change—it merely dons different masks—was all too clear.

One of the final arguments I had with Becky laid bare these unsettling parallels. As her sharp words cut through the air, I was pulled back to memories of Mother, who wielded control with the same

oppressive hand. It seemed as though the sins and abuses of the past were etched in stone, passed down age after age, unchanged by time or circumstance.

With no other way to contact Ashley, I resorted to using pay phones, like something out of an old spy novel. Eventually, Ashley agreed to let me stay with her. As soon as I stepped into her apartment, I knew I was on my own when it came to meals and care. The apartment offered little more than a roof over my head, but I had no other choice. I accepted the situation with gratitude, knowing it was the best I could hope for under the circumstances.

The cycle of suffering etched itself into my psyche, and the weight of its continuity bore down heavily upon me. It was as though the same patterns were destined to repeat themselves, each iteration mirroring the last, with each generation inheriting the pain of the previous one. This unchanging nature of the cycle was a distressing revelation, a testament to the enduring existence of malevolence and suffering.

Amidst this tumultuous landscape, books again became my refuge—offering solace and wisdom. Concealed in the quiet corners of the small apartment, I transformed into a reluctant specter, hidden behind the pages of text. It was an act of survival, an attempt to evade the malignant gaze that might otherwise expel me from my fragile haven. In books, I found allies—offering me refuge and companionship in a world that often seemed relentlessly hostile.

The transition from summer to fall marked a shift in my circumstances. The embrace of academia and athleticism offered a welcome reprieve from the cacophony of chaos that surrounded me. Engaging in both pursuits granted me a semblance of stability, a rhythm that directed my energies toward the pursuit of knowledge and physical achievement. Amidst the maelstrom of life's challenges, a path began to emerge, illuminating the way forward.

The track team beckoned, promising belonging and purpose. The coach's invitation to join, extended during a pivotal moment while overlooking the thunderous motions of the runners, provided an unexpected lifeline. The rhythm of feet pounding on the track echoed the tumultuous rhythm of my heart, and the prospect of becoming part of this vibrant energy offered a glimmer of hope. The track, with its uniform lanes stretching ahead, seemed to offer a semblance of control in a life often governed by chaos.

With determination, I stepped onto the track, propelled by the desire to prove myself. Amidst the sea of competitors, I navigated the challenges of tryouts, seeking to secure my place among the chosen few. The tension in the air was palpable, a mixture of anxiety and anticipation. As names were unveiled, one by one, my heart raced, my eyes scanning the list for a glimpse of my own. In that defining moment, as my name emerged from the sea of letters, I savored a taste of triumph—a brief respite from the bitterness that frequently clung to my existence.

The track team became a haven—a sanctuary where I could channel my energy and frustration. The commitment required to balance academics and athletics brought structure and purpose to my life. The camaraderie that flourished among teammates provided an escape from the isolation that often gnawed at me. Engulfed in the rhythm of running, the sensation of propelling forward, I experienced fleeting moments of escape—times when I could momentarily transcend the pain that clung to me.

However, even within the confines of the track, uncertainty loomed. The ever-present weight of my living situation cast a shadow, reminding me of my vulnerability. The tumultuous living arrangement with Ashley and Jerry was a constant source of distress, where danger was ever-present. One night, tensions escalated to a breaking point, leading to a confrontation involving a shotgun. This desperate flight, fueled by jealousy, paranoia, and the fallout from deceit and infidelity, served as a grim reminder of the fragile, precarious ground I tread.

The unrelenting challenges of my life mirrored the battles fought on the track. The effort required to maintain my studies while excelling in athletics tested my resilience, exemplifying my tenacity. Amidst the swirling chaos, the track emerged as a symbolic arena—a reflection of my determination to persevere.

As summer yielded to autumn, the passage of time paralleled my transformation. The internal conflict I experienced found an echo in the tumultuous environment in which I lived. The track, a place of unity and purpose, provided a stark contrast to the chaos that engulfed my daily life. As I ran, each stride felt like a declaration of my will to overcome, a testament that I could navigate a path toward a brighter future.

Yet, despite this newfound sense of purpose, haunting echoes from my past still visited me—especially at night. Memories of Mother and the strangers' demands or punishments haunted my thoughts. Sometimes, their laughter seemed to echo, a painful reminder of the traumas I had endured.

After returning from an overnight track invitational, I was taken aback to find that Jerry had changed the lock on Ashley's apartment. She and Jerry had ended their relationship, and they would soon be moving out. Graduating from high school was my ultimate goal, and I needed only a few more months to achieve it. Ashley offered me a place to stay with her and her new boyfriend, but I declined, sensing that it wouldn't last and that I would soon require another place to live. We parted ways with heavy hearts, both burdened by the shame of our past.

Feeling desperate, I turned to my girlfriend Kim's house, where her father and stepmother had always shown kindness to me. I knocked on the door, and Kim's stepmother answered. Overwhelmed, I couldn't hold back my tears as I explained my situation. They welcomed me with open arms, treating me as one of their own. They made calls to find me a more permanent residence, and luckily, a local minister

named Peter offered me a place to live. He was associated with a Methodist church located across from his home.

When Kim's father brought me to Peter's home, he greeted me with a warm smile and a handshake. He didn't pry into my past or the world I came from. Instead, he simply offered me refuge and a safe space to stay until I graduated from high school. Peter had a joyful demeanor that brightened my spirits and helped alleviate some of the pain from my past. He seemed to understand the struggles I faced without needing to discuss them. His gentle words of encouragement gave me hope and warmth, and in his presence, I felt a glimmer of a brighter future.

Under Peter's love and acceptance, I found myself thriving once again. With renewed confidence, I immersed myself in my studies and embraced my track practice wholeheartedly. Peter's encouragement extended beyond academics and athletics; he also supported me in the church's theatrical events. Enthusiastically, I took on leading roles in plays he directed, including Joseph in the Christmas play and Christ in the Easter production. These experiences left a profound impact on me, and I felt a deep connection to the spiritual themes they portrayed.

I couldn't help but wonder if one day, I might have something interesting to share with Jesus. But as soon as this hopeful thought crossed my mind, my inner doubts resurfaced, reminding me that such a possibility seemed impossible. The devil within me, with its spiteful whispers, sought to crush my hopes and dreams, sowing seeds of doubt and self-criticism.

It wasn't just the inner demons that plagued me. My family's disapproval and hurtful remarks also played a significant role in chipping away at my sense of self-worth. Their words and actions echoed in my mind, becoming a constant reminder of the barriers I faced.

Amidst the love and support of Peter and the church community, I found myself grappling with this tug-of-war between hope and despair, unsure of how to reconcile the positive influences in my life with the

negativity that seemed ever-present. Yet, despite the darkness that surrounded me, I clung to the light of Peter's love, the encouragement of the church, and the glimmer of hope within myself, knowing that they held the potential to lead me toward a brighter future.

Close to Peter's home, I found a true friend in Sherry, a kind and caring girl who went to high school with me, and who had faced hardships in her life, taking care of her alcoholic father and younger sister. Sherry had a sweet mother, and despite her father's struggles with alcohol, he could be loving when sober. Together with Craig, the only openly gay boy in our school, Sherry and I formed a unique and supportive group. Craig was an exceptional diver on the high school varsity swim team and had earned a full scholarship to a prominent university. The three of us became inseparable, and their acceptance of me for who I was mattered more than any societal norms. We were a misfit crew, but I felt comfortable and at ease with them. Craig's infatuation with me did not bother me; he was kind, and that was what truly mattered in our friendship.

One day, I rushed to Sherry's home after hearing some devastating news that her father had attempted to commit suicide. She greeted me at the door, her face pale and tears streaming down her cheeks. The weight of the tragedy hung heavy in the air. Sherry's younger sister stood behind her, clutching a blanket and weeping as well. I held Sherry close, offering what little comfort I could as we grieved together.

I could sense the pain in Sherry's words and the desperation in her voice as she grappled with her father's tragic act. In moments like these, easy answers were elusive, and no words I could offer would alleviate her anguish. All I could do was stand by her, lending an empathetic ear, holding her hand, and providing whatever solace I could.

The night of the incident we rushed to the hospital and were met by Sherry's mother whose tear-filled eyes spoke volumes. The gravity of the situation hung heavily in the air as we gathered in the waiting room, clinging to any scrap of information about Sherry's father's condition. Time stretched endlessly as we anxiously awaited updates from the medical team.

Throughout that long night, Peter joined us at the hospital, his presence a soothing balm during the turmoil. With his serene demeanor and reassuring words, he had a unique ability to infuse calm into moments of distress, offering a glimmer of comfort amid chaos.

As the hours passed, the hospital staff informed us that Sherry's father was in critical yet stable condition. Surgery was imminent to remove the bullet and assess the extent of the damage. The night felt endless, defined by hope and uncertainty, as we clung to the belief that the outcome would be favorable.

The blips on the heart monitor symbolized hope and tenuous connections to her father's existence. Each sound brought both relief and a stark reminder of life's fleeting fragility.

In those agonizing hours, time seemed to slow, allowing us to confront the complex emotions that accompany such situations. The hospital room felt suffocating, a space charged with the weight of suffering. Holding Sherry tightly, I shared in her pain as we faced the harsh reality of her father's condition. It was a moment that underscored the fragility of existence and the reverberations of our actions.

Gazing through the hospital window at her father, vulnerable in his hospital bed, I couldn't help but reflect on my dark past. The memories of my mother's struggles and the disturbing episode with Jessica's gun resurfaced a stark reminder of my journey from darkness to redemption.

Amid the chaos of the hospital, a familiar sound echoed in my mind — my mother's voice calling my name. The haunting memory dredged up a torrent of painful experiences, a reminder of the battles I'd

waged to overcome my demons. At that moment, it felt as though the pain I had once endured was crashing over me anew.

Later that night, I finally left Sherry and her family at the hospital. As I walked away, the weight of my tormented history clung to me. I found myself ensnared in an unending loop of anguish, a relentless cycle from which escape seemed impossible. The hospital corridors merged with my memories, Mother's voice intermingling with the mournful cries of Sherry's family. The past's grip was unyielding, leaving me trapped in a narrative of abuse, abandonment, and violence.

Amid this tumult, I found solace in the fact that I could be a support for Sherry. Our bond tightened, fortified by shared struggles, a testament to the strength of our friendship. Though life had led us along divergent paths, in that moment, empathy and compassion united us.

In the days that ensued, Sherry's father displayed slight improvements, but the road to recovery stretched ahead, uncertain, and arduous. Peter and I remained by Sherry's side, offering the support she needed to navigate this trying time. We alternated visits to the hospital, a united front of love and encouragement for her father. Progress was slow, and hope flickered like a fragile flame, but the signs of improvement were enough to kindle optimism.

Sherry's father's attempt on his own life had shattered her family's world, leaving them reeling from shock and sorrow. No words could mend the pain or unravel the mystery of that fateful night. Our role was to stand together, a beacon of support as we navigated the dark waters of grief. Tears were shed, conversations flowed, and memories of her father were shared in abundance. In this trying time, Peter's steady guidance provided comfort and wisdom, reminding us that even amid despair, hope persisted.

The one-time kiss I shared with Sherry was a fleeting connection, a desperate attempt to escape my inner turmoil. It symbolized a longing for something different and simultaneously reminded me of my brokenness. It served as a momentary respite from the haunting memories that threatened to engulf me.

Walking away from Sherry, the realization dawned that evading my past was a futile endeavor. Regardless of how far I distanced myself or how fervently I suppressed memories, they would resurface, a persistent tide that refused to recede. The battle to keep the darkness at bay was ongoing, a struggle for a semblance of tranquility.

In the aftermath, I tried to provide my steadfast support to Sherry and her family. However, this became more difficult as I was grappling with my own inner demons, the echoes of past traumas relentlessly tormenting me. Nightmares and memories would assail me during quiet nights, with Sherry's cries and the image of her father's frail form plaguing my thoughts. A profound guilt gnawed at me for not being there when she needed me most.

The days turned into weeks, and I found myself withdrawing into isolation. The weight of shame from my history made facing my peers a daunting task. My classmates' curious glances felt like judgmental stares, my perceived inadequacy a paralyzing burden. Seeking refuge, I retreated into solitude, carving out moments of peace in the hidden corners of the school.

As the weeks stretched on, isolation became my default state. The company of others became increasingly overwhelming, the dread of pity and judgment stifling my interactions. I buried myself in academic pursuits and track practice, using routine to establish some semblance of control.

Amid glimpses of Sherry in the hallways, my heart ached for her. I yearned to provide solace, but my struggles made it a challenge to be the support she needed. The past's echoes persisted, and summoning strength to confront them was a daily struggle.

During my turmoil, the church's theatrical productions provided a temporary escape. The stage allowed me to slip into alternate personas, a brief respite from the pain. Yet, as the applause faded and the lights dimmed, I was left with memories that continued to haunt me.

With time, I began to reckon with my past, and the impact of my experiences on my present became undeniable. Slowly, with Peter's guidance and the unwavering support of friends, a semblance of peace emerged. It was a gradual journey, filled with setbacks, but I was resolved to move forward, step by step. Though the echoes of abuse might persist, I was determined to find hope amidst the darkness.

One morning before school, as Craig and I sat in his car in the parking lot, he tearfully confided his feelings for me. His vulnerability and courage at that moment were poignant, a testament to the depth of our friendship. I recognized the weight of his trust and knew that I needed to respond with kindness and empathy, ensuring that he felt supported and understood.

Craig's struggle with emotions and challenges in his personal life was palpable. His coping mechanisms were far from healthy, marked by substance abuse and promiscuity as a means of escape. Concern for his well-being weighed on me, and I resolved to help him seek healthier outlets for his pain.

As the school day unfolded, Craig's grief was evident, and I felt a deep responsibility to stand by him. Throughout the day, I offered support, a reassuring presence amid his turmoil. This was no simple task, for he was burdened by his complexities, and the weight of his emotions was almost overwhelming.

Encouraging him to seek help became a priority, a step toward confronting his struggles head-on. However, I understood that healing wasn't an instant process, but rather a journey that required time and effort. His path to recovery was laden with challenges, and I resolved to be a steadfast companion along the way.

Despite the uphill battle, I remained by his side, offering a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, and a source of comfort in the face of his pain. In the days that followed, our bond strengthened, and my role as a true friend solidified. While I couldn't fully comprehend the depth of his struggles, I was committed to offering unwavering support.

As we navigated the intricate web of high school life, my understanding of compassion and empathy deepened. My experiences with Craig underscored the importance of extending a helping hand and a sympathetic ear, even when grappling with our tribulations. Through our connection, I discovered that by offering support, we could make a positive impact on others' lives while finding healing and purpose in our journey. The weight of my history may have been daunting, but it also provided an avenue for me to be a beacon of light for others.

The decision to distance myself from Sherry after her father's tragedy was a painful one. My affection for her was unwavering, but the emotional toll on my well-being was undeniable. The dysfunction of her family and the stark reminder of my past struggles weighed heavily on my shoulders. Prioritizing my healing and mental health became imperative.

Being in the presence of such turmoil and pain brought back memories and emotions that I was trying to escape. It was a constant reminder of the struggles I had faced in my own life and the journey I was trying to move past. I knew that I couldn't be the support system Sherry needed at that moment, as I was still trying to find stability and peace within myself.

Guilt weighed on me for pulling away from Sherry, especially when she needed someone to lean on. But I also knew that I couldn't truly be there for her if I was drowning in my own emotions and anxiety. It was a difficult lesson to learn, but I needed to set boundaries and prioritize my mental and emotional needs.

My friendship with Craig also played a role in my decision. His struggles were already a lot for me to handle, and I couldn't bear the weight of two troubled lives on my shoulders. I knew that if I didn't create some distance from Sherry and her family's problems, it would be detrimental to my recovery.

It was a painful decision, but I had to focus on myself and my healing journey. I hoped that Sherry would find the support she needed from other sources, and I prayed that she would overcome the challenges she faced.

Life's passage is filled with twists and turns, and sometimes we must make difficult choices to protect our well-being and find our path to healing. As much as I cared for Sherry, I had to care for myself and work on my recovery before I could be a source of support for others.

One evening, Ashley called and left a message with Peter that Mother was in the hospital after being found on the living room floor lying unconscious. She had two broken ribs and had suffered a punctured lung. The news of Mother's condition sent a flood of conflicting emotions through me. Despite all the pain and abuse she had inflicted upon me; she was still my mother and a part of me still held onto the hope that she could change. The thought of her lying unconscious and injured stirred a mixture of compassion, guilt, and fear within me.

Upon receiving Ashley's message through Peter, a surge of emotions propelled me to leap onto my motorcycle and hasten to the hospital. As I entered the room where Mother lay, she turned her gaze towards me and mustered a smile. My heart sank at the sight of an extremely blue-black bruise adorning the left side of her face, and I noticed her wincing with every movement. At that moment, conflicting feelings swirled within me.

Despite the hardships I had endured because of Mother, I couldn't deny the genuine affection I still held for her. Our history was fraught with pain, and I knew it would continue to haunt me for years to come. But now, observing her broken and weakened state, I couldn't help but feel a glimmer of compassion for her vulnerability. Memories of the love we once shared came rushing back, reminding me of a time when things were different.

Despite her past actions and the person, she had become, that love remained real within me. It was a complex mix of emotions to witness her in this fragile state, and I found myself guarded and wary, unsure of how to navigate this encounter. Yet, there was a flicker of hope – she was sober, a side of her I had not seen in years. The prospect of a sober Mother brought a ray of optimism, even amid the lingering pain from the past.

Mother didn't resist my presence; instead, she seemed to welcome the visit, which was a surprising change. In some inexplicable way, she appeared more composed and freer from the usual burden of her afflictions. It left me uncertain whether she was feeling lonely or if there was still a remnant of love within her for me. During our conversations, there were fleeting moments of connection when she would gently place her hand over mine, allowing it to rest there for a while. It was a small window of opportunity, a chance for me to try and reach her, to coax her into opening up.

Hoping for some form of reconciliation, I decided to dedicate the following ten days to visiting her after school every day. Each time we spent together, I held onto the dream that, someday, she would clasp my hand, look into my eyes, and offer a heartfelt apology.

In the coming days, I would continue to wrestle with my feelings toward Mother. It was a complex and painful process, but I knew that I had to find a way to move forward and find peace within myself. While I couldn't change the past, I could shape my future and create a life that was free from the cycle of abuse and pain that had haunted me for so long.

On the tenth day of my visits, I pushed open the hospital door with a mix of trepidation and anticipation, only to find the bed empty. Panic surged through me, and my first thought was that she might have passed away. I stood frozen, unable to move, my belly filled with a low, sorrowful howl. Suddenly, a nurse quietly approached from behind, startling me.

"Your mother left today," the nurse informed me. "She signed herself out."

The revelation hit me like a tidal wave, leaving me in a state of bewilderment and heartache. The possibility of reconciliation, which I had nurtured in my heart, had slipped through my fingers. Mother's departure without a word of farewell or explanation left me grappling with an emptiness that seemed insurmountable. The blessed respite I had experienced with Mother was now officially over. My emotions were a whirlwind of sadness, anger, and confusion, as I tried to make sense of the rejection I felt.

As a sixteen-year-old boy, I clung to this visit as a beacon of hope, seeing it as a chance to mend the broken bonds with my mother and finally find closure and forgiveness. My prayers to Jesus had been fervent, filled with longing for this long-awaited reunion to be meaningful. My heart brimmed with anticipation as I yearned to reconnect with the person who had been absent from my life for so long.

But as reality unfolded before me, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of disappointment and heartache. It became apparent that Mother's pride stood as an insurmountable barrier, preventing her from allowing mere human emotions like compassion and empathy to take precedence. It seemed that her ego and self-centeredness outweighed any desire to rebuild the fractured relationship with her child.

In the face of this painful truth, I couldn't help but wonder why someone I loved so much could turn away from me with such indifference. The emptiness and longing within me only deepened, as the hope for reconciliation gave way to a profound sense of loss. It was a sobering reminder that sometimes, no matter how much we yearn for closure and forgiveness, some wounds may remain unhealed.

Mother's inability to put aside her pride and embrace the opportunity for reconciliation left me feeling vulnerable and abandoned once again. As a sixteen-year-old, I grappled with the complexities of human emotions and when reality struck, it was devastating.

The truth that my mother had little interest in forming a meaningful relationship with me crushed my spirit. The hope I had clung to was shattered, leaving me adrift in a sea of pain and abandonment. I couldn't help but question why this chance, which held so much promise, had turned into yet another painful chapter of disappointment and loss. The void left by her departure seemed almost insurmountable, and I struggled to find solace in the face of such profound heartache.

Running out of the hospital room and down the corridor, I emerged into the cold night with a single thought driving me forward – to race my motorcycle to Mother's house as swiftly as possible. My heart pounded in my chest as I reached for my bike, but to my dismay, it refused to start. A cracking noise followed by an unsettling grinding sound heightened my panic. I kept kicking at the bike frantically, desperately trying to get it to come to life. Eventually, after numerous attempts, the motorcycle roared to life with a soft growl, perhaps struggling to start due to the chill in the air.

With the bike now in gear, I felt a semblance of reassurance as I sped onto the road. As I turned onto Mother's Street, reality struck me – I hadn't been home in years, and the overwhelming fear almost caused me to lose control of the motorcycle. Struggling to keep my composure, I pulled into the driveway, and a surreal sense of dread enveloped me, knowing I was about to confront a past I had tried to avoid for so long.

The sight of the old house, still leaning to one side, brought back memories of its dilapidated state. The living room curtains remained perpetually closed, as if concealing the chaos within. Faint sounds of shouting emanated from inside, and a blurry figure moved behind the grimy fabric. Despite my instincts, I

parked my bike and approached the porch. Without a second thought, I opened the battered screen door and pushed through the worn inner door, made of cheap wood.

Stepping into the living room, I found Mother there, her disheveled appearance mirroring the state of the house. Her makeup was smeared, and she wore a wig haphazardly. It was evident that she was under the influence of alcohol. Still standing at the doorway, she angrily ordered me to leave. Despite her inebriation and outburst, I could still discern traces of the woman she once was, buried beneath her current state. Her voice grew louder, escalating to a holler, as she vehemently demanded that I vacate her house. Despite the tense atmosphere, I felt a mixture of sorrow and empathy for her, knowing that her struggles had trapped her in this nightmarish reality.

Within the confines of the house, there was only Mother, and her tumultuous shouts aimed at an unseen adversary. She had succumbed once more to the ravages of alcohol, losing herself in the grips of madness. A myriad of emotions surged within me, and tears streamed down my cheeks, but despite her command to leave, I couldn't bring myself to walk away.

Summoning all the courage I could muster, I implored her to communicate with me, as we had done during the past ten days. In response, she flung something toward me, striking my leg with force. Then, with an air of hostility, she moved closer, her jaw snapping with malice. As she neared, she seized my hair and pulled my head down to her level. For an instant, it seemed as though she was going to kiss my cheek, but instead, she cruelly sank her dentures into the tender flesh of my neck, biting down with a ferocity that elicited screams of both agony and sorrow from me. When she finally released her grip, I staggered back, my heart heavy with pain. I found my footing and rushed out of the door, sobbing uncontrollably. Blood trickled from the wound on my neck, and the biting cold air exacerbated the pain.

Struggling to start my motorcycle, I could hear Mother's laughter from the doorway. It was a chilling and haunting sound, serving as a cruel reminder of the torment that existed within her mind. Despite the

harrowing encounter, I couldn't escape the love and sorrow that still lingered for the woman who stood before me, so lost in her darkness.

Riding back to Peter's place, the cold night air mingled with my tears, making it difficult to see clearly. The encounter with Mother had been harrowing, and it felt as if the weight of the world rested upon my shoulders. Her behavior was as unpredictable as a rabid dog, and her malevolence was relentless.

In the depths of my heart, I knew I had been foolish for allowing myself to be drawn back into her web of pain and despair. Her eyes, now hollow and sinister, pierced through me like a dagger, emanating from her skeletal and malicious countenance. Despite all the times I had faced her wrath, I found myself standing there like a naive child, vulnerable and helpless, unable to break free from the cycle of abuse that had haunted me for so long. Her strength seemed boundless, and the intensity of her hatred was powerful enough to overwhelm an entire army of men.

As I returned to Peter's place, I hurriedly made my way to the bathroom to examine the bite on my neck. It was a distressing sight - two sets of teeth marks that formed an eerie eye-shaped pattern, surrounded by a hideously red and swollen area.

Carefully, I washed the wound with soap, attempting to cleanse it of any potential contaminants. Despite the pain, I knew it was necessary to prevent infection. Applying hydrogen peroxide to the bite, the liquid foamed up, intensifying the burning sensation to an excruciating level. The stinging pain served as a stark reminder of the violent encounter I had just endured with Mother.

Lying in my bed that night, tears streamed down my cheeks as I wept silently. The haunting image of Mother closing in on me refused to fade from my mind. Her words uttered in a language that resembled the rapid clack of knuckles against wood, echoed relentlessly in my ears. It was a language that mirrored the chilling sound of teeth grinding against bone, a horrifying sensation that continued to linger, etched deeply into my memory. The darkness of the night provided no solace, as I grappled with the aftermath of our

encounter, trying to make sense of the tumultuous emotions that engulfed me. I could not sleep, tormented by the wounds in my neck and in my heart.

"Are you up?" Peter's voice called from downstairs.

"Yes," I replied, stepping out of my room, fully dressed, and prepared for school.

As he noticed the gauze covering the bite wound on my neck, he inquired, "What happened to your neck?"

"I accidentally got too close to the hot muffler while working on my motorcycle," I answered, avoiding his gaze.

Though he seemed skeptical, Peter didn't push for further explanation. Instead, he hesitated for a moment before delivering the news, "I'm being transferred to another church."

I remained silent, anticipating the inevitable next words.

"You'll need to find another place to live," Peter continued, and though he might have offered an apology, the words escaped my memory. All that mattered was the overwhelming urge to hold back tears that threatened to spill from my eyes.

In the weeks that followed, I felt like I had no other choice but to act. I reached out to Becky and Father, desperately pleading to live with them just until I finished the school year. Despite being in the middle of the semester, I was determined to persevere and complete my education. Father had been transferred back to our hometown, but he showed no interest in knowing my whereabouts or whether I was even alive. When I called him from Peter's place, his reluctance was evident from the groan he made upon answering the phone.

Father insisted that it would be best if I found another place, but I persisted in my pleas, wearing down his resistance until he finally agreed, albeit begrudgingly. However, he set strict conditions, emphasizing that there would be no more "bullshit" between me and Becky. Though the "bullshit" he mentioned hadn't been my fault, it didn't matter in the eyes of those making the decisions. I reluctantly accepted the terms, knowing that I had to seize this opportunity to secure a stable living arrangement, even if it meant enduring a challenging environment.

So, with a heavy heart, I moved back in with Father and Becky, hoping to maintain some semblance of stability until I could graduate and embark on my path, free from the burdens that had weighed me down for so long.

Living with Father and Becky was far from easy. Father would occasionally raise his voice, making it clear that he didn't want any conflicts or disturbances with Becky while he was away at work. As he sternly admonished me, Becky would stand quietly to the side, a smile playing on her lips. Her silence and subtle gestures conveyed an unspoken message, and she would point toward the door as a warning to avoid any trouble.

In those moments, I would nod in response to Father's question, understanding the gravity of the situation and the consequences of causing any disruption. It was a delicate balance, trying to navigate their expectations while holding back the turmoil brewing within me. Despite the challenges, I knew I had to endure this temporary arrangement until I could break free and forge my path forward.

Living with Becky brought a different set of challenges. Although the locks on the phone, cupboards, and refrigerator were gone, she imposed strict rules on what I could eat and when. Food became another tool of control and punishment, reminiscent of my time living with Lauren and Tim. I had to tiptoe around the kitchen, fearful of breaking any rules.

At times, my hunger got the better of me, and I would attempt to sneak a snack. But inevitably, Becky would storm into the kitchen, swiftly grabbing my arm and swatting the treat from my hand. The air was filled with her angry tirades, berating me for not obeying her rules.

In those moments, she would unleash a series of rapid, sharp commands, resembling the quick yelps of an enraged dog. Her shrill voice echoed like a whistle inside a metallic canister, filling me with a sense of dread. Over something as trivial as a Twinkie, Becky would raise hell, issuing dire warnings about being kicked out if I didn't adhere to her strict regulations. The atmosphere in the house became oppressive, and I longed for the day when I could finally break free from this cycle of control and manipulation.

With only a month left until high school graduation, I found myself with no college or university applications submitted. My grades were not exceptional, and the lack of financial resources further limited my options. Father, however, was adamant about pushing me toward the military. Whenever we had discussions about my future, his voice would escalate, nearly reaching a scream.

"Don't mess up your life!" he would shriek, insisting that the military was the best path for me. It was ironic, considering Father himself had never served in the military.

Amidst the pressure to decide about my future, finals loomed over me, adding to the overwhelming stress. Eventually, I attended the compulsory graduation ceremony, where I received my diploma. Yet, it felt hollow to me, lacking the significance for which I had hoped. The piece of paper seemed to hold little value, considering the uncertainties that awaited me beyond high school.

The night of my graduation, Father's insistence on enlisting in the military immediately after was met with my open refusal. My voice shook with a touch of defiance as I stood my ground. But Father's reaction

was swift and visceral. He stepped toward me, forcefully shoving his finger into my chest, his eyes wide with a mix of surprise and anger.

Before I could comprehend what was happening, I found myself pinned against the thin, flimsy wall of our cheap trailer. The pressure exerted by Father caused the wall to buckle slightly, emitting popping noises intermittently. He made it clear that the very next day, we would visit a military recruiter, and he was determined to make the decision final.

The suffocating sense of being trapped intensified, and I felt my resolve waver under the weight of his aggression. But deep down, I knew I couldn't let him dictate my future. Despite the fear, I had to find a way to break free from this oppressive cycle and carve my path forward.

As the situation escalated, a small cry involuntarily escaped my lips, and Becky rushed into the room, seemingly fascinated by the scene unfolding before her. Father, undeterred by her presence, intensified his aggression, pushing me harder against the wall. His hands, massive and overpowering, covered my chest and shoulders, making it difficult to breathe.

With an even greater force, he dragged me away from the wall and raised his fist, threatening to unleash his fury upon me. Fear gripped my heart, and I braced myself for the inevitable impact. At that moment, I realized that I could no longer endure this environment, and the realization filled me with a newfound determination to break free from this cycle of abuse.

Simultaneously, I leaped from the couch and stood before him, my heart pounding in my chest. In the heat of the moment, I swung with force. My balled fist connected with Father's chin, and he stumbled back, eventually falling to the floor. Becky's voice pierced through the air with a shrill cry, a mixture of pain and shock echoing her distress. Father struggled to his feet, blood trickling from his bottom lip. As he lunged toward me, fear propelled me to make a quick decision. Without hesitation, I sprinted toward the door, and with a burst of energy, I pushed it open, escaping into the warm summer night.

Once outside, I took a few steps away from the trailer, and as I turned around, I noticed Becky closing the door firmly behind me. The sound of the lock snapping shut echoed in my ears, a painful reminder of the rift that had grown between us. Feeling a mix of emotions, I decided to ride my motorcycle to a nearby park, where I could find some solace. I carefully hid it behind the restrooms, seeking refuge in the darkness.

Sitting on the ground, my back against the motorcycle, I waited patiently for the dawn to break. It was a long, restless night, filled with both anger and sorrow. As the first rays of sunlight began to grace the horizon, I couldn't help but reflect on the irony of the day—it was Father's Day.

The next morning, I set out on my motorcycle to where Ashley was now living. As I approached her, I couldn't help but notice the excitement that flushed her face. There was a sense of triumph in her eyes as she met my gaze.

"Hey, kiddo! You made it!" she exclaimed with genuine joy. "You finally graduated!"

We spent some time talking about the events of the previous night, and tears welled up in our eyes as we shared our emotions. As I narrated what had happened, my voice took on a rumbling, monotone quality, reflecting the turbulence within my heart. Eventually, I found myself asking Ashley the question that had been haunting me, "What do I do now?"

Her response was kind and understanding, "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," I replied, feeling lost and uncertain.

Ashley then shared some information she had gathered, telling me about how Jessica had mentioned that Lauren had sold a house to a college track coach. Without waiting for my reply, she continued, "Why don't you give Lauren a call and ask her to introduce you to this coach?"

Her suggestion opened a spark of hope in me. Maybe there was a path forward, an opportunity to pursue my passion for track and field. Grateful for Ashley's support, I realized that reaching out to Lauren might just be the first step toward shaping my future. But I knew it wouldn't be easy.

Unlike my ability to hold no animosity and forgive, this was not the case with Lauren. My parents and siblings held onto their grudges tightly, refusing to forget or forgive, especially when they believed they had been wronged. It was clear to me that any admission of guilt from Lauren would never happen. Their resolve to hold onto this resentment was deep-rooted and persistent. As much as I wanted resolution and closure, I knew it might not come anytime soon, and it was a burden they would carry with them to the very end, possibly even beyond.

Nevertheless, I was determined to try. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance for some sort of reconciliation or understanding. I owed it to myself to explore this possibility, for my own sake and for the chance to move forward with my life. It was a daunting prospect, but I was ready to face whatever lay ahead on this uncertain journey.

As Ashley sat there, smiling confidently, I pondered her words. It was a moment of inner conflict, as I wrestled with my emotions and fear. However, in the end, I decided to put aside my reservations and give it a try.

Swallowing my pride, I mustered the courage to call Lauren. To my surprise, she agreed to set up a meeting with the college track coach. Maybe she sensed my vulnerability and decided to show some compassion, or perhaps she had her agenda, secretly hoping for my failure. Regardless of her motivations, I knew I had to keep the appointment and face the uncertainty head-on.

After the call, Ashley took care of me, providing support and comfort. The weight of the past days, filled with emotional turmoil, took its toll, and I slept through most of the day and into the following

morning. Despite my inner turbulence and uncertainty, I had taken the first step on this journey, and that gave me a glimmer of hope.

As the appointed day arrived, I felt a mix of nervousness and determination. It was time to meet the college track coach and see what opportunities awaited me. The meeting was a crucial moment, and I was ready to embrace it with all the courage I could muster.

The university loomed before me, and I couldn't ignore the realization that it was well beyond my academic range. Still, hope was the only thing strong enough to counter the fear that gripped me. So, I put on my cleanest clothes and made my way to the meeting, riding on a motorcycle that was badly in need of repair and had certainly seen better days. Despite its worn appearance, that old motorcycle was my faithful companion, carrying me toward this uncertain opportunity.

The meeting itself was undoubtedly a long shot, but in a way, it made it feel safe. With nothing else to lose, I had the liberty to face the situation with an open mind and heart. Arriving early, I had some time to spare, and feeling slightly disoriented, I decided to explore the campus.

As I wandered, I was captivated by the university's beauty and stately presence. The small, private institution nestled among green, sloping hills exuded an aura of charm and prestige. Despite the gap between my background and the academic standard of this place, there was something poetic about being in such an environment. It was as if, for a moment, I could imagine myself fitting into this world, even if just for a fleeting moment.

Sitting on a weathered wooden bench outside the coach's office, I waited, trying my best to calm the nerves that churned inside me. My hands involuntarily twisted together as I attempted to practice a confident smile for when I met the coach.

"Hello, my name is..." I whispered under my breath, but every attempt at greeting sounded awkward and forced. Worries plagued my mind, making me question every word before it even left my lips. This wasn't how I usually talked or expressed myself.

"I would very much like to attend your university," I muttered, feeling frustrated that my words seemed so unlike me.

As time ticked by, the fear intensified, wrapping its suffocating grip around my throat. Panic loomed over me like a dark cloud, threatening to engulf me. The weight of self-doubt felt unbearable, and I tried to find solace in prayer, but my nerves made it challenging to focus. I felt too restless to pray effectively.

The fear was suffocating, as if it threatened not just my life but my very sense of worth. It was more than just a fear of death; it was the dread of failure. Failure to be accepted, failure to prove myself, failure to find my place in a world that seemed so distant and foreign.

At that moment, I recognized that facing this fear meant more than just confronting a daunting situation. It was a confrontation with the possibility of my dreams slipping away, and the thought of that was excruciating. Still, despite the turmoil within, I knew I had to gather every ounce of courage within me and face this challenge, for the sake of my future, and for the chance to prove that I was worthy of this opportunity.

My face felt flushed, and the urge to flee nearly overwhelmed me. But I hesitated, my attention caught by the soft, gentle voice of the young assistant calling me to come forward. Her soothing tone provided a moment of respite from the chaos within.

Inhaling deeply as if drawing courage from the very air around me, I rose from my seat and took deliberate steps toward the formidable door that served as the gateway to the coach's sanctum. Crafted from

stout wood and infused with the gravity of countless pivotal conversations, the door seemed almost a monolith. Yet, gathering my resolve, I pushed it open and crossed the threshold.

The assistant greeted me with a smile as warm as a hearth in winter, instantly infusing the room with an aura of kindness. As the door clicked shut behind me, I experienced an ephemeral sense of sanctuary. It was as though an ethereal veil had momentarily segregated me from the tumultuous world beyond, granting me a fleeting armistice from the anxieties that had relentlessly pursued me.

Despite the persisting tendrils of nervousness that coiled around my thoughts, the assistant's smile ignited a spark of hope within me. Her demeanor served as a comforting beacon, a gentle yet potent reminder that even in intimidating corridors, humanity and warmth could still be found. Marshaling a spirit now fortified by this fleeting exchange, I steeled myself for the encounter with the coach. I knew, deep within the marrow of my bones, that the impending conversation was more than a mere meeting; it was a crossroads, a pivotal juncture with the power to reroute the trajectory of my destiny.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sitting on one side of the desk, Coach began to speak, gently tugging at his beard. Despite his short stature, his fit physique created the illusion of a much taller man. Our introductions were a blur, but I knew him as Pat or Coach Palmer.

The distant laughter in the hallway had faded away, and Pat's words quickly put me at ease. I could feel my cheeks flushing a dull red, displaying my fear. Pat had a commanding presence that compelled you to follow him, not because of the darkness he had endured and survived during his own life, but because he exuded a sense of doing what was right and just.

I remained reserved during our conversation, mostly listening. There was no need to review my high school transcripts; they hadn't met the university's required level. That's why I found myself with this special audience with Coach Palmer. While my academic credentials were lacking, my test scores were exceptionally high.

Between 1979-81, I sat for the SAT, SAT II, ACT, and Advanced Placement exams, and I remember doing remarkably well on them. My test scores compensated for my lackluster academic performance, which intrigued Coach Palmer. He questioned the disparity, causing a brief awkward moment until I assured him, "It was not due to a lack of motivation." That seemed to satisfy him, and we moved on. He was impressed

with my scores, and I was surprised to hear they were that good, though perhaps I had forgotten amidst the turmoil and chaos in my life. It had been difficult to savor any accomplishments when depression loomed over me. I worked hard to shift my focus from "what I missed" to "what I have." Right now, I had a chance at a better life, and I desperately tried not to let it slip through my fingers.

But my test scores meant little to me; I knew it was merely a matter of pride and a waste of energy. In this world, no one cared about your accomplishments except for those who loved you. Unfortunately, I lacked letters of recommendation from high school counselors and teachers, and I certainly didn't come from a wealthy family. Any dreams my parents might have had were drowned in alcohol and sin. All I had was the fire in my belly, the desire in my heart, and my faith in Jesus. I hoped Pat shared that faith.

I couldn't help but think of my father and wonder how he would react if he knew where I was right now. The answer stung in my heart, and the same would likely be true for my mother and siblings. Jealousy and anger might be present too, but I brushed those unrighteous emotions others may have had for me aside. Right now, my focus was on this enduring race towards a better future.

An old homeless man in town, who went by the name "Willie J," used to say, "God knows it's a long game when it comes to life." He'd also quip, "Jesus don't take these three things: Cash, Credit, or Shit." Those words held truth, and I believed in the journey I was undertaking.

As we sat across from each other early in our first meeting, I sensed that Pat was exactly what I needed. For a while, we just faced each other, with Pat at his desk, his piercing blue eyes seemingly trying to understand me rather than pass judgment. The green landscape outside the university was slowly being swallowed by the approaching darkness.

"Gregg, it would be a trial semester," Pat said, leaning in closer. "You would need to work in maintenance and housekeeping throughout the summer."

He continued, "Perhaps we could work out a partial track scholarship if you hold your own on the team," accompanied by a kind smile that held a hint of mischief in a wholesome way.

Throughout his words, Pat's voice remained steady and unwavering. He made no promises except those he expected me to uphold. "It'd all be up to you, Gregg," he concluded. At the first hint of opportunity in Pat's tone, I was already agreeing to the terms. To my surprise, part of the package included a place to live on campus during the summer before my first year of college. Pat looked at me with curiosity, his powerful hands supporting his bearded chin. He appeared neat and composed, wearing a crisp shirt and tie.

Though it would be a lot of work, I felt a sense of safety in this opportunity, something I had never experienced before. My faith in myself had always been riddled with doubt, like a piece of old cheese with holes, but not so with Jesus.

Pat seemed to sense my hesitancy and leaned in even closer as if drawing the agreement from me. "You in, Gregg?" he asked.

"I'm in," I replied, my voice betraying a hint of uncertainty. I knew I couldn't expect to breeze through academics. Fear gripped me, and I had countless reasons to be apprehensive. Yet, Pat wasn't about to let me off easily. He had a firm grip on me and seemed determined not to let go. In his mind, the decision was already made – I was going to attend the university, and that was final.

Pat conveyed a sense that success wasn't a question of whether I would make it, but how I would succeed. Despite the pile of evidence against me, pointing to my potential failure, Pat refused to accept that as an option. He made me believe that I could overcome my challenges. Though I lacked the confidence in

myself that Pat had in me, I knew deep down that I was broken. But it didn't matter to Pat; he saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself.

I wondered how many of my fellow bright-eyed students had a past similar to mine and still chose education over homelessness, effort over sloth, and good over evil. It didn't matter. I was going to do just that—I was going to choose the light over the darkness.

Pat had faith in me, and I found solace in combining that with my faith in Jesus—it felt like a perfect combination. Despite the words of my abusers, there were new words like diligence and perseverance, which were foreign to them. Pat was telling me to fight or die. It wasn't something new to me; I had been fighting since birth. He encouraged me not to fear the dark and promised to be more than just my companion, but also my coach and mentor—he would be my refuge. His eyes shone with a light that was already saving me.

Meeting Pat made me realize that I had already given up on myself before our encounter. His words struck me like a crashing train, urging me to go back and start over, or else I would be lost forever. The idea of disappointing Pat filled me with overwhelming fear, even though we had just met. He had already made up his mind to save me; that much was clear. In just fifteen minutes of our meeting, I sensed something about him, something full of potential that he wanted to pass on to me and make stick.

Before Pat, I found it hard to hold back tears. With him, there was no need to hide. Surprisingly, I didn't feel vulnerable; instead, I felt exposed in a way that made me trust him completely. It was in his gaze, words, and smile that I found myself drawn in—so much so that I experienced a feeling unlike anything I had known before. It was as if I were a child gazing up at freshly falling snow, an excellent and soft sensation that brought a profound sense of peace, calming my every nerve. This vision felt like something I had been searching for my entire life, and Pat offered it to me unconditionally. He might have called it an opportunity or a chance at something better, but to me, it was mercy. That moment when mercy embraced me through

Pat made me feel a sense of belonging, a comfort of being part of something, and it will forever be etched in my memory.

Later, alone in my new dorm room, I let the anxiety surface. 'Dear God,' I wept, stifling my cries to avoid being heard. Nestled under a pile of blankets, I pressed my back against the wall, trying to calm down. My tear-filled gaze met the mirror's reflection across the room, revealing a face both happy and afraid. Clutching a pillow against my belly, I reminded myself that it was all up to me.

As the summer wind whined at my window, I contemplated the weight of the situation. I arose and stood near the door, turning off the light, enveloping myself in the darkness, illuminated only by the moonlight. Returning to my nest of blankets on the bed, I let my eyes adjust to the dimness. Soon, tears continued to stream down my face as I softly cried and mumbled words I couldn't comprehend.

From deep within, an unsettling feeling started to rise, and I braced myself for the familiar voice of doubt—the collective voices of all my abusers. I saw the gray space stretching before me, between success and failure, and the latter seemed to race toward me like a pack of hungry wolves. The unexpected opportunity before me brought both excitement and fear, as the realization dawned that I could fail miserably.

The weight of this fear crushed me, and I yearned to escape from it all. I cried more fiercely, burying my face in the pillow, while the summer wind continued to whine outside. In the confines of my room, I wept into the empty air. The intense emotions surged through me, and I nearly threw up before settling back down on the bed.

My mind involuntarily went back to the memories of abuse, replaying them like an investigative report from a detective. In my mind's eye, I saw a small and frail figure—a young boy—darting frantically from room to room in a dilapidated house, desperately trying to help his mother find her glasses, her alcohol, or her cigarettes while she screamed incoherently for him to hurry before she lost her temper. Her temper was already beyond the boiling point, and the boy bore the scars to prove it. The tender areas of his body were red and

aching, as he was pursued by this haunting and nightmarish creature—the woman who should have been a nurturing mother was now reduced to a tormentor.

In these memories that tortured me, the voice of that woman's laughter echoed in my mind. I couldn't help but reminisce about the incredibly challenging journey that led me here. I worked relentlessly to escape the clutches of abuse and poverty that plagued my past. Despite my achievement, I found myself feeling utterly alone and burdened by the dysfunction of my family, making them untrustworthy companions.

In this moment of solitude, I leaned heavily on my unwavering faith in Jesus, for my self-belief had waned due to the hardships I had endured. Nonetheless, I was determined to embrace this new chapter in my life, drawing strength from my faith and holding onto the hope that college would pave the way for a brighter future.

Now, in this college dorm room, I finally had the simple luxuries that I hadn't experienced in years—a clean toilet and shower, a place to sleep and eat in peace. It was surreal to have these basic comforts that most take for granted. Gone were the days when I felt guilty for nourishing myself or finding joy in modest pleasures.

In the past, I was but a terrified child, forced to shoulder burdens beyond my years, which aged me prematurely. The memories of those horrible sights and sounds still haunted me, and I carried the weight of countless arguments that surrounded me, leaving me perpetually sorrowful. But here, in this new environment, I could hope to mend the wounds of the past and find some semblance of peace. I was determined to seize this opportunity and reclaim the happiness that was stolen from my youth. This chapter held the promise of healing and rebuilding, and I was ready to embrace it with an open heart.

The thick night swallowed my dorm room, and ahead of me lay college—slowly looming, bringing great trepidation. I clenched my fists and wept, feeling the weight of expectations pressing down on me. Glancing at the mirror, I could no longer see my reflection and a sudden fear gripped me. But I fought against the terror, focusing on slowing my breathing as the panic subsided.

Tears continued to stream down my face, and the pain in my heart was unbearable. Wrapped tightly in blankets, I tried to find solace and concentrate on my breathing. It was too late to quit now. I had committed myself to this opportunity for higher education and the promise of better days. I knew I had to ride it out; if I didn't, I would be submerged, lost forever.

Exhausted, I began to drift off to sleep, the room still spinning around me. The voices of my abusers—the yapping and howling of my mother—rose close behind me. I groaned and curled up into a ball, knowing that I had to face the demons that lived within me. They hated this place and threatened to drive me insane with every panic attack, always seeking to break me once and for all.

As I lay buried deep within the blankets, sleep slowly taking over, my thoughts drifted to where life had brought me in the past eighteen years. This night marked a significant moment—the first time I had lived away from family, friends, and foster homes. The weight of this new chapter was overwhelming, especially when considering how I would navigate the challenges of academics in college.

Yet, there was something else troubling me, which had been on my mind since I woke up that morning. It was a particular event, a yearly celebration, which I had never been able to fully enjoy or discuss due to my mother's refusal to recognize it. She had a vehement dislike for this annual celebration, even wishing it had never happened. Whenever it was accidentally mentioned, she would punish me or my siblings, so we learned to keep quiet about it and never speak of it, let alone celebrate it.

My father, on the other hand, did celebrate this event once, but he managed to ruin it, making it an awful day. So, that day was also lost to me for celebration. Nonetheless, this event held great significance for me, making it even more surreal due to its date—September 2, 1981—my 18th birthday.

But more than this particular importance was the ominous fact that after eighteen years straight, it would be the first time in my life that I would be away from all of my accusers and abusers. The first time food would not be withheld from me, and I wouldn't be abandoned outside some grimy bar or thrown out of the house into the dark as a child while I beat endlessly on the door and window in fear, pleading for my mother to let me inside again. It was not merely because I was fearful of the dark, but rather because I was afraid my mother would hurt herself, and I wouldn't be there to stop her. The burden of scouring the house for spent cigarettes due to my mother running out and enduring her lies and ugly words bellowing into my small and confused face would no longer be mine. I could finally be free from the constant vigilance against strangers visiting and all the other malevolent things darkened hearts and depraved minds conjure for their enjoyment.

In other words, if I failed, I would have only myself to blame, and I refused to play the victim. I was a survivor, chosen, and made in the image of YAH (B'tselem Elohim), counted among His Treasured People, and grafted into the family of Abraham. My Father had not created me to quit or give in, but to be righteous, virtuous, loving, and compassionate, and filled with faith and devotion, not the sin of 'pride.' God calls me to be an agent of peace and justice, forgiving and merciful, and ultimately to become one with Him.

This understanding might seem foolish to my mother, father, and siblings, but to me, as I reflected on the sacrifice Jesus made for me on the cross, I was overwhelmed by the depth of His love and selflessness. His willingness to endure such immense agony for the sake of humanity's redemption filled my heart with gratitude and purpose. I was determined not to let this incredible sacrifice go to waste by dwelling on victimhood.

I would often cast my mind back to the time when Jesus suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane. The weight of His imminent sacrifice becomes palpable as I imagine Him in deep anguish, carrying the burden of the world's sins upon His shoulders. His soul was in turmoil, and He sweat drops of blood in distress. At that moment, I could sense the profound loneliness He must have felt, as even His closest disciples could not stay awake to comfort Him. Despite the overwhelming agony and the desire to be delivered from this responsibility, Jesus chose to submit to God's will above His own.

This poignant representation of taking up one's cross and embracing responsibility resonated deeply with me. It was not just about my life, but also about the lives of those around me. Jesus' willingness to endure the unimaginable demonstrates His unparalleled love for humanity. He could have sought relief, yet He knew that fulfilling God's plan was paramount. In this moment of vulnerability, He exemplified the epitome of faith and obedience, and it serves as a powerful reminder for me to face life's challenges with strength and unwavering devotion.

As I reflected on this pivotal moment in Jesus' journey, I was inspired to confront my challenges and responsibilities with grace and determination. I understood that my journey may be fraught with difficulties, but by keeping my faith steadfast and focusing on the lessons of selflessness and perseverance that Jesus imparts, I was confident that I could navigate the stormy waters that lie ahead.

This newly minted courage wasn't about negating the scars of the past or minimizing their imprint on the tapestry of my life. Rather, it was an affirmation—a conscious embrace—of the untapped capacity for growth and personal metamorphosis. No longer was I circumscribed by circumstances that once sought to shatter me; I was, instead, sculpted by the fortitude I had harvested through unyielding perseverance. This journey unfolded not merely as a solitary quest but as a generational undertaking—a tangible chance to sever the insidious cycle of pain and dysfunction, to bequeath a legacy punctuated by hope and invincible resilience.

Outside my window, the velvety shroud of darkness had shifted in meaning. No longer an omen of foreboding, it now stood as a subtle nudge—a poetic reminder—of the latent promise tucked within the enigmatic folds of the unknown. The summer wind, once a harbinger of restless nights, now murmured a lullaby as tender as a mother's touch, lulling me into a tranquility that had long eluded me. I surrendered to sleep, allowing dreams to ferry me to realms unfettered by the gravity of earthly woes.

As I drifted into that comforting abyss, an inner clarity dawned: tomorrow was not just another day, but a canvas ripe for creation—a fresh chapter in the ongoing epic of my existence. It was a landscape where I could ascend beyond the detritus of yesteryears, carving out a future radiant with faith, drenched in mercy, and fortified by a strength that had served as my silent companion through the inky abyss of my darkest days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After a laborious summer as a member of the maintenance and housekeeping staff—diligently scrubbing porcelain toilets, mopping cold linoleum floors, sweeping echoing hallways, and brushing soulful strokes of paint onto barren walls—the moment for my college odyssey finally arrived. Bathed in hopeful sunlight, I embraced a rigorously curated schedule of courses and, with a sense of intrepid zeal, declared my major in Business Administration and Economics. Astonishingly, I also ventured into a minor in Euclidean Mathematics. This courageous academic choice symbolized a metamorphosis that defied my understanding.

During my formative years, mathematics loomed over me like an impenetrable fortress, its complex equations evading my comprehension. Basic operations—addition, multiplication, division, and subtraction—resembled arcane runes, distant from my intellectual grasp. Emotions of self-doubt gnawed at me, threatening to unravel the delicate threads of my confidence.

I remembered how fifth grade had presented a watershed moment; a crucible of desperation compelled me to cheat on a state math exam. Confronted by the formidable edifice of the test, I illicitly absconded with it to the sanctuary of my home, seeking solace and enlightenment within its walls, only to surreptitiously return it the next day.

Guilt, that cumbersome weight, shackled my conscience. It whispered darkly in my ears, sowing seeds of internal conflict that clashed violently with my fledgling ethical beliefs. It felt as if celestial scales were tipping against me, poised to trigger divine retribution.

As I navigated this emotional quagmire, I discerned the intricate emotional tapestry I'd woven—threads of desperation, guilt, and existential dread entangled with fleeting rays of redemption. This labyrinthine journey chiseled a transformative lesson into my very core.

Guilt's haunting shadow intensified my yearning to conquer mathematics—the language I deemed the sacred dialect of the universe. Propelled by this alchemical blend of remorse and awe, I embarked on a relentless quest for numerical enlightenment. But destiny had a twist in store.

Over subsequent years, my mathematical abilities blossomed as if guided by an unseen celestial hand. I marveled at this newfound grace with numbers and equations, ascribing it to divine intervention—perhaps a touch from Jesus himself. This epiphanic revelation transformed my worldview; mathematics emerged as an ethereal language, articulating the very blueprint of existence.

When I embarked on my collegiate journey, the allure of Business Administration and Mathematics captivated me with their promise of significance, even though their true essence remained elusive. Perhaps it was the challenge these disciplines presented or the vanity of their prestigious titles—they sounded important and impressive. It was also an opportunity to prove that I wasn't as inadequate as I often believed.

Yet, throughout my life, whether by choice or circumstance, I seemed drawn to take on more than I could handle, consistently opting for the narrow and more difficult path. A mysterious, almost magnetic force compelled me forward to do just that. My college entrance examination—a rite of passage—affirmed my diverse academic abilities, even if my GPA suggested I had my limitations.

With the distribution of each course syllabus, a flush of anxiety and trepidation would wash over me. The fear of failure seemed to burgeon with every passing day, and a sudden sense of isolation appeared to engulf me. As the weeks of the first semester advanced, I found myself falling behind, the nagging sensation of being unprepared for the academic rigor growing stronger, despite my intellectual capability. I remained committed to keeping pace with my studies, dedicating every moment outside of track and work to reading and learning. I committed double the usual time to my studies, laboring to bridge the gap.

As weeks lapsed into months, the specter of failure hovered ominously. Time, once abundant, became a scarce commodity as academic rigor escalated, despite my earnest efforts. Yet, undeterred by this tide of uncertainty, I submerged myself in a sea of knowledge.

Still, an undercurrent of anxiety tugged at every endeavor. The stakes were immense; my future, it seemed, hinged on navigating college successfully, evading the fate that had befallen my parents and siblings. With unwavering resolve, I embraced my studies, though a persistent undercurrent of panic and unease persisted. I recognized that I must give my utmost. I immersed myself in reading until my eyes stung and wrote until my hand cramped, pushing myself to my limits.

The weight of college, coupled with the shadows of past abuse and poverty, cast a heavy toll on my ability to focus. It felt as though I was learning to read anew, and the stakes had never been higher. The rigors of the collegiate track added to the challenges, creating a formidable obstacle.

Recognizing that vulnerability could be a bastion of strength, humility became my compass, guiding me away from the treacherous cliffs of pride and toward collaborative endeavors. My collegiate sojourn was sculpted not merely by the hurdles vaulted, but also by my newfound openness to soliciting help—a vital ingredient in my ultimate triumph.

Seeking help was an active pursuit; I joined labs and sought guidance from teachers and students alike. I acknowledged that seeking assistance was a sign of strength, not weakness. I discarded the notion

that I should brave every challenge alone. Pride, I realized, could be a barricade to progress. I was determined not to be hindered by such hubris. Instead, I humbly sought guidance, recognizing that success often rests upon collective effort.

As the semester unfolded, I absorbed invaluable lessons. I learned not only about my academic subjects but also about the importance of humility, persistence, and the potency of seeking support when needed. My collegiate journey was shaped not just by the challenges that arose, but also by the willingness to ask for help, a factor that contributed significantly to my development and triumph.

Success, I realized, was a mosaic, assembled from individual tiles of effort and guidance. As the academic term unfolded, each lesson—academic or otherwise—etched itself onto the slate of my evolving identity.

During this trying period, I aimed to strike a balance amidst the demands of academics, track, and the emotional baggage I carried. It was a time of introspection and tenacity. While I battled, I also understood that each hurdle offered a chance for growth and resilience. Despite the hardships, I persevered, knowing that this journey would lead me to greater strength and insight. The first semester became a pivotal chapter, a time of facing fears head-on and uncovering the depths of my determination.

Being a freshman on the track team was not without its challenges and self-doubt. It was evident that some teammates and competitors surpassed me in athleticism, leaving me to feel like a mere training tool, struggling to keep up. The ongoing effort to improve highlighted my perceived skill deficit. Yet, amid my feelings of inadequacy, there existed joy and camaraderie in the thrill of competing against skilled rivals. Regardless of the outcome, being part of the team offered a wonderful experience, reminding me that the journey itself held its rewards.

Positioned in the starting blocks, the world seemed to fade, and I transformed. Running provided an escape from emotional wounds and life's burdens. On the track, the fear of failure and haunting memories dissipated, leaving only the race ahead. At the starting gun's report, a journey began where focus narrowed to a single point of light, with breath and a determination to give my all. With every stride, that light expanded, propelling me closer to the finish line.

In these moments, I couldn't help but draw strength from biblical runners, who overcame trials and races of their own. Their stories resonated, reminding me that running wasn't solely about physical performance but also about inner resolve and unwavering faith. The biblical quote, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding" (Psalm 119:32), held deeper significance as I ran with my sights set on God's purpose.

Through trials and challenges on the track, I found comfort in knowing I was part of something greater—a team that supported and uplifted each other. While I may not have been the fastest or most skilled, the lessons learned and bonds formed on the track were invaluable. Each race taught me that it wasn't solely about victory but about transcending my limits and running with a heart fueled by determination and purpose. Ultimately, I grasped that my track journey mirrored life, and it was the courage to persist despite obstacles that truly counted.

The rigor of my courses was daunting. The university, a prestigious institution run by Dominican nuns, adhered to traditional educational methods, structuring undergraduate courses to be as challenging as modern graduate programs. Their goal was to shape capable individuals who would use their knowledge to make the world a better place. This approach was rare, particularly as the U.S. educational system had become more lenient after the 1950s.

In one of my courses, we were tasked with producing an extensive business case—a challenge that would have been daunting even on a good day. But as the deadline loomed closer, a new kind of panic began to creep in. It wasn't just about the assignment; it was something deeper, something darker, like a shadow unfurling in the corners of my mind. The weight of expectations and the fear of failure wrapped around my chest like a vice, tightening with each passing moment.

The panic attacks came without warning, seizing me with an overwhelming sense of dread that gnawed at the edges of my sanity. My heart pounded with the force of a sledgehammer, each beat echoing in my ears as if the world itself was closing in. Breathing became a battle, as though the air around me had turned into thick, suffocating smoke, and every gasp was a desperate attempt to stay afloat.

These attacks were more than fleeting moments of terror—they were the embodiment of a profound sense of helplessness. The metallic snap that accompanied each one seemed to herald the collapse of my carefully constructed world, a cruel reminder that control was slipping through my fingers. As I lay there, gasping for breath, I realized that this wasn't just about an assignment; it was a confrontation with my vulnerability, a glimpse into the abyss that resides within us all.

In those moments, the line between reality and nightmare blurred, and I was left to grapple with the overwhelming question: What does it mean to truly lose control? The business case became more than just an academic exercise—it became a symbol of the deeper struggle within, a test not just of intellect but of endurance, resilience, and the fragile nature of the human psyche.

In these internal storms, I fought to stifle whimpers, to retain control. Yet, I wrestled with overwhelming feelings. My struggles weren't just academic; they delved into my core. Reaching out for help was imperative, to confide and seek understanding. It was an uphill battle, yet confronting issues was crucial. Over time, I aspired to uncover triggers, to heal emotional wounds. Resilience aimed to triumph over emotional whirlwinds.

Education was my lifeline, my last hope. Promising Pat I'd give my best effort; I concealed the turmoil. A gathering storm of shame and secrets raged, ready to burst. The lure of temporary escape in relationships couldn't erase demons. Amid emotional instability, I faced guilt and shame. Struggles persisted; lessons awaited. Reckoning with actions was vital for redemption.

The professors, Pat, and the university's support staff aided my studies. During track practices, Pat's presence reassured me. His arm was around my shoulders, and his encouraging words uplifted me. Supportive gestures buoyed me, sheltering me from internal storms. A battle raged within me, shadows yet to emerge. I remained on the brink, in a haven that offered refuge but not salvation. Academic challenges loomed. Amid the darkness, hope for a brighter future persisted.

Despite my efforts to control the flood of emotions, I often found myself racing against it, struggling to stay ahead. Nightmares haunted my sleep, and each morning, evidence of tears stained my pillow. The weight of the past persisted, and I wrestled with the balance between moving forward and confronting the pain within. My journey was a testament to resilience and healing, a quest for a brighter future while reconciling with my past ghosts.

As darkness loomed, I sought refuge in studies, immersing myself in higher learning to counter the suffocating grip on my soul. Track, work, and academics filled my days, leaving little room for self-analysis or therapy. Even the most severe panic attacks nudged me only slightly toward considering seeking help. Shame eclipsed the burden of panic.

Survival became paramount, and education held the key. Graduating with a college degree was my lifeline. Amid the turmoil, a positive transformation slowly emerged. Higher education began to reshape me, yet the lurking darkness remained. Each moment seemed suspended between barely holding on and pushing through.

Choosing education over confronting inner demons, I distanced myself from my abusers, embracing new possibilities. Knowledge became my refuge, protecting me from those who spewed hate and crushed me without love, as Pat had cautioned. Witnessing cruelty had marked me, but education offered hope for a brighter path.

The first semester at the university brought ups and downs, navigating college life, and balancing various subjects. Years of attending different high schools left me with a mixed bag of study habits. This journey was my stand, a vow to seize every opportunity.

Amid the relentless pursuit of a brighter future, a crossroads appeared where survival and growth converged. I was determined to rise above the shadows. Higher education was my beacon, leading to brighter days despite navigating a sea of emotions.

The curriculum laid out by my chosen major provided structure amid life's chaos. I began jotting down emotions on scraps of paper, a cathartic attempt at expression. I even wove elements of these feelings into my literature assignments, masked by the main character. This process, though, intensified emotions rather than providing release. I halted this approach, refocusing solely on academics.

The first semester ended, marking a significant milestone. Though challenges remained, progress and hope replaced despair. Each step forward held meaning, a testament to resilience and the development of who I would become.

Facing the second semester, new challenges emerged. Halfway through, I called Lauren, despite past pain. Her condescending reaction stung. Lauren still held power over me, fueled by love for my sister Lynn. Separation from Lynn was painful, especially since I attended college nearby. I yearned to see Lynn, but Lauren's reluctance during our call was evident.

Pleading for the chance to see Lynn, I sensed a shift in Lauren's stance. She seemed intent on keeping Lynn away. Lauren and Tim had decided to distance us further.

Eventually, Lynn was placed in foster care during her sophomore year of high school. Despite the pain, the foster home was near the university, offering freedom for Lauren and Tim. Determined, I vowed this was the last time Lauren and Tim influenced us. I aimed to build a better future, free from their toxic grip. This newfound freedom allowed me to focus on my studies and break free from their hold.

Reuniting with Lynn brought joy amidst challenges. Her laughter and embrace filled me with happiness. She ran to me at her new foster home, small and beautiful. Separation was overcome by our bond. Lynn attended a high school near my university. Seeing her fortified my resolve to build a better future for us both.

Lynn's presence motivated me to become better. Our bond was strong, a chance to break free from the past. Tears flowed as she expressed love, and I held her close, embracing the moment. She confided in me, and I promised to be there for her. With Lynn, my purpose was renewed. Our bond could overcome any obstacle. I vowed to protect her, to be the brother she deserved, and to build a future filled with love and hope.

The reasons behind Lynn's separation from Lauren remained unclear, much like when I was removed from her life. The hurtful and nonsensical words inflicted upon Lynn, a scared sixteen-year-old, left her bewildered. Holding her hand firmly, I reassured her of our joint resilience against this new challenge. In my eyes, Lynn found unwavering love and support. Our bond grew stronger, her tears transforming into a smile.

We bid each other goodnight with deep breaths and newfound strength. Lynn introduced me to her foster mother, a kind-hearted woman despite her visual impairment. Lynn's happiness brought tears, and I was thankful for the care she found in her new home.

As I left Lynn reluctantly, her final embrace renewed my sense of purpose and hope. This encounter had saved me from the dark spiral I was descending into before seeing her. As I returned to college, my gaze involuntarily turned back, and there she was, waving from the yard, her presence palpable even after a considerable distance.

In that instant, I understood that despite any challenges life might throw our way, Lynn and I would face them united. Our love and connection transcended distance, and I committed to being there for her just as she was there for me.

For the next two years, my unwavering dedication centered on ensuring Lynn's high school graduation. While Lynn cherished me, my family's sentiments toward me were starkly different. Their deep-seated resentment and jealousy fueled their intense hatred for my determination to escape our past and create a better life.

While I pursued higher education and worked diligently, my family remained trapped in cycles of substance abuse, crime, and darkness. My pursuit of a brighter path contrasted sharply with their lives, intensifying their disdain. My actions inadvertently felt like a judgment on their choices, though my intent was never such. I deeply cared for them, longing for their liberation from self-inflicted pain.

To them, I became a constant reminder that an alternative path existed—one of redemption and transformation. Their denial of this possibility twisted their perspective, labeling me as someone who thought himself superior. They couldn't grasp that my heart ached for their suffering, and I yearned to see them find solace and happiness.

Their animosity persisted, baffling me as I struggled to comprehend why they couldn't see my love and concern. My faith in God's plan for me, whatever that might entail, propelled me forward, even as their

bitterness and destructive actions weighed heavily on my heart. I didn't understand why I was designed with a compassionate heart, but I embraced it as an intrinsic part of my identity.

Despite the pain their hatred caused, I refused to abandon them. I held a steadfast desire that they would find light and embark on a better path, even when it seemed elusive. Guided by this hope, I clung to faith, navigating life with a purpose. I carried their burdens in my wounded heart, but I persevered with determination and a profound belief in the power of compassion and empathy, overcoming the challenges that came my way.

This same hope and resolve fueled my dedication to Lynn's well-being and education, which was a duty and a selfless act of care. It stemmed from a deep desire to give her the support she deserved. I was determined to ensure her life would rise above the hardships we experienced growing up. Even during my university studies, I always made time to help Lynn with her schoolwork and offer guidance, always putting her needs before mine.

As Lynn had only recently transitioned to a foster home among other girls cared for by a kind woman, I knew her adjustment would be challenging. Nonetheless, I was committed to being a steady presence in her life, helping her navigate high school academics and easing her burdens. Caring for Lynn felt natural and gratifying, reciprocated by her love. Her presence restored my sanity, making me feel valued once more.

The joy of being with Lynn, her gratitude for my support, and the satisfaction of aiding her studies rekindled my sense of purpose and meaning. It was a fulfilling endeavor, and every moment spent with her was cherished. Despite my busy schedule, aiding Lynn took precedence, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

During that summer, Lynn and I faced challenges together, mainly shielding her from distractions like boys and excessive partying. Our proximity allowed us ample time to support each other. Our bond

acted as a counterbalance. However, I remained unaware that the weight of my past would eventually breach the protective barriers I'd erected.

My sophomore year at college became a crucible of repressed memories and emotions, a relentless pressure cooker that threatened to explode. The specter of a mental collapse, akin to my mother's decline, haunted my every waking moment. I lived in perpetual fear of losing my sanity, a fate I'd watched my mother succumb to, and now it loomed ominously over me.

A severe panic attack, unlike any I'd experienced before, took hold with an iron grip. It engulfed me in a paralyzing fear that my mind was teetering on the brink of irreversible madness, mirroring my mother's tragic fate. I felt as if my memories and secrets were converging upon me, suffocating me with their weight. Despite my desperate attempts to suppress them, they proved insurmountable without proper therapy or a release valve for the pressure building within me.

The horror of losing my sanity felt like a terrifying death sentence. The dread of my mind shattering beyond repair was paralyzing. Scars from my mother's abuse and the painful history I carried surged to the surface, leaving me defenseless against their relentless assault. I had tried to be strong, to carry on for Lynn and myself, but the burden had become unbearable. I stood on the precipice of an abyss, expecting the darkness to consume me entirely.

In that despair-ridden moment, my thoughts turned to those I cared about – Lynn, who loved me deeply, and Pat, whom I felt I had let down. I also considered the idea of angels, beings believed to offer solace in times of darkness. But above all, my thoughts turned to God, a desperate plea that He could hear me, that He was not indifferent to my suffering.

Tears streamed down my face as I reached out to God, uncertain if He would answer or if my pleas would fall on deaf ears. Memories of the statue of Jesus outside the college library flooded back, the

embodiment of mercy with outstretched hands. In moments of solitude, I would softly kiss His feet, believing this gesture conveyed the intentions of my heart without the need for words.

Amidst the emotional turmoil, a resonant buzzing filled my ears, like trapped ringing in a sealed metal box. It felt suffocating, a sensation reminiscent of my childhood when, during terrible fights between my parents, I would cry and hide inside a metal rocket ship. A feverish heat enveloped me, drenching my bed in sweat and leaving me disoriented.

But despite the engulfing darkness and overwhelming sensations, one certainty persisted – I did not want to die or surrender to madness. The fear of losing myself to insanity or death was overpowering. Amid this overwhelming apprehension, I clung to the sliver of hope that a path out of the abyss existed, that within my pain, a spark of light might be found.

In this desperate moment, I made a frantic plea for help. I reached out to Dr. Ed Skinner, a psychology professor at the university, whose contact information I had from an elective course. Trembling and desperate, I implored his assistance. The intensity of fear far outweighed any concern for appearing vulnerable or weak. Confronting the abyss, I needed someone to save me.

Dr. Skinner, also a suicide prevention counselor for the local Sheriff's Department, remained composed on the other end of the line. He was well-versed in handling such situations and was ready to help. He instructed me to meet him at the Sheriff's Department in twenty minutes.

I drove with a sense of urgency, racing to meet Dr. Skinner. Despite the late hour, around 1:00 am, he was already there, waiting. His immediate response was a comfort, a sign that he might have set aside his own needs and sleep to aid me. This act kindled a glimmer of hope that escape from the encroaching shadows and the journey toward healing might be attainable.

Together, we would confront the darkness that threatened to engulf me. Guided by Dr. Skinner, I aspired to make sense of the unbearable memories of my past and initiate the process of healing. It marked the initial phase of a prolonged and demanding path to recovery. Yet, for the first time in a long while, I had a lifeline to hold onto.

During weeks of therapy with Dr. Skinner, I bared my soul and shared every agonizing detail of my past. The burden I had carried for so long was finally released, pouring out in an unstoppable torrent of words. Dr. Skinner listened attentively, occasionally urging me to slow down as emotions surged. His presence offered solace, enabling me to share the depths of my torment.

Dr. Skinner's office became a sanctuary, a place where vulnerability could surface without fear of condemnation. He encouraged me to express my feelings, even in the face of potential insanity. The breakdown had left me shaken, yet I recognized that I had come to the right place to confront my inner demons.

As I spoke, Dr. Skinner assured me I was not alone and that he was there to guide me through the darkness. His genuine care and compassion shone through his eyes, and it was evident that he possessed a profound love for his patients, including me.

Our sessions became a lifeline, a chance to confront the traumas of my past and initiate the healing process. Ed's presence provided a sanctuary for me to navigate the intricate labyrinth of my emotions. With his guidance, I embarked on the journey of unearthing the tangled threads that had ensnared me for so long.

The road ahead was challenging and lengthy, yet within it, a spark of hope ignited. Dr. Skinner's compassion and wisdom played a pivotal role in granting me the courage to confront my past, initiating a process of healing and transformation.

In Dr. Skinner's sanctuary-like office, I summoned the strength to disclose the horrific memories that had long haunted me. Tears flowed, and my nose bled as I unearthed the torment I endured at my mother's hands. Every buried secret surged forth, unimpeded by fear or shame.

Ed listened with infinite patience and empathy, encouraging me to continue sharing. His reassuring grip on my hand provided the support and comfort I craved. As I narrated my devastating history, I saw pain and comprehension within Ed's gaze, alongside empathy that kindled a spark of hope.

He reassured me that I bore no responsibility for what had transpired, that as a child, I was blameless. He recognized my love and care for my mother, assuring me it was natural for a child to love a parent, even in dire circumstances.

In that instant, the phrase "This isn't your fault" took on true significance. Ed's words permeated the walls of shame and self-blame I'd constructed, casting a glimmer of light into the abyss. I began to recognize that the abuse wasn't my doing and that I merited understanding and compassion.

In that moment of vulnerability and shared understanding with Ed, I felt a profound connection. It was as if I had found a guiding light amid my darkest night. Ed's genuine care and his unwavering belief in my capacity to heal alleviated the profound solitude of my suffering. Finally, I had someone who was not only willing but committed to journeying alongside me as I embarked on the arduous path toward healing.

As Ed enveloped me in his empathy, tears flowed freely, releasing emotions that had long been trapped within. It was a moment of profound relief and liberation, as though a heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders. With Ed's presence and support, I began to believe in my strength and resilience, and that I could surmount the deep scars of my past.

Guided by Ed's compassion and wisdom, I glimpsed a path forward—a path that involved confronting my painful history, mending my emotional wounds, and reclaiming my life. The spark of hope

that had infiltrated my heart became a lifeline in the darkness, and I clung to it with unwavering determination.

Ed evolved into my anchor, a steady presence in the turbulent waters of my past. With him by my side, I embarked on the gradual reconstruction of my life, piece by piece. His belief in my strength bolstered my confidence, and I began to envision a future bright with possibilities.

Yet, as my journey toward healing and self-discovery continued, the presence of Jesus in my life remained a source of both comfort and mystery. My faith remained a refuge, and I delved deeper into the teachings of Jesus, finding inspiration and guidance in biblical tales of resilience and redemption.

I pondered the enigma of my survival and why I had been given the chance to rebuild my life when so many others suffered. It was a question that haunted me, one for which there might never be a single, grand revelation. Instead, I considered the possibility that my purpose lay in the small, meaningful moments of helping others, particularly Lynn, who needed my love and support to build a brighter future. Perhaps I was meant to use my experiences to assist others who had endured similar traumas, to be a beacon of hope for those who felt lost and broken.

Throughout my healing process, I learned that understanding why certain events unfold may always remain elusive. Yet, this doesn't mean our experiences lack meaning. Through pain and hardship, we gain the resilience to rise above and create lives filled with purpose and significance.

While the enigma of my survival's purpose persisted, I embraced the ambiguity, trusting in the greater design at play. My faith in God, combined with the love and support of individuals like Ed and Pat, gave me the courage to persevere even in moments of overwhelming despair.

In my journey toward healing and growth, the memory of the past remained a steadfast companion. It had molded me into the person I had become, and I no longer wished to erase or forget it. Instead, I embraced it as an integral part of my narrative, acknowledging the darkness while drawing strength from the light that followed.

Over time, my wounds healed, leaving behind scars that served as a testament to my resilience and the power of love and support. My identity was no longer defined by the horrors of my past; rather, it was shaped by the strength I had harnessed to overcome them.

In the end, the reason behind my survival could forever be shrouded in an enigma—an inscrutable mystery that defies earthly logic—were it not for an unwavering belief in something—or rather, Someone—many might dismiss as a mere illusion. To me, He embodies a brilliance and profundity that transcends any mortal attempt at explanation. He is my King of Kings, and the inexplicability of my survival mirrors the immeasurable worth I hold in His eyes. I wrestle with the age-old question: Why does Jesus love me when society is so quick to ration its affection, to measure love as though it were a finite resource?

Yet, as I pondered this, my heart brimmed with gratitude so profound it felt almost celestial. I had been gifted a life richly textured with hope, a life pulsing with purpose, fortified by the enduring belief that even in the bleakest hours, even when darkness clings like a second skin, a mere flicker of light holds the Almighty power paving a luminous path toward a new dawn.

As I continued my pilgrimage for answers, fortifying my faith with every faltering step, I clutched close to the untapped potential that lay ahead, comforted by the enduring truth that Jesus, in His all-encompassing love and limitless potential for healing, would eternally be by my side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Promise Fulfilled

Completing my sophomore year of college was an indescribable feat. It meant taking on the most demanding courses while supporting Lynn's journey to high school graduation, all while battling through a significant nervous breakdown. Keeping this struggle hidden from Coach Palmer was somewhat manageable, especially since I had decided to take a year off from track. While the hoped-for partial athletic scholarship had faded, I managed expenses through student loans and a job at a plastics molding factory near campus. Gathering my strength and focusing on my studies became a daily challenge.

During this healing period, as Ed and I worked tirelessly on my recovery, tears were always at the surface. Simple things like commercials or mundane scenes could trigger an emotional response. Even horror movies, once a source of entertainment, now felt mentally unsettling and uncomfortably close. The breakdown also left a lasting mark on my ability to engage in intimate contact with others.

In response, I chose to rent an off-campus apartment, seeking the solitude I craved. The feeling of freedom in my own space was both new and exhilarating. It stood in stark contrast to my first night in the cramped dorm room. Perhaps it was the autonomy an apartment provided, allowing me to experience a kind

of liberation I had never known before. No more dealing with campus security or adhering to the restrictive dorm rules that stifled my individuality. It was just me, enclosed by four walls that echoed the melody of my newfound independence. This was a sense of freedom I had yearned for, like a released prisoner shedding the heavy chains that had burdened my soul for far too long.

In my new haven, I relished the small yet profound acts of liberation. The ability to play my favorite music at any hour, dance as if nobody were watching, and experiment fearlessly in the kitchen without judgment became sources of deep satisfaction. The walls ceased to confine me; they evolved into my canvas, a space where I could express my individuality through art and decor. This newfound autonomy was a gift that I embraced wholeheartedly, infusing my spirit with a radiant energy that emanated from within.

With each sunrise, I reveled in the beauty of mornings uninterrupted by boisterous dorm mates or the insistent calls of obligations. The city became my playground, and I explored every corner, uncovering hidden treasures that had eluded me in my previous life. I savored the taste of freedom in the air as I meandered through the streets, my heart resonating with a heady blend of liberation and personal growth. This sense of discovery that filled my days in the city stood in stark contrast to the more complex emotions I navigated in my relationships.

Yet, amid the euphoria, there were moments of wistfulness and yearning for the simplicity of days gone by. Memories of shared laughter and camaraderie with former dorm mates pulled at my heartstrings, a reminder of the connections I had left behind. The pang of solitude was a bitter pill, but a necessary one for the emancipation I sought.

As time progressed, I grew more at ease with my newfound independence, learning to navigate uncharted waters with confidence and grace. The anxiety that had once shadowed my every step waned, replaced by a burgeoning assurance in my choices and a belief in my capabilities. The apartment became a

haven of transformation, a cocoon where I shed the restraints of my past self to emerge as an unburdened and empowered individual.

Thus, with each passing day, I embraced my journey with unyielding resolve, delving deeper into uncharted realms of aspiration and dreams. Once a released captive, now a conqueror, I harnessed the power of freedom to shape my fate and forge a life that was authentically my own.

Beyond the realms of class and the factory, solitude was my frequent companion. Before my breakdown, I had been in a relationship with a fellow student named Lana. She possessed a captivating beauty with flowing brown hair and entrancing eyes. Her disposition radiated patience and kindness, qualities I tested with my frequent lapses of fidelity. Despite my flaws, Lana always forgave me. Conveniently, she lived in an apartment just a block from mine, facilitating our time spent together.

After my breakdown, I faced the heart-wrenching decision to end the relationship with Lana. She was hurt and angry, desperately trying to convince me that we could mend the fractures in our connection. Amid the turmoil, Lana took the reins, driving any decisions we made about our relationship. I played my part when it came time to part ways. I can still vividly recall that moment – Lana standing at the entrance of her apartment, her eyes swollen from tears, her breath ragged and uneven. The memory haunted me relentlessly in the days that followed.

For years, a weighty shadow shrouded me, nestled deep within the recesses of my mind. I did my utmost to keep it dormant, fearing its reawakening. Acknowledging it meant confronting something I had deliberately avoided naming until my breakdown – my profound and entrenched fear of caring for another person. I carried the belief that I was tainted, marred by something unsightly passed down by my mother. The fear that I might never be capable of nurturing a normal, wholesome relationship loomed over me.

It wasn't until I embarked on therapy with Ed that I finally confronted this suppressed fear. It taunted me as I unearthed it from its hiding place. Guided by Ed's support, I set forth on the formidable journey of accepting that traditional intimacy and ordinary relationships posed mental and emotional challenges for me. My past experiences of caregiving, particularly with my mother, cast a long shadow over me. I realized that I needed to address these deeply ingrained issues.

And so, I mustered the courage to take a bold step – distancing myself from all relationships, whether brief or enduring. It was a crucial stride towards healing from the cascade of pain. Few truly comprehend the intricate layers of abuse – like peeling an onion, with each layer causing tears to flow. It's not just the overt abuse that leaves a mark; it's also the enduring aftermath that gives rise to various psychological, biological, physiological, mental, emotional, and even spiritual ramifications.

Often hidden are the myriad phobias that develop and the involuntary habits and tics that besiege survivors, further isolating them from the world around them. Yet, society frequently turns a blind eye or brushes aside these struggles, leaving survivors to navigate their recovery alone, stranded in a sea of confusion. Compassion and empathy for survivors of abuse are rare qualities to find, as they demand profound understanding and genuine care.

Embarking on the journey of healing from the aftermath of abuse was a daunting task, and with Ed's steadfast guidance, I confronted it head-on. I began to grasp that my path to recovery necessitated moments of solitude, introspection, and the courage to confront my past. While I longed for understanding and support from others, I also recognized that true healing would emerge from within – a voyage of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Standing before Lana, endeavoring to elucidate the reasons behind our farewell, I found myself engulfed in a maelstrom of emotions. The pain she was experiencing was undeserved, and the act of causing

her hurt was agonizing for me. Yet, I understood that honesty was paramount – both with Lana and myself. The reality was that I was ill-equipped to manage a committed relationship, let alone the weight of a marriage and potential parenthood. The residue of my past trauma still clung to me like a shroud, rendering it nearly impossible for me to extend trust to anyone.

Ed, my dearest friend, consistently reiterated that I was not yet ready for the magnitude of such a commitment. His sentiment was echoed by every therapist, psychologist, and counselor, as well as those in my inner circle – friends, family, and my inner apprehensions. They were all cognizant of the recent tumultuousness I had endured, which had left me fragile and teetering on the edge of uncertainty regarding my mental equilibrium.

Handling the demands of college was a formidable task in its own right, let alone shouldering the intricacies of a serious relationship. My foundation was already trembling, and adding more to my plate would be akin to attempting to bear the weight of the world with arms already weakened by the trials I had faced.

Yet, my reluctance to embrace a serious relationship wasn't solely rooted in the present circumstances. The scars etched by my mother's emotional neglect ran deep, interwoven with a tapestry of past disappointments and betrayals. I had poured my heart into the people I cared about, hoping they would recognize my worth and reciprocate the same level of affection. However, it seemed that my efforts were met with an inability to reciprocate in kind.

"Catch-22," a book that seemed to capture the very essence of my inner struggle, resonated deeply with the turmoil within me—the yearning for love and connection intertwined with the gnawing fear of enduring more pain. Each page mirrored the paradoxes of my own life, where hope and despair wove together in a relentless dance, ensnaring me in a web of conflicting emotions.

One of my long-time aspirations since childhood had been to become a pilot. It wasn't just about the thrill of soaring through the skies; it symbolized my desperate quest to rise above the sorrow that had weighed me down for so long. Flying represented freedom—a chance to escape the tangled emotions that had become my reality.

Years after my nervous breakdown, that dream became a reality. The cockpit became my sanctuary, a place where I could distance myself from the chaos of my past, navigating not only the open skies but also the turbulent waters of my soul. Yet, even as I continued to fly, searching for meaning in the vastness of the skies, the weight of my unresolved emotions persisted. Each flight offered a reprieve, but the underlying turmoil remained.

As the earth fell away beneath me, I imagined that perhaps, in the silence of the clouds where the world's noise faded, I might find something more—a glimpse of Heaven itself. I longed for the idea that, in those moments of quiet, I might encounter a celestial presence, an angel, or even Jesus Himself. Maybe, in that serenity, He would reach down and lift me from the weight that had pressed so heavily on my heart.

However, with each flight, the reality of my inner conflict became more apparent. The desire for connection was always there, but so was the fear that reaching out would bring more pain. The higher I climbed, the more I realized that true escape wasn't about leaving the past behind—it required facing it, understanding it, and finding peace within it.

But immediately after my nervous breakdown, the fear of placing my trust in others remained deeply entrenched within my soul. It was like being trapped in a labyrinth where every passage led to more barriers. The desire for love was strong, but the prospect of vulnerability was unbearable.

As I bid farewell to Lana, I understood that parting ways was the right choice for both of us. She deserved someone who could offer the love and trust she required, while I needed the time and space to mend my wounds before contemplating the endeavor of constructing a life with another person. The separation was agonizing, but it represented a stride toward emancipation from the paradoxical situation that had held me captive for so long. Thus, I pressed on along my journey of self-discovery, holding onto the hope that one day, I would summon the strength to extend trust and allow love to enter my heart once again.

On the day I informed Lana about our relationship's end, she radiated a beauty more captivating than ever. The warmth of a September afternoon cast a gentle golden hue upon her face as she stood before me, her features reminiscent of a delicate doll. A hooded sweatshirt framed her auburn curls, adding a touch of vulnerability to her appearance that tugged at my heart. While explaining my decision, I glimpsed in her the qualities that could have made her an extraordinary partner. However, I also acknowledged the insurmountable challenge posed by her struggles with addiction.

In the wake of our difficult conversation, Lana surprised me with a small box swathed in tissue paper. Each tenderly folded layer unveiled an engagement ring, and in a spontaneous act, I delicately placed it on her finger. It marked a fleeting yet profound moment of connection, a gesture that resonated with significance despite my reservations about the institution of marriage. The memory of that instant lingered within me long after our paths diverged.

Back in my apartment, I couldn't shake the image of Lana, her face framed by the hood, glowing in the afternoon light. However, it was soon overshadowed by troubling memories of the night she caught me cheating. In a fit of despair, she broke a light bulb and cut her wrist, collapsing just a few feet from my dorm room door. The sight of her unconscious, her face ghostly pale against the darkness, filled me with dread and panic.

Her actions brought forth memories of my mother, whose struggles with addiction had haunted me for so long. The burden of taking responsibility for another person's actions, the fear of inadvertently causing harm, was overwhelming. I couldn't help but resent Lana for stirring those deep-rooted feelings within me.

Nurturing relationships with individuals like Lana or my mother required an immense reservoir of emotional strength and unwavering courage. The gnawing fear of never knowing whether my efforts to provide support and assistance would prove sufficient weighed heavily on my heart. This sentiment mirrored the emotional weight I experienced with my mother – the solemn responsibility of a caretaker, persistently fretting over her well-being and the lurking potential for harm she might encounter.

I seemed to gravitate towards these kinds of relationships, a pattern that persisted throughout my life. It's possible that this inclination emerged from a subconscious desire to rescue those who were struggling, akin to a perceived Jesus-like mission. Yet, in truth, the motivation wasn't driven by a savior complex. Rather, the reality is that a significant portion of the world's population is marred by brokenness, often inflicted by others who are similarly broken. Consequently, the probability of encountering such relationships is heightened.

Avoiding these connections entirely is an insurmountable feat, as humans are enigmas capable of concealing their true selves. However, the key lies in recognizing that even amidst brokenness, there is potential for redemption and transformation. It's about finding a balance between offering care and maintaining one's well-being, acknowledging the limits of what can be achieved in the realm of human relationships.

Balancing love and understanding was a battle I fought daily—a tightrope walk where one misstep could plunge me into despair. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't break the grip of Lana's addiction, which clung to her like a shadow, darkening every corner of our relationship. Her struggle with alcohol

dependency, making her a "functional drunk," added layers of complexity to both her character and our relationship. It was a relentless adversary, resisting every attempt to loosen its hold, much like the demons that haunted my past. I found myself at a familiar crossroads, where the choice between sacrificing myself or stepping away became agonizingly clear.

In the end, I chose survival, just as I had with my mother. It was a painful decision, realizing that I couldn't sacrifice my mental and emotional health for someone who wasn't ready to help themselves. The scars of my past taught me that self-preservation isn't selfishness but a necessary step toward healing and growth. Sometimes, the most compassionate act is to let go, to allow the other person the space to confront their battles without dragging us both down.

Throughout this journey, a thought kept nagging at me: Is this how Jesus sees us, tangled in our demons, hesitating to reach out for the healing and love He offers? The parallels between my struggles and my faith were undeniable. Just as I longed to save Lana, I imagined how it must grieve Him to see us suffer, trapped by our choices and the pain they bring. Perhaps, like me, He understands that sometimes, despite the deepest love, stepping back is the most loving thing one can do.

My decision to step back from Lana's addiction wasn't as gentle as I would have liked, but desperation drove me to an immediate form of self-compassion that I rarely embraced. I couldn't articulate this at the time, not even in college; yet, it was the same self-compassion I showed when seeking escape from my mother. Or perhaps it was the Holy Spirit intervening—if I knew this for sure, I wouldn't feel so guilty for the many decisions I've made in caring for myself, including this one. Every time I sought freedom, it felt like I was abandoning someone, but I didn't realize they had their abandonment issues and demons to wrestle with—just as I was wrestling with mine. I wish I dared to treat myself with the same kindness and understanding I offer others, but I never did. It's just not my nature. And perhaps, I thank

Jesus it never was—not even as a child. If it had been, perhaps my mother would have been dead years earlier.

By choosing self-preservation, I was practicing self-compassion, acknowledging that I couldn't continue to pour from an empty cup. This decision was also influenced by setting boundaries, a crucial aspect of emotional resilience, where one recognizes one's limits and protects their well-being. Just as Jesus might feel sorrow watching us struggle with our self-inflicted pains, I too felt the weight of love and helplessness. However, this step back wasn't abandonment; it was a way to preserve my strength and sanity, hoping that by giving Lana space, she might find her path to recovery.

In letting go, I found a deeper connection to my faith—a faith that teaches us to cast our burdens on Him and trust that there is a greater plan beyond our immediate understanding. Just as I sought to rise above my sorrow by becoming a pilot, I now sought to rise above the pain of unfulfilled love, finding solace in the belief that my journey, and theirs, would lead to a place of peace and fulfillment.

In the larger context of life, the significant lesson I drew from my experiences of caring for others was the intricate nature of love, which sometimes demands making tough decisions. My feelings for Lana were profound, but I gradually recognized the crucial significance of self-love and the ability to let go. This realization guided me on a personal journey of healing and forgiveness, prompting me to acknowledge that not everyone seeks or needs to be rescued. These reflections mirrored the parallels with my interactions with my mother, underscoring the necessity of acknowledging our limitations and embracing self-compassion.

The turning point that ultimately led to my eventual nervous breakdown, after enduring the relentless challenges that life had thrown my way, centered around a pivotal aspect: the unceasing pouring of boundless love into my mother's heart, despite the overwhelming feeling that it was not being reciprocated. This emotional conflict, where I gave so freely and yet seemed to receive so little in return, became an insurmountable battle within me.

Caring for my mother became a continuous cycle, an endless loop of offering love without acknowledgment or appreciation. The affection I gave seemed to dissipate into thin air, leaving me with a sense of emptiness and emotional depletion. Despite the mounting disillusionment, I found myself unable to cease my nurturing efforts. In a way that echoed the boundless compassion of Jesus, whose love knows no bounds, an unwavering impulse compelled me to persist in showering my affection, even in the face of indifference and rejection.

Yet, this unbalanced relationship exacted a toll on my heart and spirit, eventually culminating in a breaking point that led to my nervous breakdown. The weight of pain, exhaustion, and the absence of reciprocity became overwhelming. My mind and soul reached their limits, unable to bear the weight any longer.

Now that Lana and I had officially parted ways, I was looking forward to some much-needed rest—time alone in my apartment to focus on healing. The pressure had been immense, especially with Lana dreaming big for our future together. Though I was still a couple of years away from graduating, she was already planning our marriage and starting a family. She was older and ready for that commitment, while I had gone along with it at first, unsure of my readiness. But after my breakdown, I knew I needed to pause, to deal with the trauma I'd been hiding for so long. Spending time alone, caring only for myself, was crucial for my recovery.

Back in my apartment, I was on the brink of sleep when a sudden knock echoed through the room. I jumped out of bed, quickly dressed, and made my way down the short flight of stairs. Peering through the glass, I saw Lana standing outside. A flood of emotions surged through me as I steadied myself before unlocking the door.

Without a word, Lana pushed past me and stormed upstairs. I followed her, and as we reached the top of the stairs, her anger erupted in a furious outburst. When her tirade finally subsided, I could see tears glistening in her eyes, mirroring my own misting eyes. She appeared as a reflection of shattered dreams, and the ache in my chest deepened. My heart ached for her, but the truth was undeniable—it was over. She couldn't be with me, not in the state I was in, not as a broken individual. Lana, despite her passion and essence, unintentionally became a danger to both of us. I had no choice but to ask her to leave, however she clung to her defiance. In the end, without another alternative, I found myself gently carrying her downstairs and placing her outside, locking the door behind me.

As I made my way back up the stairs, the sharp sound of breaking glass pierced the air. I turned towards the noise and saw Lana walking away from my apartment. The upper window of my front door lay shattered, the floor of the foyer covered in shards of glass. Determined to clean up the mess, I quickly fetched a broom and dustpan. However, something caught my eye—a sudden anomaly.

Without a second thought, I bolted out of the door and chased after her. From a distance, I saw her sway, stop abruptly, and then collapse, her back turned towards me. The distance between us was no more than twenty feet, but a disturbing sight held my gaze—her right arm, stark crimson against her pale skin. Just before I reached her, I faintly heard Lana call my name. I sprinted to her side, gently turning her body over to check for a pulse and any signs of life, but there was none. Her pulse was weak, and blood welled from her arm in time with her faint heartbeat. It became apparent that Lana had punched the window after I locked the door, resulting in a grave and life-threatening injury.

Overwhelmed by guilt and fear, I didn't wait for help. Instead, I lifted Lana into my arms and carried her to her apartment. The spare key, which I had offered to return multiple times only to spark disagreements, was already on my keychain. So, when I went to assist her, I simply grabbed my keys as I left. Once inside, I gently placed her on the couch and improvised a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. Lana drifted

in and out of consciousness, her words slurred and fragmented, while I managed to call for help with the assistance of a neighbor who kindly lent me their phone.

As I waited for the police to arrive, I pressed down on her wound, swapping out towels as they became soaked. All around me were remnants of our time together—love notes, photographs, fragments of our shared past. For a moment, I wondered if I should hide them, afraid they might be used against me somehow. But my focus remained on Lana's life, and I continued my frantic efforts to keep her alive.

Amidst the chaos, I came across an old envelope with the date of our wedding written on a scrap of paper in my handwriting. The weight of guilt bore down on me, and I slipped it into my pocket. Other tokens of our relationship were scattered around, serving as poignant reminders of the love we once shared. Yet, in that critical moment, none of these mementos held any significance; my only goal was to try to bring Lana back to consciousness.

As I listened to her weakened heartbeat, I heard sounds of movement in the corridor, followed by the crackling of radios. Assuming it was the police or paramedics, I stepped towards the open doorway to signal for their immediate assistance. However, the moment they saw me, their reactions turned defensive, with one officer drawing his weapon and taking cover. Swiftly, I retreated into Lana's apartment, kneeling with my hands raised in surrender.

Tensions escalated, and the officers questioned me repeatedly. I remained composed, trying to provide them with the necessary information while insisting on my innocence. Gradually, they started to believe my account, and I felt a rush of relief when I was allowed to accompany Lana in the ambulance's front seat. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I maintained a stoic expression, not revealing any traces of emotion. As the ambulance sped to the hospital with sirens blaring, I stole a glance at Lana lying on the stretcher.

She was fully conscious now, her voice trembling with grief as she whispered weakly. "I'm so sorry," she managed to say, her voice heavy with sorrow.

Lana's face was marked by the weight of her guilt, a sight that brought back memories of my tumultuous childhood with my mother. My mother's recklessness often led to accidents, caused by her neglect or the actions of others, leaving my siblings, myself, and even our pets vulnerable and in need of protection. Some individuals harbored ill intentions towards my mother, indifferent to the potential harm they caused her children. I had to remain vigilant, taking on the role of caring for everyone, including our pets like my beloved cat, Sam, with whom I shared my meager food.

During those twelve years, our family struggled with food scarcity, with groceries being a rare luxury. Sometimes older siblings or my father managed to provide, but it was a constant battle. Trips to the grocery store with my mother often descended into chaos, resulting in embarrassing scenes and potential dangers.

Returning to a life of financial instability with Lana was something I was determined to avoid; I longed for a stable relationship with someone who had a steady job and shared my work ethic. The days of witnessing someone's suffering or fearing their loss were behind me.

Lana's apology hung in the air, and I struggled to find the right words to respond. My gaze fixed on the windshield of the ambulance, lost in contemplation.

Over the weeks that followed, Lana's recovery progressed, but our interactions remained minimal. Eventually, I disentangled myself from her life entirely. The incident with Lana led to my eviction from the apartment, forcing me to return to the campus. I resumed my therapy sessions with Ed, enrolled in courses again, and rejoined the track team. Through these therapeutic experiences, I started to see life not as a burden, but as an unfolding opportunity.

During this phase of healing and self-discovery, I gradually realized that I wasn't equipped to carry the emotional weight of caring for another person. I needed to prioritize my well-being and cultivate stability within myself before venturing into serious relationships. Therapy acted as a guiding light, illuminating the potential for growth and positivity that life held, and I was determined to seize those opportunities.

Fueled by this renewed sense of purpose and free from the heavy responsibilities that once weighed me down, I soared like a rocket, reaching new heights. My academic performance not only improved, but it excelled, conquering challenges that had once seemed insurmountable. The scholastic struggles that had burdened me were now met with a disciplined study routine that felt second nature. I could approach my studies diligently and overcome any obstacles that came my way. Instead of feeling trapped in a Catch-22, I was now "catching on," and I knew the source of this transformation. Though I didn't always engage in traditional prayer, my heart knew how to send a message to Jesus, even when I wasn't fully aware of it. I was embracing the power of faith.

I chose to leave my factory job and returned to working for the university's housekeeping crew, a position I had held before. While my tasks mainly involved cleaning and maintenance, being in familiar surroundings brought a sense of comfort. The income from this job provided crucial support for my education.

Meanwhile, my close friend Pat Palmer moved on to a new position, and a capable young man stepped in as the new track coach. He had proven himself both as an exceptional athlete and a skilled coach. Filling Pat's shoes was a daunting challenge, but he handled it with excellence. My academic, athletic, and emotional trajectories were aligning harmoniously. Receiving another varsity letter and being honored with awards for my contributions to Track and Field filled me with pride. Additionally, due to my commitment

to academics, I was invited to serve as the treasurer for the university newspaper—a role I embraced wholeheartedly. It felt like I had finally found my stride in life.

The convergence of academic success, athletic achievements, and emotional growth brought contentment and fulfillment to my life. I embraced this new chapter, fully aware that the struggles of my past had sculpted me into the person I was becoming.

Though Pat was no longer my coach, he remained a steady presence, much like a caring father. Throughout my junior year, Pat continued to greet me warmly in the hallways, offering a supportive hand, and cheering me on during track competitions. His concern wasn't merely about protecting his reputation; he genuinely cared for my well-being and disliked the idea of failure, especially when it came to supporting and safeguarding others.

As the semester wore on, each day felt like a precarious step on a bridge that stretched out before me, its end lost in the mist. I couldn't see the other side, and I had no guarantee that I would reach it. The degree I was working toward seemed like a distant dream, one that might slip through my fingers at any moment. But somewhere deep inside, beyond the gnawing fear, there was a flicker of confidence that nothing could derail my course. It wasn't born of arrogance, but of sheer necessity—the kind of determination that comes when you know that stopping isn't an option.

One of my professors, a man whose words carried the weight of years, once told me, "Only a bullet could stop you now." I clung to those words as if they were a lifeline, letting them steady me when doubt crept in, even as I wondered if I truly deserved such faith.

Lana, who had already traversed the road to graduation, was never far from my thoughts. She lived nearby, a constant reminder of the path I was struggling to tread. The temptation to reach out to her was strong, but I knew in my heart that this was a journey I had to make on my own. It felt like letting go of a

cherished possession, secure in the knowledge that it was safely stored away. My emotions had become less self-centered, and I recognized that I didn't deserve to harbor such feelings.

The urge to seek her out occasionally tugged at me, but I understood it for what it was—a fleeting sense of desire and nostalgic yearning. So, with a heart that was both heavy and hopeful, I kept my distance, understanding that in this solitude, I would either find the strength to go on or lose myself to the fears that threatened to pull me under.

Confronting my vulnerabilities and being honest with myself allowed me to dispel the discomfort and turmoil that came with encountering Lana. The truth was, I didn't genuinely love her, and our paths weren't meant to intertwine for a lifetime. Pursuing such a connection would only bring heartache to her in the end. This introspection and self-awareness became increasingly important as I faced even more intense moments of crisis and decision-making.

I was resolute in not perpetually defining myself as a victim, clinging to a past relationship fueled by selfishness or a lack of self-control. My journey with Jesus brought about a much deeper understanding. I had fought battles, leaning on Him for years; it was inconceivable to downplay His role or take credit for myself. I acknowledged that I wasn't shackled by insanity, despite my mother's efforts to convince me otherwise. Jesus had freed me from that burden, empowering me to cast aside the chains of the past.

Lynn continued to be a cornerstone of my life, and while our affection for each other ran deep, we both harbored secrets from each other, including my experience with a nervous breakdown. Despite the closeness we shared, there were times when revealing our burdensome truths proved challenging. My love for Lynn was profound, but my tumultuous history with my family had left me mistrustful. Their repeated betrayals, emotional pain, and exploitation of my vulnerabilities had fostered a deep sense of distrust. My

family members had chosen paths marred by dishonesty, anger, substance abuse, and violence, without seeking solace in prayer or turning to Jesus.

The prospect of Lynn and I baring our painful truths to one another loomed as a daunting task, particularly given the depth of our love. We feared that doing so might cause irreparable damage and jeopardize the bond we held so dear. Consequently, confronting the sins that others had perpetrated upon us presented a challenge we hesitated to tackle head-on.

While my relationship with Lynn remained strong, my interactions with other family members gradually waned. My parents had become strangers, and as I grappled with the aftermath of my abusive past and impoverished upbringing, I found myself pitying them. I had come a long way from the time when I longed to shower my mother with affection without fearing retribution. My journey revolved around reclaiming my life, breaking free from the chains of sordid secrets, and pursuing my happiness.

As graduation approached, the possibility of finally earning my degree seemed closer than ever. I stood on the precipice of boundless opportunities, pushed open the door, and gazed into a brighter future. The grip of panic attacks began to loosen, and though the nightmares persisted, faint glimmers of hope emerged on the horizon—circles of light, promising better days ahead, growing more prominent and radiant with each passing day.

Even as the recurring nightmares occasionally jolted me awake with anguished cries, I refused to let them consume me. I had taken charge of my destiny, even if the journey had left me exhausted and weary. Amidst the challenges, a newfound sense of hope lingered, casting its light over the remnants of those haunting dreams.

With unwavering determination, I pushed forward, confronting the darkness head-on, and facing each new day with courage. My commitment to overcoming my past remained unyielding, and every morning, I woke up with the resolve to confront whatever lay ahead. As graduation loomed, I clung to the belief that I possessed the ability to forge a brighter future for myself—one built on resilience, faith, purpose, and an unwavering refusal to give in.

One day, as I sat in my friend Billy's room, engrossed in final exam preparations alongside him, an abrupt entrance shattered my concentration. Julie – a former girlfriend of mine, burst into the room, her voice filled with panic and distress. Although Billy's initial laughter seemed to mock her entrance, it quickly faded as her eyes revealed the depth of her fear. Her attempts to communicate left her resembling a fish gasping for air, and the amusement in Billy's eyes turned into genuine concern. As Julie's frantic cries subsided, a heavy silence enveloped the room. Her panic had given way to sobbing, adding to the eerie quiet that settled in.

Julie's trembling hand grabbed my shoulder, urgently pulling me towards the door. We raced down the hallway, her sobs merging with the unsettling silence that surrounded us. Amidst her emotional turmoil, she managed to utter a few coherent words: "Gregg! Come with me!" she pleaded; her breaths ragged. "It's Sandy—she's hanging from the window!"

Under normal circumstances, the height might not have been an immediate concern, but we were on the third floor of the university building, and the fall could be potentially fatal. There was no time for deliberation. Without a second thought, Billy and I followed Julie, who led us in a sprint to the end of the hallway and into an open dorm room. It was Sandy's room—she was a freshman, about to complete her first year. Billy and I entered the room after Julie, and a sense of unease settled in the air.

As I surveyed the room, Julie's words and urgency became clearer. Sandy was nowhere to be seen, and my eyes were drawn to the open window, its screen conspicuously absent. Julie's once-fair complexion now appeared as dark and mournful as the opening notes of a song that always stirred melancholic emotions within me. That melody invoked a profound sense of nostalgia, akin to a memory just out of reach.

Amidst the chaos, my attention was drawn to something peculiar on the window ledge. As the realization dawned upon me, my heart raced even faster, and I called out Sandy's name once more. Julie and Billy stood by my side, and I began moving cautiously towards the window, my voice imploring Sandy to hold on. However, urgency surged within me like a tidal wave, propelling me into a sprint. Panic and horror gripped me, and my hand extended involuntarily as if trying to reach Sandy before I had even reached her position.

I tried to reassure myself that Sandy would be all right, but then her fingers began to disappear—one by one. Julie's grip on my shoulder grew tighter, forcefully restraining me, and she pleaded with me not to look. Yet, the tragic outcome was already painfully evident. My heart pounded painfully in my chest as Sandy's body plummeted from the window, and a disconcerting silence settled over the scene. It was as if her life had been extinguished the moment her fingers let go.

The sickening sound of Sandy's impact against the ground sent shockwaves of distress through me. My mind struggled to comprehend the surreal silence that followed. Sandy's body lay motionless, and no sound emanated from her lips. Her life seemed to have faded away instantly, her heart silenced, her once-terrified mind rendered quiet.

I stood there, frozen by shock and disbelief, unable to fully grasp the grim reality that had just unfolded before my eyes. The silence seemed to stretch on indefinitely, enveloping me in a heavy shroud. The world around me faded into the background, leaving me alone with the haunting memory of Sandy's fall.

Julie's voice shattered the silence, her screams piercing the air and jolting me back to the present. The moments that followed felt like an eternity, and her screams gradually transformed into a low moan. Together, the three of us approached the window, our gazes fixated on the scene below. Julie's reaction was a mix of horror and grief, while Billy ran to make a frantic call for help from the hallway phone. My head spun momentarily, a wave of dizziness threatening to overwhelm me. I fought against it, focusing my attention on Sandy's lifeless body.

Despite the growing sense of dread, I knew we couldn't afford to stand idly by. We had to reach Sandy quickly. We ran downstairs and outside. As I arrived at the site of the tragedy, the harrowing reality became even clearer—what was once Sandy's body now lay motionless on the ground. Placing my fingers against her neck, I detected a faint pulse. Her skin felt cold and damp, her body clammy with perspiration. I wondered how long she had clung to that ledge before her strength had finally given out.

Julie knelt beside Sandy, weeping, as I struggled to maintain my composure. Billy's voice must have reached emergency services, and I could hear the wailing sirens growing louder in the distance. My head spun again, but the cool night air helped alleviate the dizziness as I covered Sandy with a jacket that Julie had been wearing, shielding her from the cold. The paramedics and police arrived swiftly, and a small crowd of students had gathered, forming a semi-circle around Sandy's lifeless form. Some were visibly emotional, while others stood there, their expressions uncertain and unsettled.

The paramedics worked quickly, carefully maneuvering Sandy onto a gurney and into the waiting ambulance. Chaos reigned, much like the stormy night when my father had committed a tragic act—an act etched into my mother's memory forever. The sights and sounds felt eerily familiar, like a *déjà vu* from the depths of despair. Trouble seemed to be found by everyone on Earth, regardless of their identity. Calamity was an intrinsic part of life, capable of unleashing its wrath, sometimes subjecting us to its judgment. Yet, one day, that reality would change. I made a silent vow to myself that it would.

Julie, Billy, and I rushed to the hospital where Sandy was being taken. Amidst the uproar of the emergency room, we waited anxiously. A feeling of helplessness weighed heavily upon us, and the fear that Sandy might survive but be forever changed cast a shadow over our thoughts. I understood too well that no one was immune to danger, and the thought of Sandy confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life sent shivers down my spine. The idea that her parents had never imagined such a fate when they sent her off to college was heart-wrenching.

Seated next to me, Julie trembled with fear, her eyes locking onto mine. Gently, I brushed aside her long, beautiful red hair, offering a soothing touch. Our relationship had grown from romantic involvement to a deeper, more profound connection. I had been Julie's first love. When we discussed taking our relationship further, Julie had been contemplative and introspective. Eventually, she smiled and nodded in agreement.

Both of us were intimately acquainted with loneliness, having experienced isolation and unsettling uncertainty due to having alcoholic parents. Though my struggles had been more intense, Julie had endured her share of pain, and we understood that pain was pain, regardless of its degree. As we approached the significant step we were about to take, Julie hesitated, unsure whether I was the right person to entrust with her most precious possession—her love.

Overwhelmed by excitement, we gave in to our desires eagerly. Yet, afterward, as Julie turned away from me on the pillow and dissolved into tears, regret consumed me. She asked me to leave, and though it was difficult, I complied. Roughly twenty minutes later, she appeared in my room, her eyes swollen from crying. She wept uncontrollably and sought reassurance that I wouldn't abandon her. I tried my best not to, but the fear of being responsible for someone else's heart gradually pushed me to create distance, ultimately leading to my withdrawal from our relationship.

For months, Julie pursued me relentlessly, while my rejection remained steadfast and her pursuit unwavering. She saw that I was doing everything in my power to create distance between us. The faster I tried to escape, the more she interpreted it as a reflection of how deeply she loved me.

When the doctor approached the three of us, a sharp, nauseating sensation briefly overwhelmed me. His words left an indelible mark as he delivered news about Sandy's condition. The prospect of Sandy needing a wheelchair for the rest of her life echoed relentlessly in my mind. Instinctively, I reached out to prevent Julie from collapsing onto the cold, sterile floor of the emergency room. The nurse used smelling salts to revive her, and Julie's gaze gradually refocused on her surroundings. Panting as if she had just finished a race, Julie slowly regained her composure.

As the doctor's words fell upon my ears in a blur of medical terminology, my attention shifted in and out of focus. Although Julie was the one who had fainted, the room itself seemed to spin around me, and I felt an impending sense of collapse. Sandy's ability to walk had been abruptly extinguished. The doctor's grim description of her injury hit me like a tidal wave—her fall had resulted in severe damage to her lower spine, nearly splitting her spinal cord. The impact had caused her to lose partial or complete sensation and mobility below her waist due to a spinal cord injury in the thoracic or lumbar region. As he detailed Sandy's condition, a rush of dizziness overcame me—I understood every word he said.

Despite my university's lack of a medical program, I completed a two-year pre-med course before switching to business administration, economics, and mathematics. I also completed a two-year residency at a local hospital, albeit not the prestigious one we were in now. Sandy's condition was so critical that they had opted to transfer her to the university hospital, renowned as one of the best in the country. Despite the hospital's air of superiority, I knew their confidence wasn't unfounded, and their expertise was what

mattered most at the moment. Our role now was to hope, pray, and offer unwavering support as Sandy embarked on this arduous and uncertain journey ahead.

My deep comprehension and somber portrayal of the situation were inevitably influenced by my two years in pre-med. That period of my life granted me an intimate understanding from both a professional and academic standpoint. However, reaching back to my childhood, I had already grasped the essence of this situation from various angles. Standing there, memories of those emotions came rushing back. The antiseptic scent of the hospital, masking the underlying scent of illness, triggered a flood of vivid recollections.

The day I took the MCAT exam at college remains distinctly etched in my memory. I was one of only two students sitting for the test. The other student was undoubtedly brilliant, but struggled with social skills, wandering the halls absorbed in make-believe games like laser tag, Dungeons and Dragons, and hide and seek. Eventually, they transferred away, and I lost track of them. I often wondered about their path, hoping they hadn't pursued a medical career given their challenges.

The pre-med courses I undertook were some of the most demanding I've ever encountered, with subjects like General Chemistry, Biology, Organic Chemistry, Physics (all with labs), Calculus or Statistics (which I surprisingly enjoyed for its logical approach), Biochemistry, Anatomy and Physiology, Microbiology, Genetics, Psychology, Sociology (which felt somewhat disconnected from the scientific rigor), Ethics, and Humanities (where I earned an A+ despite being unsure of its exact nature).

But an unusual test stands out—during my time at Siena Heights University (SHU), I took part in their Theological Values I-IV courses, essential for developing leaders rooted in the Dominican tradition. These courses emphasized community, spirituality, ethical leadership, and social justice, with assessments focused on reflective essays and real-world applications. In a Theology class led by a Dominican Nun, I was invited to take an exam normally reserved for those entering the Dominican Order. Remarkably, both the

Nun and I scored the same, a result that left us both amazed and provided a moment of shared surprise and joy. My academic journey was punctuated by such unique experiences, yet it was not without moments of reflection on the profound human experiences that shaped me.

As the doctor's words echoed in the air, my mind wandered back to my days poring over medical textbooks. Those texts carried an unmistakable archaic quality, harkening back to ancient times when the art of medicine was first inscribed onto the scrolls of civilizations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, and Greece. They often held an unusual first-person perspective, which struck me as both odd and disconcerting. One passage that stood out was titled "The Brain," where the text began with "I Am Jack's Medulla Oblongata," presenting a seemingly personal account of a man's struggle with a brain tumor. The descriptions were oddly detailed, such as "This is George's heart. It has four valves—two on the top and two on the bottom. This is George's heart."

In my mind's eye, I could see another passage depicting Sandy's broken neck, with the emotional text mournfully stating, "This was Sandy's neck." The injuries described in these texts lingered, leaving a significant impact. Sandy's injury meant that she might never walk again, and perhaps she would never experience love in the same way. It all seemed to stem from a kind of pride—a stubbornness that prevented her from accepting help or acknowledging her limitations—and the consequences were undeniably far-reaching. These reflections on the frailty of the human body were a reminder of the emotional and spiritual resilience needed to navigate life's trials.

The journey back to the college felt surreal as we drove in silence. Billy was at the wheel, Julie sat in the passenger seat, and I found myself alone in the back, struggling to meet anyone's gaze. In moments of crisis, my instinct was to seek solace under the apple tree with Sam, if he happened to be around. There, the gentle breeze, and Sam's comforting presence would help quell my nerves and restore a sense of calm.

Interestingly, my recovery was always swift, and I often referred to myself as a "fast healer." It seemed as if I had been granted a divine gift of endurance, both for internal and external pain. I sometimes wondered if this strength was given to me so that I could bear life's burdens, or perhaps it wasn't my strength at all, but rather a form of divine intervention. It was something I couldn't quite grasp—why would Jesus carry my burdens, considering my feelings of unworthiness? But deep within, I sensed that Jesus must have been aware of my struggles.

Despite my confusion, I couldn't deny the profound connection I felt with Jesus. It was as if this bond had something to do with my ability to love those who had hurt me and to forgive them. Even more astonishing was my capacity to forget the wrongs done to me and to start anew, time and time again, no matter how severe the pain. Perhaps in this ability to love and forgive unconditionally lay the true essence of Jesus' presence. I might not fully comprehend Jesus, but it seemed that everything revolved around this remarkable capacity to love and forgive.

As Julie, Billy, and I continued the drive back to the university from the hospital where Sandy now lay immobile, our time together as the three of us felt surreal. The visceral sadness hung heavily around us. It was as if we existed in a world of emotions beyond explanation—an event that nobody else could truly understand. The answers to this inexplicable event seemed to reside solely within God's realm, recounted in the chronicles of "That's Our Father's Business." The enduring impact of these experiences highlighted the deep emotional reserves I had drawn upon throughout my life, particularly in the face of adversity.

The atmosphere inside the car remained peculiar, and this dynamic persisted for months until Sandy finally returned. Those months seemed to stretch endlessly as we all needed time to heal and recover from the trauma. When Sandy rejoined us, we couldn't help but notice the mark the fateful night had left on her. It seemed as though something precious had been taken from her, something good. Still, we held onto the

hope that whatever was lost would be replaced with something even better. We clung to the belief that time would eventually mend our wounds. That night had left an indelible imprint on each of us, shaping the course of our lives.

In the days and weeks that followed, I found myself revisiting that night repeatedly, tortured by thoughts of whether I could have acted just a little bit faster. The smallest hesitation, a mere second's delay, haunted me incessantly. The 'what ifs' loomed large, plaguing my mind endlessly. Regardless of how many times I dissected and analyzed the events, the weight of responsibility bore down on me heavily. It was as if my upbringing had ingrained in me the inclination to assume fault, even when it wasn't truly mine to bear.

My junior and senior years of college, while overshadowed by the weight of abuse and the presence of toxic individuals, became a pinnacle of academic and athletic achievement. Amid various athletic honors, I ranked third in the NAIA (the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) for my contribution to the university's 1600m indoor relay team. These years, where my potential flourished, showcased a side of me brimming with vitality.

After escaping the clutches of abuse, a newfound sense of liberation paved the way for healing and growth. It was as though I had tapped into an extraordinary wellspring of resilience, an inner strength that flowed endlessly, like an eternal spring from the fountain of youth. The presence of the Holy Ghost in my life was undeniably transformative, infusing me with power beyond my own.

There's an undeniable truth in carrying Jesus within one's heart – it nourishes the soul and preserves the youthful essence of one's spirit. The journey of healing, both physical and emotional, unfolded rapidly, like a tapestry woven with divine threads. These blessings that graced my life felt undeserved, leaving me pondering their origin. Perhaps therein lies the answer – true honesty, the willingness to see oneself unfiltered, opened the door for Jesus to carry me through my struggles.

From the depths of my existence, Jesus reached out to me, pulling me from the abyss and initiating a profound process of transformation. With each passing year, this truth became more evident, revealing a path I could never have navigated alone. I've come to realize that my progress isn't solely a result of my efforts; I am not as skilled or strong as my journey might suggest. Gratitude fills my heart, for I am the recipient of divine benevolence beyond measure, showered upon me despite my shortcomings.

As I completed my junior year with determination, I embarked on a journey of dedication that summer, immersing myself in the creation of my undergraduate thesis. Devoting countless hours to crafting draft after draft, each one meticulously dissected and ultimately dismissed by my 'major thesis professor,' I persisted with unwavering resolve. In the twilight of my undergraduate voyage, a tapestry of transformation and influence unfolded through the narrative of that senior thesis, entitled "The Personnel Manager's Role as Agent of Change." My intellectual odyssey commenced with the aspiration to explore the profound impact a personnel manager could wield in inciting organizational metamorphosis. Driven by fervent curiosity and boundless introspection, my thesis embarked on a structured trajectory that echoes the depth of my convictions.

The opening chapter delved into the annals of history, tracing the evolution of personnel management from a mere administrative function to a pivotal force of change in the contemporary corporate landscape. Driven by an insatiable curiosity to unravel intricate threads, I ventured deep into the realm of organizational behavior in the subsequent chapter, meticulously dissecting the underlying dynamics that demand transformative leadership. I aspired to imbue the Personnel Manager's role with compassion and empathy, positioning it as an integral component of a broader doctrine of self-discipline. I firmly believed that by embracing this approach and style, I could not only enhance the role's financial effectiveness but also embody the best practices.

Undoubtedly, positive reinforcement tends to yield more favorable responses from people. Throughout my career, I've encountered numerous challenging and unkind interactions among individuals. It's common to witness discourtesy and indifference, and the subsequent decline in overall productivity and rising attrition rates can be attributed to this absence of compassion. It's a reality that businesses are frequently perceived as profit-centric and impersonal, primarily concerned with financial gain rather than making a positive impact on the world.

In a different light, I've noticed that conducting business with righteous motives has not only boosted my income but has also enabled me to sustain and expand my financial prosperity. Moreover, I no longer need to worry about the ethical implications of my financial endeavors or feel a sense of guilt for causing harm to others in the process. This approach has allowed me to conduct myself with the highest standards of professionalism and integrity, free from the need to constantly watch my back.

In essence, my conviction was that the most triumphant Personnel Manager, or any occupant of a similar role, would achieve unparalleled success by grounding their management methodology in the simple act of infusing empathy into their day-to-day practices. Alternatively, the elimination of a significant impediment to running any business or governing one's own life could be achieved by adopting a fundamental tenet – “Just Don't Lie.” Although this might appear deceptively rudimentary or even childlike at first glance, I assure you, it is not. In reality, it operates with exceptional efficacy. I stood as a testament to its success, having embraced this principle for nearly twenty-one years, achieving an unblemished record of accomplishment.

Moving into my senior year, anticipation and restlessness swirled in the atmosphere, overshadowed by the uncertainty that awaited beyond the confines of college. The primary focus, however, was to achieve the milestone of graduation. Approaching this dream with eyes wide open, a dream that once seemed

intangible, I braced myself for the final stretch of my academic journey. My family, except for sporadic letters shared with Ashley during my junior and senior years, remained motionless in their absence, an absence that felt like death itself. This was a conscious choice they made, an act of abandonment.

Even in the rare moments when we were all together, particularly in Mother's company, the air was fraught with an unsettling tension. Carter and now even Lynn seemed more at ease away from me than by my side. Their presence around me was marked by restlessness or indifference. Swiftly after we began to engage, they would vanish as though they had never been there. There were no farewells or goodbyes, just an abrupt departure that left me suspended in a sense of abandonment. This pattern was universal; my siblings would go months without speaking to me, displaying no curiosity about my whereabouts or my well-being. Our encounters were accidental, and their responses were consistently devoid of joy. Instead, their words would often spiral into hateful declarations about the world, themselves, and everything in between.

The smallest disagreements would transform into monumental conflicts, an Armageddon of emotions. It was as if the foundational message of a loving God who sent His Son to the world had vanished, leaving no impetus for love or connection. This pattern of disdain and animosity echoed throughout my interactions with my family, plunging each encounter into a living hell. In moments of desperation, I would cry out, "You left me!" Yet, my siblings would simply stare back at me, their eyes vacant and devoid of empathy, their connection severed from the light of love.

And then, at times, it got even worse. In moments of pain, I would catch them smiling, even laughing, as they inflicted their hurt upon me. It was a juxtaposition that defied comprehension, a display of cruelty intertwined with joy that left me grappling with the depths of their emotional detachment.

Every member of my family remained significant in my heart, and my love for them endured, accompanied by forgiveness. Yet, a distance emerged, akin to the light of a faraway star, where the steady

glow of my future beckoned—a future forged by a belief in myself that stood in stark contrast to the enigma of hatred that persisted. A God-man who sacrificed himself so I could thrive, a notion beyond my comprehension and forever beyond understanding the hatred I encountered. Who would ever go to such lengths, I pondered as I sought solace in my runs, music resonating through my headphones, a sanctuary from life's tumult. Running was my refuge, a space where my thoughts invariably drifted to Jesus. Amidst the rhythm of my footsteps, I wondered if heaven could truly be attainable for me. I never concluded with an affirmation; instead, doubt lingered. Who would welcome me in heaven? After all, my own family had forsaken me, beginning with my mother and father.

This uncertainty loomed, intermittently held at bay by the security of Jesus' presence in my life. I clung to the belief of having His tunic wrapped around my right wrist, a tangible connection to His unwavering love and devotion that stood in stark contrast to the transient affections of others. Jesus, unlike anyone else, wouldn't abandon me, or so I believed on good days—although they were few and far between.

Most days, it was solely me gripping onto that tunic, holding on with a tenacity born of both love and desperation, even as an undercurrent of anticipation persisted. A haunting thought would sometimes sneak into my mind—that when my time came, Jesus might simply sweep my hand away, discarding me like an insignificant speck. I knew the origin of this thought, even though it conflicted with the Gospel's promise that Jesus would never forsake us.

Yet, faith became an elusive entity in this realm of mine, where the last two decades were marked by an overwhelming abundance of hatred directed at me for reasons so trivial. Amid these internal battles, I found solace in my faith, a lifeline that held me steady amidst the stormy seas of doubt and isolation.

Throughout the summer and throughout the two semesters that comprised my final year of undergraduate college, I labored with greater intensity than ever before. As I traversed an uneven terrain of

highs and lows, I encountered sharp pebbles along the way. Yet, armed with newfound dexterity and skill, I navigated these challenges with a grace that stood in stark contrast to my previous struggles.

Occasionally, the threat of panic would loom, akin to the howling wind, the weight of a sky hanging low, and the haunting echoes of Mother's laughter reverberating in my mind. But during these tempestuous moments, there emerged another sound—a resolute chant urging me forward, compelling me to continue the fight. It was a force larger and loftier than me, transcending individual boundaries.

No longer could I hear the haunting echoes of my abusers while awake. Instead, they invaded my dreams, an expected intrusion. Those who appeared in these nightmares were individuals who had long ago sown the seeds of their undoing, relegated to shallow graves they had dug for themselves. These spectral figures lay within these earthy confines, awaiting their final shroud of dirt to seal their fate, to fade into oblivion.

As I leaned over these makeshift resting places, a solemn awareness pervaded my being—these tormentors were already vanquished from my life. Their power over me had dissipated, their presence a mere shadow of its former potency.

When I graduated, it was devoid of honors, academic regalia, or any special recognition. Yet, these distinctions held no weight in my heart. Because what I achieved was something far more significant—a culmination of my relentless pursuit, a goal that had nearly cost me my life and sanity. A college degree. Within the confines of this precious parchment lay the knowledge that would propel my existence forward, lifting me from the precipice and guiding me toward a luminous horizon. A light emerged, destined to overcome the darkness that had cast its shadow for so long. The years of isolation that marked my journey were not new to me; I had encountered loneliness before, its heartache and longing echoing in the void left by the physical and sexual abuse that once engulfed me in a black and soundless abyss.

The specter of insanity had loomed close, and the desire for a taste of Mother's love had nearly consumed me entirely. Yet, things were changing, shifting for the better. Though the undercurrent of panic still lingered, it no longer gnawed at my soul incessantly, both day and night. This burden was now reserved for the nightmares that only appeared when my heart was being shattered anew by external forces.

There was a time when my existence hinged upon Mother's presence, but that perception belonged to my childhood, now behind me.

Many years later, the next chapter of our connection would be written on her deathbed. It was a brief encounter, a moment that would find me entering a hospital room, flanked by my siblings, each of us taking our place around Mother's bedside. I, the reluctant latecomer, had been persuaded by Carter and Lynn to be present, as they sought solace in avoiding this challenging juncture on their own. Their internal void rendered them absent of courage, mere shells coasting through life like hollow zombies.

As I stepped into the room, a frigid atmosphere greeted me, each family member radiating a cold detachment. Approaching Mother, I settled beside her, our eyes meeting as she whispered my name, only to slip into a coma that would claim her life hours later. That fateful night, the call would come from Lynn, bearing the news of her passing. It was Lynn who would also inform me of Father's demise, but it would be me who spent his final night on Earth by his side. The intricacies of why this sequence unfolded in such a manner remain beyond my grasp. While I understand that Jesus did not orchestrate this path, it is clear that the culmination of these lives was shaped by the choices they made, their Free Will steering them toward these inevitable moments of departure.

As I stood by Mother's deathbed, a profound understanding began to dawn after years of grappling with the aftermath of unrepentant living – the regret, remorse, and guilt that can turn souls meant for Heaven into something far darker.

Walking into that hospital room, I saw Mother lying there, motionless on the bed. Without a second thought, I took my usual place beside her, the position I'd occupied countless times before. It was a place of care, of offering solace during medical crises, of praying and tending to her needs simultaneously. Memories of those moments came rushing back, emotions flooding my senses, making my heart race and my head ring. Yet, I remained resolute, determined to provide her with whatever comfort and care she needed, even if it meant breaking me apart. My love for her endured, unwavering, despite everything she had done.

I reached for her limp hand, just as I had countless times before, and her eyes flew open suddenly, startling me. In that instant, her gaze bore me with pain and sorrow so profound, that it was as if she was pleading with me to deny the reality of our circumstances. As if she wanted me to tell her it was all a terrible dream, that she hadn't committed those awful deeds, and that I wasn't there beside her on her deathbed, mere hours from her fate and her eternal destiny. These thoughts, however, only came later as I reflected upon that moment.

At that time, I hadn't considered any of this. All I had were her eyes, one whispered word – my name, "Gregg" – uttered with tremendous effort, her voice hoarse and raspy, and her feeble attempt to squeeze my hand. It was all I needed to piece together the puzzle of her emotions. In those fleeting seconds, as her eyes remained open, I tried to convey my forgiveness and love, silently assuring her that I had forgiven her long before I arrived at the hospital. I wanted her to know that I understood; she was dying of regret.

Before she closed her eyes once more, I mustered the strength to utter a single word in response to her call, "Mom." Tears welled up, blurring my vision, and my throat constricted with emotion. As she closed her eyes again, slipping back into a coma, I was left with the heavy weight of my regret, which had haunted me for years and continues to do so today. I couldn't comprehend why she would reject a life filled with

love, a son who cherished her as deeply as Jesus himself. The question lingered as a painful enigma in my heart, one I feared I would never truly unravel.

Hours later, Lynn would call to deliver the news of her passing. After hanging up, my grief poured out in deep, guttural sobs that left me raw and utterly drained. I missed her terribly, but I also grappled with the unending question of why some allow their hearts to grow cold and dark, forsaking the love that God had always intended for them. It was a question that would forever haunt my soul.

Several years after my mother passed away, I would find myself at my father's deathbed as well, a scene that carried its own internal trauma. The night he lay dying in that sterile hospital room marked both an ending and a beginning. It was the culmination of years marred by neglect, an illness that had taken root after a lifetime of abusing his body with cigarettes and alcohol. It seemed as though he had finally reached the point of surrender.

I found myself alone with him, the rest of the family scattered, lost in their regrets and sorrows. His wife would leave us that night, a decision she would regret but add to the pile of a life already filled with remorse. Unbeknownst to me then, it would be the final night my father spent on this Earth. This sequence of events marked my second time on a parent's deathbed, the first being my mother's. Both were pivotal and heart-wrenching.

As I sat beside Mother during her last moments, words barely escaped her lips. A mere flicker of consciousness allowed just enough time for her to say my first name, "Gregg." Her voice, though sweet, tore at my heart. It carried the weight of tragedy, of missed opportunities, and the unspoken pride that refused to let her admit to her faults. With her, there was no time for reconciliation, no time to mend broken bonds. But with my father, it was different.

In contrast, Father's departure granted us a rare opportunity for dialogue while his coherence remained. As I stood by his bed, looking at a face etched with pain and mistakes, I found the courage to say the words that had been growing inside me for years.

"Dad, I forgive you," I stammered, awkward and clumsy. The words felt heavy, like a stone thrown into a silent pond. Time seemed to elongate in that moment, a stretch filled with a *mélange* of hurt, anger, and a sudden shared understanding that had long been stifled between us. In an unexpected twist, I had found myself voicing words of forgiveness that seemed to originate from a place beyond myself as if an unseen hand guided them through me.

However, my gesture triggered an unanticipated reaction. Father visibly tensed, discomfort radiating from his features. He held his silence, leaving my offering of forgiveness hanging in the air. It was as though he perceived no necessity for my absolution, possibly believing he had already found it in his relationship with Jesus. This lack of emotional connection was no new occurrence; my father's affection had been conspicuously absent throughout my life. His indifference, though not surprising, still stung.

The bitter end of our tumultuous relationship left me even more forlorn and bewildered. I sought to mend the emotional rift with a declaration of love, which he reciprocated in words, but the embrace that followed felt hollow—a perfunctory act he appeared keen to conclude, eager to move on to the beyond that awaited him. As I departed his bedside, a wallet-sized image of Jesus on the wall caught my gaze. When I glanced back, I noticed Father's eyes affixed on it, his countenance softened in a manner suggestive of prayer.

That night, my heart bore both the weight of unresolved pain and the lightness of having tried to repair the fractured bonds, extending my forgiveness not only to my father but also to my mother and siblings. It marked a stride towards healing and comprehension, a tentative step toward accepting that these

intricate, painful experiences were part of a higher design. I could only hope to reunite with them in the embrace of Heaven, should fate favor me.

Amid this scene, grace intertwined with forgiveness, a blend of awkwardness and anguish that held immeasurable worth. It taught me that even in the depths of shattered relationships, redemption glimmers, comprehension dawns, and love persists.

In the years leading up to and following Mother's passing, moments of forgetfulness proved elusive. On these days, her voice seemed to resonate closer and more vividly within me. She etched herself insistently into my thoughts, a presence that gradually waned with time. She became a constant companion within my nightmares, a recurring specter that cast a looming dread upon me upon waking, anticipating her inevitable return the next time sleep embraced me.

A persistent urge to return to her grasp seized me intermittently, a temptation that felt akin to surrendering to death itself. I recognized that yielding to this desire would negate the victories I had hard-won since breaking free from her clutches. Consequently, I resisted with the same ferocity as one who fights against the jaws of mortality.

My efforts propelled me steadfastly forward, despite the invisible tug of Mother's hands from behind, attempting to reclaim me. It wasn't a smooth path, not with others relentlessly trying to wrest away what did not belong to them. They sought to ensnare me in their deceit, peddling their bitterness and hatred. These were individuals who, with their venomous tongues, dared to label me with titles like "Son," "Brother," and even "Husband." Throughout the years, I found myself needing therapy repeatedly, a consequence of entering into abusive relationships that seemed nearly unavoidable within the complexities of earthly existence.

During this tumult, my faith in Jesus remained unwavering, a steadfast guide that never faltered. His presence urged me onward, beseeching me to engage with the world of the living. I seized this opportunity with unwavering determination, enlisting the guidance of the Holy Spirit to navigate the turbulent waters of my life.

The years of enduring abuse have not managed to leave a lasting negative impact on me, thanks to my unwavering faith. I pray that more individuals discover this empowering force and harness its potential. It carries a name, a name elevated above every other. I still engage in battles and weather occasional storms of anxiety, triggered by encounters with what I term "the living dead"—those the Gospel refers to as being "dead in sin." Nevertheless, Jesus steadfastly guides me through these times, just as He has through all others.

My personal history is marred by tragedy, but this sentiment is shared by countless others. In the realm of earthly existence, all days can be perceived as the most challenging if you are living right. As the saying goes, "Love the world and the world loves you." However, akin to my Savior, "I hate the world, and the world hates me," often with a fervent passion. Mother would consistently remind me, "The world hates you with a Purple Passion, Gregg!" Indeed, these are my most arduous days and will remain so while I'm on this earthly journey. I will never experience the love and pampering that I've bestowed upon others. The tender strains of a child's lullaby or the joy of a birthday celebration will remain elusive to me. True happiness, too, feels just out of reach. In my present reality, these are indeed the most trying days. Yet, amidst the darkest hours, something pulled me into the light.

There was suffering, tormenting dreams, and anguish. But there was also triumph, even during periods of extreme starvation when sustenance seemed almost impossible to find—somehow, bread appeared or was provided. The seed of belief was sown from an unknown source, crystallizing into unwavering faith even when I was just a child. Despite being tattered and torn at the edges, my spirit soiled

by the most grotesque forms of abuse, some of which left me emotionally lifeless, I shed no shame in admitting that I wept. However, the power that rescued me refused to leave me for dead. It viewed me as both a beacon of life and a source of light, lifting me from the depths of despair.

Each step I took, every day I lived, was a testament to that otherworldly power that refused to let me succumb. It was a force that held my hand through the darkest nights and guided me toward the glimmers of hope that emerged from the shadows. It was this power that helped me transcend the boundaries of my circumstances, allowing me to rise above the mire of suffering and find purpose in the midst of chaos.

As I reflect upon the path I have walked, I am reminded of the words of the psalmist: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." This truth has been etched into the very fabric of my being. Despite the storms that raged around me, I knew that I was not alone. In my moments of weakness, in the depths of my pain, I felt the presence of a divine comforter who whispered words of solace and strength into my soul.

There were times when despair threatened to consume me, when the weight of my past seemed too heavy to bear. But it was precisely in those moments that the power of faith shone the brightest. It was as if a divine hand reached down and lifted me, reminding me that I was not defined by my circumstances and that my worth was not determined by the opinions of others. It was a reminder that I was loved, valued, and cherished by a Creator who saw beyond the brokenness and into the depths of my heart.

This unwavering faith, this unbreakable bond with a higher power, became my anchor in the tumultuous sea of life. It provided me with the courage to face my past, to confront the demons that had haunted me for years. It gave me the strength to extend forgiveness, not only to those who had wronged me but also to myself. It empowered me to transform my pain into a source of compassion, a driving force to help others who had experienced similar struggles.

I am not defined by the scars of my past; rather, I am defined by the healing that has taken place within me. The power of faith, of belief in something greater than myself, has been the catalyst for my transformation. It has enabled me to rise above the ashes of my past and embrace a future filled with purpose and possibility.

As I look back on my journey, I am filled with gratitude for the grace that carried me through the darkest valleys and the joy that lifted me to the highest peaks. My story is one of redemption, of a life reclaimed from the clutches of despair. Through it all, I am reminded that I am never alone and that the power that rescued me from the depths continues to guide me forward, lighting my path with hope and love.

Amidst the pursuit of a brighter day, my faith in its possibility remained fleeting, with doubts overshadowing any chance of its realization. Yet, in the midst of my struggle, I defied all odds and shattered the very statistics that seemed insurmountable. However, these achievements paled when contrasted with the supreme equations crafted by the Father of Mathematics. My heart, despite its near-lifeless state, failed to perceive these victories. Instead, all I saw were the impassive visages of those who had oppressed me, leaving me parched within, as if I had traversed a fevered haze.

Thus, I address them now, declaring that they are naught but transient water stains and indistinct blurs. I obliterated their hatred and found solace in laughter, despite the unspeakable atrocities they inflicted upon me. With this newfound strength, I stepped out into the maelstrom of a storm, its blinding chaos mirroring the tempest I had traversed within myself.

On a scorching August afternoon in the year of our Lord Nineteen-Hundred and Eighty-Five, I stood tall, donning the only suit and tie in my possession that didn't match its components—pants, belt, shoes, socks, and shirt. In the presence of a distinguished faculty panel, I confidently presented my

undergraduate thesis paper, titled “The Personnel Manager’s Role as Agent of Change.” Although I have no recollection of the words I spoke during that presentation, I possess pictures as evidence of the occasion. Just a week later, I found myself amidst a procession of caps and gowns, a part of the select group draped in the university's colors of blue and gold. As we, the recent graduates, filed into the ceremony venue, a robust wind picked up, prompting me to hastily secure my cap to prevent it from being carried away. Lynn captured this moment in a photograph, an image that encapsulated a snapshot of that day.

In the midst of that monumental occasion, as we stood within the hallowed walls of the university’s athletic building – the Field House – memories of past victories and defeats flooded my mind. The resonance of footsteps and the echo of cheers seemed to linger in the air as if the very essence of my athletic pursuits had been woven into the fabric of the building itself. It was within these confines that I learned the intricate dance of perseverance and humility, where every stride represented a commitment to push forward regardless of the outcome.

The memory of that incredible mile run, achieving a time of 4:41, remains etched in my mind like a timeless treasure. It was an emblem of my dedication and a testament to the strength that flowed through my veins. The words of encouragement from a fellow competitor, proclaiming, "Milligan is a beast," echoed like a chorus of affirmation, reverberating within me.

Yet, as I stood on the precipice of an uncertain future, the memories of athletic triumphs seemed dwarfed by the magnitude of my spiritual journey. I yearned to run with even greater fervor, not around an indoor track, but toward the Jewel of Heaven itself. The thought of that final sprint, with my eyes squeezed shut tight, stems from a mixture of hope and trepidation. I admit my fear, fearing that the outstretched arms of Jesus might not be waiting to receive me as I've longed for, but instead, I envision the same look I've seen in the eyes of those who harbor hate and wander lost. Despite this fear, I recognized that, like the broken souls in this world, I would run toward Jesus with unwavering determination. Perhaps this time, as I

approached the culmination of my earthly journey, I wouldn't be met with rejection, dismissal, or the command to depart. Instead, I held onto the glimmer of possibility that in that final sprint, I would be welcomed with arms open wide, radiating with the embrace of unconditional love. As my feet carry me through that last stretch, I dream of finding not a distant figure, but a Savior whose eyes reflect compassion, grace, and a promise fulfilled.

As the anticipation in the air grew palpable, I found myself standing on the threshold of the stage, a mere heartbeat away from the sacred space where the culmination of an arduous journey awaited—a journey that was marked by both relentless determination and a guiding hand from above. This stage was not just a physical platform, but a symbolic altar where my dedication and resilience would be recognized, and where I would receive the reward for my tireless efforts—a bachelor's degree, a testament to my unwavering commitment.

Yet, it's crucial to understand that arriving at this watershed moment was not merely the outcome of my earthly efforts. Far from it. Rather, it was a surge of divine potency, a force emanating directly from Jesus Christ, which permeated the very core of my being. This sacred energy propelled me to stand at this crossroads, a meeting point of past struggles and boundless future possibilities.

In this hallowed instant, I was receiving far more than a mere piece of parchment. What I held was a gift, an invitation that transcended academic achievement. It beckoned me to not only marvel at the beauty of the world but to actively participate in its transformation. Guided by an ethereal grace, each step I took was not just a physical motion but a spiritual act, an unfolding realization of my unique capacity to "paint the world beautiful."

Every stride carried an extraordinary sense of purpose, almost as if it were imbued with divine intent. It was more than ordinary; it was part of a celestial ballet—a dance swirling with elements of

creation, inspiration, and empowerment. And as I stood on that stage, moments away from receiving my degree, it dawned on me: this was not the end. This was the threshold of an eternal journey—a quest to saturate the world with hues of compassion and the indelible imprint of a soul invigorated by divine grace.

EPILOGUE

In the world of "Suffering to Fulfillment: Resilience and Liberation in a Beautiful World," these words echo as an unwavering mantra: "Born into a family of demons, I've fought my whole life 'not' to become one." This is a story of pain, promise, action, adventure, and the triumph of the soul that only a Savior can save and deliver. It's a spiritual battle for survival in a world plagued by the most decadent of human beings.

Amidst the perpetual tango of chaos and complexity in this realm, where suffering and triumph intermingle, this narrative unfolds as a tapestry of human endurance and the indomitable spirit's victory. It invites you into the labyrinth of life's unpredictable landscape, embarking on a journey that bears witness to survival, resilience, and the radiant glow of human potential.

Within these pages, you will discover stories that mirror your own, tales of struggle and strength, of darkness and illumination. Each chapter is a self-contained cosmos, offering intimate narratives and practical lessons, all interwoven with the author's life saga—a testament to a world teetering on the precipice of transformation.

As you delve into these chapters, you'll realize that you are not merely reading ink on paper; you are participating in a collective human experience. These shared struggles invite you to question the

ethical paradigms that guide your choices and to recognize the motifs of resilience and hope that weave through the fabric of your life.

In the aftermath of horrors that defy human comprehension, my spirit found itself ensnared in a shroud of darkness—a void so thick that it yearned for even a pinprick of light to pierce through. Yet, two unfaltering beacons broke through this abyss: the transformative love from kindred souls and the divine grace of Jesus Christ. They acted as lighthouses amidst the storm-tossed sea of my past, casting illuminating rays that fortified my resolve to sail onward and maintain unwavering faith in trying times.

Though I trudged on without the presence of my departed parents, my heart was anything but vacant. As a warrior armed with a soul of steel, I ventured through the maze of my mottled past, using the memories of their cruelty as combustible fuel for the inextinguishable fire of my resilience. The lighthouse symbolism not only represented divine guidance but also an unwavering faith in the face of adversity. It stood tall like a broken chain, symbolizing liberation from the chains of the past, and a ship's wheel, representing taking control of my destiny.

In my heart's inner sanctum, the hallowed words of Jesus etch an incandescent path through the labyrinth of my life. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). These sacred syllables pulse through me, like lifeblood, defying the venomous whispers of despair that once held dominion over my soul.

As a child, enveloped in the suffocating cloak of solitude, my whispered vows punctuated the oppressive stillness. I vowed, my voice trembling yet determined, never to succumb. It was faith that enkindled this vow—an ever-glowing ember forged in the fires of hardship, tempered like steel to withstand life's harshest blows. Even if my complete purpose remained elusive, life unfolded its blessings. I already have a cherished son and a steadfast relationship with Jesus, immersing myself in repentance daily. The days do get lonely, but I find solace in my books and music, and the company of

my son. Together, we collectively erected a sanctuary from the shards of a fragmented past, its walls fortified with love, compassion, and enduring strength.

From the crucible of hardship, I transcended poverty's unyielding clasp, finding refuge in the soul-stirring cadence of music. As a guiding force for my son—a radiant beacon illuminating my sojourn—I aimed to instill not just mortal love but also a reverent awe for the boundless love of Jesus, the ultimate lighthouse that guided me through my darkest nights.

Haunting memories occasionally surge forth, like uninvited waves battering the shoreline, yet they meet a bulwark fortified by faith and unblemished love. In them and in the shimmering dreams that beckon from beyond, I find a sanctuary—a resilient ember of hope that defies extinguishment.

In the sweltering summer of 1974, a life-altering crossroads loomed before me. Choosing liberation over deceitful entanglements, I shattered the fetters that imprisoned me, embarking on a journey ripe with endless possibilities.

From pain to promise, from struggle to strength, from darkness to illumination, my life's journey became a testament to the power of faith and resilience.

As stars embroider the celestial canopy, mirroring the lullabies I hum to my son, I bear witness to his blossoming life—a kaleidoscope of dreams and prayers. Through every shared laugh and every earnest conversation, I discern the ineffable essence of divine love shaping the very fabric of my existence.

Though absolute tranquility may elude me, if my story imbues even one soul with the courage to break free, then my purpose is fulfilled. For every dawn heralds renewal, and though abuse sought to cleave my spirit, I stand resolute—a monolith of resilience against the face of malevolence.

With each unfolding day, my unwavering faith in Jesus Christ solidifies. I have weathered the tempest and emerged unbroken. To all who still tread the stormy waters, let's set sail, guided by a hope that forever illumines our path and a love that refuses to wane.

At the end of this odyssey through suffering and triumph, I stand before you, not as a paragon of perfection, but as a testament to the enduring human spirit. My story is but one thread in the rich tapestry of existence, a tapestry woven with threads of pain, hope, love, and faith.

As you close this book and embark on your journey, remember that life's trials are not meant to break us but to shape us. They are the chisels that sculpt our character and the crucibles that refine our souls. In the darkest of moments, when despair threatens to consume you, look for those beacons of light—the love of kindred souls, the grace of faith, the strength of resilience.

May my story serve as a reminder that, even in the face of the most daunting adversities, there is a path forward, a path toward healing, transformation, and ultimately, fulfillment. Embrace your journey, for it is uniquely yours, and within it lies the potential for growth, redemption, and a radiant life illuminated by faith and love.

As we part ways, know that your story is still unfolding, with chapters waiting to be written. May your life echo with the triumphant refrain that only faith and resilience can compose.

Thank you for sharing this journey with me.

| THE END |