

University of Nevada, Reno

Burning Bullets

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in English

by

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Abstract

Burning Bullets is a memoir told in short story form. I intended for each story to stand alone as a piece of short nonfiction, but also to connect to the surrounding chapters, giving broader layers of my life in identifiable chunks instead of a straight chronological memoir.

The stories begin at age ten and navigate through some of the most difficult times in my life: illness in the family, divorce, isolation, loss of innocents, and depression. The book contains moments of triumph as well, and ends on a high note with a scene of my life now, as a husband, father, and teacher—elements of my life that always seemed out of reach, and now these aspects drive me forward.

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Burning Bullets

Preoccupied

I stood in the hallway staring through a partially opened door. My father sat on the edge of the bed, close to the television, struggling to see the baseball game as Vin Scully called it. I pushed the door open, and he turned to me.

“Is that you, Pat?” he asked.

“No, Dad, it’s me.” I walked closer to him and sat on the edge of the bed. “Me and Trent are going to the park to have batting practice. You wanna come with?”

“No son, I can’t. I don’t feel so hot today. Maybe next time.”

He reached an arm around me and squeezed a little as I patted his leg. I left the room and went down the hall to find Trent sitting on the couch pounding a baseball into the pocket of his mitt. I stopped in front of him and shook my head side to side.

On our way out the front door, we stopped briefly to pick up a five-gallon bucket of baseballs and a couple of bats. We saw BJ and Jameson coming down the block when we reached the sidewalk. BJ and Jameson were my age, nice enough guys, and decent ball players.

“Dude, I hate BJ,” said Trent.

“Yeah, but he’ll play catcher the whole time. Then we can get more batting practice in, so don’t mess with him, okay?”

“I guess so.”

BJ and Jameson were now within shouting distance, “Let’s go, you slow pokes, or it’ll be too hot to practice,” said Trent. The two boys broke into a slow jog, which turned

into a foot race as they came closer to where Trent and I were standing. Jameson lead BJ by a few strides when the race ended.

“I won, I won,” said BJ. We all rolled our eyes, I handed the bucket to BJ, and we headed toward Rancho Park. Trent made a cadence with the end of his bat against the concrete, the heavy traffic of Royal Avenue whizzing by, that kept us all moving.

“How’s your dad?” Jameson asked, looking at me.

“He’s all right. He feels tired today. He was gonna come with us. I was hoping he would drive us so we wouldn’t have to walk back. I know I’m gonna be tired by then.”

“Is that safe?” said Jameson, “I thought he was going blind.”

“Yeah, he is. But I tell him when the lights are changing and when to turn. He also uses those bumpy lane markers to help him stay in the lane.”

“Driving by Braille? That’s got to be scary.”

“It was at first, but I’m used to it now. A few weeks ago we drove from Simi all the way to the Pacific Palisades.”

“How far is that?”

“We were on the freeway for a while. I’d say the drive was over an hour. Anyway, we made it.”

I started thinking about last year and how life as I knew it had seemed to disintegrate so fast. My father worked sheet metal for all of my life—he was a giant to me: six feet two inches tall with real muscles, built by real work. He worked hard, and lived hard. Sometimes I had trouble remembering his face; often he’d be gone for work before I woke up and I’d be asleep before he got back. The lifestyle was too much for a

healthy body, let alone one stricken with diabetes. And he broke all the rules set by the disease. He drank, smoked, even dabbled in drugs on top of working sixteen-hour days. That kind of living will always catch up to someone, and it caught my father. The first thing to go was his sight. He tried numerous laser surgeries, but none of them helped, and each time he went in, the intense light only created more spots where he couldn't see.

Before marriage, my dad was a bit of a baseball superstar. Many news articles featured his accomplishments while in high school, and he went on to play at Pierce College. He tried out for a handful of pro teams in his early twenties: The Dodgers, The As, The Royals, and the Orioles. He was diagnosed with diabetes around this time and, well, he gave up.

“Hey! Watch out, man,” Trent yanked the back of my shirt, and I nearly fell backwards. “You almost walked out into the street.”

“Sorry...thanks.”

Donny

Donny was my best friend when I was eleven and was also my worst enemy, depending on the week. He had a younger brother, Brady, who was around Trent's age. Donny and I fought on a regular basis, as did Trent and Brady. I guess our entire relationship could be compared to the epic battles of the Hatfields and McCoys; they'd try to gang up on us, if they ever happened to catch Trent or me off guard and alone with the two of them, but, despite the clashes, we packed together. They lived

about four houses down and on the opposite side of Galindo, and they had a pool which made them popular with the kids in our neighborhood.

Their family dynamic differed from what I'd seen in my house. Donny's father spent more time at home than at work, and his mother was always in the back bedroom of the house. My mother said they were druggies, and I wasn't supposed to enter their house, so I would lie whenever I did. They also kept a bunch of pit bulls at the house that terrified me. Knocking on the door was nerve-wracking because the dogs would be there immediately—barking, biting, snarling, wanting to eat me.

The previous summer, Donny's toddler sister fell into the pool while trying to retrieve a doll that he'd thrown into the deep end. I came through the side gate to see Donny sitting on the diving board, motionless as the little girl's shape convulsed, face down in the water. I ran across the yard, jumped in, and pulled her out, gasping, choking, and screaming in a cycle. She vomited on the textured cement when I pushed her over the rim of the deep end, lurching into the uncontrollable breathless, jerking cry of most children.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked.

"You should have seen your face. That was so funny." Donny still sat on the diving board and was now laughing uncontrollably.

"Stop it! She would have died. You would have let her."

"So?" Donnie became serious. "So what? What does it matter to you? She's my shitty little sister."

I gathered up the sobbing child and started for the back door of the Meyers' house. The dogs were at the slider barking and slobbering.

“You better not tell my mom. I’ll get back at you if you do.” Donny’s eyes filled with tears as he stood and crossed his arms. “You know what my dad do if you tell, and I will get back at you.”

I never did tell. I just told Donny’s mother that the girl had fallen in the pool and that I had pulled her out. Donny’s mom simply stared at me, dragging on her Camel. Her eyes were vacuous and uncaring, sunk back into her head, surrounded by dark rings and bags. I handed over the girl and walked back home.

The Wash

Trent waited on the sidewalk as I knocked on Donny’s door. Jody, the boys’ mother, answered the door in a bra and cut-offs.

“What?” she asked, putting a cigarette to her mouth.

“Are Donny and Brady home?”

“Still asleep,” she said letting smoke escape her lips.

“Can you get them? We’re supposed to hang out today—“

“You go get ‘em if you want.” Jody stepped to the side and pulled open the torn screen door. I brushed past her and entered. The floor was littered with soda cans, potato chip bags, and cigarette butts. The TV was blaring *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, and Brittani sat close to the screen wearing only a diaper; she didn’t notice when I entered. I used exaggerated steps to avoid the garbage and continued down the hall. The boys slept on a sheetless mattress on the floor of the back bedroom. Mounds of laundry covered the floors along with the same spread of garbage that was in the front room. I found Donny

lying with his legs on the floor and his torso on the bed, Brady was nowhere in sight. I took hold of Donny's shoulder, and shook it lightly.

"Donny. Donny, wake up."

Donny roused slowly, turning away from me, "What time is it, dude?"

"It's 10:30."

"Already? We were supposed to be at the Wash by now. Where's Brady?"

"I dunno."

"I'll find him."

The Wash was a regular stomping ground for all the boys who lived on Galindo; we'd go there to catch lizards and frogs. We also liked to disrupt the makeshift shelters built by homeless men that lined the overpassing streets. The Wash was where all of Simi Valley's filth ended up: rain water, manufacturer's waste, garbage, chemical runoff, shopping carts, pools of reflective still water—you name it, some of it existed in the wash. Trent and I even found a halfway-submerged dirt bike down there.

Brady once tied two lizards together using some string he'd found. We watched the lizards struggle against each other, biting wildly and whipping around in a blur. When they slowed from exhaustion, Brady would walk over and provoke them back into action; usually he's spit on them, or dunk them under water—the want to live made them squirm more fiercely than ever. When the entertainment value dissolved, Brady picked up the two, wound up, and splattered them against a large boulder, putting his full force behind the pitch. The bodies twitched for a minute afterward, then the nerves finally died.

Billy Speagle

Billy Speagle moved into the house next the Donny and Brady when I was ten. At first, I tried to befriend him, but the more time I spent around him, the more I disliked him. He was annoying, younger than the rest of us by two years, and spoiled. His mother dressed him up like a little doll. He wore matching outfits, not cut offs and stained shirts, but color-coordinated outfits. His mother polished him up and sent out a picture-perfect kid to disguise the truth that lurked inside the Speagle house.

I didn't realize then, and I'm still not sure, but I think Billy's mother worked as a prostitute. Billy's father left them shortly after they moved to Galindo, and she never worked. But there were men, a steady flow of them coming in all of the time, day and night. They never stayed too long, and I would only see a scarce few of them more than once. Billy said they were his mother's friends.

The bills were paid and the family appeared to be doing well. Trent and I used to resent Billy because he always had spending cash. We were jealous at first, and then we started ripping him off by selling him worthless baseball cards, "borrowing" a few bucks, or even charging him to stay over at our house. He was an only child, and he envied what we had: a family.

One day Donny and I were at war, and Billy decided to take sides with Donny. Donny was a coward; he would pull stuff like throwing an orange at my back, then booking home before I could recover and retaliate. This time, he called my father a cripple, and I snapped. He was a good twenty feet away and sprinted for life as soon as he said it, but I was close on his heels.

“I’ll get you at the front door before you can open it!” I yelled at him. Only he didn’t stop at his house. I think it was because he knew I would beat him before his parents knew what was happening. We ran the full block like this, with me just a step behind him.

The Mix family lived at the end of the block and Raymond, the oldest of the boys, watched us while outside washing his car.

“Ray ... help!” Donny screamed.

Raymond grabbed up Donny as I took a powerful swing for his back. My fist slugged Raymond in the middle of his stomach instead, causing him to cry out in pain.

“You little shit,” he said. He tossed Donny to the side, absently, and wrenched my arm. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“He’s tryin’ to beat me up for no reason, Ray,” said Donny.

“Bull,” I said. “He called my dad a cripple, and I’m gonna kill him,” I tried to break Raymond’s grip. Ray responded by pulling my arm up high and then, he put me in a Full-Nelson, with both of my arms locked up over my head, and he squeezed, making the pressure on my head and neck intolerable.

“Let go of me, you asshole.”

Raymond started laughing as did Donny. “You know what?” Raymond said, “I think you need to be taught a lesson for picking on kids that are smaller than you.”

“Let me go.” I was crying now, struggling to break the hold. Ray swung me around to face Donny and said, “Go ahead.”

Donny started to punch me all over the body and face. I started spitting and kicking at Donny and pulled down my arms as hard as I could. Raymond wrestled me to

his front lawn and pulled me to the ground, still locked in the Nelson. He sprawled on top of me and Donny kept punching and then began to kick me in the sides. Both of them laughed while it was happening, and then I heard Billy there, too. He must've took off after us when he heard me yelling. He egged on Donny.

After a few minutes, Ray told Donny to stop and to walk home with Billy. Ray held me down until they were just about home. He let me up then, and could see I was still full of fury.

“What? You gonna try to beat me up? Huh? You want some more?”

At eighteen years old, Ray was a foot taller than me and much stronger. I turned and walked back to the sidewalk, spitting a blood-filled wad of spit on his freshly washed VW Beetle. I wanted to kill him. Donny and Billy, too.

Sweet Revenge

Everything fades in time, but I only let Donny believe that things had blown over. After it seemed safe to hang out again, I invited Donny over to the house. Trent, Brady, Donny, and I were playing in the backyard when I asked if Donny wanted a frozen lemonade from the garage freezer. Trent looked at me and smiled.

Two days before I had whizzed in a Dixie cup and frozen it, knowing that sooner or later I could feed it to Donny. We went to the freezer, and I pretended to be disappointed that there was only one treat left.

“Donny, you can have it. Trent and I had one earlier.”

“What about me?” asked Brady. Trent shrugged his shoulder and said, “Share it.” The boys licked at the frozen piss and even bit off chunks, chomping with delight.

“Good, huh?”

“Yeah,” they answered together.

Trent and I wore shit-eating grins as we watched them until they finished. That’s when I let them know what they had consumed, “It was piss! My piss!”

The two looked at each other with twisted faces, as if they’d been slapped hard on the back, and then started spitting and shouting. Brady ran out the side gate, and Donny charged me like a rabid dog.

I slugged his nose when he came into range. He fell but was not down long. He grabbed me around the waist, and I clutched a fistful of his grungy hair and yanked as hard as I could. Donny released his grip, rubbing his head.

I raised my clenched fist to see full locks of dirty blond hair sticking out from between my fingers. One had a sliver of skin dangling on the end. Donny patted the top of his head, looking at his hand every so often, and then he saw the blood. He let out a screech and followed out the side gate behind his brother. Trent and I relished the moment, retelling it to our other brothers later and adding on bits to make it more impressive.

Revenge against Raymond would be more difficult. I couldn’t take him on physically, but I would find a way. I thought about getting my brothers to help—Travis was fourteen, Tim was thirteen, and Trent and I were the youngest. Four to one. We could likely take him, but Ray had two brothers as well, both of them older than Travis. In the end, I target his precious car.

We had an orchard of sorts on our property consisting of orange, apricot, plum, and peach trees. One summer day, my mother made all us boys clean up the rotten fruit that had fallen in the yard. We filled out fifteen grocery bags with gushy, stinking pulp

and pits before we were through. The consistency of the mush reminded me of the gushy texture of a meatloaf mixture before baking. Later I was walking home from 7-11, past the Mix house, when I saw it: the windows of Ray's bug were down.

I used my brothers after all, but only to help me carry the bags down the street. We made sure to be quiet, and I told Tim and Trent to let the air out of the tires while Travis and I dumped the bags inside the car. I made sure to smear the goo all over the upholstery and jam it into the air vents. The car looked like a giant ate fruit for weeks and let out a huge, shitty, fruit-filled mess atop of it. We sprinted down the street, our small herd, and broke out cheering when we reached the safety of our front yard.

Getting back at Billy was much easier and required a little patience and timing. Donny and I had buried the hatchet yet again, so I hung around his house waiting for an opportunity.

I didn't have to wait long.

What I had planned to do was inflict serious pain on Billy, but a simple punch or bulldoze wouldn't do.

I went swimming at Donny's house, and then Billy invited us over to build Legos. The castle on the box had two towers, a drawbridge including linking chains that could actually be rolled up or down using a spoked wheel, and the Lego men wore suits of armor and had horses. Billy had several other Lego cities displayed in his room that he'd built with his mother. We would attempt to build the castle ourselves today.

I started in on him right away.

“Do you guys remember when Ray held me and you both just laughed you asses off and hit me and stuff?” I looked at them both, but only Billy looked back.

“I didn’t hit you,” he said.

“Not with your hands.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you just sat there, cheering him on.” I wanted to make him understand, so I laid out the whole scene for both of them. “I was mad at Donny for calling my dad ‘cripple’ so I chased him down the block. You came out and followed us. Ray got in my way, and then he let Donny beat me up.”

“See. I didn’t do anything.”

“Ah, but you cheered him on. You laughed. You told him to get me, and he did. But now, Ray’s not here to protect either of you. Billy, what should I do to repay you?”

“Mom!”

“I’m just kidding, Billy. I’m messing with you. I’m not gonna do anything.”

Billy’s mother poked her head through the door. “What, honey?” Billy looked at me, and I grinned back. Then I motioned down to the Legos with my eyes and head, unfolding the instructions. Billy looked back to his mother. “Could you get us Capri Suns?” She left and came back shortly with three pouches of California Cooler.

I kept my cool for a while longer, but the more I thought about the incident with Ray, the more heated I became.

“Billy, do you have any money?” I asked him.

“Yeah. I have like fifty bucks in my tin.”

“Give it to me, all of it, and I won’t punch you in the face.” I was serious, and he knew it.

“Mom! Mom!”

Fierce footsteps pounded down the hall and Billy’s mother swung the door wide open this time, her face panicked and white. “What’s wrong, Billy? Honey?”

“Tyler said he’s gonna punch me. Make him go.” Billy’s mother simply pointed down the hallway and said, “Leave.”

“This isn’t over, Billy.” I swung my leg and a sea of brightly colored toys pelted the walls as I tromped out. His mother followed behind me, yelling, but her voice transformed into white noise, like Charlie Brown’s teacher barking out assignments. She followed me outside and stood on the lawn next to the front walkway with Billy and Donny behind her. I stopped at the sidewalk, even though my better sense told me not to.

“You’re not welcome here ever again.” She said to me. “Understand?”

“Fuck you, lady.” Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She stood a few seconds before the shock wore off; she said she was going to call my mother and turned around to go back inside, passing the boys and giving me a window of opportunity.

I charged straight at Billy and was within striking distance before the screen door clipped shut. Billy was on my right side which gave me a clear shot at him, and before he could holler for his mother to return and save him, I was airborne.

I pulled off a mind-blowing wrestling move I had seen on WWF called “The Ghetto Blaster.” Essentially, this is a flying double drop-kick with a sideways swinging motion that lets a person put tremendous force behind the blow. My feet happened to

connect squarely with his left shoulder and the side of his face. He collapsed to the ground like a house of cards, immediately grabbing at his temple and screeching. I was up and half way home before the door swung back open. Fuck you, lady (and Billy), indeed.

The Fort

In the middle of summer, we began to build a fort in the wash. Billy came along with us, and we decided that the small, utility-vehicle bridge would serve as a perfect roof. We scavenged all over the wash for junk to use. I found a couple of chairs and Trent found an old couch cushion. Donny and Brady pushed a shopping cart down the slopping walls and flipped it onto its side, and Billy carried a bean-bag chair all the way from home.

We also raided the sea of sheet metal pieces in the side yard that my father had accumulated over the years. The fort was pretty solid when we finished, or at least seemed so. We would hang out there for much of what was left of that summer. Usually after baseball, swimming, or when we were bored.

We knew where a bum had built a shelter on the other side of The Wash, and walked there, under the bridge, to finish our Slurpees and chips. Trent and I started to pitch rocks into the massive concrete wall in the middle of the overpass. A spray-painted tag that read 'Chaca' served as the target. A bullseye was dead center of the first A. Donny, Brady, and Billy became the judges of the contest. After each one of us threw a

rock, one of the judges would declare the winner. Trent easily won most rounds, and I took to throwing my rocks into a nearby pool of water.

A haggard man walked down the rocky path, under the bridge, and stood next to Billy. “What the fuck are you boys doing down here?” He called. He was small and bearded, wearing a greasy, stained jacket and worn-out trousers. He rubbed his grimy thumbs against his forefingers uncontrollably while he sort of walked in place. We all stared at him, not answering.

“You the boys been messin’ with my stuff?”

Still, no answer.

“Can any of you talk?”

I slowly began to move away, and everyone else followed my lead, never answering him and never making eye contact. Billy tried to sneak behind him, but a rock shifted beneath his foot, making a scratching sound in the dirt. The man spun around and snatched Billy’s arm, and Billy started howling.

“Help! Help guys! He’s got me!”

Donny and Brady sprinted up the path, out from under the bridge as I moved to pull the man away from Billy. I yanked on the slippery collar of the worn jacket and it began to rip; the man would not let go, and Billy continued pleading for help.

Then I heard a loud thud, and the man collapsed, clutching at his ribs on the right side. Billy and I scampered off a few yards and the man let out a slow moan.

Trent stood about twenty feet from the attacker holding stones, slightly bigger than golf balls, in his hands.

“We are leaving. Don’t move.” I pulled Billy up the trail as Trent sidestepped behind us to keep an eye on the man.

Donny and Brady were already half a city block away when everyone else reached the top of the bridge. Trent and I looked at each other and shook our heads. I yelled for the two and then waved them back, letting them know the threat was gone.

“You chicken-shits!” Trent yelled when they were close. I took a big step and slugged Donny in the arm. Donny just laughed as he rubbed at the spot. We heard the f-word and looked across the expanse of the Wash to see the homeless man flipping us off and screaming obscenities. We returned gestures of our own and Trent chucked a rock as hard as he could toward the man; a puff of dust flared up just a couple yards short of him. The man turned and slithered through an opening in the fence and headed up the street.

Killing my Dad

At thirty-eight my father had worn out his body; he looked and moved like a man more than double his age. I was too young to understand, but the weight of it all still suffocated me. He was legally blind and his kidneys had just about failed.

One weekend afternoon, I asked him for some money to go to the movies and, when he explained that he didn’t have any money, I said that figured. This enraged my father, who until two years before had been the sole provider for our family of ten, and who had provided well. Now, he couldn’t.

I know he must’ve been frustrated, having his body fail long before it should have, but I was frustrated, too. This was my father, my superman, sitting on the edge of the bed all day for the last year listening to baseball games on the TV and rarely leaving his bedroom. I wanted to be close to him again, to talk with him, to go to work with him,

to play catch with him. Instead our interactions consisted of me clearing his dishes from his nightstand or acting as his eyes when he drove.

“What do you know about working?” he asked.

“Well, I helped you at Bill and Kay’s,” I replied.

“Listen, son. You know I am sick, and I haven’t really worked since that job, so I can’t give you any money. Just forget it.”

“C’mon. You have like two hundred bucks.”

“Did you get into my wallet?”

“No.” But I had. I’d looked through his wallet earlier while he was in the shower. I knew exactly how much money he had, and I could have taken what I needed, but I had never stolen from him.

“Come over here,” he said. I backed away to the hall and shook my head, forgetting that he could not see my gesture.

“No.” I said when I was surely out of range, “I’m going to walk to Albertson’s. Mom will give me the money.”

“You little shit. Get over here now!” I was already walking down the hall when I heard him grab his jacket and cane. I knew he couldn’t catch me, but the thought of him pursuing me sent an instant chill up my spine and I sped up, throwing the front door wide open and continuing to the front lawn.

“You’re not going anywhere.” He was about ten feet from me now.

I hurried to the sidewalk and stopped. “You gonna catch me, Dad? You gonna *run* after me? Is that it?” He knew what I was getting at and remained silent, but he kept

walking after me. I walked backwards, to face him as he followed. I don't know what came over me then, but after I started, I just couldn't stop.

“You're used up. You can't do anything anymore.” I turned around and felt like running, but I didn't. I turned back to him. He looked so fragile in his loose leather jacket and baggy jeans.

I saw then that he was really sick, maybe even dying. His skin looked gray and lifeless and his expression of anger was the only proof he was living at all. He was a crumbling mountain.

“Go back home, old man. Go watch your baseball, and sit in your room. Rot away.” I was hurting him. I knew it, and I kept on. I insulted him and put him down and he kept after me then I did it...I killed him.

“I wish you weren't my father—I wish you were dead!”

I wanted to suck the words back in, but I couldn't. He kept on walking toward me, and I could see now that he was silently crying. I had never seen my father cry, ever. And now I had caused him to. I started crying too. I wanted to run to him and apologize, to tell him he was still my hero, that no matter what I would love him, that I was scared because of what was happening to him, to our family. I wanted to return to age six, to the time when my father came home from work and raised me over his head with his strong arms, to the time when he used to tickle me to the point of tears; to the time when he had been everything I wanted to be. Instead, I ran. I ran as fast as I could and didn't look back. I stopped a few blocks away and sat down on a sidewalk curb. I didn't go to the movies that day. I sat alone on the curb and cried for what I had done, and for all I had lost.

Some regrets haunt far longer than others.

Burning Bullets

“You guys ready yet?” asked Donny.

Trent and I gave each other uneasy looks while Donny and Brady showed smiles. Billy, sitting on a cool slab of concrete in the shade of the bridge, piped up, “Ready for what?”

“Nothing,” said Trent. “Shut up, Billy.”

We walked out into the sunlight and Donny flicked his fingers against my shoulder, “Let’s see ‘em,” he said.

“See what?” asked Billy.

“Shut up, Billy!” Trent and Brady said simultaneously.

I reached into the front pocket of my faded 501s and pulled out a handful of .22 caliber bullets. My hand shook a little and the shells reflected the sun’s rays back into the squinting faces of the other boys.

“Are those .22s?” asked Donny.

“Yep.”

“Doesn’t your dad have anything bigger? .45s?”

I shook my head no. “Yeah, he has .45s and shotgun shells, but we don’t need anything that big for this.”

“Donny, you’ll blow off you hand if you use a bullet that big,” said Trent as he clenched his fist into a mock stub.

“He’s right,” added Brady.

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Shut up, Billy!”

“Did you guys get everything else?” asked Trent.

Donny opened his backpack and pulled out a can of Aqua Net, a Bic, and a short length of two-by-four. We decided to head over to the utility road that runs parallel to the sloping walls of the Wash. Donny walked in front of everyone else wearing a smirk. I kept in the back of the pack with Trent, and we whispered under our breath.

“This is bad,” said Trent, “we should go home and let them do this by themselves.”

“I know. I feel like I got socked in the stomach...like I’m gonna puke or something.”

We flashed looks back and forth the rest of the way to the utility road when I finally stopped in my tracks. “I can’t do this, guys.”

“What?” Donny and Brady spun around looking as if they had the wind knocked from them. “What do you mean?”

“I got a feeling...something’s wrong, man. I can’t.”

“So, you’re pussin out!” Donny said. “I can’t believe this. We planned everything and we have everything and you ‘have a feeling’ so it’s all over. No way.”

“Listen, you guys are the pussies,” said Trent. “We all watched you run for your lives when that bum grabbed Billy.”

“Whatever. Just give me the bullets then, a-hole.” Brady stepped forward holding out a hand.

“No,” said Trent.

“Both of you! I can’t believe it. Billy, Brady, lets go. Tyler’s too scared.”

“All right. If you want to do it so bad, go find ‘em.” I wound up and threw the ammo as hard as I could. The cluster of tiny missiles held together for the first ten yards or so, then dispersed into directions of their own. They landed in a mix of cacti, weeds, and murky shallow water. Donny and Brady flipped out and began throwing a tantrum—stomping their feet, cussing up a storm, and kicking rocks.

“You fucker! You asshole! We were supposed to light them. Aagh!”

Trent could see a fight brewing, “Listen, listen. How bout this: If you guys can go find one, we’ll light it?”

The brothers quieted quickly and stared at each other.

“Deal,” said Donny. The two boys ran down the side slope to seek out the discarded ammo.

It wasn’t long after that Trent, Billy, and I heard yells of triumph from the lower wash. A minute later, Brady scampered up the wall with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“I found it.” He held a single round in his dirt-caked palm.

Donny took the bullet from his brother, “You guys stayin or goin?” He looked directly at Trent and me.

“Let’s get it over with,” I said.

They began to set up; first, they laid out the two-by-four and drenched it with the Aqua Net, right in the middle if the board. Donny placed the bullet in the middle of the puddle and started spraying again.

“What’s going on out here?” An old man whose backyard ran directly up to the Wash utility road stared at us. “You boys better get on out of there, nothing for you in

the Wash except trouble. Homeless men live down there and they'll catch you and beat you up."

"Okay, sir. We were just leaving," said Trent.

"Good boys. I don't want to see you boys out here anymore. It's dangerous."

Donny looked at the others and a queer expression overtook across his face, "Shut up, you jack-off. We'll come here if we want to, geezer." The old man looked stunned and was stammering over his words when Donny held out his right arm and flipped him off.

"I, I, I'll call the cops. You little, you little shits! I'll call the cops on you."

"Go ahead," said Donny.

Donny gathered the supplies, throwing the hairspray and wood block back into the backpack. Trent walked hurriedly in front of the boys, leading them back to the underpass.

"Donny, you're so stupid. That guy's gonna call the cops on us. Now we can't light the bullets," said Brady.

"Yeah we can. Let's just do it right now, under the bridge." Donny ran ahead and the others followed. Billy half-walked half-ran all the while calling for them to 'wait up.'

Donny had already set up the wood and re-sprayed it in the center and placed the bullet flat when Billy finally made it to the underpass. The boys stood in a circle, silent and still for a few seconds. Donny whipped the Bic from his shorts pocket and leaned in to spark flame.

“Stop you idiot! The bullet is pointed right at my brother. Point it up, so it won’t hit anybody when it goes off.” Trent leaned in and pointed the bullet at the sky.

“Here goes,” said Donny. He thumbed the sprocket of the lighter and set the wood ablaze.

The flame danced with the bullet, fully encompassing it, hypnotizing the audience. The fire lasted until the hair spray had been fully consumed, and then it died. Before anyone could speak, Donny was giving the shell another shower and lighting it once again.

We watched, more of the same, and the flame began to die for a second time.

“This isn’t going to work guys.” My voice was strained. “Let’s just go.”

Billy and Donny sprang to their feet, and Donny positioned the can to add fuel. Just as the mist touched the flame, the bullet sounded. Everyone screamed, and I jumped to my feet, cheering and laughing out of fear—lightening ran through us all. The blast deafened us, but we celebrated on.

All except Billy. His eyes looked like two pale moons with black holes in the center. His chubby hand clasped around his arm, and he looked like he was screaming, but no noise came from his mouth.

Billy’s feet began to flail and stomp, then three separate rivers of maroon emerged through the webs of his fingers, running down the back of his hand to where they joined as one, continuing to his forearm and elbow, and finally dripping in the dirt. Billy’s voice returned.

Billy squealed and gasped and looked to us for help, but we were statues. He appeared to be clawing his arm off. He fell to the earth writhing and convulsing, kicking dust into the air and shooting rocks in all directions.

I finally snapped back into my body and bent over him.

“Billy, let me see.” Billy didn’t respond, he just kept on with his fit.

I looked up to see the Myers brothers jumping over a fence to flee the scene. Trent ran to the back fence of house that bordered The Wash and called out for help. I asked Billy to let me see his arm again, but he couldn’t hear me over his own voice. I knelt down next to him and grabbed his face with both of my hands, forcing his eyes to meet mine.

“Let go, Billy. It’s gonna be all right. Let me see.” I kept my voice calm, and produced a stern tone that finally broke through; he finally relaxed and let me pull his hand away.

The wound looked superficial. It was an inch long and about a half an inch wide, but it bled profusely and it made me sick to see it.

“Keep pressure on it, Billy. Hold down strong. Trent and I will get you out here.” I looked up to find my brother had successfully drawn out the inhabitants of the house, but they just looked confused and yelled at him for climbing on their fence.

“Trent, let’s go. We’ve gotta get him home. Help me to lift him over the fence.” Trent returned, and drew Billy to his feet. We both put our forearms in Billy’s armpits and slowly made our way to the chain link fence where we entered earlier. Trent hopped over and waited for me to boost Billy over.

That endless walk home: Billy limped and cried all the way, and when we arrived at Billy's house, I couldn't bear going over all the details of the day trying to explain it to his mother. Instead, Trent and I walked him to the driveway and then booked home. We both had quite a bit of blood on us by now, so we decided to hose off in the front yard before we entered our house.

Everyone was watching TV in the living room and didn't even notice we had come in. I sat down on the couch without saying a word.

Before long a knock sounded on the door. I was afraid to answer, but jumped up before anyone else, just to check. I saw two uniformed giants when I cracked the door. The one in front was holding a little flip-notebook. He asked for me and Trent. I told him I'd be right back, and I retrieved my mother. She looked at the two men and called for my father to join her. I watched from the kitchen table as the cop referenced his notes and pointed down the street and pointed to his arm.

I was summoned then by my mother, who looked at me with fury and disappointment, to explain myself. I told it like it was, everything. The officers had already spoken to the Myers brothers; Donny had spun his story to finger Trent and me as the sole culprits.

The same cop wrote everything down and said he would be paying Billy a visit to get some kind of agreement in details between Donny's story and mine. My father called us in his room as soon as the police left. I figured he'd be lashing us red, but he was calm when he spoke, and he had us sit on the bed.

"You boys are lucky that bullet didn't shoot you in the head." He looked up to the ceiling and then back at us. "What were you thinking?"

I tried to say that Donny was the one, but he cut me off.

“Son, I don’t expect this type of behavior from any of you boys, but especially not from you. You are a leader, Tyler, not a follower, and you sure as hell don’t follow a kid like Donny.”

I began to cry, which started Trent crying too.

“What if that bullet had hit Trent, or you? Then what?” He was on the verge of crying himself when he sent us out.

We went over to Billy’s house the next day. We sat in the living room while he told us about his hospital visit. His arm was in a cast. He explained that the bullet had caused a minute fracture and he had received four stitches. He was happy to see us, and I felt bad for always making him the butt of my jokes and leaving him out all the time. After the shooting, he was still smiling and welcoming, as if it never happened at all. He said it didn’t hurt too badly anymore, and that he would have the cast on for about six weeks, just a few weeks into the school year. I couldn’t look at him. I just pretended to look at the multitude of rooster figurines with which Billy’s mother decorated the living room. I looked at Trent and cocked my head toward the door, the signal to leave.

“Wait.”

Billy leapt off the couch and went into the kitchen. He came back with a large permanent marker in his chubby fist and wore an ear-to-ear smile.

“I wanted you to sign first.”

Black Sheep

Trent and I watch everyone from behind the chain-link fence. All these people are my relatives, but the fence is not the only barrier between us. Grandma Bev is drinking some kind of wine cooler with her lady friends while Grandpa pitches horseshoes with my father and Uncle Jim ... typical Easter Sunday.

We're playing tennis. Well, we're running frantically all over the court and smacking at the ball, but we play with only one rule—get the ball over the net. It's great fun, actually. The ball can bounce wherever and as many times as it needs to, and we just keep going. There is no score keeping—we have no idea how to score a tennis match anyway—and it ends when we want to do something else.

Grandpa laughs, watching us between horseshoe tosses, but Grandma drags on her Marlboro with force and crumples her brow. “Ty,” she says. “Is that the way Grandpa explained the rules to you both?”

“No,” I shout to her but then whisper to Trent, “Me like football, Gamma.” Trent and I bust up and he serves one to me at which I swing like I'm batting a baseball—it soars over the fence, bounces off the roof, and lands, smack-dab, right in the middle of Grandma's snack layout, sending a few potato chips into the air. My eyes bug out, and I freeze. For a minute I think she's going to come in here after me. Her expression is vicious—she's pissed. “Boys, if you want to keep playing, you had better follow the rules! Understand?” We nod our heads yes and pretend to be remorseful, but at that very moment Trent summons a ripper from the fart gods that booms so audibly it wakes the dog. We don't bother trying to stifle the laughs, and Grandpa giggles with us again as my father chucks the ball back over the fence.

Grandma watches us closely, shaking her head and whispering to her cronies, occasionally giving her husband a look that says, “Do something about them.” But he doesn’t. Grandpa loves us.

We grow tired of tennis soon enough, mostly because we’re god-awful, and decide to go play catch out in the front yard. I grab a beer from the ice-chest on the way, but my mother sees me from the screen door.

“Tyler James.”

That’s all she has to say. I know I’m dead, so I make a hard right to the horseshoe pit, handing the beer to Grandpa. “He asked me to get him one, Mom,” I say as Grandpa shoots me a wink.

“This Bud’s for you,” I say, and we laugh and race out front to grab up our baseball gloves and a ball. Trent or I will say this familiar line to Grandpa at least ten more times today because he goes by Bud, and we find this hysterical.

It’s not long before the rest of the crowd congregates in the front yard to join us. These are distant relatives I’ve rarely or never seen—mostly, close friends of my grandparents and cousins or second cousins of my father. The men watch Trent and me as my father tells them about the highlights of last season. I hear him explain in detail how Trent and I both made the all-star team, then his words become inaudibly quiet, and I can’t hear what he’s saying.

Trent is a natural, and, even though he is younger, he had a far better showing than I did in the all-star baseball tournament last season. My father is trying not to hurt my feelings by relaying this fact in a tone I can’t hear, but I know what he’s saying, and my feelings are hurt.

“Show em’ your curve, Trenty-boy,” he tells Trent. I pop a squat, so they can see the movement the ball takes. He throws a magnificent curve, and all are impressed:

“How old did you say he was?”

“Chip off the old block, eh, Kim?”

“He’s got close to a foot of break on that thing.”

I want to tell them that I taught Trent to pitch, but as I’m about to, I see how happy my father looks. He looks better than he has in a long time. The way he is basking in our glory, smiling, doting, he doesn’t look sick at all.

We go on showing off until Grandma walks around the house, through the side gate. “Is that a hardball? Kim, make them stop this instant before someone gets a black eye.”

“Relax, Mom. They’re under control,” my dad says.

“Yeah? Just like that horseshit they pulled in the backyard? Do you want that ball to come sailing in and hit Great Grandma Gene in the head? It will kill her. We don’t want that, do we, Ty?”

She is indirectly referencing Billy, the kid who was accidentally shot last summer when some friends and I were messing around. Dad knows where this is heading and stops the conversation. “All right, all right. Boys, put up your gloves. The barbecue’s just about ready anyway.”

Holding a plate full of chicken, ribs, and beans, I find a place to sit, and I look around, observing my extended family in action: Little cousins are running around; families are intertwined, talking about their lives, and I start to notice something...my

family sits away from everyone else, and no one mingles with us much. We are segregated. I pay close attention for about twenty minutes, and I notice that Grandma is not cross with my cousins. She doesn't correct them, or embarrass them. She sweeps them up for kisses, compliments them, and pats their heads. This is not at all the grandmother I have come to know.

My eleven-year-old mind doesn't fully grasp the weight of what I see, but my gut does. And then my grandma confirms my suspicions.

"It is impolite to stare, Ty. How would you like it if we all were staring at you?"

And then everyone *is* staring at me. I am quiet for the rest of the visit, looking at my plate during dinner, only daring to take quick glances around me.

I think about another gathering at the grandparents' house a few before. When we finished dinner, my brothers and I volunteered to help clean up. We packed up all of the leftover food, and then began bringing the dishes into the house. We almost always ate outside of Grandma's house.

Grandma Bev handed me a white, ceramic dish that had contained corn on the cob. I followed Grandma up the front steps and was right behind her as she opened the door. I thought, for sure, that she would hold the screen door for me, so I could follow her into the house. But she didn't even notice I was behind her, and she let it swing back at me. I instinctively raised my hand to catch the door, and the top of the serving dish slid off, falling in slow motion before hitting the concrete steps and shattering.

I felt heat rush through me and looked up to see Grandma Bev in the doorway, holding the screen door open with one hand while the other covered her mouth. She

stared at the scattered shards. Then her face transformed from utter shock to pure hatred, and she glared at me.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?”

“I’m sorry. I was trying to stop the screen, and—”

“That dish has been in our family for over eighty years.” She took a step toward me, “Eighty...years!”

She snatched the bottom half of the dish from my arms and stepped back inside, slamming the door in my face. I began crying, and stumbled back to the picnic table in the front yard where I sat and cried until my grandfather came over and sat next to me.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “She’ll cool down and forget all about it. It’s just a dish, right? She always overreacts.”

I smiled up at him, and he helped to dry my face.

Now I hear my Aunt Cathy say, “You gonna eat *all* that?” to my brother Travis, who is on the heavy side, and I don’t get seconds because I fear a similar jab with similar chuckles. Travis doesn’t eat much of his second plate anyway. His eyes are glossed with tears, and he is staring at our twelve-passenger van, a clue that he is ready to leave. I have seven siblings: five brothers and two sisters, and most of us are overweight. This is why Grandma shuns us: we are all fat; she believes this fact is somehow a reflection she bears. We receive comments like this at most family gatherings—something along the lines of “big boy” or “chunky” or “you’ve grown in more ways than one.” I’m about to explode, but I wait for the ride home to speak again.

“Dad, why doesn’t Grandma like us?”

“What? Of course she likes you, she loves you. You’re her grandkids.”

“But she yells at us every time we’re over for no reason. We’re just playing tennis or baseball and she goes ‘Stop that Ty’ or ‘Is that a hardball?’ or ‘You’re gonna kill Grandma Gene.’”

“She didn’t say that.”

“Close enough. Plus, cousin Nate and Jimmy were going bonkers today, and Eric and Danielle hit the tennis ball over the fence like five times, and Grandma didn’t say shit to them.” I catch myself after I say the s-word and apologize.

“Watch it,” he says, and we’re quiet for a while. But I can’t let it go. “Why doesn’t she like us, Dad?” He doesn’t answer, so I figure I’ll have to let it go.

“You guys were just a little too rowdy today. That’s all.”

I know there’s more to it, but I don’t want to irritate him. He is the father who follows through when he threatens to pull over the car.

When we arrive home, I am close to tears. I rush into my bedroom and sit for a while to think. I replay the day’s events, and come to the conclusion that my immediate family does not fit with my extended family. I am turning over possible reasons when my mother enters and sits across from me on Trent’s bed.

I don’t look at her; I can’t. She moves next to me, puts her arms around me, and starts to talk baseball. She brings up last year’s trips to Port Hueneme for the all-star tournament. We reminisce the hours we spent driving there and back, singing Beatles’ songs and eating In and Out, and I soon forget why I am upset...but family is forever, and the holidays keep coming.

Divorce

They made it nineteen years before they called it quits. I think for the last five, my mother was trying to keep it together for all of us.

My parents met while my mother was still in high school and my father was attending Pierce College. They both grew up in Southern California cities, my father in Woodland Hills, and my mother in Reseda. I've been told that my father was actually interested in my mother's sister, Jodi, and that my mother was interested in my father's brother, Jim. A little hard to follow, but in the end they found each other. I don't really know how the story unfolded, but I do know this: My mother was eighteen and pregnant when my parents married. I don't know if they were planning nuptials so soon; they had only been dating a few months. Both sides of the family seemed to be apprehensive about the marriage, but my mother has told me she and my father were deeply in love.

I don't talk with my mother about her life. She keeps to herself, and I don't press her. I found a note she had written to my father once; I was eight or nine at the time, but the note was composed before I was born. In the note my mother pleads with my father, asking for closeness and love to return to their relationship. She reminds him of the four beautiful children they have together (I am number five), and the need for the father figure to be active and caring. The note was much longer than this, about four handwritten pages on yellow tablet paper, but these are the details that stuck. My mother, at twenty-three years of age, had four kids and a loveless marriage.

I cried after I read it. I even wrote a response to her because I felt like she needed someone to understand her pain. I wrote on the backside of the last page. *I love you Mom. You are the best. Love, Tyler.* That was all I could think to write. I knew these

feelings in front of me, and it dawned on me that my mother had been feeling this way for a long time, most of her marriage.

My mother had locked my father out of the house a few times for going to strip clubs after work, and I remember some tense moments when my mother packed my father's clothes in cases and left them on the front porch. He was gone all the time, but he was trying to provide for a huge family. I also remember him using me as leverage when my mother was trying to kick him out. He would hold me in his arms and give me attention—ask me if I wanted to go to work with him next week or if I wanted to go to a Dodger game. I would be stuck in the middle with my mother telling him to get out and my father would be acting like nothing was wrong, and, of course, I wouldn't want my father to go anywhere. I was too young and ignorant to understand what was happening. All I saw was my mother yelling for my father to leave during one of the rare times when he was there. I didn't answer my father's questions. I simply wept, thinking I might never see him again if he left.

Life went on like this for a long time. Mom would beg for marriage counseling, and after one or two sessions, Dad would proclaim everything fixed and everyone happy.

I remember my last year in Simi Valley being a year of disconnections. I knew the end was coming soon, and I didn't want to face it. I didn't want to come from a broken home. I remember my father walking into the living room as my mother lay on the couch getting ready to sleep (she'd been there most of that year). He stood for a moment in front of her, trying to see her in the dim light. She spoke his name, and he was able to decipher her positioning. He knelt down delicately, like a bending tree limb

heavy with snow and took her hands into his. He had not shown her affection in front of us in so long that this act left us stunned and staring.

“Happy anniversary, Pat,” he said. “Nineteen years...” He leaned in and kissed her cheek, “Maybe just a little too long, huh?” My mother couldn’t answer. He eyes bugged, and she looked around in disbelief as he slowly creaked his body back to a standing position and turned to go back down the hall. She couldn’t see, but he was on the verge of tears and his face contorted in a grimace as he rubbed his whiskery chin.

My father moved out to Valencia with my Uncle Tim three weeks later. I was able to visit him only twice before we moved to Gardnerville, NV, and on the second visit he was gone three of the five days getting his blood filtered at the Keiser-Permanente Dialysis Center—his kidneys had shut down and the treatments wreaked havoc upon his body. It made me sick to look at him, but my father’s appearance is not what unsettled me—it was from knowing that he could live much longer like that, and that I wouldn’t be around while he had to go through it. None of us would. He looked lost and abandoned, and I had betrayed him just as much as his body did.

It took two days to pack the U-Haul that Grandpa Dick had rented. We packed our lives into that rig and just before we left Saturday morning, I walked through the skeleton of the only home I had ever known. I could almost see my dad sitting on the bed and hear the ball game on the TV when I looked in from the hall. I saw evidence of furniture, the six indentations where the bed frame rested on the carpet, the solid outline

of a huge dresser, the fresh carpet separated by areas worn smooth from high traffic—all gone.

I turned around to look in the room that served as “the boys’ room” until the birth of Todd made it entirely impossible for all six of us to fit. I thought of the time that Trent was pinched in the bunk bed when it collapsed—his naked legs kicking frantically as his muffled yells barely eked out. I could feel the deep cut next to my eye that I’d gotten when Travis tripped while giving me a piggyback ride, and I split open my eye on the corner of the dresser. All the fun, all the fights, all the life—packed into a U-Haul.

I walked to the next room to see the walls once covered with Tammy’s array of New Kids on the Block and *Teen Beat* heartthrobs, now bare. Every room was the same—so many pieces of my life floating around that I could not take with me. I was a blubbering mess by the time we left.

BJ Tsubota was the only friend of mine to see me off. He started crying when he saw me come out of the house, all red-faced and tear-stained, and I gave him a long hug goodbye. I didn’t want to let go. Letting go of him symbolized the letting go of my childhood, but I had to, and when I pressed my face to the window of the moving truck as it rounded the corner, straining to see the house one last time, I felt everything slip away. My parents were divorcing, and I would be five-hundred-miles away from the only places and people I had ever cared about.

Adjusting

Gardnerville might have just as well have been Africa. Both were such foreign, distant places to me. Riding those long hours with my grandfather, I kept wondering how much farther away from home our new place would be. I realized my deepest fears when Grandpa Dick made a right from US Highway 395 onto a dirt road.

The U-Haul jounced and jostled over the many boulders that sprang out of the rocky soil. Twisted evergreens and sage blanketed the surrounding landscape as we snaked a mile or so down the road. I felt as though I was in a horror film, and that Grandpa would pull a terrifying weapon, a machete or a hatchet, from underneath the seat and sequentially hack myself, along with the rest of my family, to bits.

This didn't happen, of course, and eventually the rig came to a stop in Bodie Flats. It was night when we arrived, and, given that there were no street lights, black and empty. The stars exploded brighter than I had ever seen them growing up in the city. This brought a smile to my face, but it was quickly stolen back by January's biting wind.

We'd been tricked into moving to Bodie Flats to live near my mother's family. I say *tricked* because my grandfather (Mom's dad) and my uncle (Mom's brother) promised they would be a positive force in our lives when we reached Nevada. We would go fishing, play baseball, go bowling, etc. None of that happened, and my brothers and I developed a deep resentment for our situation, relatives included.

Bodie, technically an Indian reservation, was a glorified trailer park, an isolated group of about forty mobile homes surrounded by evergreens and sagebrush located halfway between Gardnerville and Topaz Lake. We were one of the only white families there, along with my grandparents, my uncle's family, and my aunt.

It snowed three feet in Bodie before we ever went to school. My brothers and I had limited experience with snow; in fact, outside of a sledding trip I took with some friends my sixth grade year, we did not know snow at all. We learned quickly that snow is fun for about an hour on the first day it falls. After that, snow makes for a horrible existence, especially when you live out in the boonies like we did.

Bodie was an Indian Reservation, and it had no phone lines, and we regularly endured snow/slush/sleet/wind/darkness while standing outside to use the only pay phone for miles.

Carson Valley Middle School, in the heart of downtown Gardnerville, was nearly a quarter of the size of Hillside Jr. High (my school in Simi Valley). The redbrick front reminded me of the old school from *Hoosiers*, frozen in the plain style of the 1940s. I could smell the history, walking through the halls and aged classrooms, it was almost like the smell of a convalescent home. This struck me as odd, being that the school had always detained teenagers within its walls. Even so, I liked the school, and, more importantly, I liked my teachers.

I fell in with a group immediately. I realized after a few days though, that I had been brought in as protection. It seems the first “friend” to welcome me into the gang, Juan, was being bullied by one of the biggest kids in the seventh grade. Being that I was even bigger, Juan and I became insta-buddies. I didn’t realize my role until Juan paraded me in front of his ex-bully and taunted, provoking an attack. The other boy simply turned

away from the verbal jabs. I needed friends, so I stood there like a big, dumb animal with a smirk on my face.

I spilled a sack full of bullshit on my new crew over the first couple weeks. I claimed to be from Compton. I claimed to have been shot at. I claimed that I was from a terrible part of the city and that I carried knives with me at all times. I even claimed gang membership in an indirect way. I think they saw right through it but played along. These outrageous claims would lead to a lonely first year at Carson Valley Middle School.

During my third week, I visited a local grocery store with my aunt and one of my brothers. I saw a UNLV Starter jacket hung next to the check stand and decided I would swipe it on the way out. I had never stolen anything on this level before, mostly GI Joe's and the like from the K-Mart back in Simi. I had wanted a Starter jacket for months, and, since my family could not afford to buy one, I figured, why not?

I waited until my aunt checked her groceries and simply pulled the jacket from the rail where it hung as we walked out. My heart boomed every step of the way, and I anticipated someone from the store running out after me to retrieve their property, but we made it to the car and drove off.

When I arrived home, I noticed a name embroidered into the right front breast. I carefully cut and pulled each stitch from the jacket belonging to "Shane." I just knew that the next day I would be heralded as the bee's knees with my ultra-cool, super sweet, Starter jacket.

My day went according to plan. I made up a lie about finding the jacket in the middle of the aisle at the store and everyone, *everyone* envied me. I felt like the man. I

looked like the man. I even let a few of the guys try it on and wear it for a class each, but I would surely need it back after school.

Just about everyone in school rides the bus home in Gardnerville, and I wanted everyone to see me. Unfortunately, everyone did, including the football-playing senior from Douglas High who'd come to the middle school to look for his stolen jacket. He reminded me of the man from Brussels from that Men at Work song—six-foot-four and full of muscles. He and three of his friends surrounded me. I thought I was done for, that they would beat me to dust.

“You stole my jacket, you asshole. Take it off.” He grabbed me by the collar and yanked me to him. When he did so, he saw that I had removed his name from the right breast. “You gotta be fuckin’ kiddin me. My mom had my name stitched on there as a gift. That’s it. I’m taking you to the office.” I was relieved—the office offered protection from a beating.

He removed the jacket and forcefully escorted me to the front office with a clenched fist wrapped around my hooded sweatshirt. He rhythmically pushed his knuckles into my upper back, using his fist as a cattle prod, as we walked.

“This punk stole my jacket,” He explained when one of the office secretaries approached the office counter. “My boss described this guy, exactly. He saw this guy take it. I work at Scolari’s, ma’am, and my jacket was stolen last night, by him.” He shook me as to let her know I was the “him” he was talking about. I looked at her on the verge of tears as she asked Shane if he was positive, and after he showed her where his name had once been embroidered, she fetched the vice principal.

I sat in a small office with Shane and the principal for about an hour. He went through what had happened and told it like it was. I, scared and alone, reverted to what I did best. I lied. I tried to feed them the same line that I had given to the guys earlier that day. That I had indeed found the jacket at the store, but, against my better judgment, decided to take the jacket home instead of turning it in. She probably saw right through it, but she explained that because the offense occurred at the store and not on school grounds, it was a police matter, not a school matter.

I tried to apologize. Shane was too upset to listen. He took my information and told me he would be filing a police report that same day. My heart sank, and remorse stuck in my throat.

I stayed home for the next two days. I wasn't suspended, but I was terribly embarrassed by the whole scene. I had acted like a big tough guy from day one, and when confronted by the reality of myself, I was a coward. I was an ousted fraud, and now they all knew it.

When I returned to school, my "friends" gave me the silent treatment, and it wasn't until I asked Juan what was going on that I got the answers.

"You've only been here two weeks and you already got suspended. We don't want to be around a guy like that. We'll end up getting into trouble with you. Just stay away, okay?" I didn't know how to respond, so I shook my head and walked slowly down the hall.

The first year I lived in Nevada, I learned how important family is. After my jacket fiasco, I kept the company of my older brother, Tim, during school and associated

solely with the Hispanics and Native Americans who lived on the reservation with me. Mostly, I was depressed and became a permanent occupant of the living room couch, where I zoned out to the drone of the TV, and ate large amounts of unspeakably unhealthy foods. I wanted to disappear, but instead, grew to such a size that I attracted more attention.

One positive change from the move came in my academics. In Simi Valley, school was laughable, and my teachers the biggest jokes of all. Snide comments flowed from me endlessly, disrupting my classes and infuriating those trying to *teach* me. I don't think I earned one passing mark, aside from PE, in my first two quarters of middle school.

As my friendships disbanded, I had nothing to fill my time, and I decided to challenge myself, to see if I could actually do the work. I buckled down and started to take class seriously. The remarks stayed with my old self in Simi and a new, quiet, determined demeanor replaced the class clown. I seemed to excel at most subjects right away, but math...*math*, my Achilles heel, turned into a slow mountain I would have to crawl over. But eventually, I did, and I ended up on the Honor Roll by the end of the year.

Over the summer, I was befriended by two other boys who lived in Bodie: Mickey, a half Peruvian Indian living with his mother on the far side of Bodie, and Aaron, another member of the illustrious single-parent, white-trash-nation. I'm not mocking Aaron here. He and I were members of the same group, basically. The three of us flocked together all summer. The three stooges. We camped out, slept over, swam in

the Carson River, shared secrets, smoked cigarettes—we were the best of friends, or so I thought. Luckily for me, they were going on to high school, and I had one more year of middle school. I thought this good luck for me because my eighth grade year became one of the most pivotal in my life, and those two would have road blocked my progress. I made a choice that year, a choice to give myself a chance, to break free from the inevitable future that awaited me if I let it.

I decided I would not be a victim of my circumstance. I would fight the cycle with everything I had, if that's what it took, because I wanted more than what I saw every day. I realized the important role education would play in reaching my goals: I wanted off the rez and out of a trailer. I wanted to make something of myself, achieve something. I didn't know what I would do to get there, only that I would reach my destination. I soon found the tool to get myself moving forward would be a basketball

Gym Rat

I am alone, zigzagging back and forth: a straight crossover, through the legs, behind the back, spin move then finish with a lay up. I will repeat these motions for hours today. I will compete with a stepladder the custodian has lent me. I will shoot the same shots until they become instinct. I am alone here, lost inside the world I slam into the floor then gracefully loft toward the hoop. I know loneliness; I will for a long time. Even when they all love me on the court, I know they will not know me in the halls. There, I will walk in silence with my world safely tucked under my arm.

When I was young, my family deteriorated over the span of two years. It wasn't strange for a boy like me to look elsewhere for something to fill the void. I don't mean my family wasn't around. Physically, I lost only my father in the divorce, not that the word *only* is suitable, but I visited him every summer. I started hanging out with some dipshit kids the summer after seventh grade, smoking cigarettes, cliff diving into the Carson River, and I gained about thirty pounds of chub from eating fried potatoes, a loaded plate, close to four times a week.

Then basketball happened. Well, even before that, my older friends (the dipshits mentioned above) went on to high school and I had to find a new group into which I'd belong. I started hanging out with someone different, my polar opposite. This is the easiest way to sum up Brett Alder: he was student body president in high school and in all the AP courses, he was super-religious (Mr. Mormon), and he developed a candy-selling business in the eighth grade. I would've rather been dead than in student government, my grades were fair at best, I wasn't religious at all, and I would've eaten

the candy myself. But Brett and I had the same goofy sense of humor and became inseparable. His older brother had been somewhat of a legend at Douglas High for his basketball ability, and he had taught Brett a few things which Brett passed on to me. We made the eighth grade basketball team together.

Let me tell it straight—I had no right to be on the team that year. I think Mr. Pile, my math teacher and coach, let me on as a charity case. I think he was trying to help me lose weight more than anything else. He ran us two miles every day before practice, and I was so slow that I would miss out on ten minutes of practice finishing my second mile while the others went over the plays and worked on their skills. But Coach Pile taught me to shoot that year, and, in doing so, sparked a passion.

I figure new ways to break into the school on the weekend. I make sure to exit through one of the far doors of the gym when I leave on Friday. I don't mind playing outside, but I prefer indoors. I use contorted coat hangers to lift the orange brackets that pin the doors shut, like a film screen burglar. I pry open slightly cracked windows and squeeze through, I beg the weekend custodial workers, I walk around the entire school, patiently checking each door for a mistake that a teacher may have made in his or her haste to escape for the weekend. A gym rat.

During my freshman year I saw a lot more time on the court. I had dropped a lot of the potato weight from the previous summer, and my eight hour days in the gym had let me develop my game to the point of surpassing most of the guys from the previous

year. I had also grown to 5'10". My new coach didn't run us before practices, so I started running myself.

Sometimes I would practice with the JV team before we practiced, and then shoot on a side hoop during the varsity practice. Basketball took hold of me; it was my identity. It was how I bonded with my father—all of that “How'd you do last night?” and “I'm proud of you” stuff.

The sport stole away countless hours of my life, and back then, I could think of nothing else I would rather do. It was through the long hours on the court that my younger brother Trent and I became best friends. Life continued like this, most of it spent near a hoop, until my junior year. Personal tragedy that year would rearrange my life forever.

My father died due to diabetic complications when I was sixteen, and his death served as a disorienting crushing blow. My life was in disarray: I didn't play basketball, I missed a lot of school, and I was depressed and irate with God for taking him. I was lost and feeling more alone than I ever had.

I realized then, that even basketball could be taken from me. When I was sixteen, I had fantasies of NBA stardom, a luxurious life, happiness—all gone. Like reality grabbed me by the collar and said, “Stop dreaming, kid. It's never going to happen.” I would not be the one to pull my family out of the trailer park. I would not travel the world doing what I loved for absurd amounts of money. My world of basketball dreams would be gone soon, sooner than I expected, far sooner than I hoped.

High school was rough for me. I was a social misfit, didn't earn the best grades, and I pissed off the entire football team my freshman year by quitting after a couple weeks of practice. To them I was a pussy/wimp/faggot, whatever those macho douches wanted to label me. I didn't care much about football and only went out for the team to hang out with Brett. But he, too, turned a cold shoulder to me after I walked away. I told anyone who asked that I quit simply because football took away from basketball time. I had no room for anything else. My junior year was torturous. Football players were still giving me the evil eye, and I longed to play basketball again, so I spent much of my time training for my senior season.

I was also lonely, but I simply felt girls weren't interested in me, so I feigned indifference. I never let on that I wanted to have someone in my life, and at times I used basketball to keep my mind from dwelling on my isolation. I felt invisible at school, especially in the halls, and it was basketball that made me impossible to see through.

I transformed every time I stepped on the floor. My confidence boomed, and I could take on anything, like Superman, and it seemed that the basketball court was the only kryptonite-free zone on the planet.

Basketball made sense when nothing else did. Alone with a hoop I could practice for hours and never think twice about the time. Everything else was limited by time: schooldays, broken down even further by classes, passing periods, TV shows, commercials, meals, practice, and games. Whenever I stepped out on a court by myself, my only limitations were physical and mental and controllable. Outside of the court, my life felt like it was motions and routines I had to follow. But basketball was a choice.

I'm divided, clouded, and angry. I spend hours with my music: I can't explain how I feel, but Layne Staley and Kurt Cobain already seem to understand. I listen to them, and we share pain, sorrow, loss—I become the screaming guitars, the pounding drums, I know the lyrics as gospel truth. I command every note to sound. These songs are me.

I was alone in the gym shooting baskets one day—during what should have been my second varsity season—when three varsity football players walked in and sat down in the bleachers. I heard them whisper and laugh, cough out insults, but I just ignored them and kept shooting. No one could break into the fortress that the court provided me. Besides, I wasn't dumb. The odds in a three on one fight are less than slim, especially when you're going up against three linemen. They became louder and more obnoxious and were no longer whispering, but I still ignored them. Then I felt something strike the back of my head—a pencil eraser—and I saw red. I let the ball roll away and walked straight over to the three antagonists staring at me. No one walks into my world, purposely trying to disrupt the only peace in my life, and gets away with it. I was out for blood.

“Which one of you assholes threw it?” They all looked at each other and stayed silent, trying not to laugh, smirking. I knew one of them from a class I'd had my sophomore year and addressed him directly.

“Nick, who threw it?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Nick, if you don’t tell me who did it, I’m gonna kick your ass for it anyway, even if it wasn’t you.” He didn’t say anything. I think they were all shocked to see me as the aggressor. They were no longer smirking when one of them finally got up off of the bleachers.

“What if I did it?” said Scott Nelson, the biggest of the three. I didn’t hesitate. I shoved him with all my might back into the lowest step of the stands, which took out his legs and left him sprawled over the first three steps. He didn’t stay there long, though. He was back on his feet quickly, and fired up.

“I’m gonna tear you apart!” He charged forward, running and kicking at the same time. I backed away as he came, kicking like a chorus girl, and looked for a hole—an opportunity to strike. We reached midcourt when he finally stopped, and I started.

My first punch landed square in the face. I’d dazed him, and I kept unloading. What this guy, and the rest of the football team for that matter, failed to realize was that I was not weak like they all thought I was. I have five brothers, two of them older, and I’ve been fighting for as long as I can remember. After a few more punches to the face, Scott tried to catch me in a headlock, and held me in a loose, sideways version of one, but I kept punching, and he just sat there. His hands finally fell, and he went limp. Just then, the head football coach, Coach Wilcox, ran onto the gym.

“What the hell is going on here?” Coach knelt down to check Scott who was chainsaw snoring, his lips flapped like a child giving a raspberry, and his inhale was unusually labored—his chest and stomach convulsed when he breathed in and out. After Scott came to, I tried to explain what had happened. I recounted the events in their entirety and then went off on a tangent, telling him that I knew the football coaches

disliked me, and that the entire team thought I was pathetic, and that one of them—the coaches—had likely sent these goons after me in the first place, and they used to be my friends.

Coach cut me off and asked the boys if they had come there looking for a fight. The two on the bleachers (they had never even gotten up to help) looked down and wouldn't answer. Scott started crying and sat up with Coach's help.

"Let's just forget all of this, okay?" Coach asked. I shook my head in agreement, and Scott walked out with his buddies. It was dead silent except for the creaking hardwood and Scott's stifled blubbling. Coach stood next to me until the gym doors closed.

"Tholen, no one sent those boys in after you. And I guess you're right about us thinking you couldn't hack it on the football field. But I'll tell you, Scotty is one of the toughest kids I have ever had on a team, and it looks like you just pummeled him; he's crying for Chrissakes, and you haven't got a scratch showing. Why?"

"I have five brothers Coach, I—"

"No. Why did you stop playing football?"

"Because, this is what I do," I said as I walked over to pick up my ball.

Coach looked puzzled, but added, "Fair enough, Tholen, fair enough."

That week I walked taller than I had in a while. And in the halls, even though most of my peers didn't notice, I wore a smile that had not been there for a long time, especially when the football coaches started to give me this little nodding gesture when they passed me, like they finally understood why a guy my size didn't *have* to play

football. The rest of that year and throughout my senior year I didn't have to sneak into the gym. Coach Wilcox and the rest were there to unlock doors.

My Dad is Sick

Late November 1995

He stood in the doorway and looked closely at everything in the closet. There were some clothes, old baseball trophies, packed cardboard boxes, long dormant rifles, shoes, medical supplies, canes...everything seemed so familiar, yet so distant. Stepping in cautiously, he pulled a pinstriped suit from the hanger, and proceeded to try it on.

The pants fit his waist, but the length was a little short, revealing a bit of white sock. The jacket fit perfectly. He took a few short steps through the master bedroom, flipping on the bathroom light as he entered. The red eyes staring back showed weariness—baggy, sleepless eyes, a lifeless expression, nothing. He placed his hips against the tile counter and leaned forward until his face showed clearly in the reflection.

Do I look like him?

The staring lasted a while, and thoughts scrabbled in and out, jumbling together.

When did I speak to him last? What did I say? Was it in August before I came home for school? Was it the day after basketball tryouts? Oh, God.

The previous week he had tried out for the varsity team. Two days before the final cut, Coach had cornered him in the locker room.

“Why didn’t you come to the meeting yesterday? It was mandatory.”

“I don’t know if I’m going to come tomorrow either,” he said.

“What do you mean?” his coach demanded, “Why not?”

He replied in monotone, “I don’t know if I’ll play this year, that’s all.”

Coach lingered with penetrating eyes, then shook his head and walked away.

“My dad is sick,” he said when he was certain Coach couldn’t hear.

He should have told him. It would have helped, both with his coach’s frustration and with his own immeasurable pain. He pulled the ball from under his arm and spun it on his fingertip. Watching the round blur brought comfort, and, for a brief instant, let him forget.

That night, when his father made the weekly call, he refused to take the phone for his turn. He had been cut from the team for missing the meeting and for not completely committing to the basketball program. He knew his father would feel let down, ashamed even, because his son was an athlete, a six-foot-four-inch-monster who had started every game last year and led the team to a nearly perfect record. Basketball defined him; he was the guy with a basketball under his arm in the hall, the one who ditched class to sneak into the gym and practice his jump shot. What was he, if not a basketball player? Why would his father even want to talk to him? There would be no more, “I scored fifteen points and pulled down ten boards.” No more, “I blocked this guy so hard that his own team cheered me.” No more, “I’m proud of you, son.”

He refused to take the phone from his brother.

The sound of footsteps brought him back, and he looked up to see he’d been crying. Turning on the faucet, he wiped his eyes and flushed them with the cool water.

“Ty, are you okay in there?” It was Uncle Jim.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Okay, pal. You take your time. It’s all right.”

He gathered himself and turned the doorknob.

Jim's eyes widened as light crept in to reveal his nephew, dressed in the suit of Jim's dead brother. He, more than any of Jim's six nephews, had inherited Kim's facial features. Most of all, he had the same piercing, blue-gray eyes. Jim was overwhelmed by the sight, and a grimace crumpled his face.

"Jesus, you look just like him, with the suit and all. Jesus." Uncle Jim began to cry and pulled his nephew close.

"I didn't want to talk to him," he said, "I got cut from the team, and I didn't want to talk to him."

"Shh, it's all right. Shh."

"The closet...I can still smell him in the clothes. They smell like him." It was true; his father's scent remained.

"I know Ty. I know."

Late August 1995

His father seemed confused. He had asked his father if he could go back home, to live with his mother. He and his father already visited Canoga Park High School, and he'd enrolled in all of his classes. He'd even had a one-on-one meeting with the head coach, who brought him to the gym for a shootaround and then guaranteed him a starting position.

"What about the meeting with Coach Williams?" said his father.

"I don't know." He couldn't look at his father. "I guess I'm just a momma's boy."

“Don’t you like it here?” His father’s voice was desperate, and his face went slack, lifeless. Illness had stolen much of the life from his face, but right then he looked truly sick.

“Yeah, Dad, I had a great summer with you and Grandpa, but Trent is up there, Mom, all of my friends...It was hard for me to start over and change schools when you and Mom divorced. I don’t want to do all that again.”

He watched his father’s distressing expression sink even further, and knew the wound ran deep.

“I’ll call Grandpa to get you a plane ticket. I need to go for a walk.”

He went to the basketball court at the apartment complex to escape from the guilt. He worked on his perimeter shot, flicking the ball with some backspin a few yards away. Then, running to meet it, he took hold of it in his soft hands as he squared his body to the basket, elongated, and snapped his wrist at the top of his shot.

He didn’t know how long his grandfather had been watching, and he did a quick double take, freezing up and halting the rhythm he’d worked up when he noticed. He felt uneasy; his dad must’ve told him about the choice to return to Nevada. Grandpa walked onto the court and held up his hands in the shape of a circle, making a target for a pass. He tossed the ball to his grandfather who caught the ball and examined it.

“I never got into this game,” Grandpa said. “You know, I’m a baseball guy.”

Ty bent to one knee, pretending his shoes needed to be tied, avoiding eye contact. His grandfather continued, “Your dad told me you’re going back to your mom’s instead of trying a year here.” He paused and bounced the ball. “He’s gonna miss you; I’m

gonna miss you too. This summer was fun. Building the shed and painting the house—you are a strong kid, a good kid. But you gotta do what you feel is right. If that means going back, well, that's okay." His grandfather bounced the ball back to him.

"I never knew you could shoot like that. I mean, your dad said the coach at Canoga was impressed with you but, you just don't miss, even from beyond the arc there. If you stay, you would be seen by more college scouts, maybe get a scholarship."

"I don't know, Gramps. I just don't think I could get used to California again. It's so busy now; it's not like when I was a kid, and Travis is here—Dad won't be alone."

"Your dad and I talked about you last week. He is damn proud of you, Tyler. I told him about how hard you worked for me this summer, and he beamed with pride. If he could see well enough to watch you play, he'd cry. Hell, I almost cried myself. I remember changing your diapers, playing catch in the front yard with you when you were in tee-ball...Look at you now. You are almost a foot taller than me, and you're the spitting image of your dad." His grandfather sighed and smiled, "Well, your flight leaves tomorrow at noon."

He felt a simultaneous rush or relief and guilt. He tucked the ball under his arm, gave his grandfather an awkward hug, and tried to smile as they walked back to the apartment.

Late November 1995

It was a Wednesday. He came home from working on his game and sat down to talk with his younger brother. Todd told him that their sister was on the phone all day; every time she came out of her room she was crying or looked as though she'd been

crying. He only nodded, thinking that his sister had broken up with a boyfriend, or something of the sort. But then he saw her peek out into the living room.

She didn't say anything and didn't have to. He knew. All the same he needed to hear it, so he walked into her room and sat on the edge of his big sister's bed. She looked at him and kept crying.

“Dad's dead, isn't he?”

His father's insulin reaction that morning had required a trip to the hospital. While being cared for, a blood clot in his dialysis shunt shook loose, entering the bloodstream and stopping his heart.

November 1995--The Drive

The drive to Woodland Hills lasted eight hours. The Mojave landscape seemed to draw him out the truck window; he floated outside of himself to escape from feeling the deep hurt. He sat alongside his brother Trent and his mother. They didn't talk much, but sang along with the tape deck every now and again to the songs they knew.

He mostly looked out the window and remembered his father.

He traveled back six years, to a better day, a time when his father was strong and full of life, not withered from years of alcohol abuse paired with diabetes. He was transported back to the baseball diamond, watching his father for signs from home plate. The pitch came, and he swung away as his father had instructed with a touch to his thigh and then to his cap bill.

No one cheered louder than his father as he rounded the bases.

“That's my boy!” he called out, “Woo!”

His father heaved him high into the sky as he crossed home plate; he caught him on the way down and proceeded to carry his son back to the dugout after his son's first home run.

Trent unknowingly cut off the daydream, "Earth to Tyler!"

"What?"

"Get out, I gotta pee."

He unfolded out of the seat and apologized to his brother, who promptly ran into the rest stop.

His mother looked at him, "What are you thinking about?"

"Dad."

She waited, giving him a look that urged him to continue.

"I was thinking about my first home run." He stopped and smiled. "That is one of my best memories of him."

"He loved you very much."

"I was wondering earlier," he continued, "Could I have given dad a kidney? I mean would we have been a match?"

"I'm not sure, honey. I think you're too young. You're only sixteen. They probably wouldn't have let you because you're not done growing yet."

"Maybe. Grandpa said something about it to me last summer. I think he thought it would make it so Dad could get off dialysis. I just thought that...that I wouldn't be able to play basketball anymore. Pretty selfish, huh?" He looked away.

"Don't you even think that. Your dad ruined his body by himself; it wasn't your responsibility to give him one of your kidneys. Grandpa had no right to ask you that."

He remained silent until his brother returned from the restroom, and stayed that way until they reached his father's apartment.

The Funeral

He slowly strode into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a short drive from the apartment. He wore his father's suit jacket, but his own pants; feeling the shorter pair of his father's looked ridiculous. He felt close to his father in the jacket; he still smelled him in the fabric. He walked into the main hall of the church where he recognized the faces of many extended family members and failed to recognize even more people who had known his father.

They all seemed to know him, too. Strange men and women shook his hand and hugged him, offering condolences. He paced back and forth, looking at the table set up in the back of the room that was filled with artifacts from the life of Kim Wayne Tholen.

He slowly picked up each picture and examined it. He found a picture of himself from elementary school. His father kept a copy of this picture in his wallet ever since it had been taken nine years ago. His father used to give him a dollar every night when he would "smile for daddy." He clung to this memory as he placed the picture back on the table and looked at the wedding scene captured in the next photo. His father and grandfather wore matching tuxedos—black slacks, white jackets, frilly dress shirts, and bow ties. His mother's wedding dress flowed on the floor in a swirl of white. His father's parents stood on the outside of the bride and groom who held hands in the center of the photo. White flowers were everywhere. They looked so happy then.

Instead of a guest book, his grandfather had placed a dozen baseballs on the table for everyone to sign. He picked up the ball designated for the immediate family and signed. He handed the ball to Trent and waited for him to sign and hand the ball off. They walked down to the front pew and joined their four other brothers and two sisters.

His grandparents spoke first, recalling the life of their first born. Gramps repeatedly explained that he thought his son's trip to the hospital was routine, and that no parent should have to bury their child. Grandpa was right. The ache in Ty's chest grew as his aunt and uncles all stood up to profess love for his father and share stories. By the time it was his turn to speak, his practiced lines had deserted him.

"My Dad—" he cleared his throat—"was my hero growing up."

He looked down at his mother. Tears streamed as she held his two youngest brothers close to her sides. He waited for his emotions to calm.

"The last few years have been hard for me. The first time I came to visit Dad after we moved to Nevada, he was having a dialysis treatment and looked twenty years older than when we moved. When they told him I was there, his face brightened, and life returned to him. I know he was wiped out, but he didn't want me to see him like that."

The image of his dad's body filled his mind and he could no longer speak, could no longer see, and could no longer hear. He tried to clear his eyes but they refilled faster than he could empty them. He tried to speak, but the weight of it all filled his throat, stifling him.

"I'm going to miss him," he was able to squeeze out, "I hope I make him proud, and I hope he knows I love him."

That was it. He stood at the pulpit for a minute in silence, shaking as the tears streamed down his face. His grandfather finally came up and placed his arm around him and whispered into his ear. He returned to the front row and melted into the bench, then he leaned forward to hold his head in his hands.

Another procession of hand-shaking and embracing began as the services ended. Then the family headed to his grandfather's house for a get-together, held in honor of Kim Tholen's life.

He sat away from the unfamiliar faces and clung to his family, needing the peace they provided. The somber atmosphere of the church evaporated, and the evening progressed into the sharing of anecdotes involving his father as a young man.

Uncle Jim told everyone of a time when Jim and Kim stopped at a local minimart before school, "It just so happened that I had dressed in an all white "flashy" jump suit—it was the seventies. I bought a donut and a chocolate milk." Jim paused while trying to keep himself from laughing. "Well Kim, being the loving brother that he was, kept on watching me outta the corner of his eye as I finished my donut and opened the milk. We were at a stop light, not a block from school, when I tried to take my first sip. He purposely stomped the gas hard and sloshed that damned chocolate milk all over me. He was rolling in the seat I tell you. I was sluggin his shoulder and swearing up a storm. He had to pull to the side of the road to keep us from crashin. My suit didn't look too cool as a chocolate swirl."

He laughed deep at the stories, but emptiness filled the spaces that the escaping laughter left vacant.

Early December 1995-March 1996

He felt lost back at school. He regularly stayed home for lack of motivation and hadn't touched a basketball in weeks. His family didn't talk about feelings; they simply moved on. He wasn't sure how to do that. The sorrow, the insurmountable sorrow, crept in and took hold. He slept too many hours, he listened to his dad's music tapes, he went to school when he felt like it, and he started the process of building a wall to block out the world—to keep his pain all for himself.

He started running in the wooded hills that surrounded his home. He was alone there too, so nothing could get to him. Friends faded away. School passed like a short dream. He too, began to disappear.

“What is wrong with you, dude?” Todd asked. “You look sick.”

“What do you mean? I've been running and eating a lot better.”

“It looks like you aren't eating at all. You look like one of those Hitler-camp-victim-dudes. I can see all your ribs.” With that, Todd turned back to the TV, and tuned back in.

He went into the bathroom to inspect his body. Todd was right. His ribs protruded and his skin looked gray and lifeless. His blue-gray eyes were clouded by the dark circles and bags that surrounded them. It was time for a change.

His mother took him to see an internist. The nurse took him back to take his vital statistics before the doctor saw him. He measured 6'4" tall but weighed only 162 pounds, sixty pounds less than the year before. He was asked all kinds of questions. The

doctor wanted to pinpoint what might be going on inside of him, for this rapid weight loss to occur. Most of the questions addressed his personal life.

“Have you kissed someone you know has mono? Or do you share drinks with a lot of friends?”

“No.”

“Have you had unprotected sex with anyone who might be HIV positive or have AIDS?”

“No, I have never had sex.”

“Have you ever had unprotected sex with a man?”

“I have never had sex at all.”

The doctor took a pensive look at him and then looked down at the patient chart in his lap.

“Well, everything looks fine on your chem-panel, which means there is nothing wrong with your blood. But if you keep losing weight at this rate, you’ll be dead in two months.”

He stared at his hands, and then the tears began.

“My dad died last November. I am having trouble...It’s hard for me to talk about it.”

A Breakthrough – April 1996

Dr. Scoggin referred him to a psychologist who, after one session, wanted to prescribe Prozac. There were no more appointments. A week later his younger brother, Trent, coaxed him outside to shoot around. He picked up the ball next to the front door

and felt a thousand familiar divots gripping his hands. They took turns shooting and rebounding for each other. He was rusty, but after a few rotations his shot returned. Trent spent the next half hour rebounding for him as he sank shot after shot. Trent spoke first.

“Do you ever think about Dad?” Trent asked.

He’d been caught off guard. “What?”

“I do.” Trent said. “I think about him a lot. The last time he called was right after basketball tryouts. I was thinking...” Trent called for the ball with his hands. “You didn’t want to talk to him.”

He bounce-passed the ball to his brother. “I was embarrassed about being cut.”

“I know. I thought that might be why you’re depressed.” Trent shot the ball.

“Depressed? That doctor was stupid.”

Trent’s eyes focused intensely on him. “Look at you. You’re so skinny, and you don’t play basketball anymore, and we don’t hang out, except to zone out to TV, and you just aren’t the same.”

“I’m not the same. Dad’s dead.”

“But you’re not...I loved him too. You’re not the only one who lost him. What about Trevor and Todd? They both so young that they won’t even remember him. We moved here when they were five and six. They never really knew Dad.”

He knew the truth of his brother’s words. He had thought the same at his grandparent’s house, after the funeral, when he watched Todd and Trevor playing tag in the yard, not realizing what they’d lost.

“I still hurt.”

“So do I. So does everyone else, but we aren’t pushing you away. You’re pushing us away. Mom told me that she worries about you more than any of us. You’re my best friend—you can talk to me about it.”

So he did.

An hour passed, and they spoke openly about their father and how his death had affected them. Then Trent decided it was time to go back in and walked over to his brother and embraced him.

“Thanks.”

“You coming in?” asked Trent.

“In a minute.”

He watched his brother enter the house then turned back to the basket in the driveway. He tossed the ball with some backspin a few yards away, then, took hold of it in his soft hands as he squared his body to the basket, elongated, and snapped his wrist at the top of his shot.

The Rules of High School

I never wanted to be cool and my social class wouldn't have allowed for that type of honor anyway. I saw through the popular kids in high school. I knew they were superficial, and phony, not *real* to themselves or their "friends." Being an outcast made it easy for me to categorize everyone in school. It truly fascinated me to watch the way people separated themselves.

At Douglas High, we had "The Commons." This was our break time hangout and cafeteria. The high ceiling and cement walls lead down to a red brick veneer of linoleum. The commons had four levels to it, and people would congregate according to the unwritten laws of coolness.

The lowest floor was for the nerds, dweebs, retards, freaks, losers, whatever you wanted to call them. The fold out table/benches housed the special education kids with all the aforementioned stereotypes. This was no-man's-land. No kid at Douglas wanted to end up here, and it was a common occurrence to see kids sitting on the steps between levels, instead of filling open seats on the lower level, to avoid the stigma.

The next level was what I called the rebel level. It was a smaller platform just two steps above the rejects, but that slight separation made all the difference. This is where our stoners, habitual trouble makers, and future psychos hung out. They would try to mess with the sped kids—chuck French fries at them to see if anyone would eat them, sing songs and tell them to dance, all so the punks could laugh and ridicule them.

Level three housed the "normal" kids. This was the largest level both in The Commons and the biggest group in student population. This group did not quite reach the level of being popular, but they were not considered nerds either. These were smart kids

with good backgrounds, clean-cut kids with good grades. I had many acquaintances on this level. I say *acquaintance* because these were the people I only socialized with in the classroom setting. We got along just fine on an intellectual level, but we dared not engage in conversation in open—no, just a slight head nod would suffice instead. I would sometimes linger/mingle on this level if by chance my real friends were absent or somewhere else during lunch. Pretend to care/listen while someone talked to me, so I wouldn't be all by myself. So, yes, I guess I could be grouped in with the rest of the fakers because I would mimic their patterns of false friendship in order to save myself from feeling completely alone—maybe they were doing the same thing.

The top level of The Commons was reserved for the elite—cheerleaders, jocks, and any other kid who could be classified as popular—they were the kings of the mountain. They stood and looked down on everyone else from their thrones on high. Being a “jock,” I could have rightfully stood up there with the cream of the crop, but I didn't care for a single one of them, and the feeling was mutual. Most of these kids knew me only as “Big T,” a name given to me when I was a freshman because of my size. It was more than likely that no one would be able to tell me my name if I asked.

The main problem with all of this was the desperation of most high school students to fit in led people to change their true selves. It's sad to watch someone you maybe once knew a few years before acting like a complete fool in order to please the crowd.

I remember my friend Steven as an example. He worshiped the cool. He was a rather short and scrawny guy with large incisors that stuck out from his top lip. He revealed to me his deepest dreams once; he wanted to become a basketball player and

date one of the “it” girls. He wanted to go to the parties, be friends with the in crowd, he wanted it all. I have never been one to bash someone or their hopes, so I nodded along in encouragement. Over the next two years I witnessed countless incidents where Stevie was made into a joke by the boys on the upper crust, and he never even knew it was happening. One time in particular, Stevie was trying to hang out with Graham—the captain of the swim team, a taller, handsome guy with a muscular build, curly hair, and a reputation for being a lady’s man. Stevie seemed to be enamored with him, much like the girls at school. He stood by listening as Graham and his buddies picked apart people that passed by. Stevie would laugh at all of the snide comments made by the crew, and he even tried to add a sling now and then. The guys simply ignored him until Graham spotted a girl with buck teeth.

“Hey, check her out,” he said to his audience. “Beaver face!” he shouted at the girl who pretended to not hear as she rounded the corner and pushed through the hall. Stevie wore a huge grin before Graham turned and attacked.

“What are you laughing for, Bucky? You’re a perfect match for her. You two are twins.” Stevie’s smile sank; his face flattened.

“Go after her, man. You can ask her out or something.” Graham slapped the leg of a fellow taunter, and they nearly rolled off the bench. Stevie looked as though he would cry, and still the boys’ laughter echoed.

“I’m just messin’ with you, Little Man. Hey, go get me a Coke, all right? I’ll pay you back tomorrow. Is that cool, Stevie?” Stevie forced a smile back to his lips that looked painful. He agreed and went off to the soda machines down the hall.

“What a fuckin’ douche,” Graham said as Stevie walked away. “He’s so dumb. Stupid-ass.” Graham stuck out his upper teeth, mimicking Stevie, and all of his friends laughed. Stevie returned a few minutes later with a Coke in his hand and a smile on his face.

I refused to be caught up in all of this. I made that decision early on. It wasn’t until my junior year that I almost betrayed myself.

Micah, an exchange student from Germany, absolutely took my breath away, as cheesy as that sounds. She was the most beautiful girl who ever walked the halls of Douglas High—the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in person. She was around five foot seven inches tall with natural blond hair. She had piercing blue eyes, soft rose colored lips, and perfect tan skin. Her body was voluptuous and athletic. I had never longed for a girl until I knew she existed, but, I also I knew I had no chance.

I was big, snaggle-toothed, awkward looking (still changing from boy to man), and incredibly shy, yet I still hoped. I thought, maybe she would get to know me; we had two classes together. Maybe she would see me for who I am and then, who knows? I was trying to be optimistic, but after a few weeks of school, it was obvious that the popular crowd had dibs on her. They took her in, and she instantly out of my reach.

My best friend, Joel, and I would drive to her tennis matches to watch her—poetry in motion. I talked with her quite often in both PE and Humanities class, and was lucky enough to be placed into groups with her often. I got to know her a little, but decided that I should distance myself from her because the more I talked to her, the more I realized she was a wonderful person. She was a little ditzy, but also caring and honest.

She noticed a change in me after my father passed away that year and comforted me. I was sitting alone on the bleachers when she approached.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I was shocked that Micah noticed, that she cared enough to ask. But I sounded rude, so I added, “Yeah.”

“Why aren’t you playing?”

“I don’t feel much like basketball lately.”

“No. Why are you not on the team? You shoot better than anyone.”

“Oh. Well, my dad died during tryouts, and I just kind of felt like it didn’t matter if I played or not.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know your dad died. That’s terrible.” A long silence followed.

“It’s just unexpected.”

“Did you talk to Coach Leary? He would understand. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t really care now. The season has already started and…” I shrugged my shoulders like I didn’t know what else to say. I was also getting teary-eyed, and refused to cry in front of her.

“Well, I think you’re the best.” She placed her hand on my forearm for just a few seconds, and looked me in the eyes. It was just an instant of empathy, but it meant a lot to a guy like me. It was nice to have a beautiful girl compliment me, and even though the gesture was likely forgotten quickly for her, it stayed with me. And that is what I really remember her for. Not for being this completely unattainable beauty, but for being the

only person in school to recognize that I was troubled and then to show some compassion. Hearing her say I was the best made me feel like I was.

I never asked Micah for a date. I never asked any girl for a date in high school because I lacked the courage.

RMO

I was a senior in high school when I finally realized that basketball would not be my life, so I decided it was time to start pulling my own weight at home. I searched out employment and started working after school to help Mom with the bills, make some extra spending money, and pay for prom. The Bently Agrowdynamics Ranch wasn't any teen's number one choice, but it was solitary work and easy enough, in that I already did the type of work they would require of me: I was a self-taught mechanic.

I was far from comfortable on a farm, I guess growing up in the city never allowed me to familiarize myself with the rural setting. I didn't mind hard work; being an athlete had taught me to value that. My taste simply didn't agree with smelly animals in general.

For the first couple of months on the ranch, I put together gigantic irrigation systems and the motors that pushed these systems through the fields. Wrenches, bolts, and machinery I could deal with, and actually quite enjoyed. Tinkering with machinery had become a skill of mine that year because my old Dodge broke down on a biweekly basis, and I couldn't afford to take it into a shop; I could barely pay for the parts. I learned how to MacGyver that car together by whatever means necessary.

I would arrive at Bently at approximately two-thirty each day, driving to the main house to punch the clock and head out to the west end field. I'd go through the motions of constructing wheels, connecting them to the waterlines, then finally attaching everything to the driving motor. Every now and again my boss, Dick—who had worked himself into an old man prematurely—would order me down to the alfalfa field to operate the rake tractor (The machine that sorts freshly-cut crops into straight rows so that the bailer can

follow behind for the harvest). I enjoyed this task as well because, well, driving a tractor is pretty manly, and it didn't require much thought, so I had time to clear my mind and enjoy the wilderness around me. The town of Minden is surrounded by majestic mountain ranges that explode from the valley floor. I never experienced this wonderful contrast in landscape growing up in the city; there it was concrete, and encasing that concrete was more concrete. Sometimes I would think about my life, in a haze from the monotony of driving the tractor the length of the field and back. I would think about girls (the ones I liked but was too chicken to ever ask out), basketball, and my father. I found peace on those lonely shifts; I had enough time to explore my mind and get back in touch with myself.

When we were ahead of schedule on the irrigation project, Dick would have me straighten out the tools in the shop, help with the maintenance of ranch vehicles, or sweep the shop floor. Most of the guys I worked with could be considered "good ol' boys" except for the Indians, but they, like the rest of the crew, had grown up either in Gardnerville or in a neighboring town.

Most of the Indian guys knew me because I lived on the rez, too. They also knew me because of my basketball reputation. Four key members of the team I played on in high school were Native American.

The other workers, either native Gardnervillians or illegal Hispanics, thought I was a hard worker; we got along well enough. Everyone respected me and thought I was a bright kid. I had learned to operate several different types of tractors within weeks, with little instruction, and I was always willing to do whatever was asked of me. This

included the menial jobs mentioned above that former ranch hands had believed to be beneath them.

I think that is why Dick thought I would be able to endure the barn.

I don't recall what day of the week it was when I pulled my oxidized '67 Dodge Dart up to the shop. It must have been later in the week because I figured I would be out tinkering with sprinklers in the west end field as I had been the previous two days. I was wrong about the sprinklers. I grabbed my timecard and walked into Dick's office. He was on the phone, so I wanted to punch in and head out without disturbing him. He told whoever was on the other end to hold on and addressed me.

"Go out to the barn, Ty," he explained. "They're brandin' today, and you can lend a hand." He paused. "You okay with that?"

"Well, I thought I was going to finish the row I've been working on this week."

"You're ahead of schedule. Go ahead out to the barn."

I stared, speechless. I had seen cows while driving to the ranch, but I'd never even touched one, let alone branded one. I wanted a second option; whatever that might be, it must be better than charring heifers. I'd rebuild the work truck engines, change the oil of the irrigation motors, sweep the shop, or sweep the dirt; anything would be better than this "promotion." All I could say, however, was, "Okay."

Two ranch crewmen standing in the office stifled their snickers, knowing by the look on my face that I wasn't enthused with Dick's transfer. I dragged my feet back to my car and sped away, cursing my shitty job and trying to figure out which dirt road would lead me to the branding barn.

The usual rage that accompanies even a reasonable boss' request followed:

This is bullshit. I always do what they ask me to—I even work later than I am supposed to. They didn't tell me about this shit when they hired me. That old fart. I don't see him out here with these stinky, fucking cows. And those two assholes laughed at me—real funny—go ahead and laugh, dickwads, I can quit whenever I want to and you douches are stuck here. "What are you laughing at?" I should have asked those dicks in the office—told them off—Aah! This is bullshit.

After a short debate—quit and go home, or tough it out for the day—I took a right down a side road that appeared to run directly to the barn. I followed it for about a minute, but was wrong about this road bringing me to the barn. I ended up on the other side of both the barn and the surrounding fenced-in enclosure. I didn't see a way to get any closer than where I was, so I parked and got out.

I could see a cowboy sitting high atop his horse. The horse was a painted pony, the type that appears to have been splashed with various white, brown, and black shades. The rider was wearing all denim, his shirt a shade lighter blue than his dirt-crusting pants. Naturally, he was also wearing worn boots and a wide brim cowboy style hat. He rocked his lasso to and fro over his head as he eyed the scrambling calves. With the aid of his steed, he'd single out a little one, then smoothly cast this noose around the rear hooves. Truly a talent to behold, but at the time, I didn't think much of it. I hurdled the wood-planked fence that kept me out of the corral and slowly trudged over to where the ranch hands were gathered, next to the branding station. I recognized a couple of Indian guys and raised my chin in a greeting gesture; they did the same.

A large, plaid wearing lady stared at me and asked, "You the boy Dick sent us for the day?"

“Yeah,” I said in a shaky tone. “I have never done anything like this though, so I don’t know how helpful I’ll be.”

“Why’d you park way over there? Everyone else parks right next to the barn.” She pointed to the cluster of Ford and Chevy trucks on the far side of the barn.

“Sorry,” I said.

“We’ll learn ya,” a voice sounded from behind and I turned, “Hey, I know you. Didn’t you have weights with Ripey last year? I was in your class.”

I recognized the kid when I turned. His name was Emit. He was petite, slender, sickly-looking, and covered in grime. I nodded my head and rotated back to watch the cowboy and lasso again.

Emit was older than me by two years. I remembered him from the weight-lifting class he’d mentioned. He had a gimpy hip and had to sort of swivel his body around in a gangly fashion when he moved. I remember he was on the football team, and although he couldn’t really be effective on the field, he never gave less than his all. During weight class, Coach Ripey would curse all the healthy-bodied athletes yelling, “If any of you had half the heart and guts that Emit has, we’d roll over any team in this state!” I know coach was trying to compliment Emit’s efforts, but I think his words acted more as a reminder that he was crippled.

Emit still displayed this undying exertion as he chased down a newly-detained calf that the cowboy had noosed and put a wrestling move of sorts on the bawling animal to immobilize it. I forced myself to walk over to where Emit lay, in the dirt, half-covered by the animal. His face strained as he pulled on the animal’s front leg. He grunted and forced a smile, and I saw black bits of chew stuck to his teeth. The cries of the calf

reminded me of a human baby's, and I got a sick feeling as I looked into its bulging eyes, wanting to cover my ears to lessen the force of the bleating. Then, I witnessed what Dick had sent me out there to do.

The cowboy dismounted, pulling a knife from his side holster. He knelt down next to the rear of the beast and reached between its hind legs. He swiftly pulled the calf's scrotum taut, and then swiped it and the gonads off in one smooth stroke. A slight stream of maroon dribbled out, and I was frozen; the process continued. The other workers followed behind; one had a pail into which the cowboy tossed the bloody testicles, discarding the sac in the dust. The large women, who welcomed me initially, held two syringe-guns filled with hormones and antibiotics, and plunged both into the meaty hide. As she squeezed in the fluids, the cowboy pulled a tool from his back pocket that looked like a hefty pair of pliers and moved close to the animal's head. He placed the tool on the budding horn of the bull calf and pulled the handles in opposite directions, severing the nub and sending sprits of blood shooting from the newly formed crater.

"Cauterize it," he said calmly, and one of the boys poked a red-hot rod into the wound. The cowboy repeated the same movements on the other bud.

The bleeding stopped and then another iron, this one with the ranch's emblem, was provided to the cowboy. He pressed it firmly to the rear hide and held it there for ten eternal seconds. The calf's shrieks reached their highest point here, like a nightmarish crescendo. Then, he handed the iron back to the worker who'd brought it, and told Emit to let the calf up. Emit released his grip and waddled to his feat. The cowboy slapped the calf's backside as it bolted away from its torturers.

The cowboy looked back at me and erupted in laughter. I guess my face must've been telling a story all its own. The rest of the hands joined in the chuckle, and I could feel my face was indeed full of terror—all the muscles felt tense—but I couldn't relax them.

"I'm Steve," the cowboy said as the laughter subsided. He moved to his feet and placed the dehorning tool along with his knife in their proper places. He remounted and worked his rope back into a large loop.

"Which part of that you wanna do?" He stared, waiting for a response.

I hesitated and murmured under my breath, replaying the scene in my mind. I wanted to say, "None, thank you," and hop right back over that fence, retreating to the safety of the ranch house. I tried to gather my wits and say something.

"I can give the shots." The words were barely audible, and the crew erupted once again, as if they knew I wanted to make a run for it.

"Well, all right then. Give those to him," he said, and the plaid wearing lady presented me with the syringes.

"Just stick'em' in the ass-end, like I did, and squeeze all this stuff in," she instructed. "But don't give the yellow one to the females. That's only for the males. Got it?"

The first one was most difficult—I was tentative when trying to shove the heavy-gauge needle through the tough hair and skin. I had to jab at it a few times until it sunk all the way in, I was trying not to hurt the animal—but after that, I got more and more used to it. I must have injected a hundred calves with that murky goop before the work was all over. Blood, chunks of horn, hair, and empty scrotum sacs littered the ground,

scattered in the dirt. The sun was behind the Sierras, kissing the sky gently goodnight as its rays left a marbled pink, yellow, and purple work of art painted across the clouds.

Now covered in the same gunk as Emit, I guessed it was about six or seven o'clock. Most of the other workers broke off into pairs, engaging in private conversations, and I stood stranded in the middle of the large pen we'd been working in. I glanced back and forth at the other hands and then looked back to the sky to alleviate the awkwardness I felt. After a few more minutes of silence, I decided we must be done. The smells and sounds of the experience lingered in my nose and ears, and I gladly handed the needles back to the large woman and sighed deeply. I said a quick farewell to my workmates and walked dimly towards sanctuary of my old Dodge.

"Hey, Slicker!" It was Emit's voice calling; I pretended not to hear him. The strange cadence of his footsteps sounded, and I sensed he was running toward me.

"Tyler!" he called again. I turned to face him. "Lydie's gonna cook up them oysters if you want some."

"Oysters?" I said. "Oh, that's okay. I don't like seafood."

"No man, *oysters*...from them calves. Don't tell me you ain't never ate Rocky Mountain oysters!" His smile overtook his face, brightening it through the filth.

"You mean, eat those?" My stomach turned at the thought as I pointed at the overflowing bucket.

"Yeah, man, them's good eatin', a little garlic, some salt'n hot sauce, mmm! Damn, that's good. Ain't you hungry?"

I calmed myself down and said, "I gotta go. I have some homework and class in the morning."

I turned and continued to the fence, climbed the planks, and felt a shock of pain go through my body as my feet hit the dirt road on the other side. As I opened the driver-side door, I made out some movement in my peripheral vision and looked up at the entire crew waving goodbye. I returned the gesture, ducked into the car, and proceeded toward the shop.

I didn't bother clocking out; I figured I could take care of it the next day, and, really, I just wanted to get home and into a shower. I turned left onto 395 south and pulled out one of my father's Pink Floyd tapes. I fast forwarded to "Comfortably Numb," and struggled to keep my mind on driving and the music. But I still stunk of singed hair, and my mind flashed images of anguished livestock, and my ears echoed their wail. Five songs later, I was home. I rushed up the stairs and into my trailer, heading straight for the bathroom, stripping off my clothes as I went.

"What up, B?" My brother Trent purposely faked a rapper-like voice. "How was work, homie?"

Radiohead

I bought two guitars for myself when I graduated high school: one acoustic, one electric. I bought the electric off of TJ, my brother Trent's buddy, and found the acoustic at a pawn shop in Carson City. As with all beginners, I was crap, and I drove the family crazy as I slowly learned to emulate my favorite bands: Nirvana, Weezer, Radiohead, Alice in Chains, and Rage Against the Machine. I listened to a lot of heavy, dark music while in high school, what with my angst and all. Nirvana and Weezer were my favorites at first because they utilized one chord shape that could be moved all over the fret board, and therefore, I was able to play their songs rather quickly. I drowned in guitar that summer.

My friends from school had all moved away, mostly to Utah to attend Brigham Young University, so I would play from when I woke up at noon until I would fall asleep, usually some time around two in the morning. It was familiar territory for me. It was like I had replaced a basketball with a guitar. I worked hard, and it wasn't long before I could play full songs. But I didn't want to just cover songs; I wanted to write my own—express my pain, my love.

My first attempts, as I imagine most are, were dismal. They were either too similar to the bands I had learned from or lyrically gibberish. I guess that could be expected because I held the ramblings of both Thom Yorke and Kurt Cobain in the highest esteem and believed both to be geniuses.

I used a karaoke machine back then to make multi-track recordings. I think I still have them somewhere. I listened to them about two years ago and they were god-awful. The sound quality was terrible, but more than that, the songs themselves, total shit:

cheesy rambling lyrics, the guitar slightly out of tune, my voice way out of key. At the time though, this was some brilliant stuff, record deal type stuff in my mind. I didn't recognize any of the songs aside from the cover tunes because I had stopped playing them soon after I wrote them. I don't think I "kept" an original until I had been playing for a few years and understood the complexity of song writing and arrangement a little more.

By the time I was twenty, I'd had braces and began to lift weights on a regular basis, so I gained some healthy weight, and had a fair paying gig as a waiter at Grand Central Pizza and Pasta. My first year and a half of community college went well. I dated a few girls (the guitar helped), and I felt like I was on my way to a bright future.

I met the only girl I would ever love that year. She was from Kentucky and was out west visiting her grandparents for a while. We happened to meet at a party in Carson City while my sister was house-sitting. I kept my distance at first, but Jenna was persistent. She'd show up at my apartment unexpected or sit next to me at church, so we could flirt.

She really grew on me when she dropped by after church one Sunday when I had decided to skip church. She handed me a CD with the song "Color Blind" on it by Counting Crows. Their music was not my style, but I gave it a listen to anyway. I listened to it over and over again. It is a minimalistic song as far as instrumentation goes: a piano, an oboe, and a voice. The lyrics stunned me because I identified with them; I could have copied them out of my own journal. We started seeing each other after that.

We dated for about six months before she moved back the Kentucky. During those months, I rewrote the book on how to be a crazy boyfriend. I didn't really know

how to behave in a relationship because, outside of a few month long flings, this was the only relationship I'd ever been in. For the most part we were a train wreck—fighting, breaking up, making up, crying, loving, hating—oh, how wondrous it is to be in love.

After she moved, I tried to keep the relationship alive by visiting twice and even moved to North Carolina with my Aunt Lynn for a chance to be closer, to possibly visit more often, but Jenna began fading from me. Before I knew what happened, she cut herself from my life completely.

She broke off our relationship when I was still back east, and it utterly destroyed me. I moped around Aunt Lynn's house for another month before I decided that I should return to Carson City. Jenna and I spoke just a few more times after I returned. She asked me to buy her a plane ticket to come visit, so I did. She was supposed to fly out on the fourth of July, but instead she simply stopped returning my calls. I wrote my first "good" song about it, "We Leave Tonight." The song was an account of my last night with her. It explains how I felt so far away from her even when I was laying next to her in bed, and that I just wanted her to turn and say, "We can leave here, and just go anywhere." But then I explain that I know she won't because she has already left me in a figurative sense.

It's sort of funny how most good songs are written about being broken by women or men. Many of the songs that followed had a similar theme, but most of them were lousy and whiny. The memory of Jenna invaded all my songwriting endeavors, or at least the pain of the experience did.

I wrote a bunch of sappy, depressing songs over the next year. A few were decent, and there was an added bonus to writing and singing “sensitive” songs: The girls liked them.

I didn’t date for an entire year after Jenna and I split, but then I finally sent it all back. I say that instead of “let it go” because I had to literally send ‘it’ all back in order to be rid of my feelings. I had a box full of love letters, photos, and keepsakes from my relationship with Jenna that kept me holding on to a past that could never be reconciled. I looked through everything one last time and lingered on my favorite photo. In it, Jenna’s wearing a navy blue Abercrombie shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and she wears no makeup at all. She had a slight smile on her face, kind of like Mona Lisa, only a little brighter, and her eyes seemed to be smiling as well, back at me. I loved that picture. I still love it. I cried while I put it in the box with everything else, and then I wrapped it up and sent it back to her.

All of this, of course, did not make me forget Jenna, but at least I would no longer waste countless amounts of time reminiscing over what I had lost. I was able to start over after I sent everything away—it was a symbolic ritual, in a way.

Soon after, I picked myself up and began dating again, and I gained a new group of friends that helped to divert my mind away from Jenna. But I still wrote about her. Just about every song: “December,” “How I Miss You,” “Rubber Soul,” and “We Leave Tonight.” They’re all about her, and they’re some of my best work. Even though I had no idea what she was doing with her life, I never shook her memory.

I moved to Reno and started playing at local coffee houses. I became a big draw at Deux Gros Nez, playing my heart out for anyone who'd listen. I gravitated away from my hard rock roots and played a more subdued, acoustic brand of music. I enjoyed the attention, but I felt I was betraying myself somehow. I openly admit that I wrote some songs back then in hopes of attracting women, but I guess that is what many young, male songwriters do. I also admit that being the sensitive musician worked a few times and spawned three or four short relationships for me.

I know that what I create is magic. After I'm done, and I listen to the playback in its entirety for the first time, and I know what it means, and I know it will mean something to someone else—splendor. I also know that I have zero chance to get my music out of the garage I create it in.

I bought myself a guitar when I was eighteen years old. I wanted to be Scott Weiland—without the drug habit of course. Music is in me—my soul. I was able to start playing open mikes after about four months of playing because that is all I did (play guitar that is). After my senior year I was alone and lonely. All of my friends—the five that I had—went off to college, and I stayed behind in Reno.

I played too many cover tunes at these open mike venues; I was afraid my original music wouldn't be received well. But now that I have the courage, I lack the freedom to go out and try. I tried once, sort of. When I was about twenty, my buddy Shawn and I joined up with a mutual friend and his brother to form a small band. Kyle was remarkable figure in my life then. He was about six years older than I was and had the charisma of Elvis and Johnny Cash rolled into one person.

We were good. Kyle sang and played a little rhythm guitar, TJ, Kyle's brother, played the drums, Shawn, the most talented musician in the band, laid down the bass, and I sang backup and played lead guitar.

Our main problem (my main problem) was that I wanted to be out front singing, too. I thought I was writing the catchier, better songs, and I wanted recognition for them. I thought that Kyle would get all of the accolades for the brilliant songs I wrote, and I just couldn't handle it. He had been in a pretty popular band, Arch—a shortening of Kyle's last name—and he knew the ins-and-outs of the biz. I was a virgin in Reno's music scene. But I still wanted to be Scott Weiland, so I couldn't take a back seat to anyone, right?

We never even played a gig. After I told Kyle that I wanted lead vocals on my songs, he paid a visit to my apartment on Sixth Street. “I am the front man in this band,” he told me, “and if *you* can't handle that, maybe this project isn't for you.” I took a minute to respond.

“Okay, then let's scrap all of my songs, and we'll play just the stuff you've written. I'll save my stuff for later.” His face contorted a little, and he reddened. Then he gathered himself and the charisma came back.

“All right, my man, if that is what you want, I'm down. Let's get together with TJ and Shawn mañana and jam out our set.”

Two weeks later I was out. Kyle picked up another guitarist and a different drummer and moved on. I didn't think so then, but getting kicked out was probably better for me. Kyle was a terrible influence on me; his brother was a weed dealer, and

Kyle was known everywhere we went, which usually meant free drinks and, inevitably, a hangover.

Needless to say, I got high or drunk or both too often that year. I learned a lot from him though, and I sort of stole some of that magnetism he had when we split ways. I resented Kyle and Shawn for a while. Shawn was *my* buddy, but he stuck around and played with Kyle for about year. I couldn't blame Shawn though; he was a victim of the "Archuletta Charm" just like the rest of Reno.

Shawn was my best friend during my single years. We lived in the same house for a year before I got married. He hooked me up with some recording software and told me what I needed to buy to set up a home recording studio using my computer. I used a basic four channel mixer and some cheap condenser microphones to create what I could. I wanted to have some version of my songs saved.

In order to make full songs, I learned how to play piano on my own by staying late when my beginning music class dismissed. I also taught myself the bass and took a music theory class. This class completely changed the musicality of my songwriting. The class taught me how to make music more electrifying; it gave me the tools to know how to write complex changes and movements, but I kept that aspect of songwriting in perspective—I am a minimalist in both writing and music. There is nothing wrong with simple and beautiful.

Now that I actually knew what I was doing, I had no band. This fact would nag at me for years and really never be resolved.

Open Mike

I don't know why I sit through this shit. I have been here since 9:00, that's when we're supposed to start. The first "act" didn't go on until 10:00, He is singing covers. He looks like a member of Slayer, when Slayer was cool. But alas, he is in his forties, he's fat, his long, stringy hair is balding (skullett), and he is wearing a sleeveless—you guessed it—Slayer shirt. To be fair though, he was wearing a sweet, fringed-leather jacket before he was called up to play. He started with Bon Jovi's "Livin on a Prayer"—so bad it was great. Then some Tesla song followed by a wondrous rendition of "Girls, Girls, Girls." A little Crue is too much, and that's his time.

I'm drinking water. I don't like to drink before I play, but I'm also broke. Next up is this wanna-be hippy chick who calls herself "Earthbreeze." Huh? She's got to be close to the same age as me. How on Earth (breeze) did she get a name like that?

I want to throw my glass at her when she starts meditating. She puts down her guitar, lights some incense, and sits cross-legged on stage for her first three minutes (you only get fifteen minutes to perform at this particular open mike). Then the inevitable "original" songs about nature, peace, and pollution follow. "Reduce your greenhouse gas emissions," she says into the mike as she leaves the stage. Three more to go before me.

As the next guy jumps up on the stage, I see a familiar face at the bar: that of my ex, Molly. Molly has sort of become my stalker the last few months. She was a little too overbearing for me while we dated, and now, she was still trying to claim me. She sees me too, so I motion to the empty seat at my table. She jokes with me, pointing at her chest and then checking around to make sure it's her I am asking. I nod and she makes her way over.

“Hey, babe,” she says as she sits, “Sorry, old habits...so what are you going to play tonight?”

“Not sure yet. I have a couple of new ones I’ve been working on, but I don’t know if they’re ready.” I look up at the guy on stage; he has no instrument—kill me now, a spoken word artist. I turn back to Molly with my eyes bugged.

“What?” she asks.

“We are in for a treat.”

“What?” she repeats. The music they play between acts is loud, so I lean in close to speak directly into her ear. She puts her hand behind my neck as I pull away. Her eyes are dreamy and glossed over; I can tell she’s buzzing hard.

“Molly.”

“I know, I know...old habits.”

I take her hand away gently; I know how it feels to still care for a person after it is over, and I don’t want to be an asshole. I don’t want to give false hope either. I hold it, just for a second, rubbing the top of her hand with my other.

“You want another drink?”

“Okay.”

“What do you want?”

“Surprise me,” she says. Then she shrugs.

I head to the bar with my water glass and decide to get a drink myself. I get a Jack and Coke and a Cosmo for Molly, her favorite. I sip the Cosmo down a bit because I start to spill it all over my hand. Molly thanks me for the drink, and we listen to the spoken word artist as he screams his art:

A child left alone, no home to come from—Don't!
He finds a place to stay, away, away from pain—Don't look!
Hungry, hurting, hurrying through, frantic—Don't look away!

He went on like this, adding a single word to the exclamation at the end of each line until he said, *Don't look away from the truth no matter how painful.*

I signed up in the sixth spot tonight, but the fourth act was a band which means a half hour of set-up before they actually get going. Molly and I walk outside to talk. She tells me about school—she enrolled at UNR. She's in the education program as well, but I haven't seen her on campus. We ask the usual questions and reminisce a little about some of the times we had.

“Do you remember that day at Scruples? We started drinking at noon. Your buddy, Kyle, is so funny.” She reaches for my hand but pulls away.

I nod slowly as she recounts our binge. I don't think she remembers that day as well as I do: After we were blitzed, she started talking shit to me—*You don't respect me, I could have any guy I wanted, You should feel lucky to be with me, etc.* Kyle dropped us off at my apartment, and we stumbled up to my room. Then we slept it off.

I woke up two hours later and packed my guitar and amp into my car and then dressed her and helped her down stairs. I drove her back to the Scruples parking lot, opened her car door, helped her into the front seat, and left her there, still drunk. That might have been my biggest asshole move ever.

I'm still smiling and nodding when I notice Molly's lips moving toward mine. I know I shouldn't, but I let her kiss me. We sit back and hear the sound check from inside

the Zephyr. Molly puts her hand on my leg and her head on my shoulder. I sit there like an idiot. I'm so uncomfortable, but I don't know what to do.

“Hey, Molly?”

“Mmm, hmm.”

“I need to go tune up. I need a quiet place though...I'll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just around the corner. There is a quiet place between the two buildings where I usually tune up. I'll be right back.”

As I get up, Molly's hand brushes my crotch.

I'm on the last string when Molly rounds the corner. She asks if I'm almost done. I finish tuning and put the guitar back in its case, and she is all over me by the time I turn around, darting her tongue in and out of my mouth. “Molly.” I say when I can get air, but she doesn't let up, and her hands are undoing my pants, and I can't think of anything to say except her name...

I feel like shit when it's all over. I can see that she is glowing, like she just won the lottery or something. We get ourselves together as best we can and walk back to hear the band's final song. I'm trying to smile, but it feels forced and Molly sees it.

“What's the matter?”

“Molly, we shouldn't have done that.”

“Oh. Didn't you want me, too? Didn't you have a good time?”

“Molly, there are reasons...reasons we're not together anymore. It wasn't going well, and I don't think this makes it any better.”

The glow vanished from her face. I hurt her; maybe even more than when we split. Her drunken eyes well with tears, but she holds them back.

“I’m sorry. I just want you to know--”

“It’s okay.” She turns for a minute and brings her hands to her face. “Could you do something for me?” she asks.

“Yeah. What?”

“Sing a song for me tonight.”

“All right.”

Back in the hazy, smoke-filled bar we sit in silence until I take the stage. Molly moves close, sitting right in front. After addressing the crowd, I look at her and clear my throat. “This song is for Molly,” I say it, and I mean it. I look at her as I begin, and she starts to cry looking back at me, so I close my eyes. I sing this song I wrote called “Rubber Soul”—it’s about a guy that can’t feel anymore because he has disconnected himself for so long. I guess it’s about me. I don’t know, but I feel when I play it, and I am singing it true, for Molly: the girl who I treated like shit because she wanted to be around me all the time; the girl who drove from Carson City to Reno to see me four days a week; the girl who listened to me write songs about girls I had loved before her, and she loved every one; the girl who told me one night after we made love that she could see us married, and I said I couldn’t; to Molly.

Love Exhumed

I have to admit that every now and again I would still send Jenna a note. One year for Christmas I sent her a CD of music that I had recorded. I never received responses to any of my letters.

I started dating someone in early spring 2002. She was a lot like me, and we had a wonderful time together—whenever we could make it work. She lived in Lake Tahoe, about an hour drive one way up the murderous twists and turns of Mt. Rose Highway. I made the trip up to her place about twice a week, so she wouldn't have to drive the two hours in order for us to have a date. She liked my music, she liked me, and I liked her. Things were going just fine.

I was getting ready for the trek to Tahoe one day when my sister, Tammy, called me out of the blue. She had given birth to twin babies in May and had held a shower for them the day before.

“Hey, Ty.”

“Hey, what's up? How are the little ones?”

“Great. Jayden still has a bit of jaundice, so I have to use the Billie-lights for her. It basically gives her some of the vitamins that she is lacking. She shouldn't need it much longer.”

“Oh, great. So...how's the rest of the fam?”

“Tyler, I'm calling because Nonny came to the shower this weekend.” Nonny Glancy is Jenna's grandmother. Jenna stayed with Nonny when she came to Nevada.

“Okay, cool. She's a nice lady. Did she say anything about me?”

“She said she wants you to be her grandson someday.”

“Well that’s not gonna happen. She is a nice lady, though. You know, I stopped by once after Jenna broke up with me, and she invited me in and made me lunch. She didn’t treat me like the crazy ex-boyfriend to her grand--”

“Jenna was with her.” I was socked in the gut by that one, and I couldn’t speak for what seemed like minutes. I just stared at the wall and pulled the phone away from my ear. My mouth hung open like a panting dog, and my mind went blank.

“Tyler? Did you hear me?”

“Uh, yeah. I heard you. Why?”

“That’s what Tracy and I said. We didn’t even know she was back in Nevada, but she sure had a lot of nerve to come to my house after what she put you through.”

“How’d she look?”

“Tyler, don’t even think about it.”

“What? Did she look good or what? You know I’m dating Taylor right now.”

“She looked great, Ty. She asked me for your number before she left, but I thought I would ask you if you want her to call you before I gave it to her. Do you want her to call?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it. Hey, sis...thanks for the heads up, but I gotta take a shower and head up to Taylor’s. I’ll think about it and call you back.”

I don’t even remember driving to Tahoe that day. My body was on autopilot while my mind swirled around the inconceivable fact that Jenna had come back, and she wanted to see me.

I really didn’t know what to do. I cared for Taylor and thought our relationship could be the start of something good, and there was no baggage to sort through in order to

make a go of it. Jenna and I would need to do all of that. Rehash old shit that happened between us, try to forgive, try to forget. I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted to do. Not after I finally put myself together and was making progress.

Taylor and I went to some mediocre Spanish restaurant, and I muddled through the date as my usual carefree, joking self. We went back to her place, curled up to watch a movie and fell asleep before long. I woke up around midnight and decided it would be best if I went home. I kissed Taylor's forehead and drove back to Reno. I would've stayed, but I'd missed my early morning Spanish II class many times already.

The night seemed like a blur, and I tried to think about Taylor—tried to conjure up the excitement I felt just the day before when I would think of her, but I couldn't. Thoughts of Jenna filled my mind.

Pride wouldn't let me call her; it also kept me from wanting her to have my number. I asked a good friend at the time what I should do, and he, being the wonderful pig that he is, suggested I go off straight away and have sex with her and then forget about her. This was completely out of the question. I asked for advice from countless friends and even my boss. I was a mess all right.

The following week, my other sister Tracy called and told me that Jenna had approached her in church that Sunday, and again, asked for my phone number. I conceded this time and told Tracy to go ahead and give it to her.

Jenna was always a smart girl, and she knew that her appearance at the baby shower and her request for my contact information would get back to me, and, more importantly, that it would spark my curiosity. It did. I tried to exude a false apathy toward the situation, but I would check the answering machine after class, after work,

after a shower...I started to feel a bit out of control. I didn't know what I would say to her anyway. I only dated her for eight months, and we'd been apart for over two years. I think I wanted her to know that I was all right—that even though she had destroyed me before, I healed, and I was no longer a broken-down boy.

I was putting myself through school, I had recently bought a new car, I was renting a nice big house in Northwest Reno, I had a lucrative job as the head bartender at Mi Casa Too, I had paying musical jobs at O'Skis and Beaches. I had completely redefined myself from what she knew before. I had also grown in the time we spent apart. Jenna was my first love and losing her was something I hadn't known how to deal with, but I had. I had dated several other girls since Jenna, was dating Taylor when Jenna crashed back into my life, and these experiences, coupled with time, educated me in the ways of love and dating.

I understood myself and my emotions much more now, and I had direction in my life. But when she didn't call, I regressed a bit, feeling a little inadequate because she hadn't called. Maybe she changed her mind. Maybe this, or maybe that...

It was after a long Friday shift behind the bar that I came home to find "Jenna called" scribbled on the house white board along with her number. Now came my predicament: Do I call her back immediately? Do I wait a day or two? I decided to skip the games and just do what I wanted to. I called.

Our conversation lasted a few awkward minutes. She asked to see me, and I told her that I had planned on going to visit my sister and her family in Dayton (where Jenna was staying) on my next day off—Monday. I told her she could come over as well if she wanted to. I tried to not seem eager or desperate, besides, I had a girlfriend, and Jenna

might have had someone as well. The date was set though, and I was as nervous as I'd ever been.

I thought about Jenna all the way to Dayton and wondered how the encounter would go. I lay on the floor with my baby nephew, talking and tickling, trying to keep myself distracted. The phone rang. Tracy answered and had a brief conversation before hanging up.

“She’s on her way.”

I tried to play nonchalant as I walked down the hall to the bathroom. I did a frantic mirror check: hair okay, breath okay, skin—no zits, a couple of practice smiles and a splash of water on my face. She’d arrive momentarily.

Back in the living room with my nephew, my heart sunk every time I noticed a car in my peripheral vision. Finally, one stopped.

She strolled up the walk, and I opened the front door to meet her. Neither of us could hold back; we hugged each other and held on tight. She’d come back.

Our rollercoaster romance lasted nine months. I wanted to ask her to marry me for a while before I actually did. We had gone ring shopping all over Reno before discovering “the one.” I took her out for her birthday one cold night in January, and we had a pleasant time—a nice meal and great conversation. On the way home Jenna became visibly distressed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said in a tone that meant something was most wrong.

I put my hand on her leg, “Okay, what is it?”

“Well,” she started to cry now, “I just thought you were waiting for the perfect moment to ask me to marry you, and tonight was a good night, and I just thought...”

“I just thought it would be too predictable to ask you tonight. Don’t worry. I will. I just want to figure out an interesting way to do it.”

We drove home to the hum of the car and the occasional snuffle from Jenna as she tried to calm herself down.

I made a plan for the following week. We had spent a long day together, and in the evening we settled down to watch a movie. Before that, we’d showered, and she was laying on my bed, relaxing. I decided to palm the ring and give her a backrub. When I reached her shoulders I massaged her arms as well, and when I reached her left hand, I slipped the ring on and asked her to be my wife. She said yes.

A week before our wedding; however, Jenna called the whole thing off, and I was devastated. By then I had had enough. All of the fighting and stress that goes along with a relationship (and planning a wedding) were getting to me, so even though it hurt, I didn’t have the want or the energy to try to fix anything.

We had visited a bishop from church the previous week and confessed our “sins.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints upholds very strict guidelines for being temple-worthy. Jenna wanted to be married and sealed for all time and eternity in the Reno temple; unfortunately, we had transgressed to the point of needing six months of sin-free repentance before we could re-interview for a second judgment.

Jenna figured that we had ruined our chances, and that we wouldn’t be able to stay sin free if we had to wait that long. The situation infuriated me.

I was not churchy at all, but Jenna had been ever since she lost a friend in a car crash a few years earlier. Coming back to the gospel “saved” her and a death-do you-part wedding just wasn’t going to cut it for her. She wanted the temple marriage; that, and nothing else, would do. She gave me back the engagement ring in early May after a short visit and even shorter argument about marriage.

I drove out to my old friend Kyle’s house, crying all the way there. He and I’d had a falling out while trying to play music earlier that year, but I needed to talk to someone. I flew down McCarran Blvd. on my way to Sun Valley when a police cruiser pulled me over. The officer asked me why I was going so fast, and he could see I was distraught. I told him about Jenna breaking off the engagement, and that I was going to talk with a friend. In an act of true compassion, the officer simply asked me to slow down, and he actually said he was sorry for my situation.

I drove on to Kyle’s house, but when I arrived and saw the lights were all out, I decided not to bother Kyle with my problems.

I spent the next day calling all around Reno, cancelling tuxedo rentals, church reservations, court appointments, flower orders, and then I called the bishop from church who was going to preside over the ceremony.

Jenna’s mother had already bought a plane ticket to come out for the wedding. It was too late to cancel the flight, so she came out to visit. My plan was to avoid her. She was a very nice woman, but, if I wasn’t going to marry Jenna, I wasn’t going to have a close-to-mother-in-law experience if I didn’t have to.

Before the fall out, we'd planned to take Jenna's mother to Lake Tahoe and hike down to Emerald Bay. Jenna and I frequented the Vikingholm exhibit there, and we knew Debbie would enjoy it as well. Jenna called to ask if I would still go, and, even though I truly didn't want to, I agreed. I picked them up in Dayton, early in the morning, and we followed the twists and turns of Highway 50 to our destination.

Following the main road around the lake, we climbed ever higher before reaching Emerald Bay, looking over either side of the narrow road at the crystalline waters. We parked near the trailhead marker for Eagle Lake. We crossed over the highway and trekked down the zigzag grade of the trail to the Vikingholm. Debbie wanted to stop and read all of the signs and plaques about the Vikingholm and the building process for the mammoth undertaking way back in the early 1920s. Tourists.

Eventually we reached the end of the trail and the soft sand of the beach. A short distance away sat the Vikingholm mansion, built by a Scandinavian settler using imported materials from Norway. The tiny beach extended only thirty to fifty feet from the shoreline where it was met by the surrounding forests of the Tahoe region. Higher elevations were still adorned with snowcaps, and the lake temperature was far too cold for swimming.

We walked around the Viking Holm, and even crossed the yellow tape wrapped around the structure to keep tourists from the grounds. Debbie had traveled from Kentucky, and this would likely be the one and only time for her to see this historic landmark.

After the hike I treated Jenna and her mother to lunch at our favorite Tahoe eatery, The Brewery. All in all it was a agreeable day for me. I thought of it as my

farewell to Jenna, and it would be a fine way to leave the relationship on pleasant terms. I dropped them off at Debbie's parents' place in Dayton and headed to my sister's place to crash out. Jenna and I talked the next morning, and, if we weren't getting married, I was done. There was no point in dating if the outcome would not be marriage.

Two days later Jenna surprised me at my house in Reno.

"I need to talk to you about us."

"There is no 'us' anymore, remember?"

"That is what I wanted to talk to you about," she said.

"Okay." I moved out of the doorjamb, leaving it open as an invite to come in. I asked her if she wanted something to drink, and pulled a bottle of water from the fridge for myself. She asked for the same. We sat on the couch for a minute before she spoke again.

"I think I made a mistake," she said.

"I think you did too." I couldn't look at her. I'd been thinking about our entire relationship for the last two days, and I was pissed off.

"Tyler, don't be like this. You know we messed up."

"How?"

"We did things our church doesn't allow; we can't go to the temple."

"Who says they're wrong? Some man at church? We need a piece of paper, and then it's okay to have sex. A sex license?"

"You know I want to get married in the temple."

"That is more important than love?"

“No. In our church—“

“I don’t care. No one tells me how to live. Unless God appears and says ‘Thou shalt not grope before marriage’ I do what I feel is right with the woman I love. You think that it’s okay for us to have a physical relationship after we’re married. We were in love—married or not. My life is not ruled by what others want. I make my own choices, and so do you.”

“Tyler, I don’t want to fight. I’ve been talking with my mom, and she says you’re a good guy. She says I’d be a fool to let you go.”

“She’s right, and you did.”

“I still want to marry you.”

“Oh, in six months when the preacher man gets the okay from Jesus?”

“No. Next Saturday.”

“What?”

“Next week. I want to marry you. I love you.”

“There isn’t enough time. I cancelled everything. I had to eat most of the down payments for everything, so I don’t have enough money. I won’t even have a tux.”

“I talked with Nonnie and Poppie. We can get married at their house.”

I was taken aback. A week ago it was the temple or nothing at all, now she’s ready to get married anywhere. “Why the change? What about the temple? What about what all of your church friends will think? Isn’t that really why you freaked out?”

“I didn’t freak out. I’m not inviting anyone from church, and I still want to get married in the temple later. But my mom is right. If I let you go, I will be sorry. I already am.”

“I am upside-down and inside-out right now. You have to give me some time.”

“Well, my mom is leaving next Monday.”

“I’ll call you later. I need advice.”

“Okay. I love you, Tyler.”

“I love you, too.”

I sought out counsel from everyone: regulars at the bar, close friends, and family members. Most of them said I’d be crazy to marry Jenna. Some said to look inside myself for the answer. I thought and thought until I wore the thought out. I was completely unsure, but, nonetheless, on Saturday May 24, 2003, I married Jenna Wallace at her grandparents’ house in Dayton, NV.

Jenna and I lived a busy first year together. She worked fulltime at St. Mary’s in the OR, and I was a fulltime student by day, and a fulltime bar tender at night. Life was simple in certain aspects and complicated in others. We had two incomes, so the money was pretty great. We ate out at least three times a week, and we could basically do whatever we wanted whenever we wanted. On the other hand, we were adjusting to living with each other and getting to know all of the annoying habits that drove us both crazy: leaving the toilet seat up, toothpaste spit in the bathroom sink, clothes on the bathroom floor, dirty dishes, etc.

We fought all the time during the first seven or eight months of our lives together, and, at times, I didn’t think it was going to work. We were both stressed out all the time—I need to repeat that, all the time. Jenna thought we weren’t spending enough time together, so she started to work as a cocktail server with me two nights a week. What a

disaster. As the bartender, I am basically her boss. I have to make sure she is on top of things, and she hated working with me, so that lasted about a month. My boss came up to me, mid-shift, and said that either one of us quits or both of us would be fired. Jenna quit that night.

A few short weeks after that, Jenna came in to visit me on a shift when I was waiting tables. She sat at a table in my section, and I bought her a drink, but she wasn't hungry. I could tell something was on her mind. I was relatively busy, so I couldn't sit and chat until I satisfied all of my tables and had a minute to sit.

Things finally slowed down, and I scooted into the booth, sitting next to her. After a little bit of small talk, Jenna reached into her pocket and whipped out a piece of plastic that resembled a digital thermometer. She lifted it to my face, and I realized that it was a pregnancy test, and it read positive. I was going to be a Daddy.

The pregnancy helped us to look past our trivial squabbles. We began working together, planning our future and the birth of our baby. We knew that our current one bedroom apartment wouldn't provide enough room for three of us, so we started to look for something bigger. Jenna was tired all of the time during her first trimester, and she slept constantly. She started showing around the three month mark.

Then came the cravings. A few times she asked me, at midnight or later, to go to the local grocery store for a cucumber or to McDonald's for a large order of fries and a chocolate shake. It was during this time that I started to pack on the sympathy weight.

About six months after we found out we scheduled an ultrasound to find out the sex of our little one. I was certain that it was a boy, in fact, I had been talking to Jenna's belly and calling the baby "my little man" and referring to it as "he" whenever I talked

with Jenna about our child. So of course, we found out we were having a girl. I couldn't have been any happier. We bought pink everything for the next few months and arranged a little nursery in the living room area of our little apartment. I was excited and nervous all at once; my daughter couldn't come soon enough.

As the due date grew closer, we had yet another appointment in which we found out that our baby was breach and she was too large to turn. We scheduled a caesarian operation for October 8, 2004.

We arrived at St. Mary's early, and the nurses prepped Jenna, and I changed from my street clothes in to a pair of scrubs. At 3:00 PM, they wheeled Jenna to the operating room and gave her an epidural. A nurse directed me in after the medication set in and positioned me behind a large curtain at the head of the bed. I held Jenna's hand, and doctors Johnson and Stratton came in to perform the surgery. I was allowed to watch over the curtain, but I wasn't to begin recording until I was given permission.

The procedure began with Dr. Johnson cutting through the outer layers of skin and fat. When they reached the abdominal wall, the two doctors stepped to either side of the bed, and they wriggled their fingers through the muscle tissue—no cutting. Then they counted down and pulled in opposite directions after reaching one. They repeated this step about four times until they created a large enough gap for the baby. Dr. Johnson used a scalpel to gently release the embryonic fluid, and then he reached in to pull my daughter from the womb. Her legs and butt came first, then the rest of her body up to the neck. Dr. Johnson had to reposition his hands momentarily—then he slowly maneuvered her head, so it would come out safely, and he brought my Kadence into the world.

I'd never felt a love so strong in my life. From the moment I first saw my daughter, and every single moment thereafter—I felt complete as a person in a way I had never thought possible. I did most of the caretaking in the hospital because Jenna was recovering from the surgery and couldn't get up to change diapers or hold Kadence. I still handed her over to Jenna for feedings and mommy time, but I was a baby hog most of the time.

I love being a father. I loved every step of Kadence's growth, and I look forward to everything still to come. My little girl constantly reassures my purpose, and I was doubly blessed three years later when my son Carson was born. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to love another child as much as I love my daughter—I thought that she already filled my heart so much that I couldn't love him the same, but, when my son came into the world, my capacity for love just expanded that much more, and the same feelings I had with Kadence resurfaced. In fact, when Carson was born, I was battling a strong case of depression, and he served as the catalyst for a positive change in my life, and my usual personality returned from the depths of melancholy.

Calling Ulu

I bought a house last year, right before the holiday season, and in doing so, felt a true sense of accomplishment after many years of shoddy apartment living.

I'd been teaching in Reno for three years then, and I was looking forward to having some time to relax during winter break. My wife had purchased the DVD set of *The Wonder Years* for me a few months before, and I had yet to watch an episode. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the show, it chronicles the struggles and triumphs of the central character, Kevin Arnold. The show follows him through junior high all the way to high school graduation, highlighting all of the bumps and bruises young Kevin experiences on his adolescent journey.

As I popped in disk six, I started to think about my own experiences as a young man...friends and girls that drifted in and out of my life like the tide. I began to wonder what had become of these people, but most of all, I wanted to know what ever came of Ulu.

Ulu was my best friend in the world when I lived in Simi Valley. He and I hung around all the time. He lived about two blocks from my house, on Appleton Hill. I would stay over at his place or he at mine just about every weekend. We had our first "girlfriends" around the same time in sixth grade and lived out those dramas together. We used to go visit his aunt, Bonita, in Sand Canyon, and she took us to amusement parks and to the beach. Ulu and I had deep conversations about winning a million dollars and going on crazy shopping sprees, or about what we'd do if we had the power of invisibility, which was, of course, spy on girls. He and I tried to smoke cigarettes for the first time, and looked like total lamewads as we failed to inhale. We were shot at when

trying to swipe honeycombs from a neighbor's hive. We built a fort in one of the few places where there were no buildings in our city. We had adventures; we were inseparable.

He moved away the summer before seventh grade. Adjusting to his absence was difficult for me, but eventually, he faded from my thoughts, and then I moved away, too.

I decided that I would contact him, or at least, I would try to. First, I Googled his name, but my search yielded nothing. I tried to locate him through Facebook—no dice. I remembered Ulu said something about moving to Grass Valley in central California, but the white pages for that city showed no listings for Rapkin. I widened my search by removing the city and searched all of California.

That's when I noticed a familiar name in the list of Rapkins—David. Ulu's father was a bit of a hippie type of guy when I knew him. He liked Ulu's friends to call him Dave which made him seem to be a really cool father. He worked at a university somewhere close to Simi Valley; I remember he was a chemist of sorts—he brought Ulu and I along for a day in the lab and let us play with dry ice for most of the afternoon.

The records for David Rapkin revealed a northward migration with a current address in the upscale, bay area city of Walnut Creek. His phone number was listed, too.

I felt a little unsure about digging up the past, but I dialed anyway...only to have all of build up release when an answering machine picked up. Even though it had been years, I recognized Dave's deep, droning voice and left a message.

“Hello. This is Tyler Tholen. I hope this is the right number. I'm looking for an Ulu Rapkin. I used to run around with him back in Simi Valley. Anyway, if this is the right number, and you know how I can get a hold of Ulu, please call me back at (775)

123-4567.” I clicked the phone shut and headed into the living room to roughhouse with my kids.

I had always hoped the best for Ulu, and I imagined that he led a comfortable life and even made it back to Tonga where he undoubtedly lived the ideal life of an islander, surfing and swimming in the ocean without a care. These are thoughts that comfort me when I dredge up old memories. I hope the best for all of the people that I had loved and lost touch with throughout the years, but for Ulu, I made up the grandest possibilities.

It wasn't long until my phone rang, and I recognized the number as the one I had called a short time before. “Hello.”

“Hey, is this Tyler?” asked a deep voice on the other line.

“Yeah.”

“This is Ulu. How you doin,' man?” It was rather odd to listen to his voice and make the connection. Last time I talked to him, he still had the pubescent voice of a thirteen year old. This was a man on the other end of the line.

“I'm doing good, good. What about you?” I asked.

“Ah, pretty good. It's a trip to hear you. You sound so different.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” The small talk lasted for a few minutes. I told him how I came across his number through searching the web and such. Then I suggested that we both give each other a rundown of the last eighteen years. Ulu went first and told the following story:

“Well, we moved to Walnut Creek in 92.’ It was a tough time for me because all they have in Walnut Creek is rich white people, and I was poor and dark, so I didn't fit in

very well. All the kids at my school had the nice clothes and cars, and I didn't have anything. Dave got a job at Berkley. That's why we moved here in the first place."

"Yeah, I remember that time he took us with him to the lab," I added.

"I hated school, but there are a lot of good looking girls in this town. And they're all rich white chicks. I dated a lot of girls. I played a little basketball in high school; I grew to about 6'2". I was thin for the most part, but I'm pretty thick now. What about you? Your dad is pretty tall. Where'd you end up?"

"I'm 6'4". I'm thin, I guess, about 220. I played basketball, too, except my junior year, my dad died that year, so..."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. How'd he die? I remember him getting sick before I moved away."

"His diabetes coupled with drugs and alcohol. That's all it took."

"Sorry, man."

"It's cool. So, what else?"

"At fifteen I found out Dave wasn't my real dad. I mean, I always had a feeling he wasn't, plus Lewis and Rebecca look so different than me. They look like a mix between my mom and Dave. I look like a full blooded Tongan. Even though I thought he might not be my biological father, it still hurt to hear it, and I pushed my family away for a while. I felt betrayed. But Dave is my dad. He raised me like his own, and I love him for it. My mom and Dave divorced soon after we moved to Walnut Creek. I was angry at her for a long time. I started acting out in school, getting suspended and stupid shit like that, but I got over it eventually."

“When I was seventeen, I got my girlfriend pregnant. She was only fifteen. She had the baby, so I have a daughter. She’s nine. I don’t get to see her very often because my girlfriend’s family is fucked up and they have all kinds of money to hire custody lawyers and stuff. I hate them. They turned my girl from me and everything. I don’t really see my baby-momma often either.”

His terminology caused me to bust up. I thought he was messing around by saying ‘baby-momma’ but he was serious, and I felt awkward for laughing like I did. I settled myself and asked him to continue.

“The next year, I started working construction. I did that for a while, but it was hard labor and little money, and I knew there had to be an easier way. I smoked weed heavily at the time so I asked my dealer about getting into that. Before I knew it, I was taking it to the next level—manufacturing and selling cocaine.”

“Holy shit, man! Cocaine?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Yeah. Like I said. I wanted easy money, and for little while, it was good. But my house got raided by a SWAT team, like a special episode of Cops or something, after I was dealing for a year or so. I was fucked, man. It’s bad enough when you have the shit on you, but when you get caught making the shit with intent to sell...

“I went to prison for five years, maximum security. That was the toughest part of my life because I had no one else to blame; I brought it on myself. My ex’s parents used my conviction to distance me from my daughter even more. I don’t blame them. I wouldn’t want a drug dealer around my daughter either. It was rough though, man. I don’t want my daughter to think I don’t love her. I don’t want to be like my biological

father and just walk out on her, but I don't have much pull with the judge when we go to custody hearings.

“Um, I was working back in construction after prison. I'm a finisher. I basically go through and make the house look perfect and smooth after the basic building process is over with. Getting' it ready to sell.

“Last year, my boss was ragging on me because I couldn't lift a granite slab by myself, and he could. So I tried to lift the thing and wrenched my back out. I've been on disability unemployment ever since...that's about it, I guess. What about you?

At this point I felt like I'd been sucker-punched. I couldn't believe, or didn't want to believe the shit-storm he'd purged on me. At several points, I wanted to stop him and ask if he was fucking with me: Knocking up his girl, Dave's not his real dad, cocaine trafficking, federal prison for chrissakes, and now, living off the system. I snapped back to my wits and gave my story to my old friend:

“We moved to a speck of a town called Gardnerville in 92' as well. All of my mom's side of the family lives up here. I hated it right away. There were farms and cattle and all kinds of things you never see in the city. I didn't get along in school either. I basically hung out with Tim and Trent because I couldn't make any good friends. I messed around, as far as trouble goes, when we first moved here, but then I dove into basketball hardcore. I was obsessed.”

“You were back in the day, too. I remember you had the 'Air Jordans' and you played at lunch all the time.”

“Yeah, but back then, I really didn't know how play. I just did all those stupid double-pump, windmill layups that are of no use when you play at a higher level. I made

the eighth grade team, by an act of generosity, and I never looked back. I took every opportunity to shoot some hoop and became a pretty good player. Basketball kept my grades up, too. My dad died my junior year, like I said, so I didn't play which led to a shitty senior year. I rode the pine for the most part.

“After I graduated high school, I didn't know what I was going to do, so I didn't do anything. I have always loved music, so I bought a couple guitars and taught myself to play. I think I replaced basketball with music—I have an obsessive personality, I guess. I played the guitar for hours and hours, day in and day out. I still play when I have time, but I'm always busy, so it doesn't happen too often. I decided that rock stardom was a far stretch, so I went to community college, then university.”

“Whoa, an educated man, huh? What did you study?”

“Education, I'm a teacher.”

I heard Ulu laughing on the other end of the line.

“I can't believe it. A teacher? High School?”

“No, I teach at a middle school near my house. It's all right, but I can't see myself doing it forever. I'm getting a masters degree in writing. I want to write books.”

“A masters degree...that's cool, man.” I sensed a tonal change in his voice, and I thought that maybe I sounded like a braggart, so I changed the subject quickly.

“I bartended all through college and got married before I graduated. I've been married six years now, and I have two kids. My girl, Kadence, is just about five, and my boy, Carson, turns one in February. Kids are awesome. They really make life interesting.”

I felt like fool as soon as I said this. Ulu hadn't been around his daughter at all really, and here I am, talking about how wonderful my family is.

"My wife and I went to Monterey last year for our anniversary. Is that near Walnut Creek?" I asked.

"Not really. Sort of."

"We live in Reno now. Actually, a little bit north of Reno. I bought a house in a planned community close to the school I where I teach...I already said that, huh? What else..."

At this point the conversation became stagnant, so I asked about his family.

"My mom is still married to the guy she cheated on Dave with, Lewis is going to school, Rebecca...Rebecca got knocked up by some loser. A total deadbeat. She lives here with me and Dave. Her boyfriend is an asshole, though. He treats her like shit whenever he's around."

I thought his statement to be a bit ironic since he had explained his limited interaction with his 'baby-momma' and daughter just minutes earlier, but maybe he meant that this guy was demeaning or something along those lines.

"Dave's at the university, and I'm just chillin.' How's your brothers?"

"Travis still lives in the So-Cal area. Right now he works for some sort of lab—he takes apart electronics to check for flaws, or something like that. You'd never recognize him. He is all punked out: tats, piercings, colored and spiked hair. He's just about as tall as I am, but he's heavier. A real big dude. Tim...well, Tim had a long spell of bad luck including a psycho girlfriend, and he's pretty messed up himself, now. He lives with my mom and doesn't work. So do Todd, and Trevor. Trevor's kind of floating

right now. He has no direction or ambition, and Todd works at a supermarket and he's going to community college.

“What about Trent?”

“Trent's doing well. He's married, no kids, yet. He works for Douglas County, that's where Gardnerville is, as an assessor. He went to college with me, studied business. He even graduated before me. He lives in a really nice place called Genoa. Yeah, he's doing well.”

There was an awkward pause here, and looking at the clock I noticed we'd been talking for nearly an hour.

“Hey, Ulu?”

“Yeah.”

“It's been great catching up with you, ah, I gotta help my wife clean up a bit around here though. I can give you a call another time. I wish I could see you, man, that would be a trip.”

“I go snowboarding in Tahoe all the time, and we always come down to Reno when we do.”

I cut him off, “Give me a call. We could meet up and get lunch or a beer or something.”

“Ah...I can't leave the state of California right now, parole, but I'll give you a call next time I go to Tahoe. Maybe we could meet up there.”

“All right. It's been nice talking, Ulu.”

“Yeah, man. I never thought I'd hear from you again. I'm glad you called.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I snapped the phone shut and walked into back into the living room, feeling like my brain was floating. The conversation was so surreal, so unbelievable

Growing up and apart is a fact of life. I was thankful to have reconnected with Ulu, but his story destroyed all of the hopes I had placed on his life. He was supposed to have lived better than that. He should've gone back to Tonga like he talked about when we were kids. He should have done this or that...He laid out a life full of struggles and obstacles he had to overcome, but everyone faces barriers in life. Some of these challenges are a bit more extreme than others, but they're something to conquer. They are not something you let determine your life.

I felt, and still feel, that there are roadblocks around every corner I take. I just reacted to my circumstances in a different manner. I don't let anything keep me from the goals I've set for myself, never have. Ulu carved out his own path through life falling, stopping, and stumbling down it as long as he could, until he just couldn't get up anymore.

I looked around the room, at my daughter watching Care Bears with my wife then walked into my son's room. I studied him as he slept: the beautiful features of his face, his slow steady breathing. I gently adjusted his astronaut blankets and headed back to the front room to join my girls.

Four

*It's not time to make a change
Just sit down, take it easy
You're still young. That's your fault.
There's so much you have to know.*
Cat Stevens

I have been lonely for as long as I can remember but grew up with a gang of a family, so I was never alone. I always had a companion; my parents nurtured me through childhood; I had many friends. So why, then, does this feeling linger? Well, that's easy: some of the events in my life have had profound effects on me, at levels so deep I can scarcely begin to understand the scars their slashing blows left upon my soul.

The first came from my parents. My parents' union was doomed from the get-go. My father was twenty, and my mother, eighteen. My mother was pregnant with my oldest sister when they married. Family and friends on both sides believed the marriage to be "the right thing to do." It didn't matter whether or not the two were actually in love. But they were—my mother has told me so. They were in the beginning.

My mother wrote a heart wrenching plea to my father before I was born. They had three children at the time, and, in the note, my mother was asking my father to reassure her, to recognize her, to hold her, to want her, to love her and the children. At the age of eight, I was rifling through her filing cabinet when I stumbled upon a folded up letter, written on yellow tablet paper. I felt I was violating some unwritten law by reading it, but I could not compel myself to stop. What a realization for an eight-year-old to have. My parents were on the outs before I was even born, and they had three more children after me. The letter struck me as terribly sad, and I jotted a note back to my mother, simply saying, "I love you, Mom." And then I signed my name. While I was putting her

old letters, bill records, and recipes away, I was overwhelmed with emotion and began to cry. After twenty-two years, I can still remember that letter clearly.

*Find a girl, settle down.
If you want, you can marry.
Look at me. I am old,
But I'm happy.*

“Patti, you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous? Kim, we have eight children. Everything I do is for this family, them and you. You are staying out all night, drinking, and you’re missing out on their lives. You’re abandoning us.”

“I’m working sixty-hour weeks trying to pay the bills and make enough to build a more comfortable life.”

“At what expense? What does the money matter when you’ve alienated yourself from the ones who love you? Do those titty-dancers love you, Kim? Do you need that more than this family?”

“Is that why you locked me out?”

“Yes! I won’t have it, Kim, I won’t. I don’t want my boys to only see you when you’re drunk, and the girls are old enough to make the connection. They know what’s going on already. Do you want you boys to follow in your footsteps?”

“I had to pop out the screen and bust the window lock to get in tonight. Do you want our kids to witness this shit? This screaming match?”

“I want you out, Kim.”

My father looked at the suitcases he'd dragged in off the front steps when he broke in to his own house minutes earlier. I made a weeping sound, and he fixed his gaze on me.

“Tyler, go to bed.”

Things went on this way from age eight until I was twelve. There were pleasant periods, and my father would even go to an occasional marital counseling appointment with my mother, but would always proclaim “all is well” after one session. After nineteen years of a chaotic, rollercoaster existence, my mother asked for a divorce.

The year of divorce blurred past, and before I knew it, I was moving away from Simi Valley—away from my father, creating a physical distance to symbolize the emotional.

*Take your time. Think a lot.
Think of everything you've got,
for you will still be here tomorrow,
but your dreams may not.*

Five hundred miles away we ventured to Garnerville, NV, and settled into a trailer park set out in the woods off of Highway 395. My mother's side of the family promised they would take us bowling, fishing, whatever it took to make us feel welcomed. I think they tried, but we were too many and they had their own lives and obligations to tend to. After a few months, we were forgotten—by circumstance or design—and the Tholen boys were strangers in a strange land. We had no male role models.

When my brothers and I decided we'd had enough of church, Grandpa Dick, a non-churchgoer himself, tried to bully us into going.

“You’re all soft. Cowards! If your mom says you’re goin’ to church, you’re goddamn going!” He walked around from the back of the couch and moved close into my oldest brother Travis’ face.

“You most of all. You’re supposed to be helping out your mother, and, instead, you’re the ringleader. Takin’ your brothers out into the woods to hide with you—Fuckin’ bullshit! I guess I really shouldn’t be yelling at you.” I could see bits of saliva spraying my brother. “Your good-for-fucking-nothing father raised you wrong. Little shits.” He kept walking and berating us. This may be where some of my contempt for organized religion stems from. Can someone really force you to go, and even further, to believe?

This bullying formed an abyss filled with raw hatred between us and them. After living in Gardnerville for little over a year, I resolved to keep my distance from my mother’s family. It was a bit ironic...to finally get to know my mother’s side, the Soylands, and recognize the undeniable similarities they shared with my father’s side of the family. My grandparents on both sides had always been a little ashamed of their fat grandchildren.

My extended family never was close, and, as time streaked by, my immediate family also grew distant. My sisters moved away and got married, starting their own lives. I moved to Reno, along with my brother Trent, for school. Two of my brothers moved back to the San Fernando Valley area. My mom stayed in Gardnerville with my two youngest brothers. This is the normal progression of a family: sooner or later each member has to leave and find his/her own way in this world.

*From the moment I could talk,
I was ordered to listen.
Now there’s a way, and I know*

That I have to go away

My marriage is not perfect. I met Jenna when she was eighteen and I was twenty, far too young to even think of marriage, but she was my first real love. We met by chance at a house party in Carson City, and, right away, we connected. I lived in Carson City, and she lived with her grandparents in Dayton. It was a thirty minute drive each way to see her. We were young and stupid and careless and perfect. I hoped that we would end up together, but my logic (I knew it was unlikely) would always get the best of me, and we argued quite a bit. Six months later we had a nasty fall out after she'd moved back to Kentucky, and we didn't speak at all for almost three years. She lived with her ex-boyfriend, and I dated a few girls. Absence makes the heart grow fungus.

She moved back to the area when she was twenty-two, and we began dating again. Both of us had matured so much that it was like two completely different people meeting for the first time. Soon, we had rekindled our past feelings and began to seriously talk about marriage, and, a little later, we did just that. We were too poor for a honeymoon, but I was able to secure a quaint apartment for us the day before the wedding. We still lived there when Kadence was born.

*All the times that I've cried
keeping all the things I knew inside.
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it.*

When I walk through the door I call out, and the stampede begins. Kadence wraps her arms around me first because she is older and a little faster than Carson, but he catches up soon enough.

“I missed you, Daddy,” she says.

“I missed you, too. How was school today?”

“Daddeeee,” Carson clings to my left leg until I pick him up.

“I learned the letter L. Do you know what starts with letter L?”

“Lettuce?”

“Yeah. And leopard, lion, lake, lemon—“

“Ketchup?”

“No, not ketchup. Don’t be silly, Daddy. Ketchup starts with K.”

I kneel down and kiss her. “You’re so smart.” I scoop her up as I stand, looking back and forth at the children in my arms, and I know for certain that I am loved. Carson, my two year old son, is a miniature version of me. He’s all boy, rough and tumble, but he can also be very sweet and soft. Kadence is my songbird. An accomplished artist at the age of five, she loves to sing, draw, and paint whenever she can. Both are very sensitive, another of my traits, and their feelings are hurt easily.

Jenna comes down the hall to greet me as I set the children back on the ground, and we embrace, our daily ritual to reconnect. We rarely get time alone with each other when the kids are awake so we steal little moments when we can. The past sometimes creeps into the present, and I do have trouble expressing my feelings for her. I never had a functional model to emulate, and I’ve been bottled up for so long that I really have to make great efforts to outwardly show my emotions. Jenna becomes jealous of the way I can love our children so easily, and all she wants is for me to be that open with her. I am trying.

Our tribe is four: my wife, my daughter, my son, and me. This feeling of one common existence, a shared experience, provides a sense of family that I value more than

anything else in my life. I have the opportunity to provide a safe and happy home for my children. My greatest fear is the breaking of this bond, an unforeseen transformation that would lead to the similar, hurt filled relationship my parents suffered, and the unraveling of my family.

I want to be a part of everything that happens in their lives, and I never want them to have to experience the deep scars that divorce carves into a person's soul. I want to provide the stability I never knew as a child.

Father and son. Mother and daughter. Father and daughter. Mother and son. Husband and wife. My family is my support, they are my reason, my very breath.

And as the children return to the games they'd been playing, and my wife enters the kitchen to check on dinner, I look at the photos cascading from all directions on the wall. It's a suburban cliché, but it's also my life's finest moments frozen in time: my brothers and sisters surrounding me in my cap and gown at my high school graduation; a guitar strapped across my body as I play and sing to a small crowd; Jenna and I joining newly-ringed hands as we lock eyes on our wedding day; my parents arranged in a similar pose the day they were married; Kadence nestled against me as a one-year-old, two tiny pigtails sticking out from her head, at my college graduation; Kadence and Carson, in two mirrored photos, resting across my arms as infants; the sun glaring over my shoulder as my wife and I sit together in a grassy field, holding our children, on the fourth of July. These frames move me forward and take me back. In reality they are tiny still, but they serve as gateways into my history. If you knew the background that each provided, you might see them move.