

Hey Kid, There's Nothing Wrong with You

a memoir by Jared Garrett

Chapter 1

The Beginning, More or Less

It all started with a hippie named Catherine. At least for me it did. She was my mother. But I never called her that. I also never called her ‘Mom.’ Instead, I called her Magdalen, which was the second or third name she went by in the cult. Another name she went by early on in her time in the cult was Seraphine. I like that name a lot.

This is a story about my life growing up in a weird cult and how I freed myself from it, but there’s lots of other story to tell as part of this. So I’m going to start this thing with Catherine, but then I’ll have to rewind. The story will be linear sometimes, but only when it makes sense.

People say you should start a story at the beginning, so here we go. I was born in Chicago in a hospital. I guess the unusual thing—the reason I’m writing this—is the circumstances of my birth. Or rather, the circumstances my parents were in at the time of my birth. In fact, they’d been in those circumstances for quite a while before I was born and remained in those same circumstances for quite a while after.

All things considered, I don’t think it’s going to work out for me to start at the beginning. I’m getting off track. You would think that after nearly three decades of telling my story out loud, I’d get better at it. And honestly, I have. I’ve got the short version down to a few sentences—something I could share in a cubicle farm in a large or small company at which I’m slaving away with co-workers. Which I’ve done. More than once. I’ve got the medium version down pretty well too. I share that over lunch or a short dinner. Also with co-workers or folks who host me for speaking and teaching engagements.

The long version usually gets told over a few days or about an hour or two of unbroken, me talking time, with my coworkers or fellow church members looking on with some version of agog or aghast on their face.

But this is different. This isn't me telling the story aloud to people who start wondering whether I'm as normal as I look. People who start considering that they work with their backs turned to a former member of a cult that preached the equality and sameness of Jesus Christ and Lucifer. People who, when they Google "The Process Church of the Final Judgment," which was the first name of the cult back in the 60s, they see Charles Manson associated with it. People who maybe wonder if they should be armed, or at least get one of those mirrors you can attach to your computer monitor so you can see someone coming behind you.

No, this isn't me talking to people and gauging how much I can really say by their reaction. This isn't me insisting I'm not kidding over a lunch of curry or tacos.

This is my story.

My story. Something about finally putting those words down after all these years chokes me up a bit. I've known for a long time that I should write this thing down. Stop depending on the oral tradition because that's so three thousand years ago.

I have a lot to say. I've been swallowing it for a long time, biting back on who I am and how the life I had and have has broken, healed, and remade me.

So I'm going to start with this: My whole life, I wanted a family. Something in me knew my childhood was a—

I'm sorry for the aside, but this is important to this story.

I just had to fight to stop censoring myself. This is my story but I've been so worried for so long about how certain people might react.

Shut up, scared Jared. Tell the story and tell it right. Type the words.

Stick with me please. I promise I'm going somewhere with this. I don't want to hurt people with what I say.

You know what? Before I go further, a word of warning. I'm going to say what's in my heart. I bear no malice. I do have a bit of anger left and I'm still working through that with prayer and meditation. My intent is not to hurt. My intent is to tell this story the way my voice, the voice that is truest to me, wants me to. I have to say the uncensored words if I want to tell this right.

Here we go again.

My whole life, I wanted a family. Something in me knew my childhood was a perversion. A betrayal of what I and every child really should have. I accept that not every child has it, for all kinds of reasons.

I didn't have it because of the choices of my parents and the people who screwed them up. By 'them' I mean my parents. Yes, the cult knuckleheads screwed them up pretty royally—enough that they didn't realized how messed up they were.

I was born and raised in a cult. My whole life, I knew it was a cult. Only twenty or so years after leaving it did I actually learn most of the truth of it: that the cult was a splinter cult off of Scientology. Yup, that Scientology. I am not going to say I grew up in the cult because I'll tell you something: I've grown up a lot more in the last twenty-plus years, a long time after I left the cult at seventeen, than I did before then.

Back on track now, I promise.

Catherine was a young hippie in San Francisco. I don't know a lot of details about her youth, but she was born and raised in Palo Alto, California to a research doctor father and an

impressive mother who formed nationwide mothers' organizations. I have a picture of her at her first wedding. She looks twenty or so and is lovely in her white gown. She has a cigarette in her hand and her hair hangs loosely.

She and her husband had a son soon after being married, according to the information I've received. A few years later, a cult called The Process Church of the Final Judgment—The Process for short—showed up in Berkeley and enticed this young family to join up. Within a year or so, Catherine (whose name was now Seraphine) was fully dedicated and her husband was fully drummed out of the cult, leaving wife and son behind. Catherine/Seraphine went on to marry one of the British original founders of the Process. His name was John. Catherine became the special handmaiden to the mysterious and megalomaniacal leader of the Process.

So now let's get into this cult. We'll pick up Seraphine and my story in a bit.

The cult started in the UK, at Oxford, in the 60s. It was a time of disaffection, paradigm shifting, and rebellion. Cults were probably proliferating like rabbits in a certain park in Germany that I walked through a few times. There were a lot of rabbits. Seriously.

In the case of this cult, a fellow named Robert DeGrimston and a woman named Mary Ann MacLean were at Oxford together. They splintered off Scientology because Robert and Mary Ann were using some machine differently from the way L. Ron Hubbard did, doing something like past life analysis, energy focus, and psychic power development. No, for real.

They were essentially forced out of Scientology, but they had several people who agreed with what they were doing, so those folks stuck with Robert and Mary Ann. The cult was called The Process Church of the Final Judgment and they had some funky practices that I encourage you to learn about via Google.

Things got strange, then bad in London, and the cult shifted to the USA. I don't know the timeline of where they were and when they were there, but at some point in the late 60s, during their USA travels, they were in San Francisco. And that's where they crossed paths with Catherine, and where they first destroyed a family, as I pointed out above. Catherine's first husband was drummed out.

This might have something to do with the cult demanding total fidelity and consecration to it. So if you had money, it went to the cult. If you had a family, you gave it to the cult so you could go around printing and selling magazines, running the cult coffee shops in Chicago, San Francisco, or New Orleans or wherever they were at the time, and raising money on the streets. Whoever was bad at making money or running the coffee shops was left to watch over the kids.

In any case, Catherine/Seraphine ended up marrying one of the cult founders, a guy who had taken the name John as part of his membership in the cult. He was a British guy with big, you might say really big, eyebrows, a receding hairline, and a very heavy and royal-sounding accent. I don't know how much time passed, but they had a baby. Another boy. Now Catherine/Seraphine had two boys, separated by around six or seven years.

Neither of them was me.

Sometime later, the cult was in Boston and they recruited a good-looking fellow who had grown up in a tough home. His name was Bruce. I say it again: he was good-looking. Also, he was smart and very good at talking and charming. Catherine/Seraphine and Bruce became a thing. She was married to John still, but the cult didn't really see that as an issue and the capricious leader of the cult, Mary Ann, even blessed their relationship.

I was born in 1974, while the cult was in Chicago. I was one of many kids born into the cult. The members were young, in great shape, and had no reason to abstain from procreative activities. I was even born in the same hospital room as another cult child. All told, by the end of the cult's life, about thirty children were born into it, most of us raised together in very orphanage-like conditions. I don't mean street orphans—at least not for a lot of it. Although there were some very poor times and I have distinct memories of going around getting days-old bread from bakeries pretty regularly.

The cult didn't stay in Chicago long. As far as I can put together, by the time I was one, they had moved to New York City. So I spent the next three or so years of my life in the Big Apple, mostly in Manhattan.

The memories I have are of large religious rituals with people standing in circles, singing and swaying and of sleeping in a wide room with maybe twenty other kids where we all had I think sleeping bags, and of walking to nursery school down a bright New York City sidewalk, and of moseying around a circle of adults doing some late night wine-drinking and cult talk while I finished off everybody's red wine. I also remember climbing the monkey bars at the nursery school and attempting to spin/somersault around the top bar like I'd seen other kids doing. I fell but don't remember the brief flight. I woke up with my two front teeth in front of my mouth, my head ringing and blood on my forehead, and being circled by kids.

And that is just about all I remember from New York. Except for meeting my first best friend and arch-enemy. They were the same guy. We'll get to that in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

My Best Friend and Arch-Enemy and The Four

So the cult was in Manhattan; had been for several years, I believe. Members of the cult wore long, dark robes and heavy iron crosses and such on chains, and long hair.

Not kidding.

There were morning rituals of singing hymns and chants either written by cult members (these were overall talented folks) or taken from Anglican religious tradition. We also sang traditional Gospel songs. I remember being in a swaying circle with loads of adults and a bunch of kids singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Long, dark robes swayed back and forth along with long hair.

Sunday services were called Celebration. It probably started as something more energetic and enjoyable than what I grew very bored and cynical about in my teen years. A few images have stuck with me from my earlier years. Long robes, lots of incense, candles and dimly lit rooms, singing, people coming forward to be anointed with some kind of oil and water and soot from a candle flame and be accepted into the cult.

We kids, and I believe the place was called The Children’s Center by cult members, lived in the same large building where all the rituals and such took place. We all slept in the same, big room. Granted, I was around three or four, so if I happened to find myself in that same room I would probably be confused by how small it is now. But upwards of twenty kids were able to fit sleeping mats or bags in there. A strong image and odor of the room remains with me. It’s late, the lights are out, but some ambient light allows me to see the array of sleeping forms under thin blankets. We’ve sat through the evening prayer, singing, and lecture session

and have brushed our teeth. All of us using the same bathroom. No fights over toothbrushes as far as I can remember.

Back to the image. A concourse of sleeping kids, ranging in age from three or so to twelve or thirteen. The oldest was my oldest brother, Daniel. He's the boy that my mother, Catherine/Seraphine, had with her husband before being recruited into the cult. He was old enough at the time they joined that he remembered life outside the cult.

I do believe that he was old enough to blame the cult for his father leaving him and his mother.

I knew Daniel was my brother due to the simple fact that he made sure I knew. I don't know where he slept. I don't remember a pattern to the arrangement of the sleeping spaces either. As the kids slept, a faint whisper of breathing reached my ears. The room also smelled of urine. Why? Lots of poorly tended and cared for kids were sleeping in there; what do you expect? Also, there are stories of kids waking in the middle of the night so blearily that they simply stumbled to a nearby pile of dirty clothes and took care of business there.

The cult was based in Manhattan at the time, but they had at least one other branch running in Toronto, Canada. Which explained why, one night, I was awoken in the middle of the night to by a boy I didn't know, who was the same size as me, sitting cross-legged next to me and wearing pajamas with jockeys all over them.

I noticed his goofy overbite right away. He grinned. "Hi. I'm Mark."

"Hi." I introduced myself. My name was Jared by then.

"I just got here. My mom and me came from Canada."

"Cool pajamas." I was pretty jealous.

"I know. The jockeys and horses are running."

And that was that. Mark and I probably talked for a little while longer, arranging for him to stick by my side the next day, which was Sunday. I assume he slept near me that night. I can tell you that from then until I was 17, I spent very few years in a place where Mark was not. Sure, we were friends, but that's not why we were always in the same place. The cult seemed to want kids of similar ages to live in the same place for a while.

But that's pretty much moot, because for a long time, most or all of the kids lived together—until I was around seven.

We're not going with the linear story here, folks. I'm going to keep talking about Mark and the other boys my age for a while. I'll be jumping back and forth to tell different stories in the right way.

In any case, starting when I was around six or seven, it seems like the kids were split up. There were several branches at that time, with some closing and others opening over the next twelve years or so. Over the years, there were branches in New Orleans, Louisiana; Toronto, Canada; Las Vegas, Nevada; San Antonio, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; Denver, Colorado; Dallas, Texas; Quakertown, Pennsylvania; Washington, D.C.; Virginia, and rural New York State. Their headquarters wound up on a ranch in Arizona for a while and then, finally, on a ranch in Southern Utah. More on that later.

Until I was around seven, I spent my life with all the other kids I knew about, mostly in NYC, rural New York, and Virginia. Probably not in that order. Starting at age six or seven, I lived with a bunch of adults and a few kids in a big old house outside of Quakertown, Pennsylvania.

But by the time I was nine, I lived in Denver. The other kids who lived there were Mark and Manuel. And a couple younger girls who were Mark's little half-sisters. Initially, the man

I'd found out was my father lived there too. I'll get to that later. No, later. I'll just say here that there were several kids who grew up not knowing who their father was—and some grew up thinking one guy was their father but they looked a lot more like that other guy so what was going on?

Good times, good times.

I moved to Denver after a short spell in Dallas, which was ultimately where all the children of the cult members wound up. In Denver, we first lived in the actual city, on St. Paul Street. Picture three young boys, all around nine years old, doing their best to stay out of sight of the adults. Picture those three living in a house with I think ten other adults. The oldest was Mark. He was 16 days older than me. His mother lived in the same branch. She went by Lucina, although she changed her name some years later to Vivian. The next one was Manuel, whose parents were Anne and Cyrus—the directors of the Denver branch of what was called the Foundation Faith of God at the time.

My father lived there too, for a short time. My memory is that I lived in Dallas and went to Denver to visit my father, who was called Enoch. My visit extended and my father moved onto a different branch.

So Mark, Manuel, and I were the main kids in the Denver branch. There were some smaller kids there, but they're not really part of the story. They had bit parts in my life, being intermittently irritating and adorable.

I never liked Manuel. I'm not sure why. Maybe I recognized the privilege he had of growing up with his parents for much of his life. Truly, they treated him like a son and he treated them like parents. I'm retroactively jealous. I like Manuel now. I think he's a driven,

intelligent, deeply good man who really got a lot of teasing as a young boy and man. I'm ashamed that I was one of his teasers.

Mark and I biked together and generally got into all kinds of mischief. I guess I liked him. I don't remember seeking out his company at any time. He was just there. A fact of my life. Once all the kids were in Dallas, Isaac came into the picture. I'd known him, but he'd been able to spend his life until then- around age 11- with his father who was another bigwig in the cult and who was in charge of the Las Vegas branch. So it was then, in Dallas, that The Four came together. We were boys whose birthdays were all within about four months of each other. Isaac was the oldest. I was the youngest. I'd spent the least amount of time with an actual biological parental unit.

Mark and I spent the most time together. I don't know why. He really disliked Manuel—possibly because he'd essentially grown up right next to Manuel, and Manuel was pretty spoiled and kind of a brat. Isaac was often aloof, although he joined us in shenanigans in Dallas sometimes.

But for just under two years, Mark and I were basically joined at the hip in Denver. He was completely insane. He would crack the crassest joke possible and although it would make my skin crawl, I laughed most of the time. He and I rode bikes around the block, started fires, got injured doing insane stunts, and he had a huge temper.

So did I, though. When Mark lost his temper, he lost all of his self-awareness. He would fight and try to do damage. I would wish I could give into my anger that completely, but then I would somewhat and shout my head off. But I wouldn't fight as dirty as him. He would pinch, squeeze, go for the family jewels. He wanted to hurt. I just wanted to get him off me.

Mark had some strange predilections I won't get into. But due to our proximity and the absolutely zero chance I could ever get away from him, I would usually participate with only token resistance. Some of the stuff he did and insisted that we do made me uncomfortable. Really uncomfortable. Some was probably harmless boy stuff. Some wasn't. One time he actually wet my bed and didn't come to my rescue when I swore it hadn't been me.

We did some crime. Really lame shoplifting of candy bars. The first one I ever stole, I kid you not, was a Charleston Chew. I think I shoved it deep into my pocket and draped my shirt hem over it, probably put my hand in my pocket too. I strolled out of that corner convenience store in Denver, heart pounding, and scarfed the candy bar as fast as I could to hid the evidence. I still love Charleston Chews. I pay for them now.

Mark also found an easy way to steal porno magazines from the 7-11 up the road when we moved to Dallas. I looked at those things and was usually disgusted by how harsh they made sex seem. Sometimes I liked them, though.

We also committed some vandalism. The statue of limitations is way over, right? That was more than 27 years ago, so I think I'm safe. But I still feel terrible. One time in Dallas, during one of our after-dark excursions, we had made our way around the block, peeking into houses sometimes, and found ourselves crossing through the half-block long parking lot that ran in front of a small business district.

By the way, we were able to make these excursions because the house we lived in was the boys' house—in which as many as fourteen boys lived—and we had one caretaker and while he definitely cared about us, he did not monitor us diligently in any way.

In any case. There we were, crossing the giant parking lot and Mark suggested we see if we could get behind the single-story office buildings. It looked like there was a sort of sidewalk-

alley back there between the back of the buildings and a dividing wall. On the other side of the tall, ivy-covered dividing wall were apartment buildings and condos and houses. These office space buildings we were going to try to get behind were the kind of places where you'd find small, single-person law firms and insurance agencies.

So. We found our way between a chain-link fence and a white-stucco building wall and came upon the suspected sidewalk-alley. It was about three feet wide. The dividing wall dripped with wide-leaved ivy that was dark gray in the crappy light. The alley was dark enough that we could see each other but couldn't make out each other's features. We were sure we'd discovered a place nobody else knew about.

We soon found out we were wrong. We came to a storage shed that had obviously been custom built for the narrow space. It was maybe eight feet tall with a sloping roof and solid concrete walls. There was a space of about eight inches between the shed wall and the back wall of the office buildings we were behind—just enough for scrawny teens to squeeze through. The door was wood and it was padlocked closed, although the door had plenty of play. Which Mark discovered when he yanked on it.

If you pulled the door hard and held it, you ended up with just over an inch-wide gap between the door and the jamb. We talked about what could be in the shed, imagining valuable things. I'm not sure how we got from there to Mark jerking hard on the door over and over again until pulling the lock out of the wood of the door jamb. But get there we did.

We found file boxes of papers of all kinds. And for no reason I can remember, we took some. I think there were mailing supplies—envelopes and such—in the pile we took. We grabbed and ran, hearts pounding, imagining we were hearing police car sirens, squeezing through the narrow gap, pelting down the alley, Mark laughing his head off, and finally scampering into the

driveway of the house we boys lived in on Dickason Avenue. Mark had discovered a loose opening to the terrifying crawl space under the giant house, so we stuffed everything in there, snuck into the house, and got into bed.

No adult ever knew we did these things. The rest of the boys in the house that was called Dixie—no lie—might have known about our shenanigans, but everyone was doing their own thing and couldn't be bothered to care about what we were up to.

To Mark's credit, he felt either guilt or terror at being found out as vandals and he insisted we collect everything from the crawl space and take it back to the shed within the next few days. I didn't see the point. It was all blank papers and supplies, so I couldn't see the reason. I felt zero guilt. I should have, but at the time I figured it was really all Mark. I suppose the notion of 'accomplice' hadn't distilled upon me yet.

Mark prevailed. We gathered everything up, despite it being covered in crawlspace dust, and hauled it back under the cover of night not long later. We found the shed padlock mechanism replaced. We could still pull the door open with a half inch gap, though.

So Mark and I stood there, one of us holding the storage shed door open to provide a gap and taking turns sliding papers and envelopes through the gap feverishly, in total panic that we were taking too long and somebody was going to find us. Finally, we gave right the hell up, certain that the sounds we were hearing meant some guard with a gun was making his way toward us and we would be either shot or taken to jail. And if we were found out and not killed, we would be hauled in front of Lucia, the sociopathic leader of the Dallas branch, and she would make our lives miserable after several hours of shouted, guilt-tripping lecture.

We were more scared of Lucia and what she would say and have done to us than we were of being shot. Or of going to jail. Frankly, going to jail sounded a bit ok, as long as I never had to

face her in the process. At least I would be free of her and away from the rest of the adults. They not only didn't care about me, they sometimes seemed to actively hate me—finding reasons to get me in trouble or shout at me and the others and smack us around. To be precise, the 'smack us around' was Jason only—although spanking was administered by several adults. Jason was Lucia's husband, and I think he was one of the original founders of The Process, because he was British, extremely well educated, and came from a wealthy background. He had a giant temper and never showed a sign of even trying to hold it back. But he was also kind and gave us insanely cool art projects. We sculpted, made movies, screen-printed, and a lot more. Details on that in a later chapter. But it's stunning to me to reflect on that panic and where it was directed at that time of my life. Lucia was that powerful of a figure for us. She had all power over us. She could browbeat us endlessly and shout incredibly hateful and angry things and make me—and I would guess the other kids—feel worthless. She would piss me off, but I felt totally powerless before her regular onslaughts, so that's where the worthless came from.

Back to the shed. In blind panic, we ended up just dropping the remaining papers and envelopes on the ground outside the shed door and we took off. By the time we got back to Dixie, we were laughing at how the office people would react seeing all their stuff returned—either stuffed through a door crack or dropped on the concrete of the alley floor.

So that was Mark. He was always up to something—always pushing boundaries. Which was easy, since we only intermittently had the painful and deeply unpleasant eye of the adults actually watching us. We were living in a strange world of extraordinary stricture, but it wasn't consistent. We had huge swaths of time of being totally left alone. And Mark took full advantage.

The last bit about Mark for this chapter took place in Denver. This was before we were all in Dallas. Reader, I warned you this wouldn't necessarily be linear.

I moved to Denver when I was about nine. Or so. From then on, Mark and I were almost always in the same place- Denver, Dallas, and banished to hard labor on a ranch in Arizona. After about a year in Denver itself, living in a house on a street named St. Paul, we moved out to Arvada. Or Aurora. Golden?

Anyway, there were three of us boys all the same age: Mark, Manuel, and me. Manuel was the only child of Anne and Cyrus, the leaders of the Denver branch. We went to Vanderhoof Elementary. I was there for 4th grade and a month of 5th grade. More on that later.

We lived in a big house on a large plot of land with fields surrounding the house, the water for the house coming from a well and drinking water coming from big buckets we had to fill at the fire station a few hundred yards down the road. Halfway across one field was a tiny creek and a big tree. All the way across the same field in the other direction leaned a series of low, bedraggled, ramshackle barns. These were the source of much fun and insanity.

Mark honed his ability to piss me off in that place. He would consistently do unbelievably stupid or wrong or criminal things—very noticeable things. And he would always blame them on me or Manuel. Then, when Anne was yelling at me in her appalled and pinched way, or some other adult was berating me and Manuel (I never heard Anne say an angry word to Manuel), Mark would slide behind her and pull absurd and sometimes very crass faces, rubbing it in that he was getting away with his crime.

I hated him. But I always forgave him—for a value of forgive. I would never forget what he did and definitely resented it. Within days, sometimes hours, of the yelling and punishments, I would be back with Mark. Following him around, resentful of him, hating my life, despising all

the adults. Angry that I had already read all the books I had gotten from the library. Furious that the god I was being told existed would just let this kind of injustice go on. Wishing my brother Daniel would somehow show up and rescue me.

Nonetheless, I was back with Mark, hanging out, having actual fun. Not always committing crime. A couple of young boys living in a commune, essentially orphans, with weirdly large amounts of time to just do whatever. Because, I mean. Who else did I have?

Chapter 3

Yes, It Was A Cult—And A Commune

Let's get something out of the way at the outset of this chapter. This was an actual cult. They're not a cult anymore—the group morphed from freaking weird splinter group from Scientology through lots of phases and is now a giant, admirable animal rescue and rehabilitation outfit.

I don't want to try to provide some kind of detailed history of the cult. This is my memoir, not a historical work detailing one of the more prominent and odd cults that ever graced this planet. However, it will help you to know kind of where it all began and where it went and what the general situation was as life went on. Please note that this is all from my perspective and is based on the information I've gleaned over the years. I have no doubt that the founders of the cult would disagree on most of what I'm about to describe.

We did a bit of a history lesson in Chapter 1, so I'll recap that here along with some interesting details. First off, you've heard of Scientology, right? It's the religion that morphed from something called Dianetics, which was created by L. Ron Hubbard. We're not going to get too deeply into the practices and beliefs involved, but it will help you to know that adherents to Dianetics/Scientology back in the 60s, and maybe today, used several methods and tools to try to deal with their lives and the trauma and other issues associated with living in a sometimes-challenging world. One of the things they used was an e-meter, which was used to detect changes in a person's state of mind. The overall purpose of Dianetics was to improve the individual and elevate a person to a higher state of being.

Or something like that.

They used several processes to do all this. In Oxford, England, there was a group of Scientologists who were using the processes and tools developed by Hubbard and his people to try to find themselves and live a life that was more to their liking. They were children of British aristocracy- almost universally from wealthy backgrounds. It was the Sixties, man, and they wanted to change the world. But they were going to start by changing themselves.

One couple in the Oxford group were Robert de Grimston and Mary Ann MacLean, like I mentioned in Chapter One. Robert was born in Shanghai, China, and Mary Ann was born in Glasgow, Scotland. They met as members of the Church of Scientology and before long, they were leading a small group of people in adapting some of the Scientology practices to their own individual ideas and methods. They eventually left—or were kicked out of—Scientology and formed their own group: The Process Church of the Final Judgment. This name was conversationally shortened to simply The Process.

So do you believe me yet that this was a cult? No? Okay, well, it might help you to know that The Process's core beliefs declared that God was a being/entity consisting of four perfectly equal parts: Jehovah, Christ, Lucifer, and Satan. Members of the new cult were supposed to worship all four of these parts, and by extension their version of God, in order to gain enlightenment. Enlightenment could also be called transcendence, where a person has transcended their mortal trauma and fetters, such as family and friends, and is living on a higher plane of consciousness and understanding.

They wore long, dark robes and heavy chains with arcane symbols and used fire and incense and oil in their rituals and ceremonies. They published a magazine that morphed over the years, distributed it out of coffee shops in the several cities they moved to and eventually set up

branches in, and were a big name during the 60s. They courted Allen Ginsburg, among many others, and were forced to leave England after a particularly bad lawsuit didn't go their way.

They wandered Europe, then the US, and eventually wound up in Xtul, Mexico. I know of at least one baby that was born there. The Process's beliefs and practices evolved over the years, and they adopted new names often. One of their consistent practices was to have dogs, often large German shepherds, with them at all times. They began rescuing animals and either trying to find homes for the rescues or simply adopting them. They resisted any notion of euthanasia of animals, eventually elevating them above that status of humans, whom they regarded as an only semi-necessary species but one that had very much disappointed its Creator.

After a massive storm nearly killed the faithful Processeans in Xtul, they moved back to the US reinvigorated and became a more established. This didn't mean their doctrine and practice became standard—but they did get better at recruiting and fundraising, and before too long they bought a ranch in central Arizona, near Kirkland, which is about an hour southwest of Prescott. They renamed the ranch Faith Canyon. It's a beautiful, secluded valley ranch, with pale sand and a mid-sized pond/lake, grazing meadows for passing cattle, a pretty stream, and a now-mature orchard which they originally planted.

One of the cult's hallmarks was that it was a commune. In fact, the communal nature of the cult soon became its key feature that united the entire thing. Everyone lived and worked together, giving all of their life and talents and resources to the cult.

Allow me to paint a picture of what the day to day life of a branch in the cult/commune was like so that you can get a full idea here. From when I was about seven or eight years old, the cult had split into a few branches. I don't know the timelines and locations associated with when and such, but when I was seven, I lived in a big house on a large property outside Quakertown,

Pennsylvania. At that time, there was a branch in Atlanta, Georgia, as well as one in Denver, Colorado, and I think in San Antonio, Texas. Each branch consisted of a leader, usually a married couple that led the branch, and a bunch of adults and quite a few kids. Often the kids were the children of the leaders of the branch, and sometimes the children of other members of that branch.

Nearly twenty people lived in the house near Quakertown. That was the leader of the branch, Faith, and her husband, Gregory, my mother, my father (who I found out was my father while I was in residence in Quakertown), and I think maybe as many as eight other adults. As for kids, there were Faith's three kids, all older than me, my mother's three sons (I'm one of them), and at least three other kids.

We all lived in a fairly spacious house with a large, linoleum-floored kitchen, a long dining room with a big table for the adults and a couple card tables for the kids—which we unfolded and set up at every dinnertime. We kids went to a school nearby. I remember walking there, taking shortcuts through wooded areas. I don't remember specifically, but the school had to be in Quakertown.

The day would start with silence. That's right, mandated silence. We had a gathering every morning and we were forbidden from speaking before it. Kids and adults would get in trouble if they uttered even one word before the morning gathering.

So every morning, everyone would squeeze into a cramped living room with a few couches, a chair for Faith since she was the boss, and the kids would find any gap available. This was the morning "celebration." We usually sang a hymn—one written by a cult member. The group had its own fairly thick hymnbook, most of the songs written by cult members and some of the songs from the Anglican church. These were the more fiery songs that used the biblical book of

Revelations as an inspiration. The hymn was accompanied by someone on guitar. After the hymn, some scriptural message was shared by either Faith or her designee. Then a prayer was offered.

At that point, we would all go off to our separate labors. I almost always joined Bethany, a member of the cult, in the kitchen and helped her cook breakfast. I actually helped. This was the only major choice I was able to make in my life and by golly I made it. I chose to help cook instead of the other stuff the kids were roped into doing—cleaning bathrooms, vacuuming, and whatever other random job the adults could come up with.

We typically made a hot breakfast of oatmeal, cream of wheat, or scrambled eggs with lots of toast. Cold, boxed breakfast cereal was a rare luxury. Very rare. I can't recall eating it more than a handful of times before I was 17. When we did have it, it was usually shredded wheat or grape nuts, so yes, I grew up putting sugar on my cereal.

With breakfast served, I ate mine, then had to help clean it up. I went fast because I wanted to be away from the judging eyes of the adults as quickly as possible.

Then the kids would head out to school and the adults would, for the most part, go off and 'fund.' This was short for 'fundraising.' Later, it became its own word: Funding. What this means is that the adults would dress in their best clothes, go to big city street corners and outside shopping malls and sometimes even airports, and talk to people walking by and try to convince them to donate money.

The adults would come home tired and grumpy and would sit at the dining table counting their take, then giving it to Faith, who I assume put it in a bank account—which was surely managed by someone at the cult's Arizona headquarters in Faith Canyon. When the kids got home, we were typically in a mostly empty house. Faith or Gregory was probably there, but they

rarely made an appearance, mimicking the overall leader of the cult, Mary Ann, who made so few appearances that the kids didn't even know she existed. When I was fifteen or so, I first heard a rumor that there was some mysterious lady who actually ran the whole operation.

I don't think Magdalen, my mother (she settled on Magdalen by the time I was six) did a lot of funding, so she might have been around too. We had lots of cats and dogs and there was always something to do with them—clean up after them, bury the one that died over night, feed them, and sometimes I might even just sit with the giant, hairy black dog called Chewbacca and pet him. He was a great dog.

So we kids were left to our own devices. If we could stay out of sight of the adults long enough, we could make it through to dinner time without getting yelled at, being ordered to do some random job, or getting in enough trouble to have all the kids called down and shouted at for a few hours.

Usually, I would come home, grab a quick snack of bread from the kitchen, and go up to my room and read. Or outside to the deep hole we had dug in the woods and read. Or under a big oak tree that shaded a portion of our rough garden during a couple afternoon hours and read. Or to the natural grassy seat outside at the base of a rocky wall partway up a hill down from the house a ways and read. I tried to fly off that hill several times, with a variety of different wing contraptions. I once taped hundreds of leaves to big, long cardboard flaps and tried to flap my way up to the sky by jumping high off that wall.

The cardboard wings broke. I got a few bruises. And some adult somewhere probably wondered what had happened to all the scotch tape.

I read a lot. At that stage, I read *The Black Stallion* by Walter Farley, and every book Mr. Farley ever wrote. I read a huge book called *Man 'o War*. I read *Black Beauty* and *King of the*

Wind. You get it, right? I loved horses. I read fantasy books too, and when the libraries had comic books, I read them as well.

Then it was time to make dinner and I would do my best to simply appear in the kitchen so I couldn't be waylaid by some grumpy 'Funder' who needed to take out their frustration. I wouldn't be beaten, but being yelled at pointlessly for slouching or for walking too loudly got old fast.

I learned to make pretty much anything. I also learned to not be picky. Food was not always abundant in those years, so I ate everything I could—except for liver and avocados. I still don't eat those things. We had a pretty good garden outside, with asparagus, lettuce, carrots, potatoes, and lots more. We used that garden. Dinner almost always consisted of pasta or rice with some kind of meat, a large amount of starchy things like potatoes, and veggies. Everything was made from scratch because that was cheaper. Still is, by the way.

One time, for April Fool's Day, Bethany said we were going to play a prank on the rest of the people in the house. We made dinner, but we put a bunch of lidded and covered pots and bowls out on the serving sideboard—all of which were empty. When we called for people to come for dinner, grace was said and Faith—as was her right as leader of the branch—went to serve herself some food. She opened the first pot, which she thought had pasta in it, and discovered it to be empty.

She grew cross. Which is the British way of saying she got pissed off. Bethany explained it was an April Fool's prank, and some of the other adults laughed uncomfortably to try to lessen the anger coming from Faith. Bethany and I hurried and got the real pots and serving bowls out and the 'prank' was never spoken of again.

I still can't be sure what would make Faith so angry. It was a fun, harmless prank with no victims. I imagine that maybe she was having a hard day and this silly joke just pushed her over the edge. Faith is a nice lady—has always had a ready smile. Sure, she had a temper. So did every other adult, particularly the more long-term adults like my mother and the British founders of the Process.

So once dinner was done, the kids would do the clean up and then we would have an hour or two before the evening celebration. Twenty people would cram into that living room again, another song would be sung, and some message would be shared. Then a prayer would be offered and that was that. Kids were in their beds right after and some of us would lie there and read and others would just go right to sleep. I shared a room with three or four other boys. Maybe more. I think there were five or six boys in the Quakertown branch, and we all shared a room. All the girls shared a room too.

After lights out, I would pull out the small flashlight I'd stolen from a junk drawer and read under my blanket for as long as I could. Often several hours.

Such was life in the cult/commune of The Process Church of the Second Coming, which was soon to be renamed The Foundation Faith of God. I don't really know when that change happened. All I know is that when I first became aware of the name of our cult, it was already called The Foundation Faith of God. I knew nothing of The Process until many years after I left.

A few final tidbits about the day-to-day for your end-of-chapter goodness: Every time we encountered an adult, we were supposed to look them in their eyes and say, "God Bless You." Even if they hadn't sneezed. They would say the same back. The kids were supposed to say it first. We would also make fairly regular jaunts to the local library, whether that was in the Quakertown branch or the Dallas branch or the Denver branch. Libraries were heaven. They

smelled of old books, librarian hairspray, and people. I could get through most of a book in the hour or two we spent there. I checked out my limit every single time we went and always had several days when I had to re-read a book or find some other random book in the house because I was done with the books I'd borrowed.

I read every fantasy book that was in the local chapter of the Dallas Public Library system between 1985 and 1990. Not exaggerating. I read every single one.

Reading was everything to me. It was my life. Being born and raised in a house—or in my case, several houses since we moved so much—with so many other people could make a person anxious. I hated crowds. I needed time to myself. Books were a world I could throw myself into and control completely, because I could open and close the book anytime. The adults who got angry at me for this and that and the other over the years never had any clue how to punish me. They could spank me, beat me, scream bloody murder at me, force me to write 5000 lines, force me to work in the hot sun for hours—but as long as I had my books, I was fine. They never understood that because they couldn't be bothered to actually get to know me.

My cult—my personal cult—was stories.

Chapter 4

Quakertown and Goodbye

So Quakertown really was my favorite place growing up. I'm not sure why, since it's where I said the worst goodbye I ever had to say, but something about the particularly unfettered way we lived has stuck with me, along with vivid images of a gently rolling hill which the house sat on top of, and which led down to the goose pond. The grassy hill was surrounded on all sides by the evergreen trees that are so common on the eastern side of the USA. We had insane sunsets and I still remember the smell of the woods and grass and flowers.

We moved a lot for a lot of years. I'll get more into that in chapter eight, but Quakertown felt like the most stable my life had ever been. I got there when I was around six years old. I'd gone to preschool in downtown Manhattan, kindergarten probably in Virginia and rural New York State and maybe even somewhere else. I went to first grade in Quakertown. Second grade too, for the most part.

I lived in the same room, shared with the same boys, slept in the same bed—for about two years. This had never happened in my life before that time in my life. Heck, we'd even been essentially homeless somewhere between Narrowsburg, New York and Virginia. We slept in tents with blankets and a lot of kids stuffed into each one. Each tent, not blanket. Pretty sure I had my own blanket. Lots of adults were on that extended 'camping' trip. We ate entirely from cans. I grew to really enjoy hot chili warmed over a fire in its can and my hate for hot dogs ignited during that time. I climbed a lot of trees. A good CSI technician could probably still lift my DNA from one tree trunk, where I slipped while climbing and left a solid percentage of my stomach skin behind.

While homeless, we showered sometimes in YMCA/YWCA showers. It was a relatively short period of time. It seemed like we were going somewhere, but I was not old enough to really understand what was going on. I had to have been four or five years old.

I look at my kids. My youngest is currently almost eight. I don't have the brain capacity required to imagine him in any of the situations I found myself in. I can't imagine him not knowing who I am, who his father is. I can't imagine not hugging him daily. The idea of him not knowing in his very DNA that he can come and talk to me anytime and give me a hug and call me Dad and depend completely on me—that doesn't compute.

But there I was. That was all me. It's still surreal.

It was in Quakertown that the reality of my life really began to settle on me. The unusual reality. The weird *other* that was my life. I started hearing the words being spoken around me, the way the rest of the world was capitalized as 'The World' and the connotation was that it was a fallen and grotesque place. I think having long-term, America-typical experiences juxtaposed with the cult/commune that was the rest of my life was what did it.

I mean, I was in First Grade there. And Second Grade. I ran around and chased and was chased by the same kids for two years. Kids I didn't live with. Kids who went home to their families. Kids with their lunchboxes and regular clothes and who had no trouble talking to other kids. But then I went home to a house that I never felt like I had a place in. I had my bed. I always had a chair to sit in for meals. I had certain tasks I did. I cooked, as I mentioned, alongside Bethany and sometimes Magdalen, my mother.

But I never felt like I belonged. I could have been not there. I could have not existed. I could have been in some other branch—and my presence or lack thereof wouldn't have changed one single thing about that house in Quakertown or the lives of those who lived there. No, not even

my mother's. She was always about her work for the cult. And there was a time that my father was there—although I didn't know he was my father for a while. That's a fun story for next chapter.

In a pretty morbid way, I get all fascinated-like when I think about how much of a non-issue we were as kids. Or at least that's how I felt. No mother relationship, despite living in the same branch as my mother for much of my first seven years. I mean, I liked her. I knew she was my mother—and I knew that meant I was born from her body. But that's all that meant to me, because there was nothing beyond that except for the intermittent conversation here and there.

How am I not a serial killer? Your honor, I swear I'm not.

But despite the reflective way I look back on things, and how it's surreal that I really lived through that, Quakertown was pretty good. I had two brothers there and one of them had made a conscious decision to be a brother.

I've already described how my mother had three sons, with three different men. Her oldest son, Daniel, apparently remembered life outside the cult. He was angry about being dragged into it because he somehow knew what he was missing. I don't know how old he was when our mother and his father joined up, or how old he was when his father was pressured out of the cult, leaving behind his wife and son.

But Daniel was angry. He felt the unfairness of his life keenly. He wanted to get out as soon as he could, and I think he intended to track down his father and try to have a regular life.

In the meantime though, Daniel was my big brother. Typing that sentence stirs a pretty strong feeling in me, even after all these years. He talked to me, pulled me from my otherwise-constant immersion in books. I didn't mind. He was fun. We would explore the woods, find vines wrapped tightly around gnarly trunks, and yank them free to see if they would support our

weight. When we found a vine strong enough to support us, we would swing on it, doing our best Tarzan yells. His was great. Mine was terrible.

Daniel had fast hands. I do too, it turns out. He could catch flies out of the air and frequently grossed the people in the house out by feeding them to his dog, Amy. He taught me that trick where you bend your arm so your hand is palm up, right next to your ear and you stack coins on your elbow, then you fling your arm forward so fast you catch all the coins out of the air. He did twenty pennies once.

I can do thirty.

Every time I do a push-up, I think of Daniel. He loved having muscles, loved seeing them and flexing them and being strong. He had me doing push-ups next to him regularly, laughing when I could only do fifteen or twenty at a time. He could knock out fifty easily and was shooting for one day being able to do a hundred at a time. I still struggle to do twenty. He was particular about form too, yelling at me to straighten my back and keep my “ass out of the air.” I might not be able to do many of them, but I do perfect freaking push-ups.

Daniel got a job at the Dunkin’ Donuts in town. It was fantastic. He would bring home a black trash bag full of donuts at the end of each shift and we would eat like kings. When I say “we”, I mean he and I would get first pick and I still love donuts so much. The rest of the Quakertown branch got donuts too, but being first was great. I think having a job instilled a greater sense of anger and urgency in Daniel, because he changed fast. He went from angry to determined: he was going to leave as soon as he could.

He left within a few weeks of turning sixteen. How that was possible, I don’t know. Maybe the laws were different back then—although this wasn’t that long ago—but he was sixteen and that meant he could leave, so he did.

The news that Daniel was leaving sent shockwaves of murmuring gossip through the branch. I was young, only about seven, and I still recall vivid images of adults with their heads together, talking in surprised, muted, and weirdly gleeful tones about Daniel getting out. I don't know if the news was passed on through the branches. I don't know how my mother, Magdalen, took it. I have almost no memory that has Daniel and Magdalen in it at the same time. I don't know if she was the first he told. I do know that over the next several years, she pretty much always knew where he was, so that whenever I asked her, she could tell me. What came later is for another chapter. This chapter is about him. How I loved him. How he was the only one I loved, because he was the only person I had ever really spent time with, talking to, playing, doing silly things, making up endless stories and lies.

We weren't regular brothers doing regular things. Sometimes that was what we did, with the woods and vines and such, but it wasn't as often as I would have liked. We didn't spend a lot of time together. The time we did spend together is pre-eminent in my mind because it was so choice and the closest thing to a real relationship that I had. He treated me like a kid brother. I adored him. Worshiped him. Good heavens, when he was around, he filled my vision and brain. Larger than everything else. He lived life, from as early as I could remember, on his own terms as much as he could. And one of those terms was that he treated me like a brother. He shared his anger with me, scoffed at and mocked the cult and its members, and helped me get a little feral. What else are big brothers for, right?

All that said, Daniel had a life outside the cult early on. He was going to high school and he had friends and he didn't give a single crap about what the cult members thought, said, or did—he hung out with his friends as often as he could. The truth is that he was rarely around. Considering how much the cult as a practice and policy frowned on The World and the people in

it, I can only imagine that many arguments were had wherein Daniel was told he couldn't go hang out with friends and Daniel essentially said, "I'll do what I want." All things considered, he was in great shape, smart, and didn't care what the cult members thought. What could they do? Punish him? Ground him? What power did they actually have over him? Nobody was physically capable of actually restraining or hurting him.

So he did what he pleased. And what pleased him was to have his own life as soon as possible. Which led to him leaving with not a lot of warning for me. I feel like I had no time to process the news and then the day was there. He had a big duffle and a backpack. We stood outside the door of the big house surrounded by rolling hill and dark woods. The driveway was gravel and nearest to the house it was a wide, oval space where several cars could park. Just off from that space grew a huge tree around which Chewbacca (the big hairy black dog) had his heavy chain fastened. He had about twenty feet of play so he could get exercise.

I digress. A lot like on that day. I kept trying to find something else to think about. Granted, our times spent together had been growing more infrequent as he obviously made plans. He was going to move in with a co-worker friend he'd made. The co-worker was coming to pick him up.

So we stood outside the house in that gravel oval, waiting to hear the crunch of wheels on the long driveway that disappeared into a thin slice of woods that separated our house from more of the town. Hugs were given. A small hatchback coughed into view, zipping up the driveway and spewing a trail of dust lifted from the loose stones. The sun shone directly overhead. Daniel gave me a hug, said he would call and still come by. His grin was huge, stretching the tight skin around his square jawline. His hair bounced with each step as he hurried to get his things in the car. That hair was an alive thing. It bounced every time he walked, flaxen and wispy at the same time.

Daniel got in the car, waved at me and Matthias, our other brother who was three years older than me, and the car pulled a quick turn and drove away. It was blue-ish gray. A Fiat or a Pinto or something like that. It was dirty. The wheels were small and turned fast. Dusty clouds poured out from under its wheels.

I saw the back of Daniel's head as the car took him away. He was leaving. He was leaving me.

The car was gone in a blink, swallowed by the shadows of the evergreen trees. And my only friend, my only confidante, the only person I ever trusted, the only person who seemed concerned for me, the only person who ever *saw* me, was gone. I saw him one more time.

I turned back to the house, blank inside like those generic cards that Brian Regan jokes about. "Sorry you feel so blank inside," goes Regan's joke. The thing is that this is exactly how I felt for a while. Stunned. In shock. Empty. Not sure where to look. I definitely didn't want to look at anyone because I was actually not blank anymore and the anger that Daniel had helped ignite in me had blazed up pretty strong for a seven year old and I wanted to break something pretty bad right then.

I found myself on the far side of the house, alone. My eyes went to the tree line. Right there was the little break in the trees and overgrown berries and other bushes where we would cut through to get to school.

Daniel suddenly leapt out of the trees, his duffel gripped in one strong hand. A huge grin stretched his lips and he opened his mouth to shout that it had all been a joke. A prank. Then I blinked and he was gone.

And *that* was the last time I saw him.

Chapter 5

Denver: Roads and Ropes and Terror

For a lot of years, the reasons behind the moves that the cult made, and why the branches moved, and why kids were shipped from branch to branch, were opaque to me. I didn't know why I moved so much, just that it was a fact of life. I had an inkling of what it would be like to not move so much—the kids in school didn't move as much as me. But usually I didn't get to know any of them well enough to actually confirm that idea.

I don't really know how many times I moved. I do know that some time after Daniel left, and I made a bit of a friend in Mariah, a girl a few years older than me, I was sent to Dallas. I have no clue why. I can't even propose a reason. But suddenly I was in a car with some people, one of whom I'd found out was my father not long before, and we were on a road trip and then we were in Dallas.

At that time, the Dallas branch consisted of two buildings on the corner of Swiss Avenue and Haskell. There was also another building being rented somewhere else where the branch had its sort of operating headquarters. The two houses were literally right next to each other; they shared a wide driveway. I lived in the one on the right if you were outside looking at their front doors. I shared a room with a bunch of kids, maybe even all of the kids in that branch at the time. We were young.

We went to Davy Crockett Elementary not far from the houses. There was a bar across the busy street next to the house. At night, sometimes there were fights outside the bar. Every so often, gunfire would ring out. On those nights, an adult would rush into the kids' bedrooms and get us out of our beds and have us lie on the floor for a while. After the sirens got louder and closer, then shut off, we were allowed to get back in bed.

And that's all that I remember from that brief stay in Dallas. I was in third grade. Then I was in Denver and that's the branch I lived in for a couple years.

I was told I was moving to Denver because that's where Enoch, my relatively recently revealed father, was living and working. I was going for a visit. During the school year.

I showed up, being driven from Dallas to Denver by someone on their way to some other branch, maybe Las Vegas?, and I remember feeling like nobody had been expecting me. The Denver branch had two houses, one of them on St. Paul near Colfax and one of them on Lafayette.

Yes, I was around seven or eight years old and I remember the street names. I'll get to why in a minute.

The house on St. Paul is still there. I did a job interview out in Denver in 2014 and took some time to drive around and visit the old stomping grounds. I drove to the corner of St. Paul and Colfax, turned up St. Paul and found the house right away. That area looks a lot like Ballard in Seattle, Washington. It's being bought up by younger families with money and upgraded. I guess the kids call it being somewhat gentrified. The wood trim on the house was clean and freshly painted, and through the glass of the front windows I saw lamps on and a young family living life as if they had no clue that a cult/commune had been in that house years before. How could they not know?

How could they not know that I stood in that doorway, looking around, confused and angry? Stairs rose up in front of me, set off a bit to the left, and the entry hall extended into the house to ahead of me, with the living room through a large archway to the right and the dining room and kitchen just past that.

The creaky wood stairs led to a landing at the top that extended a little ways with a railing. You could look over that landing into the entry hall. Bedrooms lined the upstairs hallway.

The three boys, three with me that is, that lived in that branch all shared a room. It was Mark, Manuel, and me. We are all the same age. No kidding. Mark is the oldest and is just over two weeks older than me. Manuel is in the middle and he's like ten days older than me.

Manuel was in Denver because his parents, Anne and Cyrus, were the leaders of the branch. I don't know how they got involved in the cult, how long they'd been in it, whether Manuel was born into it or brought in when they joined, or anything else about them. I can guess that Anne and Cyrus were devoted hippies, since that is exactly what they are to this day. They exude a very deliberate aura of 'we are very cool and at peace and our energies are where they should be.' Which is nice. Until they lose their temper.

More on that later.

Manuel was and remains an only child. He is the clone of his father in height, body style, and apparent desire to be totally at peace with all of creation. In my eyes and experience, Manuel lived a life of extreme privilege. He spent a lot of time with Anne and Cyrus, got special gifts and attention, and absolutely got away with a lot more than the rest of us. It pains me to admit that my jealousy of him and his better life absolutely colored my opinion and treatment of him. I picked on him too much, dismissed him as annoying far too often, and considered his musical aspirations as pretentious. Although looking back I can see that he really was sincere in his desire to be a musician.

Mark was in Denver because his mother was there. I think the man he'd been told was his father, Gideon, was there too for a time, but Gideon moved on, stopping in Dallas for a while and bouncing from the desert headquarters and back a bit. Mark's mom, Lucina, was smiley, blond,

energetic, and a bit flighty. A lot flighty. Mark was her oldest and she had two smaller girls, both six or seven years younger than us. The girls and Mark had different fathers, as per the usual in the Foundation.

So yes, there were two small girls, maybe separated by a year or two. The younger of the two was Jennifer and the older was Natalie. I interacted very little with them and they were still in the primary care of their mother, Lucina.

Since the girls were so small, they didn't really factor into my life until I followed the bad example of one of the other boys. We'll get to that in a bit.

Mark, Manuel, and I were the boys. The three musketeers.

Except we weren't. We were put together by random circumstance: three wildly different personalities that did not mesh well at all, especially since I was far too happy to pile on the teasing of Manuel when Mark was in a mood and I genuinely disliked Mark.

Yes, Mark. My best friend and worst enemy. We spent so much time together and I was such a judgmental little twerp that every time Mark did something that I found unappealing or wrong, I judged his character harshly. Granted, he gave me little reason to actually like him, since he was the reason I got in trouble at least 90% of the time I got in trouble. But I was such a fussy putz sometimes. I'm sure there are plenty of good psychological explanations and excuses for how haughty I could get, but they don't really wash in my mind today. I deliberately distanced myself from Mark, not wanting to be sullied by him. I would spend time, do things, but we never really connected on a friend level.

Today, I love Mark. I like him. We have a deep, lengthy, and textured shared experience and I know him better than almost anybody. His spirit is one of happy peace. He spent years trying to carve out a place where he could just smoke, drink, and have a girlfriend and nobody would try

to get into his business. He just wanted to own his life. And he does—in a wonderfully and frankly inspiring ‘Mark’ way.

But back then, I was a little prick. Not always, to be fair, but far too much.

The adults in Denver, in the house on St. Paul, were many. One was Gwynne. She was nuts. She could be smiling and silly and the next second she could be twisting your arm and pressing you into the floor and telling you that God didn’t approve of some kind of behavior. Chandra seemed to be Anne’s best friend. She was short, blond, kind, and hard-working. I always respected her. The random edicts were rare from her.

There were lots more adults, all of whom I’ve forgotten. Either that or I can’t be certain that they were in Denver or if they were in one of the other branches I was shifted around to.

Gwynne gave me my first Bible. It was a pocket-sized New Testament, with a faded brown cover and gold lettering on the front that was mostly illegible. The pages were thin like rice paper. I read it. Cover to cover. Probably between library trips. I liked it. I still have it. The little brown Bible doesn’t really have a sentimental weight to it, but every time we move I think it would be a shame to get rid of it after it has come this far with me.

The house on St. Paul was just a little ways—maybe a hundred or so feet—up from where St. Paul met Colfax. Colfax was and still is a big road. For nine-year-olds, Colfax looked like the scariest war zone we would never dare cross. It was the border of our domain. We would bike around our block and have to be really careful when we were on the Colfax portion of our route. Cars would whiz by, zoom in and out of parking lots, and angry people were everywhere.

We were never, under any circumstances, to ever try crossing Colfax. And you know what? We never did. We generally kept our distance from the street, except for when we were going around it on our bikes.

However, my first experience with Colfax came a day or two after I arrived in Denver. Mark was still in ‘I know everything about this place so I’m cool’ mode, which is a privileged state to be in. I sure liked it when I got to know more about a place than the newcomers who would arrive after me. He was thrilled I had arrived. He remembered our meeting in Manhattan years before, remembered how he had introduced me to his mother, remembered that first Sunday celebration/ritual thing. He was excited to have someone other than Manuel to spend time with. Manuel was Mark’s least favorite human. They simply didn’t get along. As far as I can remember, they never got along. Mark took every opportunity to let Manuel know how he felt too, which was sad of course. I thought it was harsh and cool at the beginning, but as time wore on, I realized I just didn’t understand people. I didn’t like Manuel very much either, but we got along all right most of the time.

In any case, Mark was beyond happy to see me. We started hanging out non-stop. We went to the same school, although I was a grade ahead for some reason. I think that had to do with him being born in Canada and his school records not being as transferable as they should have been. But when we weren’t at school, we rode our bikes around, made ramps, imagined we were finding secret places in the house, and so on. We did a bit of shoplifting too. The first candy bar I ever stole was a Snickers. There was a convenience store down about a block from the house, and every so often we would get an allowance of a dollar. We would of course spend it on candy. I really liked the candy cigarettes and relished that first moment where you could actually puff a cloud of corn starch or powdered sugar—whatever it was—from the thing. I had no desire to smoke, but thought I looked cool with those in my mouth. I also loved the fireballs because I could get so many with my dollar.

But it also turned out you could get a candy bar in your pocket if you were fast enough. So it would be burning its way into your leg as you paid for your candy, grabbed the change and crinkly paper bag, and hoofed it out of the store back to the house.

Or at least back to the back corner of the driveway, where the house left a permanent shadow. I scarfed that contraband in seconds every time, terrified I was going to be found out and get in huge trouble. I didn't care about the police, I just didn't want to be screamed at by the adults and have them impose restrictions that hampered my ability to read, ride my bike, and eat the occasional candy.

But back to that first experience with Colfax street. One of the first things I was told by an adult was the rule to never play near Colfax and to just steer clear. So imagine my surprise when Mark told me after my second night that he was going to show me something really cool behind a restaurant on Colfax. Obviously I was no chicken, so I went along, but I kept throwing glances over my shoulder to make sure we weren't going to be spotted.

Mark led me down St. Paul and we came to one of those dirty alleys that usually run behind a row of restaurants and businesses—for delivery and trash access and such. I followed Mark around a smelly dumpster and we came to an employee entrance of a restaurant. We waited there for a bit and then Mark was talking to some adult guy in an apron and a few minutes later Mark and I were splitting a hot pastrami or turkey sandwich—I don't remember the lunch meat. But it was warm and the bread was rich and whole grain. It was delicious. It had alfalfa sprouts. I still love alfalfa sprouts.

So it turned out Mark had connections! We went back again a few weeks later, Mark explaining that we couldn't abuse the connection by going back too often. Unfortunately, Manuel had spotted us and followed us down the street and we were trying to get rid of him

when the sous chef or whatever he was came out. The guy thought we were trying to take advantage of him and told us not to come back. You can imagine our anger at Manuel.

A really important event that happened while I was in the house on St. Paul was that my father lived there for a time too. He made some strong efforts to build a relationship with me, saving his allowance for a bit and giving me my first bike for I believe my 8th or 9th birthday. It was used and had a flat tire. Which was fine by him. He taught me how to take the tire off, find the hole, patch it, then put it all back together. He also helped me learn to ride.

I remember everything he taught me. His teaching me the most basic of bike repair and maintenance was my first foray into doing things myself. He gave me tips and made it seem so ‘of course we can do this ourselves’ that I never doubted it. I went on to always do my own bike repair. Several years later in Dallas, I scrounged parts from five different dead bikes to make my own functioning bike, bought black spray paint, and painted it. I tuned that thing so perfectly that it was completely silent. I had made a ninja bike.

And I had been able to do it because my father had first taught me to repair a tube.

When it was time to learn to ride, he told me, “Don’t worry, I’ve got you. Just focus on pedaling and keep your eyes ahead of you.”

I failed pretty epically my first try. We went again and I told him I needed to go faster to find my balance.

“No, Jared. That’s not it. It’s not about speed, it’s about being comfortable in your seat. Just pedal. It’ll come naturally.”

He was right. A few tries later, I was riding. And I have never stopped. I’ve logged roughly forty thousand miles on bikes over 38 years. Cycling is the best.

The time with my father was short-lived. It was enough for me to grow to like him and feel like I meant something to him. But then he was gone, transferred to some other branch, and I talked to him on the phone sometimes. We're going to get to that in two chapters.

So we have to summarize some timeline event stuff here, but before we do, I will mention that I moved to Denver in my third grade year and started going to a school called Garden Place Elementary. This was a strange elementary school in that it only went to third grade. I met my first crush, a girl whose name I forgot, and met my first outside-the-cult best friend, a young man by the name of Halsey Hutton. He came to the school a couple months after me—so not long before the school year ended. He sat in the back, with me. The teacher asked a question and Halsey leaned in close to me and whispered, “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

This was the funniest thing I’d ever heard. I laughed in painful, silent bursts for a long time. I thought Halsey was the smartest, sharpest person I’d ever met.

But Garden Place took great pains to make sure that the girl I had a crush on, and I, knew that we were the unequivocal smartest kids in the school. We were reading at some insane level like 8th grade and were always finishing our math worksheets first. So we were called to the principal’s office, informed of our vaunted status, had our pictures taken and actually framed and hung up near the school office, and we got to be in a special accelerated group for the last few months of third grade.

Essentially we were marked for death. Good heavens. It was as if those people had never met kids at a school before. We were teased mercilessly. But Halsey thought it was hilarious and made like he was mock-worshipping me, which was pretty great.

Soon after I finished third grade, the Denver branch moved to a more rural place out in Arvada. They had found a place with a bunch of fields around it where they could let rescue dogs

run around. The land they bought—or maybe they rented it?—had three buildings on it: a front, 2-story, rambler ranch house, a back nice ranch house, and a big outbuilding that had been updated to function as office space.

Anne and Cyrus lived in the back house. It was theirs. The rest of the branch lived in the rather giant rambler ranch house. I continued sharing a bedroom with Manuel and Mark, first in a small room in the back and later up on the second floor in a nifty attic room. A bunch of adults shared out the other rooms, with Lucina and Gideon sharing a room for a while. The little girls had a small room off a big sort-of family room at the front of the house.

I don't know why we moved. I know that the branch soon added a few members and increased its charitable activity. They'd always been rescuing animals, but now some of them started dressing as clowns and taking balloons and toys and treats to hospitals to cheer up sick kids. This became a thing, and it turned out the Las Vegas branch had been doing this for a while. The Dallas branch was already doing it too.

So here we kids were, some of us cult orphans because our parents were alive but we had no parents still, being neglected, overlooked, forgotten, then abused. And the authors of our circumstances were going around making other kids' days brighter.

And then we were roped into it. I was nine when I first had to dress up like a clown, with the make-up and red nose and everything. A part of me was so deeply astonished and hurt by this appalling juxtaposition that I must have been a pretty damn angry clown. But I put on a good face and found that I could have a good time if I focused on the next smile I could get out of a suffering kid.

Over the years, continuing on into my time in Dallas, I dressed up as a clown at least a hundred times. What I'm about to say is something I haven't told anyone ever. Not even my kids. Hey family! Here's one of those Easter eggs I told you about!

I got so good at being a clown, that I created an actual persona. I was Bobo the clown. I was clumsy, unbelievably outgoing, and was extremely sharp. I had an edgy humor that got adults to laugh. I wore the same froofy wig, the same squeaky nose, and could apply all my awful, smelly make-up myself in ten minutes. I had the giant shoes and pockets full of gags like the endless nose handkerchief and whoopee cushions. When I was sixteen, I once worked a crowd in a swelteringly hot Dallas park for a half hour, making kids laugh, stumbling over every leg in sight and making the parents laugh too.

I was one of a few of the kids who sat on a convertible rented by the Dallas branch, dressed as a clown, hopping off and giving high fives to kids, during a parade through downtown Dallas.

And that clown career started in Denver. In the houses in Arvada. The water in the faucets came from a well on the property—and it was not potable. We shipped in drinking water every week. That's how I got so good at changing out water tanks. The property was big, with fields on three sides and a busy road on the fourth. We had no neighbors to speak of. At the back end of the property was a series of leaning, ramshackle brick and wood buildings that looked like they had once been stables. Mark and I made short work of the remaining glass in the windows, despite being warned not to. Throwing rocks through old, brittle glass is a singular pleasure.

We climbed all over those buildings. We explored beyond them, finding an alfalfa farm on the far side of the junkyard that was hidden by a stand of trees behind the collapsing stables. We got to know the farmer and he let us help him bale hay one time. We found a backhoe that still had a little juice, scaring the crap out of ourselves when the arm shifted as we played with levers.

There was a shallow creek that cut through a field on one side of the house. The field was simply tall, out of control grass. Just thinking about that field makes my hay fever act up. Back then, I had no idea what allergies were. I just thought that I sometimes got a hair stuck deep in the cavern of my nasal cavity and that it was irritating my eyes, nose, and back of my throat. Hay fever, Jared. It was hay fever.

A tree grew thick and tall in the middle of that field, right next to the creek. Someone years before had hung a thick rope with a tire swing from a solid branch. That was endless fun.

Until Mark, in a fit of weird vandalism, cut the rope. Nobody saw him do it. But Manuel didn't have the guts to try something like that, nor the predilections. I had no desire to cut down the awesome swing. But Mark had a bit of the misanthrope in him and Manuel and I knew it was him.

Mark told Anne he had seen me do it. He swore up and down that I had taken a knife from the kitchen and gone out and cut it, saying I had been mad about something.

As Anne chewed me out for long, blistering minutes, not far from the ruined tire swing, Mark sidled behind Anne. She screamed blue murder at me while I stood stunned, unable to defend myself in the face of her relentless fury. And Mark stood behind Anne where she couldn't see him and pulled faces at me.

I hated him so much.

A few things that happened, then we will finish the Denver chapter with a beating:

Not long after moving to Arvada, I cleared a spot of dirt between some trees, where the sun still shone, and planted some pumpkins with permission from Lucina. I lovingly watered the plot and was thrilled when they sprouted. Thick, felt-like fuzzy leaves grew from the first green

sprouts, reaching a couple inches in height. A new, jagged leaf even began to show between the first few leaves.

Then one morning I went to check them and they were gone. Plucked and gone. I was devastated. I had an inkling that the little girls and a new boy, Dennis, who was maybe four or five, had pulled them. I accosted them and they admitted to their crime. They had actually eaten the plants. Not out of hunger, but out of mean, little kid curiosity.

I told Lucina, needing the kids to get some punishment as penance for my loss. She was completely dismissive, saying kids were kids. I was betrayed and stunned.

Reader, I still garden. All is well.

Two major highlights stand out like shining beacons from the Denver experience. One was that soon after we moved to Arvada, with our home set back from the road and essentially surrounded by large fields, someone bought a telescope. A nice one, not one of those long ones that make the moon a little clearer. This was a wide, stumpy cylinder and it took some doing to line it up. But once it was aimed right, we were able to see Saturn's rings and lots more. I loved it. Cyrus made sure to tell us kids that the telescope was a great blessing and we were lectured at about creation and God and similar. I just thought it was awesome.

Also, I had a totally unexpected experience during one Fall day. We were living in Arvada. I was back from school and was reading in my room when someone came and told me that I had a phone call. I was confused. I never got phone calls. Had one of my school friends somehow learned my number and were they calling to get together? *I* didn't even know our phone number, so that was unlikely.

I picked up the handset and said, "Hello?"

It was Daniel. He'd left about two years before. This was the first time I'd heard from him since that day. He asked how I was doing, told me he'd had to call Magdalen and find out where I was and get the phone number. We fell quickly into our routine of complaining about life and the world around us and commiserating. He told me he had been working on starting college, that he was in California and had found his father and that his father was helping him start out with life. Daniel said life had never been better, that being free from The Foundation was great and he couldn't wait for me to be out too.

We talked for an hour or so. We talked long enough for a few adults to walk by where I was sitting, holding the handset to my ear, and for them to give me a pointed look telling me to wrap it up. I ignored the looks. I told Daniel that I'd been renewing a Boy Scouts Webelos book from the library to try to informally learn scouting. He laughed of course. We chatted about everything we could think of until finally Daniel said he had to hang up or his father would kill him for racking up a huge long-distance phone bill. We said our goodbyes and I spent the rest of the afternoon glowing, marveling that he had called. Mark and Manuel couldn't believe I'd gotten a phone call and kept asking about it. I ignored them. That was a really great day.

It was in Denver that I learned I had a significant pain tolerance. One afternoon as I was walking from the houses to the stables, seeking some alone time, I stepped on a nail that was poking through an old piece of wood. It hurt, then throbbed, then burned. I slipped the nail out—it had gone through the sole of my worn-out sneaker and into my foot almost enough to come out the top. Feeling the nail slither out of my flesh was one of the most singularly awful things I've ever experienced.

I hobbled home and sought help from Lucina. She poured alcohol over it and put a band-aid on it. Done. She warned me I might get lockjaw. Luckily I was current on my shots. This

treatment was normal. Unless something was visibly broken or bleeding couldn't be stopped, we didn't go to doctors. I'd learned this in Quakertown. I had found Daniel's Swiss army knife and was using it to try to scrape a paint fleck off my cot—oh yeah, my bed was a cot until Daniel left—and the knife slipped and I felt it hit one of my fingers. I dropped it and put my finger in my mouth. As one does.

I immediately discovered I had cut it severely because it was bleeding fast and pulsating uncomfortably. I made my way to a bathroom, grabbed a ton of toilet paper and wrapped it around my finger, and squeezed and walked downstairs. Daniel found me first, dripping blood on each step. He took me to Magdalen.

She washed it and found that I had cut the side flesh of my finger down about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. So a section about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long was hanging off my finger. Sorry for the graphic details.

Magdalen put my finger in a small cup of hydrogen peroxide to make sure it was clean, then wrapped it tightly in band-aids. She changed the band-aids every couple of days, with me putting my finger in a fresh cup of hydrogen peroxide each time. No doctor needed. It healed. Yes, my finger is a bit misshapen, but now I have a cool story to tell.

Ultimately, Denver was pretty good. I was still young, had moved a lot, but that was all I knew. I got to read all the time, wound up in a place with huge fields to explore—which weren't as good as the woods of Pennsylvania, but that was fine—and Mark was all right, albeit somewhat evil. We boys argued quite a bit and sometimes got into actual fights.

One day, Manuel and I were arguing in the grassy plot between the front and back houses. He was being annoying and I'm sure I was being pompous. I had a huge temper and he whined. He had parents and I didn't. We swung at each other and missed. He pushed me. I pushed back

and he sat down hard. I've always been strong and solid. He whined that I had hurt him and that he was going to tell on me.

I considered him. He was curled up in a whiny position, sniffing—no, sniveling—and being a total jerk. I thought I could probably just walk away and leave him and he probably wouldn't go running to tell. But he was such a whiny, irritating gnat. So I kicked at him. Reader, I did not hurt him. I shouldn't have swung a kick at him, but I was a dumb, twit of a kid sometimes. But I wasn't evil, so I pulled the kick and swung wide and grazed him. He caterwauled. I wandered off.

Anne found me a minute later and shrieked at me about violence and the devil and sent me to my room. That was fine by me; I had books up there. I buried myself in a book, probably one about horses, and heard heavy steps coming up the stairs fast. A moment later my bedroom door slammed open and Cyrus stood there, breathing hard from running up the stairs.

He screamed at me to stand up and then he started shouting about hurting innocent people and bullying and how I should pick on someone else and then he kicked me so hard I actually went flying. Then he was on me, punching me, slamming his knees into me, shouting about how I needed to know how it felt.

I was so scared that the pain didn't hit until it was all over. It was a blur of guttural screams from him, whimpers from me, blows hitting me, and me wetting myself in total, uncontrollable fear. He landed a few more punches in my stomach and sides, stood, breath heaving noisily. Muttered that I had better learn my lesson. Then he stomped out.

The pain flared as soon as the door was closed. He hadn't touched my face, but the rest of me felt broken and battered. My jeans were soaked and cold and clingy. It hurt to breathe. My throat was tight with fear and crying. I pushed to my feet and wiped my face on my blanket,

crying and snarling that I would kill him. I was going to kill Cyrus. That son-of-a-bitch had better watch his back because he was going to get it.

I made sure our door was closed then, hiccupping and still trying hard to breathe, peeled off my wet jeans and underwear, found clean, dry ones, and got dressed. I hid the peed-in clothes under my bed until laundry day and then added them to the load so nobody would ever know what I'd done. I stayed in my room the rest of the day, only finding some smooth breaths after a long time of staring blankly at the ceiling above my bed. I was going to get him back. Cyrus was going to feel my wrath.

I never got him back. I don't need to. He has had to live with the lie of who he really is for more than thirty years. He knows who he really is, knows his hippy, peace-touting countenance is a lie. And forgiveness is a gift I deserve to give myself.

This happened when I was nearly ten. I only found out when I was 42 that Mark had heard the whole thing. Until then, I thought I was the only one who knew Cyrus had beaten me in a fit of temper. Mark remembers other times that Cyrus had lost his temper, but he had never heard or seen anything like that before.

And Mark never talked to me about it. And I never talked to him about it. I never talked to anyone about it. I had nobody I felt like I could trust. I knew I was at the mercy of the adults—they could do whatever they wanted to me. I had no recourse, didn't know anything of the world that would offer me some place to go to be heard.

I was furniture. No. I wasn't even furniture, because chairs and tables were useful for the adults. I wasn't a pet, because the cats and dogs had a better life than I did. I was less. Not even worthy of notice. I was an inconvenience. But mostly I was forgotten.

Chapter 6

Are You My Father?

My memory of the exact timing of what I'm about to describe is a bit hazy. I know the conversation that ensued happened in Quakertown as well as in Denver.

It went like this.

I was in Quakertown with several other kids, including Daniel and my other brother, Matthias. Matthias is about three years older than me, so he was something like seven years younger than Daniel. I wasn't much past six years old when this all went down.

We all knew that Magdalen was technically married to John. John was name that one of the original founders of The Process Church of the Second Coming had taken upon himself. He was British and probably had a bit of a pedigree. He had light colored, reddish blond hair, bushy eyebrows, and spoke with a heavy accent that sounded like you might imagine a king to speak, but with a bit more through the nose than you might expect. He was balding from very early on and did a strange, wispy comb-over for a while before giving up. John's real name was Christopher Fripp. In The Process, and later in The Foundation, he went by John Christopher. My mother had married him some time after joining The Process and after her husband had left. They'd had Matthias and John had formally adopted Daniel. So John was Daniel and Matthias's father, although Daniel had a biological father who nobody had kept track of.

In Quakertown, I started getting an inkling that John might not be my father, although Magdalen and John had been married when I was born. I'm not sure how this notion occurred to me. It might have been other kids saying I didn't look at all like John, but did look somewhat like Enoch.

The idea percolated in my brain for a bit. It's possible that the idea was reinforced by the fact that not only were Magdalen and Enoch together—they were very publicly together. They were both mature, but young and good-looking and articulate, so they were the public face of the Quakertown branch and actually of The Foundation for a while. They appeared on a show called AM/PM, which was some kind of newsy/talk-show thing. The show was so impressed by them that the producers sought and received permission to film a segment at the house in Quakertown.

Reader. This was huge for the cult. Mary Ann, the leader I didn't even know existed, was obsessed with celebrity and had been forever. Getting this kind of legitimate notoriety absolutely thrilled her. Did she make an appearance? Nope.

But everybody's very best behavior sure did. And so did so much false BS that it was a wonder it didn't stink in there. We kids were choreographed and orchestrated to make things look normal, happy, and healthy. We dodged heavy cables and light stands and generally tolerated the insanity that was having a production crew come out to the house.

In any case, seeing the woman I knew was my mother spend so much time with Enoch must have really set the idea that Enoch was my father in my head. Because I, out of the blue one day in Quakertown, asked him if he was. We were in the same place, probably by his design, doing something together. I turned to him and asked, "Are you my father or is John?"

What possessed me to do such a brazen thing? I'll tell you. I had brought it up to Daniel and Matthias in one of the rare moments that just the three of us were together. Daniel got agitated and swore up and down that John was everyone's dad—that all three of us had the same mother and father. I think he was doing his very best to try to maintain something normal for me, despite us growing up in a cult/commune. I questioned his certainty and he bore down, repeating several times that John was my father. I don't know if he didn't know the truth, didn't want to believe

the truth—my personal theory—, or if he knew and wanted to maintain the fiction. Matthias agreed with Daniel, saying John was my father and the matter was settled.

But Daniel's protests were too enthusiastic and I felt like he was pushing on me, so I naturally pushed back and asked Enoch. His response was to tell me he would get back to me. I don't know for sure, but I think he might have had to get permission to tell me the truth.

A few weeks later, Enoch took me aside and told me the story. He led off with, "Yes, I'm your father." It was as I have described already—Magdalen had been married to John but they had basically moved on, despite being legally married. Enoch joined the cult in Boston and he and Magdalen hit it off and, with Mary Ann's blessing, became an item. I was born.

So I'm not technically a bastard, because my mother was married when I was born. But my parents weren't married to each other when I was born—so what does that make me?

It makes me normal for The Foundation. So my legal name when I was born was Nathan Fripp. I had to legally change my name to my father's last name on my own.

A funny thing that happened soon after I found out that Enoch was my father? Magdalen and Enoch got married. It was quite a thing. I don't know if it was a civil/legal marriage or if it was simply a cult marriage, but inside The Foundation, it was a big deal. Why? Because these two were movers and shakers and were somewhat famous because of their appearances on AM/PM. So people came from near and far to attend the wedding. One very large lady who was very demonstrative with her affection toward me broke my hand-made stool when she stepped on it to get off the bus that had brought her to the house. I do not know who the lady was and didn't then—possibly an aunt of some kind.

But I met my grandmother—my father's mother—and liked her. She was Grandma Garrett. I had already met my maternal grandmother, Grandma Eaton.

I was the ring-bearer at the ceremony. I was all dressed up and carried a small pillow with the shiny rings on it. I did a good job. The marriage was solemnized by Faith, the leader of the Quakertown branch. A party followed the ceremony.

And that was that. My parents were married. It didn't last all that long, because Magdalen wound up permanently stationed in the desert headquarters of The Foundation not long after I left Quakertown and my father was transferred with some regularity. He was finally permanently assigned to the Arizona ranch where the cult had its headquarters—before it was moved to Southern Utah. Enoch married Evelyn, a woman from Canada who I had known in Denver for a while. They had a daughter when I was almost eleven. She was the youngest cult baby ever born.

I'll take a minute to catalogue my father's journey since this is his chapter. He was essentially perma-assigned to the headquarters some time after he left Denver. He was smart and handy, so he became the de-facto plumber, taking care of all things pipe-related. After the headquarters moved from Arizona to Southern Utah, he became the expert on all things 'water.' He led the water supply efforts, from tapping into water tables to sinking water supply tanks in the ground, and from leading the burying of miles of water supply pipe to installing toilets and sinks.

He married Evelyn, a lovely lady from Canada who had taught me some cooking in Denver. She had told me stories of her childhood and I really liked her. I had no clue why she would join the cult but never got the courage to ask her.

In 1985, my sister was born. Before long, Enoch, Evelyn, and Emma lived in a small house on the property that The Foundation had bought in Southern Utah. The cult renamed the massive ranch Angel Canyon and began Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in earnest. The cult demanded that Enoch and Evelyn send Emma off to Denver to begin the separation process—under the

guise of needing Enoch and Evelyn to do more work for the cult. But this was cult policy and practice: separate the kids from their parents and make sure there was no particular relationship there. The priority was the cult/commune and its efforts.

Enoch and Evelyn resisted, but eventually relented and Emma spent time in Denver at a very young age—I think even before she turned two. They were able to get her back after a while, maybe even up to a year later, and they tried hard to be a regular family—albeit still in a strange cult that lived in a sprawling commune and rescued hundreds of animals each year. Enoch even began to form friendships in the small town of Kanab, just seven miles south of Angel Canyon. He started volunteering on the all-volunteer Kanab Fire Department.

Every summer when all the big enough kids (age 10 and older) were hauled out to Angel Canyon to work twelve-hour days and sleep every night for two months in a tent city next to the cat portion of the animal sanctuary, my father would make sure he spent time with me. He got me as his assistant on a lot of projects, mostly plumbing related. We installed toilets, built water supply infrastructure, and I learned to connect PVC pipe.

In 1989 or 1990, the cult told Enoch and Evelyn it was time to send Emma to Dallas, where all the rest of the cult kids were living and attending Faith School, the cult's tiny private school. They refused. Eventually Emma was taken to Denver. Within a couple months, Enoch said "Screw it" and went and got her. He, Evelyn, and Emma were told to leave the cult. They moved into a tiny house in Kanab and at the age of something like forty, my father and his small family began life. He was industrious. He worked as a handy man, laying carpet, doing plumbing, and lots more in order to support the family. He rose in the ranks of the Kanab Fire Department, becoming the training guy. He went back to school and chose the medical field. He became a nurse at Kanab Hospital, then did more training and eventually moved to Salt Lake City after

separating from Evelyn. They had reverted to their pre-cult names by this time, so were going by Bruce and Susan.

He's had a long, inspiring career in the medical field, training and guiding lots of other nurses and medical professionals, saving lives regularly. Susan (Evelyn) moved back to Canada soon after the separation and divorce, taking Emma with her. Emma went to school there, graduating from a high school in Barrie. I got to watch her graduate. She and I had stayed in close touch because we were sister and brother and that mattered to us.

Susan got sick years ago and still lives in Canada. We got to visit her years ago and we've seen her a couple of other times. Emma eventually moved back to Utah after some college, got married, divorced, and married again to a very fine man. They have a baby. We spend time together as much as we can.

And that's what came of "Are you my father?" A lot of this will be useful context for stories I tell in the upcoming chapters.

Some people might wonder how it feels to be the son that my father didn't fight for—didn't risk his standing in the commune he had been part of for decades for. It doesn't bother me. I'm so glad he fought for Emma and his small family. Yes, I would have liked the same, but he was younger. We all change and we need to have the freedom to change and learn from life. I take comfort in the certainty that his and my somewhat odd relationship was part of the motivation for him to do what it took to keep his family together. That he wanted to make sure he didn't make the same mistakes twice.

Because yes, it was a mistake. Leaving your kid in the hands of random cult members who might not have the skills or temperament to properly care for children is a mistake. Straight up. He tried to form a relationship when we were together, and that surely made a difference, but it

wasn't what a kid needs. It wasn't what I needed. I needed a father. A confidante. A protector. A dad.

And I didn't have that. And that was a mistake. But mistakes aren't an indictment and a conviction and a sentence to lifelong guilt and burden; they're an opportunity to learn. I was hurt by the mistake, but again, I have been blessed with the gift of forgiveness, and I like who I am, so there's no way I would go back and change things. I believe my father learned from what he knew was a bad series of circumstances for me. I know he regrets those old choices, but I pray he also is blessed with the gift of forgiveness—of himself. Because we're all just doing the best we know how, and I know top to bottom that he had no ill intent. He was just trying to figure things out and that's all we can ask of each other and ourselves.

Chapter 7

Twice A Year

This is a good time to talk about what my relationship with my parents was like, given the circumstances I've described.

I'll summarize those circumstances now so that they're fresh in your mind. Until I was seven years old, I lived essentially in the same branch of the cult as my mother, Magdalen. There were a couple years between age three and six that I didn't live with her, but instead stayed with the rather large group of kids while she was about the cult's business. My mother acted as a mother to me until I was about two, maybe a bit longer. I know that by age three, she was no longer the person primarily responsible for me eating, being clothed, and being where I was supposed to be. That said, when we were in the same actual branch, she did take some time here and there to chat with me. But it felt like she was talking to me the same way she talked to any kid, so that didn't mean much to me.

I found out who my actual father was at around age six or seven, mainly because he treated me like we had a relationship whenever he could. He did his best to be in my life within the constraints of the cult.

But then when I was nine, that all ended. I never lived in the same branch as them. The children's caretaker was essentially anyone who happened to be in the house when the kids were around. And by caretaker, the entirety of their job was to keep us alive. Somebody else made dinner usually. Sometimes the caretaker was pretty engaged, and that sucked, because they would make us get to bed early, make sure our lights were out at a reasonable time, and would find a lot of fault in us.

A few months after I turned ten, I was shipped to Dallas, to stay this time. We'll talk about the especially unique situation there later. From then on, I spoke to my mother and father twice a year. My father happened to be in Dallas when I turned eleven, which was great, so he was at my birthday celebration.

I spoke to them on my birthday and either on Christmas or the day before or the day after. I would usually get a card or present from each of them too. My mother was creative in her gifts for a while, since she still knew me somewhat from our interactions in my early years. She knew I was into cowboys and made sure I got boots, a hat, and a denim jacket. That was rad. After a couple years though, she knew I must have changed in my interests, because she started simply sending a nice card with cash inside. Usually twenty bucks. My dad sent money sometimes, and sometimes sent just a card.

When my birthday rolled around, I could usually expect a phone call in the early evening, after dinner and any festivities. Typically my mother got to the call first, when she made the call at all. She missed a few years. After leading with, "God bless you, Jared," and waiting for me to provide the correct parroted response, she would ask after my health and such, ask what I was up to, ask if I'd gotten her card. The calls lasted about ten minutes and ended because there was a lot of silence between spurts of interchange. The same thing happened on Christmas, usually mid-day was when she would call. Same questions, but this time she would ask what presents I got. She was pretty surprised when, for Christmas when I was thirteen or fourteen, I actually got a heavy training bag. I was as shocked as she was. It was the second and last time I felt actually seen in the entire time I lived in Dallas.

When my father called, it was usually similar. But we'd spent more time doing work as the years went on, so we usually had more to talk about. I was pretty terrible on the phone, but we

kept things cooking along, especially after Emma was born. He would put her on the phone and she was completely adorable. I did my Mickey Mouse and Pee Wee Herman impressions for her and she asked me for them every time we talked on the phone for the next five years.

It's hard to describe how those phone calls felt. I enjoyed them, but it wasn't like I was some kid off in boarding school and aching to talk to my parents. And I wasn't on a trip somewhere that was going to end some time in the future, so there was no sense of clock ticking until a reunion could happen. To be sure, when the birthday call happened, it was usually about a month before we bigger kids were shipped out to Angel Canyon to help do heavy labor. So my mother and I would mention that we would get together for lunch once or twice during the kids' time there. And my father and I would talk about some of the work we had done together and he would tell me that he was going to make sure I got to work next to him as much as possible. It all felt familiar and normal and pretty low on emotional attachment.

It's so hard to describe what it's like to have parents, but to not really have ever been involved- during my memory- in raising me. They were alive. They intermittently were involved in my life on a surface level: eating lunch, working side by side, talking on the phone, or checking my work. There wasn't really a deep connect. To be fair, I felt more connected to my father; his efforts were paying off. I felt like I could say things to him that I couldn't say to my mother.

So they were parents, sure. But they were parents in the way I understood from my own experience. They were far away. They were voices on the phone. They sent gifts sometimes. But when I read books and saw depictions of kids giving and getting hugs, having heart-to-hearts with their parents, being fundamentally emotionally close and dependent on them—that seemed

completely foreign to me. I couldn't imagine crying in front of my parents. Or anyone. I couldn't imagine getting playful hugs and throwing harmless teases at each other.

Now that I'm a father and my heart compresses every time one of my kids is sad and I reach out and get to give them a hug and have them lean on me, sit next to me, baring their soul as they deal with life—I am so jealous of my children. I never had that. Kids need that. Whenever the youngest wraps his skinny arms around me in a tight hug and grins his rogue smile and whenever the oldest slides casually across the tile floor and throws an arm around me—I love it. And when I muse on my own life, yes, I'm jealous of the relationship that my kids have with Annemarie and me as their parents.

But I'm confused too. And sad. For my own parents. How could they have chosen to miss out on this? How could they have chosen to have me call them by their adopted first names? How could they have chosen to deprive themselves of these beautiful moments?

So I mourn the loss of something that never lived. I grieve for it on my behalf, but also for my mother and father.

Chapter 8

I Moved A Lot, Then I Didn't

This is a pretty simple chapter. The cult moved a lot. They were nomads, although maybe not by choice. They started in Oxford, set up a group of devotees and practitioners there, then were somehow involved in some kind of lawsuit which went badly for them. They spent time in the US, then migrated south with adults, kids, and dogs. They headed back north after big events for them and wound up opening a coffee shop in New Orleans. The rest of the moving isn't entirely linear. They were opening branches here and there, sending individuals or pairs or small groups out to California to recruit, or to Boston, or somewhere else. They were in Toronto for a while, but I think they were also in Chicago at the same time.

I was born in Chicago. That branch closed down sometime after a fire. Legend goes that the two twins and I were tossed out a first floor window into a snow bank—and I couldn't have been older than seven months. I don't know if that's true. But we all ended up in New York by the time I was one year old.

The cult—The Process at the time—seemed to be regrouping, finding its feet, and opened a coffee shop and continued printing a strange magazine that they had started some years ago. While in Manhattan, I started going to preschool, which I've mentioned. There were something like thirty kids and had to be around that number of adults, if not more.

Some kids came and went as adults tried out the cult, then decided it wasn't up their alley for the long term. Caregivers came and went too. I've met some of the people—women for the most part—who knew me as a baby and as a toddler. They said I was sweet and cute so they're obviously excellent judges of character. People universally loved my mother. Right after joining,

she took the name Seraphine and began doing spiritual readings, becoming well known as particularly spiritually sensitive.

We were in Manhattan until I was at least three years old. Then we went to a place the cult dubbed Angel Mountain, which might have been in Virginia. Maybe in New York. Maybe some other rural place on the eastern seaboard. We had a lengthy stop in Narrowsburg, New York. There was a river and maybe even a pond there, along with woods and fields. We kids were surrounded by dogs and cats and adults who were always in our business.

We still slept on sleeping mats, or in piles of blankets, and all the kids still slept in one biggish room. We spent our days pelting around the property, playing endless imagination games, pissing off the adults, and generally looking pretty *Lord of the Flies*. Two quick highlights from Narrowsburg: our caregiver got so angry once that he smacked a kid on the head with a screwdriver handle and man, head wounds bleed a lot—and the same caregiver loved Pittsburgh Steelers football and I got to watch them on TV as they won a Super Bowl. I’ve been a Steelers fan ever since.

As I’ve mentioned, at some point we were homeless, camping in tents and trekking a few miles a day. After several stops, in New Jersey, and Washington, DC, I ended up in Quakertown. After Quakertown, I moved to Dallas for a year, then Denver, then Dallas again.

I counted and found that I had moved at least ten times before I was ten. I’d been physically present in twenty states by then too, due to all the driving we did.

I do not know why we moved so much. I have the impression that sometimes we had to move because we could no longer pay the rent. It’s entirely possible that Mary Ann, the murky leader, was mandating all the moves. But by the time I was in Quakertown, several branches had been established. Kids were divided amongst them, often with their parents, in an unusual mercy.

Which didn't last. By the time I was nine, I was hearing about Faith School, the private school that the Dallas branch had opened. This was not a school for anyone—it was exclusively for cult kids. The Foundation was steadily shifting all kids to the Dallas branch so that they could all be free from the staining influence of The World which we were being exposed to via public schools.

So I'd moved a lot, but then found myself in Denver for a few months of third grade, all of fourth grade at a new school, then the first month of fifth grade at the same school as my fourth grade year. I wondered if maybe the moving was done. I had the same school friends as I'd had the year before. I knew my way around the school. I knew which teachers were angry all the time and which ones liked me. I had begun to sprout roots and it was awesome. Maybe this was it!

But I should have known better.

I was sent, with about one week's warning, to Faith School in Dallas. That's where I lived for the next seven years. On my last day of school at Vanderhoof Elementary in Arvada, Colorado, during the last period, I was called to the principal's office. The principal spoke to me and said he was disappointed I was leaving. He wondered why my family was moving. I explained I didn't live with my family. Yadda yadda yadda.

I got back to my classroom and found all the kids gathered at the front of the room. They surprised me with a big shout of "We'll miss you." My friends came up and gave me hugs. The girl I had a crush on, Brenda Hutchinson, told me she couldn't believe I was leaving. We were good friends.

Then I found a paper in my chair's cubby. It had everyone's signature on it and most of them had glued a piece of candy above their signature—some with a note too.

It was the single nicest, kindest, loving thing I'd ever experienced. My chest squeezed so tight I couldn't breathe. These were kids who were choosing to be nice. This was an adult who saw me, knew how this must be hurting, and thought of what might make it better. I scrubbed tears away, gasping as quietly as I could, trying not to embarrass myself. A tear landed on the beautiful and sweet note. I trudged off the school property, onto the bus, and rode home in a dying, darkening haze.

Two days later I arrived in Dallas. I'd lived there briefly before and the houses were the same. I got out of the car and stood in the driveway as dusk fell. Asta, one of the kids whom I'd spent time with in another branch and who was only a couple months older than me, came out and said hello. She was nice and sweet. I was so completely inside my own head, grieving the loss of my hopes and life, that all I could do was awkwardly put up a hand and say, "How." As if I were in the stupid western TV shows I watched.

Dallas is where I stayed for seven years. I spent the first few months sharing a room with Asta's brothers, the twins, whom I remembered from another branch a few years before. After only a few months though, it was decided that all the boys would live in the house on Dickason—which was across the city from the houses on Swiss Avenue. It wouldn't only be boys there though; some of the older girls lived at Dixie—the house on Dickason—and they would stay in their big room. Only the girls my age and younger would remain at Swiss.

Today, as I look back, it's pretty clear what was going on. Lucia, the leader of the Dallas branch, wanted to get the kids away from her. She didn't like kids. She had two daughters that she doted on and spoiled, and she kept them nearby along with her oldest daughter's friend, Asta. And then a few really small girls stayed there too. But all the rest of the twenty-plus kids in Dallas lived in Dixie. Far from Lucia's eye. And we didn't mind one bit.

Dixie was great and we'll get into that shortly. We lived there for about five more years, then, as Dallas became more and more successful with fundraising, we moved to the suburbs in Richardson.

So even though Dallas was basically my last stop, I still lived in four different houses there.

Plenty of kids spend time fantasizing about moving a lot and seeing new things and experiencing new places and people. They fetishize a bit the 'new kid' notion and daydream about being a different person and starting again if they could just move.

Moving a lot as a kid sucks. Don't get me wrong; moving with your family every few years is a necessity for thousands of kids and it goes okay, although it gets tiring. You get used to it. And you can handle it because your family stays the same, most of the time.

But combine moving so much with a constantly shifting group of sometimes pleasant, temperamental, capricious adults, being subject to their angry and petty whims at the same time—that sucked a lot. I don't recommend it.

It's particularly lame to move to a school of about twenty kids—all of whom I had known since birth, where the teachers tended to have little to no knowledge of their subject and very much had no idea how to teach. Worse was that they had power over us because we literally lived with them. It was like being homeschooled by people who aren't your parents and who gave only small damns sometimes in most cases.

Oh, and the school day was always kicked off with lessons on lying.

More on that in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

Faith School

The Foundation was pretty inconsistent in a lot of things. The cult had morphed from scary The Process Church of the Second Coming with creepy magazines and folks in heavy robes haranguing people on the streets to something more middle of the road, then to a totally bland and unrecognizable mutt of a doctrine. I once asked Evan, a man in the Dallas branch, what we believed. He said we believed in God. That was it. He called us a non-denominational Christian sect. We had gongs in our rituals, incense, burning candles, anointings with oil, hymns, pianos, guitars, poetry readings, and more. The Foundation was a religious mutt.

The Foundation was a charity for kids in hospitals, an animal rescue and rehabilitation organization, and a weirdly religious commune, even though the religion was hazy as all get-out.

Yet with all of this weird inconsistency, it got new members pretty regularly. And as branches settled into place in several states of the United States west, the cult itself settled down and settled into rote practices and day to day life.

Money that fundraisers made was used to cover all costs of each branch, with the expectation that there would be plenty of excess to send on to the headquarters—by that time in Angel Canyon in the red cliffs and washes and valleys of Southern Utah. As things stabilized, the notion that the kids were being far too exposed to the world became a thing. Mary Ann rubber stamped the idea of a Faith School in Dallas. I don't know why Dallas. Maybe because it was the most financially successful. That had to be why.

So the school was started. They found a house not too far from Dixie, on a street called Bowser. It was in a row of houses that had been converted to small law firms and insurance

agencies. We called the house Bowser, as was the tradition there in Dallas to call the houses by the street they were on.

The school was going for a couple years before I got there. I had no real idea what the school was like until I started there a month into my fifth grade. When I moved to Dallas to join Faith School, I re-encountered around twenty kids that I'd known for years—basically since I was born. My older brother Matthias had already been there for a couple years. A bunch of girls I'd grown up with were there, most of them a couple years older. Robin I met for the first time in my memory. There was also a boy I didn't remember knowing before named Adam. All the rest were old cronies—in the very loosest sense of the word.

We headed to school around 7:30 every morning and classes began at 8:10AM. The kids living in Swiss had to be driven every morning. The rest of us, mostly boys, who lived in Dixie—we got to ride bikes to school every morning. It was about two or three miles, so we could do it in a lazy twenty or so minutes. We would head out in a staggered group, some of us racing and some of us always losing. I had a terrible, old bike so it was me losing the race. It was all because of my bike. No, really, it was.

We would pelt down roads, cut across parking lots, defy traffic lights and hurtle across busy roads. We rode in front of a Safeway that I sometimes stopped in on the way home to spend thirty-seven cents on a bag of Skittles. Then we would cut across a huge parking lot, popping over curbs and trying to get air, then we were on Bowser and riding up the steep hill of a driveway. We pulled our bikes around back and went in to Bowser.

The expectation was that we would all be sitting in the Focus room by 8:10AM, ready to get started. Why was it called the Focus room? Because that was where we had Focus class at the beginning of every day. What was Focus?

Well. I'm so glad you asked.

Focus was a 45-minute session in which Lucia (remember, she's the leader of the Dallas branch—I'll talk more about her later) or Jason (her husband), or some other very senior person on the branch would guide us through a series of Steps. That is capitalized because that is exactly what the things were called. The Acceptance Step. The Redirect Step. And so on. We did these things so that we could interact with the world in a way that kept us free from its corruption and so that we could learn to find peace and some such other silliness in every moment.

The Acceptance Step was one where we paired off, usually in two rows facing each other. I would be facing any other kid in the branch who was attending Faith School. This could be Adam or Julius or Matthias or Mark, or Vanessa, Asta, or Ananda. Anyone. Our task was to sit across from this other person and look them directly in the eyes. Upon securing a lock on their ocular instruments, we would then have to sit there with absolutely zero expression. It was called the Acceptance Step because the idea was that we were accepting everything about the person before us. Their appearance, their gaze, their nearness, and so on. We were accepting it, internalizing it, and that was all. Acceptance meant nothing about them caused any kind of reaction in us—negative or positive.

So we were taught to keep our expressions bland, completely void of anything that might be a sign of not full acceptance.

By 'taught' I don't mean we were told techniques and coached on mastering them. We were told to have no expression and were yelled at if we cracked a smile, yawned, pursed our lips, or heaven forbid burst out laughing because Mark didn't care about the Acceptance Step, he just wanted to sow chaos and get away with it. When you were publicly shamed and yelled at for slipping a bit, you quickly found whatever worked for you to keep your face completely slack.

You couldn't close your eyes. You could not move your body.

And we sat there for several minutes at a time. When we were done, we were told to rotate. So one row would move up one seat and the top person would come down to the bottom of the row and we would repeat the process. This went on through a few cycles.

I learned to meditate essentially. I would fix my eyes on the person across from me, usually on their eyebrows, and tune out just enough that I could breath steadily and stay aware of what was going on around me. I got extremely good at this. It's not a staring contest, by the way. Everything had to be completely normal and flat. Regular breaths. Regular blinking.

So now you might want to give this a try. Go ahead. It's a fun exercise or parlor game. Is it weird to make kids ranging in age from 8 to 17 do this every morning through several cycles?

You make the call. I still learned valuable skills from it, no matter how bizarre a picture it might have been to the casual, uncomprehending observer.

The Redirect Step was also done in pairs. This was a step wherein the people in one row would face their partner, then offer as sincere an insult as they could come up with within ten seconds or so. Their partner would have to hear the insult, thank the insulting party for the comment, then redirect with a sincere compliment.

My Redirect Step consisted of things like this:

"Mark, you smell like orc dung."

"Thank you, Jared. You are very observant."

Or:

"Jared, you are incredibly ugly."

"Thank you, Asta. You are a very sincere individual."

Why on God's green earth were we doing this step? I never knew. They never explained. But between this and the Acceptance Step, I got pretty good at lying convincingly.

Then there was the Circle wherein we were all to say something nice about a kid selected by the adult facilitating Focus class. I got a huge reaction when, on my turn to compliment Ananda, I said, "Ananda, I like you because you look just like Justine Bateman." She really did look like Justine Bateman. And the rest of the kids exploded in laughter. I got yelled at for being inappropriate and having worldly thoughts.

Speaking of learning to lie, another activity in Focus class was acting. For real. We would arrange our chairs in in an open circle, our backs against the walls, and the adult directing the class would call on someone to go to the front. Then the adult would call out an emotion.

"Angry!" And the person at the front would have to act angry. Robin was fantastic. She always talked about her brush. "I can't believe someone broke my brush!" she would say, seething. "Sad!" might come next. Robin, sniffing: "I miss my brush so much." And so on.

Usually we would cycle through at least half of the kids.

I was terrible at it. I was so self-conscious that I would second guess every word, every movement. I would worry that if I were too real, people would think I was nuts for being so dedicated to the activity. But if I didn't show enough effort, I would get in trouble. So I tried to find some balance, but there was none. However, as the years passed, I grew more comfortable with myself and did a little better. When the time came to apply the skills that I'd learned, though, I did so with roaring success. That will be in Chapter 12.

We would also have to write and perform impromptu skits based on a scenario or topic that the adult would provide. Yes folks, this was an improv class as well. And finally, we would sometimes be sent to the front and be told to give a speech. It had to be religious themed and we

had to do it entirely off the cuff. No preparation whatsoever, although if you weren't first, you spent the entire time the first person was struggling through their time up there thinking of what you were going to say if called upon.

Every so often, these were filmed. So somewhere out there, one of my old cronies has the footage of my single greatest victory of Faith School. No joke.

Picture young Jared. He is around twelve or thirteen years old. He is relatively small, round in the middle, round of face, and wearing a perpetual crew cut that had grown out and was now in his eyes. He has a multitude of freckles and is wearing jeans with a striped, blue polo shirt tucked in.

I was sent to the front and made sure I looked as nervous as always. But I had a plan. Oh yes, I sure did. I wasn't someone to be ignored anymore. I was going to show them a new side of me. And for the first time ever, that fantastical plan came to fruition.

I was prompted to begin. I surveyed the gathered kids, my pseudo-siblings. One of them was an actual sibling. I let the silence stretch. Jason, Lucia's husband, was at the back, filming. I was prompted again to get started. I sucked in a slow breath, then spoke in a soft, slow voice. "We take God's gifts..." I petered off. Then I shouted. "AND WE THROW THEM AWAY!" I launched into a diatribe supporting my opening thesis, but the kids were gone. They were all laughing and the footage of me doing this is a bit shaky because I'm pretty sure Jason was having trouble keeping it together too.

Lordy, that was a fine moment.

So we've spent a long time talking about Focus class, but the rest of the day unfolded in much the same way that most people's school experience did, but for a few differences. The

groups were arranged in classrooms based on grade. No classroom had a single grade. My classroom typically had my grade plus one below it.

And teachers would come to the rooms where we sat. So my desk was my desk. And my desk was an actual chair/desk combo from a school where I imagine some enterprising adult had found a surplus sale going on. Or maybe they had been donated.

Because the truth is, it's entirely possible that one of the reasons Faith School was started was to give the Dallas branch another charity to cite when asking people for monetary donations. And maybe one of the adults had made a connection that got chair/desk combos donated.

In any case, the teachers were people in the branch who either had a passing interest or actual skill and background in the subjects in question. Our French teacher—and we all took French together in one big classroom—spoke French fluently. He wasn't a great teacher and to this day I still only remember four of five phrases after five years of French nearly every morning. Our history teacher didn't know history very well, but she was not good at fudging, I assumed, and she was a good teacher. She had us create skits in which we made songs from the perspective of historical figures like Attila the Hun. She was endlessly creative and is still one of the top five teachers of my school career.

My math teacher was the same guy who taught French. He also happened to be the main caretaker of Dixie, the house with all the boys and some of the girls. He knew advanced math very well, but he could not teach it. Algebra was completely opaque to me from day one and never got any clearer through hours of grueling homework. I ended up throwing in the towel on understanding algebra and sneaking into Bowser on off hours to find the teacher copy of the homework and copy the answers. Which is frankly horrible. Luckily for me, I took a pre-college algebra class at Brigham Young University and that went a lot better.

Then we had some real highlights. Jason was a capricious, temperamental, funny, bear of a British man. He was incredibly well trained in art and was himself an extraordinary artist: painter, sculptor, and more. He knew techniques for so many mediums. Art was his ultimate passion. He did work that would have been worth thousands of dollars.

And he taught art class. I have more advanced art training under my education belt than ninety percent of the USA, I have no doubt. I have done screen printing, clay sculpture with plaster casting, gold leafing, watercolors, oil painting, theater make-up, papier-mache, sketching, inking, and lots more. I was a terrible painter. I struggled and still struggle with the human face and form. I can draw shoulders and eyes pretty well. Otherwise, I'm a human photo copier. Give me a 2D picture and I can draw a nearly exact copy.

Sculpture has been my favorite medium forever though. I loved making shapes, taking tiny tools and adding detail, pressing here or there and giving the face expression, and I couldn't get enough of polishing a plaster cast of my sculptures. I love it. I love to see amazing sculptures. The Victoria & Albert Museum in London is my favorite museum because it has a massive gallery of sculpture on the ground floor and in its own special alcove is the greatest sculpture of all time: Alberto Canova's 'The Three Graces.' It's rapturously stunning.

For art class we even sometimes did music videos and movies. For one entire semester, we divided into four production crews and made a movie. This was top to bottom film-making. We wrote scripts, revised them, created costumes and sets, and cast the roles. I was the only kid to appear in every single kid production. One of my old cult siblings has these movies I believe, but I will never tell you where you can find them.

What I will tell you is that I hate the smell of drying ketchup and drying chocolate? Why? Because my character Wilbur died a terrible death by falling out a window and it was important

to the producers and directors to make sure my dead body looked properly defenestrated. I was covered in chocolate syrup, ketchup, and strawberry jam.

Twenty minutes lying on the ground as still as I could manage, with goopy mess drying all over me was enough to scar me pretty well.

But the movies were great. I played a middle-aged mother, a goofy and heroic cowboy, a police detective with morals and a temper, and a pirate. When the movies were done, we showed them in a sort of film festival format and they were cheered by the adults.

Which makes that situation all the more fascinating as I look back at it. There were really good times and I learned a lot from life and school. We had fun, we had incredibly robust and important experiences that helped us become well-rounded adults, and we got along a lot of the time.

And yet, I see the seven years in Dallas as a perfect microcosm of the cult. We got to do these things and were ostensibly cared for—which totally enhanced the sensation that we were orphans. Except we all knew we weren't. Faith School was a final nail on the coffin of parents who we essentially had to bury, even though they still lived and breathed but had somehow decided their cult/commune was more important than their kids having parents.

But there's no denying that the experience was rich and lasting. I wouldn't go back and change a single thing. I particularly wouldn't go back and change the moment I swore off baked beans and hot dogs.

Chapter 10

Hot Dogs and Beans and Fury

I got to Dallas full of fury. We sometimes discount the emotions of children—maybe not saying that they’re not valid, but implying that they’re immature and poorly informed. But kids’ emotions are real and how they deal with the particularly big emotions can be a defining event in their lives.

Such was the case with me. I’d been torn out of my fifth grade year at Vanderhoof Elementary. This was the first time I’d ever felt like I had roots, like I had something constant in my life. Hope had flared that I was done moving. I had a friend or two in school that I really liked and was beginning to even trust. My fifth grade teacher was kind and let us read a lot and read to us and she smiled at me and asked how I was. I was seen every day. It was the very best.

And without warning, it ended. No reason given. No choice given. I was being sent away.

Look, I get that there are times that kids have to move with their families due to work or other circumstances. This was not the same thing. This felt malicious. And I didn’t have a family that was doing this because of work or some other compelling good-for-the-family reason. This was people who had abused, ignored, and beaten me telling me I had to move. No reason given. This was a return to instability, to the unknown and scary.

So I was livid when I got to Dallas, never mind that I was ten. I started attending Faith School the next day, joining a class with all of my peers. Asta, Vanessa, and Isaac. Mark and Manuel came to Dallas after me—several months after me as I recall. Why? I didn’t have a clue. It was unfair and wicked.

Vanessa was a grade below Asta, Isaac, and me. She was friendly, a bit snobby, and artistic. I thought she was very pretty. Asta was kind and temperamental and loyal. Isaac I barely knew

from some other branch some years before. He was the son of the branch leader in Las Vegas—a British man who was one of the original founders and who was tall and debonair. Isaac took after him and very much liked that. Isaac was a good guy whom I liked more than Mark and Manuel combined. He was decent and had a sharp sense of humor. But like the rest of us, he could be a jerk. Because we were kids.

Our teacher gave us worksheets from math workbooks. She gave us worksheets from grammar workbooks. She assigned us reading and other homework as well.

I didn't do any of it. I paid almost no attention in class, ignored the homework, and deliberately turned myself onto auto-pilot to try and make it through the next hundred years of my miserable prison of a life.

It turned out we were getting graded. This was because Faith School was actually an accredited school for a year or two after it was started—which is another thing that makes me wonder if Faith School was a charity money grab. The accreditation had to have lapsed, judging by the fact that I didn't receive grades for my last three years in it.

But at the start, we were getting graded and my grades sucked. Which added up, since I didn't do any homework and didn't participate in class. I had no intention of ever participating in anything in the damn cult anymore. Those jerks could all rot—was my main thought. With more swearing thrown in. Instead of participating and doing homework, I read my books. I was reading a lot of mystery and still a lot of action and fantasy at the time. I read *Dune* that year. I didn't like it—probably because I wasn't even eleven years old yet.

Let me share with you the absurdity of homework in this setting. I lived with a bunch of kids and adults. I shared a room with the boys, even. We got in a van, drove a few miles to another building, then sat in chair/desks and listened to one of the adults with whom I shared a house

drone on about some random topic for a while. Then we would be given worksheets to do as homework. Then we would get back in the van, haul the worksheets to the other house where we slept, then do them, then bring them back to the school building, then lather, rinse, and repeat. It was beyond pointless. Why not just sit in the class, do the worksheets, then throw them in the trash which is where they ended up anyway? Better yet, why not just admit that our lives were going nowhere, because we were stuck in a messed up commune of indistinct religious flavor and this was going to be our lives until we died—at least as far as the adults were hoping for.

So the futility and absolutely asinine exercise of the whole thing had become clear through my fury and I was going to have nothing to do with it.

Except that one day, upon arriving back at Swiss from school, Lucia called me to see her. What this consisted of was Lucia sitting somewhere, like in her office or in her special throne/recliner in the living room and commanding the nearest slave *ahem* person to go find me and tell me to come running.

I showed up and stood in front of her, already used to this rigamarole. She laid into me about the fact that I wasn't doing my schoolwork and wasn't completing any of the work I was supposed to be doing. I wasn't participating and my attitude was terrible and what we resist we become and other bull crap. I let the diatribe slide through my ears, into the back of my brain, and down my neck and back into... where all crap winds up.

She figured out I wasn't listening and got really angry. She screamed at me that I had darn well better fix my attitude and sent me to my room until she said I could come out.

I nodded, saying nothing, and crossed the driveways to the second Swiss house, climbed the stairs, and plopped on my bed, grabbing a book on my way down. A second later, I had found my spot and began reading. I was still reading as the sun went down. I picked up another book

and kept reading as night fell. I was still reading when Lucia pushed open the door and spoke quietly, saying she had brought me dinner.

The image is vivid in my mind, so I want to make sure you capture it too. This was a bedroom of five beds: two stacked as a bunkbed and the other three sticking out from the walls, their feet separated by a narrow walk space. My bed ran parallel to the wall with windows on it. The windows looked over the shared driveway and gave me a lovely view of the first Swiss house's red brick and old window panes.

Lucia crossed the room and sat on my bed. I sat up, the windows in my peripheral vision. She was carrying a plate of baked beans with hot dogs in them. I could tell with one glance they were cold. The way she dropped on my bed forced me toward the foot, and she wound up sitting practically on my pillow, which bothered me. You don't put your butt where someone's head is going to be. That's just rude.

She held the plate out. "I brought you dinner." This was said in a faux-warm, nurturing tone. I was ten, but I was an old, perceptive ten. You learn to read adults and a room pretty fast when you're surrounded by, and can't get away from, people who acted in bad faith with you all the time. I knew this was an act. The tone did not match her eyes and her smile was far too tight.

"You must be hungry," she prompted.

I said nothing, not really sure what to say at this point. This was a new thing. She was usually aggressively awful, with zero indication that she felt she had to hide it or try anything other than unhinged screaming to teach us lessons and get us to fall in line.

"Look, I know you must be hungry. You've been up here for hours."

I shrugged and nodded. "A little."

She proffered the plate of truly nasty looking food. The problem was that I was in fact a bit hungry. This plate of baked beans and hot dogs did not look appealing, but when had that ever stopped me or any of the kids? Pickiness did not last long unless you were the child of your branch's leader. I took the plate, grabbing for the fork she held under it.

Lucia launched into a lengthy lecture on how important it was to do schoolwork and have a good attitude. I let it slide, as usual, through me. I picked at the dinner. The beans were a little better than the hot dogs, but not by much. She pointed out that school might be hard for some of us, but that we still had to work, and sometimes that meant we had to work a little harder.

That caught me up. "What?" I spoke around a mealy baked bean I was trying to swallow.

She raised her eyebrows. Not a good reaction. My tone had obviously not been meek and subservient enough. "Excuse me?"

"Uh." I thought fast. "Sorry."

She peered at me with lidded eyes, then repeated what she'd just said, but in slightly different words. It went something like this: "Jared, learning math and other subjects isn't going to be easy. I know it's a little harder for you. But that doesn't give you an excuse to not do the work. And if you do the work, one day it won't be so hard for you. And Bridget is there to help you when you get stuck."

COME AGAIN???

I finally processed what she was getting at. She was implying I was stupid or slow or something. She was acting like I wasn't doing the schoolwork because it was too hard for me and I didn't understand it. That was all kinds of crap. I set my plate of inedible dogs and beans on my knee and glanced at her eyes for a second, then looked down, terrified of what she would do if she saw how mad I suddenly was.

I wasn't not doing the freaking work because it was too hard for me, I was ignoring it because it was pointless and I was being forced to grow up in a crappy, stupid cult full of people who didn't give a flying crumb about me!

I wanted to yell at her, throw her fake sincere, supportive words right back at her face. She had no clue. She had no idea how wrong she was. She thought I was stupid.

Well to hell with that.

Lucia nodded. "Okay, this was a good talk. I think you know what you need to do. Make sure you do this week's worksheets by the end of the week." She stood and brushed the wrinkles out of her trousers and walked toward the door. "Make sure you wash and dry your dishes when you're done."

I briefly considered hurling the plate of nastiness at her, or at least at the door after she closed it. Opting not to, I glared at my pillow, then out the windows. A minute later, I caught sight of her emerging from this house, crossing the driveways, and going into the other Swiss house. I would have liked to drop the plate out the window so it shattered with a loud crash right behind her in the driveways. Instead I tried to eat one of the cold, baked-beans-sauce-covered chunks of hot dog. It was supremely disgusting.

I set the plate on the floor next to my bed and stewed. Freaking Lucia thought I was stupid. She thought the homework and classwork were too hard for me and that I was just too shy or whatever to ask for help. I swore over and over in my head, coming up with every combination my sheltered, ten-year-old imagination could produce. Lucia was the stupid one. Thinking I couldn't do the work. Telling me I was slow in the head. She looked at me and thought she saw a moron or something.

Screw that. I would show her. Her condescending words hurtled around in my mind, building my fury to a bonfire in my gut and throat. I would show her. Stupid? Slow? Me? No freaking way.

I poked at the plate of nasty dinner with my toe, then reached for my school folder. I pulled out the math worksheets that I had from last week still. I completed them in a few minutes, then did this week's worksheets in the same amount of time. I shoved them back in the folder, then flopped back onto my bed, grabbing for my book.

The next day, I made sure to get to the classroom first. I pulled my completed worksheets out of my folder and set them on Bridget's desk. Bridget was our teacher. She was pretty okay. She tried to have fun sometimes and she had a quick smile.

I was sitting all innocent at my desk when the rest of the kids got into the room, and Bridget showed up a moment later, a mug of steaming coffee in hand. She sat, found the worksheets, saw my name on them, and raised her eyebrows at me. I looked back, doing my best version of the Acceptance step. No expression. No reaction whatsoever.

"Good job, Jared." Bridget smiled. "I'll check them at lunch time."

I nodded and said nothing. This was just the beginning.

From that day on, I did all my homework before leaving school. Let me be very clear: I am talking about all of my homework through graduating. I even attended public school for my last year of high school (more on that later) and I kept up that habit for 95% of my schoolwork. Throughout the next seven years, I completed every assignment before everyone else, at a high level. I was the fastest on the math worksheets for the rest of elementary school. Nobody came close, frankly.

I was the top of my class. Period. Unquestionably. This actually led to me graduating #2 in my class at Kanab High School after my senior year there.

Lucia had thought I was stupid. No, I was just angry. Furious at my life. And that fury did not leave me for years. It fueled my academic excellence—fury and spite. I would show her. I would leave no doubt. And the funny thing is that her lecture, in a sense, did work. But not the way she thought—unless she was a master of reverse psychology. And I don't think she was astute or knew me anywhere near well enough to have known that would have worked in that way on me.

All in all, that night, in my room, with a plate of cold baked beans and sliced hot dogs, Lucia insulted me to my core and I decided to get back at her in the only way I could control. I would prove her wrong. I worked hard and found that before long, doing the precise amount needed to get an A became easier and easier.

Unfortunately, I spent the next nine years hating beans and I still don't like hot dogs. Which leads us to me becoming the main cook for my house by the time I was thirteen years old.

Chapter 11

Food Is Life

As I've mentioned, I spent a fair amount of time at the hip of Magdalen, my mother, and Bethany, and Evelyn, helping to cook dinner. I'm not entirely sure why. I can't recall if I was doing it to try to get out of helping with cleaning up and washing the dishes. If that was my reason, it never worked, because one of my most vivid lifelong memories is of standing at a sink or rubbing a clean, dry towel on hot, dripping plates and carefully stacking them in a cupboard.

Over the years, when we kids were in Angel Canyon for a couple months, I would get an afternoon or evening and work with Magdalen to make part of dinner. She taught me to make samosas, how to prepare tofu, how to peel potatoes, and more. Before that, Evelyn taught me to cook pasta and I always liked the way she, a Canadian, said "pasta."

So it's probably a natural thing that I ended up being a big part of the food scene in Dixie after moving there. I think I was considered too small or young or irresponsible to help make food in Swiss. Or maybe I was too completely disengaged while living there to even try to help out. I know there was nobody in those houses that I connected with at that point. No adults, no kids. I talked with and spent time with the girls, but the entire time I felt like I would rather have been reading.

But I moved to Dixie before turning eleven. Dixie was a big house full of nearly twenty kids and one adult, Jonathan. He was the caretaker—essentially our guardian. That at least was how he introduced himself when we were going to the YWCA a couple years later. That sounded like a legal term to me, and it turns out that my impression that we were basically orphans was accurate. It's as if we were in the foster/child services system—but this system was entirely self-contained in the cult.

In any case, Jonathan was a precise guy who liked order. He put together a rota—short for rotation—of all the chores that needed to be done daily in the house. Food prep for breakfast and dinner was on there. Not lunch, because we ate lunch at the school house and that was typically prepared there by the older girls and boys.

Pretty soon after I landed at Dixie, I got myself permanently assigned as one of the two people making breakfast and dinner for all the kids there. Since I was younger, I would assist whoever it was of the older kids that had the main job.

Breakfast was a rotation of hot cereals and eggs and toast. One day we would make hot cereals. The next day we would do eggs and toast. Repeated. Every. Day.

Cold cereal? That was a luxury. A treat. I think we had cold cereal once or twice a year. If that. Sometimes on the weekends we would make pancakes and the house would go through two plastic jugs of Aunt Jemima's maple syrup. The house consumed only two or three gallons of milk a week though—which looking back is a bit of a surprise. My house now goes through six gallons, and that's with nine people. And we only allow two days a week of cold cereal for breakfast.

Back to cooking at Dixie.

Picture our mornings. We did the morning prayer ritual thing and when it was done, we would all be sitting in a circle in the living room. So, I and the other person on breakfast would announce 'hot cereal' or 'eggs' to remind everyone what breakfast was. Then we would take orders. We weren't short order cooks, but we needed to know how much to make of each thing. So on hot cereal days, we would ask people to tell us if they wanted Cream of Wheat, cooked oats, or cold oats. We would tally the number for each item, then make that much of each, plus a bit. Because running out of food at mealtime in that house was dangerous. We didn't have a lot

of variety, but by that time, we had enough food in the cupboards, so there was no excuse and those teenagers could get hangry, my friends.

The aroma of the steam from cooking rolled oats has a special spot in my recollection. I love it and have loved it from day one. The same for Cream of Wheat. If too many carbohydrates weren't bad for me, I would still eat these porridges all the time. I always found it incredibly satisfying to measure water, get it to a boil, then carefully stir in the processed grain of choice and then keep stirring it while it softened and thickened. I got very deft at making sure the oats cooked fast, but didn't boil over and didn't burn on the bottom.

I got very deft because I burnt the oats a few times and that is a smell that is seared into my brain too.

The Cream of Wheat was my true medium, though. Nobody could make it as well as I did. I got it to the perfect consistency every time before long. Not too watery, not lumpy. Never. Lumpy.

My secret? Put the dang Cream of Wheat in cold water, before even turning on the heat. Add some butter. Then stir the entire time. Boom. Perfect Cream of Wheat.

For cold oats, we put out the giant tub of rolled oats and the people who wanted that would serve themselves. We typically had about 20-30 minutes to prepare breakfast, so we had to hurry and we got really good at the division of labor. There was no need for assigning labor so it was evenly distributed—we just worked fast until it was done. We spotted what needed to be done next and did it.

So since I got amazing at cooking Cream of Wheat, and even the oatmeal at the same time, the other person ended up setting the tables and putting everything out.

Eggs and toast were a bit different. We actually took orders and fulfilled them, mostly, for those. On the mornings of those days, we would ask for a count of scrambled and fried, then for toast. Scrambled were easy. Fried were a little harder, because all of them were done over-medium and nobody liked their yolk popped. Some of the kids preferred sunny-side-up, so we would do those last. When it was all cooked, we would serve up a pile of scrambled eggs, almost always an entire dozen, and a plate of fried over-medium eggs. We would also toast a full loaf of bread every morning of eggs. I learned very quickly that the toaster warmed up and the second batch of toast, and every batch thereafter, cooked a lot quicker. I've burnt so much bread in my lifetime.

And that was breakfast, except sometimes on Saturdays we would choose to make pancakes. These were done from scratch and were very basic. We would make about one and a half gallons of batter and cook on an electric griddle and three frying pans to go as fast as we could. We added extra sugar to the pancakes to make them taste a bit better, since we didn't ever have buttermilk to make them extra tasty.

One time, I thought it would be helpful to make the batter the night before so that I could get right to cooking and get breakfast out faster that way. I did not understand chemistry, it turned out, and my pancakes were sad, flat little things.

But I was not daunted. Next time, I mixed up all the dries, then combined all the wets, each in their own separate bowl. I refrigerated the wet ingredients and in the morning combined the two and that was a major triumph. Pancakes much faster than before. And drench them in syrup or jam or apple butter—or the very best—sour cream with some apple butter on top. Those Saturday morning breakfasts were great.

Dinner was another story. We would have a set menu from Monday through Saturday. Sunday was when the whole branch ate together and we kids did not get enough to eat. But Monday through Saturday, we made what the menu said. As I grew older, I got to influence the menu. By the time I was sixteen, and we were living in Richardson, a north Dallas suburb, I was making the menu, doing all the shopping within the budget given me, and doing all the cooking. At that point, since I was doing all that, I figured I shouldn't have to do the dishes. That was shot down. I did dishes every day of my life in the cult that I can remember.

The dinner menu cycled through hot dogs, a lot of pasta, and some more creative things like shepherd's pie, baked chicken, fried chicken, beef stroganoff, and more. We did grilled cheese sandwiches, build your own submarine sandwich, and soup. The soup was almost never from scratch because that took too long.

I always just loved cooking. Maybe that was because by the age of thirteen, I was the main cook, and by the time I was fifteen, I was one of the older kids and the other older kids had moved on—in the case of the boys—or had been shifted to a different house so all the girls could live together. Since I was one of the older kids, I essentially eliminated the assistant chore so I was cooking by myself.

Those early evenings in the Dixie kitchen are huge parts of my identity. I had that time to myself, unless Mark or Manuel (yes, they showed up a year or so after I did) decided to bug me while I was cooking. I focused entirely on the food, figuring out what worked for chicken, how to brown beef, how to keep spaghetti noodles from sticking together in thick, inedible clumps, how to make tasty pasta sauce. That brown-carpeted, white cupboard kitchen was my domain, my kingdom, during those times. I would pull out ingredients, picture what needed to happen to them, and make it happen. Total control.

So that had to be a part of why I loved cooking. The solitude and control. But also, love for food was always in my DNA. My father loves to cook. My mother loved to cook. My step-mother, before she was my step-mother, taught me cooking. It's been a part of me for as long as I can remember.

One of my best jobs after I escaped the cult was becoming a BBQ restaurant chef-trainee and manager. Learning the secrets of treating meat the way it should be and preparing it to perfection was like learning magic.

It might seem strange, but now, more than thirty years later, cooking is still one of my favorite activities. I get tired of the rote cooking I need to do to keep the family fed and to keep us out of the poor house by doing crazy fancy stuff every day, but there are days I get to do awesome things that still make me feel energized. Making a giant dish of lasagna in thirty minutes, with spinach blended into the sauce so it's invisible, and with enough cheese to make a Wisconsinite blush—that's a good time.

In all the travels my wife and I have done, both together and individually—and that has included stints in Brazil, London, Scotland, Paris, Japan, Taiwan, Italy, Spain, and more—the food has been how we've experienced those places. Finding the places that locals go, trying the regional dish, like paella in Madrid, there's nothing better.

Growing up in the Dallas branch, cooking as much as I did, there's no doubt that I gained a life skill and relish for food that have served me well. It's one of the good things that came from that complex, harsh, weirdly great, abusive, and ultimately triumphant experience.

Chapter 12

Swiss and Dixie and Richardson: The Dallas Branch

The Dallas branch morphed a lot over the years. I'll tell this as linearly as I can to keep it clear. This will be a long chapter and you'll have a good time.

When I went to Dallas for my first, very short, stint, there were two houses on Swiss Avenue, right next to each other, and another house about a mile down the road where all the Sunday services and clown activities happened. Lucia had an office there and thousands of balloons and loads of costumes and helium tanks and more supplies were stored there.

When I got back there after Denver, there were the two houses on Swiss, the house down the road, Dixie, and Bowser. As I consider it, that is a lot of houses to be renting. That had to cost a lot of money.

The houses on Swiss Avenue were red brick, two stories, and had big front yards and the main one had a big back yard. One month, for a major project, we kids helped one of the expert adults named Dillon build a tall wooden fence around the back yard of the main house. There were lots of windows in the houses.

Lucia and Jason shared what I now know is called the master bedroom of the main Swiss house. It was on the main floor and was very large. Another adult or two shared the other bedroom on that floor, and Lucia had an office in that house too. Rounding out the main floor were a pretty big kitchen, a tiny attached parlor/dining room, and a big wood floored dining room that flowed into the large living room. When you went in the front of the house, you were in a front hall that led you right into the living room. Across the front of the living room was a door that led to the stairs that took you upstairs. At the top of those stairs was the kid's rec room, which had a couple bedrooms off it and a hallway off the far side that led to another kitchen, a

small dining room, and three more bedrooms. The hallway widened at the end in order to lead to the three bedrooms and the big bathroom. There was one of those cool trapdoor/stairs contraptions that you could pull out of the ceiling that led to a pretty large attic. The attic was full of old boxes some cult member had hauled there from it looked like New York City. We found old pamphlets and magazines in them and got in a lot of trouble for snooping around.

I'm giving you the layout because it will help you to understand the scope of the insane, aggressively obnoxious inequity that we experienced at Christmas.

We kids often ate meals in that upstairs kitchen and dining room. I did a lot of dishes there. I also liked it because the kitchen also led to the laundry room which was just inside a sort of sun room that you could access from outside at the top of some stairs. I preferred to go upstairs that way so that I didn't have to go anywhere near the adult domains. Ninety percent of the time that you were in the presence of the adults, they either found some way to get you in trouble or they gave you a bunch of work. So staying invisible had its rewards.

The other Swiss house was not quite as nice, but was overall the same layout. Jason, Lucia's bear of a British husband who also knew art backward and forward, essentially owned the majority of the downstairs of the second Swiss house. He had an office and a workshop there. All the bedrooms were shared by at least two adults per room. There was a kitchen there, but as far as I knew, it was rarely used. The cult was a commune after all—you had to do things together and the main house's kitchen and dining room were where meals and morning and evening rituals took place.

The two houses shared a driveway. There was no particular break between the two long concrete strips, so it was a double wide that gave us more space to roller skate and such. Where the space behind the main house was a yard, the space behind the second house was a small dirt

strip and a large concrete pad that led to a rundown sort of open garage. It was perfect for the several cars that the branch had. It was also perfect, when there weren't cars, for us to play serious four-square in.

Let's take a moment and unpack that last tidbit. Four-square was serious for us kids. Serious like Uno. Serious like major illness that isn't cancer is what I'm saying. We played four-square a lot. I preferred it because I was good at it, unlike basketball. I have great hand-eye coordination, but I can't shoot a basketball to save my life.

So the space behind Swiss was great for four-square. There was also space behind Bowser, the school building, so you can guess what we drew in heavy chalk lines on the asphalt out there. Lots of four-square. Our individual squares were always at least six by six, making the whole space twelve by twelve feet. Adam, the serious basketball player who gave nicknames and teased me relentlessly about everything, had the biggest feet, so he would measure out the squares usually.

At Dixie, we didn't need to draw chalk squares. The parking lot of the business behind the house was pretty big and was laid out in pretty large squares. So we just chose four in the right pattern and played like that. Those squares were big, like ten feet by ten. That was hard, but made for a lot of fun. Picture doubles four-square.

The first four who showed up got to be in the squares first, and the loser got eliminated and replaced by someone waiting to get into the game. The best couple of players tended to play as long as they wanted to, only getting out when they wanted to rest.

I'm not going to explain the rules of four-square, but with a game that requires you to hit a bouncing rubber ball somewhere in someone's square that they can't get to it, your going to get some aggressive play. We played hard and fast, and it was sweaty and exciting and fun.

A lot like the way we played Uno. An Uno deck is pretty big, but when you've got ten people sitting around a circular table, you need more cards. So we typically used at least two full Uno decks, sometimes three. You had like two seconds to play your turn or you would get yelled at by everyone, so you had to be really on top of it. It was Killer Uno. We got so loud and fast and I swear it was the coolest card game ever.

A final note about games for us kids. I don't know how it was at Swiss, but we played a lot of boardgames, a lot of D&D, and a lot of card games. When Pit was first released, it was a huge hit. I can still see Adam and Judah and Julius laughing and shouting, "Four four four three three three three!" We played chess, checkers, Risk, Axis & Allies, and we were stunned by the awesomeness that was Shogun when it came out. Tim (Xavier) and I played a game of Axis & Allies for several days, on my top bunk. When we had to stop the game, we would carefully lift the board onto the top of the wardrobe next to my bed.

Those were some of the great times. There was no conscious decision to make the best out of a crummy situation. It was simply kids being kids and the caretakers being intermittently intelligent and providing ways for us to kill time. The outdoor games were our creations. We ultimately had a lot of time on our hands and it was entirely up to us what to do with that time.

On its face, that seems pretty dreamy. And honestly, it was fine. More than fine. Being able to have so much time to yourself is a thing that our far too fast-paced society and culture of over-scheduling kids is missing out on. Kids need time to be bored and explore their own brains and voices. Having free time to play insanely dangerous, pad-free tackle football on a rocky side yard is essential to growing up. No really, it is. Or at least free time to do things that you enjoy and not feel like something's always hanging over you. Kids need to be free from that kind of pressure. And we were free of that, to be sure.

That said, we were also free of adults who saw us, talked to us, took us aside and listened to us, hugged us, comforted us, encouraged us, and everything else parents do. We had an adult who made sure we followed rules when we were visible, kept the fridge and pantry and cupboards stocked, and went to bed earlier than the older kids. He did hygiene checks of all the kids at Dixie for the first couple years I lived there, then I imagine he decided we were fine and stopped. But it sure is an interesting thing to have an adult lean in close so you can breathe into his face to make sure you don't have halitosis.

We were almost street kids, except we had a house to sleep and eat in. Have you seen Annie? That's how it was but with a lot more dogs, and cats too, and cleaner clothes, and less Carol Burnett.

In any case, let's finish talking about Swiss then we'll go back to Dixie. Swiss was not great. The adults were all too close. The food was fine. The bedrooms were packed. Christmas was a highlight. We each had a store-bought stocking with our name on it and we could usually find a couple presents under the tree. I spent two Christmases at Swiss—with one of them being a sleepover because we were going to have all the kids there for one year.

On the evening of Christmas Eve, we kids gathered around the upstairs kids' tree which we'd bedecked with a bunch of homemade ornaments and some shiny glass balls. We did Fake Christmas then. This was when each of us would have picked a name out of a hat and then chosen a ridiculous present to wrap in toilet paper or paper towels. I guess adults call this a White Elephant. We called it Fake Christmas because the point was to laugh our heads off.

In the morning, all of the kids except Vanessa and Johanna, sisters and daughters of Lucia and Jason, emerged from our rooms to find a present or two under the tree and stockings with a chocolate Santa, a thick peppermint stick, and a few more pieces of candy. It was great.

You might be asking “What about Vanessa and Johanna?” Their presents weren’t with ours. See, ours took up a fair chunk of space in the upstairs rec room of the main Swiss house. Consider that there were twelve to fifteen kids and multiply that by two or three presents. That covers a lot of ground.

So no, Vanessa and Johanna had too many presents to fit in the rec room. We all filed downstairs after finishing our joyful opening and watched as the sisters—again, daughters of the leaders of the branch—dove into a pile easily as big as all of the kids’ combined pile upstairs. Their presents were arranged around and under the adults’ Christmas tree in the living room on the main floor. The adults would come in and clean up when this part was over then put out the presents they had.

It wouldn’t be fair to call Vanessa and Johanna spoiled, because they were sweet and good and fun, but Lucia and Jason sure seemed to be *trying* to spoil them. And they sure *weren’t* trying to hide the obnoxious unfairness of it from the rest of us kids. I was completely stunned that first Christmas. I couldn’t wrap my brain around the huge number of gifts those two girls had and the giant mess they made tearing into them. Lucia and Jason would look on happily as the two girls went at it. The girls would thank them for the presents. It was a lot like a family Christmas.

Except the rest of us kids were forced to watch it.

I have no clue what on earth was going through the minds of Lucia and Jason in making us do that. It did not make for a yuletide full of joy and Christmas spirit, that I can tell you.

My next Christmas was at Dixie, a giant old house that never seemed to end. Its exterior was white wood siding that peeled and chipped over the years we lived there. The front of the house faced Dickason Avenue. The house sat on the corner of Dickason and Hood. Hood Street ran

down to a big road called Cedar Springs. Dickason went a few blocks then hit Turtle Creek Boulevard, which is a major road. The school house was on a street called Bowser, which is only about a half mile from Dixie. We rode our bikes to school and even walked when we couldn't ride for whatever reason. In my case, I didn't have a bike for a while, so I walked.

Dixie was, in a way, a wonderland. It was far enough from Swiss, about three or four miles, that it was a hassle for Lucia to get over there. Which meant we were free from her megalomania for large portions of our week. Nothing could have been better. It also sat on a large corner lot and had front and side yards, a giant tree in the front yard that we put a swing on, attached a pulley we found to and pulled ourselves up and down it, and we used that tree for a hide and seek starting point all the time too. The front of the house had a big porch that wrapped around a bit to one side of the house. The porch railing was the perfect height for we adventurous kids to vault and drop to the ground five feet down. It made me feel like an action hero when we were playing cops and robbers.

The front door opened directly into the big living room. This living room stretched the entire width of the house and took up nearly half of the ground floor. It was filled with couches and chairs and a TV and at first an Atari 2600 which Tim bought, and later a Nintendo 64, which I think one of the other kids bought with saved up birthday money. I got so good at Duck Hunt that nobody even tried challenging me after a little while.

Just through the door from the living room to the rest of the house were stairs off to the left, a hallway that led both straight ahead and down to an odd little sunken alcove that also had a side door to the outside. That sunken alcove was a perfect place for ailing dogs to live out their last weeks. That sure was fun to watch. Over. And over. Again.

Go through that hallway and on the right was Jonathan's room. Jonathan was Adam's father. But he wasn't actually. That was a mess. Jonathan had a beautiful, sweet German Shepherd that went from friendly to slow to ailing to in extreme pain to a slow, painful death over the years. Jonathan's room was done up nicely. It was tidy and softly lit and the pad of a confirmed bachelor who was also celibate. Opposite his room was the ground floor's bathroom. Keep going toward the back of the house and you entered the large, concrete floored utility room. Also a good place to have dogs live out the last months of their lives.

The washer and dryer were in there, along with a big sink and the water heater. There was no furnace and no AC. The house had a couple window air conditioning units that worked to varying degrees. The utility room had a bedroom off from it. The bedroom was big enough for three bunkbeds and at least one single bed. The house's back door which led to the driveway behind the house was on the back wall of the utility room. That was the door we used the most. We played basketball out back and four-square in the parking lot out there. I got a key to that door when I joined the ranks of older kids, as I was the most responsible of the boys my age.

My first bedroom in Dixie was that one with three bunks and a single. That's because the older girls occupied the immense bedroom on the second floor. I always had a top bunk, although I can't imagine why.

We shared a couple wardrobes and dressers. I had two drawers and a small section of the wardrobe for my clothes. Anything else I owned I stored either under the bottom bunk, on top of the wardrobe, or on my bed. Luckily, I didn't own much beyond a cowboy hat and a few books and action figures.

I snuck out of that room so much it became muscle memory to grip the loose knob tightly, pull the door my way to keep it from scraping, and turn the knob. We had a bedtime we were

supposed to stick to, but I enjoyed going outside when I wasn't supposed to and wandering the property and the block. I peeked into houses sometimes, saw a few things I should not have seen, and generally tried to defy as much as I could.

Eventually the older girls graduated from Faith School and we boys got the run of the house. I ended up in the immense upstairs room, on a top bunk. I fell off that bunk one night. It was kind of funny, because I have no recollection of it. I woke up one morning and felt like my neck was weirdly stiff. I blearily opened my eyes, looked around, and saw Matthias, yes, my half-brother, using his pliers to pull a broken lightbulb from a lamp. Upon closer examination, I realized that was the lamp that Tim, who slept on the bottom of the bunk we shared, used to read by. I glanced down and saw his flimsy, plastic bedside table had a leg broken off. "What happened?" I asked.

Matthias scoffed. "Yeah right, like you don't know."

Confused, I shook my head. My neck *hurt*. "I don't. How'd that get broken?"

Matthias raised his thick eyebrows at me. "Forget it, Jared. Nobody's going to believe that."

"Believe what?"

Tim broke in, poking his head out from his bunk. "You fell off your bed and landed on my lamp and table. Then you just got up and climbed back into bed as if nothing had happened."

Completely astonished, and not really believing them, I said, "No I didn't. I would have woken up."

"Well you woke up enough to get back in bed," Matthias said.

This was nuts. I didn't remember any of this. They had to be making it up. I dropped out of bed, my neck twinging. "I don't remember that."

“What a lie.” Matthias shook his head, totally justified in calling me a liar. I’d gained a deserved reputation of being a huge teller of tales. I insisted that my totally fabricated stories were real—to the point that I started believing them.

I ignored him and went to the bathroom. I caught a look at myself in the mirror hanging from the bathroom door. *Holy crap!* I had a huge scrape on the side of my neck. They weren’t kidding around; I had fallen off my bed. The scrape had to have come from the side of Tim’s bedside table.

But why didn’t I remember it? And why did I wake up and just go back to bed?

It was only many years later that I realized what must have happened. I fell off a bunk bed that was about five feet above a hardwood floor, hitting a lamp and table on my way out. I must have hit my head on the way down, then on the floor too. I had gotten a concussion and completely forgotten the few seconds before it happened.

They never believed that I didn’t remember it, so that was great. But I deserved their skepticism. Soon after moving to Dallas years before I had told the story of my girlfriend from 2nd grade, Maria. She was pretty and had dark eyes. We kissed a lot. We had once kissed for, “Like at least fourteen seconds.”

After hearing this and whenever they wanted to give me a hard time, a chant was taken up by the twins, Asa and Bart, since they knew it wasn’t true. “The fourteen-second kiss. The fourteen-second kiss! Hi-ho the Jared-o, the fourteen-second kiss.”

Maria was a total fabrication. I had my first girlfriend when I was seventeen—only after escaping the cult.

Dixie was where I learned a lot about myself and went through a lot of changes. I moved there just before I turned twelve and we left there around when I was sixteen. I had gotten pretty

round from spending all my birthday and Christmas money from my grandmother on ice cream and candy. I bought Skittles so much that Adam teased me daily by asking if I had “Skittled my money away.” I tried to lose the fat by playing basketball, but I was so bad that I finally gave up after feeling bad for missing shots and feeling bad from the relentless teasing of Adam. He loved basketball. He played by himself all the time. He was pretty tall, maybe six feet, and had the body for it. He could do every move and could even dunk the ball if he could get some lift off one of those small trampolines.

Luckily, the dilapidated garage at Dixie was full of broken old bikes and a mismatched set of weights. I began to lift weights and jump rope and jog around the block. I eventually built my own bike, like I mentioned before. I asked for and, to my total surprise, received a big training bag and speed bag for Christmas the same year that Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” came out. I’d seen Rocky and was sure I could learn to box from it, so I watched it as often as I could on the VHS I had used to copy it from the TV some time ago. I studied the boxing in it. I borrowed books on boxing from the library and learned to keep my gloves up, my shoulders mobile, and my feet moving. I lost the fat after three years of working really hard. Then I built muscle for the next couple of years. Every so often I could convince one of the other kids to spar with me and we would use the training gloves I’d acquired to punch each other. I was fast, but the older kids’ reach was hard to deal with. But if I landed a punch it was a good one, because I was also strong.

The Dixie garage was also a haven. I could blast music there, lift weights, jump rope, punch my bag, and generally have time to myself for a while. After a while, we found we could climb into the garage rafters easily enough, so we put some thick plywood across a few and turned that into a little hideaway. Mark stole a couple porn magazines from the 7/11 up the road and stored

them up there. I looked at them too much, grossed out and fascinated. I hated how preoccupied I got with them. I also read up there in the cooler months.

It's hard to capture all of the Dallas experience, particularly the time I spent at Dixie, in one chapter of a book. Even if it is a giant chapter like this one. Not to worry though, Dixie was where I lived when a lot of milestone things happened to me, so I will be referring to it more throughout.

Ultimately, Dixie was the site of a huge variety of experiences for me and it would only be right to share two more before talking a bit about what happened after we moved to Richardson and how that was fundamentally different.

I've described Uno, four-square, and the intensity with which we played them and other games. It was the same intensity that drove the way we cleaned up after dinner. None of us enjoyed work—what kid does? But we adopted the approach that the quicker it got done, the quicker we could get back to what we wanted to do. So when it was clean-up time, Adam would go get his boom-box (Google it, kids), pop in a tape or later a CD, and blast music while twelve kids cleaned up at lightning speed. A sink of soapy water was filled and we rotated on who did the actual washing. The rest would clear, put away, rinse, dry, and wipe surfaces. We worked fast to tunes by bands like Sex Pistols, Big Country, the Psychedelic Furs, the Clash, The Smiths, and lots more. This was my first exposure to Big Country, which has been and remains my favorite band of all time.

It was an exhilarating way to clean up. A force of teens young and old united in one vision: get done fast. No movement was wasted. We were practically choreographed. Why don't my kids do it this way? Because they chat about Overwatch, that's why.

A final Dixie moment. By the time I was fifteen, I had hit my current height of five foot nine. I was trim and strong. And I wanted to be a cop. I wanted to be strong and mysterious too. So I would sometimes put on my galaxy-wash jeans (Google it), a dark t-shirt, my black denim jacket, and my heavy combat boots. Then I would slip outside late at night and wander the neighborhood, lost in thought or pretending to be some kind of superhero stalking the night and waiting to right a wrong.

I probably looked more like a criminal than anything else. Or like an easy mark. One night I had crossed the street and was headed toward Turtle Creek Boulevard. It was late and the light mostly came from dirty orange-ish yellow streetlights and traffic lights. A car pulled alongside me, a man driving. I couldn't see his face, since he was in the shadow of his car, but he rolled down his window and spoke, saying, "Want a ride?" He was offering much more than a ride.

I looked at him, pretty sure I was glaring at his eye sockets, and pitched my voice low and angry, hiding my thundering, scared heart. "No. Buzz off."

He huffed. "No need to be rude."

I planted my feet and glared harder. "I said no."

He muttered something and drove away.

I continued around the block and opted to cut my walk short that night. I knew exactly what he really wanted from me and the thought made me scared sick. Sick scared. Both. I went back out a few nights later, prepared to deck him if he showed up again, but he didn't.

During the summer after I turned sixteen, the Dallas branch moved its residences to Richardson, a suburb north of the main metro area. This was a more upscale area, full of families and professionals and more. The boys were moved into a house on El Santo, while the girls were

moved into a house on Chattington. The adults who didn't live in Chattington lived in a house on La Cabeza.

These houses were less than a half mile apart. Plenty happened in them, including some major triumphs for me. For now, it's worth pointing out a few things that couldn't have happened anywhere else but in Richardson. First off, there was a low-cost movie theater (What's that, Dad? Well, kids, it's from a time in the halcyon days of yore when the movie theaters in this country were more independent and weren't all run by the same three companies.) about a quarter mile from the house on Chattington. The theater was called The Promenade. Some youths near our age worked there, as we discovered once during a cult-kid trip to see a Lucia-approved movie.

We started hanging out there and I met my oldest not-in-the-cult friend: Jena. Jena is great. If we sat down right now for lunch, after not seeing each other for like nine years, we would be able to drop into a loud, fun conversation right away. I love her dearly and can't possibly express how important her friendship was, and still is, to me. Admittedly, I had a huge crush on her for a few months, but that was because I didn't know how to interpret a friendly, smart, pretty, happy girl's chatting with me beyond being smitten. Luckily, our friendship strengthened and extended even as my journey took me to some very unexpected places. Her journey wasn't what you might call typical either and she has grown into a remarkable, fundamentally kind and wise human being.

Some of the other youths that worked there were Todd and Echo and Zarah. Todd was a self-proclaimed intellectual, a cross between Todd in "Dead Poets Society" and Judd Nelson's character in "The Breakfast Club." Echo was an inked up, pierced, free-wheeling nutjob who

loved people. Zarah was a beautiful young Asian woman whom.. well.. yes, I had a crush on her too. What of it? She was funny and a little shy and a loyal friend.

Some of us really hit it off with these guys. I loved hanging with them. I didn't do it much, because that required sneaking off and somehow staying off the adults' radar for a while. One night, I left Chattington, ostensibly to go back to the house on El Santo. I rode my bike down to The Promenade and got caught up in a wandering conversation/argument with Todd and some other employees there up in the break room. I forgot to keep track of time, so when the phone there rang and it was Johanna calling to say that Jason was storming around wondering where I was, I realized I'd been there for an hour. I tore out of there and got on my bike, hurtled across the parking lot, then turned down the street toward El Santo. I passed Chattington road and saw headlights coming up from the direction of the house. I slowed down, certain that it was one of the Dallas branch vans and that Jason was driving it. I instantly fabricated a story in my mind and pedaled lazily toward El Santo, my heart pounding. It was a quick ride, so I pulled into the driveway behind the house at the same time that the van caught up to me. I innocently glanced over my shoulder, nodded at the driver whom I couldn't make out, and strolled my bike through the gate into the back yard to where we parked bikes.

The van door opened hard and fast, then slammed closed as Jason hollered, "Jared!"

I stopped and spun, injecting fear and surprise into my voice. "Yes?"

"Where have you been? You were supposed to be here an hour ago!" He loomed over me in the dark.

I still had a hand on my handlebars and I used the sensation to center myself. "What?" I used all that I'd learned in Focus class and through my meditation to stay calm and be totally in the moment of what he needed to hear. I had no particular desire to be in trouble or to be one of the

kids that they were always keeping a close eye on. “An hour? Oh no, I’m really sorry. I must have lost track of time.”

Jason’s breath came loud as he pondered me for a moment. “Lost track of time? You’ve been gone for an hour. It takes five minutes to cycle here!”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just kind of biked around the neighborhood, not paying attention, thinking about stuff. I must have lost track of time.”

“Well that’s for sure.” Jason’s voice had lost most of its heat.

I was being completely meek and submissive and deferential and it was defusing him top to bottom. And I was taking him for a heck of a ride. I dug deep and found the right redirect to make sure no trouble came my way. I found the deep shadows in his face where his eyes were and looked squarely at him. “I can’t believe I did that. It won’t happen again.”

And Jason bought it. He nodded, harrumphed (he was very good at harrumphing) and said, “See that it doesn’t.” Then he turned and got back in the van and drove back to Chattington where he and Lucia lived with all the girls.

I parked my bike, my heart pounding loud in my ears. I threw my hands in the air and whooped. I’d done it. All that absurd training they’d been feeding us for years and I had turned it on them and come out the victor. He had thought he was the master of me and the situation—but I had been in control of it for the entire thing.

That was the beginning of the end of the cult for me. Gaining that power and knowledge illuminated a pathway out some time later.

Finally, I was one of the older kids by the time we moved to Richardson. I was by far the most responsible of the boys and was also seen as at least as responsible as Asta, the oldest of the girls. I managed the food budget and menu for Chattington myself, going on the weekly

shopping trip for the whole branch and taking care of what our house needed entirely on my own with zero oversight. I did all the cooking too. I had set my heavy training bag up in the garage and had installed a terrible pull up bar between two rafters. I'd made sure we brought all the weights too. The garage was my gym and I spent two hours every night in there at minimum, burning calories and building muscle while listening to great 80s rock like Hall & Oates, Big Country, Journey, Foreigner, Bad English, the Clash, Duran Duran, Mr. Mister, and more. When a particularly great song came on the radio, I would press record on the tape recorder of my boom box and capture it.

A few months after we moved to El Santo, we were robbed. We came home from school one day—we had to be driven now because the school was still in Bowser—and found the back sliding glass door jimmied open and the house empty of all appliances and anything else valuable. None of my exercise equipment had been touched, but the nice binoculars Matthias had given me were taken. My crummy old CD player was untouched because it was obviously garbage. But it worked. Tim was living with us again, as an adult! And sharing a room I think with John (not the one who was my legal father). They had lost a lot of nice things, including stereo equipment and a saxophone.

We'd had some guests over a month or so before and we figured that one of the people they had brought had cased the house then and brought some friends over to empty it. Jonathan filed a police report. We all took it in our own way. I found it a bit surreal, but what was one more violation of personal space, privacy, and freedom? Life went on. I wasn't attached to things. I'd only been asked what I might have lost to make sure it got on the police report. Nobody asked us how we kids were. Nobody thought to comfort Dennis, the five-year-old boy I shared a room

with, since he might have been pretty scared by the notion that strangers had been in our house, doing whatever they wanted and that they might be dangerous.

Nothing new. Being overlooked in the most important things was par for the course. Which leads us to Chapter 13, where I...

Look. Just keep reading. You'll see in a minute.

Chapter 13

A Rose, A Memorial, and A Mistake

My little sister Emma was born while we lived in Dixie. She didn't live there, nor did our father, Enoch, or her mother, Evelyn. Enoch and Evelyn were living in Arizona at the time. They'd been married for a couple years, legally, and Emma's coming appearance was well known throughout the cult's branches. As I reflect, I wonder if she was so anticipated because no babies had been born into the cult anymore, recruitment was totally stagnant, and maybe underneath it all the cult faithful knew that we kids would by and large be taking off as soon as we could. So the cult had a shelf life, and having a baby be born might have felt like a needed spot of hope.

I got the call from Enoch on a day that wasn't my birthday or Christmas. He told me I had a sister, that her name was Emma, and that she was beautiful. I saw her the next year and agreed. My sister filled part of a void I'd had for as long as I could remember. I doted on her, loved her unconditionally. I babysat her many nights in Angel Canyon and she always insisted on watching "The Little Mermaid," which has such a terrible message that my kids have never seen it.

My relationship with Emma has always been one of a simple, direct fact: she is my sister and I am her brother. Period. I would be her brother in every situation I could be and that was that.

I'd spent several years in the same house as Matthias, my older brother. Remember, we shared Magdalen as a mother. He had a better relationship with Magdalen. I don't really know why. Maybe because he was more mature and wise. He and I had a relationship that extended deeper than mine with the other kids by virtue of our being brothers. But we didn't talk much. He was always into incredibly advanced things like Calculus and programming and electricity. I was

more into biking and reading awesome scifi and fantasy and horror books. And spy books, of course. It was hard for me to figure out how to be a brother to a guy a few years older than me, with whom I had very little in common. He was also a few years older than me, so we were essentially treated like we were of different generations. He was in one of the first graduating classes of Faith School and was the valedictorian. After graduating, he and the rest of the newly minted grads were plopped right into being adults in the cult and sent out to fundraise in busy public areas. And that was that. He was my brother, but I had no idea what that meant to me or for me. I didn't know how to reset our relationship to be closer.

So it was a new and wonderful thing for me to be able to try getting it right from the start with Emma. I was going to be her brother, her close friend, someone she could look up to. I would be there for her always.

Over the next two years, I saw Emma during summers and she was a fun, happy toddler. I loved having a baby sister.

And then one day, when I was about twelve or thirteen, Lucia called me into her office at Swiss. She had me sit and I did. I wondered what was going on. She sat in her office chair at her desk, her arms clasped on the desk's surface. "I've just had a call from Magdalen," she said. Her face was a bit pockmarked and it had some strange shadows on it.

I had a sudden impression that Magdalen was getting married, or that she was pregnant. I said nothing.

"She had some news that's not very good."

Definitely not pregnant. I held still, wondering if my grandmother had died.

"She just found out that your brother, Daniel, has died."

The words she said were actual English words, but my brain couldn't understand them. They were somehow spoken in a language I'd never heard. I sat there, staring at her. "What?"

"Daniel. Your brother. He was killed."

This time I understood what she'd said, but it didn't make any sense. Daniel wasn't dead. He was off on his adventures, living life his way. This was impossible. I wanted to ask her how. I wanted to sit back and let the shaking that was vibrating inside me take over. I wanted to blink back the tears and swallow hard and shake my head and ask how. But I just sat there. I couldn't do any of that with Lucia. She hated me. She saw me as her enemy and I couldn't trust her.

"Magdalen doesn't know much more, but she wants to talk to you tonight. She'll call later in the evening." Lucia tilted her head to the side and raised her eyebrows. She was so hideous. She looked mad all the time. Had she liked telling me this? Was she already preparing some kind of lesson for me to learn? "I'm sorry for the bad news."

I still didn't say anything. I clamped down hard on all the questions exploding in me. I squeezed the armrests of the wood chair I sat in.

"Had you spoken with him recently?"

She would know, wouldn't she? She would know if I'd gotten a long-distance call from my oldest brother, who had escaped the cult and was living the way he wanted—which everyone knew was a total betrayal of all the adults. Even if I had gotten a call at Dixie, somebody would have made sure she found out about it.

I shook my head. "No." I met her eyes for a half-second and saw no concern. I didn't see anything there. Like usual.

"Well, Magdalen will call, so we will let you talk to her in here."

I got it. She was offering me some privacy. I nodded and haze fell over me and some time later I was sitting on my bed and completely numb. I hadn't cried. I hadn't protested. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I'd shoved back against the shattering reaction that had tried to control me in Lucia's office—shoved back so hard that it was maybe gone for good. I stared at my pillow for a long time and numb haze carried me through the rest of the day and dinner was over and we'd cleaned up and someone told me I had a phone call in Lucia's office.

Then I was in her office and picked up the phone and it was Magdalen. She sounded calm, collected. She told me as much as she knew. Daniel had been with a friend of his who was developmentally challenged. He didn't reason well, but Daniel had been a friend. Unfortunately Daniel had also been sharing drugs with this friend, who was named Simon. Simon's parents had forbidden Simon to have Daniel over, but on the day in question, Daniel had been over and something bad had happened and Simon had pulled out a shotgun and threatened to kill Daniel. Then he had accidentally pulled the trigger and Daniel was killed.

Later I found out that Daniel had more than likely been selling drugs to Simon, and possibly other people, and that was why Simon's parents didn't want Daniel around. Simon had pulled out the shotgun and possibly didn't know it was loaded and pulled the trigger as a threat, killing Daniel. Most likely instantaneously.

Magdalen shared what she knew, asked if I was ok, told me she loved me, then we hung up.

Word had gotten around to the rest of the people in the Dallas branch and the kids had no idea how to react. They stared at me as if I was some kind of alien creature. The older boys had not yet graduated and some of them had been friends with Daniel through the course of our earlier travels. They said they were sorry and Julius got emotional. Which was understandable. Daniel, Julius, and I, I think in the basement of the Quakertown house, had written an epic

parody of Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" in a fit of perfect creativity. It was called "Another One Cuts the Crust." The only line I remember is this:

"And an elephant faints and a bear just dies when Julius cuts the crust.

Dun, dun, dun, another one cuts the crust!"

The idea was that we could replace the name of Julius with any kid's name and have a grand old time. We laughed uncontrollably for at least an hour as we worked on the song.

I had no clue how to respond to people's condolences. I wandered aimlessly, nodding acknowledgment of what they said, feeling totally strange about even saying, "Thanks" in response. I wasn't thankful Daniel was dead. I don't remember talking to anybody about it except Matthias. He had been told by Lucia, then had also talked to Magdalen on the phone. We compared what we'd heard. I told him I didn't think Magdalen was even sad about it. He called me on that nonsense, insisting that of course she was. He was right, of course.

Some of the adults had known Daniel and they mostly just looked at me with scrunched, meaningful expressions and said nothing. I firmly ignored them.

I didn't cry. I felt like the moment for that had passed. I started taking pride in not crying about Daniel's death. Directing my thoughts to where I figured his consciousness or spirit or whatever might be, I mentally said, "I'm not going to cry for you. I'll be strong like you would want me to."

Lordy, that was stupid. My mistakes were myriad.

A memorial was planned for the next Sunday, in lieu of the normal Sunday Celebration.

If you've read *Beyond the Cabin*, my novelization of much of my childhood, this next part will be very familiar.

My overriding emotion leading up to the memorial was dread. I did not want to be involved in some public display of mourning. I thought whatever they were going to do was going to be empty and theatrical and probably be spun around so it would be a lesson to all of us.

My secondary emotion, only second by a hair, was disgust. Most of these people hadn't even known Daniel. As far as I knew, Lucia had never met him either. How could people who had never known him, much less been his family, plan a memorial for my brother? Hot anger built in me, adding to the banked fury I'd felt at being yanked from my Denver school life two years before.

Sunday rolled around. Dressed in our Sunday clothes—a button up shirt for me and something like slacks or dockers—we arrived at the building and went in. The chairs were arranged as usual, in rows that faced the all-glass altar at the front. But something was different. Each chair had a rose on it. What insanity was this?

Matthias and I were directed to sit up front. Then the service began and we sang slow songs, accompanied by piano. The piano was lovely. Lucia got up and I wanted to barf. She spoke of Daniel and everything she said was evidence she'd never known him. She talked about—I kid you freaking not—how broken and sick The World was and how we just had to fight so hard to remain clean and pure and separate from it. She was spinning a lesson from it. And like usual she was talking politics and was getting all animated. For this being a supposedly religious ceremony, there was major lack—as usual—of scripture and mention of God.

I swore loud and long in my head, flicking at the thorn on my rose stem. I knew it. I had spent the entire previous week dreading this thing and being disgusted by it and was I hearing snuffles behind me?

I hazarded a glance behind me and caught sight of several adults who were actually in tears. One: why? They hadn't known Daniel. This I knew for sure because they'd joined here in Dallas and Daniel had been long gone before this branch had started. Two: why? Lucia was blathering on like usual about who knew what and there was nothing in what she was saying that meant anything.

Lucia finally tapered off and picked up the rose on the chair she sat in during these Celebrations. The rest of us sat in folding chairs with something that resembled a cushion on it, but it did not particular good. Her chair was soft and had arm rests and a tall back.

"Now," Lucia said. "We each have a rose. We will take the rest of our service to allow anyone who wants to come up to the altar, place their rose on it, and offer a prayer in honor of Daniel." And she turned, carefully set her rose on the glass altar between the ceremonial burning candle and bowl of water, and bowed her head. She soon straightened and sat in her chair.

A few seconds passed. Then Joanna, a short, somewhat round woman with short graying brown hair, walked down the aisle between the rows and stood at the altar. She set her rose down, sniffing hard, and bowed her head. Her shoulders shook as she prayed.

She had known Daniel well. She loved Magdalen, had considered her a friend for years. Joanna was one of two adults in the cult who expressed genuine emotion around me and treated me well. She could assign random work as well as any other adult, but I never once heard her raise her voice at a kid or saw her lose her temper. She *hated* funding. I guess she might have been terrible at it too. But she was sweet and genuine and was giving her all to the group she'd joined so long before.

After a while, Joanna straightened and turned, using tissues she had in her sleeve cuff to dry her cheeks. She offered a tender smile at me as she went back to her chair.

A few more adults went up. All of them in tears, all of them bowing their heads in apparent sincere prayer. The pile of roses on the altar grew steadily.

What the hell was going on?

I'd spent my whole life in this stupid, crap-eating cult and not once had any religious expressions by any of the adults had any actual meaning behind them as far as I could tell. This was insane.

Matthias's movement startled me from my fuming, blistering rage. He stood and went up after the last adult, placed his rose on the pile, bowed his head for a few moments, then turned back and sat next back next to me. He met my gaze and raised his eyebrows slightly.

I felt like he was giving me a message. Go up there.

I had no desire. He and Joanna were the only ones of all these idiots who had any right to go up there and cry about Daniel dying. They were all fakers who were feeling mob sentiment, not anything real. Even some of the kids were sniffing.

A couple of the older girls went up. They'd known Daniel. They were ok.

I argued with myself as they set down their roses, bowed their heads, and then returned to their seats. I wouldn't give these people the satisfaction. He was my brother. My brother. *My* brother had died, not theirs.

Screw them. I wasn't going to go up there, cry at the stupid glass altar under the bizarre Foundation Faith of God symbol, put a rose down, and pray to a non-existent god who would never respond because he wasn't there.

The roses piled up as the ceremony continued. The only sound was sniffing and the scuffing of feet on the short carpet.

All the adults had gone. Most of the kids hadn't. I could tell they weren't going to.

I stood, making the decision before I knew I was going to. I took three firm steps forward to the altar, set my rose down on the pile of dark stems and red petals and closed my eyes.

My heart sharpened and dug into my chest. I couldn't breathe. My eyes stung with threatening tears. No, I thought. I was not going to cry. I wasn't going to cry in front of these people. I wasn't going to validate their empty ceremony that meant nothing because none of them had really known him. This was a fake. A disgusting act.

I turned my thoughts to Daniel, wherever he was. I'm not going to cry. You would want me to not, wouldn't you? You'd want me to show them how stupid this whole thing was. I can't believe you were doing drugs. Why would you do that? When I get out of here, I'm going to be a cop like those undercover cops in those movies and I'm going to stop drugs. I'll fight drugs to honor you. And I'm not going to cry. To honor you.

My throat burned. My chest squeezed. I forced a tight breath down, carrying tears away and turned back to my chair, keeping my expression flat. I sat and spent the rest of the ceremony trying to loosen up my chest.

By the time the final song was sung, I could breathe. My face was hot from the effort of keeping it all down. The last note ended and I stood, pushing through the nearest door of the big Celebration room to the small hallway that had a small bathroom off it and then a door to the back yard of the building. I got to the door and stood there, looking through the clear glass, still fighting to get my emotions under control. I heard voices filter out of the Celebration room, people talking in normal tones and betraying how fake the emotions of the memorial service had been.

That helped. The rage gave me some strength to calm the tears and all the other stuff that was clawing, shoving, prying at my chest and throat and eyes. I stared at the weedy grass and

rocks in the back yard, the privacy fence that divided it from the next property, the trees in the park across the wrought-iron fence that ran the length of our property. A breeze blew lazily through it all. I got a few even breaths down and felt my control coming back.

Joanna bustled through the small hall I'd just come through. "Jared?" Her hand on my shoulder turned me around. Her expression went wide, I assume because she saw the struggle I was going through. "I'm so sorry."

It wasn't her words. It wasn't her expression, as sincere as it was. It was her hand. Gentle. Concerned. Demanding nothing. Only giving comfort.

My control slipped.

"It's going to be okay," she said.

My throat tightened again. A tear slipped down my cheek. NO, DAMMIT! I fought the heat and everything back down and wiped the tear away, stiffening my back. I took a noisy breath and felt myself begin to shake.

I nodded, knowing I couldn't speak. Even one word would break the fragile control I'd gotten. Joanna was a hugger. Always had been. She was so sweet, innocent in so many ways. So her next words weren't a surprise, but they scared the hell out of me. "Can I at least have a hug?" She must have felt the stiffness in my shoulders and back.

I nodded and let her wrap her short arms around me. I lifted my arms and felt my face brush her shoulder as I squeezed her back. Gently. Very carefully.

She tightened her arms around me, pulling me close. "It's okay."

I gasped and a few betraying tears fell. Everything in me wanted to hold on and let it go, let the flood just go. And Joanna was nice and kind. But I couldn't let go. I never had. What if I did

and she recoiled at everything I was feeling and the fury that would make it all worse? She pulled me tighter and whispered again, “It’s okay.”

My legs went weak and I let my control slip a bit. I hiccupped and sucked in a breath. A few more tears fell and I knew I was done for.

“It’s okay to cry.” Her voice was soft and sincere.

And I made the biggest mistake I’ve ever made in my life. I let go of her and shoved every bit of will I had at the boiling mass of grief and confusion and fear and loneliness and anger and told it to stay put. I stepped back, flicked the stupid tears off my cheek, and forced a flat smile. “I know. I’m fine.”

She held my gaze for a while, kindly. Then she gave a small, sad smile, squeezed my arm, and said, “It’ll be okay,” again and that was that.

Why it was so important to thirteen-year-old me to keep it all under control and not cry and not hold onto someone who was offering love and comfort and kindness I just don’t know. Maybe it was because I had trusted one person so far in my life—the only person who had ever earned my trust and not been randomly angry at me and made me feel unwanted, unseen, and unworthy of anything. And we had just had his memorial service. Because he had betrayed me by leaving me behind and had called one time—ONE TIME—in seven years. How could I let everything that I was feeling go with someone who I didn’t know, someone who hadn’t earned my trust? It was too strong, too raw, too much, for me to show. Too true. Too much of what I always felt, of who I really was.

I had been called a robot for a lot of my life, even though I had struggled for years with crying too easily and feeling too emotional about things. Mark said my face “got flat” when I

was angry. Which was his way of describing how I held it all back and didn't give into the huge explosion of fury I was feeling.

Because I was feeling. I. Was. *Feeling*. Constantly. Everything made me feel angry or sad or lonely or inspired or like I could conquer the world or like the world was against me. I felt impotent against the fury of adults who didn't give a damn about me at best and who wanted to hurt me at worst. I felt invisible and lonely among the kids, not understanding that by closing my emotions off I was closing them off and isolating myself.

So this time it had all built up and it was going to explode and it was way too much and it would scare people and it would show them too much of me and I would be weak and they would know how weak and emotional and hurt I was and that would give them power over me and I couldn't have that because I needed to have the power and be strong so I could win.

And I made a mistake. I know it was a mistake now, but back then I saw it as a victory. I should have opened up, let the floodgates open, release the damn kraken and let loose the dogs of war. I should have shown myself that I had the ability to let go—not be in total control all the time. I should have let myself be vulnerable for once and allowed that to build a special and close relationship. The kind of relationship I had craved my whole life but—in my stupidity at the time I pushed it away.

What a mistake. What a life defining mistake.

I still haven't ever let completely go except for with my wife, and that very rarely when I needed to be the weak one and I knew she loved me and would be the strength I needed.

Now. I promise the stuff at the beginning of this chapter about my sister and Matthias was not a red herring, trying to direct your attention elsewhere so you didn't know what was coming. It was to show a contrast in my relationships. And to tell you that I have only ever let partly go

and allowed the still strong emotions that burn in me nearly constantly to be expressed in my face and body—one other time.

That was with my sister. My dear Emma. In a dark and astonishingly miraculous time, when I was hurting and terrified on a deep level despite knowing on another level that all would be well. Emma was in our family's kitchen. My wife and I had six kids and Emma was there after we found a thing and I was making dinner and talking to her and I turned to her and needed to let some of it go. And she was there and she held her big brother as I wept into her shoulder and released some of the boiling pressure in my soul.

I'll be more specific about this in Chapter 25. Stay with me.

Chapter 14

Summers and Road Trips and Sunkist

Now you're going to appreciate how much detail I've added up until now. This begins a bunch of chapters of important things that happened and that I did. I'll be able to say things like "In Dixie" or "at Angel Canyon" and you'll know exactly what I am talking about.

When I hit age eleven, the cult had become pretty vanilla in its religious doctrine. Basic Christianity with a sprinkling of Judaism and pretty leavened with Paganism. Ah, tree worship. But the biggest thing that the cult—called The Foundation Faith of God—was doing at that point was animal rescue. And in order to be able to do more for the hundreds of animals they were rescuing and rehabilitating—they needed more space than their ranch in Arizona had. So as I mentioned before, they bought a several thousand acre property called Kanab Canyon, a few miles north of Kanab, Utah. They renamed it Angel Canyon. They moved in and were, as you might imagine, eccentric and unexpected in that small town. The townspeople were pretty leery of them and probably a little scared too. They were cultists.

But they were also an animal sanctuary. And they showed up in force and brought a lot of animals—dogs, cats, horses, lots of birds, I think some pigs. They built rough kennels and runs and pens. They built a long, low bunkhouse to sleep in. They drove jeeps and trucks and had a lot of money to spend—money raised by the funders in the three or four branches that remained. They tapped the water table and ran pipe and dug septic pits. They were industrious, somewhat diverse, and there were a lot of British people. They were strange and they were kind of like homesteaders.

And there was a lot of work to do.

So they hauled the biggest kids from Dallas to help out with the work in Angel Canyon. We youngers were left behind and were jealous. We thought it sounded like a nice change of pace.

The next year they had all the kids aged twelve and older go to Angel Canyon—also called Best Friends Animal Sanctuary by then. We packed a small bag with underwear, socks, a couple pairs of jeans and shorts, and a few shirts and headed out.

Actually, it wasn't that simple. The Dallas branch had a lot of kids to regularly haul around. Not to mention adults. They had two giant vans and several big cars. For the road trip from Dallas to Kanab, Utah, they took all the seats out of the 15-passenger van except for the front bench seat. Then we laid out a bunch of blankets and sleeping bags, basically making a giant nest of the back of the van. We all had the pillow from our bed and our packed bag and that was what we stayed responsible for. We jammed into the van after helping where we could to pack other things into a big, canvas cargo bag on the top of the van. Sleeping bags, tents, lots of tarps, and more all went up there. It had to be enough for something like thirteen kids' worth of camping gear.

Once that was all tied down tightly, the kids climbed into the van, one older kid getting the front passenger seat and a rotation set up for the front bench. The rest of us arranged ourselves on the piles of blankets around the inner van walls, some of us with books and others immediately settling down to sleep.

The trip is over 1100 miles, which made for about nineteen hours of driving with the speed limits of thirty years ago. Jason typically was the one who drove the van out there. He would mainline coffee and drive for ten to thirteen hours and then we would stop in some fast food place's parking lot and he would kick us out of the van with cash thrust into the hands of one of the older kids. We went in and got a meal, playing boardgames and goofing around on the

playground if there was one. We were supposed to occupy ourselves for several hours while he slept on the soft piles of blankets.

Then we would go back out at the designated time and someone would wake him up. He would grunt and snort and clamber up and out of the van, like a bear coming out of hibernation. He would go in, use the bathroom, get some breakfast to take out and a large coffee, and then we were off again.

The trips felt endless. Remember that we were leaving Texas at the start of these trips and the border between Texas and New Mexico—our first major milestone—took forever to get to. And west Texas, the panhandle especially, is boring. Flat. Featureless. Dry. Dead freaking dull. You couldn't even play the alphabet game because there were no signs and trying to win by watching license plates or passing trucks just didn't work and made you car sick.

So we played quiet Uno and other card games. And we listened to music powered by lots of batteries. Adam was the default DJ because he wouldn't let anyone else do it. It was his music or nothing, because it was his boom box. So we listened to the Cure and the Smiths and the Clash and a lot more punk and alternative. Sometimes Big Country would get thrown in there and that was great. Every so often Jason—or in later years another adult—would demand different music. So we listened to Jackson Browne and James Taylor and Simon and Garfunkel. Mercifully, no Beatles. Come at me.

We played I Spy. We slept. We argued- but not much. We knew better. Some had long, quiet conversations that sometimes seemed to last an entire state. That wasn't me. I spent a lot of time zoned out, staring out the windows. Every so often I joined a game. But I'd made a habit and artform of isolating myself and I did what I was good at. I didn't feel like I fit in very well. I always thought that if people knew what was in my mind and heart, they would be repulsed by

the intensity of everything I had going on in me. And I didn't know how to tone it down, how to talk on the surface.

But there were times I did join in and those were good times. I often felt like they went great until I found a nice awkward way to end my participation and the activity petered out. Effectively killed by the numbskull that was Jared.

Those vans were troopers. Aside from the occasional overheating and one time when a few things came off the top while we were zooming along at seventy miles an hour—they functioned great. The trips were uneventful.

The things that came off the top of the big van? That was after our second year of doing this—so I was thirteen—and we were on our way back from Kanab to Dallas. One of the activities I'd done that summer had been to help build a bunch of dog houses with John, my legal father with the eyebrows, and David, one of Daniel's peers. I learned how to work with wood, saws, screw guns, and all that. I did a side project at night with scrap wood—I built a solid wood ladder for me to use to climb into my top bunk. Up until then, I'd been clambering up the bunk bed frame, so this ladder was a useful thing. I got help from my actual father, Enoch, and when it was done it was straight and strong. I sanded it, stained it, and clear-coated it. I'd even cut a notch into it so the ladder would hook onto the side of the bunk bed.

I was so proud of that ladder. I made sure it had space on the top of the van so we would for sure bring it home.

A few hundred miles into our trip back to Dallas, somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico, we heard a clatter, a thump, and scraping. Some people saw dark shapes of things that flew off the top of the van.

Jason pulled over and we all streamed out. A couple tarps and one tent in a bag had flown off. A couple poles had snapped. And my ladder was a couple hundred feet behind us on the shoulder of the road. I ran to get it, knowing what I would find. Snapped wood. Scraped and broken.

It had been scraped on several corners and one of the rungs was a bit loose, due to a crack in the long side piece. Otherwise, it was fine. It was a miracle. Nobody could believe it. We tied everything back down, tighter this time. I checked the rope several times. I got the ladder back to Dixie, dug up some wood glue, and slathered it into the crack in the wood. Then I sat on the ladder for a half hour, reading, squeezing the broken parts together. I got up and arranged a bunch of paint cans on the ladder to keep it together.

And that was all. The ladder lasted me until I no longer had a bunk. I don't know what happened to it, but it was tough.

Our summers unfolded very similarly for the five years between me turning twelve and seventeen. June would show up and it was time to get ready for the trip to Angel Canyon. Sometimes Lucia would teach us some unbelievably brown-nosing song about the Foundation and Best Friends, usually set to the tune of another song. Like the one she set to the tune of the—I kid you not—USSR national anthem. Lyrics like, “Red canyons, white mountains, a land for His children, proclaim now His glory, proclaim now His song!”

I only realized it was to the tune of the communist nation's song when I watched Rocky IV. Lordy, that was mortifying. She would teach us the song and we were to perform it for all the people at Angel Canyon. And we did so. We once even sang to a Dallas-based group that supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Lucia called us kids her Intifada, for crying out loud. She named a cat Waffen.

She was nuts.

So we headed out on the endless road trip and would arrive at the edge of Angel Canyon and turn down the rough, graveled county road, then onto the soft red sandy roads and pull up to the space we would set up our tent city. This was usually near the Cats section of the sanctuary—a bit up from the Bunkhouse and very near to the Steel Building—which was a massive storage building and workshop with a bathroom and shower in it.

No matter how dark it was when we got there, or how hungry we almost always were, we spilled out of the van and set up tents. We got good at spotting branches and prickly pears in the dark and moving them or avoiding the sharp things. We set the tents up in a rough circular area, usually at least four or five tents. In the meantime, or the other adult, would get the rest of the things off and out of the van and would drive away, in the first years to the Bunkhouse so they could go to sleep and in later years up to the Village to the room that was waiting for them.

In the light of the stars and, if we were lucky, moon, we finished putting our camp together. We tossed our sleeping bags in, followed by our backpacks or duffels and pillows, then went to sleep. In the morning, it was a race to the Bunkhouse and/or the Steel Building to get a shower and then to find breakfast.

Then it was a workday. A few Angel Canyon adults, often original founders of the Foundation/Process, showed up in trucks and jeeps and grab a few kids and that was who we worked with for the summer. The first summer was a bit different, because there was still so much basic infrastructure to complete. The Bunkhouse was relatively new and the water and plumbing was rough at best. All the kids were put to work digging a trench between eighteen and twenty-four inches deep. We all agreed to stick to twenty-four inches to keep it simple.

We dug for days. Twelve or so kids, all with shovels, some with pickaxes too, bent over the hard packed dirt under the pink and red and white sand, mounding up a line of dirt next to a winding trench. This was for three-inch PVC water supply pipe. Adam made sure music was playing. He was a relentless teaser, which often amounted to bullying, but that dude was also a natural leader and he knew what would keep us going. And we had to keep up a steady rhythm and make quick progress or we would be yelled at.

It wasn't slave labor. We weren't being bought and sold and slavery is beyond evil. But it was hard and cruel and character-building.

And we kids triumphed over that trench. We did so well that we spent several days later digging more trench. Adam would turn on Van Halen or something else fast paced like New Order and that beat kept us going. I have vivid memories of cooking under the sun, my back getting sore, sweat dripping down my face, cutting into the desert dirt—all while David Lee Roth sang, "Ah, might as well jump." We hit a great rhythm. The kids with the pickaxes would go up and down the line and loosen up rocks and hard dirt and we would come behind and scoop and haul dirt.

My work varied every summer, with the last two summers being spent by Enoch's side, helping install plumbing and doing other water supply and drain building. By then, I'd helped build huge cat runs out of rough, round cedar trunks and long screws and braces and chicken wire. I'd built dog houses, hung dry-wall, taped and mudded (Google it), roofed, jackhammered concrete, and scooped so much baking dog crap that the sight of it disgusts me and the smell of sun cooking dog crap makes me angry. You wouldn't like me much if you saw my reaction when I find some neighbor's dog feces in my yard. If I wanted to scoop anymore of the nasty stuff, I would have a dog. Keep that thing off my yard.

And slow that car down, youngster.

I'm aloud to be cranky about dog crap, guys. I've done the math. Two tons of it. I've scooped two tons of it, minimum, from acres of sun-exposed dog runs in the high desert of Angel Canyon.

I do still like dogs. I think they're generally organisms of unconditional, extraordinary love and light. I have no use for one and it's too bad for my kids that they have a dad that is cranky about dogs. Another thing about dogs? I'm not scared of them. I respect angry ones, but I am not scared of them. Have you ever had to repeatedly go into a dog run with seven dogs of varying sizes—mostly big—where one of them has been abused and is angry and aggressive and for some reason hates the look or smell of you? I have. Plenty. You get used to facing them down when your pleas to be assigned to a different run are totally ignored. I got very good at facing down angry, aggressive dogs. I know what they're capable of because I've been bitten plenty. But I am also capable of doing harm and I make sure they see that in my stance and eyes and I win every face-off now.

Sometimes my kids notice me stare down an aggressively barking dog until it shuts up and they laugh and ask me how I do it. I don't know. I just do.

Summers in Angel Canyon were filled with twelve-hour workdays that were sometimes broken up by day-long murder hikes through slot canyons and over amazing swells and into hidden lakes and caves. We piled into pickup trucks and loved being jounced around over bumps. Some trucks had a frame on the back that allowed us to stand and hold on and it was like were desert surfing. By the end of the summers, we were all bright red, but the pain was gone. We leapt out of slowing pickup trucks, ran to jump into moving trucks, and we'd lost our fear of

scorpions because we'd been checking our sleeping bags every night and if you flicked them just right, they sailed pretty far.

We'd eaten our fill of vegetarian food because you can be sure no meat was cooked there. So much tofu and potatoes. Some summers I saw PETA bulletins on the cork announcement boards.

And there was soda after the second year. Because they built the Village. This was a beautiful, rambling complex with adobe outer walls and loads of bedrooms with doors to the outside, and two kitchens, and a giant dining and meeting room with one part on tile and the other down several feet into a sunken sitting area. That huge room has—yes, still has—massive glass doors and windows that look out over Angel Canyon. It was an incredible view and it's more incredible now because they've put in a big deck out there. I helped Magdalen cook in that kitchen for a couple days one summer.

And in the village was a great big walk-in cooler. This was a major operation and refrigerators weren't going to get it done anymore. At least fifty people lived at Best Friends by then full time, and several volunteers showed up each year. Now the number of volunteers is in the hundreds each year and full-time employees number over three hundred I think. Probably more. Hey guys. I helped build all that.

Back to the cooler. It had all kinds of food in it. And it was kept pretty well stocked with all kinds of sodas. My favorite was Sunkist. We were sometimes told we could go get a soda out of there. But most of us didn't wait to be given permission. I was in there every few days, grabbing a Sunkist and sometimes a Mr. Pibb so the Sunkist weren't depleted too fast. Surely the adults knew, but they only brought it up once or twice, then let it go.

Then the last summer the cooler was locked all the time. Jerks.

I had countless experiences both good and bad during those summers. I had one life-changing one when a girl I'd never met was visiting. She was from Scotland. I loved her accent. More on that in Chapter 18.

We had very little time to ourselves at Best Friends. Every so often we would get a short break, and if we were at Dogs, I would go find my favorite dogs and pet them and wrestle a bit. My favorite was Amra, a massive Alaskan Malamute whose name meant Lion. He was a deep red and creamy white. How he didn't totally overheat in those summers, I never understood. But I'd mastered the whistle that summoned him. Amra was Damon's dog—Damon was Tim's father—and Damon had some funky vibrating whistle he would do. I figured out how to do it and Amra would shamble over and put his massive nose on my hand and that was a good time. If there were rescued puppies, I would find them and give them some love to help them get used to people. If there were dogs being rehabilitated, I would go talk to them to show them people weren't all bad.

It was funny to see, more than twenty years later, a show called DogTown be made about some dogs that had been rescued from an illegal dog fighting operation. Every time they showed the area that the dogs were in, I saw something I'd built or some place I'd scooped dog crap. It's weird to go back now and see so much of what I helped build be only slightly visible under the giant operation that Best Friends is now.

After reading the *Back Stallion* series religiously over and over for years, I finally got to ride one of the rescue horses at Best Friends. He was named Navajo and was beautiful. It was the first time I'd ever ridden a horse. I swung myself up, settled into the saddle, and felt completely at home. The lady who was there to show us how to ride gaped at me as I clicked at Navajo and got him moving. "I thought this was your first time on a horse!" She looked shocked.

“It is,” I said. Except for in my imagination. I’d been riding a beautiful black Arabian for years by then. And when, a few years later, they rescued two spirited Arabians, I visited them in the evenings and they grew to like me and I got to ride the brown one, named True. The gray was called Faithful. True could run. He would stretch out in this smooth, delightful gallop and I would lean forward and feel free for a couple seconds until the adults nearby screamed at me to slow down.

There’s no doubt that those summers were a huge part of my development. I got strong and confident in my physical abilities. Having a semi-truck trailer get dropped off and need to be unloaded in two hours will do that to you. It was full of donated dog food—fifty pound bags. I was sixteen. I picked up one bag and slung it over my left shoulder, then picked up another under my left arm, then hauled both. But that was inefficient. We wound up making two rows of people about five feet apart. We tossed a bag down the row and the people in the pickup trucks would arrange them neatly in the beds. I drove a backhoe, connected pipe, drank water right from a crystal clear spring more times than I can count. We played hide and seek in the shadows of junipers and cedars, ranging over a couple acres. We hurtled down steep hills of soft, collapsing red sand.

And of course we worked. But Lucia was over a thousand miles away for two months, which was the very best. How it worked was one adult would drive us all there, spend a night or two as a reward, then drive back, leaving us to work for two or so months. When our time came to return to Dallas, an adult would show up, most of the time Jason or Jonathan, in the van and we would pile in two days later, tied cargo to the top, and drive back. Our socks were stained sandy red. We found sand in our shoes for months after.

Summers were a highlight, even though the Sunday celebrations were a long, boring mess and dog crap stunk badly in the sun and the work was back breaking. One time Gabriel, who was the figurehead leader of the whole cult (Remember that Mary Ann was the real leader, except we kids had no idea she existed), gave a gift to each kid. He gave me a set of two carved camels. They were pretty cool and I kept them for ten years or so until they finally broke in a move. I have no idea why he did that, but he did.

As a final note, I found out just as we were about to drive away after our second or third summer there, that many of my peers still thought John was my father. We kids were claiming spots in the van as several adults tied cargo to the top. Enoch was helping Dillon and Jason. Asta looked at me quizzically. “You know, you look a lot like Enoch.” I had assumed everyone knew that he was my real father. “Maybe John’s not your father, actually.”

I gave her a look. “Enoch *is* my father. I’ve known that for a while.”

Years later, it was a comment about my family that taught me one of my final lessons about anger and tempers and really drove home who I wanted to be. And I wanted to be someone who was not angry all the time. So I had to solve my temper problem.

Chapter 15

The Problem with Tempers

My temper was famous. Or at least famous in Dallas. People didn't walk around on egg shells near me, worried that I would fly into some kind of murderous fury at any offensive comment. I had thick skin just like every other kid in the cult. This was a necessity and might even have been a natural result of being verbally assaulted so often by Lucia. Her yelling sessions were epic and textured. More on that in the next chapter.

For now, yes, Lucia had a temper, but so did I. When set off, which wasn't often, I would rage pretty hard. I would scream bloody murder, physically threaten people, and swear more than a little. When I say physically threaten people, I mean threaten. I rarely used actual violence, especially after Cyrus beat the piss out of me. A variety of things would set me off into these fits of temper. For a while, it was people being really inconsiderate, or somebody insisting on being a rude jerk to somebody else. I don't mean when I was teased or mocked, since that was day-to-day stuff. I mean like being truly mean-spirited.

But what really got me going was when people insisted on me lying, that I was being dishonest. I would completely fly off the handle. Which should make you say, "Huh?" given what I already shared about being a known liar. But by the time I was thirteen, I had decided that I didn't want to be a chronic liar anymore, so I worked hard on going straight. It was important to me to rebuild my integrity, so I did my best to be as honest as possible. That said, I still cheated in Algebra. Man, that class was impossible. (Still not an excuse to cheat kids! Work hard!) I didn't tell long intricate fabricated stories as if they were true anymore. I even tried to avoid white lies.

So when people challenged my integrity, justifiably of course given my history, I got angry.

And when I gave into the fury, boy howdy it burned hot enough to catch a building on fire. The temper fits—it would be fair to call them tantrums because I wasn't trying to get my way, I was letting the anger free—came to a head one afternoon at Bowser, the building where school was held. I don't remember screaming at whoever had irked me, but I found myself on the small, brown-carpeted patio outside the front door to the building. Bridget was lecturing me about keeping my temper under control. I probably started off pretty defensive, but I know that before long I was feeling contrite. This is likely due to Bridget being a genuinely sweet person who had my best interests at heart. Yes, she was in the stupid cult, but she was a good person nonetheless.

She had gotten me talking and in a moment of unexpected honesty I actually shared stuff from my heart. I told her I knew getting angry was wrong and that violence didn't solve things. I told her about the fantasy class called Paladins, about how they were driven by strong, purity to do right and good. They were unassailable in their righteousness. And I told her I wanted to be that way. I wanted to be so good that people couldn't attack my character.

The conversation ended, probably with her being encouraging, and I spent that day musing on what I'd revealed and how I'd really meant it. Soon after, on a rainy day there in Dallas—I was living in Dixie—I decided I didn't believe in God. I couldn't. Too much crap had happened to me; the cult was teaching a terrible and angry God who hated people and killed them and let tragic things happen for unknown reasons, and I never felt any God answered me or even listened whenever I tried praying.

So I gave up on a God soon after I had found myself being more introspective than usual about my temper. And in those days that I was reasoning out the lack of a God, I reasoned out why I needed to get my emotions under control. I couldn't have people be scared of me and my anger. When I stopped to think about it, I didn't want people to be scared of me at all. Aside

from that, I was already fourteen and I felt like I still got too emotional about stuff. Sometimes I would actually feel like crying if I felt hurt or disappointed by something—which was far too often.

So, since the cult wasn't teaching a coherent religion, I figured I would go find one myself. I read up on basic Protestantism, Evangelicalism, and Catholicism. They all seemed fake and they thought God existed. Which was, to me, obviously not true. Then I found a book on Buddhism at the library and borrowed it. I read through it and by the time I closed it, I had decided this was my path. The teachings about deep peace with oneself and the world around resonated powerfully.

Using that book, I learned to meditate. I began to meditate at night in my bed, in the hidey-hole in the garage rafters, and sometimes late at night outside, when I was supposed to be in bed. One night I meditated in a soft, warm rain and it felt like I was more alive than I'd ever been. After that, every time it rained, I would go outside and soak it up, finding the experience deeply centering.

I got very good at meditating. Through it, I found a deep well of peace and personal will. I even used meditation to disconnect my emotions then later, in my mind, to actually turn them off. I know now that you can't really turn off emotions, but for several years I felt completely unaffected by everything that happened to me, and that was a gift. Eventually I realized that I had found a way to bury my emotions, not face them honestly, so I had to retrain myself—but that came years later.

In the meantime, I meditated. I learned to breathe myself calm and clear. I practiced my slow, aware breathing all the time. In school, during sessions of being yelled at, even when doing the Acceptance Step in Focus class. The breathing exercises helped a ton. I studied a little more

and came upon the Non-Aggression Principle. It seemed right to me, so I decided I was a pacifist for a while.

I'm not a pacifist anymore, but the non-aggression principle is still my practice for life.

Using meditation and even some of what I learned in Focus class, I developed control over my temper and other emotions. This became very helpful years later when I hatched a plan to finally escape from the cult.

My victory over my temper is a huge part of my life. It taught me that when all is said and done, I am the owner of myself. My emotions and behavior in connection with them are all mine and I am responsible for them. This became a powerful epiphany when the time came for me to throw off the control of the sociopath who ran the Dallas branch. But before we get to that huge moment, let's talk about the system of punishments that we had in Dallas.

Chapter 16

Punishments

I was lying. There was no system of punishments in Dallas, or in any other branch of the cult/commune called The Foundation Faith of God. At least there wasn't a consistent cause and effect system where if we, say, forgot to fold our laundry we lost TV privileges for a night. Nothing that consistent or harmless.

What we had was a constantly evolving, devolving, and unexpected pile of vindictive fury being thrown at us for whatever slight had been imagined or was being currently blown out of proportion.

I've referred to this before and I worry that I'm not being specific enough. Here then, a list of some of the things we were actually chewed out for. And to be even more specific, what would happen was that an adult, usually Lucia, would probably be in a grumpy mood (always it seems like) and would see a kid. They would find some kind of fault in what they were doing or their appearance. Whereupon, all the kids were summoned and the malignant tumor of verbal abuse be metastasized in our faces.

So, the list:

- Socks not pulled up
- Hair looking greasy
- Shirt not tucked in
- Not wearing a belt (boys only)
- Hair looking clumpy (we were yelled at about how to wash and conditioner our hair)
- Walking with poor posture
- Sitting with poor posture

- Not greeting every adult we came near with “God Bless You”
- Dirty looking shirt
- Sniffing (like, as if with hay fever)

Those are just the one-off, random things that I now know are random things from grumpy people, not actually wrong things to do. Except for not pulling up your sock. Pull up your freaking socks, you rascal.

We also, of course, got in trouble for what you would expect: fighting, not doing our chores, swearing, and being irritating simply because our personality needed nurture, not fury. I’ll get to that last one in a minute, because it’s a specific case.

One of the most ridiculous punishments was to stand in the corner. What corner? Any corner not full of furniture or some other kids being punished. I once counted three kids standing in corners in the Swiss living room. What they’d done, I have no idea. Obviously it was egregious, because a half hour later, they were still there. No adults were supervising the punishment. But every adult who went through was instantly engaged in teaching the kids a lesson, pointing out that this kid or that one needed to stand straighter and “Nose on the wall!”

I was once made to stand in a corner for six hours straight. I kid you not. Read on to find out why. It was a backup punishment.

Fighting would yield one of the worst punishments. As I learned that Lucia targeted fighting as the thing she would teach us not to do, I mused over the absurd notion of Cyrus getting in trouble for beating me up.

In general, for slights like those listed above, the most common punishment was simply Lucia getting her pound of flesh by having all the kids stand in a row in front of her for her to yell at.

She would mention the offending child by name and detail their offense, then verbally assault us for a while and that was typically that.

But if you got in a fight and were caught, you got major trouble. The most common punishment for fighting—and this was helpful to have something consistent—was to have to write lines if you got caught.

You're probably thinking, "Lines? Big deal. It's just writing the same sentence over and over again. Like, fifty lines should take thirty minutes or less. You're such a whiner, Jared."

I am not! Behold the majesty of lines done Lucia style.

One time I got in a fight with one of the boys my age and lines were the resultant punishment. Unsurprisingly by that time. Here was the line. You might be about to raise an objection, that there's no way I could possibly remember the line I had to write.

Yes, there is a way. It is because I had to write it five hundred times. You read that correctly. Here is the line: *I will not fight or quarrel angrily with others because violence is never the answer.*

Hey, that's fun. Fifteen words strung together five hundred times. And it isn't even particularly good grammar.

Lucia had a terrible memory, by the way. She rarely remembered edicts she would hand down. She once, when I was thirteen or so, forbade us from listening to rock and roll. I was living at Dixie by then, and she of course was in Swiss. Did we kids living at Dixie heed this edict? Only when Jonathan was around. And only that for a week or two. Then it was back to normal. When she came over, which was very rare, we would make sure to not have any music playing.

Then she might be our driver to our regular swimming or volleyball at the YWCA and she would have the radio on. Rock and roll coming from the speakers and weird edict completely forgotten. Did we forget it too? Yes we did.

So yeah, not a great memory. Except for lines. She remembered if she'd had to give you lines before, so if you were back and had been fighting and she had to give you lines, she would make sure the lines punishment was worse this time around. Therefore, if you had had two hundred lines before, this time it was going to be three hundred. Or if she'd talked to you about fighting or whatever the offense was several times in her memory, she would bump it up to five hundred or so.

One time, some poor kid was assigned a thousand lines. It might have been Manuel—for talking back. He was a hunched, sometimes whiner, but that kid had a spine. He didn't always know when to keep his mouth shut, though. Sometimes the utter unfairness of being yelled at for doing literally nothing wrong whatsoever would just be too much for him and he would erupt and fling his long arms out and talk back to Lucia. She did not like when this happened, although on some level she probably did since it gave her a legitimate excuse to go completely unhinged.

"But Jared," you're saying. There is no way that your depiction of Lucia is accurate.

Reader, it is accurate. It is not exaggerated in any way. Everything you've read so far is factual and the same will be the case for the rest of this.

Back on track now. Manuel, I think, got a thousand lines. It was probably something along the line of "I will honor God by respecting my elders at all times and in all places."

But the runner up to the champion lines punishment was assigned to two young men. Strapping young men in the prime of health. Two of the young men who were not related to each

other in any way, but who had chosen to be friends due to a shared interest in gaming. Serious gaming. Board games and other games of strategy. Dungeons and Dragons. And so on.

Okay, yes. One of them was me. Tim and I got along really well. I got frustrated that he won every game that we played against each other, but he was more dedicated to reading the rule books and thinking through his strategy, so he was simply better than me. And I knew that on every level. And I knew that if I wanted to compete with him, I would have to also read the rule books over and over again and take some serious time to think through my opponent's moves and strategy and find ways to trap his advancing armies. I knew that and also knew I would never put that kind of time into the games.

So he won all the time.

That's not why I got mad at him. He'd been lame and irritating on purpose, which all of us were very good at. He was a full six inches taller than me and thin and had thick glasses. He was also strong and smart and had a very irritating evil laugh. We argued plenty. This time, I punched him in the shoulder out of anger and frustration.

I felt bad right away—and not only because he had a broken collarbone from some sporting accident. I was already trying to control my temper and this was a step backward. Look, I know it's a jerk move to punch the shoulder of a guy with a broken collarbone. I KNOW ALL RIGHT.

Tim pushed me away and that was the end of our fight. We made up within the hour and were playing a game or building vast Lego castles by the end of the day.

Two days later, Lucia showed up at Faith School. She called us down to a room and told us that fighting was not okay. We were both completely floored. We had settled the matter already and had probably forgotten it completely by then. That's kids for you. But some knuckleheaded

kid at Dixie—at Dixie no less! The haven from Lucia where no eyes were upon us!—had told on us for some asinine reason.

So Lucia lectured us in her usual angry, personally offended way. Then she gave us a punishment of lines.

Consider: we had fought, made up, gotten over it, and probably both of us had made at least a slight resolution to be nicer. What better lesson is there? And here we were, completely oblivious to the insanity that was about to befall us.

She gave us this line (Yes, I'm drawing this out for effect. Don't worry; it's worth it.): *I will be Godly in all my behavior and will never hit or fight another person because all are my brothers and sisters.* She told us to write it down now so we wouldn't forget it. Twenty-three words in a single sentence. She had to repeat it so we got it right.

That was one unbelievable line. When she told it to us, my mouth dropped open.

She then said the number. "You'll write it five thousand times."

My mind went totally blank. That was ridiculous. I think I almost laughed, but caught myself just in time. What the hell was she thinking? She couldn't be serious, could she?

"You'll write it five thousand times and you'll finish this by the end of the week."

I have spent years intermittently wondering what on earth she was thinking about. Had she decided that we kids were slipping in our respect and total lawlessness was right around the corner? Had she lost her mind?

Tim and I looked at each other, utterly astonished.

Lucia was not done. "You are confined to your room at Dixie until this is done." Today was Monday, the start of a school week. She wanted us to stay at home working on this job, skipping school and its inanities. This was not entirely terrible.

But she hadn't considered anything in this punishment, that much was clear. Where were we going to get all the paper? And how many pens were we going to go through? And did she realize that Tim and the twins and I shared a room that was converted to the big dining room during the day, so we would be interrupted pretty regularly after kids got home from school?

She obviously had not.

But this was our punishment. And that was that.

"You'll go back to Dixie at the end of today and get started immediately." And she dismissed us and we left, flabbergasted at this impossible task we'd been given.

The historically, epically ridiculous lines assignment was widely known within minutes. We told everybody who asked. Why wouldn't we? But I know I also stewed for a while, wondering what traitor had told on us for fighting. I also felt bad that Tim had been given the same punishment as me, even though I had been the one to throw an actual punch. And he had a broken collarbone.

The next morning we arose, pulled out some spiral notebooks, wide ruled, and got to work. We both knew the drill. Fill the first three or four pages, front and back, with the line written clearly and somewhat unevenly. Just write the sentence out and see if you can fit it on one line so you could save space. This sentence was too long. So the back-up strategy was to take up two complete lines so that there weren't any weird looking blank spaces on the page.

I was able to fit fourteen of the ridiculous sentence on a single side of paper. Which meant I could do twenty-eight per piece of paper. So about four pieces of paper for a hundred lines, and of course forty pieces for a thousand lines.

I did the math and shouted to Tim, "This is going to be like two hundred pieces of paper!"

He was about fifteen feet away. He nodded. "Yeah. Better go fast."

So we both bent to our task. I sat on the inner edge of a couch and leaned on the wood shelf behind it, using that as a writing desk.

It took me about an hour to fill the first page and a half. That was a terrible rate. By the time we heard Jonathan come in downstairs, obviously to check on us during lunch time, I'd filled three or four pages. Very slow going. I said as much to Tim.

"Yeah, there's no way we're getting this done," he replied. "Two pages an hour means two hundred hours. There's not enough time in the day."

"We have to go faster."

Tim agree, but Jonathan came in and asked us how it was going. I showed him the curving pages filled with my messy scrawl. "Try to write neater," Jonathan said.

I laughed long and totally quietly in my head.

He left and it was time to do the only thing we could do: take a break and throw wadded up socks at each other, followed by a pencil throwing war. There was no winner and we went back to work. He wrote faster than me. But we both started doing the normal things to make the stupid job go faster and try to get out of at least some of it.

This was a multi-part strategy. First off, we would number fresh pages, skipping tens at a time. So I went from 251 to 262, then proceeding with 263, 264, and so on. Until 311, then 321 and so on.

By the time I was past my first thousand lines—on day three—I was going from 1202 to 1243 and so on. I was tempted to skip a hundred at a time, but never had the chance. This was because I was bored and furious and simply too slow for Lucia's taste.

Neither of us was done by the end of Friday. I had hit about 1500 by that time, and was developing a thick callous on the pen side of my middle finger. Tim got done on Saturday,

delivering three spiral notebooks to Jonathan and moving on with his life. He was very clever, so if he wrote more than four thousand lines, I'd be shocked.

The next Monday rolled around and I hadn't read a book in seven days, hadn't even been outside except for on Sunday to go to Celebration. Lucia knew I was nowhere near done. By my numbering strategy, I was in the 2500s, but I was slowing down. I was pretty mad at the whole thing.

Lucia sent Jonathan to let me know that I couldn't skip school and so I had to go and still do lines after. So I did that day. The next morning, Jonathan informed me that my line punishment was over, but that I would make up for the ones I didn't do while at school. I was relieved until he was specific. "You'll stand in the corner of our classroom all day today."

So I did. I was fourteen, at least, and I stood in the corner of the classroom I shared with Asta, Vanessa, Isaac, Mark, and Manuel. I guess this was so I could hear the school material. Which I pointedly did not listen to. I spent the whole time imagining stories and probably conjuring up pictures of hot chicks like I'd seen in Conan or other movies like Better Off Dead. Or imagining I was hanging out with Tandy, the character of Dagger in the Cloak & Dagger comics. I had a giant crush on that character.

And at the end of the day, it was over. My legs were tired, I was bored, and my anger at Lucia was a constant, pulsing fury that would carry me through many years of this.

I alluded to the fact that this was only the runner up line punishment champion. Here's where I tell you the champion.

Dixie, as I've mentioned, was a big house. The stairs from the downstairs hallway to the upstairs went halfway up, turned a corner at a landing, then went the rest of the way up to a wide, wood-floored landing. That top landing had four doors: one to the right which led to the big

room shared originally by all the big girls, one right at the top of the stairs and across the landing which led to the main dining room (which dining room was my bedroom for a bit), one to the left and one to the left and in a little bit. The first left was a small bathroom that was just a toilet and linen closet. The other deeper in left was a biggish bathroom with a clawed tub/shower combo and a sink. That bathroom had another door that led to another closet which opened to a smaller dining room and the kitchen.

Why am I telling you this? Because one time when I was about fifteen, one of the girls really made Lucia mad. Lucia really picked on this girl. Her name was Leonora. Leonora was harmless, friendly, very needy, and very sensitive to unfairness. She also got upset very easily. I remember numerous times watching Lucia actually tease Leonora.

Anyway, Leonora showed up at Dixie one day, escorted there by Jonathan. She had some blankets, a sleeping bag and pillow, and several notebooks and pencils and a crate. She had been banished from Swiss for some undiscernible reason and had been sent to Dixie with the biggest punishment of all: ten thousand lines and banished to Dixie's upper landing. She was to spend all day and night there, writing her lines during the day. Her sentence was a one-liner, which was a mercy.

This girl, who was perhaps twelve or thirteen, had been sent away from the house she shared with girls she knew. She'd been sent to a house of only boys by that time- whom at least she knew and trusted given our commune circumstances. But this was totally unreal, given the abject paranoia that Lucia demonstrated around having the boys and girls mix. So this was an even worse insult: Lucia clearly thought Leonora was so unappealing that there was no danger of a boy mixing with her.

And Leonora wasn't even given a bedroom. She'd been given a landing, so anybody going up or down the stairs would see her in her shame and punishment every time. To top it off, she had ten thousand lines to write.

That was Leonora's life for three or four weeks. A nest of blankets and scrawling in notebooks the same sentence over and over.

We boys took pity on her. I was already her good friend. Leonora found in me a trusted and sympathetic friend and I was usually happy to be a bit of respite for her. I found her very needy and selfish, but also incredibly unfairly treated. And she was funny and kind as well. When I passed by her, I would stop and talk. Which consisted of me saying hi, leaning on the bannister, and letting Leonora complain and vent, which was necessary.

I still don't know if Leonora ever really finished the lines. I feel a little bad about never offering to help, but I'd already had my own epic line punishment so I had no taste for them anymore. I suggested several times that Leonora do the strategic numbering, but she was paranoid that Lucia would notice and make her do it all over again.

Either way, after about four weeks, the era of Leonora camping on Dixie's upper landing ended and we boys had a bit more privacy back.

You can't make this stuff up, friends. Surely I'm exaggerating. I'm not. Lucia was everything that I have described. I considered her my nemesis, mainly because she treated us kids like we were her enemy. There was no particular nurture. Even when she was teaching us Irish Republican Army songs (she was not Irish), teaching me how to make crusty bread (I have since forgotten how) or telling me I was much more handsome when I smiled (I resolved to never smile around her), there was always the certainty that one wrong look, step, or word and her fury would erupt.

She was a controlling force of incredible magnitude. She doted on her daughters, although they still surely received some of her infinite well of ire. I never felt safe around her. I felt watched, picked apart, judged, held unworthy and bug-like. More than anyone else, she made me feel like I had nothing good to offer.

Even when I was older and she sometimes even spoke to me as if I were an adult, the edge in her voice and tilt to her expression were constant indicators of a volcano waiting to erupt all over me. She spanked me a few times when I was smaller. Screamed endless lectures at me. Sat me down countless times. She didn't like me, much less love me. She had no concern but control.

She was the embodiment of everything terrible about the Foundation Faith of God.

I had to get away from her, away from the cult.

Chapter 17

Facing Her Down

What I'm going to describe in this chapter might not have the impact on you that it had on me. But know that this event is one of the very first defining events of my life after the stupid mistake I made on the day of Daniel's memorial service.

I've talked up Lucia's apparent megalomania. At the very least, she was a tyrant. Was she aware of how awful she was being to us kids, or did she believe that she was doing the right thing? More than likely the latter. Most of us are the hero in our own story and it's not hard to guess that Lucia thought we kids needed to be brought into line and that her efforts were righteous and good. She wanted to control us. She wanted to control me. Her vision for me was a Jared who listened meekly to what she had to say, internalized it, and changed my behavior to be more attentive and responsible and faithful to the cult's ideal. Ideals, in this case, which were entirely her version of the ideals.

It's possible she wanted me to become a faithful member of the Foundation Faith of God too. There were times when I was younger when I wondered if I was seen as having a special destiny in the Foundation. It's common for young people to feel that they might have some kind of special future or destiny, but this was a bit justified. Many of the adults didn't even know that Mary Ann existed, so to them, the real leader of the Foundation was Gabriel. He was a soft-spoken, soft-featured, soft-haired British gentleman who seemed to be doing his best to look and sound like the Aryan Jesus that much of western Christianity has settled on. My birthday is the same as Gabriel's, and the people of the Foundation were superstitious about such things. Numerology was a common practice for many of them, as well as the use of Tarot cards. So it's entirely possible that, due to my sharing a birthday with the leader of the entire cult, I was seen

as having a bright and important future in the cult. It certainly didn't hurt that Magdalen- widely held as the most in-tune with the Spiritual person in the cult- was my mother. So maybe Lucia saw me as a future leader or at least strong devotee of the Foundation.

My vision for myself much different. My vision consisted of me not being interrupted by adults when I was trying to read. It also included being able to walk through a house calmly without having to sneak around so adults couldn't find me and give me work or punishments.

Of course, my ultimate vision was to have a family. Due almost entirely to the innumerable books I read, I was a huge romantic. I didn't believe in God, but I sure believed in True Love. My aim in life was to marry the girl of my dreams, be the perfect man for her, and to have a few kids and spend our lives in mad love with each other. Our kids would call me Dad and would never doubt my commitment to them. I knew I couldn't achieve all of this in the Foundation, so I was going to get out as soon as I could. In the meantime, I was going to keep my head down and just get through life as unscathed and uninterrupted as possible.

And that's just what I did. When it was time to stand in a row in front of Lucia and have her petulant screaming pour over us, I would fix my eyes on her eyebrows and zone out as quickly as I could. I got very good at listening just enough so that I could respond if needed, but otherwise letting the useless, noisy drivel bounce off me.

Except, there came a time that I couldn't do that anymore. The unfairness, the loneliness, the fury, the relentless fact that there was no escaping a commune full of people who did everything to make me certain that they hated me—it all built up.

While it built, I took control over every aspect of my life I could. I didn't have the life I wanted, the family I wanted, the parents I should have had—so I decided to take control of everything else.

I've already talked about my studies of Buddhism and meditation. I still practice meditation—it has served me very well. I got control of my temper finally. I also started working on being less of a lonely jerk. Until then I had been convinced I was a loner, but I finally realized that I was surrounded by kids who were going through the same thing as me. So I should try to connect with them. I tried to stop being short with people. I still felt melancholy and lonely a lot, but I did my best to, as much as I could manage, not let those feelings cut me off from people.

I did not succeed very well, to be honest. I was still in a shell when I got out of the Foundation years later. But I did make better friends with those around me and got a little better at sharing things that were pretty deep and personal to me.

And I got stronger. I put in a lot of hours on the heavy bag and lifting weights. I jogged around the block and later a track. I did pull-ups, sit-ups, push-ups, and dropped a lot of fat. I loved lifting and still do. I loved pushing my body to the very edge of needing to give up and going a little farther. I still do.

The point is that I got strong and knew I was strong. I also watched Rocky movies as often as I could and studied the boxing. I practiced a lot, learning and mastering combos, and sometimes even punching myself in the face a bunch to learn to take a hit. That had to be a sight.

By becoming stronger and physically much more confident, I found I could hold myself straighter in the presence of the people who had spanked me when I was younger. When one of the twins, Bart, got in a bunch of trouble for being insolent, I watched Jason try to loom over him to physically intimidate Bart into being respectful to Lucia. But the twins were my workout buddies and we were all strong. I realized I had the same power and it came to me in that moment that physical punishments meant nothing to me. Nobody could hurt me physically anymore. They could try, but I would stop them.

I had come to a better, more in control, me. It had been deliberate effort and choices. I barely resembled the furious, emotional, terrified ten-year-old I had been when I arrived in Dallas. That kid and my sixteen-year-old self had the same face and very similar hair—although my older version had longer hair. I was lean, strong inside and out, and frankly was not going to take any more physical crap from these people. Could I escape yet? Not as far as I knew. I was still too young and didn't have any idea where I could go. But at least I could protect myself now and that was a freeing realization.

But the big moment came on a day that I was not expecting. Don't they always?

Summer was ending and we had just finished our two months of labor at Best Friends. The long road trip was coming to an end and we had pulled into the shared driveway of Swiss to drop the girls and their stuff off first. They spilled out of the van, hauling their bags and sleeping gear and disappeared into the houses.

We boys sat in the driveway waiting for Jonathan to come back out and drive us to Dixie. By this time, my peer group was considered the older group. That consisted of me, Mark, Isaac, Manuel, and Asta. So Asta was the senior girl at Swiss and the boys and I were the older ones at Dixie. Jonathan was taking a while but we were tired so we chatted, settled down, talked, probably argued, then finally grew quiet waiting for him. One of the girls, I think Johanna, showed up, eyes wide. She said, "Lucia's really mad because you guys left Dixie really messy when we left for Angel Canyon."

We boys exchanged glances and expressions of surprise and confusion. I said it first. "No we didn't. Jonathan made us clean the whole house."

"Well Lucia's really mad and she's been yelling at Jonathan."

Isaac joined in. "That's ridiculous. We left it clean."

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s so dumb. Everything’s spic and span.”

Johanna shrugged and walked off.

We boys exchanged looks again, totally offended at the implication that we had left the house dirty. Every time we went on a trip, we were made to clean the whole house. This was normal. It felt like Lucia was making things up just to get us in trouble.

Somebody else showed up at the van. Not Jonathan. Apparently he was really hearing it from Lucia. Which you would think was strange but this was the Lucia-led Dallas branch of the Foundation Faith of God. The new person said, “Jared and Isaac, Lucia wants to talk to you.”

Isaac and I looked at each other, the usual knot of tight fear clamping the inside of my chest. “Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know, just come on.” They left and were clearly not important enough in the scene to remain a named person in my memory.

I jumped out of the van, my heart pounding but shaking my head in irritated and resigned frustration. This was nuts. We were going to be yelled at for like a sock being left out under a bed or behind a dresser or something else just as stupid. She was making crap up just to show how she was our boss. Thoughts raced through my head as I scrolled through the expressions I had on tap, trying to figure out which one to settle my face into so that this would be over as soon as possible.

We’d been in Angel Canyon for two months, so she probably just wanted to reassert her control over us. Which was so freaking stupid. I swore in my head and under my breath.

I led the way into the main Swiss house and toward the main dining room. Jonathan passed us going out. He was stone-faced.

Lucia sat at the dining table, her back to the wall of windows that lined the dining room. We stood facing her, the long and wide table with its chairs between us and our sociopathic tyrant. Two wrought-iron chandeliers with yellow incandescent bulbs protruding at all angles lit the space, throwing a few jagged shadows on Lucia's flat cheeks.

I glanced at her face long enough to get a feel for her mood. She was pretty worked up, her nostrils flaring and her brows drawn down. Her hands were clenched on the table in front of her.

I don't remember the words she said, but she indicated that she'd heard that we were bad-mouthing her in the van. I do remember my feeling of utter betrayal. That damn kid had heard us griping harmlessly and gone and told on us. Why the hell had she done that? She knew what would happen—wasn't she in this with us?

No, of course not. She was living a privileged life, spoiled and doted on by her insane mother.

So we got reamed by Lucia for hearing that she was mad at us for a house that was actually clean despite her fabrications and being upset that it was all bull crap. I looked at her chin, letting her fury flow over me. Meanwhile, my own anger had built into a raging inferno. Not only had we just spent two months doing hard labor which I actually enjoyed, and not only did it feel like every adult in my life either hated me or had no use for me, and not only was I trying to be a better person, but now I couldn't even trust the kids. What a load of garbage.

Heat built in me. I practiced my breathing to stay calm and keep it out of my face.

She paused and asked us a question. I didn't hear the content of the question. She repeated herself and directed the question at Isaac. He muttered some response. Then she asked me. I answered and she launched into her diatribe again.

I let my gaze slide up her face and caught her eyes, then eased my attention to one of her eyebrows. She was so full of crap. And this was beyond stupid. All she ever did was spit hate and anger. She assigned stupid, useless, petty punishments that meant nothing.

I squeezed my fists tighter against my legs and breathed. Rage filled me at the unfairness of my entire life. Having to stand here and listen to this stupidity. My feet on the slightly uneven, dark wood floor. Her useless anger. Her pitiful need for control and kids to fear her. Hate, anger, fury, and it was all meaningless.

It meant nothing.

It hit me. It all meant nothing. She meant nothing.

That perfect line from Labyrinth slammed into my head. “You have no power over me.”

I didn’t say it, but I felt it from my head to my toes. The rage was pure and cleansing and hot and it said in quiet words, “Stand straighter” and I did. I stood straight.

I caught her gaze, my expression empty, my eyes flat. Behind them burned fury that had helped me get control of myself and had carried me through countless spankings and endless verbal and emotional abuse.

I met her dark eyes and stayed there. Didn’t move. Held completely still and mentally trapped her gaze. In my head, I thought, “Shut up.”

Her spewing lecture sputtered. She gave a quiet snarl and barked a question at me. I ignored it and held her gaze. She tried to slide her attention to Isaac, but I willed her to keep her eyes on me, even stepping a bit to my left to keep her gaze trapped.

She yelped a few more sentences, but the wind was gone from her sails. I stood tall, straight, and let some of my disdain for her behavior slip into my expression.

“Just keep the house clean,” Lucia said lamely.

We stood there as she floundered for something else to say.

I raised my eyebrows, forcing myself to stand as tall and straight as I could. I kept my feet planted, then slowly and deliberately crossed my arms. I stared her down, pushing the weight of my utter disgust with her toward her through my gaze into her eyes. She made a weird face at me, screwing her lips into an ugly/goofy grimace.

“We’re done?” I said that aloud.

She nodded and we walked away, went back to Dixie, Isaac muttering about the injustice of it all the whole way. But we hadn’t even gotten a punishment, which he never seemed to realize.

We’d already been gearing up to move to Richardson and were moved within the next few months. It was maybe three months after we’d moved to Richardson that Lucia called for me. I had no inkling nor the desire to care about what she was angry at me for.

She was sitting in a chair in the Chattington living room. She told me to pull a chair from the side so I could sit across from her, our feet on the heavy, white shag carpet.

Lucia launched into a lecture about attitude and respect and being a productive member of the Foundation Faith of God. I let it all slide over me. I was overdue to get back to El Santo—the boys’ house—and the pull-ups I’d been gearing up to do all day. Then I had a book to read, probably a Mercedes Lackey book or something by R.A. Salvatore. And then I was going to keep trying to control my dreams so I could dream about a certain someone. More on that in the next chapter.

She stopped and the quiet brought me fully back. “You’re not even listening to me, are you?”

I raised my eyebrows, realizing that I had adopted a very relaxed posture, one leg crossed over the other, my arms resting comfortably on the curving arms of the chair. I shrugged a little

and looked her in the eye. This was the first time we'd interacted since that moment in the dining room. She had no power over me anymore. No physical punishments could be enforced. I would ignore any other punishment. And her meaningless rants were a waste of breath and time.

"No, Jared. Be honest. You don't even listen. It just goes in one ear and out the other."

I slid my leg down so both feet were on the carpet again. I looked down and thought about how to respond. Honestly. Always honest now. "No." I cracked a grin and met her eyes again. I made sure this didn't come out insolent or sulky. I wanted her to know I was treating her like an equal and we were having a conversation. "Actually it doesn't even go in one ear." I smiled wider.

She blinked, her mouth dropping just a bit open. She frowned. "That's.. honest of you."

"You asked." I leaned forward, met her eyes again and smiled. "We're done?" I stood.

Shaking her head in what can only be described as helpless bemusement, she gestured at the rest of the house. "Yes."

The next time we talked, Lucia was teaching the kids how to make bread. I treated her as an equal again, listening to her instructions and making very good crusty bread. Sometime later she called out to me as I walked through the kitchen. "You're handsome when you smile."

I ignored her. What a disgusting thing to say.

We never spoke again. I was still included in line-ups for her angry rants. I always stood there with my hands in my pocket, obviously ignoring her. Not long after, I stopped attending the rants.

I was not punished ever again. She and I never exchanged words again except for one time, when she banished me from Dallas to Faith Canyon. She thought she had finally won. But she

had fallen for my plan hook, line, and sinker. More on that in Chapter 20. It's time to tell you the story of my lifelong love affair with the Scottish accent.

Chapter 18

The Scottish Chick

The kids of the Foundation Faith of God were of varying pedigrees, as I've described a bit. As we grew up, things clarified for us as we found out who our father was, and in doing that we found out who was related to whom. One interesting reveal came later than almost every other. One of the boys from the group about three years older than me grew up being told by his mother and literally everyone else in the cult that a fellow who had left the cult years earlier was his father. This boy had the departed fellow's last name and everything. We all just accepted that his father had left and that was that—which was the case for at least one other boy I grew up with.

But not long after I finally got out of the cult, I heard what had happened with this boy, now a man. He had started to bald fairly early on in life and people were noticing that he was balding in precisely the same pattern as this other man in the Foundation, one who essentially ran the Cats section of Best Friends. This was a pretty high-up Founder in the cult and Best Friends.

And people also noticed that my peer was the exact same build and height as the other man who was still in the cult. Inquiries were made. Yes, the Founder was actually my peer's father. Revealed when the progeny in question was at least twenty years old.

Why the secrecy? I have no earthly idea. Every time I try to guess what the reason could be, it makes zero sense to me and I discard the guess. What good does it do to hide from kids who their parents are? It's going to come out eventually isn't it? Why lie about it for years, decades in some cases, and then totally confirm that you've been an organization of chronic lying since inception?

Lying is stupid, guys. I learned that when I was in my early teens. The Foundation? I don't know when or if they learned that.

One of the biggest lies that the Foundation told as an organization, which the inner circle of adults stuck to devotedly for more than forty years, was a lie of omission. It was the implication that there was no mystery lady at the actual top of the Foundation. There was no bizarre conspiracy to keep her secret and totally hidden from the entire world. My mother, Magdalen, went and worked at the Lake House, a giant mansion that Best Friends built, every day for more than ten years. When I asked, she told me she kept the massive residence clean and made food for Gabriel.

Not true. It turns out she was basically Mary Ann's handmaiden. I didn't even know Mary Ann existed until my last few months in the cult, and I barely believed it then. I only truly believed it when I had several reliable sources confirm it some years later. Then my friend was the mortician when Mary Ann passed away, so that was the final confirmation of her existence.

Why the lies? Was it because Mary Ann was a former prostitute in England? Was it because she was rumored to have been involved in some major sex scandal in England's Parliament and the Foundation wanted to hide her?

I never knew and I still don't know. The curiosity is still there, but it's pretty tame and I waste no energy trying to satisfy it. The facts: Mary Ann did actually exist, she lived in the giant building called the Lake House, and one of my peers was related to her.

A quick note about the Lake House—this for the benefit of the adults of the Foundation/early Best Friends who were coerced into building a multi-million mansion for their traitorous, capricious, murky leader Mary Ann and her footstool, Gabriel. When the Lake House was conceived, it was sold to the members of the Foundation as a beautiful, temple-like structure that would serve as—well, a temple for the members. It would be a common space of beauty and spiritual elevation. Artwork worth thousands of dollars and more adorned the Lake House when

it was done. Everybody helped build it. I helped install toilets, helped terrace the back patio, and dredged the mid-sized lake that the mansion looked out over.

But when the project was done, everybody was kicked out—mostly to never return. Mary Ann was moved in and Gabriel too. And my mother served Mary Ann hand and foot for the next decade plus.

Back to this chapter's focus: Mary Ann had relatives and it turned out that one of my peers was her niece. And this peer knew all along that Mary Ann existed, that she was her aunt, and that her own mother was complicit in the massive deception.

Leonora was Mary Ann's niece. Yes, the Leonora that Lucia couldn't stand. And the Leonora that Lucia treated abominably. Why didn't Leonora have special protection due to her powerful relative? I don't know. But in my last summer at Best Friends, Leonora revealed to me that Mary Ann was real and that she was her aunt. She did this in connection with my heart mending from a years-long infatuation.

Which brings us to the Scottish Chick. I was thirteen. This was my second summer going to Best Friends to "help out." I'd been there for about six weeks of the ten or so weeks we typically spent there. All of the kids aged twelve and up were there, so Leonora and Vanessa—who were twelve—were there and being put to work.

One day, I showed up at the Village in the evening to have dinner with the sixty or seventy people who lived and worked there. This was a noisy, messy affair that typically had me eating in the sunken portion of the giant common room of the Village. I heard laughter and a raised voice got my head to whip around in instant interest. Leonora was sitting with a very cute young girl with light brown hair in a short bob. The girl's clothes were dusty from a day of work like

the rest of us and she had glittering eyes and a quick, wide smile. She also spoke with an accent that made my heart thump.

After dinner while I read and stole glances at this lovely mystery girl, the two of them chatted and laughed. How did Leonora know this new girl? And why was a kid I'd never met at Best Friends working? Why would anybody who wasn't trapped in the Foundation ever show up and help out?

Since I was Leonora's best friend in the Foundation, it didn't take too long for me to find out. Leonora led the girl down the stairs where I was slouched in a soft chair reading. Leonora stood in front of me and the girl stood next to her. "Jared, this is my cousin Sharon."

I looked up and said something perfectly smooth and disarming. Actually I feigned annoyance and said, "Hi."

Sharon smiled. "Hi."

Her accent made my heart thump again.

"I'm from Scotland." Sharon smiled again and, without any further ado, sat on the arm of my chair and started up a conversation.

We talked for a bit, including Leonora. We talked about the work and the dogs and the Foundation and even if she hadn't had the Scottish accent, I would have formed a massive crush on Sharon anyway. By the time we had to call it a night, I was totally infatuated.

Sharon was staying at the Village, while Leonora and I had our tents down the hill from the Village toward the Bunkhouse. So we said our good nights and Leonora and I descended the sandy road to our tent city.

"You like her don't you!" Leonora bumped into me, teasing.

“Whatever.” I spent the walk down denying the existence of my pounding heart and the reason I had for living.

For the rest of that summer, I lurked near where Sharon was going to be between work and after work and wished I could get rid of Leonora so Sharon and I could have time alone to talk and get to know each other more. Every so often, it worked. Probably through none of my own doing, but just by blind luck. We spent one evening talking and laughing in the soft chairs of the Village common room. We all three ran around outside, finding the rough board and rope swing that someone had rigged on a tall, strong cedar tree.

One early evening I pretended to be a werewolf stalking them and they shrieked and laughed and called me names. I only stalked Sharon and Leonora had to have noticed that.

I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I was thirteen and had formed a crush here and there when I had been in public school, but the girls in the Foundation were all my sisters, in my mind, so no crush there. This was my first true infatuation. I was sure I was in love. Real, true love.

And by the end of the summer, it seemed like Sharon liked me too.

I was thirteen. She was twelve. We were young, I was infatuated, and the age difference didn’t matter the slightest to me.

The summer ended for us abruptly. Nobody thought to tell me what her family’s travel plans were. I had met her grandmother, who had brought Sharon and who was related to Mary Ann somehow, but all of a sudden, one day, Sharon and her grandmother were gone. They’d gone back to Scotland. The other side of the freaking world.

And I didn’t have any way of contacting her. And we’d never said anything that was in our hearts. Or at least that was in my heart and I thought was in her heart too.

I was gutted. I felt like one of the horses had kicked me in the stomach. I couldn't believe it. Was I never going to see her again? I asked Leonora and she said she thought Sharon would come again another summer.

Another summer. Maybe next summer? That was ten months away.

We returned to Dallas and Sharon was never very far from my thoughts. I wished I could dream about her to see her face again, because I was forgetting her adorable pout and eyes. I pined pretty hard and pining for the Scottish girl I'd met that summer became a part of me. I decided that if we could meet up the next summer, we would have the conversations we should have and we would become an item and we would find a way to make it work.

The next summer rolled around. I was anxious to get to Best Friends. Our trip was unaccountably delayed. Except Leonora went before all of us, I think because Lucia wanted to get rid of her or she had been such a handful that Diana, her very British mother, had sent for her.

We got to Best Friends and I hunted down Leonora immediately.

"Hey, do you know if Sharon's coming this summer?"

Leonora made a face that I didn't like. "She was already here and they went back home already too."

I couldn't believe it. What was the universe trying to do to me? Didn't it know I needed to see Sharon again? I needed to see her like a fish needs water. Like I needed air. I felt betrayed by everything in creation. How was I supposed to wait another year? This was so wrong. True love shouldn't be so terrible.

Then Leonora said more. "She was asking about you. She was so mad that the Dallas kids weren't coming yet."

My heart leapt and soared. She liked me. She liked me enough that she remembered me, even while she was in far away, exotic Scotland, she remembered me. She'd thought of me. She'd come back to red sand and endless dogs and cats and had wanted to see me.

I felt like whooping and crying. Because she *did* like me! This wasn't going to be unrequited love—but it was going to be lonely because we couldn't see each other! But it was better because we were both thinking about the other from far away. We were both looking at the same sky. Her name was in my head and my name was in hers.

The summer passed and the betrayed anger at missing Sharon faded into a dull ache. Not long after returning to Dallas that year, Leonora found me at Faith School. "Sharon wanted me to give this to you."

She handed me a photograph. It was of Sharon! She was sitting in one of the many cat runs in the Cats area. Her hair was longer. So was her face. She looked older, more mature. More beautiful than cute now. She had an impish, clever smile that made her eyes crinkle a little and I was completely done for.

I looked at that picture daily. I had conversations with Sharon through that picture, me imagining her perfect Scottish accent and voice. And the year passed and pining for the Scottish girl named Sharon became an even deeper and more meaningful part of me. We had the same feelings for each other, so the next time we saw each other, life was going to change. I would have a girlfriend and who knows? We might even kiss.

I told nobody. It's possible Leonora suspected the depths of my feelings, because when the next summer came up, she told me early on. "Sharon's not coming this year."

I was devastated. Another summer passed. I got stronger, taller, more confident, and got to know myself better. I knew what I felt wasn't love yet—it was the beginning of love. It needed

to be held up to Sharon and we needed to have time together to figure out if we fit, but the infatuation was still strong.

We moved from Dixie and Swiss to Richardson and the houses there after that third summer. I formed a deep friendship with Jena at the Promenade movie theater, but my loyalty to Sharon was unassailable. Until we'd had the chance to be together again and talk and find out if what we felt was going to be a real thing for our lives, I wouldn't betray it by having a relationship with anyone else.

During the next year, as I drew closer to turning seventeen, I changed a lot. I formed real friendships with the kids of the Dallas branch and we had some very important experiences together, which I'll talk about in the next chapter.

But I still thought about Sharon all the time.

Then one day, around Thanksgiving, Leonora called me on the phone. I was surprised, but not much. She snuck onto the phone regularly and called me and we talked and she vented and it was good for her. By that time, I was in El Santo, the house the boys lived in. She was in Las Vegas I thought, having been sent there finally because Lucia couldn't handle her anymore.

It turned out that Leonora was at Best Friends for the Thanksgiving season. And so was Sharon. And Sharon wanted to know if there was a way she and I could talk on the phone the next day.

I just about lost it. I had spent three and a half years thinking about Sharon and pining for her and wondering if her feelings had faded or if they'd ever really been anything worth mentioning. It turned out maybe they had.

I of course said yes, Sharon and I could talk. But the wrinkle was that I had to be on the phone from Chattington, the girls' house. Which was also the house Lucia and Jason and a few

other adults lived in. There were a couple telephone lines at Chattington, one I always assumed was the business line and the other a regular one.

For some reason, it would only be possible for us to talk on the phone on the business line. Why? Because I had to call and for some reason the business line wasn't tracked. Or something like that.

Worth the risk. All day worth the risk. We arranged a time and I prayed I would dream of Sharon. I needed some sub-conscious warm up so I could talk to her competently the next day, but it was no good.

I spent the evening at Chattington, which was normal. I often hung out with the girls—they were more interesting than the boys. They talked about cool stuff and we played games and music and had a good time.

When the appointed hour came, I melted out of sight and into the office where the business telephone was. I closed the door and, my heart pounding, dialed the number for Best Friends.

I had never before called another branch of the Foundation. The only phone calls I'd ever made were to local libraries and the Promenade movie theater and Chattington.

As my chest compressed and sweat broke out on my brow, I listened and the phone began to ring on the other end. It rang for a bit, then was answered. By Cyrus. Cyrus. The absolute jerk who had beaten me years before. I stuttered and hung up.

I waited ten minutes, long enough for me to screw the courage back up, and dialed again. Someone else answered. A woman. I asked for Leonora. She went and found her and a minute later, Leonora was on the phone.

I whisper-screamed at her. "Why weren't you there to answer the phone?"

“I’m not allowed to answer the phone here,” Leonora said. As if I would have known that. Clearly, she had more experience with phones than I did.

“Well Cyrus answered it and I hung up.”

“Do you still want to talk to Sharon?”

Did I still—I nearly barked a laugh at her. “Yes!”

A few moments passed. “Jared?” It was her heavy, delightful Scottish accent. Her voice was deeper than the last time we’d spoken—three and a half years before.

“Hi!” I sounded like a complete idiot. More than three years and that was it? “It’s good to talk to you again.” That sounded so forward, so totally inappropriate. But it was true, and I was not in the mood to mess around.

“You too.” She laughed nervously.

She was nervous too. That was perfect. We settled into a conversation, doing our best to talk fast and quiet and catch up on more than three years of separation. I knew my yearning was coming through in my voice, but I had no idea how to hold it back.

We didn’t say anything about feelings or us, but we began to rebuild a friendship that started so long before.

“Leonora’s saying we have to hang up.”

I looked at the clock. We’d been talking for a half hour and my chest and face hurt. My chest from my heart trying to slam through it and make my mouth say things I shouldn’t say—and my face from grinning the entire time. “Okay. Maybe we can talk again?”

“Tomorrow?”

She laughed. It was delightful. “I’ll try. Maybe I can call you instead.”

“Okay.” We decided on a slightly later time and hung up.

We weren't able to talk the next day, but over the two weeks she was at Best Friends, we spoke on the phone several times. By the end of that time, I was head over heels. I think she was too, because she promised she would do everything she could to make sure she came to Best Friends in the summer and we could see each other again.

And we were older, so we were smarter and we traded addresses. We started writing letters to each other right away. I wrote the first one, telling silly stories and being ridiculous. Three weeks later, I got her reply. She was funny and wrote in a very tidy script and drew hearts and signed her letters SWAK. I had no idea what that meant. Then I asked Leonora.

Sealed With A Kiss.

Lordy I was done for. This girl liked me. She LIKED me. She had liked me for years, just like I had liked her for years.

I got money for my birthdays. Usually I got some from Magdalen and Enoch both, and often I would get some from my grandmother—Magdalen's mom. That was Grandma Eaton. She was a fabulous, driven, amazing woman. She never approved of her Katie (that was Magdalen's birth name) haring off to join the hippy cult. But she was determined to be part of her grandsons' lives, so she sent money for birthdays and Christmas.

I had about seventy-five dollars saved up and I decided I was going to do something insane for Sharon for Christmas. I was going to send her a dozen roses.

So I pulled out the yellow pages and started calling around to find a flower place that would deliver roses all the way to Erskine, Scotland. When I found one, I arranged to spend fifty dollars to have roses delivered Christmas morning to Sharon. The card said, "Merry Christmas!"

I figured I didn't have to say much more.

Her letter showed up a week or two after Christmas. She was blown away and a little mortified at all the questions that her family kept asking about the boy in Dallas who had sent roses a few thousand miles. But there was no longer any question of my feelings and our letters changed in tone. We talked more about our feelings and about how we couldn't wait until summer when we would for sure be able to see each other again for the first time in four years.

This, my friends, was an epic love story. A love for the ages. Several nights a week I would play a tape that I had made as I went to sleep. Yes, a cassette tape. I recorded myself saying Sharon's name over and over again, interspersing this repetition with little tidbits about her. I filled one whole side of a cassette. I put it in my boombox, plugged in my headphones, and hit play as I went to sleep.

The idea was that I would trigger dreams of Sharon through the power of suggestion. My sub-conscious almost never cooperated. Once every month or two she would show up fleetingly, smiling.

Summer drew closer. I turned seventeen and found myself increasingly impatient with my life. I couldn't take another year in the cult. I had to find a way out. But the next day would dawn and I figured I could manage the next year until I was eighteen, then I would leave.

But what was happening around me made me furious.

Then the final straw fell. It sounded like Sharon wasn't going to be able to make it to Best Friends. But the final straw was removed almost right away. Leonora called me and said that Sharon was going to visit Best Friends, but that her visit was going to be in mid-summer. Perfect!

Then we all found out that the Dallas kids weren't going to Best Friends this year. No reasons were given and that was that.

I was going to miss Sharon. She was in the USA, at Best Friends, and now some jerk had decided we weren't going. So I was going to miss her.

Bull crap on that.

I was livid. Four years of pining and we still weren't going to see each other?

Then it came out that people had found out about us. And the Foundation was also livid and was doing everything it could to keep us apart. Through a series of events that I helped orchestrate and that Sharon finally brought to pass, we made it happen.

I will talk about how I ended up in Faith Canyon in the middle of the summer of 1991, when I was seventeen, in another chapter, but I'll simply say here that I did and it was by my design. I was there ostensibly for a month of punishment. But I got there when Sharon was at Best Friends. The Foundation was not going to let us get together. The panicked paranoia that I kept hearing about would have been comical if it weren't so maddening.

I'd been in Faith Canyon for a few days when I got a call from Best Friends. It was Leonora, then Sharon. She was there. Which meant she was only a few hundred miles north of me. We spoke for a while, laughing and me falling head over heels for her and her accent again. By the time we hung up, she had said she was so mad that they were trying to keep us from meeting again. She was going to do everything she could to make a reunion happen.

It turned out that she had the power. She went to her aunt, Mary Ann, and demanded to be allowed to visit her friend Jared in Faith Canyon. Mary Ann relented. Sharon called me a couple days later with the amazing news. Mark was going to be driving a bunch of supplies from Faith Canyon to Best Friends, and he would bring Sharon down with him when he came back.

Simple. I was going to see her in less than forty-eight hours.

The next day I got a call from Adam. This was totally out of the blue. He'd been bouncing from branch to branch, being sent out to fund and hating it, and had wound up at Best Friends, helping with the work there. He was famous in Kanab for being pretty hip and being able to dance really well.

Adam was calling out of concern for me. He knew what was happening and congratulated me on everything I'd done to be able to see Sharon again. He and Sharon had become good friends over the week or so that they'd been at Best Friends together and he wanted to talk to me about her. It turned out that Adam knew me pretty well after having grown up in the same house for several years. Sure, he'd teased me relentlessly, but we were both Foundation kids, so we had each other's back.

He knew I was tightly wound. He knew I was awkward. He also knew I had a pretty rigid set of morals that I'd adopted and was determined to live by. He told me that Sharon might not be what I expected, that she was an outgoing, somewhat crazy, fifteen year old girl from Scotland and that she might come on a little strong. I asked Adam what he meant and he was more specific. "She's not an inexperienced kid who grew up in a sheltered cult, Display (Display was the shortened form of his favorite nickname for me: Garish Display—a play on my last name and which was really clever when you thought about it. Hence, my readers and friends are all part of the Garrish Army as a hat-tip to Adam. Love you and miss you, brother.)."

"What are you talking about?" I wasn't sure what he was getting at. I knew Sharon was different from me. I loved that about her.

"She likes to party, man. And if she says she wants to party with you, specifically, she's not talking about dancing or confetti." He stopped and let that sink in. "She's talking about sex."

That set me right back. I was seventeen. I'd had plenty of thoughts along those lines, but had no experience and frankly was terrified of the very thought. And I had no intention of doing anything of the sort when Sharon and I met. "Oh."

"It's just a warning. She is really into you. Be cool. Be you. She likes you a lot." He laughed. "She's a great girl."

And we hung up. And I overthought every word he had said. The idea intrigued me, but I knew myself well enough to know I didn't want that at all—at least not right away. I loved Sharon and had loved her for years.

A day later, Mark drove into Faith Canyon late in the evening.

A small, energetic, blond girl dropped out of the Toyota pick up truck and saw me. "Jared!"

"Sharon!"

We hugged, both of us feeling the awkward, totally bizarre pressure of the moment. We hugged for a long time and she was just great. We went for a walk and then I showed her the fun flat-bottomed boat we rowed around on in the dirty old pond.

We spent the evening talking and walking around and talking and sitting near each other and having a bit of trouble connecting.

You know where this is going. Four years of pining and yearning could never really deliver anything except too much pressure between two kids who didn't really know each other and who were really different.

But by gosh she had a delightful accent. And when the evening ended she gave me a sweet, sort of sad kiss on my cheek and hugged me tight and said she was so happy to see me again finally. I said the same and we all went to our beds and slept.

And the next day she spent with Isaac, who had been sent to Faith Canyon a week before. Isaac was taller, leaner, and had a very different set of rules he lived by. He and Sharon hit it off well. She'd also hit it off well with Mark, who also had different rules and a bit more experience than me. I watched her hang out with both of them and hated myself for not knowing how to be the guy Sharon wanted. I crept around behind the three of them. When she and Isaac went off by themselves, my imagination went crazy. I was angry and disappointed and probably a little relieved, but I hated Isaac. Maybe if I'd had another day without these other two strapping teen boys who were better at this than me—

It didn't matter.

Mark left the next day, with Sharon in the passenger seat. We hugged tight, I think both of us a bit sad and grieving the loss of years of—whatever it had been. We stayed in touch for a while, but I still kick myself for losing touch. And for the week after, I was heartbroken and a seventeen-year-old boy who had no idea what I was doing so I lost myself in music and a narrow rushing stream and cried and shouted and then moved on. I probably wrote poetry that is thankfully lost in the dust of the years.

I've tried to find the Scottish Chick several times, but have failed. I'd love to reconnect and see how she's doing. It's so strange to not know what became of the girl I was so infatuated with for so long. I look back on those years and shake my head at myself, but what else was I going to do? What else did I have?

In that last year of pining, I finally revealed to some trusted kids the secret I'd been keeping. I told the twins and their sister Asta. Vanessa as well, since Asta and Vanessa were together so much. It turned out that sharing things and making myself vulnerable made me more interesting and made me a nicer person who wanted to connect with others. And that's really what brought

Asta, Vanessa, and me together so we could spend Sunday mornings near a pond, talking and listening to music and leaving vivid memories of a terrifying swan indelibly scratched into my brain.

Read on, friends. Here's where I found out what friendship was really like.

Chapter 19

Swans, Morricone, Music, and Covering

Forming actual friendships in the Foundation was hard for me. There was too much chance of people tattling for whatever reason. I felt like I should be able to trust the other Foundation kids—after all, we were growing up in the same miserable situation. So we should by all rights have each other's back.

Such was just not the case. Tattling happened lots. I never really understood why. It seemed like such a fundamental betrayal, since everybody knew that there was a constant war going on: adults versus kids. Did I know what we were fighting for? In my mind, we were fighting to be ignored and not give the capricious and too-often grumpy adults reasons to yell at us. But we hadn't started the war. The first blood was shed, literally, by the adults. Sure, there were a few adults who seemed nicer, but even those nice ones could lose their tempers.

So there was always a conflict—some kind of tension. And entrusting my secrets or safety to other kids always seemed like such a dangerous thing to do. I'd seen enough tattling from traitors in our ranks that I kept myself apart from things as much as I could. I still participated in the activities that the kids did as part of growing up: swimming lessons which I failed completely at, volleyball in the YWCA, and flag football. These were all PE activities over the years with Faith School. I did these things and more.

But I never initiated activities with other kids. I never sought out Mark or Isaac or Manuel or anybody else. I never put together a game of four-square or a chess tournament or an epic game of Axis & Allies. The very idea was foreign to me.

As I got older, the idea began to shine differently. I had been realizing that my loneliness was somewhat self-imposed. I was surrounded by kids sharing similar experiences; I should try

to connect and form relationships. I thought of them as siblings, essentially, so I should try a little harder to be a brother to them.

Moving to Richardson was a helpful catalyst for the change I'd been wanting to make. The girls' house, Chattington, and the boys' house, El Santo, were only a few blocks apart. I'd grown fairly bored with the boys. Isaac was fine, mostly harmless, and sometimes a bit snobby. We had very little in common and got along well. Manuel was artistic and still learning to play his guitar. He was still irritating and whiny, but we got along ok when necessary. Usually we didn't spend much time together. Mark was still my best friend out of the boys, more or less. We weren't spending much time together, but we talked some and he seemed to have outgrown his more chaotic tendencies. I shared a room with little Dennis, who I had no interest in being friends with. He was loud and spoiled by his mom, and he was also curious and a really neat kid upon reflection. He wanted to be a paleontologist. I could be a judgmental jerk sometimes.

Overall, I just had no particular interest in trying to connect with the boys. I'd lived in the same house as them for years and I figured we had become as close as we ever would. Then Mark said the thing one day and that was pretty much the end of things for us for several years. We were arguing about something in El Santo. He was across the house, near the end of the hall off which our bedrooms lay. He shouted something along the lines of, "At least I'm not a stupid drug dealer like Daniel was."

I was standing in the living room, about to head out the back door when he said that. I paused and considered what he'd just said and the outright meanness that would lead a person to say such a thing. It made my skin crawl. I also mulled my choices in that moment. I could let it slide or I could go make sure he never said anything like that again.

I decided to make sure he knew to never say anything like that ever again. Saying nothing, I basically teleported across the house. He didn't see me coming. His back was to me, so I spun him hard and threw him against the wall between the doorways to our rooms. I grabbed his shirt and shoved him hard into the wall and lifted, flexing every muscle fiber in my body. I got him an inch or so off the ground and leaned in close to his face, shoving harder and making sure he knew exactly how strong I was. "Never say his name again. Never."

He sputtered something stupid.

I shoved and lifted harder. He gulped as my fists gathered against his neck and under his chin. His hands flailed ineffectively at me. "Never." I seethed into his face for a moment longer.

I dropped him and turned and walked away. The next day we still exchanged words like normal. Nothing had changed. But he never said anything like that to me again.

So I was pretty much done trying to get closer to the boys. I liked them, but didn't know what the next step would be. We all lived in our own rhythms and worlds. Why should I bother?

Man I was a putz.

But at least I didn't totally stop trying. I'd been making some attempts at forming friendships with the girls too. It started with Ananda and Alicia, who were both a lot younger than me, but were fun and silly and it was nice to play with them. We got along really well. I still remember what Alicia swore to me after we'd been made to watch the film version of "Lord of the Flies."

Next I started talking more with Asta and Vanessa. I told them about Sharon, keeping my stronger feelings to myself, but saying that we liked each other and were hoping we could see each other again and figure out what came next. We talked a lot, with plenty of griping about the Foundation and life in it.

This all happened in the months following our move to Chattington. We were all growing up. I was nearly seventeen, along with Asta and the rest of the older boys. Vanessa was nearing sixteen and the slightly younger girls were in their early teens. Hormones are a thing and they were real for us. As far as I know, none of my group ever got together... in that way. However, we lived near the Promenade movie theater which was staffed by youths our age, and we had made friends quickly the first time we went there.

I described much earlier how I ended up visiting there a bit, chatting with Todd and Echo and a few others, becoming close friends with Jena, and spending more time than I should have with the new, extra-cult friends. I wasn't the only one, and really, I was doing it the least. But it seemed like I was the most adept at getting there and getting back home seamlessly. I only needed someone to cover for me and watch my back that one time.

Everybody else needed someone covering for them nearly constantly. Some of the kids moved from visiting friends at the Promenade to visiting other friends at the Blockbuster and the Borders Books down the road. More than one of the kids wound up actually dating someone outside of the Foundation, all unbeknownst to the adults in the group. One of the girls even had a pregnancy scare since she had no actual idea how sex and pregnancy worked—nor did the rest of us. I still wish I'd known more so I could have comforted her.

But how did they get away with being away from the houses for so long? We covered for each other. And since I did this stuff the least, I found myself covering for the other kids a lot. I got very good at keeping the adults' attention focused on something else long enough for the wayward kid to return and find a way into their room without being seen. I got so good at this, and so accustomed to being the one people turned to, that I got really angry when one of the girls

got caught and yelled at for spending time at the Promenade. This cascaded down as the Promenade becoming off-limits. We ignored that, but were a lot more careful.

However, when that girl got in trouble, I found out about it and made a point of tracking her down and having a chat. I told her she'd been irresponsible, that she should have talked to me beforehand so we could have made a plan to keep her out of trouble. Didn't she know better? I was the webmaster, baby.

I was proud of being so good at keeping kids out of trouble. I felt responsible for them and that I could keep the adults' prying eyes off them so that their lives could be at least a bit better.

These activities brought us kids closer, particularly me with the older girls. We gained a mutual respect for each other and found out we were real people. And that led to Asta, Vanessa, and I beginning a regular Sunday morning ritual.

We wanted some special time to ourselves, and we were teenagers so drama was in our blood. So we began to have a breakfast picnic at a park a short bike ride from Chattington. The park was a big greenway with lovely trees and a big pond. The pond had geese and even some swans. We would bring some bread and jam and cheese, spread out a blanket, and have a nice few moments. Conversation ranged from our various adventures out of the Foundation to music and to much more. I would bring my boom box along, stuffed with big D batteries, and we would play music softly while doing this.

The most common music we played was the soundtrack from *The Mission*, that powerful movie from the late 80s. The soundtrack is Ennio Morricone at his very best. It is haunting, elevating, and thoughtful. We loved it.

So there we three were, lounging on our picnic blanket, eating bread with jams and cheese, talking and creating a memory so vivid it will never leave me. Especially since there was often a very aggressive swan who wanted bread. It wanted bread and it would not be stopped.

That is, it would not be stopped unless I did my newly discovered and patented move. This consisted of me pulling off my sweatshirt or jacket and spinning it in fast circles in front of me, advancing on the aggressive water fowl. This typically scared it away. But not always, and not always for the entire time. The thing would screech and hiss and try to get at our food, even when it was all gone. We would stumble backward, terrified of the creepy freaking bird. What is with swans, anyway? We kicked at it and shouted but we only discovered my jacket trick after totally retreating at least once.

I wonder if swans are good eating. Probably.

These jaunts were great. We felt like adults, going on a small trip on our own and taking care of ourselves and talking about important things. The music was a perfect soundtrack. Sometimes I would even hook my boom box's handle over my bike's handlebars and play the music while we rode to and from the park. What a sight I imagined we were. Three strange, compelling figures biking on Sunday mornings, in light rain, overcast skies, sun, and any other weather north Dallas threw at us. With Morricone or Peter Gabriel or Eurythmics accompanying us, we had to be a dramatic scene.

Music was important to us. It drew us together, provided subjects for us to talk about, and often gave us openings to learn new artists or tease someone about their tastes. When we were all piled in the van, the radio was almost always on and modern music played. Just like radio stations today, the stations then played the same catalogue of songs over and over again. One of the songs that got everybody singing was The Escape Club's "Wild Wild West." That one-hit

wonder. We sang along and when the lyrics got to, “Gimme gimme wild west, gimme gimme safe sex,” we would sing along, but everyone would yell “beep” at a high pitch instead of saying “sex.” Because, you see, “sex” was a bad word. A massive taboo. We knew it should never be spoken of. Woman and man parts were never to be discussed or acknowledged. And paranoia around the kids pairing off was on the rise always.

I think music was a particularly important escape for many of us, as it often is for teens and adults. It’s a powerful and effective way to express ourselves. And for a group of kids going through a particularly unique and often lonely and painful experience, finding music that really spoke to our souls was important. I still remember the first time I heard Big Country’s “Big Country,” their huge international hit. The words echoed a yearning and a craving for something pure and good that I felt daily.

I’ve never seen you look like this without a reason

Another promise fallen through

Another season passes by you

I never took the smile away from anybody’s face

And that’s a desperate way to look

For someone who is still a child.

In a big country dreams stay with you

They’re still my favorite band.

For me, one of the most important songs of my teen years was the Moody Blues’ “I Know You’re Out There Somewhere.” I heard this for the first time during my first pining summer for Sharon. I was sitting in the sunken common space of the Village at Best Friends and the opening bars for this song came on and I was caught up in the haunting electronic chords and notes.

Justin Heyward's soft, emotional vocals washed over me. I found the tape as soon as we got back to Dallas and played it endlessly. I still know every word of every song on that album.

Sometimes music was the soundtrack and of my days and moments and sometimes it served as an expression of my mood. And sometimes it was a tool for me to use to get attention. I still don't know really what I was thinking I was doing, but I spent a few nights wandering the residential streets between El Santo and Chattington with music blasting. I popped batteries in my boom box, inserted Peter Gabriel's incredible album "So", and hit play. I turned the volume up and walked for a half hour or so, sometime around nine at night when it was dark, blasting my Peter Gabriel and acting like I was in some kind of trance. I paid no attention to the people whom I could see from the corner of my eye poking their heads out of their doors or looking out through front windows. I just kept on walking, "Red Rain" pouring out of the speakers, possibly even breaking a noise ordinance.

I should point out that we got a weekly allowance of a couple dollars. I would typically save it for a few months, then go out and buy a tape I'd been wanting. That's how I got Mr. Mister's "Welcome to the Real World," Tracy Chapman's self-titled album, lots of Phil Collins, and a couple Big Country CDs later in life. That allowance was limited, so most of the time when I wanted to have my favorite songs on tape, I would keep my boom box near at hand and tuned to the right radio station with a blank tape cued up and ready. If a song I wanted came on, I would hit record as fast as I could. I wound up with hundreds of songs on several tapes, most of them with the first few notes missing.

I spent most evenings for three years in a garage, either in central Dallas or in Richardson, with music blasting while I worked out. I mostly kept my boom box tuned to my favorite radio station, with Shadove Stevens DJing a national rock show a lot of the time. When I tuned into a

different station, if I thought ahead, I could call the DJ and request a song. Which is how I learned that “Oh Sherrie” was not by the same guy who sang “St. Elmo’s Fire” (John Parr). In fact, “Oh Sherrie” was by Steve Perry, which came as no surprise since I loved Journey.

The radio kept me going. The music filled the enclosed space, putting up a barrier that the outside world couldn’t intrude into. For the last couple of years, the twins had moved on, so I had no workout partners and was on my own. As I preferred. I would build a story in my head where I was the hero and I had to win at a bunch of physical tasks in order to rescue my true love. The tasks included lifting weights enough times or doing enough pull-ups. I always finished up with a long session on the heavy bag, pounding away and dancing around like a real boxer, throwing out combos and dodging heavy roundhouse punches.

I can’t say much more to try to get across how important music was to me growing up. I spent hours in my room with headphones on, listening to Springsteen on repeat and Van Halen as loud as I could manage. Taking that time to let the music fill my veins and seep into my skin and elevate my soul—that kept me sane at times I needed it the most. Journey’s love ballads kept my hope for true love alive. Chicago’s versatility wowed me. Boston, Styx, Kansas, the Clash, Big Audio Dynamite, David Bowie, Queen, the Smiths, Michael Jackson, Beastie Boys, Foreigner, AC/DC, and even some country all made up the soundtrack of my childhood. There were lots more of course. Doesn’t everyone have a giant line-up of music that means something powerful to them?

The summer of my escape had a soundtrack too, by the way. That soundtrack consisted of Survivor, Skid Row, Guns n Roses, and a few others. That was a good summer.

Chapter 20

Summer Escape

Getting out of the cult was a combination of opportunity, planning, and luck. I'd been wishing I could find a way out, maybe even somehow wind up with a family. As far as I knew, every kid in the Foundation wanted to get out. Most of the time we talked it was about how incredibly lame it was and how stupid Focus class was.

The truth is that it was not one hundred percent awful. I've tried to share some of what was all right, including making movies for art class and trying almost every visual art medium. We did screen printing, block printing, sculpting, papier mache, oil painting, watercolor, sketching, and lots more. I tried and tried to learn how to draw the human body but messed up proportions far too much, partly because I was too focused on my drawing and not understanding the actual shapes of the model I was drawing from. The models, of course, were other kids.

Sculpting became my favorite art medium. And I became pretty good at acting. I had developed a wide array of practical skills related to construction. I had spent years transforming myself, in and out, into a person I was proud of.

Except when I stopped and thought for a quiet moment, I found empty spots. It's hard to describe it better than 'empty spots.' It was like I was a book with all its pages, but a lot of the pages had blank spaces where words should have been. Words that would have told the story completely and would have filled in important details. But they weren't there. And it wasn't like they were erased, it was more like they had never been written. So the story the book told was choppy and inconsistent and hard to understand.

Which is a pretty good description of me at that point of my life. I think I've got a lot of those words filled in by now. Writing this story does some of that.

The point here is that I knew my future was not in the Foundation. I had freed myself from the power of Lucia and all the other Founders of the cult. They could still affect my physical location and my day to day and how I spent much of my time, but I had freed myself emotionally from the turmoil of living that way. And I knew our life was strange and off. I saw families around me and sometimes I was jealous and sometimes I thought they might be jealous of how unique my life was.

What it all came down to was that I felt ready to get out by the time I was seventeen. I'd been pining for the Scottish Chick for years and hopefully the coming summer would see an end to that—and if I had my way it would end in us starting a life together.

As 1991 unfolded, life in Richardson was straightforward and was getting more interesting, albeit within limits. We got up, went to school, came home, and I covered for the kids who went out and hung with friends and started dating and so on. I walked in the rain, soaked up the amazing thunder and lightning storms, ran around the track down the block late at night, wrote letters to Sharon, listened to a lot of music, tried to get my dreams to include Sharon, and started handwriting a book. A novel after the pattern of *The Bourne Identity*. I wanted to write spy novels like Robert Ludlum. I put together a solid outline, mapped out lots of exotic locations for my hero to visit in his chase to stop the bad guys, and even reached out to the Grossmunster Cathedral in Zurich, Switzerland. They sent me a big book with the layout of the cathedral and lots of information about the exhibits. It was awesome.

Between writing, music, sometimes hanging out with Jena at the Promenade and covering for other kids, and letters between Sharon and me, my life was settled. But I still wanted out. I was getting tired of seeing the other kids get in trouble and get yelled at. I was tired of adults treating me like an enemy and like someone who was only a bother. By this time, I was

managing the shopping and all the cooking in El Santo, the boys' house. We had a couple grown men in the house with us, one of them John, who was an accomplished musician and who formed the Faith School kids into a choir. We were pretty good. But back to being tired of being dismissed and treated like dirt.

Finally, I realized that I could do more than just fume when I saw Jason looming over a small kid, yelling at them for some surely terrible sin they'd committed. So I began to noisily step into the room where he was doing that. The first time I did this, he was yelling at his daughter, Johanna. I walked in and leaned against the doorframe. He noticed me and told me to leave. I smiled at him and shook my head and said "No." It took a few rounds of this and he gave up. I continued doing this when I could, just being there and watching so that he knew he couldn't get away with his abuse. I wanted to threaten him that if he ever touched another kid, he would answer to me, but I didn't have the guts.

Then something unexpected happened. Mark got caught sneaking out or something and got in huge trouble. I think whatever he was doing it was with a girl, so it was a nuclear moment. He was banished from the Dallas branch to Faith Canyon, to presumably do hard labor there. The Foundation had been trying to sell Faith Canyon for years by this time, so the work there was to keep it maintained so that potential buyers could see it.

In any case, from one day to the next, Mark was gone. I heard that over the next few weeks, he started driving and was even being trusted to drive between Faith Canyon and Best Friends. Did he have a license? I had no idea. Did it matter? But the life he must have been living in Faith Canyon had to be better than the humdrum abuse I was seeing and still experiencing sometimes. Granted, I was doing all right, but the prospect of my routine going on for another year or even longer was terrifying and depressing.

So I figured I might be able to get out. If I was careful and planned right and got lucky, I could actually get out. Or at least start out by getting away from Dallas. And closer to Best Friends and the outside hope of seeing Sharon again.

That is when I decided to stop letting things slide. That's also when I started deliberately getting on the radar of the adults. All of them. Until then, I was on regular sort of speaking terms with one of them: Joanna. She was the one who had tried to comfort me at Daniel's memorial. She would come home from funding and while she counted, I sometimes gave her a shoulder rub. She was tense and really appreciated my help.

One evening an adult decided that she didn't like that I played with her daughters sometimes. I was turning seventeen soon and her daughters were early teens at most and she just thought it was inappropriate. I horsed around with the girls and we talked and we played games and it was simple, innocent fun. I appreciated their lack of cynicism and how much they looked up to me. Their mother told the girls that they should tell me I shouldn't be spending time with them because it was inappropriate. I found that silly. Why didn't the adult say this to my face?

So I went downstairs and found her counting her funding take with the rest of the adults. They were at the table at the back of the big dining/sitting room in Chattington. I tapped her on the shoulder and took a small step back. "Nicole, can I talk to you?"

She looked up at me in surprise and stood. "What is it?" She was tired from a long day and she was probably in for the nightly lecture from Lucia about whatever the woman screamed at the adults about. We kids heard these a lot.

"I just wanted to make sure you know," I stood tall, my hands loose at my sides, "that if you have something to say to me, you can talk directly to me. You don't have to send a message through your daughters."

She blinked in surprise. From the corner of my eye, I saw several of the adults take notice.

“Jared, you need to be careful of how you talk to me, young man.”

“No, I want to be respectful.” I made sure I wasn’t acting threatening. I wanted to keep my voice as mild as possible. “In exchange, I would ask the same.” I knew this was formal sounding, but that was my safe place. “If you have something to say to me, please say it to me. You don’t have to bring the girls into it.”

“You have no call talking to me like this.” Nicole was tired and I think she couldn’t believe someone she saw as a kid was talking to her with this kind of calm. “And I don’t appreciate you interrupting my work.” She was getting angry.

I nodded. “Please, continue.” I pointed at her chair. She was totally refusing to discuss the issue I’d brought to her. She was just taking it personally. “I would appreciate it if you would talk to me directly next time.” I turned and headed out the door, making for my bike and then riding to El Santo. My heart was pounding, sweat beaded my forehead and dripped down my back under my shirt, and my hands shook. But not with fear or anything close—with triumph. I’d done it. Nicole was a nice person, although she had a temper. She was not the lumbering yell machine that Jason was, or the passive-aggressive guilt-infuser that Lucia was, but she was a good start. A fairly easy start.

I kept doing this. Stepping in and interrupting Jason’s furious diatribes. Talking to adults plainly and verbally demanding respect, which was always interpreted as disrespectful by them. In doing this, I made myself more visible. I became a troublemaker. On purpose.

Of course, I was a troublemaker only because I was pissing the adults off by showing them at every turn that I had thrown off the fear they’d used to intimidate me. I had become my own person, in control and frankly able to control my interactions with them.

Why did I do this? I wanted to be banished to Faith Canyon too. I figured if Mark could push Lucia to the point where she felt like she couldn't do anymore, I could do the same. But in my way, not by following his example.

Did it work? It sure did. I got word in mid-June of 1991 that I was going to be sent to Faith Canyon to help maintain it. Nobody said I had pushed Lucia and other adults to be angry with me, but I knew it. Things were getting a little weird in Dallas anyway, so I was able to take advantage of a growing feeling of chaos and add to it.

I had a week's notice. I was told I would be there for a month then come back to Dallas. By then we already knew that we wouldn't be going to Best Friends that summer, for reasons that were never made clear. I knew that part of it was that Sharon was going to be there and I couldn't be allowed to cross paths with her. I've already described where that went.

So I was off to Faith Canyon with a return to Dallas in my near future. And I had a week to get ready, which in their mind was plenty. As far as Lucia and the rest of the adults knew, I would just need to make sure I brought enough changes of underwear and clothes and that would be that.

They were so wrong.

I packed carefully, making sure I took everything that I would need for the foreseeable future. I put my boom box in the duffle and stuffed clothes all around it both to protect and hide it. I made sure I had the tapes and CDs I would need in my backpack. I stuffed a few books in there too, and put as many clothes in both bags as I could squeeze in without bursting the zipper.

For the rest of my stuff, which consisted of winter clothes, books, collected trinkets, comics, letters and cards, notebooks with my poetry and stories, artwork, music, and other things a cult

kid acquires over 17 years, I'd been preparing for this for a few months. I will mention that I did NOT pack the letters Sharon had sent away—I brought those with me for careful re-reading.

I had been carefully acquiring boxes and a couple rolls of tape over the last little while. I had collapsed them and hidden them under my bed. I had about ten under there, and a roll of packing tape too.

So I made sure nobody else was in the house when I did the rest of my packing. I put together the boxes and filled them with my stuff, packing them tightly, but carefully. I wanted to make sure none of them were too heavy, and that they could be thrown around without breaking anything. I ended up with nine full boxes, about the size of a U-Haul book box, all taped tightly and with every corner and edge sealed. I wrote all over them: “Jared’s Stuff.” And “Please Send to Jared When Called For.” And “Property of Jared Garrett.”

Then I stacked them all neatly against the wall where my things had been hanging in my closet. It took up surprisingly little space. I draped a blanket over them and closed the closet door and prayed nobody did anything terrible with my stuff. But if they did, I had the absolutely necessary things and I would be fine. I also put a masking tape label on my bike so it was obvious which one of the many was mine.

I did all this because I had no intention of ever returning to Dallas. I was only seventeen, but I felt like I could find a way out of the cult, and a place to land and get my feet under me. I was leaving and being sent to Faith Canyon was going to make it easier. I imagined myself putting on my backpack, slinging my big duffle over a shoulder, and heading out to the highway outside of Faith Canyon. I would put out my thumb and head generally East. Or West. Somewhere away from the Foundation. And eventually I would find a place to settle, maybe I would finish high school, and I would send a delivery service to pick up my things. Or I would drive up in an

awesome car one day, walk into El Santo, ignore everyone, and grab my things and disappear again.

My plan was not specific and that was fine. I was leaving and that was all that mattered.

The day came and I left. I don't remember saying goodbye to anyone. Which is truly awful and very telling about how much work I still had to do to stop self-isolating.

I don't remember who drove the car to Faith Canyon, but one long nap and a lot of silence later, there I was. I'd been to Faith Canyon once before when I was much younger. I didn't remember how long the driveway was, nor had the singularly idyllic location in a pocket canyon made an impression on me. There were a couple orchards with peaches and other summer fruit, a small lake, a river on one end of the property, several fields that cows came and grazed in, two residences, and a big barn/outbuilding. I soon found out that the orchards were swarmed by skunks every night. I was never hit, but I sure was scared of them.

I unloaded and Mark and I greeted each other and lo and behold, he had grown up some. Responsibility had done him good. He was still goofy and chaotic-neutral, but he kept his cool and was comfortable being a bit of a leader there. He knew the work that needed done there and he made sure it got done. Until I got there, it was just him, but he took charge and we divided up the work evenly and I learned a lot. I drove a tractor, a backhoe, nearly killed us learning to drive a stick shift pick-up, and we worked together to drag a massive chain between a truck and the backhoe to dredge the lake.

I also took over the cooking and was able to use the minimal budget to try some cool recipes. I made delicious beer-battered onion rings. I learned to bake a little.

I harvested fruit, eating the biggest, most amazing peach I've ever encountered. I dealt with angry birds, since the woman who was the caretaker of Faith Canyon was also the bird rescue

lady. Interestingly, her name was Sharon. She was a bit daft, had a temper, and overall stayed out of our way. I used a jackhammer to tear out a big portion of a foundation so plumbing could be replaced, herded cattle through the property to the fields on the other side, repaired fences, and plenty more.

Faith Canyon will always be a bright memory for me. I grew stronger, more confident, and finally found resolution to the Scottish Chick story.

Oh, yeah, and I went on a Vision Quest. Sort of.

Okay, let's unpack that. I don't want to be appropriating another culture, but this is what Steven called it.

Let's back up a smidgen.

After the Sharon event, Mark, Isaac, and I were three teen boys working to keep this ranch up. We cleaned floors, big glass doors, and the grounds. We stayed pretty busy. And at night we just went our separate ways and did whatever. The nearest town to Faith Canyon was Kirkland, Arizona. This town consisted of a post office, a bar, a tiny school, a few houses, and a train track running through it all. There was not much night life—not that I would have taken advantage of it if there had been. I don't know if Isaac and Mark ever went to the bar.

Come on. It was 1991, we were in a small town. I doubt the bartender would have ID-ed them.

In any case, a guy from the Foundation decided that we three boys needed a sensei. He was Steven. He was a really neat man—still is as far as I know—whose dedication to the Foundation was completely enigmatic to me. He came from Hawai'i and was a lot of fun. He showed up in Faith Canyon and stayed for a week, gathering us boys together his first day there to tell us that he was there to guide us to become men.

I hoped he was going to teach us martial arts, but no luck.

He wanted us to go on spiritual journeys and experience things that would push our spirits to reach out *and* inward. He wasn't there to get us to believe in God. He wanted us to find something in ourselves to believe in.

While he was there I asked him to read my poetry. He did. He was kind about it and pointed out a couple that were actually pretty good and suggested I publish them. He was the second and last person in the Foundation to notice my writing and encourage me.

Back to our journeys. He started by teaching us to meditate. He was surprised to see that I already knew how to and encouraged me to keep up the practice.

Next he had us go on Vision Quests. He described what a Vision Quest was from Native American heritage and told us that we would not be doing anything so extreme and potentially deadly. He wanted us to fill a two-liter water bottle in the morning, gather some materials we might make a shaded shelter with, and head out by 8AM. We should come back by 8AM the next morning. Twenty-four hours. No food. Just the one bottle of water. So it would be grueling, but not deadly. Unless we came in contact with a rattlesnake or something else poisonous.

The thing is that we were pretty good outdoors. We'd been hiking in the desert through several summers and when you're confident enough to flick a scorpion out of your tent, you're probably ok for a day.

Isaac went first. We saw him sneaking down late at night to get more water. Otherwise he acquitted himself well. Mark and I spotted his hangout spot on a ledge about three-fourths up the mesa on the west side of the ranch.

I went the next day. I filled my water bottle, rolled up some sheets in a long, adjustable luggage strap, made sure I had my pocket knife and some sunscreen, and wore a sweatshirt. I

hiked up the slope of the mesa to the west and lit out across the top, realizing it wasn't a mesa. Faith Canyon was in a pocket canyon, so this was ground level. I hiked a mile or two, thinking about lots of things, including my non-specific plan to get out on my own. I realized that I had gone through too much water and I knew I would need more, so I turned around. I didn't want to climb down the slope in the dark to refill my bottle.

I found a nice flat space on a big rock area, somewhat softened by a layer of sand. I went to work and cut some tall, straight yucca sticks and used my luggage strap to fasten them into a teepee shape. Then I draped my sheets over it, took off my sweatshirt and balled it up, and sat in my shade.

You'll never believe what I did next. I meditated. I did my best to put my thirst out of my mind through the mental exercise. It helped for an hour or so, then I decided to take a nap. I used my sweatshirt as a pillow and had a very nice nap of a couple hours in my perfect shade. I was really proud of the shade. Isaac had said he'd kept moving to find any shade he could on his ledge. I had outsmarted the sun.

When I woke from my nap, I found three turkey vultures circling a few hundred feet above me. I laughed and stood and stretched and they flew away. My watch said it was mid-afternoon and I only had a few gulps of water left. I picked my way down the slope and opted to refill my water at the river. While there, I dunked my face and head and cooled my feet and mediated a while longer. Eventually I climbed back up to my shelter and spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening daydreaming and meditating. I went for another hike as the temperature dropped and the stars had no trouble lighting the open scrub desert. The thick tapestry of stars I saw that night has never been matched in my life. I spent the night in my shelter, sleeping fitfully with my

sweatshirt as a pillow. In the wee hours, I took my shelter down, wrapped up in the sheets, and went back to sleep.

As the sun rose, I woke and stretched. I felt deliciously empty. I hadn't ever done anything like this before, despite how much time I spent in my own head growing up. My head was as clear as it had ever been. I wasn't worried, wasn't thinking about Sharon, wasn't thinking about what other people thought of me. I hadn't had a vision, but the experience is one I'll never forget. I broke my meager camp and went back down to the house, feeling pretty good about myself. The sun was well up by the time I got back.

"You're going to get sick." Mark caught me going in as he was coming out of the house on some errand.

"What?" I stopped and looked at him quizzically.

"We saw you come down and get water from the river. You can't do that. You'll get the squirts." He laughed in his very Mark way.

I laughed too. "We'll see."

I did not, in fact, get the squirts.

After Mark's Vision Quest, which he cut short because he didn't want to sleep outside, Steven gathered we boys together. "Next is hot coals."

We were surprised and doubtful, but he insisted we needed to master ourselves and do it. The next evening, after Mark, Isaac, and I had spent the day joking about how we were going to walk on burning coals, Steven gathered us again in the fading light. He had started several bags of coal on fire and then banked it to get them all red hot. Then he spread them into a thin space about two feet wide and eight feet long. The coals were quickly becoming covered in light, gray ash.

Steven told us to meditate and center and breathe. Then to simply walk across. Not quickly, not slowly, just normally. We were supposed to acknowledge the heat, but not let it bother us.

It was a lot like the acceptance step, but with our feet and potentially injurious coals.

I did it. I don't remember if the others did, although Isaac probably did out of pride and Mark might not have because he was smart.

I did not burn my feet. I probably got lucky because the coals must have cooled a lot. The uncomfortable part was the knobby chunks pressing unevenly into the bottoms of my feet. The heat wasn't bad. It was over quickly and the sand of the driveway was cool and soft.

The last activity Steven had us boys do before he went back to Best Friends was to spend an evening meditating together. Our purpose was to seek deeply inside and try to uncover any special gifts we might have. I was happy to do this. I'd been reading comics and fantasy books for a lifetime so I wanted magic and extra-sensory gifts to be real. I breathed, emptied my mind, and let it all go. Soon I came out of my trance and told Steven I had some kind of intuition and vision about circumstances and people around me. He nodded, proud of me, and confirmed I was on the right track.

This week was huge for me. I found myself well along in my journey to be at one with myself. A man had taken interest in helping and guiding me, like my father had for a couple months in Denver years before. It left a strong impression. That Vision Quest is an experience I will never forget. The white under-feathers of the turkey vultures circling above me are part of an image that is seared deeply as a milestone on my road to freedom and peace.

It was only a few days later that the rest of my escape came about. Magdalen called. She plainly informed me that the Dallas branch was going to be closed, that in fact all the branches were going to be closed, and everybody was going to move to Angel Canyon/Best Friends to

focus on the animal rescue operations. She said that some of the adults were going to leave and in the cases where they had kids, they would be taking their kids with them.

She pointed out that I had a choice. She had talked to Enoch, my father, who was long out of the cult by then as I've mentioned, and he was fine being an option. I could choose to go live with him, Evelyn, and my sister Emma in tiny little Kanab. Or I could do what most of the Foundation kids were going to do: stay in the Foundation, move into the Pueblo which was a house that Gabriel had lived in for a while before the Lake House. The kids who still hadn't finished school would attend school in Kanab and they would live at Best Friends and continue their lives in the Foundation.

I heard no hope in her voice, although maybe my excitement was too loud so I couldn't hear anything else. I did have the presence of mind to tell Magdalen that I would need to think about it for a day or two and that I would get back to her.

We hung up and Mark, Isaac, and I compared notes after they'd also had phone calls. We kept the phone busy that day as we talked to other kids, mostly already at Best Friends and got the actual truth.

The adults in Dallas had either staged a coordinated walk-out or they had all gotten exasperated at the same time. Because one day had dawned and like eighty percent of them had walked out. Some of them were long-term stalwarts. A couple of them paired up and got married and started lives together. This event had cascaded through the other branches, where apparently there was a lot of discontent.

Essentially the Foundation folded. Several original Founders, including Magdalen and others of her rank, were sent to branches to officially shut things down. The adults I talked to afterward described the arrival of the Founders and crew as the arrival of Mafia bruisers. They

came in, took no crap, were very forceful, and made sure anything of value was properly dealt with.

Within a couple weeks, Dallas was done. The branch closed and houses vacated.

But meanwhile, I called Magdalen back a day or two later and told her I would prefer to move in with Enoch, Evelyn, and Emma. She pointed out that I would have to sleep on the living room floor, since they didn't really have space for me. Their house was two bedrooms. I didn't care. I told her that it would be easy to move my things from Dallas to Best Friends; I had packed it all in boxes with my name clearly marked all over it. She wondered how this was the case. I didn't bother explaining and told her my bike would also be included in my personal things.

Somebody from Best Friends showed up a couple weeks later and picked me up. Yes, just me. Mark stayed in Faith Canyon and I lost track of him pretty fast. Isaac wound up going to Las Vegas I think, where his father stayed. His father. One of the original Founders. This guy had left.

I landed at Enoch and family's house on August 21, 1991. This was the exact day that high school was starting. I opted to wait a week to get my feet under me. Enoch took me to the school the next day to get me registered. They asked for a transcript from my previous school. When it came, that became a story and it was fun and that's where we'll start the next chapter.

Before that, a final note. My escape plan had worked. With a lot of luck thrown in. I was free. Done. The Foundation was no longer my life. The kids who had opted to stay in the Foundation and live at Best Friends and stay under the thumbs of those people—I didn't understand that. Still don't. I have theories, but I just don't get it. I've never asked why they

stayed—mainly worried that my questions would sound like an attack. I worry I would be unable to keep the still strong stupefaction out of my voice.

But I was free. I allowed myself to think that my defiance in Dallas had influenced the adults there to break free. That's a fantasy and nothing more. That said, I was out. No fanfare. No drama. No hitchhiking.

That's not the end of the story though. I still had freedom to fight for.

Chapter 21

Kanab High School

Enoch drove me to Kanab High School the two days after I arrived in Kanab. I was sleeping on the living room floor of his family's house. The family that would soon feel a bit like my family, but one that I never really felt entirely assimilated into. I think there was just too much time past. I was too grown and independent and interested in getting my life going—not being part of a family that was already a family without me. But they were kind and warm and Emma, my sister (Okay let's settle a thing. She was my half-sister, but I have never cared about that. She was my sister and that's that.) was great and I doted on her. And she semi-worshipped me. And her goofy little friends were adorable in their preoccupation with her handsome older brother who had just shown up.

They were my family. My strange family. My family where I called the parents by their first names. Evelyn wasn't my mother. I didn't really have one. Enoch was my father, but I knew him as Enoch. And that was that. And that's why I call him Enoch here. I want you to get the importance of when that changed.

He drove me across the town of 4500 people that was struggling to find its footing after the Kaibab Forest lumber industry had been shut down by environmentalists. That had been the major source of employment for the workers of Kanab. That and tourism. This was the first time I'd gotten a good look at the town. It had one stop light, no chain fast-food restaurants, a couple diner/café's, a bunch of gas stations, and some struggling tourist stops. It also had an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. The high school was near the south end of town.

Enoch and I rolled in and met with Gene Drake, the assistant principal. The principal was a transplant from another town. Mr. Drake was a big fellow with a diminutive wife and simply

gorgeous daughters. He asked for a transcript. We promised one and Enoch tracked Jonathan down in Dallas. Jonathan was the closest thing Faith School had to a school principal, so he put together a transcript for me. It's hard to not put quotes around 'transcript' in that sentence. Nobody in the history of Faith School had gotten a transcript yet because we never heard anything about grades after the first year. But now a bunch of us needed these things, so Jonathan did a great job putting together an official transcript. The grades on mine absolutely reflected my rank in the school. I hadn't been tested or pushed for years, except for with Algebra. I still freaking hate Algebra.

I started school just under one week after I arrived in Kanab. I rode my bike from the north end of town, where Enoch and family's house was, across town to the school it took roughly seven minutes to go the one and a half miles. My first class on that Monday, August 26th, 1991, was weight training. I met the Kanab High School football coach, who was the teacher of that class. I met six or seven of the football players and several other folks, like Tyson Johnson, a Geiger, a Glover, a Hamblin, and Jeremiah Tatum.

Arlyn Hafen was the teacher and coach. He was great and welcoming and put me right to work, showing me how to use the weight machines and introducing me to the guys. It was the single most perfect way for me to start school at Kanab High. Coach Hafen immediately saw how strong I was already and audibly lamented a few times that I hadn't been around for football tryouts a few months before. That was the best thing I had heard in almost my entire life. He said, "You're a strong kid," more than once. And the other boys welcomed me too.

The rest of the classes of that day went by in a blur. English class looked interesting, Government was full of really smart people who were unexplainably nice and interested in me,

and Geometry was taught by a youngish teacher with a razor-sharp sense of humor. Carolyn Hamblin is still the best teacher I ever had.

I was concerned about lunch that day. I had brought money and bought the school lunch. I'd seen this in the movies and this was where bullies showed up or where I fell over in the middle of the cafeteria and made an awful idiot of myself. But I turned from the counter, looked around, and saw two of the guys I'd had weight training with that morning sitting at a table of equally fit fellows. They saw me and invited me to join them. This, it turned out, was the jock table. I fit right in, but I wasn't Mormon like many of them and nor did I drink beer every night, like many of them. They asked a bit about growing up in the weird cult that had settled North of town, but lost interest as they turned their conversation to their next football game.

The next day, when I'd finished lunch, I cleared my things and found a quiet spot in a hallway and pulled open my notebook I was writing my story in. I got to work and looked up when I saw feet stop next to me. A pretty, curly brown-haired girl crouched with a big, sweet smile. "Whatcha doing?"

"Writing." I was ridiculously shy. Had no idea how to talk to pretty girls now that I could actually date, which was a terrifying prospect.

"Whatcha writing?" She settled to the hallway floor and we talked for a bit. She was Annie. She was friendly and soon the bell rang and I was able to break free from my awkward one- and two-word answers to her questions.

By the end of the week I had made some friends who were already friends with Tim, who had preceded me to Kanab by nearly a year. Tim was renting a small house in the middle of Kanab and had made friends with a bunch of kids who were basically the alternative group. They had funky hairdos, listened to weird music, and loved poetry. These friends consisted of Javen,

Spencer, Byron, Chris L, Chris M, Robert, and Nathan C. They had a club at school called the Green Party. They also all participated in the drama club, which they soon convinced me to join.

That senior year was fast-moving and full of a lot of milestones that were incredibly important to me. These milestones came because of dear, warm, wonderful friends. I traveled with them on drama competition trips, played a bunch of D&D, did some medieval reenactment stuff with them, and lots more.

It's hard to choose the things that belong in this part of the story. I'll start with the transcript thing. Gene Drake got my transcript. I heard indirectly that he was really unhappy with it. Why? Because my grades made me a contender for Valedictorian of my graduating class, and I was a newcomer. They had Kelly Pepper all set to be the Valedictorian and here I was threatening that. Kelly was smart, friendly, and a really great lady. I had zero beef with her. So the drama of grades was elevated for some folks in Kanab High whenever they came out.

And then final grades came out—at least the ones that would matter towards the Valedictorian race—and mine were higher than Kelly's. Javen was thrilled. He thought it was great that the provincial small-townners weren't getting what they wanted. He had a point. Kelly came and shook my hand, saying congratulations.

I truly did not care. School was a necessary bother. I did all my homework in the school, almost never having to bring it home.

When Mr. Drake saw the grades and that I was #1, the story goes that he sequestered himself in his office and found an error somewhere that gave me too many points. Whatever happened, I wound up as Salutatorian.

I truly did not care. Again. I had to give a speech at graduation. Since I was new to the school, it didn't make sense to do the usual Salutatorian speech about the class's history and such, so I

was designated to talk about our futures and so on. My speech pissed off everyone from Best Friends who was there.

More on that in the next chapter.

So that was the grades drama. The next drama was my introversion. My painful, incredibly awkward introversion. I would hang out with my friends and was able to keep up with conversation and we got along really well. When we talked poetry, that was my jam. We loved Dead Poets Society, the movie, and wanted to seize life and live big lives of beauty and meaning. Then they would play music and I had no skills whatsoever. I could barely keep a beat on simple bongos. I felt like I didn't quite fit in, which was true. They were warm and kind and were on a journey of faith, for the most part, back to the faith of their parents: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I was not on that journey. They invited me to come to church and I said no thanks and some of them talked about their faith and beliefs. That was great. I admired it. I loved them and had no use for their faith.

And I was friends with the jocks because I did weight training the entire year and was good.

Then there were the intellectuals. Javen crossed into all these groups, with some abrasion. I did too, but without the abrasion. He and I were really similar, except he was far more talented than me. I met his the girl he was going to marry before he did though. I had no intention toward Tara, but I met her first, man.

The intellectuals were Lori and Nate R and Billy and Kelly and Janea and Erin. They were academically focused and goals-driven and active politically. They were great to talk to and I wound up dating Erin for a minute or two after we graduated.

But all in all, I just felt like I still stuck out as incredibly awkward and stiff. Because I was awkward and stiff.

A few weeks after starting school, there was a post-football game dance. At the urging of Byron and Spencer and Chris L, I joined them and went to the dance. It cost two bucks. I went in, watched Byron dance with any girl he felt like asking. I saw Chris L dancing with his girlfriend, the German exchange student. Spencer.. I don't remember. But when the fast songs came on, they would let loose and swing and flail around the gym. I couldn't believe how un-self-conscious they were.

Girls came up to me in a steady stream, asking me to dance. The first one was Annie—you know, the one from earlier. She was very cute and very sweet. And I turned her down. I said, “I don't dance.” And I continued warming the bleacher bench like a freaking moron. The next girl was also lovely, offered a nervous smile, and asked me to dance. I declined again, the entire time wishing I would stop being so stupid but also rationalizing that I had no idea how to dance. I was seeing the dancing out there. Rocking in a slow circle, hands on hips, is not a complex dance. The very thought of my hands on a girl's waist was so terrifying to me that I nearly left.

I declined every girl who invited me to dance. Byron and Spencer tried to get me off my butt and dance, but I refused, hating myself the entire time.

I left early, realizing how asinine the whole experience was.

A few weeks later, the same friends got me to go to another after-game dance. I sat on the bench again. A couple girls asked me to dance. I declined the offers.

A fast-paced song came on. “Unbelievable” by EMF. Byron boogied up to me and grabbed me. “Let's go, man.”

I pulled back. “Nope. Not for me.”

“Bungalo, Jared! Bungalo!” This was the word that my friends used as a name for the flailing, leaping dance they did to fast-paced songs. “Get out here!” He got me to my feet.

Inside, I really wanted to relent, but the notion of letting any control go and doing this bungalo thing was terrifying. “No. You do it.”

Spencer and the others were already rocketing around the gym to the fast, techno beat.

Byron stared me down. “Dude. You need to bungalo. You don’t do it, you’ll regret it forever.”

I heard what he was saying and let him pull me out to the floor.

“Just close your eyes and let the music move you, man!” He flung his arms out and danced in a wild circle.

My heart was beating hard and sweat beaded my hairline. I swallowed and bounced on my feet a bit. No. Nope. This was stupid.

The thing was, I knew how to dance somewhat. Sometime years before, we’d been taught a basic waltz. And a while later we’d been taught a sort of salsa dance move. I had rhythm and I could sing, not that I’d ever shown that to anyone.

Byron danced by. “Bungalo, man!”

I shook my head, fought down the urge to leave. “Oh to hell with it.” I bounced and flapped my arms up, listening for the beat. EMF was still going. This had all happened in the space of less than a minute. I got the beat and—

Let go.

My breath caught in my chest as I let my movements go fluid and match the rhythm. Byron caught up at the exact perfect time, yelled something at me, and I stuck with him. The safety in numbers was the only reason I didn’t stop right away.

The song ended two of the shortest and longest minutes of my life later. I was exhilarated, out of breath, and was second guessing every second of what I’d just done.

Another fast song came on. We bungaloed again. And that, my friends, is how I broke the shell of my introversion. I didn't get rid of it completely, but by the end of the school year, I was flinging myself around that gym and asking any girl I felt like asking to dance. During the following summer, Tim, Byron, Spencer, and I went to college dances in Cedar City and St. George. We had a great time. People complimented our dancing. I didn't care. I was having fun.

It was during a dance, I think the third one I attended, that I did a terrible thing that resulted in a lovely thing. Byron, Chris L, Spencer and I were out of breath and sweaty from dancing, so we went out in the hall to get water. A conversation sprang up about girlfriends. I hadn't gone on any dates and the guys were giving me a hard time about that. Part of me was scared, and another part of me had no idea where to start. I'd met so many wonderful, stunningly beautiful girls that I had no idea who I should ask out.

Byron shared that he had girls he dated in several towns between Kanab and Salt Lake City. Chris L said the same. He was dating Claudia, the German exchange student to Kanab High, at the time.

In a moment of absolute jerkiness, I told Chris, "I could steal Claudia from you."

Chris raised an eyebrow. "No, you couldn't."

"I'll do it within three weeks." What on earth was I doing? I had no idea what was wrong with me, but Claudia and I got along well and had talked plenty. She came along to the gaming nights.

"Not a chance," Chris said. "You have zero experience and game."

I didn't back down. And I started talking to Claudia more. And Chris didn't like it at all, especially since she and I got along so well and laughed a lot together. So they broke up and Claudia and I were dating within three weeks of that stupid conversation.

Claudia was my first girlfriend. My first kiss. My first actual love. And my first heartbreak, since she went home after Fall semester. We were in love, as teenagers are, and spent a lot of time together. We talked a lot, I taught her to meditate—she was weirdly good at it—and we liked making out. We also agreed that we wouldn't be doing anything beyond making out.

I dated plenty in that year of high school. I dated plenty after it too. The girls were invariably sweet and smart and funny and great to spend time talking to. They were also all very good kissers and they taught me how to do it better. The girl I was dating as I made some important changes in my life turned out to not be good for me, but that ended fine despite some drama.

Kanab High had one more important major event in my journey. This is not meant to devalue all the amazing experiences I had there with the beautiful people of that school and that town. And you would think that joining my friends Byron, Spencer, Robert, and Nathan on their weekly Monday night pirate video and variety show that aired on a local channel would need to be on this list. And that was hilarious, goofy, awesome fun.

But giving that Salutatorian speech had effects I could not have predicted.

Some context first.

I did not completely abandon Magdalen when I left the Foundation. I went up to Best Friends a lot of Sundays. I got a ride from someone, usually one of my friends, and we would attend the Sunday service. One Sunday evening after a special service on Angel Landing, which is a beautiful, grassy natural amphitheater in Angel Canyon, Magdalen and I strolled around chatting, each of us carrying a wine glass.

I was seventeen. I drank wine. The Foundation people did not care.

Magdalen stopped at the edge of Angel Landing and got serious. "Some of the kids have said that Dallas wasn't a very good experience."

I nearly choked at the understatement, but instead nodded. I could tell this was important to Magdalen.

“They sound angry and bitter about it.” She sipped from her wine. “Are you? Angry or bitter about your time in Dallas? Or even in the Foundation?”

My life flashed before me. No, it really did. I loved Magdalen on some level I didn’t understand, considering she hadn’t been a mother to me since I was a baby. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She had given her entire life to this cult, this commune. I didn’t want to hurt her. But I had no interest in hiding the truth. Maybe it would help her to know how I felt, maybe even open her eyes a bit to the truth of my life. I shrugged. “A bit. It wasn’t great.”

“Dallas?” Her expression had hardened.

“Lucia was not very good to live with.” I tried to make sure it wasn’t about Magdalen.

“And your life in the Foundation?”

Crap. I closed my eyes for a moment. I shook my head. “I’m not bitter. Maybe a little upset and angry.”

Silence stretched between us. She glared at me. Then she said, “Well f*** off, Jared.” And she stalked away.

It took me a minute to gather myself. That hadn’t gone well. But I had to tell her the truth. I left and didn’t go back for a while. A couple months later I was back in her good graces. I read a poem at the Sunday service. I don’t know why, but they were happy to have me. I even hit the final gong a few times. The craziest thing was that one Sunday, a trio of beautiful Kanab High girls showed up to participate in the service. I had no idea they were coming. I was in the kitchen with Magdalen and Michael Mountain found me, eyebrows raised high, and said, “There are three pretty high school girls here looking for you.”

I laughed.

He was not joking, although he was very amused.

I hurried out to the main room of the Village and found the senior class royalty. Big, fluffy bangs, lots of makeup and really pretty and smart and friendly. Holy spit. I went up to them and said hello and asked why they were there. “Don’t you remember when we talked? You said you’d come to church if we came to yours.”

I guessed I had. I grinned and told them it was a deal. When the service was over, they smiled and nodded and said, “It was interesting,” and a week later I attended the LDS church down the road. It was boring. Nobody there sang out in a perfect tenor “The mark of the Beast is upon mankind” or anything even similar, so I found it dull.

In any case, there were no hard feelings between me and Magdalen and Best Friends. I slept on the living room floor of Enoch and Evelyn’s house. I got a ride to school every day from my friend Kristi. I played Anarchy Ball with my friends, played D&D, and even hosted it. I had started working for the thrift store Best Friends had opened in downtown Kanab to make a few bucks. Before long, I was the evening manager, working every night I wanted to from about five until closing time at ten. There was a nice big sitting space at the back of the store and that was where we usually played D&D.

But then I gave the Salutatorian speech at graduation and everything changed. I introduced myself to the gathered four hundred people and said, “I was born in Chicago, but moved to New York before I was one.” I paused and made a bemused face. “Come to think of it, I have no way of knowing if that’s true—they might be lying to me!”

It was a joke. I thought it was good. Most of the crowd knew it was a joke.

The Best Friends attendees, including Magdalen, were mortified. Word got to me before the weekend that I had offended everybody at Best Friends and was not welcome.

I never attended another Sunday service. That was the end of the cult for me. I sometimes think I should have made a clean break, but I really wanted to try to build a real relationship with Magdalen. I wanted to figure out how to be a son to her, as well as to Enoch and Evelyn.

Their weird offense at my harmless joke was the final straw that got me free from the cult. I had no use for religion anyway, but had been happy to help out at the services. I still didn't believe in God, thought any organized religion was a silly waste of time, and had decided the Foundation was a strange religion anyway. By that time its rituals were a mix of Pentecostal Christianity, Paganism, Jewish tradition, with some Anglican stuff thrown in there too. It had no coherence and I felt nothing beyond admiration for music well-performed.

I still think my joke was pretty funny. Maybe you had to be there.

Chapter 22

The Cult's Life and Death, But Not Really

This is a weird chapter title, designed to hook you. But it's also an accurate depiction what I'm about to describe. I've gone over the cult's birth and evolution, but there's more to the story.

So the cult started as a weird splinter off Scientology. With some weird views on Gods and Satan mixed in. And using practices and a bizarre machine to help people get in tune with their traumas and buried experiences so they could find the truth within and so on. They moved a lot, opened coffee houses, published strange magazines, rescued dogs a lot, and sent folks out in big heavy cloaks to collect money from the general public. This was The Process Church of the Second Coming.

After a while, there was a schism and Mary Ann and her husband Robert broke up. Mary Ann stuck with the main group and they formed The Foundation Faith of God, with Mary Ann being a capricious leader who was obsessed with finding legitimacy through associating her cult/commune with celebrities. They tried to recruit Allen Ginsburg, of all people. The Foundation made some funky symbols, established a sort of Christian doctrine, and had their own hymnbook. We all greeted each other with "God bless you," and adults would pair off only with Mary Ann's blessing.

The Foundation morphed and moved until it finally established permanent branches in Dallas, Las Vegas, and Denver, with the headquarters moving from Faith Canyon to Angel Canyon. Fundraising efforts were the focus of the daily commune practice for the adults. Going to busy public places and soliciting money for the animal rescue cause was the mandate. This went weirdly well, evidenced by how big of a ranch they bought in Southern Utah.

When they moved to Angel Canyon, which they named, the people of Kanab were concerned. These were weird, hippy-like cultists with a lot of animals and many of them had rifles in the back of their jeeps. Kanab residents were leery and lots of rumors abounded. Plenty of townspeople learned that the cultists were generally nice and good, having to do business with them a lot. There were also not positive things that happened, but this is not an expose. I'll just say that the Founders of the Foundation, and by extension Best Friends, are doing a generally good thing right now and they've been happy to do whatever it takes to do what they want in that town and in that canyon.

The Dallas branch became the source of the steadiest and most substantial income. At the same time, Best Friends had been publishing a magazine and collecting membership donations via their website. My brother, Matthias, was involved in that work for a while before he moved onto higher education. Money had been a problem for a long time, but the funding efforts by the branches combined with magazine subscriptions and large donations from organizations was helping Best Friends become more stable. Meanwhile, Mary Ann was sending the most charming, articulate, and attractive Founders to Los Angeles to hobnob with celebrities and start bringing in other donations and raising visibility. They were decidedly not publishing the fact that Best Friends was the charitable organization being run by a long-lasting cult/commune that originally splintered off Scientology. Which makes sense.

By the time I launched my plan to leave the Foundation via being banished to Faith Canyon, unbeknownst to me, things were ailing. Many of the adults were getting very angry and felt like their concerns were not being listened to. They had joined, in some cases decades ago and in some cases only a year or two ago, because they had found a cause they believed in and a spiritual home. But they were being treated like slaves and the spiritual nourishment they sought

was nowhere to be found. This was happening all over, including in Best Friends, although most of the folks working there were happy. They got to work with animals all day, or do work that was immediately and obviously meaningful—so there was satisfaction there.

The walkout and branch closures happened, as I've mentioned, while I was in Faith Canyon. Magdalen, surprisingly to me, was sent with John, the man she'd been married to years before, to Dallas to shut things down. I had the unfortunate occasion to cross paths with Lucia a few years later and heard from her that Magdalen and John had been quite forceful in the way things were closed and shuttered. I'd only seen Magdalen as a sweet hippy with a very occasional temper, so this didn't add up to me. I still don't know what really happened.

What did happen was that a few weeks after I started at Kanab High, I heard that my boxes were up at Best Friends in the steel warehouse and that my bike might be there too. Enoch and I went up that weekend and got my things. My bike was not there. I made sure to bug people until it showed up a couple weeks later. I have no idea why it disappeared in transit, but all was well that ended well. I returned to Best Friends on an almost weekly basis to spend time with Magdalen and to see my peers who had stayed. I participated in those Sunday rituals.

But then, sometime after I was blacklisted due to my speech, I heard that Best Friends had officially dropped all cult activities. The Foundation was legally and technically closed down. Which probably required only a little paperwork and a general announcement. Emerging from the closure was Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, a totally non-threatening and non-weird animal rescue organization that was doing its best to stop euthanasia of pets in animal shelters the country over. A noble cause.

According to the Best Friends official story, it was started by a group of like-minded young adults in the 60s. They formed a group of animal rights activists who wanted to make the world a

better place for dogs, cats, and any other animal that was being mistreated. The official story describes their moving around, some of the more colorful but innocuous things they did as a cult, and moves very quickly to the founding of Best Friends, which is now called Best Friends Animal Society—presumably so it can be seen as a more inclusive and wide organization. The official story also says that Best Friends was founded in 1984, which is an accurate statement in that 1984 is the year they acquired the land now called Angel Canyon.

The rest of the “History of Best Friends” that they have published is accurate for a value of “accurate.” I’m not going to unpack anything in their official story here except two things to finish off this brief chapter. Two powerfully telling things that, even though I am at peace now about my life, piss me right off today.

First, there’s a precious scene painted of Judah Battista, Francis Battista’s son and one of my peers, living in a shed while the Cats area was being built. The story says, “Seventeen-year-old Judah Battista, Francis’s son, worked with Diana Asher to care for the cats. He slept in a shed at night while construction of the facilities was underway.”

Why this needs unpacking:

1. Judah grew up with a different last name. He only found out Francis was his father in his late teens or early twenties.
2. Judah might have slept in a shed, but he also slept in a tent city two summers in a row with the rest of us kids. The rest of the time, he lived with the rest of us kids in the Dallas branch at Dixie.
3. A bunch of the kids helped build the facilities. A bunch of us slept in tents for two months while building and digging and more. Not just Judah.

But Judah stuck with Best Friends and is doing great work. He knows his calling and seems very happy. I'm delighted that he is happy with his life and choices. This is why he's in the story, because it adds color and texture. Otherwise it's utter BS.

And that leads to the thing that makes me livid still and I need to meditate this out of me.

The official story of Best Friends talks about the Founders in terms of their being these guru-level rock stars. It idealizes their work and history and paints everything in a sepia-toned shade of total crap. Nowhere does it mention that they had thirty plus kids. All the work we did for them, all the pipe we buried, all the actual dog and cat crap that we cleaned out, all the times we were bitten by emotionally traumatized dogs, all the drywall we hung, all the roofing we did, all the plumbing and more—totally whitewashed out of the story. Deliberately overlooked.

Just like the rest of our lives.

Don't get me wrong, Best Friends is a famous and legitimate corporation that has to manage its image and there just isn't time or space to include all the details of their actual history. But having a bunch of kids through partner swapping, rearing them in an environment of abuse and hard labor and absolute lack of love and nurture—that's kind of an important detail.

It is not nice to spend your life overlooked and see that the people who made your life terrible never learn their lesson or even acknowledge that what they did to a bunch of kids could possibly be not ideal.

We are not even worth mentioning.

I have a message for the Best Friends 'Founders:'

I lie to myself and say I don't need you to publicly or even privately to me and the other kids acknowledge that you gave birth to and raised us in an terrible environment. I tell myself I don't need to hear you say you shouldn't have given over care of all the kids to a sociopath in Dallas.

The truth is that I do need to hear that on a deep level. It might finally fill in one of those blank spots on a page somewhere in this book that is my life. But I am writing the words now. I AM WRITING THE WORDS NOW and that little blankness recedes and shrinks with each new word of family and grace and love I add to my life, so it will be fine when you do not acknowledge this.

In the continued vein of message for you, why ‘Founders,’ do you insist on acting like we don’t exist? Why even now when I show up for a visit every so often can you not meet my gaze? Why can’t you look me in the eyes? Why can’t you face the utter garbage you made me and the other kids you essentially orphaned go through? Yes, you orphaned us. For most of us, our parents were still alive, but you stupidly demanded that kids be separated from parents and not have the love and nurture that not only do children *need* but are fundamentally entitled to?

It is because of you that I score 8 on the ACE psychology test. That’s the Adverse Childhood Experience test. I score 8 out of 10. Because of you and the absolute and utter dismissal of us kids. You will never acknowledge that.

And all things considered, I made my own mistakes. I own them and I own every careful, deliberate decision I made to fall, roll, and run far from the tree that I came from. The flesh and spirit and heart you gave me was clay and it was ugly and sad and alone but I have shaped it with each conscious choice to turn from anger to love and hope.

I have shaped it.

You gave me this clay. You made it lonely and angry and powerless.

But I took the power. I took the power for myself and I have shaped it now.

I have shaped myself and have found the path I would follow in life, embracing the good from my childhood in your terrible commune. Taking the work ethic, the ability to build and fix, and

empathy, and the beautiful times with each other and the love-golems that are dogs—and using them to shape myself into what I am today. I am self-made. I acknowledge part of me has the hue of the Foundation and Best Friends, and I see those hues and tints and shapes and I am happy with them. Because I have decided to be, despite your shameful mistreatment of me and my sisters and brothers.

But as usual, you will live in your carefully fabricated world, imagining you are separate and better and all that you did was right and good and for the cause. You will continue to gripe about this or that and not see that you are this and that. Just like the rest of us.

Meanwhile, you can walk past the sage brush that I hid piles of dog crap under in Dog Town. And you can keep drinking water that I helped get to your sinks. And you can flush toilets whose plumbing I helped install.

That's my legacy with you. You flush your crap down a pipe I put in.

Chapter 23

Losing and Finding My Religion

This chapter is not here as a way to convince you to come join me at church on Sunday. You're always welcome, but this memoir is the story of my life. If I ended it with the previous chapter, the story would be incomplete.

The book is called “Hey Kid, There’s Nothing Wrong With You” for a reason. I spent my life feeling, not in the words but in the certainty in my heart, that there was something clearly unappealing about me. Why else would my parents have rejected me in their lives? Why else would all the adults be arrayed against me as enemies?

But my journey in life has been to the path where I can discover and be reminded that there really nothing wrong with you. The title of this book came to me one day when I was listening to Big Country’s astonishingly perfect album, “Why the Long Face”. There’s a song called “Send You” and it’s typical Big Country—interesting and textured lyrics backed up by beautiful guitar and drums and Stuart’s deeply emotional vocals. I just turned the song on so I can write this part with the right music playing.

I’d listened to the album several times, but one day, the words of the chorus hit me hard enough that I had to catch my breath. Stuart sang to me the words, “Hey kid, there’s nothing wrong with you, there’s nothing wrong.” It’s so true. It’s true for everyone. We might have physical, emotional, and/or mental challenges and problems. They’re real. They’re hard. They’re sometimes never going to go away. But there is nothing wrong with you. There is nothing wrong. You are worthy top to bottom and in and out of love and being seen and being safe.

I left the cult determined to craft a life that I could be excited and happy about. I had no belief in God and, in my mind, I had never met someone who demonstrated a sincere belief in a God

that made any sense to me. I was out of the cult, I had to finish high school, and then I was going to find a way to make my writing a career and eventually find a woman I could love forever and we would make a family. Right there. My two greatest dreams: a family of my own and a successful writing career. Everything else has always been secondary, and I listed them in order. The image of a happy family of laughing and curious and beautiful kids was my driving force. I was going to have lots of fun while getting there, and that consisted of a lot of gaming, endless hiking, loud music, and dating the smartest girl in the room wherever I went. I had no intention of going to college, unless it could somehow help me write better and build the career. But I was going to have a family.

So there I was, an avowed atheist. I had escaped the religion of my childhood because it was bad. Empirically bad. I had faith though. I had faith in myself and the human spirit and people's ability to do amazing and astonishing things.

And I landed in Kanab, Utah, which was at the time around eighty percent members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I made friends with a bunch of kids, many of them members of this church. I frankly had no idea what their church was about, but I thought it was probably fairly useless and damaging like all religions. But I also spent very little time or effort caring about it. Which resulted in a funny thing happening to me in a car about halfway through my senior year. We had eight people stuffed into my friend Nathan Riddle's Plymouth Valiant. It was small. Everybody was talking and it was loud and in a lull in the conversation, I asked, "So who here's Mormon and who here's LDS?" A beat, then everybody burst out laughing.

They explained that Mormon and LDS referred to the same church. They were both shorthand for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Since I was getting better at

being witty and quippy, I was able to get my juju back by saying, “That’s the longest church name in the history of church names.”

We laughed and that was that.

My friends tried to get me to go to church, but I’d been there, done that thank you very much and had no desire. I finally did go after the girls came up to Best Friends that time, but it was boring.

Before school ended, my dear friend Lori convinced me to go with her. It was the first Sunday of the month, which was apparently a thing. It was a thing because in the LDS church, on the first Sunday of the month, members of the congregation could go up to the podium and “bear testimony.” And as I sat there in a fairly warm room on a hard pew, they did. Adults, kids, older folks—they all went up and shared special feelings they had about their God and religion.

I was not touched nor did the heavens open. I was impressed though. Some of my schoolmates went up and offered some expressions of faith and belief and I was impressed that they were so sincere. I’d become pretty jaded by the jumbled and clearly insincere doctrines of the Foundation. When the leader’s sermon is all about politics and comes off sounding like a bunch of whining, there’s not going to be a lot of uplifting feeling happening. And Lucia and Jason sure did love to sermonize about the corrupt world and government.

One time, returning from a successful regional drama trip, I sat on a bus bench with Javen. He took the opportunity to share with me some of his church’s more interesting doctrines. He was enthusiastic and surprisingly, to me, sincere. He meant it. And he wasn’t trying to convert me or coerce me into joining his religion, he was sharing stuff that was important to him.

Ultimately, that became my takeaway from all my friends and their stories of faith and their church's doctrine. It was actually important to them. This was such an unexpectedly opposite thing from the way I'd grown up, so it left a bit of an impression.

My own journey of faith is not direct in any way. It consists of a few vivid images, late nights under stars, and some smart and genuinely kind neighbors and missionaries.

One critical image that repeated itself happened during the summer after graduation. As we neared the summer, many of us in the Kanab High drama club heard about a theater company that was coming to town to set up a cowboy dinner theater program in a big old barn playhouse behind a local hotel. Kanab has a history of being in the entertainment business; a lot of western TV shows and movies were filmed in the nearby area. The land is stunning—full of reds and pale yellows and sage and juniper and canyons and more. The original Planet of the Apes was filmed where I many years later loved to hike. The Lone Ranger was filmed there.

All of this matters because as the lumber industry totally died, Kanab began to pivot toward tourism as its major industry. So this theater company was going to take advantage of the steady tourism and put on a dinner show of a melodrama. And they were seeking actors young and old for paid parts in the show.

My friend Nathan Riddle and I, along with a bunch of other drama club members, showed up for auditions. Nathan had been winning awards as an actor for a while. Theater was and remains one of his big passions. We were both cast in the show, him as the bartender and later several other parts and me as the melodrama's hero. I was later informed that I got that part because I was the least grizzled looking of the people they were casting. Which is an indirect way of saying I had a baby face.

Nathan and I loved it. By the end of the summer run of the show, we each had several parts to help fill in for other actors who had dropped out. We spent the evening running in and out of the back doors of the barn, rolling up sleeves or putting on a mustache, and having a grand old time. The show and characters became a hobby too. We started dressing up early with other cast members and wandering the streets of Kanab, cracking whips, doing mock gunfights, trying to drum up more business. I made some dear friends that I love still. Many of the other cast members were wizened by life and looked the part of gambler and villain and gunfighter. They were fast on the draw, crazy good with the gun tricks, and some of the most genuine people I'd ever met. They were quite a different group of people from the mostly very clean-cut youth I'd spent my school year with. The time I spent with Jack Hodges and Cherokee and Alma and Gigi is incredibly vivid in my mind. That summer unfolded like you would read about in a novel, with romances coming and going and friendships being forged.

Most nights, when the show was over and tourists were gone, Nathan and I would get a burger from Stage Stop and sit on the Kanab Middle School sandstone wall talking and eating. That friendship was the most important of those forged during the summer. Nathan and I spent a lot of time hanging out, writing screenplays, filming some scenes, hatching plans for awesome cars and more. We double-dated and I learned a lot from him. He was sly and a bit of a mooch and incredibly, fundamentally good. He lived by some very firm principles and intended to spend his life learning to live better by them every day.

He let me know by mid-summer that he was planning on serving a church mission. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, young men and women and older, retired folks serve missions. The younger folks are sent around the world to preach the word. In those days, the young men could leave starting at age nineteen and young women could go when they were

twenty-one. Young men go for two years and young women for eighteen months. They pay their own way and live by some of the strictest rules you'll ever hear of. They also work a long schedule, arising at 6:30AM and getting home by 9:30PM and getting to bed an hour later. Every day.

Nathan described all of this to me. I'd also already seen a few of my friends leave on these missions. Javen had gone to New Zealand. And Nathan soon got his call to Nairobi, Kenya. Members of the LDS church believe strongly that the mission assignments are led by God, so they feel they are on a divinely inspired mission to find people who need to hear their message.

And I thought it was nuts and totally impractical. These young, smart people were leaving their career and education goals behind to go and preach the word of God? What God? How could they think that made any sense?

But when I shared my reaction with Nathan, he just smiled, grinned at me, and said something about how he knew what he had to do and he was going to do it. He also told me he was sure I'd been brought to Kanab for a reason.

I knew that reason already. To get the heck out of the Foundation and start living my way finally. Things were going great, too. I was courting a brilliant, beautiful, driven, college girl and I was beginning to write a little more and taking a distance course on writing novels. I'd moved out of Enoch's house very soon after graduating and was living with Tim, my friend and pseudo-brother whom I'd grown up with in the Foundation. We had a sweet two-bedroom apartment behind the fire station where I had just started volunteering on the department. I had a solid job at Big Al's Junction and owned a crummy, functional Ford Fairmont Futura. Life was looking good so far, and I'd only been out of the cult for a year.

Nathan headed out not long after summer ended. Before that, his good friend John had come home from boot camp with the Marines and married one of my good school friends, Lori. I'd been pretty pissed off that I couldn't attend their marriage since it was happening in one of the Mormon temples that was in St. George. I did not understand why I couldn't go. I went to the reception and helped deck out their car, but thought it was bizarre I couldn't attend the actual wedding.

After Nathan was gone, life reverted to a simple rhythm. I worked at the restaurant, brought in enough home to save a bit every month, paid my share of rent, and we gamed a lot. I hiked all the time. I read a lot, wrote poetry and worked on my stories, and dated like crazy.

Missionaries from the Mormon church showed up at our apartment once or twice, but we kindly turned them away. Tim and I were both totally uninterested in getting involved in another church.

Then a funny and totally predictable thing happened: a tall, beautiful girl convinced Tim to go to her house for dinner and a discussion with some of the missionaries. I think he took that to mean it was going to be a conversation. But no, the missionaries have 'discussions' that are actually lessons, and they were standard lessons back in those days. I gave Tim a ride since his truck was broken down again. I returned after an hour and found Tim and the missionaries in a lively conversation. I sat on the edge of the living room where they were talking, waiting for Tim to stop giving them a hard time. Tim was asking pointed questions using the Bible we'd been taught in the Foundation and his naturally analytic mind. The missionaries were doing fine, but fumbling a bit.

Finally they finished and I was relieved to get out of there. But then the missionaries showed up at the apartment, apparently on Tim's invitation. They had a lesson they wanted to teach us. I

was surprised and angry with Tim. This was our domain—our home. And he'd let the missionaries get a foot in the door as if we wanted to listen to them.

They continued visiting, ostensibly to keep talking to Tim. Most of the time they were just starting as I was getting home from work, which was rather inconvenient for me. I wound up sitting through several of the lessons. Some of what they said sounded pretty good, but they kept trying to get us to read the scriptures and pray and obey their commandments. I insistently declined every time.

They soon found that we weren't particularly interested in joining their church and they invited us to keep searching and when we needed them, we could just call.

And I was happy to see them stop coming. They were great guys and weirdly enthusiastic, but I was having way too much fun in life to even begin to consider changing any of my behavior, much less to start studying scriptures and praying like some kind of rabbi or priest.

Then things happened. I can't be specific, but one evening in the rain I found a new path for myself. The evening started with me finishing work and ended with me hungry for something to fill a deep, yawning need I'd just found. It was a powerful, fundamental, and forever change for me.

When I called the missionaries and told them I needed to talk about being baptized, they were shocked, stunned, and overjoyed. I was baptized within weeks. I didn't know the doctrine or much of anything, but I knew on a level I'd only just discovered that this was the absolute right path for me and I was determined to stay on it.

Sixteen months later, I started my mission in Brazil. Remember that shell I started breaking out of by dancing with my friends? That shell was dissolved in Brazil. The people of that country are warm and beautiful and the food is the same. The language and culture and kindness of

Brazil are ingrained in my DNA. I came home a different person. My head was clear and my heart was soft.

While I was in Brazil, Enoch and Evelyn had reverted to their pre-Foundation names of Bruce and Susan. But when they picked me up from the airport upon my return, I started calling him Dad. I continued calling Susan by her name, but she was warm and sweet and good as always. Very much the closest I'd ever gotten to having a mother/son relationship.

I'd left the cult in the summer of 1991 with a fuzzy plan to live life on my terms and make writing my career. My religion was freedom from control and fear and loneliness. In the summer of 1996, I arrived home from Brazil. Five years after leaving the Foundation a listless, angry young man who had no idea who he was but who needed so much—five years after that I returned home with a clear path forward.

That path has not been clear ever since. But what I found that night in the rain has stayed with me, indelible and unassailable. My path has wound and become obscured, and I have made countless mistakes big and small. I have had to learn more about who I am and who I want to be so that I can let happiness come from within.

A few months after coming home from Brazil, my old crony Adam came to visit my dad and Susan and Emma and me. Adam had relentlessly teased me when I was younger. He'd been a bully, although ultimately he did have my back. After our visit, as he was leaving, he turned and gave me a funny look. "You're a lot different, Jared."

I frowned, not sure what he was specifically referring to, but also knowing that I was. "In what way?"

"Dude. In every way. Nice job, man." Then he left.

I loved that. My desire to break free from my past and all the negativity was working. My efforts to deliberately choose to connect and to turn from isolation and loneliness were effective and it showed. Those words, coming from Adam, meant the world to me.

Chapter 24

Reader, She Said Yes

After Brazil, I had direction. For the first eight weeks of my mission, I'd been in the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah. I'd had to learn as much Portuguese as possible as well as how to be a missionary. I'd loved it. The whole experience had been endless awesome. I was older than most of the missionaries and started thinking about what would come after my mission. So before leaving the MTC, I'd asked my favorite teacher how a person could get a job teaching there. Brother Carr told me that I would have to be a student at Brigham Young University in order to teach at the MTC.

So my plan was clear. As soon as I got home, I started working at Stampin' Up! in Kanab again, and took a job making and delivering pizza too. I'd worked for Stampin' Up! in the months leading up to my mission, having been offered a job by one of the owners when she saw me working hard at the restaurant. I took the job and within weeks was making all the stamps the growing company was producing. When I got home from Brazil, the company had tripled in size and I joined the stamp making crew. They paid great and between lots of overtime and the pizza delivery job, I saved a bunch of money.

I also took the ACT, did well enough, and applied to BYU. I got accepted, which my dad was really proud of. I guess not everyone gets in, but I knew exactly what I wanted to do, so the idea of not getting accepted never entered my head. My dad and Susan were also incredibly helpful, letting me stay with them for the six months between coming home and going off to college. I paid them rent, but it was very little and I saved a good chunk of cash.

I dated a girl I met at Stampin' Up! and we had a nice time. She was very Mormon, like me by that time, and we liked dancing and talking and watching the stars. She was smart and had major goals. When the winter rolled around, we went to different colleges and that was that.

I started at BYU in January of 1997. I drove up to Provo, Utah—a four-hour drive from Kanab—and went looking for the apartment that a mission buddy had said I should be able to find a place in. I tracked it down without much trouble. It was in the Glenwood and I was going to share a room with a guy fighting to get on the dance team, and two other guys had individual rooms. My roommates were Nolan, Heinz, and Chad, and they were fun and smart and not great at keeping things clean.

My first night, Chad asked me if I was going to get a job while going to school. I told him I planned to work at the MTC and he asked if I was serious. I said yes. He smiled and shook his head. “Dude. It’s really hard to get hired there. Everyone wants to work there.”

I shrugged, unpacked my few belongings, and did what I could to make sure I was ready for my first day of classes the next day. I was twenty-two and was about to be a freshman at Brigham Young University, and I had been atheist four years before. Everything was new and a little foreign to me. I’d been in a cult only six years ago.

I had an interview at the MTC lined up for the next day, after classes, and I drove my tough little white Chevy S-10 up the hill to the big training center campus. I called that truck Stanley, thinking that was a suitably silly name for a vehicle.

It turned out the interview was a group interview. About six of us were called into a room and had a few supervisors throw questions at us. Next we were paired off and asked to teach a language principle and a gospel principle. I taught a thin, quiet fellow and was hired the next day.

No sweat. I had never doubted because this was exactly what I was supposed to be doing in my mind.

The next day was also my second day of classes at BYU. My second class was held in a small room in the testing center on the south end of campus. It was an Honors writing class. My class before it was in the building right next to the testing center, so I got to class early that day, and every day after. I really liked having my pick of seats and found I really felt more comfortable at the edge of the room, with one side against the wall.

The other students filed in, the teacher joining the steady influx. He was a shorter man with a great, orange mustache. He wore tweed jackets every session. He was Dr. Pinegar.

I was pleased to see that several pretty girls were in the class. About two minutes after Dr. Pinegar started describing the class, the door opened and a tall girl wearing brown corduroy pants and nice-looking earth-toned shirt entered, a bit sheepishly. She had brown hair to her shoulders, high cheekbones, a strong nose, and she looked really smart.

By the end of the second class that week, I'd met most of the students who sat near me. The tall, late girl was Annemarie. The rosy-cheeked, heavy-coat wearing girl was Leslie. We three wound up in a peer-review group a few times. My first impression of Annemarie was spot on—she was brilliant. She was also always late. She had a class on the far end of campus right before this one.

Within a couple weeks, Annemarie and I had reviewed each other's work several times, walked and talked our way out of the room when class was over several times, and I thought she was the smartest person I'd ever met. We had a lot of shared interests, particularly theater and literature. When Honors Writing was over, we both had an hour break we usually took for lunch, so we spent several of those breaks eating and talking.

She was from Alaska, was the sixth of seven girls, had grown up in the LDS church, and had an uncle who was a chemistry professor at BYU. Her uncle's wife was her dad's sister. Her aunt would make a lunch for Annemarie every day and Annemarie's uncle would bring it to campus every day and put it in the fridge in his chemistry lab. So when we talked during these lunch breaks, I would go with her up to the chemistry lab and she would give me the Capri Sun that her aunt always packed her. Annemarie wasn't into the delicious juice pouches because she was wise. I was a former deprived cultist, so tasty beverages were my jam.

The class was soon assigned a major project to do in pairs. We could choose our own pairs. It was to be a research and writing assignment. I followed Annemarie out of class the day we got the assignment. We were supposed to have our pairs settled by the next session. I asked her if she wanted to be a pair for the project. She agreed and we had a blast.

We also spent most of our free time together. She came to my apartment at the Glenwood several times and at some point I dropped by her dorm room on my way to work at the MTC and met her roommates. We watched movies together, some for research, listened to music, had food, and became great friends. I felt a little bad, since Nathan Riddle had been my best friend in Kanab, but Annemarie quickly became my best friend.

I told her a bit about my past and she didn't freak out and run away. Why would she? I had to be an interesting specimen. I wore a sweatshirt with "Animal Liberation" on it there on BYU campus, after all.

After a particularly late night of movie watching, my roommate Heinz took me aside. Heinz, it turned out, knew Annemarie's cousin, with whom Annemarie shared a dorm room. Heinz informed me that she shouldn't be staying so late since that was against the BYU rules. I

laughed, sure he was kidding. He was not, in fact, kidding. But he also asked me a pointed question. “Are you two dating or what?”

I laughed again and said no. We were friends. Why would I want to date my best friend? I’d been dating other girls, nobody seriously. But dating Annemarie seemed like a quick way to ruin a friendship.

“Why?” Heinz’s question was simple.

I had no answer for him.

The next time I saw Annemarie, I realized that the grin I had was pretty goofy. And she made my heart thump kind of a lot. And I loved it when she leaned on me when we were watching movies. And she had this light, sweet smell that I also dug kind of a lot.

What on earth had I been thinking? She was awesome. And she was beautiful too. By this time, we had compared notes about our past love lives and knew each other pretty well. I suggested we go on a date. She readily agree and we went to dinner and an incredible dance performance on campus. The dinner was mediocre and she was so quick and funny and had the best laugh ever. During the dance performance, we had leaned close to each other and her arm and shoulder were so close and warm. She was great.

I got home that night and my roommates grilled me on how the date had gone. I told them and they all agreed I was in deep smit.

Things moved fast after that. We had no reason to hide our feelings for each other. I was regularly surprised at how much she liked me. I was falling for her completely, and she wasn’t scared of where our relationship was going. She’d mentioned that she hadn’t really had a real kiss yet in her life, so I felt a bit of stupid pressure about being her first real kiss.

One night, we decided I would teach her how to drive Stanley, my stick-shift truck. She had gotten a huge kick out of my truck being named Stanley. That was her father's name. We did not change the name of the truck. And this night I was going to teach her to drive Stanley. The parking lot across from her dorms was huge, so we had her practice for a while, then finally parked for a bit and snuggled and talked.

I wanted to kiss her so badly. I did not want to screw it up. I wanted to be smooth, but I did not want to make it fake or weird. It had to be natural and simple and not pushy. I stalled, trying to find the right moment and angle and being a total idiot for a long time. Finally, we both felt the moment come and we kissed. I had thought she was going to be hesitant or nervous but she was warm and completely there for every moment and her lips were just about perfect. It was not a quick peck. It was a lifetime. My heart stopped and stayed still and so did the whole world. We leaned back after the exactly perfect amount of time and smiled at each other. The light from the streetlights illuminating the parking lot accentuated her oval face, the slight pout to her lips, her always dancing eyes.

I was completely and utterly smitten.

We kissed again that night and we dated like crazy for the rest of the semester.

Remember friends, we had made promises as part of our faith. We had no intention of doing anything sexual outside of marriage. We weren't talking about marriage. We weren't talking about sex. It was never even an issue because we both knew that we shared the exact same principles in our lives.

So kissing is as far as we ever wanted to go and it was great. Her roommates even approved of me, even though one night I took Annemarie out and right after dropping her off I went out again with a girl I'd known during my mission. Annemarie's roommate Jamie did not approve of

this and she told me as much. She made me promise to call the dorm room after my second date was over.

What she didn't really get was that I was going to a movie with this other girl so we could catch up. We had become great friends and wanted to have an excuse to catch up and talk. We had a good time and had no romantic intentions anyway.

But I still called the dorm room when I got home. I ended up leaving a voicemail on their machine and assured everyone that all was well.

Winter semester came to a speedy end and Dr. Pinegar, the professor of the class Annemarie and I had met in, had learned that we were dating. He made a point of having us come to his office one afternoon as the semester wound down. He told us that Annemarie had the highest grade in the class, and that I had the second highest grade. Why he thought we needed to know that, I don't really know.

But Annemarie and I took quite a few classes together, and invariably she was number one and I was number two. Every time.

Annemarie went back to Alaska for the summer. I drove her to the airport, we kissed goodbye, and I spent the summer in Provo, working seventy hours a week. We emailed and wrote letters through the summer. I worried she might find someone else in Anchorage during the summer. I knew exactly how I felt about her and prayed her feelings wouldn't change.

After a hugely wonderful surprise at the beginning of the spring/summer terms, summer seemed endless. Annemarie had arranged with one of my roommates for birthday presents to appear around our apartment from her. Her thoughtfulness and creativity blew me away. She put a ton of work into the awesome birthday gift project and it meant everything to me. I'd literally

never had anyone ever put that kind of thought and effort into doing something nice for me. I got a lot more smitten.

The long-seeming summer was exacerbated by the fact that I had to take a no-credit pre-college math class in order to eventually qualify for graduation. I hadn't done enough math in Faith School, so this was required. This was an algebra class. It was no-credit and I was terrified because it was algebra. I'd cheated in algebra in Faith School and still got a crummy grade. I set aside Spring term for it, taking no other class and spending four hours a day on the class. It was pass/fail. I passed and felt incredibly accomplished.

Annemarie's letters and emails were hilarious and full of Monty Python references. She sent me a mix-tape and I did the same. It was the 90s after all.

Finally, she was coming back to Provo. She told me that she had changed her hairstyle—that she'd gotten it cut short and even dyed it. I was kind of worried that I wouldn't like her new look, but I was certain that it wouldn't matter. I hadn't fallen in love with her hair.

I went to the airport to pick her up. This was the 90s, so I went into the airport and waited just outside her gate.

She appeared from the tunnel and my chest compressed and my mouth went dry. When she'd left, she'd been wearing her usual earth-toned, loose pants and shirt. She wore blue jeans, a white t-shirt that fit her... very well... and she had the most perfect pixie cut and red hair I'd ever seen. And then she hugged me and I felt her breath and strong arms around me and she filled my senses completely.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. We spent the day getting her moved into her new apartment she was sharing with a friend from Alaska and a few other women. We did some shopping, I cooked her an omelet, and I was completely head over heels for her. She hadn't changed and had

worked during the summer, having a mixed experience working for a tour company. Her haircut accentuated her perfect oval face, highlighting the slightly exotic, almond shape of her eyes and the red color was perfect with her beautiful green eyes.

How had I missed how drop-dead gorgeous she was? The haircut was way different, but she was still Annemarie—the same one I’d been spending all my time with before summer.

We picked right up where we’d left off at the beginning of that fall semester. This was made easier because I had moved during the summer too. I’d moved in with a bunch of guys I had known in Brazil—dear friends all of them. And it turned out that my new apartment and Annemarie’s new apartment were right across a street from each other.

I told her I loved her. In Portuguese. Because I was an awkward idiot. She said it back to me in English. I flubbed her birthday so badly that I will never not regret it. We made out and danced a bit and listened to music and took classes together. When I thought about my future, she was always in it.

One delightful benefit of living close to Annemarie was that my roommates and I were able to cross the street, stand in front of her apartment complex, and sing her John Denver’s “Annie’s Song.” Miles played the guitar. The rest of us sang mostly on key and when we were done most of the apartment doors were open and we got an ovation. I also got a big hug and a smooch, so it was a fabulous night.

I invited her to come down to Kanab and meet my step-mother and sister, and hike in Zion. This was in October, not long after her birthday. We had talked a bit about our future, since we’d made our feelings for each other clear. We talked in very hazy terms about how we wanted marriage to work and how many kids each of us had figured we might have. We never really specified being married to each other, but it was certainly implied.

We went on our trip to Kanab. She slept in my old bedroom and I slept in the big sewing room on a futon. Annemarie and my sister, Emma, hit it off right away. Because they're both smart and funny and happy people. Susan really liked her too.

After our first night, we headed to Zion the next day. This was back before Zion was as insanely busy as it is these days, back when you could just drive into the park, easily find a parking space, and go on a hike. We decided to head up the iconic and famous Angel's Landing hike. It's billed as strenuous, but it wasn't that hard. There are a few somewhat precarious parts, but we did fine.

About halfway up the hike, I felt a sudden, strong urge to ask Annemarie to marry me. I could ask her at the top of the hike. What could be more perfect?

Well, it would have helped if I had a ring and did any kind of planning. I argued the urge away, reasoning that some planning and forethought would be good.

But the urge would not entirely dissipate. I chewed on the notion of simply getting on a knee up there and saying I didn't have anything to give her except my love and eternal commitment. The idea stuck with me and I sort of settled on actually doing it. My heart hammered and my mouth went dry as we got closer. This was a truly insane idea. We'd never really talked about getting married. What if she said no? She wouldn't would she? What if me doing that at the top of Angel's Landing just embarrassed her? I didn't want to do that.

By the time we reached the top, my stomach was in knots and my brain was rapid-firing panic after excitement after terror.

I was bailed out by the presence of quite a few people lounging about on the rocky landing hundreds of feet in the air. There was no way I was going to do it right there. Relieved, I let the weird urge go. I would plan something and it would be awesome.

But as we descended, the urge came back. I got the very strong impression that if I didn't ask her here, now, I would lose her. I was insane, of course. There was no indication that such a thing would actually happen. We chatted the whole way down, although I'm sure I was a little quiet as I continued arguing with myself. I had no ring for her, no plan in place, no specific place to do it, and I doubted my courage.

We got back to Stanley the truck and had a picnic meal late and talked as the stars came out. The night sky was unbelievable. Clusters and quilts of stars parted the deep black of the night. As we talked, the urgent need to ask her to marry me kept prodding at me. I tried to ignore it, but finally I realized that I really really wanted to propose. I loved this woman. I loved everything about her. I wanted to be with her forever. Why not propose? Why not do it here under these stars?

She suggested we get on the road and I stalled. I tried to get my courage up, because I needed to do this. I had no real idea how she would take it. She would definitely be surprised.

I had to ask her.

I stalled, filled with stupid, inarticulate fear.

She grew more insistent. It was getting late and chilly.

I finally asked. I didn't get on a knee. I faced her on a picnic bench at the foot of the Angel's Landing hike under an incredible sky.

Annemarie sat back, obviously shocked. She smiled and asked me a couple questions. I answered them and loved that she would ask them. She knew her mind, knew her priorities, knew where she meant for her life to go. She would not shrink or hide her determination, even in this moment. I loved her even more.

Then she said yes. She smiled her wide, beautiful smile and we laughed and we were engaged. We kept it to ourselves for a week at my suggestion, for reasons that were probably stupid. She picked out a perfect, Native American themed sterling silver woven ring that I paid cash for out of my wallet. We firmly agreed that it was dumb to start our marriage in debt for a ring. We talked to her parents and my dad, mom, and step-mom. Then we told people.

We got married six months later. Two years after we were married, we'd been living in Japan for nearly eight months. I arranged a romantic evening in and prepared a bit of a surprise for Annemarie. When she came into the kitchen, I dropped to one knee, presented a modest diamond ring I'd bought, and asked her to stay married to me forever. Reader, she said yes.

So I consider my monumentally, epically awkward proposal made up for.

Besides, we are all about making our own moments, the rest of the world's traditional moments be damned. We've had a lifetime of doing the nuts, the seemingly impossible, and the exciting. Doing the unusual is one of our family's storied traditions.

Chapter 25

A Choice and a Tumor

There's a very real danger of this chapter becoming too specific and touching on sacred experiences that should not be shared. So thank you for your patience as I try to share something that my family and I experienced that fundamentally changed us and made me certain to my bones that there is nothing wrong with me. That there is in fact something very right about me—and you, and everyone else. There is something extraordinary in each of us, an ability to touch something powerful that can lead to lasting, positive change in our lives.

In 2013, my family was well and truly settled for pretty much the first time ever. We'd moved a lot, struggled with employment and trying to start several companies and invest in money-making endeavors, and finally I'd gone back to school to finish a Master's degree. We'd lived in Japan for two years, Taiwan for nine months, Alaska for a total of more than two years in between adventures, and Utah for several years as well. We had six children, the youngest nearing three years old. I'd been with the same company for three years and was doing well and had just gotten a big promotion. We finally lived in a house that was big enough for us and we were making progress on the landscaping. We had chickens, a productive garden, and were growing roots. It was great.

Our six kids were awesome. They were smart, funny, irritating sometimes, happy, as healthy as we could possibly hope for, and were becoming hard workers. We had Brazilian neighbors, which was the coolest thing ever. I got to practice my Portuguese a lot.

We had decided after our sixth child that we were done. Six was a great number and both Annemarie and I felt good about this being our last baby. She was excited about being able to regain her complete health and I was happy to not be woken up by a crying baby most nights.

As 2013 unfolded and we found some financial security for the first time in many years, we felt like we were finally reaping the fruits of hard labor. And then one day Annemarie and I were snuggling on our living room couch and we were talking about how maybe we actually needed to have another baby. We had both been feeling a little bit of a poke and our conversation was mostly aimed at dispelling the poke and returning to a peaceful contentment with six kids.

The poke would not be dispelled. We talked a lot over the next weeks, deciding at the end of each conversation that we were fine. Six kids was plenty. We were allowed to choose to be done.

And yet the poke persisted. After a long conversation and some prayer, we finally realized that we had both become convinced that we needed to get pregnant again. We were surprised and confused, but we decided we were willing to do it. Then we realized we were excited to have another baby, despite the fact that it was a reset back to diapers and breastfeeding and high chairs and restless nights.

All of Annemarie's pregnancies had been generally straightforward. She was healthy and the births were uneventful. We had even had a few babies at home, because why not?

But late in the second month of this pregnancy, something was not quite right and we went to the ER to make sure all was well with Annemarie and the baby. She wound up in an ultrasound room and the ultrasound technician spent a long time scanning Annemarie's stomach area. I noticed he kept going back to her right side. I asked what was up and he indicated that what he was getting from the pregnancy was that the baby was only at six weeks, no more, judging by its size. This didn't add up for Annemarie and me. We were pretty sure she was at eight weeks.

We were led to a waiting room after the lengthy ultrasound. The doctor came in. I read people very well and there was something alarming in his expression. I sat up straighter and took Annemarie's hand.

The doctor sat and spoke very simply. "The technician found a mass on your right kidney. It's quite large, we estimate about ten centimeters in diameter. We don't know yet if it's malignant, but we can do some tests."

The moment he said the first sentence, a thunderbolt that was nearly physical slammed into me. This was why. This was why we'd gotten pregnant. To find this mass on her kidney. The poke had led us to finding this mass.

The doctor continued, talking about the baby and how they were struggling to confirm whether the pregnancy was still viable. He warned that if it was, we would have to make a decision. In his judgement, the way the kidney tumor looked, it could very well be malignant cancer. He told us that treatment of a malignant tumor became incredibly iffy in relation to an ongoing, viable pregnancy.

He essentially encouraged us to hope that the pregnancy was not viable. He was telling us to hope that we lost our baby.

We did not hope that. I won't try to express the complexities of the hope we tried to have, that we prayed for, that we talked about over the next ten days. The next day was Sunday and while Annemarie took her time to get ready for the day, I gathered the kids around the dining table. I told them that Mom was pregnant, but that something had happened and it was possible we might lose the baby. I told them about the cancer and how it was a miraculous thing that it had been found before she had the symptoms that come with kidney cancer. We prayed together, a few of us taking turns.

The sweet, innocent seven-year-old boy prayed that the baby would make it. He was excited to have another baby. I wanted his prayer to come true but by then I also was struggling with the insane conflict in my heart.

For ten days, life for the kids stayed pretty much the same. Annemarie and I found a urologist to look at the tumor and confirm that it looked malignant. He explained that it would be useless to take a sample of it to test for malignancy. It was so big he might get a small benign bit while the rest of it was malignant. He also implied that it would be a lot easier if the pregnancy ended. We continued to not want that. We wanted our baby. But at the end of the those ten days it was confirmed: Annemarie was having a prolonged miscarriage. It was the worst thing.

We might have been reticent to come to the decision to have another baby, but once decided, we were all in. We were excited. Seven kids was going to be a big party no matter where we went. It would literally make our family odd. So when we lost the baby, it was not a relieved moment. It was hard.

But the confirmation brought clarity and we moved fast to have Annemarie scheduled for surgery. Our neighbors and church community had rallied around us in an exceptional way. They started offering to help care for kids as I continued working up to and after Annemarie recovered from surgery. I worked with some dear friends and several of Annemarie's closest friends to put together a schedule of meals and child care. I also started writing down everything that was happening, wanting to record the miraculous way the tumor had been found. I found myself weeping on my knees, saying thank you over and over.

The surgery day came and Annemarie went in. I was terrified but deep on a level I'd been slowly learning to listen to, I knew she would be okay. That poke that led us to get pregnant had not been for nothing. It was to save her life. I knew that.

Annemarie's mother had come down just before the surgery and she was going to stay for a month to help Annemarie recover and keep the kids from disrupting her healing. As the surgery began, the kids in school, my mother-in-law and I chatted, then grew quiet. She read a book. I fidgeted. Finally, I had to step out during the third hour of the surgery to deal with kids. As I pulled back into the parking garage, my mother-in-law called me.

"She's out. Doctor Landau says he is certain he got it all. She's going to be fine."

I parked, turned off the engine, and fell apart. Relief flooded me and I wept in utter exhaustion and release. While it might have been more proper for me to be upstairs in the waiting room to talk to the surgeon, I was happy to be in the privacy of my little Corolla in the dim parking garage. I took a few minutes to let go of all the tension and fear and pull myself together.

Annemarie came out of the recovery room pale and with a small smile. She was everything.

Her recovery was slower than she wanted, but uneventful. The kids were champions. Annemarie's book club friends were exceptional. Suzanne particularly was amazing, making sure meals were delivered and kids were thought of and gaps were filled so that I could keep working and managing the house.

Our outlook on life changed considerably due to this experience. First, life is short. Dr. Landau, the surgeon, informed us that if we'd been even six months later, Annemarie's prognosis would have been far different. She would have been given a limited time to live. Seeing her mortality and coming out of this experience, we felt a draw to live life a little bigger. To go after more adventure. We wanted the kids to see more of the world and get a fuller experience with the great, beautiful, difficult world. We wanted that for ourselves too.

More importantly, we all saw the hand of Providence in this experience. Experiencing this has made it clear to me that we all—no, that *I* am a person who is worthy of extraordinary experiences and beautiful experiences. We all are, yes, but it was important for me to see and feel this for myself.

How could I be flawed and unworthy of love and attention if the reality of my experience proved otherwise? My childhood had been marked by neglect and dismissal and abuse and loneliness, but not because I deserved that. Because of the choices that others were making independent of me.

I can say with certainty to myself, “Hey kid. There’s nothing wrong with you.” Even writing that now and feeling the truth of it makes me tear up. All that terrible crap I experienced—it was not because I was fundamentally flawed. And by turning to beauty and grace and hope, I have even found a way to transform all of it into, at minimum, learning. And a hell of a story to tell.

I have one more story to tell that’s important to all of this. Stay tuned.

Chapter 26

Twenty Plus Seven Equals Heaven

You might think that having a miscarriage and a cancer scare, followed by a lengthy recovery, would be enough excitement for 2014. You'd be wrong. After running my department at work, improving morale by a large margin, and nearly doubling our productivity, I was included in a series of layoffs in mid-2014. It was sudden and I was surprised and angry and hurt. How could they lay me off after what I'd accomplished, particularly during the time that my wife had been sick and recovering from major surgery? It felt like a slap in the face. A dismissal of my work and dedication.

I got a new job within three days. See, when you have six kids and are recovering from the financial disruption of major surgery, there's a pretty high level of risk. The money's gotta keep coming in.

But I was still pissed at the other company for laying me off. So after a period of fuming and grieving, like a week, I got to work taking charge of my career. Every time I drove near the building that company was in, I muttered, "Watch this. I'll show you." I took classes, did a bunch of online certifications, studied several hours a day, and got involved in conversations in my industry. I built a network and learned how to stand out more in my growing field. I applied myself at work and mastered multiple aspects of my job and the team I worked with.

It paid off. A few months after starting with a local web-hosting company and helping them fundamentally change their training approach, I was contacted by Amazon. They were interested in me going to work for them in their Seattle headquarters.

I was surprised and didn't think much of it. I consented to the interview because I figure it's my responsibility to always have my 'bait in the water' so to speak. If there are other, better opportunities out there, I should know about them.

Annemarie and I talked about the Amazon possibility and as we spoke, something became quite clear. We were both quite interested in the opportunity. Here's why.

When Annemarie was back on her feet and life resumed a normal rhythm, it was clear that Annemarie and I both had changed. In a very similar way. She had faced cancer and beat it. I watched her keep moving forward as we lost our baby, as we dealt with the terrifying tumor, and as we later faced my layoff. She was hopeful, strong, aware of her need to vent and grieve and recover, and as far as I was concerned, she was an example of stunning grace. We'd been through a bunch of hard things, coming safely through them in large part due to an extraordinary impression we'd had and decided together to heed.

And I had experienced these things by her side, losing our baby too, facing the fear of cancer and my favorite person's mortality, and then being shamefully treated by my employer.

It turned out we were both not interested in having a limited life. Not say our life had been boring. Nothing close. But we had together come to the certainty that life was short, the kids were resilient, and we all needed to keep our eyes and hearts open to new opportunities. With that coming out clearly in our conversation about the Amazon interview, we decided we would take it seriously.

My first phone call went fine. I didn't feel like it was my strongest phone interview ever. But I hit it off with the interviewer, who was the actual hiring manager for the position in question.

I had a second phone interview a couple days later. It went better—this was with a person who knew my industry and I was able to confidently speak to the situations and questions she posed to me.

Within the week, the recruiter got back to me, inviting me to go up to Seattle for a day-long series of interviews. They would pay for the trip, including food, so we thought why not? I could use a bit of a break and why not enjoy an all-expenses paid trip to Seattle? I'd never been there before, so I figured it would be fun. And there was no way they would actually offer me the job after meeting me and having me spend an entire day talking to a hiring committee.

My first impression of Seattle was that it was cute and nowhere near as cool-looking as Chicago, London, or New York. My second impression was that it was insanely awful to drive and park in. My third impression was that it was a neat city to walk in.

That first night, I went up the Space Needle, knowing this was the only chance I would get to do so. I had no expectation that they would actually want me for the role. There was no way I would fit in with the insanely fast and cutting edge culture of the world's coolest company. So I enjoyed my evening, didn't expense the ride up to the top of the Space Needle, and had a good meal in a Chinese restaurant after.

The interviews went well. I took a lunch break halfway through. I came out of the building I was interviewing in, in South Lake Union, and looked left. There was a lake right there! It was a sunny day, so I hung a right, found an amazing food truck called Jemil's Big Easy and got a catfish po'boy. Cajun food is tops. I strolled down to the lake, dodged the large chunks of goose crap, and sat on a bench right near Lake Union and enjoyed a truly delicious lunch.

As I finished the huge sandwich, I leaned back and took in the moment. It was fantastic. Beautiful lake. Amazing food. Cool people I'd already talked to.

“If they offer me the job,” I said aloud to myself, “I think I just might take it.”

Reader, they offered me the job. Within 24 hours of returning home, I had a verbal offer. A day later, I had the offer letter. It was a good offer and it included not only paying for the move, but a moving company to pack our things and load them and help selling the house and buying a new house and a scouting trip for the family to come up and look for houses. The offer wanted me to start in a few weeks.

We talked. We prayed. We talked to the kids. They were resistant. We told them why we were leaning toward accepting. They still resisted. We listened. Then we said, “What about if we accept the job, move up, and give it two years? If after two years, we don’t like it, or something else comes up, we’ll leave and come right back to Utah?”

We prayed as a family and talked more. I felt very strongly that this was something we needed to do. I wanted the kids to have their horizons opened and I was excited about working for such an awesome company. The team and position sounded pretty great too. The money was fine—we figured it would be enough to get by ok in the much more expensive Seattle area.

The kids agreed to accept the job and move.

I went up in mid-April and they came up in June, after school was over. Living by myself in corporate housing for two months was a singular experience that I don’t ever care to repeat. I got a lot of writing done, but I also spent a lot of hours and gas and miles exploring the Seattle area in search of a house.

We finally got a house right before the family came up. It was an hour south of Seattle. My commute was going to be 1.5 hours each way, since driving in traffic is a quick way to destroy my soul and make me have a terrible day.

We moved to Black Diamond and set up life in a home across a gravel road from beautiful Lake Sawyer. The house was nice and big, so we fit well. Three younger boys in a big bedroom, two older boys in a bedroom, and the girl in her own room. And of course Annemarie and I in the master bedroom. I loved the kitchen so much. It came with a big, very good gas stove. I love to cook on gas.

The lake was the best feature of the house by a wide margin. Our nearby community had shared, private access to the lake, with a dock that went out about twenty-five feet into the lake, so we could take a run and jump off the end into the water. Which was the best way to get in the water of course. We bought a couple low-cost kayaks and some sets of oars and some mornings in the summers I was able to spend a few hours rowing around the lake. It was fantastic.

My job with Amazon was demanding. My commute wasn't great. I had to drive about twenty minutes to a train station, then get on the train for thirty-five minutes, then get on a shuttle or walk to the actual office. It took an hour and a half on the days that the modes of transportation didn't line up perfectly. On the best days, it took an hour and twenty minutes.

The job was stressful and kept me busy and sometimes on edge. I found myself shifted around by reorganizations that didn't make things better. Eventually I hit a bit of a home run there and started travelling to deliver a high-impact training workshop that I'd created. I took the program around the world twice. I loved traveling but didn't love it as much as I would have if Annemarie had been along. And I missed everyone more than a lot. It got lonely after the first few days.

Early in the second school year the kids had there, our daughter, Lily, started bringing home a friend named April. She was taller than Lily, had dark, wavy hair, a beautiful smile that revealed not great teeth, and an endlessly playful spirit. She played video games, goofed off with

our youngest, who was five at the time, and even the older kids got along with her. She came over so often I got a bit concerned and asked her in the second week or so if her parents knew she was coming to our house. April said yes and pointed out that she lived right down the gravel road and up the rougher, pot-hole-ridden road into the homes that were built under a copse of huge pine trees. She also said she lived with her mom, but not her dad.

I made sure to ask if her mom was all right with all the video games April played at our house—hey, some families have rules and stuff. April grinned and said it was fine. I trusted her and let it go.

Sometime in October, April showed up at our front door on a rainy, gloomy Saturday. She had socks on and no shoes and was wrapped in a blanket. She was bedraggled and crying. We brought her inside and she said her mom had kicked her out of the house. Which might have been something of an exaggeration. It turned out the two of them had been arguing and her mom lost her temper and tried to punish April, and April left and came to our house. About two hours after April showed up, someone who lived in the house with April and her mom showed up with shoes for April for when she was ready to go home.

Two left shoes, that is.

So her mom knew where she was, which was good because we wanted to call her and make sure she knew April was ok. But April didn't know a phone number for her mom.

Annemarie is a remarkable person. She strikes me as fearless in everything she does, but that is simply because she tells stupid fears to bugger off when things are very important. Annemarie put her arms around April the moment April was in the house and spoke quietly and comfortingly to her while leading her to a couch. She talked to her and calmed her and then got her dry clothes—which were Annemarie's, since April was so tall.

We wound up keeping April there until late. Darkness had fallen and we had fed everyone and were either playing a game or watching something on TV when a knock came on the door. One of the kids opened the door and told me it was a police officer.

Annemarie and I went and talked to the officer for a while. He led off by asking if April was with us. We told him yes and he said her mother had reported April as missing. Except when questioned, her mom had pointed out that April had friends down the street. And we of course knew that her mom was aware of April's location, since two left shoes had been delivered a while before.

The officer nodded sadly and gestured for us to join him outside, leaving the kids in the house. The rain was mostly stopped and everything was wet. His patrol car's bright headlights threw white light everywhere, reflecting off every surface. He said in a quiet tone, "Honestly, the longer she can spend outside of that house, the better."

We wondered what he meant and found out that April and her mother, Dawn, were living with one of Dawn's friends. And Dawn and her friend and many other people who lived or slept there were drug users. The Black Diamond police regularly stopped by the house and were concerned about the state of the residents.

Finally, with his consent and the relayed consent of her mom, we decided April could stay overnight. We asked Lily if she was okay with April sleeping on an air mattress in her room. Lily was fine with it. We told the kids what we were doing and they all basically shrugged and said, "Good."

Our kids are the absolute best.

On Sunday morning, April joined us for breakfast, said she wanted to go to church with us, and she did so. The girls in our congregation were incredibly welcoming and warm, as were the

leaders of the young women's program. After church, we made sure she had a good lunch and she put on her washed and dried clothes. Then Annemarie and I walked her home. We met Dawn, her mom, and talked for a while. Dawn was in her early fifties and had the appearance of someone who had struggled a lot in life. She was kind and happy to see April. She needed a walker to help her get around.

Annemarie and I got a glimpse of the interior of the house and talked about April and her situation. We were glad April had known she could come to us when she needed a friend.

The next Saturday was not rainy. It was bright and sunny. Just after noon, the doorbell rang. It was April with her adorable grin and a small bag of clothes. "Can I come over again?" We said of course. She asked if she could sleep over again and come with us to church on Sunday again. We made sure Dawn agreed to it and said yes.

This continued. Every Saturday through the rest of October, then into November. She came over, played like crazy, ate a lot of dinner, slept on her air mattress in Lily's room, came to church and had a great time, then ate lunch with us and we walked her home. Sometimes Annemarie and Lily walked her home. I started jokingly calling April weekend-daughter and she loved it. She called me weekend-dad. I loved it.

Then near the end of November, she stopped coming over. We had no idea why. We asked Lily and she said April wasn't at the bus stop or school lately. We tried calling the only phone number we had—which we weren't sure if it was April's phone or Dawn's. Nobody answered the phone. We asked Lily to ask around at school and even try emailing April. We got nowhere.

Then, in the third week of December, Lily finally got an email reply from April. She had been removed from the home—although she had actually been picked up directly from school—after a drug raid on the house turned up paraphernalia. She had tried to tell the social workers

and police that we were just down the street, but she wound up in a transitional foster home and was about to be sent to a longer-term placement.

Annemarie and I heard this and didn't even need to ask each other what we should do. I mean, we still talked about it because that's what you do, but we agreed that we needed to get April and have her stay with us. Of course. Anything else was insane. The kids agreed. Lily didn't even blink, even though she was essentially giving up her private room to share with her school friend for however long it took. Annemarie called child services, tracked down April's case worker and we picked up April from her case worker's office in the child services facility three days before Christmas. We hugged her, apologized that it had taken us so long, and brought her and a big bin and duffle bag home.

Her case worker told us that she had heard April talk about us and had asked the police in Black Diamond to reach out to us. That did not happen, for whatever reason. But because we had a history with April and we had sought her out, the foster system treated us as if we were extended family. We still had to do the foster licensing, but we could do it while she was with us.

Annemarie and I intended to foster April for as long as we could. Before we'd even met April, we'd been planning on moving back to Utah in 2017 for Annemarie to start law school. So we knew that there was going to be a bit of a challenge if April was still with us when it came time to move. We talked to her next social worker about this and he suggested we could even take April with us, but bring her up to Washington intermittently to visit her mom.

These supervised visits between April and Dawn were already happening, with Annemarie there to supervise. Dawn stayed in the same house that had been raided for a few months, then finally moved out to a shelter where she hoped to get her feet under her quicker.

The process of getting a foster license and permission to bring April along was long, complicated, and involved Annemarie spending hours on the phone with child services and standing at a scanner sending paperwork to the case workers at a blistering rate. I also ended up having to email the Washington state secretary of child services to see if that would loosen up some of the weird delays we were facing.

We had a lot of crazy things getting in the way of being able to bring April with us. One of them was not Dawn, unfortunately. I was traveling for work and was in Madrid, Spain when Annemarie called me, which she never did. We texted or did Google hangouts. Annemarie had just gotten news that Dawn had passed away in her sleep. We talked for a while, trying to figure out the right way to talk to April and the rest of the kids. Mostly we needed to talk to get some comfort. April loved her mom. Dawn loved April. Dawn struggled a lot, but she tried hard to keep April safe and fed. April had been in the foster system several times, so it hadn't always gone well, but April loved her with a beautiful devotion.

This was going to break April's heart and our hearts were breaking at the thought. Annemarie and I talked later that day and she told me how it had gone and shared a singularly amazing and humbling thing. Annemarie had told the kids about April's mom and, after some time to let April be alone and feel and get over the shock, the kids gently and lovingly swarmed her and hugged her.

These were: a nearly seventeen-year-old boy, a fifteen-year-old boy, a twelve-year-old girl, a ten-year-old boy, an eight-year-old boy, and a six-year-old boy. And they were unabashed in their desire to comfort their foster sister. They loved her and wanted to take the pain away. The youngest, who always had a sweet connection with April, sat next to her and snuggled for most of the day.

Later that day, when Annemarie and I talked, it took us maybe ten seconds to get to the point: adoption. We wanted to adopt her. And it turned out April, as soon as she was calm and clear again, brought it up too.

The process of getting things moving was complicated. We ended up having to move before the adoption could come anywhere near completion. But not before April, all the other young women in our church congregation and their leaders, and I had a stunning, extraordinary experience.

I joined the young women one day in the summer to help feed the homeless in Pioneer Park in downtown Seattle. I'd had knee surgery two months before to fix a torn meniscus, so after our first trip around the area, which was more of a plaza than a park, I needed to sit. We'd handed out a lot of burgers and water, one to a nearby fellow with a shopping cart, a functional-looking bike, and clear eyes.

Now. I like my space. I like my alone time. I wanted to sit in a chair away from people, but I knew I should put my ideals of kindness and warmth into action, so I sat down next to the man with the bike and introduced myself. He said his name was Tim. I asked him about his life and he was happy to share. He talked about how he'd been in prison until recently and was trying to just find a way to get some life going again. He said he'd been married three times with a few kids. He and his last wife had several kids and as he described their birth order, something in what he said caught my attention. I asked his kids' names. He said the oldest, twin boys, had been adopted as babies, so their names were for sure different.

I perked up more. What? Impossible.

Then he mentioned their youngest, a sweet little girl. He'd had to leave for whatever reason when she was about four. I asked her name.

He smiled. “April Marie.”

Good heavens. I turned my attention heavenward and mentally asked, “Are you kidding?” I couldn’t believe this. I asked him a bit more about his life, but everything he’d said had lined up already, and I hadn’t prompted or prodded or led his answers in any way. Finally I asked where his last daughter was. He said he’d heard her mom had died and that she was living with a family that had been her neighbors.

I realized the young women and their leaders were looking impatient. We were supposed to leave a few minutes before.

“I want to keep talking, but I have to go ask my friends to be patient for a minute.” I stuck out my hand. “My name’s Jared Garrett.” I prayed for confirmation.

He shook my hand and stood tall. Then he said his full name. Confirmed.

This was April’s father. The man she remembered just a little.

Shaking, stunned, my head spinning, I stepped away and had no idea what to do next. I called Annemarie and told her what was happening. She was shocked, but we talked and she calmed me down. She told me she knew I would do the right thing, including deciding if April should meet him. Because April was with us. She’d joined our church and was one of the young women and she was playing basketball with a homeless man literally sixty feet from her birth father.

I told the young women’s leaders what was happening. They couldn’t believe it, but they also could believe it.

I went back to Tim, not sure what I should say or do next. But I simply plowed forward and met his eyes. I told him that something amazing was happening. I told him that I not only knew his daughter April, but that I was her foster father. His eyes went wide and he started to cry. I

hugged him, told him April was great. We talked a little longer, then I said I would be right back. I went and got April and sat her down about thirty feet from Tim. I don't remember what I said, but I pointed at Tim and said he was her father. Her mouth dropped open. She stared. "No way."

I nodded and assured her I'd asked a lot of questions to make sure.

"No way." She said this a few more times.

"Do you want to meet him?" I figured it could only be good. Maybe some closure for her and him.

She closed her mouth tight and nodded.

I brought her to Tim. I introduced her and looked at April, then Tim. She looked so much like him there was no way to doubt.

The rest of the evening consisted of the young women of our congregation and their leaders slowly approaching, then meeting Tim and hugs and tears and then a quiet conversation.

"Are you happy?" Tim asked April.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"You want to be adopted by him and his family?"

She nodded again.

"I just want you to be happy."

It was obvious that he couldn't care for a child. He didn't want to either, to be honest. But those long moments of miraculous grace gave him the opportunity to be filled with love and gratitude and it helped our April know she hadn't been abandoned and there was nothing wrong with her at all. Her life in the foster system and with a struggling mother wasn't her fault—it was because of the choices other people. The losses she had experienced, the times away from her mother, the too many tough times with her mother, the moving, the family spread out—all of it

wasn't because of her. Other people were making their choices because of their own problems and the way they wanted to live. It wasn't her fault.

There was nothing wrong with her.

The adoption was finalized twenty-one months after April joined us. This was not long after Annemarie and I celebrated twenty years of marriage.

Twenty years of me growing up much more than I ever did in the Foundation. Twenty years of me trying to find my way through a life full of beauty and happiness beyond imagining and love and snuggles and extraordinary experiences while hauling around seventeen years of cult life and trying to find a way to take the good, but let go of the bad.

Some of those twenty years had been hard, usually because of either bad choices of mine or simply because I couldn't predict the future. All of the years had still been good. Too many of them had passed too fast. We'd travelled a lot, had adventures all over the world, and had become changed by every encounter and experience.

Twenty years of marriage. Seven children. Heaven on earth.