

HALFBACK ON ACID:  
A COMING OF AGE MEMOIR

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I dedicate this to my father, Butch. Thank you for never  
losing your belief in me.

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## **Introduction**

### **Fathers, Sons, and the Coming of Age Memoir: A Writer's Reflection**

It should come as no surprise that the relationship between fathers and sons plays such a significant role within the genre of memoir. Memoir offers writers the opportunity to look back and examine critical moments in their personal development. What influenced them at a young age? What steps did they take at important moments in their lives that helped guide them down the path that they have taken? For many young men, these questions are inseparable from the relationships they had with their father while growing up. To what extent was their father there for them? Was he a good or bad role model? How did the relationship change as the son grew older? Did he feel the need to rebel against his father during the critical teenage years? If so, what form did this rebellion take, and what were the long term consequences? Looking back, what were the key moments in the son's coming of age, and what part did the father play in these moments?

Along with these thematic questions, writers of coming of age memoirs, particularly those focused on father-son relationships, must confront a series of technical questions in their work. How are they to focus and organize the material? What voice and point of view should they use – one that highlights the way they saw things as a child, or a more sophisticated, retrospective point of view? How do they dramatize the passage of time? These are questions that I have pondered often both in my reading of contemporary memoirs, and in my own attempts to write in the genre.

Geoffrey Wolff's *Duke of Deception: Memories of My Father* (1979) is a good example of a contemporary coming of age memoir in which the theme of fathers and sons plays a major role. Wolff begins his memoir by letting the reader know that his father was, in Wolff's words, "a bullshit artist" (Wolff 7). Of course, in hindsight Wolff understands that his father was a liar, but as a child he had no idea. Duke, as his father was known, took advantage of any store that would offer him credit, and anyone who would loan him a buck. Wolff goes with his father at the age of twelve once the parents divorce, his brother with their mother, and Duke was not only his role model, but his hero as well. He did not immediately go with him, though, only after he began seeing his mother with other men. He made the decision and she did not argue. Wolff didn't know at the time that his father had not accomplished all of the great things that he claimed to have, or gone to the great schools that he boasted of attending, and young Wolff believed Duke to be the greatest man in the world. The older he gets though, the more the picture begins to come into focus that his father was a liar. "By now I knew my dad was a phony," he writes. "I wasn't dead sure about Yale, but I was sure he was a phony" (Wolff 175).

This is the time period that I am presenting in my first two chapters, "Learning to Pay the Price" and "Something Missing." The first chapter is about a single football season when I was 8 years old. I was that little boy who idolized his father. I wanted him all to myself. He had been my older brother's coach all through junior football and I counted the days until it was my turn. I focus on the events of that season, and the bond that was forged between the two of us at that time. I only got him for that one season, and the hurt and anger from that carried long lasting effects. Events that happened at his

job over the following year required a great deal of his time and attention and prevented him from being able to coach my team the following seasons. In my mind at the time, I believed that it was because I had let him down as a player. It was important for me to remember, and even re-feel, the exact way it impacted me.

Next comes the time when that little boy starts growing up and starts questioning the father, finding faults with the things he does. My second chapter deals with the awakening to the reality that it seemed, to me, that I had gotten the shaft so to speak. My father, who I had so admired, had found, I felt, other things more important than me. A key moment in this essay occurs at the final awards banquet of my junior football career in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This is the one night where the coaches gush all over their star players. You got to hear your coach talk about the great things you did that season, a verbal highlight reel. The awards banquet was usually attended by the junior high school football coach. My team's introductions finally began. My palms were sweaty as I waited for my name to be called and for my moment in the sun. Before my name was called, my coach called an audible, and he called my father to the microphone to do the honors. I was thrilled.

My father was not. He could not stand the fathers, usually the same ones year after year, who would stand and go on and on about their own sons at the banquet. I sat there grinning from ear to ear, my disillusionment had already been stirring, and this was the moment when I would finally hear how proud of me he was. Instead he spoke about every other kid on the team except me. As he stepped away from the microphone he looked right at me. What he saw was his boy gritting his teeth, batting his eyes and anything else he could do to hold back his tears, crushed. He had not done it on purpose, but try explaining that to a kid. In many ways this was a glance at things to come



between us. It was the beginning of our failed attempts to communicate with one another, and when my seeds of doubt began to sprout.

The older Wolff gets, the more he begins to follow directly in his father's footsteps, taking advantage of credit, lying when convenient to get what he wants, and becoming more and more like him as he begins to like him less and less.

Once Wolff hits a certain point in his own life, he begins examining the direction his life is taking. He has seen what has happened to his father, the man he is and always was, and he makes changes in his own life as a result. He repays his debts, and refuses credit from then on. This was the moment of realization in his coming of age narrative. The entire memoir is twenty two chapters, and the real coming of age moment doesn't strike until chapter twenty. This is not uncommon in the coming of age memoir. It is not so much about the destination, but the side-tracks that occur along the way. Up to that point Wolff had been reflecting on the decisions he had made, the reasoning behind the choices he had made, and critiquing the kind of person he, as well as his father, was. Everything up to that point was in relation to his father's position, or what his father thought of him. Once his realization began, he then became his own man and the memoir becomes his story and his alone. What is important, though, is not what he himself became, but rather the path that he took to get there, the journey. We are aware from the opening pages that he did not turn out like his father, yet his formative years are fascinating and the reader follows the story with interest to discover how he gets to the place where he ends up. It is a coming of age memoir that captures everything from even before day one of his life. Once he comes of age and makes the transition, the story closes.

Blake Morrison offers another example of a coming of age memoir with a strong father-son component with, *And when did you last see your father?* (1995) He begins his memoir, just like Wolff, as a grown man. He is sitting with his father who is dying. The relationship between the two is nothing like that of Wolff and Duke, but he chose to frame his story of coming of age in terms of the events in his life and what was happening between him and his father during those times.

His earliest childhood recollections begin with his memories of getting his tonsils taken out. He interweaves the chapters so that they alternate between recalling the past, and then in the next he will be back in real time following the events of his father's final days. In the chapters that he dives into the past, he calibrates his voice and thoughts to his age at the time of the memory. With each look back, he brings to his voice the clarity of his memories and the manner in which he, at whatever age he would have been at the time of the episode, would have thought, spoken and reacted.

A good example of this calibration occurs in a scene from Morrison's early adolescence, just about the time when he is beginning to notice girls. Beaty, known in the family as Auntie Beaty, was a *very* close family friend. His father, Auntie Beaty, her daughter, the author, and his sister all go for a ride and stop the car on the edge of a field. The kids are let loose to play in the pasture, the two adults remain behind. This is the first time Morrison gets the sense that his father is having an affair.

I look up the field to where the car is parked, but the windscreen is lit and flaring and I can't see behind it. It's as if all the power of the sun were in the glass containing dad and Auntie Beaty, and no one else can look in without being blinded. I put my hand – flat as if saluting – over my eyes, and look again. I think I can see two heads there,

close together, safe inside the blaze. I wait for the car doors to open, and I hear my father's voice again: "Everything will be fine. Where's the harm?" (Morrison 60)

In this memoir, it seems, every major event in his life is somehow affected or witnessed by his father. He recalls the Cuban missile crisis, watching the events unfold from inside of a pub during a failed camping trip (Morrison 69). In this scene, the adolescent Morrison begins to take note of the traits that he likes about his father, and more importantly, the traits he dislikes about him. This scene is a transition point where Morrison is beginning to step into phase two of his coming of age when he begins to see the faults of his father for the first time.

A moving scene occurs in a chapter devoted to his father's final hours. In this scene he is going through his father's desk, looking at the mementoes his father held onto for all of these years. As he gazes at each item, movie ticket stubs, a diary from a family trip abroad, a ticket to the stockcar races they attended on Morrison's birthday, a receipt from a hotel, etc., Morrison interjects his own memories of the events.

Four torn off cinema stubs (it must have been *South Pacific*, the only film we saw together as a family, my mother's idea, but my father in his cock-eyed element: "A hundred and one pounds of fun/ That's my little honey-bun.") A ticket to the stockcar races, Bellevue Stadium, Manchester 8, October 1963 (my birthday, one of his magical mystery treats). A receipt for the Regent Palace Hotel, 29 July – 1 August 1966 (The World Cup final: we were standing down by the Russian linesman when he gave *that goal*, and left thinking the final score was 3 – 2 because the Germans didn't kick off again, joined the celebrations afterwards and heard the horns hooting all night in Piccadilly Circus). (86)

Throughout his memoir it becomes apparent that every great, and at times not so great, moment in Morrison's development is not just witnessed by his father, but tied to his father as well. For instance, when he goes off to college, a strong sense of competition is exposed between the two of them. As he recounts some of the more competitive moments between them, or is reminded of them while lying awake due to his father's snoring on a family vacation, he begins to hint at resentment of his father. He learns to water-ski, so does his dad; he and his pals decide to go for a midnight swim in the lake, his father is the first in the water; Morrison decides to leave for Canada to finish his MA after graduating, his father opines that he just might buy a camper and tour Canada as well.

The whole point of Canada was to get away from him. "It isn't just a matter of not letting go, but of needing to prove himself better," Morrison laments. "When is the old bugger going to admit that he's old? Why does he make me feel, and behave like, the old one...Next thing my father will be telling me he has given up medicine and applied to read English at Nottingham" (134).

Just as the relationship between my father and I was different from that of Geoffrey and Duke, it is different from that of Morrison and his father. At the same time, there are still the familiarities. My father was never a con artist like Duke, nor was he ever as smothering as Morrison's. Rather, mine was a man working his hardest to move ahead in life, and our relationship just happened to be one of the sacrifices that he was willing to make in order to get there. As a son, just like Wolff and Morrison, I was interested in making my own mark on the world in my own way, and by the time my

father got around to wanting to be a part of what I was trying to do, I had begun to feel that it was too late.

As disillusionment begins to grow and young boys start to become teenagers they enter the phase where they want nothing to do with him. This is the coming of age period in so many ways. In my third and fourth chapters, “Drift Away” and “No Compromises” I confront this material. This is the period in a guy’s life from the early teens until the son can come to grips with the world and understand the way things are. Each of us deals with this time in his own way, and these chapters explore the crisis that was mine. It is a reflection on the struggles between my father and me. At times they were physical, at others vocal, and most of the time through my teens, quite brutal.

Richard Hoffman examines the roles of fathers and sons in his memoir, *Half the House* (1995). Hoffman finds a delicate balance between his persona, and his development in relation to his father. Throughout his book there is the mixed approach of presenting the events as he experienced them at a young age and as he witnessed his father experience them, combined with an attempt to understand their meaning as he looks back at them. Hoffman separates himself from Wolff and Morrison in that in retrospect he is only beginning to understand his father for the first time. His is a unique story that is quite tragic.

His mother carried a gene that led to his two younger brothers being born with and succumbing to the disease of muscular dystrophy. The youngest, Mike, never learns to walk and dies very young, and the other, Bob, with whom Hoffman was very close, begins getting sick in elementary school and the progression of his illness is much slower and painful until he dies in his late teens. At one point we see Hoffman recalls himself at

the age of ten or eleven years old, and the way his father dealt with the situation the family found itself in.

My father had always been given to sudden rages, even when we were little. Some days he came home from work already angry about something, and we were careful not to provoke him. Some days that was impossible, and he would pull his belt from his trousers, double it, and come after us. "I'll teach you!" he'd shout.

Now I had become the target of his rage. He would chase me, and I would try to keep some piece of furniture between us: the kitchen table, or the sofa, or Bob in his wheelchair. Sometimes he would corner me and, as he kicked at me, huddles on the floor, he'd shout, "Get up! Get up off the god-damned floor!"

It must have seemed to him that life was sneering at his every plan. It wasn't me he wanted to "get up off the god-damned floor." He must have been living in hell. (Hoffman 55)

Hoffman mixes the vivid clarity of his childhood memories with passages of reflection that suggest he still does not completely understand what happened and why. There is always a sense that even though time has passed from when the events took place, he is still unsure exactly how he feels, or felt, about them. As a grown man he returns to confront his father, and it is very clear that his father still didn't know how he felt about the events of the past.

It isn't until Hoffman is a man and there is a sense of peace and understanding between them that he sees himself as being free from all of the guilt and pain he associates with childhood and his development through his teenage years. I see this as the final phase, the phase of acceptance.

This phase usually occurs once the writer has started his own family, or become what he is in life, and realizes that the struggles and problems were not all his father's fault after all; he was only doing the best he could. Not to say that this final phase of

acceptance is true in all situations, but it was for me and my work. The chapter I have written for this period in my life, "Becoming a Union Man" deals with my following in my father's footsteps and joining the Local Pipefitter's Union. My experience in the union was not ideal, but the manner in which my father and I dealt with one another shows a great distance from the manner in which we clashed through my teenage years.

It is in Hoffman's portrayal of this final phase in the father-son relationship that I find myself relating to his work to the greatest extent. Some rough years occurred between my father and me as well, and it wasn't until I was older and more mature that I came to grips with all of the events that made our relationship so tough. That is not to say that I completely understand everything that ever happened. I acted out in my teens intentionally just to make him mad, and I wonder if he was doing the same. At times I wonder, especially now that I have kids of my own, if he ever hesitated for a minute to consider the impact his decisions might have on me when I was a little boy? I understand that he had certain expectations for himself in life, but how much was he willing to sacrifice in order to reach his goals? What price was he willing to pay? If he had a chance to go back, would he make the same choices? These questions I will never know the answers to, but will always stay with me on some level. As for myself, yes, I wish that I could go back and make better decisions. Not understanding the position that he was in was selfish on my part, especially as I matured into a teenager.

Above all else, I wanted to write a memoir about our relationship that I would feel 100% comfortable having him read. Certain moments that we discussed during my writing process he remembered differently, and at times, not at all. Some instances he recalled I had either forgotten about, or am still unable to remember as well. In any

event, though, it has been my attempt to recall the phases in my own coming of age that influenced who I was, who I became, and my relationship with my father.

The images that I recalled and put on the page were important images from my past. It is not by accident that many of the memories are about the pain that was endured along my coming of age journey. Patricia Hampl states it very clearly: “we store only images of value...and pain likes to be vivid. Over time the feeling and the image may become estranged” (Root, Jr. 311). It is through the writing of memoir that we can discover who it is we are by re-discovering how it is we became. It is the moments of the most significance that stand out the clearest, and many times it is the painful memories that are easiest to recall.

In recalling them, the feelings and images are no longer disconnected. In the discovering of self that is so crucial to the coming of age memoir it is a matter of total recollection of these feelings that bring about the meaning, or as Robert Root, Jr. genuinely puts it, “I simply need to go as deeply into wilderness as it takes before the wilderness comes into me” (Root, Jr. 194).

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

That is a question asked of us at some point in our lives. My answer to that question has changed over the years from a football player when I was eight, a rock star at sixteen, a bar owner at twenty one, and a professor at some point in my early twenties as an undergraduate student. Graduate school was the necessary training for my goal, and I entered with that goal in mind. Just as my undergraduate career had taken me in new and inspiring directions, so did graduate school.



I enrolled in W507, Writing Creative Nonfiction, for the spring semester of 2007. I had never studied this genre, and I soon realized that I wanted to be a writer of memoir and creative nonfiction. As the semester began, and I began to understand the genre, I quickly found myself writing with a passion and purpose that I had never felt. It was as if a door in my mind had swung open and let out a flood of material for me to explore. I made attempts at personal narrative, reportage, and other forms in the genre. At times I was successful, and at other times I just couldn't get the piece to work. No matter the outcome, I enjoyed the process each and every time.

As I began wading into the water of creative nonfiction, I encountered more stops and starts than at any other time in any writing that I had done up to that point. There would be a thread, a single scene, or one particular idea that I would run with and attempt to build either upon or around. Many times I would start strong, really tear out of the gate, and write down the page furiously. Then I would stall right around 1,500 words or so.

With each attempt, though, I saw my writing begin to come more and more into focus as I was finding my own voice for the material I was trying to get onto the page. If the memoir begins when the writer is eight and progresses through childhood and into adolescence, the voice from age eight and the voice at age twelve should not be the same. The narrator's voice is very important for the memoir to work, this need for, "variously growing and sufficiently moving emotional progress" (Larson 99). The recreating of the younger self and voice is difficult. What it achieves, when done correctly, is a deeper sense of "structure and imposed order...texture" (Gornick 4) that only the authentic voice can capture.

In my reading, too, I was drawn to memoir above all else. Some writers and works I felt immediately drawn to, for example Wright Morris and his essay, “Will’s Boy.” Others I wasn’t sure I would be interested in at first, such as Maureen Howard’s “Facts of Life.” But by reading these and other memoirs, I gained an understanding and appreciation of the genre. What I found fascinating was that memoir writing begged the question “what’s your story?” and then offered endless opportunities for the writer to tell it. As I read essay after essay I began to further understand that it wasn’t so much the story that was being told, but rather the honesty and voice in which it was presented.

It was while enrolled in W507 that I began finding the answer to the question of my own story. I began sifting through all of the material that had been released into my mind, focusing on what it was about my own story that someone else might relate to, or want to read about. My own voice and style began to slowly emerge as I focused on many aspects of my own childhood, upbringing, and struggle with my own coming of age. This in turn led me to classic examples of coming of age memoirs such as *Growing Up* by Russell Baker and “Sex and Death to the age 14” by Spalding Gray. Gray’s writing really jumped from the page and grabbed me. His essay moved so smoothly, and there was a sense of style to his language and voice that worked so well. The way he embodied his character at the different stages of development, the at times almost brutal honesty that he put on display was inspiring. I realized that he was putting it all out there for anyone to see, and had he held back the entire memoir would have suffered. Gray helped me to understand that in order to succeed in my own memoir, I must be willing to be brutally honest with myself and the reader.

I began to notice a pattern in my own writing. It seemed that each essay that I wrote that dealt with the issues and struggles that I was confronted was in direct correlation with the relationship between me and my father. The relationship between us played a huge role in many of my essays. What was happening between the two of us seemed to come to the foreground of every essay that I wrote and acted as a catalyst. It was about finding the right voice, the correct balance, between narrator who is reflecting and being true to the boy who I was at the time.

In the moments when I felt that a particular essay was really moving along, it was as if the events were happening all over again, unfolding in front of me. The persona of my character, who was me after all, seemed so true and real. I had moments when I would have to stop writing. They were moments when I found myself completely overcome with emotion as I recalled in such detail certain events that I had not examined for many, many years.

Most importantly though, was that I was able to harness that emotion and bring it to, and from, my character. I was learning the importance of framing a scene in a particular way in order to present the emotion and conflict in the most powerful approach. I was starting to understand and see the areas that were working against the grain and weighing the essay down in a way that was counter productive and subtracted from the essay as a whole. It became very clear to me that in order for the emotion that I felt in remembering the events to come across on the page that the reader must first and foremost care about the character and the character's persona. Just as Spalding Gray did, I had to be willing to fully expose myself.

I attempted more essays that embodied the innocence of childhood, and the slow recognition of how my views of all that was happening around me gradually began to change. Again, much of what I recognized as changing, either in a good or bad way, was entirely influenced by what was happening between me and my father at particular moments as I was growing up. I struggled to find the correct voice for capturing the varying time periods. At times I wanted to be the reflective narrator looking back and trying to determine how I feel now about what happened then. At other times, I wanted to present the material as purely and truthfully as possible through the young boy's eyes as I felt at the time.

As I continued to write more essays and read more memoirs, I began to notice a common pattern. This pattern focused on the relationships between the fathers and sons I was reading about, and the father and son I was writing about. It occurred to me that the phases in my relationship with my father, and my own coming of age, were not unique to the two of us.

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## Chapter One

### Learning to Pay the Price

You've got to pay the price.

Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all-the time thing. You don't win once in a while, you don't do things right once in a while, you do them right all the time.

Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing...I firmly believe that any man's finest hour-his greatest fulfillment to all he holds dear-is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle-victorious.

-Vince Lombardi

When a new baby boy arrives in this world, sometimes his father will hold him up, look him in the eyes, and say, *he will be a doctor*. Other fathers might look in those eyes and say this one is going to be a lawyer or even the center fielder for the Chicago Cubs. When I entered this world, my father looked at me and said *here is my running back*. From that moment it began. From my very first day in this world, my father had a plan for me.

I grew up with a football in my hands. My brother was five years older than me, and my father was my older brother's junior league coach. I never missed a practice or a game. My brother, Bubba, was very big, a lineman, and very passive. My father coached him and guided him, just like every other boy on the team, but my brother was just not a fighter. He was never pushed to be a fighter, to get mad or anything else. My father focused on his other gifts and talents, and how to utilize those instead.

I, on the other hand, was just a little smaller than most kids, or at least very average-sized. I was quick, and possessed a fearless nature. More than that though, there was just something a little different about me: I was mean. I was the kid always coming

home with a bloody nose, ripped clothes and a reason why the other kid deserved to get punched in the mouth. I was drawn to football like a fish to water.

Before I was old enough to play junior league, I was already practicing. My dad and I would spend hours in the yard. He was a tall, thin man with six-pack abs and a runner's athletic build, muscular but not bulky. His hair was thick and brown, and he always wore a mustache. I would run pass pattern after pass pattern, working on my ability to catch the ball. I would take handoff after handoff from him, perfecting the technique of receiving the ball from the quarterback. He put me through drills; bear crawls, two point shuffles, wind sprints, and form running to name a few. By the time I was in second grade, a year before I was allowed to play in the league, I was practicing with my brother's team in full pads. I would go through the whole practice with them. From the form tackling and form blocking, to the hamburger drills. I was allowed to tackle, and to be tackled. He wouldn't put me up against somebody who was going to hurt me or anything, but he still let me get in there if I wanted to.

Some parents must have thought my dad was crazy for letting his seven-year-old little boy get hit by sixth graders, but he knew that I could handle it. He was getting me ready. Even at times when I would find myself a little bit scared, facing a kid bigger than me, I would just look at him. He would look directly into my eyes and nod his head. That was all I needed. The fear would disappear, and I would throw my body whichever direction it needed to go in order to stop the ball carrier or avoid being tackled.

My dad was tall, strong, tough, and I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. He had paid his dues on the football field growing up, on the basketball court, baseball diamond, and dojo mat as well. I knew that he could beat the crap out of any other kid's



dad I had ever known. Every other kid I knew looked up to him as well; they were drawn to him. Everyone in town knew him. He ran six miles through town every night, three miles to the water tower, and then three miles back. Once he got back, he did push-ups and sit-ups before doing chin-ups on one of the branches from our tree in the back yard.

After that, we would throw the football and do drills. All the kids knew him and they all wanted him to be their coach because every team he got a hold of, no matter how bad they were the year before, he quickly turned into a winning team. He showed boys how to play the game, the fundamentals of every position on the field, and most importantly what it felt like to win. He taught me these things right along with the other boys, but then at home he would teach me more. Not only about football, but lessons he had learned from the martial arts. We had a little saying we used, one that we still joke around about even today. *No mercy sake, so hard time give.* Soon I was old enough to play for real.

I thought the day would never come. I waited and waited for that Saturday in early August when it was finally my turn to sign up. I was up with the sun, unable to contain myself. My dad and I went to breakfast at the Waffle House, and I counted the minutes until it was time to go to the fields. Finally the time came, and finally, my dad was going to be *my* coach, not my brothers, mine. After signing up, I picked out my helmet, my shoulder-pads, got a pair of brand-spanking-new white football pants along with the pads for my thighs and knees. I was no longer stuck with my little red shoulder-pads that were my dad's when he was a kid. I no longer was stuck wearing my second-hand helmet that was painted yellow and had once belonged to my mom's best friend's son. The second I was back home I ran upstairs and suited up. We stood in the kitchen

and boiled my new mouthpiece, and then molded it to my big teeth. I attached it to my facemask. There were still two weeks until practice started.

For those two weeks, our drills took on more intensity. I was working harder than ever. My football didn't leave my hands. He would sit with me and tell me stories. He explained what it meant to "pay the price." To "pay the price" became something special between the two of us. Before long I discovered what it truly meant.

Those two weeks passed, and our first practice began. We were the "Patriots" of the minor league. The minors consisted of third and fourth graders, and the majors were made up of fifth and sixth graders. The previous year the Patriots had won the championship, but unfortunately for us, most of the team had moved on to the majors. We were a team composed mainly of third graders. We had a few big boys, Todd Plough was one, and one of the few left behind from last year. We had a little speed, Jason Eheret, though he was a fourth grader, it was his first year to play. For the most part we were a bunch of rookies.

My dad began easing players into their positions, and slowly began the process of teaching everyone the fundamentals of the magical game that is *football*. He put the team through different drills to find out who could hit, run, catch, and block. He wanted to understand where each player needed to improve, and where they belonged on the field. Before the first practice came to an end we all gathered around him. He told us how proud he was of each and every one of us for coming out onto the field. He explained to us how by the end of the season we would be more than friends, more than just teammates, and more like brothers.

He stood before us as we all took a knee and looked up at him with the sun getting low in the mid August sky.

“Boys,” he spoke in a soft tone, “you will remember moments from this season for the rest of your lives. What do you want these memories to be? Always remember, winning is not a sometime thing; it’s an all-the-time thing. Not just on the field, but off of the field as well. Football is a great game, and it is a privilege for all of us to be out here. Keep in mind that it is a privilege. School comes first, and I will expect to see each one of your report cards this season. Your grades must not suffer, or the privilege will be taken away. Football players are smart, they have to be smart, and they are gentlemen. Any trouble at school will be dealt with here as well. We are gentleman who set an example, and as of tonight you represent the Patriots of the Brownsburg Junior Football League. The scoreboard does not tell us if we are winners or losers, it is our attitudes. We will win as a team, with pride and be humble. If we lose, we will lose with pride and be humble, as a team, like gentlemen. Now let’s bring it in.”

We all huddled real close, hand over hand. “On three, Patriots, one, two, three,” and we yelled at the top of our voices, “PATRIOTS!”

Before dismissing us, he gave every player a playbook. We each received a green folder. Inside of that folder the pages were secured in the binder clips, and on them was every play, every block, every defensive formation, and special team formation that we were going to be responsible for knowing before our first game. We had two weeks to learn it all. This only gave us three more practices, only allowed two per week. I still have that playbook.

After this, all the kids scattered and ran to waiting parents to head home. A few parents stuck around to talk with my dad, and I was in charge of getting our stuff together. I gathered the orange cones that we used for drills, and lugged the tackling dummies to the car. I talked with the other kids, some I was meeting for the first time.

As they went home, my dad and I went over to the high school and watched the Varsity practice. This Varsity team would go undefeated that season, all the way through the state championship. I knew each player by name, face and number. My dad would point out little things that the running backs were doing. How they carried the ball, sidesteps they took and what they were doing wrong. I was his halfback, and I was willing to run through walls in order to make him proud, fight to prove my worth and do whatever it took to show him how tough I was.

In the days before the first game he inspired me with the speeches of Vince Lombardi. We sat together and watched The Rocky Bliar Story, and of course, Brian's Song, the tragic story of the Chicago Bear's fullback Brian Piccolo. On the drive to the fields before our first game, we were both quiet. I asked him how long I had to hold onto the ball after scoring a touchdown before I spiked it. He laughed and told me to just hold onto it. He and I had prepared for this game together for many years. As a team we had grown in the two weeks leading up to that game. We practiced hard; every player learned their responsibilities and we were firing on all cylinders.

We were the early game that Saturday. There was an eight, ten and twelve o'clock game every week. The eight o'clock game was our favorite. The dew was still wet on the field as we got out of the car. I could see the sun reflected off of the grass, and felt the slight chill from the early fall air. Once the team was there we took a lap from

goalpost to goalpost to get our blood going before we started getting warmed up for the game. We started with stretching, which eventually led to sitting down in the dew. That dew was a cold welcome into my first season.

My stomach was in knots in the final moments before the opening kickoff. He knew what I was feeling as I looked over to him. We locked eyes and he gave me a nod. That was all it took and I was ready to go. As the ball was kicked into play all fear was washed away. I still remember taking that first handoff, seeing the hole open up in front of me. I took a quick cut to the outside, the entire field opened up in front of me. Once the field opened up there was no stopping. Nothing would keep me from that goal line. At times I didn't think I was going to make it. That was what "paying the price" meant, getting it done when I didn't think I could. At times, I would push too hard.

I would make it back to the huddle, and even back to position before the snap. In the seconds before the ball was snapped, I would fall forward, passed out. I wanted to score those touchdowns so badly that I would run myself to the point that my little lungs couldn't take it. It was worth it for the high five and pat on the head he would give me when I got back up. That, along with the little look we would share in the huddle after I just smoked the linebacker and rolled over the safety. I would be forced to sit out for a play, but then I would run right back out for the kickoff.

As the season progressed, one play became the symbol of the relationship between my dad and me. The play: Power Right 17 dive. Not some fancy play, no, nothing like that at all. It was right up the middle. Each time he called it in the huddle he would look me right in the eye, not a glare, just eye-to-eye. Although we ran it often during the game, it was always called in clutch situations. I knew we needed to get three

yards or so, and that he knew that if I really wanted them I could get them no matter who, or what, stood in my way. I would push and fight for every single inch. Sometimes I made it, sometimes I failed, but I always gave it everything that I had. I got to a point where I refused to fall down anymore. My little eight-year-old body got punished. I refused to let him down, and if the other team was going to bring me down they were going to have to fight for it. My little body was paying the price. The bruises over my kidneys got darker and darker as facemask after facemask pounded into them. I was instructed by our family doctor to watch for blood in my urine, and to let someone know if it started happening. We found some pads to guard my kidneys, and the season kept on moving.

During the regular season we lost three games. Once to the Chargers, in a game we should have won, and twice to the Rams, who were the best team in the league. Nobody ever scored a point against them, and they beat their opponents badly week in and week out. They beat us 21-0 the first time we met, and 13-0 the second time. As the regular season came to a close, we had the best record in our division, and the Rams had the best in theirs. We would meet them in the championship, under the lights on a Saturday night, on the same field where the varsity team played every Friday home game.

On the day of the game I woke up to driving rain, thunder and lightning. I sat with my dad watching weather reports, and hoping with all of my soul that it would clear up. The Cubs game was on rain delay, and we sat and watched The Three Stooges. About an hour before the game it stopped raining and the skies cleared. The game was on. My dad and I didn't talk much as we prepared for the game, both mentally preparing in our own way. We met up with the other players and made our way to the field in a

parade of decorated cars honking their horns the whole way. I wanted none of it, neither did my dad. We just wanted the game to start.

Everything about the championship was different from any other game. It was on a Saturday night, not morning. The wait was almost unbearable. They introduced every player from each team as they ran one-by-one out to the middle of the field. It all seemed to take forever. The air was filled with humidity and the smell of the wet field under our cleats. There was a small eruption of air-horns and cowbells as each name was announced. Finally, it was time for kickoff. I was once again ready to puke. I looked over at my dad moments before the ball was kicked into play, and he in turn looked at and gave me the nod. I was ready for battle.

The field was slippery, and before long we were all wet and muddy. The ball was hard to hold onto. It was in this game, more than ever, that I unleashed what was referred to as, “the secret weapon.” The secret weapon was a kind of battle cry, but with more significance. What it is specifically is the noise that martial artists make at the moment of contact, the kiai, the supreme effort. It was a tool my dad would introduce to a team when the odds were stacked against them. He would tell us to let out a yell as we fired off the ball in a tight situation. Later he would explain what it was all about. As the ball was snapped, I would let loose with the secret weapon, a growl, a roar or whatever it was. As I would cross the line of scrimmage with the ball in my hands, I was screaming and yelling like a little animal. On defense, as soon as that ball snapped, I was screaming while I attacked. Attack is the best word for it; I was a boy possessed, and losing was not an option. I had to win this game, not only for me, but for my dad as well.

They were, without a doubt, the better team in the contest. What we had going for us though, like my dad had told us the very first practice, is that we were ready to fight for each other like brothers. Our hearts had grown throughout the season, and we were showing it on the field. The way it stood, we were evenly matched. They were unable to break a big play, but either were we. The first quarter came to an end with no score for either team.

The second quarter was more of the same. We marched up the field, unable to break that one play. Suddenly, the 34 cross buck opened up. It was a hesitation play where I would counter step and let the fullback pass in front of me and fake a handoff. After my counter step, I would head toward the line of scrimmage at full steam as the quarterback spun around and placed the ball in my gut. If the defense bit on the fake, the hole opened up and I had running room. They were biting on the fake every time, but were fast enough to recover before I made it more than ten yards into the secondary. I just couldn't break the big play, but like I said, neither could they. The second half closed with no points on the board, and raindrops beginning to fall.

The whole team piled into my mom's great big ugly Dodge van to get out of the rain, and warm up a little. Though my dad gave us a halftime speech, he knew he could say nothing to get us to play any harder than we already were. Each kid on that team was playing with everything he had. There were no tears from little bruises, no horseplay in the van, and we were determined to win. We decided right then and there to win that game, no matter what it took. My dad stepped out of the van letting us work ourselves into frenzy, like a pack of wild dogs. We opened those doors and came out on fire. Before we walked onto the field my dad gathered us all around him.



He looked at each player, one at a time, right in the eye.

“Boys,” he was speaking in the same tone as the first practice, “win or lose, you all are champions. I am proud of each and every one of you. You have played your hearts out all season. Now let’s get out there and kick some butt!”

We ran out onto the field with raindrops bouncing off of our helmets. Tears were building in my eyes in the seconds leading up to the kickoff. Not out of pain or fear, but from pure excitement and adrenaline. I looked at my dad from across the field, and he once again matched my stare; we knew what we could do. We kicked off and the second half began. It didn’t take long for them to break a big play and Denny Kelly ran the ball down the sideline for a touchdown. We stopped the extra point, but were down 6 to 0.

Try as we might, we still just couldn’t break the big one. The third quarter began winding down with the rain falling harder. We were pounding the ball up the field, but plagued by turnovers from the wet ball. The rain began to fall even harder as the quarter ended, and anger was building inside of me. My dad was patient. He didn’t get mad at us, and he didn’t get down on us. Instead, he once again inspired us. His intensity was contagious as he called each play.

The fourth quarter began and the game was a tug of war. We would march, and then they would march. All they had to do was hold onto the lead. All we had to do was score a touchdown. Lightning began flashing in the background, and thunder began to roll. The clock hit the two-minute mark as we regained possession of the ball. It was now or never. We stood before him like soldiers. I wanted the ball, but strategy was to give it to someone else; they expected me to take the handoff. We marched slowly

toward the goal line. I got the ball a few times, but he spread it around, trying to keep them off guard.

As the clock fell below one-minute, hail began pounding down. It bounced off of the top of my helmet making it hard to hear. We should have received a weather time-out, but we didn't get one. Instead, the clock kept ticking, and we kept going. We took that ball down to inside of the ten-yard-line. He called my number in the huddle. I took that handoff and plunged up the middle of that field, making it to the five-yard-line. We got back in the huddle. The hail was coming down so hard that it was painful. The clock was inside of thirty seconds as we all gathered in really tight trying to hear the play. He called the "secret play." He had faith in me to get it done, to fight my way into that end zone.

We lined up and I glared ahead waiting for the snap. Nothing was going to keep me from winning this championship for him. As the center snapped the ball I took off toward my hole, and watched the ball fall to the ground. Our quarterback fell on it so we didn't lose possession, but we lost a down, and precious seconds off the clock. Back in the huddle we again stood in close with the hail banging down. This time he called a sweep, a quarterback sweep. This eliminated the possibility of a botched handoff, but I didn't get the ball. Instead, it was my job to clear the path for the quarterback to run it in. I could still win the game by scoring the extra point, and above all I could still do my part to bring the championship home for my dad.

Again the ball was snapped, and I headed toward the end to take out anyone in the path of the goal line. I ran ahead with the willingness to take out anyone in our way, to clear a hole for my brother to score. He followed me around, and just as we started

heading up field he once again dropped the ball. He fell on top of it, and we again saved possession. This left us with close to no time on the clock.

In that huddle he pulled us in real close. With his hand on the center's head he looked right at me. The hood of his green rain slicker was pulled up over his head. I knew what play he was going to call by the look in his eyes. I can still see him standing there looking at me, his eyes wide as he crouched down to our level so we could hear him. He called our play, and I knew that I could punch that ball in. I had to, winning was not a sometime thing. I had to.

We broke the huddle and I got into my stance. I looked up at the clock-- six seconds left. I saw the Rams' assistant coach jumping up and down in celebration on the sideline. My blood boiled. I exploded toward the line of scrimmage as the ball was snapped into play. I closed my arms over the ball as it was slid into my belly at full tilt on the five-yard line. I drove my facemask right into the chest of their linebacker as I stepped over the five. My feet were pumping, and I was growling, spitting, and doing everything I could to run right over him. He wrapped me up and slowed me down. I felt the line collapsing on me, still I kept driving.

I fought with every ounce of my heart and soul to reach that white line, but it wasn't enough. I fell forward to the three-yard-line as the final whistle blew. As I waited for the bodies to roll off of me I could see the hail and rain falling around. I heard their screams of triumph, and yells of victory all around me. I stood up and saw my dad standing there with his head held high and a funny smile on his face before he turned to walk off the field.

Of all of the seasons I played, none of them stand out to me like that particular season when I was eight years old. Little lessons learned from that season stayed with me through the years. I only had the chance to play for him that one season. That stayed with me as well.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Something Missing**

I had it all figured out when I was a kid. I was going to be a professional football player. Before that, though, my father was going to be my football coach and teach me everything that I needed to know about the game. As far as I was concerned, my dad was just about the greatest thing in the world, and there was nothing that he couldn't do. Every night after he came home from work and did his workout, but he always had time to toss the football in the yard. He would play quarterback and I would be receiver. He would call out the pattern and what it was on.

“All right, down and out on two. Down...Set...Hut...Hut!”

The count was very important. Jump off sides and I owed him a summersault, which could be embarrassing if anyone else was around. I sprinted the ten yards, cut outside hard and waited for the ball. We went through the list of patterns; down and across the middle, down and out, post, flag, inside chair, and outside chair. It was important to me to catch any ball within my reach. I did this for hours with him, and we would play until it was time for dinner.

I was eight years old when “The Mutiny” occurred. When it happened, I wasn't quite certain what it meant, but that was what my father called it when he and my mother spoke about it at the dinner table. It had something to do with his office. He wasn't part of it, and I knew that for sure because he said he wasn't. Before long I was called into the kitchen for a family talk, along with my older brother and older sister. He explained

to us that the company he had worked so hard to make into what it had become was changing hands.

“Now kids,” he began, leaning his back against the stove with his arms crossed, “I’m sure that you all have some idea that some things have happened at work.” He paused for a few seconds, and I can still see his eyes focus down on mine as all of our silence signaled agreement. “What has happened is that they have sold the company out from underneath me.” He again paused to gauge our understanding. “What this means is that they have offered me a much smaller territory in southern Indiana, Evansville, and we are in for a bit of a change.” In his business, territory is all you have. Outside of your territory belongs to another sales representative. The larger the territory, the more the commission, and he had a large territory. Evansville was very small.

My father had played a significant role in building the company from the ground up. He sold a specific line of industrial steam products called *Armstrong*. With this line he gained a contract and the loyalty of Eli Lilly. From then on the company grew right along with Armstrong. My father was the sole representative for the Armstrong name in Indianapolis and surrounding area, and when they sold the company, they assumed Armstrong was loyal to *them*. Later that same night, after our talk in the kitchen, my father received a phone call from Gus Armstrong, the owner of the line my father sold. Mr. Armstrong told my dad that they were loyal to him, and wherever he went they were going too.

With this my father was given an option he wasn’t sure he had. Armstrong was loyal to *him* and not *them*. It was the best thing that could have happened, and he could have taken that line alone and started his own company. The risk was too large, and

instead he offered his line to a company out of Chicago with no Indiana sales reps. Indiana would be all his, his alone, just like the Armstrong name. In some strange way, with that decision, my father was taken from me.

From that moment he started down a new path. He had to be out of town one full week out of every month, and about two nights of the other weeks. He just seemed to disappear all at once. He was still my hero, and I watched the clock counting the seconds until he would come home.

I always knew that he was going to be away for awhile when I watched him pack his bag the night before he left on a business trip. It wasn't the amount of clothes in the bag, but instead it was his running shoes. When I saw him take his *Adidas Oregon*s out of the closet and put them in his bag I knew that it was a long one.

The summer before I entered the fourth grade, and before my second year in the minor league before graduating majors for two more seasons, it had not occurred to me that my father would not be returning as my coach. He coached my older brother all four seasons before junior high school, and I took it for granted that he would do the same for me. As summer was moving along and he and I had the, now rare, chance to play catch, he broke the news.

“Jacob, I know that you haven't understood all that has happened this year,” he said, stopping the game as he spoke, “and I need you to understand that there is nothing more I would like than to take your team again this year.” I could tell by the look in his eyes that he meant it.

“What do you mean? You are the coach, and you have to take the team, right?” I didn't like the direction this was taking.

“Now, Jacob, you know that I am working a lot,” he said quietly, and spun the ball in his hands.

“Yeah, I know, but this is football.” It never occurred to me that anything could be more important than football to me or my dad.

“I know that it is football,” he threw me the ball, “but it wouldn’t be fair for me to take the team this year. It wouldn’t be fair to the team for me to miss practice all of the time, it wouldn’t be fair to you or the rest of the boys.” He stood there waiting for my reaction.

I just tossed him the ball, got in my stance and waited for the snap-count. I didn’t want him to see me cry about it. I ran the remaining patterns as hard as I could.

He took me to get signed up a few Saturdays later. I got my pads and helmet. I got on the scale to be weighed, over 80 pounds and you couldn’t run the ball. I was in the mid 70’s. The whole thing was still an event for me. I loved getting my gear, getting home and molding my mouth piece, putting my pads in my pants, and the rest of it. I would again be a Patriot. The year before we lost the championship, and I wanted to win it this year no matter what it took. I would not know my coach’s name until after tryouts and the draft of all of the third graders and the fourth graders who had not played the season before. My mom eventually told me that my new coach was Dale McLane. I had never heard of him. He took the team to coach his son, Jason, whom I had never heard of either.

It didn’t take long for us as players, or parents who came to watch practice, to realize that Dale McLane knew absolutely nothing about the game of football. Most of my teammates from the previous season had not returned to the team. Some moved up to



the majors, some moved away, and others just didn't want to play anymore. There were a lot of third graders, the coach's son being one of them.

Coach McLane was a short, chubby man who was missing some of his front teeth. He wanted his son to play quarterback. Jason had no idea how to play quarterback. Jason would get the ball and hold it straight out for someone, anyone, to come take it. The sooner he could get rid of it the better because he was scared to death of getting hit. My dad made the first few practices and tried to help when he could, but he also knew that it was no longer his team. As the first game approached I was desperate for him to take over.

"Please Dad, can't you do something?" I begged him in the car on the ride home after our final practice before our first game.

"I wish I could, but we have to let coach lead his team." His voice told the story though, and I knew that it was killing him to watch.

Our first game was nothing short of pathetic. Jason McLane cried every down for the first quarter and I was moved to quarterback and Jason placed in the backfield with Wallace. There weren't any plays to call. Coach McLane would just tell me to keep it, or to hand it off to Wallace. Our line had no idea how to block, and our defense had no clue how to tackle. We got crushed. I couldn't tell you the score of that first game, except for ours, zero, because we only scored one touchdown that season and it wasn't until near the end. We had more than one chance to score, but every time Wallace or I marched us down near the goal line Coach McLane placed his boy in the backfield for the score. I would have to hand him the ball, and he would simply stand still, afraid to move, until he would finally get knocked down.

When he was around, my father would try and keep my head up. He would remind me that it is still football no matter what the scoreboard said, but he knew how bad it felt not only to lose, but to be the worst on top of that. Once the season finally ended we were at the far end table for the awards banquet. That meant last place. I set my sights on the majors, tried putting the season behind me, and hoped with all of my heart and soul that things would change and my dad would be able to be my coach again.

As the new season approached I knew that nothing had changed. I knew that I would have to tryout this season for the majors so the new coaches could have a look at what I could offer. My dad drove me to the fields for tryouts, but before I geared up and hit the field he pulled me aside.

“This will sound funny, but I want you to hold back out there,” he said.

“What?” I looked at him like he was nuts. This was tryouts, and I had to prove myself to the coaches.

“Look, Larry Rose wants you on his team.” Larry Rose had taken many teams to the championship, and was respected in the league like my father once was. His oldest son, Jeff, was the varsity quarterback, and his youngest, Brian, was the best quarterback in our league. The previous season they had won the championship, which meant they were the last team to pick in the draft. “I already talked to him. I want you on his team, so don’t show anyone else what you’ve got; just hold back a little.”

My dad and Mr. Rose had been friends for years; his oldest son and my older brother had played together and against each other since their days in junior league.

“Okay.” That was all I could manage. I was always taught to go 100% effort 100% of the time, but if he told me to do this, it must have been okay this time. I hit the

field and half-assed just about everything until I got to Coach Rose's station. I went all out. I ran as hard as I could, hit the tackling dummies with a grunt, and took hand-offs with textbook precision. The plan worked, and I was on Coach Rose's *Colts*. My dad understood how much I hated being on a losing team the previous year, but had failed to account for the fact that Coach Rose had gotten almost every player back from the previous season. On the night of the first practice, the reality of the situation set in to me.

My dad was out of town for that first practice, and wasn't there to see that Coach Rose didn't really have a position for me. Coach Rose was a very nice man, and very tan. He knew the game well, and he had all of our respect. He had the same backfield that won him a championship last season. He placed me at tight end. I couldn't believe it. All I ever wanted to do was carry the ball, and everyone around me knew it. I only knew to do what coach said, so I played where he put me.

I began to resent my dad that season. I didn't care that his intentions were for the best. I would rather lose and carry the ball than win and not be in the backfield, and he knew that as well as I did. Running the ball was my life.

All of this began affecting me in other ways. I started screwing around at school, getting into more fights. Eventually, my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Trent, called my parents. It was during this conference that I learned my dad still had my back. He told me all about it later.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nichols, hello, please sit down." Mrs. Trent instructed them as they entered her classroom. She was an old woman who had retired a few years prior, but was covering for my actual teacher who was on maternity leave. She began the laundry list of the stunts I had pulled, homework I had failed or not bothered doing, and

anything else she could think of. After she had finished she then offered her opinion of what the problem was. “You see, Mr. and Mrs. Nichols, Jacob’s problem is that he is a dreamer.”

“How do you figure?” My dad replied after a shared glance between him and my mother.

“All he ever thinks about is football.” She paused, waiting for them to acknowledge. They were silent, not sure what she was getting at. “Whenever anyone asks him what he wants to be when he grows up his response is always the same, *Pro Football Player*. He isn’t being realistic!” She said, and then folded her hands as if she had solved some huge mystery.

“What are you talking about?” was about the only reply my father could conjure.

“He isn’t being realistic!” She insisted once more. “He lives in his own dream world of football, football, and more football, and I don’t think that it is healthy or productive,” she added.

“Lady,” my father stood up, “he is a 10 year old boy. He’s supposed to dream about being a professional football player!” He was getting angry at this point. “You called us in here to tell us that? Come on,” he motioned to my mother, “let’s get out of here.”

I was waiting at home for the fallout for whatever crimes I was accused of. My stomach tensed as I heard them pull into the garage. I sat motionless in my room, waiting for my father’s slow death march up the stairs and to my room. Instead of being punished though, he called me downstairs, grabbed the football, and we played pass for the first time in what seemed like forever. After he told me about the conference, he told

me that if I wanted to be a pro football player, then I should be one, and never let anyone tell me that I couldn't do it.

That first season on the Colts we won the championship. Although winning was better than getting beaten all over the field every Saturday, my heart wasn't in it. The championship that I won didn't mean nearly as much to me as the championship I lost as my dad's running back. To tell the truth, there is little of that undefeated season that I recall today. I couldn't wait for the next season because I knew I would be returned to the backfield. I knew that almost the entire team would be moving on to junior high next year and I didn't care.

Jim Cherry was my new coach heading into my 6<sup>th</sup> grade and final season in the league. Jim Cherry led to a new rule in the naming of coaches into the Brownsburg Junior Football League, making sure they had at least some knowledge or background in the game. He knew nothing of the game, even less than Dale McLane I would say, and wanted his son to be quarterback. His son had never played the game.

By this point, my father was away more than ever. My brother was a junior in high school, my sister a sophomore, and they were never around to notice him gone anymore. As Mr. Cherry arrived, five minutes late, to the first night of practice, I missed my dad more than ever. He pulled up in a little truck with the license plate on the front that read, "Mr. Chemo." He got out and was only a few inches taller than me, and to be honest, I figured that I could kick his ass. He was a tiny man with a beard and glasses, wearing his work scrubs from the hospital where he worked. His son, and our new quarterback, was just a little guy too.

I was one of only four 6<sup>th</sup> graders on the Colts of 1988, and out of the new pack of 5<sup>th</sup> graders, only a few had played in the minors. Mr. Cherry didn't know how to draft. As he spoke to us that opening night I could smell the booze on his breath. He didn't have us stretch to begin practice. Instead, he had us run to the goal post and back to "loosen up." I returned first, and Mr. Cherry was standing there holding the tackling dummy.

"All right everyone, let's line up." Mr. Cherry positioned himself behind the blue bag, wide stance and all, wanting to see who could hit the bag. I lined up first and got into my stance. "Okay, on three," he said, not even a snap count, "okay, one, two, three."

The "three-count" was enough for me. I didn't like this guy from the moment I saw him get out of his truck. I knew by looking at him that he had never played the game for real, and I fired out of my stance. I hit that dummy as hard as I could, maybe harder than I had ever hit anything, or anyone. I slipped my facemask and threw my right shoulder into it, THUMP, as I let out a growl. I felt it give and fall away. The cigarettes in his shirt pocket sprawled all over the grass, his glasses half off his head, as he lay there on his back with the bag cast to the side.

"Well, what's your name!" Mr. Cherry called from the ground with an awkward chuckle.

"Jacob Nichols, coach," I stood over him and replied.

Another of the parents, Mr. Lacey, grabbed the bag from then on. He was much bigger, and his son, Ben, was one of the better 5<sup>th</sup> graders on the team. My dad tried to be there when he could, but he could only do so much. The silence between the two of us began to grow stronger.

Before the first game I was moved to quarterback. I hated that position. I craved the three steps before the hole and before I got the ball. I loved accelerating toward that line of scrimmage and hitting it with a full head of steam right as I got the handoff. From behind center I got the ball and everything was all around me and I didn't have those three steps to see the play unfold and react.

Mr. Cherry had the same game plan as Dale McLane for every game. He wanted his son in the end zone. My dad would be on our sideline during games watching, and he knew when it happened each time by the look I would send him from the huddle. I had given up asking him to do anything. He was too busy, and by midseason I'd had enough.

We had made it inside the ten-yard-line, and once again Mr. Cherry called his boy Jonas into the backfield to run it in. First down, hand off to Jonas, he gets the ball and freezes. Second down, and Mr. Cherry calls his boy's number in the huddle to run it in. I call the cadence, the ball is snapped to me and I put the ball out for Jonas to take. Then I pull it back in and run to the outside. I am on about the eight-yard-line when I cut up field. I see my hole and go with the defense closing. At the two-yard-line I get taken down, but not after fighting and twisting.

"What was that?" Mr. Cherry grabbed my face mask.

I didn't answer, "Fine!" Mr. Cherry threw his hands in the air and stormed off the field on third down.

"What do we do...what happened, why is he mad," the chatter in the huddle went.

"Quarterback sneak, on one, ready...BREAK," I told the team, and we approached the line on third down. I gained about a yard, and went back to the huddle, Mr. Cherry still on the sideline.

“All right, Jonas, right up the middle on my right, on one, ready...BREAK!”

The center snapped me the ball and I turned to find Jonas. Jonas came to that hole faster than he had all season. I put that ball in his basket just as the defense read the play and reacted to him. I grabbed him by the back of his belt and threw my shoulder into it as his little frame slid through the gap and into the end zone. We lost the game.

After that game Mr. Cherry seemed to take the hint and we scored a few more times. We never did win a game though, and at the awards banquet we were the last table.

The awards banquet was a long night when each coach gets to brag about their team, introduce each player, hand them their trophy or certificate of participation (depending on how well their team did), and brag about some of their players. For the 6<sup>th</sup> graders, this was our night in the spotlight. The event took place in the junior high school cafeteria, and the junior high football coaches tended to hang around and see who they had coming up next year. The last table is introduced first so that the champs get the final honors, as it should be. I was ready to get my team out of the way, ready to be puffed up as the team leader, whatever, Mr. Cherry had been informed of at least that much in terms of tradition.

Many of the coaches couldn't help themselves, even in the years before their son's 6<sup>th</sup> grade season, but had to go on and on about their own kid. Some fathers were worse than others, but it was part of it. My dad despised those fathers who did that, and I understood why. I hated hearing them go on about their sons, and usually the fathers who went on the longest were the guys whose sons were the worst.



Mr. Cherry went name by name, and I was squirming in my seat waiting to hear what he had to say about me. How I had kept a good attitude, ran hard, and really shown some of the younger guys what football was about, or something like that. I waited. He called up every member of the Colts, went on about a bunch of 5<sup>th</sup> graders, called his own son the “surprise player of the year” because he had never played the game before, and managed a touchdown.

I was the last member of the team still waiting at the table to have my name called when Mr. Cherry called an audible and changed the play. My dad made it to the banquet that night, and given his reputation as a coach in the league, Mr. Cherry invited him up to the stage to introduce his son. I was elated. I wanted my dad to stand up on that stage and tell each and every one of those coaches what they had missed out on, just how special I was, and just how hard I had worked to be the best football player that I could be. I didn't want him to pad my stats, tell a lie, or tell them I was the best he had ever seen. I just wanted him to tell *me* how proud he was of me, and let *me* know how proud he was.

“Well, let me say that this was an exciting season to watch, and congratulations to everyone,” his speech began. He pointed out the accomplishments of other 6<sup>th</sup> graders in the league who he had known and watched develop over the years. He went name by name through the team that I was on and recounted a moment or two that had stood out to him. I could see the smile on each kid's face when he said their name, because after all, it was coming from “Mr. Nichols.” He kept it short, didn't go on and on about anything, was gracious in his regret that he would no longer be involved with the program.

“Good luck next season,” was his parting remark.

I couldn't believe it. He had said nothing at all about me. I sat at our team's table with my jaw clenched and eyes blinking, trying to figure out what had just happened. Two steps from the microphone he looked in my direction, but it was too late to turn around with a "by the way," type of thing. I sunk into my folding chair. I fought back tears as far as I could, but I know that some slipped out.

I knew that he hadn't done it on purpose, but that didn't make it hurt any less. I had, on a certain level, understood the reasons he couldn't coach me through those last three seasons, and I forgave him for it each year. There would never be another season when he could take my team though, and there would never be another 6<sup>th</sup> grade awards banquet for me to hear my name.

## Chapter Three

### Drift Away

My parents were fundamentalist Nazarenes. We were allowed to break a few rules of the church. Going to movies and playing cards were two such rules. A pattern began to emerge as I stepped into my early teens. I began to rebel against my parents. Their solution to every problem boiled down to two things: church and my father's strong hand of discipline. He had not always been quite so strict, but as I grew up, he changed.

The relationship between he and I had once been very special, but by this point, I felt like a distraction to him. When he was at home, he was at his desk; in his office working. Whenever I would try to pull him away from it, or distract him, I was met with a short and agitated, "not now," or, "I'm busy." Most of the time I would just slide in and sit in the wooden chair across from his desk, silently, just so I could be near him.

He began to rule by fear. As long as we remained afraid of him, he had us pretty much under his thumb. Our fear meant no backtalk; when he said jump, we jumped, and when he snapped his fingers we stopped talking. For him, it was about discipline. His life had become a study in discipline, and what he could accomplish by setting his mind to it. For me and my siblings it was fear of the consequences if we didn't jump.

I never witnessed him lay into my older brother all that much, but then again, my older brother had never really done anything all that bad in his life. Bub was a model child. He enjoyed church. Church was where his best friends were, not at school. He was a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He never smoked a cigarette or drank a beer in his entire high school career. He was a damn good kid, and I was

expected to follow in his footsteps in that regard, or more to the point, I was required to. I quickly developed other plans, plans that consisted of being the complete opposite of my brother.

As kids, my next door neighbor and I had stolen some sips from his dad's liquor cabinet and swiped a few beers from his dad's refrigerator, but nothing major. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade I got drunk for the first time and smoked my first of many cigarettes to come. I had already started to rebel in my own little ways. Getting in trouble at school, mouthing off to my mom, and I stole a few things from stores around town. Sometimes I got caught, and sometimes I didn't. It was usually when my father was in town that I got caught. The physical punishments got harsher as time went by, but one thing remained the same, more church.

I really began to hate going to church by my early teens. I hated the people there. The youth group I was forced into was full of a bunch of soccer players who all went to other schools. One of those schools was my school's biggest rival in terms of sports that mattered, and I didn't count soccer among those sports. I was the odd man out. As far as I could tell, everyone there but me enjoyed being there, and so it was a fitting punishment. A call home from the principal meant I would not only be in Sunday School, Sunday morning service and then Sunday evening service, which was what we had to do every single Sunday, but I would find myself being driven by my father to Wednesday night church as well. In response, I began harassing the other kids in the youth group and gaining a reputation as being a pretty bad kid.

I was thrown out of Sunday school for the first time in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My teacher finally got sick of me making fun of the other kids. The last straw was when I told them all that they were “a bunch of soccer fags.”

Mrs. Cossell had enough of me harassing them and dragged me out of the room and to the youth pastor. He walked me down to the Sunday school class that my parents taught and told them that I was asked to leave because of my behavior. I admit that I deserved it. I was pretty mean to the other guys in that class.

This event embarrassed my dad, and there was little that made him angrier than being embarrassed. He put me in a chair on the far side of the room, and gave me a look that assured me that I was in for it once we got home. I squirmed and sweated through their class, and then through the service. I rode home in the back of their car in silence. He didn't speak to me until we walked through the door.

“Get upstairs and change,” he snapped at me, giving me his *look*. “I'll be up in a minute.”

He didn't take his eyes off of me as I bolted up the stairs. Once in my room and changed out of my church clothes, I sat on the edge of my bed. He knew how to make me squirm, sitting there waiting. He took his sweet time coming upstairs, going into their room and changing. The anticipation drove me crazy. It was always the same routine whenever I was in trouble. If I got in trouble at school, upon returning home I would be told to wait in my room until he got home. He would breathe loudly through his nose as he slowly walked up the stairs, past my bedroom door; down to his room. If it was only something small he would sometimes call me down to his room and lecture me while he

changed into his workout clothes. If it was something big, I waited in my room until he was good and ready. I flinched as my door swung open.

“You really embarrassed me today,” he spoke through gritted teeth, breathing heavily through his nose, and holding his long wooden paddle with one baseball-sized hole in the center of it. “And I will not be embarrassed!” he yelled, pulling me from my seat on the bed, throwing me toward my desk chair. I knew what to do at this point. Bend over and grab the back of the chair, brace myself for what was about to happen.

He swung that thing like he was going for the game winning homerun. I would set my jaw and wait for it to be over. After five, maybe ten swats, depending on how angry he was, it would be over, completely. His punishments were to the point, and when he was finished we both walked away. There was no grounding for a week or being banned from watching television like many of my friends. Most of my friends didn’t get spanked as kids, or paddled as they got older, but instead their parents chose grounding. I didn’t mind the physical punishment for that reason. Once it was over it was over, and I would head out the door to go play.

My parents started getting wind of my antics throughout that 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, and before long started imposing rules concerning whom I could and could not hang out with, where I could and could not go, etc. But I still managed to do what I wanted for the most part.

My buddies and I would sneak vodka into varsity basketball games and spike our sodas. My parents would be at the game as well, and from where they sat they couldn’t tell a thing. I would go along for a while, and then get busted, again, doing something around the neighborhood. Each time the punishment would get a little harsher. It went

from spanking to screaming and then the wooden paddle. By the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade I couldn't count the number of those he broke on my butt.

As the summer grew close at the end of my 8th grade year, my father called me in for one of his *talks*.

“Jacob!” he bellowed from his office. “We need to have a talk.” These talks were never a good thing, and usually occurred when he had found out about something I had done, or what someone had accused me of doing. By now, whenever anything happened in the neighborhood I would get the blame for it.

“What?” I came in and stood in front of his desk.

“This summer we are making a change,” he said, leaning back in his chair as it squeaked like it always did. “We are not having a repeat of last summer.”

Near the end of the previous summer, I had gotten into a pretty bad fight during a game of flashlight tag. This one kid, Mike, kept following me and giving away my position. The more I told him to stop, the more he did it, basically he was taunting me. I warned him that if he didn't stop I was going to kick his ass. He didn't stop, and when he gave me up again I went at him. He saw me coming and swung first, he missed.

The flashlights shining in our direction helped me see as I pinned him against a tree trunk and proceeded to pepper him with right hand after left hand until I was tired of punching him. It wasn't long after I got home that my parent's phone rang. It was Mike's parents. Apparently I had broken out all of his bottom front teeth, and there was the threat of some kind of lawsuit.

I hadn't meant to knock his teeth out or hurt him as bad as I did. I was at the age when I had just hit puberty over the past year. All of us guys were getting bigger and stronger, and I just didn't know at the time that I could even hit that hard

"This summer, unless you are at a supervised event," he said looking right at me, "you are in when the streetlights come on."

"What!" I didn't really know how to react to the news. "There is no way. You can't punish this summer for something that happened last summer!" I had never in my life been in before dark in the summer time.

"I can, and I am." He continued, "It wasn't just that one incident. It seems to me that all of the trouble you got into last summer happened after dark, so your mother and I made this decision."

The boundary was set. I was heading into my freshman year of high school, and I wasn't allowed out after dark. That meant I would miss the annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July carnival, I would miss the night games at the girls softball diamonds where everyone hung out, everything. I sat and festered every night of that summer. Some nights my buddies would hang out with me, but most of the time too much fun stuff was going on, like the carnival. Besides, when most parents were having friends over for drinks and cookouts, my parents were having another Bible study, or worse, they were just at home, and my buddies and I couldn't even curse without them hearing and raising hell about it.

Freshman year is a lonely year for a guy in a mid-sized high school. All of the girls in your class start to date upper-classmen and there is not much left for the rest of us. I dove pretty hard into sports. I had switched to offensive line, right guard, on the football field, and was hitting the weight room hard. I worked my ass off, and by the end



of the season got called up to varsity for Sectionals. That was a pretty big deal. I played my final season of basketball, and even tried out and made the baseball team. I had quit playing baseball in 5<sup>th</sup> grade because the same terrible team kept drafting me.

I had kept my nose clean all year. It wasn't so much that I wasn't causing trouble, but more that older kids around me causing more, so mine didn't get noticed. I was still hanging out with my two best buds from the neighborhood, Neil and Ron, and soon the summer was getting close again. Ron was also on the football team, and Neil was just our buddy by default of being in the neighborhood. With one week left of school for the semester, my parents left for a two-week long vacation to Hawaii. They left my grandparents in charge, to check in and things, but my brother was home from college and the most responsible person on the face of the planet. It was understood that Bub had things under control. I knew that he would be out all night, every night, and hanging out with his church buddies.

The last day of school fell on Friday. I had decided the Monday before that to throw a party. I mentioned it to some friends at school, and I figured some people would come over. I was only a freshman and didn't know many upper-classman yet, so I didn't think word would really spread. I asked one of my senior friends from the football team about getting the booze, and the word spread fast.

On that Friday my buddy from the football team and a few of his friends showed up with five-gallon-buckets, a bunch of fruit punch, and Everclear--Jamba Juice they called it. By nine o'clock, my parent's house and yard was full of people. By ten o'clock one of the neighbors had called the cops. We knew because the upper-classmen always brought a police scanner to every party that picked up the signal, and by 10:02 the house

was empty, except for a few people passed out, and Neil, Ron and I frantically cleaning up. Soon the police showed up, and so did my father's parents. My grandparents were more embarrassed than anything and really didn't say much to me about it. They knew that there would be hell to pay when my parents returned in a week, and they decided not to ruin their vacation by telling them. They let me do that.

My parents returned on schedule, and once they got their bags and everything else inside, it was time to face the music.

"Dad," I murmured, "we need to talk."

"About what?" He had no idea what had happened.

"We had better go upstairs." I turned and headed toward the staircase, and I could hear his breathing change, started breathing through his nose.

"What's the problem?" he closed my bedroom door behind him.

"Well," I said, scared as hell. "Last Friday, the last day of school, I threw a party here at the house." I looked up at him, and could see his face redden. I continued before he could speak, "I got intoxicated and the police showed up."

"You did what!" His voice gurgled as he yelled when he was really mad, as it did then. "Stand up!" he was in my face grabbing me by the arms, "Sit down! I didn't tell you to stand up!"

He was so mad that he didn't know what to do, "Stand up damn it!" as yanked me by my collar from my seat on the bed, spit flying, pulling me within an inch of his face.

The rest is a blur to me. I know that it got ugly, but I was beginning to get really good at just turning off at the peak of his greatest rages, blocking it out and just focusing on making it through. At times, when I was a kid, my sister and brother would be outside

laughing their asses off. I would see them rolling on the floor as I would be thrown accidentally out the doorway before being yanked back in. At times, the scene would spill out into the hallway. I would be trying to get away from him, or he would be coming after me. Regardless, by the time we hit the stairs he would have me by the back of my shirt, bouncing me off the wall. More than a few times he threw me into the garage and tore into me with his wingtips. The walls of the garage angled up right about waist high, and I would be bent backwards from the waist up facing the wall as he went to town on me. He was getting to the point with me where it was difficult for him to control his anger.

As a result of my party fiasco, I spent yet another summer on a pretty short leash. By the middle of July, things were fairly normal again. Because of football I was staying out of trouble. In mid-October, Ron got his license and his dad gave him his old car. I was now getting a little more freedom, and counting the days until I got my license. I had bought a car in April of that year, a 1963 Ford Galaxy 500XL. I washed it every weekend even before I could drive it. It was a three-on-the-tree with a 289 V-8 under the hood. There were moments when my dad and I really bonded over that car. Right after I bought it, he had to teach me to drive it; I had never seen a stick on the steering column like that.

On December 23, 1992 I got my license. The first thing I did was pick up Ron to see how fast she would go. We hit the back roads and took her up to 125 mph before winding her down. That night I drove into the city with three more of my buddies and walked into a 500 Liquors like I owned the place, asked the man behind the glass for a case of Budweiser, and he sold it to me. No questions asked, no I.D., nothing.

From that moment on I was a pretty popular guy around town. I could score booze! I would hop on the interstate, drive the eight miles into Speedway and go from store to store until I wouldn't get carded. If I was asked for identification I would say I didn't have it on me and walk out the door and head to the next one, near the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with a liquor store on every corner. Before long, I began to be recognized, and getting kegs and cases of beer was a snap. I was pretty easy to remember. You couldn't miss me: the guy with the Mohawk I had just shaved to piss off my dad.

I was having the time of my life. I was dating the hottest girl that I had ever met. Angie and I had started dating just before I got my license, and we had been together ever since. She had long brown hair and big brown eyes. We met one night before a basketball game. I was with Neil and Ron at a fast food joint when I first saw her and got her number. I called her later that night, and we had been dating ever since. As the summer began though, I was beginning to notice a whole lot of other girls in town. Although I still liked being with her, I broke off things to play the field. I still went over to her house pretty often. She let it go on like that for a while.

One afternoon in early summer, Ron and I were playing basketball in my driveway when my mother called me into the house. Ron came in with me.

"Ron can wait outside," she snapped at me.

"Ron can stay right here," I snapped back. Things were getting worse by the day with the relationship between my parents and me, especially me and my father. My mother usually just let him deal with me though.

“Fine, Ron can stay. What is this?” she slapped an empty condom wrapper on the kitchen table.

Ron and I burst out laughing. She had found it in my pocket while doing laundry.

“I cannot believe you don’t have more respect for her than this!” she was still snapping, speaking about Angie.

Ron and I continued to laugh, “Just wait until your father gets home.” It was a Monday. He got back into town on Wednesday.

“At least I was wearing one!” I called as she stormed out of the kitchen.

I knew that I had a few days before he returned. I started to hang with a new crowd at night. I was smoking a lot of weed and a lot of cigarettes and drinking a lot of beer and whiskey. I was partying harder than my football buddies did. I just began feeling more comfortable around my punk rock friends. Wednesday rolled around, and my father returned at around five that evening.

“Get cleaned up,” he scowled in my direction. “We are going to church.”

“I have plans,” I said.

“I said get cleaned up!” he said, and I knew I had better.

We drove west on US 136 toward the Westside Church of the Nazarene. I was beginning to really hate going to their church. I was tired of the people, tired of getting up every Sunday morning at 8 a.m., and really sick of having to be there every Sunday night from 6 to 9. I was finding myself not agreeing with much of anything that was being said. In the recent months and years I had witnessed the youth pastor and associate pastor’s wife get caught in an affair. I had been thrown out of the youth group a few times for taunting the other people, been forced to attend multiple “youth retreats” and

nearly clocked the new youth pastor across the jaw. Sex outside of wedlock was one of the rules of the church that was not to be broken.

“There are some sins that are a sin against man,” my dad began, hands tight on the wheel of their big blue Cadillac. His glare was balanced between the road and me as he paused. “And there are other sins that are a sin against God!” His voice rose for emphasis. “You had better change your ways, son, or you will burn in eternal hell and damnation!” he said, slapping the steering wheel as he yelled the last word. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” I spoke dryly.

“Yes, sir,” he demanded.

“Yes, sir,” I said, just to end the conversation. With that little speech the switch had been flipped within me. Whatever God they were so wrapped up in, I wanted no part of. I had never been all that attracted to it anyway, and now I wanted absolutely nothing to do with it. I was over their ideas about premarital sex, and their beliefs on sinning in general. I wasn’t going to risk getting caught with a condom wrapper in my pocket again either.

From that moment on I rarely saw my football buddies until football started in August. I began changing and becoming who I wanted to be, not who my parents expected me to be. I returned home one night, one minute before my 11:00 curfew that had been imposed to find them waiting for me in the living room to get home. I was stoned, as usual, and as I walked into the house my parents were waiting for me. My dad had his Bible in one hand as he and my mother both came toward me, putting their arms around my shoulders.

“Now, Jacob, a few months ago you weren’t wearing cut off fatigues and a Mohawk,” my dad began as they were forcing into the keeling position on the seat of the couch. They began praying out loud for God to exorcise the demons from my soul and let Jesus back into my heart. It went on for a while, and, being stoned, I thought it was funny as hell.

The exorcism didn’t do a whole lot. It just made me more hostile. Not going to church was not an option, though I pleaded; my father insisted and rambled about a promise he had made to Nana about keeping us kids in church. Nana, my mom’s mom, died the year I was born, so that meant little to me. He would not budge, so I was stuck going. I began a new ritual of smoking as much weed on the drive there as humanly possible, and before long Sunday morning youth group was no longer required, only Sunday service. I never asked and was never told, but I assume they didn’t want me at youth group anymore.

Football once again began in early August of my junior year. I cut back on the drinking for the season, a little at least, and although I was doing my own thing away from my football buddies at night, I still made the weight room and summer workouts every day. I was close to 6’ tall, and at about 185 pounds. I was the returning starting right guard on the varsity squad, and I kept my spot.

About halfway through two-a-days I was hanging out with my brother at a baseball card shop between practices when Angie tracked me down and walked inside. Until about a month before football began the two of us had been hooking up from time to time.

“Jake, we need to talk.” She sounded strange and looked nervous.

“What?” was all I really thought to say, Bub just ignored us, and I walked outside with her. One of her friends was waiting in front of the store in her car.

“I might be pregnant. I bought two tests.” She had tears in her eyes.

“Well, call me in a little bit, okay?” I said and headed back inside.

I got home that night from football practice and took a shower. I walked into my room still in my towel when the phone rang and I sat down on my bed and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Jake, it’s me.” Her voice quivered a little bit. “I took both tests.”

“Okay, are we cool?” I didn’t want her to answer. I didn’t get caught with anymore rubbers in my pocket that summer. I didn’t use them.

“They both came back positive.”

“I’ll call you back.”

I looked up at the ceiling for the next hour, still wrapped in my towel. I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t know what to do. I eventually called her back, and then drove over to her house. I was sixteen; she was fifteen. I didn’t know what I planned to do for my junior year, but having a kid wasn’t it.

Angie lived with her grandmother. Her grandmother also raised Angie’s two younger sisters. Her parents were not around, although I had met them a few times. The two of us told her grandmother the situation, and we all came to the agreement that an abortion made the most sense. She and I were not ready to handle such responsibility. Above all things though, it was understood that my parents should know nothing of it.

After practice I went and had a few beers before going home. Her grandmother had found out that she had to notify the parents for consent, since she had never been



given legal guardianship over Angie. I wasn't aware of any of it. I pulled into my parents' driveway and saw a car next to my spot. I approached the front door and looked through the window and saw both of her parents sitting in the living room with mine. I almost turned to leave, but walked inside instead.

"It's my grandbaby too!" I heard as I opened the door. My mother's sobbing and hysterical voice was yelling and getting closer. "You can't do this, you can't do this, you can't do this!"

I stood in the doorway as she screamed and looked around the room. Her parents had already made the case for an abortion being the best thing to do. It was their decision in the end after all.

Her parents soon left, my mother went to her bedroom, and Butch stared me down. He started to argue with me, but he quickly realized that it wasn't his decision. No matter what he said, he could do nothing about it.

The following week I missed my first and only practice of my football career. I paid the \$356 for the abortion and made it to the second of the day's practices. After that, Angie and I were never the same. I didn't realize the many ways that this would have an effect on me at the time, both the fact that the two of us could never really be comfortable around one another again, and later the guilt I felt for what had happened over-all.

I focused on football, drinking, my car, weed, and getting laid for the next few months (always making sure any girl I was with was on the pill). Angie and I were done. After the abortion, I more or less blew her off. I tried to hang around for the first few days, but it was uncomfortable. In the moment, I was unaware of just what she had gone through, both physically and mentally. Looking back, I think that she was trying to

express this, but my mind was elsewhere. As years passed by, that has always weighed heavily on me in a “what if” kind of way. How poorly I handled the whole situation is something that I will always regret.

My parents and I rarely spoke at all, but my mother insisted that we all eat dinner together. It was the two of them, my sister who was going to barber college, and me. One evening, not long after the abortion, as they “bowed their heads to pray” I started slapping the potatoes onto my plate. Mid prayer, my father reacted.

“You will not blaspheme the Lord at this table!” he yelled, slamming his fist down and knocking over at least one iced tea in his way. As this happened my sister threw some food onto her plate and retreated while I sat stone still, looking at the pork chops.

“What is wrong with you?” my mother asked, as she stood and walked back behind the kitchen counter.

My dad and I then started yelling at each other, but I was hungry and sat until I finished eating. Then I left. I got in my car and drove off, loud and fast, to find somewhere to get drunk. Later that night, on my return home, I circled the block until I saw all of the lights off in my parents’ windows. Then I killed the engine and coasted into my spot so they wouldn’t hear me pull up. This same scene played out over and over.

My mother had jingle bells tied around the inside of the front door knob. Being a light sleeper, she would wake up and look at the clock to see what time it was when I got home. I usually hit the curfew right on the dot. On week nights I would usually make more food and then sit in my room smoking weed through a muffler, a tube with laundry

sheets stuffed in it to hide the smell, for a few hours before going to bed. On the weekends I would close the front door and let it jingle, walk straight through to the back of the house and go right back out the sliding glass door. I had to push my car out of the driveway to avoid waking them when I started it up.

I was spending most of the money I saved up working all summer on booze and weed. Prior to that, most of the money went into fixing my car. It was forever breaking down, mainly because I drove the hell out of it. After one to many of those break downs I decided to sell it. I replaced her with a brown, 1985 Cutlass Supreme. I didn't love it the way I loved my hotrod, but at least I still had wheels that weren't costing me money in constant repairs.

My relationship with my father remained very cold, and as the New Year approached, it didn't look like it was going to change. On New Years Eve I met up with a guy that I knew who sold LSD, acid, and I bought four hits. My friend Jarred and I had decided to give it a try for the first time at a New Year's party. Jarred was one of my oldest friends, one that I wasn't spending much time with any more, but he was curious and so was I.

While I was getting myself together to go out that night I went ahead and popped one of the hits about a half an hour before I walked out the door. As I prepared to leave the house it was already taking effect, so I hurried to get out of there at around 7:00. Just as I was grabbing the door knob to leave my dad came around the corner.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked me.

“Going out with Jarred,” I spoke flatly, not quite able to judge exactly how this acid was working.

“Well, where are you planning on going?” he asked, arms folded, standing at the other end of the hallway.

“It’s New Years Eve; where do you think?” I wasn’t really being a smart ass, but I thought it was a pretty stupid question.

“I don’t think so,” he told me, his arms still crossed. “No, you are not going out to some party and drinking!” his voice began to rise.

“What is your problem? I am going out with my friends!” I said, my voice rising.

Another ugly fight ensued and I ended up being barred from leaving the house that night. I called Jarred and asked him if he wanted to pick his up since I couldn’t leave. He decided not to, since he didn’t want to do it alone, and I told him I was going to do it anyway. I proceeded to take the other three, alone, in my bedroom.

The full effects of it started to set in right as my parents were leaving for their own New Years Eve Christian gathering. To some, the thought of this might be terrifying. Anyone who has ever dropped acid knows that it can be quite frightening, especially the first time, with no one around to help calm you down. I loved it! It was the greatest thing that I had ever done.

I sat on my bed and couldn’t believe what I was experiencing. My stereo was a waterfall of skulls and bones, my ceiling a lake of skulls and bones. I managed to make my way out of my bedroom and downstairs to turn on the television. The sounds and pictures coming from it were indecipherable in any way. The phone kept ringing, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. Eventually I figured it out; it was Jarred calling to ask how it was. He told me later that he had no idea what the hell I was saying and that at some point I simply hung up the phone.

As I settled into the trip I grabbed a notebook. I had never been a writer, but that night it all changed. All I could do was write what I was feeling and thinking. I filled page after page a notebook. The words were flowing out of me almost faster than I could write them. Most of what I had written ended up being about the guilt that I felt about Angie. The whole event had not registered with me at the time, but then and there it began to. When I heard the sound of my parents returning home, I simply turned off my bedroom light and sat with my headphones on until the sun came up.

## **Chapter Four**

### **No Compromises**

The following Monday, Christmas break was over and I returned to school. In the parking lot I saw the guy I had bought the acid from.

“Hey Andy,” I waved him down, “do you have anymore doses?” I asked.

“No, but I am getting some. Want to go in?” he asked while walking to the far end of the parking lot. There we met up with a guy named John and we bought ten hits, split them and both threw two on our tongue before school started.

This started a trend for me. I would drop acid everyday before school began and then a few more after school while I got high with my buddies. I was still lifting in the off season for football, and I would be tripping the whole time, five nights a week right after school before going to party with my friends. I was always pretty careful about getting caught with anything, or giving him a chance to bust me. Every once in a while I would get sloppy though, and he would be there to swoop down on me.

I got loaded at a party one Friday night in early March. After dropping a buddy off at his house, I passed out in his driveway for a while. I woke up and knew I was late. As I drove through town I realized that I had to puke and pulled into a parking lot about halfway home. I opened the car door and instantly saw the police officer sitting n the other side of the lot. I acted like I was looking for a cd, fumbled around for a second and quickly left. I was pretty well known to the cops for multiple reasons. Most knew me from football, and those same ones heard the stories about me around town. It was no secret that the once promising athlete, Jake Nichols, was a total mess and doing a lot of

drugs. Teachers knew it, my parents knew it, and their friends knew it. It was pretty obvious that I was no longer the same kid that they once had known. As I pulled out onto the main road through town, Officer Price followed me.

Apparently, multiple cars had flashed their lights at me from the opposite lane. I was too busy watching my rearview mirror to notice. His lights came on about a quarter mile down the road.

“Mr. Nichols,” Officer Price called out as I rolled down the window, “How are we doing tonight?”

“Fine Officer Price,” I managed, trying my hardest not to look or breathe in his direction.

“You been drinkin’ tonight? Sure smells like it.” He was leaning down with his arm on my window ledge.

“No sir,” I tried my best not to slur.

He explained that he pulled me over for failure to turn on my headlights. He had me turn off the car and step out. He put me through a series of balance tests and what not. It was pretty clear that I was tanked.

“Are you gonna take me to jail?” He hadn’t put the handcuffs on yet, just had me sitting against the hood of my car.

“Nope,” Officer Price looked right at me and said, “I’m going to call your dad.”

Right then and there I would have preferred going to jail. Instead, I had to sit there and wait for him to show up. It was only about another quarter of a mile to their house from where I was pulled over. I saw the headlights from their Cadillac as they approached. He got out and gave me a look like I had never seen to that point. If I had

“embarrassed” him by getting into trouble at church, what would he make of this? He spoke briefly to Officer Price, motioned for my mom to drive off, and walked toward me.

“Get in!” he growled and I scurried to my passenger side door. He got in and started it up, not taking his eyes off of me. He was beyond pissed. He was so mad that he couldn’t speak. He pulled off white knuckled and breathing loudly through his nose. I just stared straight ahead and focused on not passing out. I was so drunk that I don’t remember what happened when we got home.

My dad had just gotten back from getting his every other Saturday haircut. My hair was a different story. I still had the Mohawk, and though I kept the sides shaved, the Mohawk was down around my shoulders. It was 1993; I was a grunge dude. This bothered the shit out of him. As a kid, neither my hair, nor my brother’s was allowed to touch the collar in the back. This never bothered Bub, but it had bothered me even as a kid, when mullets were cool.

I made my way down stairs and into the kitchen where he was waiting, sitting at the kitchen table. He didn’t say a word, just glared at me, as I came in and took the chair opposite him.

“I am taking you to the barbershop, and we are getting rid of that hair.” He spoke calmly, almost icily, as he sat there and glared at me.

“I’m not cutting my hair,” I replied, just as calmly, and I glared back at him.

“Do not test me right now,” his teeth were gnashing. “Get your ass up out of that chair, now.” He stood up and I could see the veins pulsing on his forehead and neck. I stood up to defend myself as he pushed me from the kitchen to the garage and to his car. A heavy, silent, thick tension hung in the car as he drove. He was heading to the



barbershop, not his barbershop, but one right down the road in a strip mall. He pulled up in front of “Judy and Friends” and turned off the car.

“Get out of the car, now!” He threw his door open.

“I’m not cutting my hair,” I defiantly stated, but as he came around to my side of the car I knew that I was going to be pulled out and dragged into the barbershop, and get really embarrassed, or I could just get out. I got out.

“Listen here,” he was right in my ear as we walked. “You are going to sit in that chair and they are going to do what I tell them or there will be hell to pay, you got me!” He was seething as he squeezed my arm, and I realized for the first time that his hand could barely get a grip on my bicep.

I flexed my arm and looked at him. I was stronger than him, and maybe he too realized right then that I was bigger than him. He was still taller than me by four inches, but I was pretty big otherwise. We walked into the barbershop. Judy had worked at his regular barbershop for years and had only recently opened her own place. She was waiting for us as we walked toward her.

“I want all of this gone, Judy.” He spoke to her in his calm, calculated voice, as he motioned toward my hair. “Sit down, Jacob.” He called me “Jacob.” Nobody had called me “Jacob” since I was a little boy, at least in that tone.

“You’re not touching it,” I told her as I sat down. She could sense the tension in the air, I’m sure of it, and probably knew the situation by then.

“You will not come out of that door until it’s gone,” he said, and tried to force a smile to ease the situation, but the look on Judy’s face was uneasy. “I’ll be waiting in the car.” He walked out the door.

“What am I doing?” Judy asked. I had known her since I was a kid and used to go with my dad when he got his haircuts.

“Nothing,” I said as I stood up and walked toward the back door. I walked out and around the back of the shops. I crossed 267 and took the back way into the neighborhood. I was home and sitting at the table for at least ten minutes when he stormed through the garage door and stomped into the kitchen.

“When I tell you to do something, you do it!” his face was almost purple as he screamed. “Do you hear me?” he yelled.

“Yes” was all I said.

“Yes, sir!” he demanded. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes!” I responded and flexed every muscle in my body as he came toward me. I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I knew that I wasn’t afraid of him anymore. If he grabbed me, I was grabbing back. If he swung, I was swinging back. I knew that what I had done the night before was stupid, but at the same time, I was tired of his shit.

He came right up on me, tried to move me chest to chest. I stood my ground, didn’t move an inch, he couldn’t budge me. The look in my eyes was probably the same as his, he was ready to lay into me like never before and his eyes told me so. I bet my eyes said the same thing, because he stepped back a few steps.

“Okay, here is how it is going to be,” he calmed down and focused his glare, “For the next month you aren’t driving anywhere or going anywhere except to school, church or the gym. For a month after that, you are only driving to school, church or the gym, and are not going anywhere else,” he said, and gave me another look, almost daring me in some way. “Got it?”

“Yes,” I stood there until he was gone, then I went upstairs and simmered for a few hours.

I continued to eat a lot of acid at school. I went to the gym, went home and ate more acid. My parents had decided that I needed to go to counseling. Of course, the only counselor who could do anything was a religious counselor who could tell me that the “Lord” was the only solution to my problems. I was allowed to drive there as well. I walked out on all of them. They would send me to another one, and I would refuse to talk or listen.

As far as I was concerned, they were the ones with the problem, and their problem was their stubbornness. They refused to accept the fact that I no longer believed in their God, and insisted that I still attend church against my will. In many ways, the more they tried to push that on me, the more I chose to rebel. If they had not made such a huge deal about everything, then probably would not have taken things to such an extreme. I even attempted to reason with them at times, but they would not hear any of it. I would try to reason that isn't it better that if I am going to choose to have sex, that I used a condom? Their only response would be about the sin of premarital sex. They had the rigid stance on all fronts that basically said *No you cannot!* I responded with, *watch me*. There was never an attempt to sit down and look for some sort of compromise. What they said was right, was right. My brother, in recent years, referred to their approach as the “Jesus Hammer.” He reasoned that each child is like a crate of fine china. Some parents carefully open the box and examine the contents to see how to care for them. My parents, instead, used the “Jesus Hammer” to pound the box to shreds, and then wondered why all of the contents were broken into pieces once they looked inside.

My father tried to reconnect with me on some level while I was grounded. On Friday nights after my parents returned home from going out to dinner, he would take his Mustang out of the garage. His Mustang was one of the few things that he and I could find common ground on. It was a blue, 1987 Mustang GT convertible, and he and I could drive together for hours. In the summer we would pull the top down and go on long drives, not having to speak to one another because the wind was too loud. Every once in a while, on those summer drives, he would stop on whatever back road we were cruising down and let me take the wheel for a while. I loved that car.

On these Friday nights I would climb in the passenger side and he and I would travel in relative silence to the Waffle House and slug back coffee. I had been doing so much acid at school and at home that I was able to hold myself together to the point that nobody would know I was tripping. At the same time, I was so saturated with it that I needed to take time away from it in order for it to have any effect on me. Sometimes he and I would talk while we sat and drank coffee, other times we didn't. He was doing me a favor by letting me at least get out of the house for a while.

I knew that he was trying to make up for lost time and hoping that I would somehow come around to his way of thinking. I was not about to see it his way, and hoping that he might give a little. I knew that he was allowed to crack a beer with his dad when he was my age; he never told me that, but I had seen the pictures. I was hoping that, for instance, as we sat and slugged coffee that he might, because he knew that I smoked cigarettes, give me the green light to have a smoke. Instead, I knew that if I so much attempted to sneak one in the bathroom of the Waffle House there would be a scene if he happened to walk in and catch me. Any talk about the abortion was unheard of, and

in his mind it had never happened, I was convinced. *No son of mine would have done such a thing.* No son of his could possibly have smoked, drank, done drugs, had sex, used bad language, or anything else because he had forbidden it.

I really thought about Angie a lot over those two months. Not being able to drink the thoughts away every night was forcing me to think about all of it over and over again. I tried calling her at times, but she wouldn't speak to me. She was angry, I was sure, about everything that had happened. The only time she took my call was to inform me that she was seeing someone else, and of course, at that moment I wanted her back more than ever.

Before long, the two months was over. After a long lecture about not letting him down again, I was once again set free. I went to a big party that night, a bunch of kegs of beer. I dropped a few hits of acid and tried cocaine for the first time. I felt absolutely wonderful. I went to the party with Jarred, and that ended up being the last time he and I ever really hung out. Most of my friends were seniors that year, or they were drop outs. That night I met a guy named Seth, who had dropped out of school the previous year. Over the next few weeks, Seth and I became inseparable. The two of us could sit around and talk for hours on end and never run out of topics to discuss. We also had quite a few friends in common.

We all hung out everyday after school at Seth's house. His mom let us do just about whatever we wanted as long as we didn't tear the place up and cleaned any mess we made. I was over there just about every night hanging out, smoking weed and drinking.

It didn't take long for my parents to figure out that I was back to my old ways. My life was getting pretty bad everywhere, but I didn't care. At one point in early May, my head football coach called me down to his office. The thought of not playing my senior year had already crossed my mind. Early on, up until about midway through my junior season, I was still being looked at by a few scouts and getting a few letters of interest from some smaller colleges, but coaches had a lot of influence on what the scouts knew about the players. The letters dried up pretty quickly.

"You asked for me, Coach Godan?" I asked him as I walked into his office.

"Have a seat." He didn't bother to look at me. Mr. Godan had been the head coach of the varsity squad for about twenty years. He was short and stout, and chewed on a cigar at any chance he got. "What are your plans for next season?"

"Well, I hadn't thought about it." I didn't know what he wanted. He never called players into his office during the off season.

"Well, then let me help you decide," and he sat back in his chair. "How about you just don't play?" he looked right at me.

"What?" I didn't expect that. I knew that I had my problems off the field, but on the field was one of the only places that I felt 100% in control. There had never been a question about my dedication to the team. I worked hard, I trained hard, and I gave everything I had for every minute of every game and practice.

"Yeah, I don't want you on my team. These underclassmen think that you are some kind of god, some sort of rock star or something." He stood and came around to the front of his desk and sat on the ledge, "And I know what you are about, I know what you do, and I don't want these boys looking up to you."

“Well, we’ll see.” I stood and walked out of his office. Now I knew I was going to play, and started lifting harder than ever. After the gym though, I would head home, take a shower and be off to Seth’s house to get loaded. On Friday nights I would tell my folks that I was staying there.

“I’m staying out tonight, so I won’t be in by midnight,” I would tell them as I headed for the door.

“Where are you staying?” my father would ask.

“Seth’s.”

“No you aren’t,” his voice would rise. “You will be home by midnight.”

This would bother the hell out of me. They knew that I would be out drinking at Seth’s, yet he would insist that I drive home. Again, I couldn’t get a handle on his reasoning. Just because he didn’t want me to go out boozing with my buddies and hooking up with girls didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to do it, and he knew that. But he was stubborn. So was I. It was his way or the highway. He would rather I rolled my car into a ditch, or worse, than compromise even a little bit.

One of those nights, I passed out on my way home and took out a row of mailboxes with the passenger side of my car and lost my mirror. He was up when I got home, and I told him what had happened.

“Are you drunk?” he asked. I had been drinking vodka, so I didn’t reek like I would have had I been drinking beer or whiskey.

“Not a drop,” I lied, hoping that I could pass for sober. I somehow pulled it off as he proceeded to take his flashlight out to my car and scour for a bottle cap, beer can, or anything else, but it was clean. I watched him as he looked through the windows. I

wouldn't let him inside. Even if I let him in, he wouldn't find anything. Without drug dogs, the cops wouldn't either. I had everything stashed and hidden.

A few weeks later, the week that most of my friends were set to graduate, the assistant principal came and got me from the woodshop. He had a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket.

"Follow me," he said as I walked toward the front office with him. As we walked through the office door I saw two cops standing outside the principal's office glaring at me. We went into the office and there were two more cops, the principal, Mr. Land, and the school drug counselor, Debby Hopple, who had tried to bust me many times.

"Mr. Nichols," Mr. Land, who was a great big man who we commonly referred to as *Landmass*, began, "we were informed this morning that you were to receive a large amount of LSD today." He was standing behind his desk as he spoke.

After he said this, both cops slid behind me shutting and blocking the door. I was a little shocked. I had planned on getting quite a bit, but the deal fell through. I was in the habit of getting quite a bit at a time. I kept a lot for my own use, and let go of some to my friends for no more than I paid for it.

"We have already notified your parents, and if we find that you have received anything you will be going directly to jail. We have already been through your locker, and only found cigarettes, which are banned on school property."

I was instructed to hand over my wallet, empty my pockets, remove my shoes and socks, and remove my flannel shirt. I was only concerned about my wallet. Many times I stored a few hits in cellophane behind my license, and hoped like hell that it was empty. It was. I had nothing on me, and they could do nothing to me, except for the cigarettes,



for which I received a two day in-school suspension, and a one game suspension tacked on to next year's football season. When I got home, my father was there waiting.

“What's this about dealing LSD?” he demanded as I walked through the door.

“Nothing or I wouldn't be here right now,” I said as I walked by him, knowing that he had as much on me as the school did.

“Well, these kinds of accusations don't take hold unless they think that they could be true, not like this!” He was worked up already. We both had very short fuses with one another, and the argument soon got very heated, and he eventually ended it. “Well, I don't want you, and whatever you're doing in my house!” he screamed, “and I'm taking your car!”

“The hell you are!” I yelled back, and the race was on. I sprinted out the door to the driveway with him close behind. I jumped into the driver's seat as he folded his arms and stood looking me eye to eye through my rearview mirror. My parking spot in the driveway was in a little grave patch that had been put down to make more space, and that gravel probably saved his ass. I fired it up, threw it in reverse and floored it. My tires spun and gave him just enough time to get out of my way. I bolted down the road and drove to Seth's.

Three days later, the night before the last day of school and graduation, the party at Seth's was in full swing. We were halfway through a bottle of Southern Comfort when the phone rang. I was closest so I answered it.

“Hello?”

“Who is this?” the voice on the other end asked.

“Jake, who is this?” I didn’t recognize it as any voice that would normally be calling.

“Jake, you’re just the man I’m looking for. This is Sergeant Buffington from the Brownsburg Police Department.” As he said this I covered the receiver and motioned frantically for everyone to be quiet. The thing about Seth’s house was that just by being on the side of the street that it was on, it was out of Brownsburg Police jurisdiction, and the reason that it didn’t get busted for the parties that happened from time to time.

“Why are you looking for me?” I asked him.

“Well, I got a call from your dad, says you ran away, and I need you to do me a favor,” he was speaking very respectfully.

“What’s that?” I knew that this had to be a trick.

“Well, my officer is out in front of the house, and cannot legally walk up to that front door. I need you to walk out there and get in that car so we can clear this all up.” He hung up the phone.

Everyone was hiding everything when I hung up. I told them it was cool and looked out to see the car right out front. I explained what Buffington said, and I figured if I didn’t walk on out, they would have a Sheriff there before long. I got into Officer Ingle’s police car and kept my face toward the open window. We got to the station and walked into Sergeant Buffington’s office. Sitting there in one of the two chairs across from Sergeant Buffington was my father.

“Now Jake,” Buffington, who looked a lot like my dad, started as I sat down, “I have instructed your father that he is going to sit there while you tell him anything that

you need to say.” He looked at me and my father as he spoke. “And if he tries to get up I will put him in handcuffs.”

I called him every name in the book. I told him how I wasn’t a little kid anymore who worshipped the ground that he walked on. I let him know just how little he even knew about me, and that he was chicken shit for calling the police and lying to them about me running away.

Once I finished, Sergeant Buffington sat back in his seat and once again looked at the two of us. “Now that should be about the end of that. You two head home, and let’s not get into this situation again.”

With that he and I headed for the door. My car was at Seth’s still, and as I rode home next to him he was silent, white knuckled on the wheel and fuming. Once home, I ran into the house and into the bathroom. I took the longest shower of my life, hoping that he would just go to bed soon.

The following night after graduation we were all at Seth’s house partying before heading out to graduation parties. Just as we were all leaving, I looked up and saw my dad’s Mustang trying to sneak away unnoticed. I jumped into Joe’s car and told him to catch him. Once in town we got right behind him. He pulled into a church parking lot in the middle of town. He stopped and got out, slamming his door, and I got out as well. He and I stood face to face in front of Joe’s car and behind his in the three foot wide gap between them.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I asked him, “spying on me?”

“I can drive wherever I want,” he responded.

“Yeah, well then why don’t you drive somewhere else; you have no reason to be out there.” He and I hadn’t spoken since the night before at the police station, and he was still pissed.

“Don’t you tell me what to do!” he seethed through gritted teeth as he began to ball his fist. Just as he did this, I took one step back, leaving only him between the cars as Joe revved his engine.

“I dare you to,” and I smiled at him, “all he has to do is drop the clutch.” He was bright red as he spun around and got back in his car.

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The following season started and I was bigger than I had ever been, and I don’t mean fat. I was up to 195 pounds, could bench press 325 pounds and had 21 inch biceps. I had worked construction all summer, made every workout that was required by the coaches, and partied hard every night. I quit the line and moved to the backfield as a backup. The offensive line coach was one of the coaches who didn’t want me to play, and I couldn’t stand him anyway. I kept my starting spot at defensive end. The defensive line coach only cared about what his players did *on* the field.

Coach Godan found any reason he could do penalize me during practice, and would devise outlandish punishments for me after practice. For the slightest misstep I would find myself being chewed out and given “up downs” after practice. Up downs were as bad as it got. He made me begin on the goal line of the game field because it had five-yard markers, and not just ten like the practice field. From the goal line I would run five yards, hit the line, and do a push up, all the while in full pads. He would walk with

me the whole 300 yards that he made me go. At the 200 yard mark I was never more thankful for my facemask, because that is what I landed on for the final 100 yards. No other senior on the squad would remove a single pad until I would return to the locker room.

About halfway through the season Angie's cousin, who was one of the team managers, told me that she was pregnant again. I didn't know her cousin all that well. The managers were just the girls who made sure that the water containers were full and picked up equipment after practice. She knew the whole situation between Angie and me though, and also told me that she was pretty sure that Angie got pregnant just to spite me. If that was her goal, it worked. I was heart broken. I couldn't believe that she was pregnant again. I couldn't stand the thought of her sleeping with someone else, and I couldn't stand being sober enough to dwell on it.

School let out at 2:50, and we didn't have to be on the field until 3:30. That would give me plenty of time to get baked before getting my pads on. I would stop in the parking lot after school on my way to the locker room and get high. On Fridays I would drive around with my buddies for an hour before we had to get ready for our games and do bong hits until I could barely see. As messed up as I was, I still played as hard as I could day in and day out. Football was the only aspect of high school that I could stand, and the only reason that I showed up in the first place.

When the season closed, my patience for school was at an end. I was sick of the petty bullshit that seemed to control everything, like not being in my seat when the bell rang.

“Mr. Nichols, the bell has rung and you are not in your seat. You are tardy. That is your third one.” This is just one example of what was driving me crazy. Tardy three times and that meant Friday school. Friday school meant that on Friday after classes let out I had to report to whatever room I was assigned to, along with everyone else who had been out of their seat three times, and sit in silence for three hours. Anymore, I just began to leave halfway through the day, or not show up until lunch, the punishment was the same.

The front office was supposed to notify the parents of any student who ditched classes or got a Friday school for any other reason. At some point they quit bothering my parents with it. I was going to graduate mid-term anyway just to get the hell out of that place.

Most mornings I went by Seth’s house and wake him up to get stoned. I didn’t have any friends at school that I felt like hanging out with anymore, so I made him get out of bed. One morning in mid December, two weeks before I would have been done with the whole deal, I stopped at Seth’s before heading to school like usual. As we sat smoking, I remembered that I had booze in the freezer.

“Is that fifth of rum still in there?” I asked him.

“I think so, along with the Early Times.”

“Fuck it, let’s do some shots before I go.” I ran down and grabbed both bottles. We drained both of them before long and were pretty wasted. Without thinking of either the time, it was around noon, or the state I was in, I headed for the door.

“Watch this be the day they require breathalyzers,” I joked as I closed the door behind me. I made my way to school and parked in the front visitor parking right by the

main student entrance. I walked in and stopped by the attendance office to get my unexcused pass and be assigned Friday school. I had not realized that it was already after lunch when Mrs. McCoy, the attendance secretary told me what period it was.

“Would you please take this note to Mrs. Rector?” Mrs. McCoy asked as I walked out the door.

“Sure,” I slurred and grabbed it.

I made my way into study hall and gave Mrs. Rector the note. I then staggered to my seat and began talking loudly to my girlfriend and making a scene in general.

“Jake,” Mrs. Rector called my name, “would you return this to Mrs. McCoy?”

“Sure,” I again slurred, and staggered back to her desk and grabbed the note that was folded in half. I made my way out the door and as I reached the stairs decided to read it. It said, “His activities would seem as such.” I was too wasted to realize that I was basically turning myself in. As I handed Mrs. McCoy the folded note, she picked up her phone. In a matter of seconds the vice principal was behind me, and he took me by the arm into his office.

“Some teachers are under the impression that you might be intoxicated,” Dr. Savage spoke. “Is this true?”

“No,” is all that I said, realizing how stupid I was for delivering the note.

“Well, then will you take a breathalyzer?” he asked.

“Nope,” I replied.

“Then come with me.” He took me once again by the arm and into the principal’s office. “Mr. Land, some teachers suspect Jacob of being intoxicated, and he refuses to take a breathalyzer.”

“Then call the police,” he said without even looking up.

“That won’t be necessary,” I informed him.

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“Because I am fucking out of here!” I yelled as I darted for the door before the vice principal could stop me, and ran like hell to get my coat out of my locker. I knew that they would be waiting at the main exits, so I went out the shop hallway doors and ran all of the way around the back of the school and got to my car. I started it up and remembered that the reverse was out so I had to push it out of the parking spot. Just as I got it out and jumped back in, Mr. Land saw me and came running out the door, pointing at me with his walkie-talkie and yelling for me to stop. I floored it and swerved around him, nearly hitting him, hit the street and hauled ass to the back roads. I knew the cops were on their way and I got as far out of town as I could before I stopped at a truck stop and called Seth.

“Open your garage door. I’m coming fast.” I told him.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Busted,” I said as I jumped back in my car and took back roads all the way to his house. I sped into his garage and closed the door. Luckily there were no windows. I hid in Seth’s room and about an hour later my brother showed up looking for me. Seth covered for me, telling him he hadn’t seen me, and asking him what had happened.

“Nothing,” he said as he walked away.

The police also called his house asking if he had seen me. Apparently there had been an “All Points Bulletin,” or A.P.B., out on me that I had managed to allude. I waited it out for a few hours until after dark and decided that it was time to face the



music at home. I pushed my car out of his garage and made my way there, not knowing what to expect. My father was pacing as I walked through the front door.

“Just where in the hell have you been?” he yelled as I entered.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“You know that you are expelled from school, right?” he again yelled.

“I was pretty sure, yeah,” I kept it short, watching him move.

“Well, either go to rehab, or get out of my house,” he spoke calmly.

I went upstairs and threw what I could into a bag. I called Seth and told him to meet me at the gas station where I worked. I had no use for the car. It only had one gear left anyway, so I left the keys and walked out the door.

“Later days, man,” I said to my father as I closed the door behind me. I walked down the street just as it started snowing. A few minutes after I got to the gas station Seth and his mom showed up.

“Can I stay at your house for a while?” I asked her.

“Sure, how did it go at home?” she asked me.

I just shook my head and watched the road.

A few days later a friend of mine forwarded me a letter that the school had given him to give to me. It was for my expulsion hearing. I went to it to see what they had to say. They didn't really have anything on me, at least no proof of anything. They got me for insubordination and booted me until the next semester. I would not be graduating mid-term.

As the next semester began, I was wearing my welcome thin at Seth's house. I understood though. I was using their utilities and stuff, and not contributing to anything except my growing drug and booze excess.

I began working the over night shift at the gas station and going to school during the day. I gobbled tons of acid to keep myself awake and traded packs of cigarettes for lines of crystal meth. Once the weekend arrived, I would either go back to Seth's or find somewhere else to sleep for hours on end. This lasted for about a month. On February 18<sup>th</sup> I walked through the doors of the school and made it to my locker. Before I even opened it I decided that I had had enough, turned around and headed for the door.

I asked a friend of mine to borrow his car and he gave me his keys after I promised to be back at the end of the day. As I walked through parking lot toward his car, I could see Dr. Savage running after me. I started it up and saw him in the rearview mirror as I backed out.

"You are making a huge mistake, Jacob!" he called out as I rolled down the window and lit a cigarette.

"Whatever," I said as I let out the clutch and drove off.

Two days later my father, whom I had not seen or spoken to since the night I walked out of his house, came into the gas station at about 4:00 in the morning.

"I heard you quit," he said as he walked up to the counter.

"Yep," I replied, not making eye contact.

"Have fun digging ditches." He turned and walked out the door. That would be the last conversation that he and I would have for months.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Becoming a Union Man**

As time passed, my father and I began to mend our relationship. I knew that I had made some really bad decisions, and I slowly pulled myself together. It didn't happen overnight, but we eventually began speaking again. I was out on my own and no longer felt the need to rebel against him, and he in turn no longer felt that it was his responsibility to tell me how to live my life. I still enjoyed hanging out with my friends and drinking beer, but the drugs were no longer in the picture.

As even more time went by, the two of us even got to the point where we were once again friends. I was comfortable going to my parents' house with the rest of the family on Sunday afternoons, and even bring girlfriends along to introduce to them.

I enrolled at IUPUI in 1996 after a year of goofing-off after finishing high school. I thought about becoming a literature teacher. I was working to pay rent and bills, but classes took up a lot of time, so I wasn't able to work much. I was making just enough money to pay rent, but that was about it. I was hungry, I wasn't enjoying the classes I was required to take and at the end of that first year I started framing houses.

A month later my older brother told me about a plumber he sold equipment to who was looking for somebody, and he thought that I should give him a call. I was more of a carpenter. I had been roofing houses, working in cabinet shops and framing houses since I was sixteen, but I grew up around plumbing and knew all about it. I gave him a call and began doing residential plumbing in July of that summer.

I came from a long line of plumbers. My grandfather had been a union plumber, as were his four brothers. My father began his career as a union plumber as well. He worked his way up through the field and eventually took a sales position, selling industrial plumbing equipment. The “Nichols” family name had a strong standing within the walls of the union hall.

I enjoyed what I was doing. Running water lines for houses that were being built, sweating copper joints for water, and gluing PVC for drains while I learned new skills from my boss. I felt like I had found my spot, it was a fit for me. I began second-guessing if I would return to school at the end of the summer? Mid-August my phone rang.

“Hello,” I answered the call.

“Jacob?” asked the voice on the line.

“Yes,” I answered, and knew it wasn’t a friend calling by the sound of the voice.

“This is Gary Yancy, Union President Local 440,” he said, the Union President was on the phone, calling me at home. The Union was not something that was ever pushed upon my older brother or me. My older brother was not mechanically inclined at all. Manual labor was not his thing, but it was mine. I was always there with my dad when he was installing new sinks or toilets at home, helping him or whatever. While my brother was reading *The Hobbit*, I was learning my dad’s secret to soldering copper pipe. “I hear that you are working residential?”

“Yes, I am. I’m sorry, who is this?” I asked him. It was a Friday evening at about 6:00, I was ready to go out and spend a chunk of my paycheck.

“Gary Yancy, your father stopped by the Union Hall today, told me you were working in the field, residential.”

“Oh, yeah, for Gary Phillips, I’m sorry, is this Gary Yancy?” I asked again because I knew the name from hearing it growing up.

“Yes, I have known your dad since our days in the apprenticeship. He was at the Hall today, told me you were in the field. Have you thought about coming down to the hall?”

There had been some talk between my father and me about the prospect of joining the Union, but I never thought about it beyond that, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to take that path.

“No sir, I hadn’t really given it much thought,” was my only reply. Until that moment I had never thought about the reason my dad was showing me how to install toilets and sinks when I was a kid. He always thought that I would follow in his footsteps. Especially since I was now in the field, he couldn’t wait to get me into that Union. He was proud enough to have the President call me.

“Are you interested in coming to work for Local 440?” he asked, and I was face to face with the rest of my life. If I answered yes, then I would be working as a Union Plumber for the next thirty-five years or so until I retired. I would be finished with college after one year, just like my dad. If I told him no, I was still unsure about what I was going to do that fall, school or not.

“Yes, sir, I am interested,” I replied, and at that moment I was committed.

“Be at the hall at eight a.m. Monday; don’t be late.”

“Well, I need to give notice” I told him. I respected my boss, and two weeks notice was the respectful way to move on. I had almost always given a two week notice for any job I had ever quit, that was the way I was brought up.

“No, you don’t, you are in the union now son.”

I didn’t argue with the man. I called my boss and told him what had happened, and that I wouldn’t be on the job on Monday. He understood but expressed his disappointment in the union and asked me to reconsider.

I walked into Mr. Yancy’s office that Monday.

“I have you in as a trainee until we accept the next class of apprentices. You’ll be working at the Apex fabrication shop.” He introduced me to a few other men, always as *Butch’s boy*. “Here are the directions. They know you are coming and it is the best shop we have,” He informed me as we walked to the door.

I shook his hand and drove to the shop.

The shop was a big place, semi trucks would back in to be loaded with the pipes that were cut with torches. There were not many employees, ten journeymen welders and pipe-fitters, two apprentices and about five trainees. The trainees did the same work as the first year apprentices. The apprenticeship is a four year program. An apprentice works on a job site during that day, and attends classes in the evening learning the plumbing codes, math, reading blueprints, and other technical issues. The trainees work at the job site, but do not attend classes. A beginning apprentice and a trainee make the same hourly wage, which is half of Union scale, what a journeyman makes. The apprentice receives raises along the way so at the end of his four years he is at full scale.

The trainees pay remains the same until they were accepted. Some of the trainees at the shop had been waiting nearly five years for their turn.

I worked along with the other trainees and apprentices, helping the welders, carrying pipe, running the lift that carried the big pipes, and bringing raw materials in from the stockyard. I was learning new skills as the weeks passed, was finding myself with more responsibility around the shop and getting to know the guys I worked with. Most of the apprentices had family in the Union already, and none of the trainees did, except for me.

An old man in the shop, George Loving, was in his early eighties, and had worked with my grandfather back when they first began in the Union. He had broken off from the trade and started his own shop years before, and at some point his shop went bankrupt. Instead of being able to retire, he was once again back working as a journeyman. Even after he stopped working as a Plumber and bought a shop, he still paid his Union Dues each month, and retained his Union Card.

“You’re Henry’s grandson?” he asked me after about my first week in the shop.

“Yes sir,” I replied. He was a man who demanded respect around the Hall, an old timer who knew just about all there was to know about the trade.

“Glad to see you joined, now come with me.”

He took me by the arm, and away from the, sort of, grunt work the other guys in my position were expected to be doing. I was quickly cutting pipe with dual acetylene torches, shown how to mark and label each one. I had a list of pipes which included diameter and length of pipe to be cut, as well as a job number and blue-print code that I scribed on each one as it was finished. These labels let the apprentices know which flat-

bed semi to load the pipe onto. Once the pipe is at the job site, the code on each one tells the pipe-fitters where it belongs.

I could see the resentment on the faces of the other trainees. They knew that I would become an apprentice long before many of them already, and they knew it was because I had family already in. Though it was nothing I asked for, I was getting special treatment. I began to volunteer for some of the nastiest work in the shop. Sandblasting out in the stockyard in 90 degree heat, hot dirty work, grinding the beveled edges for the welders which threw sparks in every direction, burned holes in my clothes. I helped lugging pipes onto the trucks. By the end of the next break, George would have me back on the torch, organizing fittings or assisting a journeyman welder.

At times my grandfather would happen to drop by the shop. He would stop and talk with ol' George, and it wouldn't be long until I would be pulled away from my work to sit with the shop foreman, George and my grandfather, or at times my grandfather would come over to see what I was doing in order to show me a better way, or to correct my technique. Even the journeymen, though at times I could feel their disdain for me, knew where I stood. My Great Uncle's were their teachers at the Union Hall. My Grandfather was close friends with George. They knew how things worked, and that even with little effort my family name was going to pull me through the ranks.

I enjoyed the work that I was doing, even when I had to do the hard labor. If I were working along side an apprentice, of course he drove the forklift and I did the ground work, but that never bothered me. The shop had heat in the winter, and though it wasn't air conditioned, big exhaust fans to pull the welder's smoke out kept the place cool in the summer. There was a big table that everyone sat around for our breaks and to



eat lunch, except if it was nice outside, then most of us sat outside on an upturned bucket or the tailgate of a truck. I was working hard and doing good work. Sure, I had a few advantages, but I was determined to *earn* anything that came my way on my ability, and not just through my name.

Just as winter was rolling in an announcement was made at the shop. Apex was being bought out, and the fabrication shop was being handed over to the “tin-knockers.” It was to become a sheet metal shop in a few weeks, and everyone there was going to be reassigned. I was a little let down. I enjoyed where I was at. I had grown used to it in the four months I had been there, and made some friends who I would be working alongside with for the years to come. I wasn’t excited to leave. I figured that wherever they sent me I would just work hard and do my best.

The town of Avon was building a new high school. On the day I arrived it was a big, open cement structure, like a giant parking garage. There was about six or eight inches of snow on the ground, and it was about ten degrees not including the wind chill. The day before I had been in a heated shop, cutting pipe and only wearing long sleeves to protect myself from sparks and heat. Now I was in winter cover-alls, clutching my thermos and lunch pale as I closed my car door and wished that I was back at the shop.

I was assigned inside, not that it mattered, helping the journeymen run steel pipe through the floors and along the ceilings. The cold from the cement floors rose up through the soles of my boots into my feet. They got so cold that it was painful. The wind whipped through the structure from every direction. I spent most of my time standing, just waiting for a journeyman to yell for another length of pipe.

As a section was getting close to finish, I would have to go get the pipe for the next section from the stacks outside. I had to dig through the snow in my work gloves and find the numbers I was looking for. Once I found the right stack I would carry, two at a time, ten foot lengths of six inch pipe up three or four flights of stairs. At other times it would be ten inch pipe. Those were the worst, cold, heavy steel pipe that took two of us to manage, and my shoulders would ache from the cold as I balanced them.

Break time arrived at ten o'clock on my first day, and I was grateful for my thermos full of steaming coffee. That first morning was rough, and for the first time I found myself wondering when they were going to realize that I was a "Nichols?" I poured that coffee into my cup, waiting to take that first sip to warm me up, crouched on my lunch-box on that cold cement floor, I took that first drink and had to spit it out. I hadn't rinsed all of the soap out after washing it the night before. All of my hot coffee was nasty, and I was cold.

The restrooms were icy Port-o-Lets outside. The time it took to unzip the coveralls, unzip my pants to take a leak seemed insane. Each time having to read the stupid shit written on the walls; WHAT PLUMBERS KNOW...SHIT RUNS DOWN HILL AND PAYDAY IS FRIDAY...THE END, written by some electrician or some other tradesmen. I was surrounded by a bunch of weathered old men, seeing another guy my age, another apprentice or trainee every now and then, but not often. I began seeing what I was to become in life, an old plumber, rough and strong with a great big truck and tool box.

The winter wore on. The temperature rose and the snow melted. All of that frozen ground turned to thick, wet mud. Instead of pulling pipes out from ice and snow, I

was trudging through mud to get to them. Before long, it got so muddy that the forklifts which delivered the materials from the semis would get stuck, and began unloading them farther and farther away. This left me with even more mud to trudge through. By the end of the day I would be too tired to walk, and it seemed like forever to make it to my car for the drive home.

Back when I was still working at the shop, I would get home, take a shower and meet up with my buddies for beers. They were all still bumming around working at pizza joints and the like, and I was more than happy to pay the tab a few nights a week, or we all would hang out at my apartment, and I would have my fridge stocked with cold ones. They were scraping by making, maybe, a little more than minimum wage. Most of them didn't even put in enough hours to be full-time. I was pulling in around eleven bucks per hour, and working forty hours a week. I had the extra cash, so I never thought twice about buying. They would have done the same for me.

The winter wore on, I was too tired to go out through the week, and if they came over, I was ready to crash at ten o'clock. Until then, especially while still at the shop, I was hanging out until at least midnight and up for work at seven with no problem. I began seeing my buddies a few times a week, a few weeks later, maybe once a week, and eventually not at all. I would get calls from time to time, asking me to go out, but after hearing me say "no" so often they just stopped wasting their time. Soon, the only calls I was getting were from my dad.

"Hello," I would answer, and usually assumed it was him.

"Hey, Jake, how ya feeling? It has been a tough week of weather out there."

Always referring to the job, and wanting to hear every detail as to what I was learning,

who was teaching me and telling me all the good things he had heard about the work I was doing.

“Yeah, been a tough week, got the building framed in though, a little warmer inside.” As I answered, he began to sense the lack of enthusiasm in my voice as the weeks passed.

“Stick with it. It will be spring soon,” he reassured me. I agreed with him, and in the back of my mind wondered if it would be worse than winter during the heat of the summer?

Before long, the thought of returning the next day made me cringe as I drove home each evening. I began thinking more and more about becoming an old man, doing this same shot day in and day out for the next thirty five years until I retired. I began missing my buddies, and even more so meeting girls at bars. I hadn't had a date in weeks. I hadn't done anything except go to work, come home tired, eat and go to bed. I was still young, but already feeling old, like I should be married and having kids.

I knew that I had expectations set upon me due to my last name, and I began to resent that too. Any other job I had had in the past, when I got to a point where I hated it I would give my notice and find another job. I was backed into a corner. I could see the pride in my father's eyes when I would see him. He shook my hand in a different way now, talked to me in a different way. My grandfather would call me to check in on what was happening on the job. He had never called me in my life before this. The job foreman by then knew my name, and things were getting easier, but it didn't matter.

I started going out with my friends again, and at times showing up to the job site hung over as hell, or just calling in sick. Having fun again felt better than I remembered

it. I was having people over and getting more and more tired of waking up each morning when it was still dark outside, throwing on my work clothes and grabbing my hard-hat. I was envious of my slacker buddies, some who were back in classes, sitting next to pretty girls in warm classrooms, blowing off homework and living life.

It wasn't long until my dad came by, ready to lecture and tell me to straighten up.

"It isn't hard to see that your enthusiasm has been sliding here lately," he said as he looked down on me like I was a kid in trouble. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"Not really." I didn't really want to talk to him about it. I already knew what he would say. "I am just questioning if this is what I want to do for the rest of my life," I told him as I looked him eye-to-eye. I was trying to be honest, but I may have well been talking to a wall, he didn't want to hear it. After all, the Union President had called me personally to offer me a spot. It was understood that I was going to be a full apprentice in a matter of months, and it was because of the family name I represented.

"Well, this is the only thing I will ever be able to offer you in your life, and it has been good to our family. You have a legacy to uphold, a name that you carry, and it will take you as far as you are willing to take it. You are not a kid anymore, though a lot of your friends still are," he spoke calmly. We were talking, maybe for the first time, man-to-man. "You tighten those boots in the morning, and you do exactly what they tell you to do the very best that you can," he wasn't asking me; he was telling me. I nodded my head and he walked out of my apartment.

I sat on my couch after grabbing a beer from my refrigerator. I knew that I needed to make a decision. I wondered if my mindset was temporary, if once spring hit I would enjoy the work again, and if this all was just a part of growing up? Would I outgrow my buddies soon, meet some girl and settle down into that kind of life? The more I thought about it, I began to feel nauseous. That wasn't what I wanted at all. I wanted to read books, not carry wrenches. I wanted to hang out all night if I felt like it, I wanted to hang out with my buddies until as late as I wanted and not have to walk out into the cold before dawn and trudge through the snow and mud for eight hours. I didn't want to be a member of the Local 440, and I wanted to go back to school to earn my degree in English.

The following morning I turned off my alarm as it sounded. I lay there in my bed, in the dark, and thought to myself, *no, I'm not going*. I awoke a few hours later as my phone rang. I let the machine answer. It was my foreman looking for me. I hadn't bothered to call in. The next three days was more of the same. I didn't go. The foreman would call and I wouldn't answer. On the fourth day my mother called, and I listened to the machine as she spoke.

“Jacob, this is your mother. Those are your father's colleagues, and I expected you to bow out with a little more respect for him than this. We are very let down. He did all that he could do, so don't bother asking him for help in the future, that was all he could do. I hope you are happy.” With that, the call was over.

I knew that I should have handled things better. I felt bad about it. I also knew that had I given my two week notice to the Union, I would have gotten a call from every member of my family with a list of reasons why I was making a huge mistake, that I

needed to stick with it, and what a terrible choice I was making. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to hear it from my dad especially. I let him down. I let him down huge. He was going to be let down regardless though, whether I gave two long weeks to make my exit, or if I did it like ripping off a band-aid and just quit.

I did nothing for the next few days. I felt relieved and happy. Weight was lifted from my shoulders. All of the expectations were gone. I had failed miserably, over and done with. I drank beer with my buddies and laughed like I hadn't laughed in months.

I eventually walked into a downtown restaurant and took a job as a bar-back. I went back to campus to find out what I needed to do in order to re-enroll. Of course, that summer at the Nichols' family reunion I was not the most popular person. Disdain was a proper sentiment, and I watched the uncle's gather around one of my second cousins who had just graduated high school with no plans for college, the new hope was alive.

I returned to college, this time I was happy to sit in any class and hear any lecture, because I knew what the alternative was. My first semester back was the spring semester of the '97-98 school year. It was mid-January, and boy was it cold outside. I graduated in May of 2002, and was the second "Nichols" in family history to receive a college diploma, my brother was the first, and I am working on becoming the first in the family to ever earn a post graduate degree.

By now, most of the family has forgiven me, most. There are still a few Uncle's and cousins who won't look in my direction. Some of them are about my age, been in the Union for a good ten years, and man, do they look old.

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The relationship between the two of us has become stronger and closer as time has passed. We have, over the years, taken the time to talk about some of the events that occurred, and examined some of the mistakes that both of us made along the way. Even more importantly, we both have had a chance to not only say *I'm sorry*, but *I love you* as well. It wasn't until my early twenties that we actually had the chance, and finally took the time, to get to know one another. I made many changes in my life compared to the rebellious teenager who I once was. In turn, my father is not the same person he was when I was a teenager.

Many small special moments occurred between us in our journey to repair things. I will never forget the first time I sat and had a beer with him. We met at a small bar during my junior year of college, and we sat and talked like two buddies just having a cold one. What I remember most about that event was that we didn't feel the need to talk about all of the turmoil from our past, but rather, about what was happening in our present lives. We laughed together, and it felt good.

Recalling the events that were my coming of age was not an easy task. I hold deep regret for much of what I put him through. As I look at my own little boy, Hank, age two, it brings the reality of it all into a much brighter focus. What will my reaction be when he begins his coming of age journey? I often ask myself the question of what will he be rebelling against when the time comes? How will I handle it, and to whom will I turn to for advice? Of course it will be my father, because I think that it is safe to say that he has seen it all.



## Annotated Bibliography

Agee, James. "Knoxville: Summer of 1915." 1938. *The Best American Essays of the Century (The Best American Series)*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 171-75.

Agee's essay is a reflection of his childhood in the Knoxville summer. It is not a reflection in the sense of a detailed account of the events of that summer, but rather a reflection of the sensory perceptions that he recalls so clearly. He begins with a description of what his neighborhood looked like, from the houses to the yards, and then shifts to the moment where he wants to take us. It is the moment just after dinner, when there is still light, but it is *like the lining of a shell*. (171) He recalls the hissing of the hoses as the fathers hosed down their lawns and how the sound was echoed as the locusts and crickets came to life. As the light dimmed, they retreated to porches and he expands on the sounds of horse buggies, loud cars and silent cars passing, lovers walking. They further retreat to the backyard to sit down on quilts laid out on the grass and the sounds of the quiet conversations around him until he was put into bed.

Baker, Russell. "Growing Up." 1982. *Modern American Memoirs*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996. 49-67.

Russell Baker's memoir is a child's account of what he observed during the Great Depression. It begins with a move to Newark with his widowed mother and sister to his mother's younger brother's house. He gives an account of the struggles that he mainly observes and seems rather unaffected by. What he is most affected by are the twice daily doses of Cod liver oil, and then the determination that he has a dire case of spinal curvature. The remedy for this was gymnastics, which he fails at terribly. His mother struggles to find work, and eventually meets a man and decides that marriage is the best option for stability. Oluf was the man she met, a hard working Danish immigrant. He travels around looking for work, and his letters provide a strong sense of what was happening all around the country during the time. Each letter sounds a bit more desperate and hopeless until they are no longer being written, he vanished into the depression, and the mother's hopes for salvation vanished with him.

Bartkevicius, Jocelyn. "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction." *Fourth Genre*:

*Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Ed. Robert L. Root, Jr. and

Michael Steinberg. New York: Longman, 2005. 275-82.

Bartkevicius begins her essay with a memory she has in her grandmother's garden. The conversation, as she remembers, was quite stirring, and she reflected upon often. After giving the scene she reflects on what must be flaws in her remembrance of the events. She ventures off into a definition of creative nonfiction, and makes comparisons along the way. These definitions focus on the origin of the "non" as compared to "un." She compares this to the idea of non-American to un-American and the implied meanings. She then explores the way in which two people, or a group of people, can witness or participate in the same event and through the act of writing the event down create stories so differently. In a discussion among other writers where dialogue comes into question, and the need for a recording device, it is concluded that there is more to the dialogue than what a machine could capture. For instance, what the writer was thinking as something was being said. She concludes with the current state of creative nonfiction departments, that there are times that the departments seem homeless in the general landscape, and that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Birkerts, Sven. *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2008.

Sven Birkerts examines several styles and approaches to memoir writing and explains the manner in which they are different and the instances where the varying methods overlap. Though his research it becomes clear the "I" must be an inhabitable character that finds strength and credibility through the collision of original perception and hindsight realization. The writer walks a fine line between the act of telling and showing, and must recognize that the stakes in memoir writing are set very high. This is due to the perception that memoir has been viewed recently as merely a self-involved, even therapeutic, exercise. The writer is responsible for digging up material, guiding the expression and giving the memoir a clear form for the reader to follow. One way this is discovered is by the uncovering of the powerful effects of seemingly small events. He also reminds us that memoir serves as the spirit, rather than the letter, of the past.

Clearman Blew, Mary. "The Unwanted Child." 1991. *Fourth Genre: Contemporary*

*Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. By Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael

Steinberg. New York: Longman, 2005. 37-47.

This Coming-Of-Age memoir is based wholly on reflection, and takes a familiar approach to the notion of a writer looking back at the moment when she had come of age, and all that led to that point. Clearman Blew begins her memoir with the discovery that she was pregnant, and although she was married, it was not news that they were prepared to hear. She dwells on what this would mean for her college career, and the reasons she had wed in the first place. As she goes to her parent's house to tell her mother the news she begins to reflect on her own childhood, and that of her mother's upbringing. Her mother was an unwanted child, or unplanned, and Clearman Blew always felt the disappointment in her parents that she herself was not a boy. The memoir ends with the author holding the baby in her arms and asking *what now?*

Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,

2002.

Vivian Gornick explores the art of essay writing and memoir writing. She begins with the essay, and what it entails to write a compelling and well discovered work. Through the exploration of many well known essays, Gornick gives examples of where the writer failed to bring their points across clearly and effectively, and also where they succeeded. Memoir is treated in much the same manner. What she reveals is the relationship between a well written essay/memoir, and the reader's ability to see the narrator, or writer, clearly. What is it that pushed the writer to create this, the situation, and what is it in relation to what is read, or the story? The memoirist has the task in front of them to engage with the world as the story is taken from life, not a life of imagination, and must hold a sustained narrative of raw material. The idea of the self becomes the organizing principle, and what gives the memoir both shape and texture. It is also the task to become acquainted with the stranger with whom the writer shares the same skin. It is the task for the reader to get to the narrator, because only through understanding the narrator, or writer, can the piece be understood.

Gray, Spalding. "Sex and Death to the age 14." *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 161-76.

This essay covers the time of Spaulding Gray's life from childhood up to the age of fourteen. In the early pages, time is framed in terms of the pets he has, and their untimely deaths. In the later pages it is framed by the girls that he had crushes on. The early years seem to be a random recollection of memories, but as the time passes he begins to focus more directly. This technique works well in terms of his early memories, in the child-like rambling that occurs in the verses, and then gaining clarity as he matures. What stands out in this memoir is the absolute honesty, the *warts and all*, nature of how he handled this material. As a reader, I truly got the sense that he held nothing back in terms of exactly what he felt at the time, even at the expense of his own embarrassment at times. This is a true example of a Coming-of Age memoir as it chronicles everything from childhood innocence to adolescent wonder.

Hampl, Patricia. "Memory and Imagination." 1985. *Fourth Genre: Contemporary*

*Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Ed. Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg.

New York: Longman, 2005. 306-15.

Hampl begins her essay on memoir writing by beginning a memoir of her own. She then begins to dissect certain aspects of the opening of her first draft attempt. She instantly recalls that things were remembered incorrectly, even names being incorrect. The importance of memory, the disbelief of memory at times are important in the process of remembering. She states that, *I do not write what I know, I write in order to find out what I know.* (309) Her focus then turns to the importance of writing a first draft, and that the second draft must always be a true *re-vision* and not just a cosmetic going over of the draft. She also poses the question of why write memoir in the first place. She comes to many insightful answers and reasons why it is important to write memoir, and sums them up that *to write one's life is to live twice.* (315)

Hoffman, Richard. *Half the House*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995.

Richard Hoffman's memoir is a tragic story that reflects his struggle and that of his family as they deal with death, abuse and many hardships. It begins with the mother on her deathbed, and then quickly shifts gears to his early childhood. What begins as two brothers living a normal childhood, he being one year older, begins to change at about age 8, when his brother begins suffering from muscular dystrophy. He can do nothing as he watches his brother deteriorate, and also another one of his younger brothers begins to

suffer. The youngest brother never even is able to walk, and is the first to pass. We follow Richard as he struggles with this, and through is sexual abuse by his baseball coach, the physical abuse from his frustrated and overwhelmed father. The background of his childhood is drenched in cold war fear, and Catholicism that he uses to punctuate the fear that he was surrounded by. We follow him through college, and his “war” with alcoholism, until his final arrival at peace with himself and life.

Howard, Maureen. “Facts of Life.” 1975. *Modern American Memoirs*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996. 68-79.

*Facts of Life* covers a lot of ground from Maureen Howard’s childhood up to her ex-husband picking up their daughter for her weekend visit. It begins with her taking over for her brother at elocution lessons from Mrs. Holton. These classes were meant for her to learn what it was to be a lady. She provides details of what those classes entailed, and what she learned. We also get an examination of the general dynamic in her home. She recollects some of the antics that occurred almost nightly at the dinner table. As she progresses through public high school, she begins making excuses to avoid elocution classes, and the skills learned eventually become little more than party tricks. On a visit home from college she visits Mrs. Holton and is given all of the materials that she was made to study as a little girl, which end up ruined in a flooded basement at her ex-husbands house where she no longer lived.

Karr, Mary. “The Liar’s Club.” *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth*. By Bill Roorbach. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 143-55.

Chapter thirteen begins with a very powerful scene from Mary Karr’s childhood that involves here mother nearly shooting her stepfather. It continues to recount the details of them leaving the following day to live with their father, the details of the trip, and the eventual reuniting of her parents. Mary Karr has chosen at times to write in the voice of herself as a child. She holds true to the manner and line of thinking that she, as a ten year old, would have sounded, *I brushed each tooth with the neat circle stroke Captain Kangaroo had instructed me to.* (148) But also switches to a voice of reflection, at times admitting that she didn’t remember what she was thinking at the time, but speculating what she thought she might have said or thought. This works well to show both sides of her memoir. At times we are given the innocence, and at other times we are offered explanation.

Larson, Thomas. *The Memoir and the Memoirist*. Athens, Ohio: Swallow/Ohio UP, 2007.

Thomas Larson covers the entire spectrum of memoir writing in his book. He begins by defining what it means to write memoir, and by doing so explains what separates the memoir from other classifications, autobiography for example. He moves on to discuss different approaches that writers can take toward memoir writing, and the problems that may be encountered along the way. The problems he examines range from the difficulty of finding the correct voice, or narration, for the piece, and the obstacles the writer faces when it comes to memory. He closes the book by examining the place memoir holds in the world of writing, and where he feels the direction that memoir is heading in the future. He also questions the damage that has been done in the recent past concerning false memoir, such as *A Million Little Pieces*. He makes his strongest points while discussing the importance of truth, but does not rule out the subjective nature of memory in regards to the truthfulness and what the writer remembers, and that others may recall events differently though both people witnessed the same events

Morris, Wright. "Will's Boy." 1980. *Modern American Memoirs*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996. 222-30.

After leaving college, Wright Morris finds a postcard from his uncle in Texas and decides to go to work for him. He didn't realize what he was getting into until he arrives at the hardscrabble farm in Texas. There were 1,800 acres that had to be plowed, and if the tractor ran day and night it would be ready to plant by spring. The other reason the tractor ran day and night was due to the difficulty in getting it started. Wright ran the tractor all day, and his uncle ran it all night. There was little more than work that went on except on Sunday, their day off. He discovers that his uncle is a great conversationalist, and learns a great deal about him on these days off, and much about the relationship between his uncle and his uncle's wife. There is little in terms of introspection, but this excerpt is fueled by observation.

Morrison, Blake. *And when did you last see your father?* New York, New York: Picador USA, 1995.

Blake Morrison approaches this memoir by juxtaposing chapters which reflect his coming of age under his father's scrutiny and as he watches his father die. He begins the book with a scene that really presents his father, how he was, and slowly begins to bring himself to the forefront of the following scenes. He takes us through his childhood, and through situations that he now clearly understands what was happening, but remains in a

childlike narrative voice that lets us, as readers, know what is happening, but his naïveté remains. What begins to emerge as he gets into his teenage years is the competitive nature of his father, and how this went on to mold who he would ultimately become, along with the resentment, embarrassment at times, and the fact that he held his father up as larger than life. Then there are the chapters that chronicle his father's failing body. The shift in authority is profound, as if the child had become the adult, the adult the child. He takes us through the final moments of his father's life, and then through the funeral and cremation. Throughout the chapter on the funeral he again recalls moments of his development with the people who are paying respects to his father, the part they played in moments such as his discovery of sex, or when a friend died in a car wreck in high school.

Root Jr., Robert L. "Knowing Where You've Been." *Fourth Genre: Contemporary*

*Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Ed. Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg.

New York: Longman, 2005. 188-94.

In his essay, Root takes us along with him on his way to making a personal discovery. The setting is the terrain of Montana where he has gone for an environmental writing workshop, but the essay is focused mainly in the mountains outside of the retreat. Each afternoon there is time set aside with nothing planned, which allows him and a few others the time for hiking. At the end of the hikes, upon returning, he couldn't get past the idea of not really knowing where he had been. It sat with him as a kind of regret. On his final afternoon in the terrain he finally makes the internal connection in his mind as to what he was feeling that it *isn't how far at all but how deep*. And it is summed up as *Sometimes you need to go as deeply as possible where you've never been to reach a place you recognize at once, recognize entirely*. (194) Once this connection is made there is no question, or need to look back, to know where he had been.

Scwartz, Mimi. "Memoir? Ficton? Where's the Line?" 1999. *Fourth Genre:*

*Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Ed. Robert L. Root, Jr. and

Michael Steinberg. New York: Longman, 2005. 399-404.

Scwartz tackles an issue that every writer of creative nonfiction writer encounters at some point. If I remember this wrong is it still true? She offers many explanations and words of support taken from various respected creative nonfiction writers that, yes, if you believe that it is true, it is true. She also looks at issues such as composite characters, and the role they play to protect both the real character and the writer as well. There is

nothing wrong with changing a setting as long as the meaning is the same. What is important is that it still rings true on “my” truth scale. Only the writer knows how he or she remembers a certain memory, and everyone will remember it differently, that does not mean that one is correct and the other is incorrect. She uses the example of Geoffrey and Tobias Wolff, and their differing accounts of their childhood in each of their memoirs as an example. Neither were wrong, just remembered it differently.

Updike, John. “The Disposable Rocket.” 1993. *The Best American Essays of the Century*

(*The Best American Series*). Ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan. Boston:

Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 549-52.

*The Disposable Rocket* is an interesting look at the coming of age memoir. Updike, in reality, goes beyond just the C.O.A and takes a look at the whole spectrum of becoming, and then declining. He uses the body as the ever changing diagram of how one is, what they are capable of and what becomes of them through the stages of the bodies youth, adolescence and old age. He also makes comparisons between the male and female bodies, and that the male body has to go through far less of a decline. He takes us from the rubber ball that a child’s body is, to the strong body of the young man, to the slow decay that begins sometime after the thirtieth birthday, and then the body at age sixty. Sixty is his age at the time of writing this essay.

Wolfe, Tom. “Putting On Daddy.” 1964. *The Best American Essays of the Century* (*The*

*Best American Series*). Ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan. Boston:

Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 280-87.

Wolfe takes an interesting view of the gap between parents and a young adult during the early years of the culture wars. He tags along with a friend of his, Parker, age 46, who is heading to the city in search of his son, who out of nowhere dropped out of Columbia. He knew where to look, and that he was living with a bunch of *flipniks*, his word for beatniks. The two men, in their Chesterfield cats and hats make their way to the, as Wolfe puts it, *slum tenement*. There is the uneasiness immediately between the father and bearded, long-haired, shirtless son, and his son’s pals sitting on the floor. The smell of pot is in the air, but is ignored, and any sort of conversation is strained. The distance between father and son is a chasm, and Wolfe and Parker leave without really accomplishing anything. Ben, the son, is coming of age in a new time that his father has no concept of.



Wolff, Geoffrey. *Duke of Deception: Memories of My Father*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

In his memoir, Geoffrey Wolff begins by recounting the origins of his family. He details the events that brought his father into the world, what his father's life was like growing up; and eventually how he met his mother. What this memoir then becomes is a recollection of the life he was born into, the trials and struggles that were endured and created by the manner in which his father lived. As he grows up, soon separated from his mother and drifting with his father, there is a deep bond between father and son. Eventually The Duke remarries for money and Geoffrey is sent to boarding school, and then to Princeton with a few detours along the way. Over time he is slowly beginning to see his father for who he really was, and the anger and resentment begin to bubble over. There are times when he seems to be in some ways following in his father's footsteps, and then catching himself before the descent has been fulfilled. It is only after his father's death, after Geoffrey has grown, married and has children, that he can once again remember his father and the fond memories again return.

Wolff, Tobias. "This Boy's Life." 1989. *Modern American Memoirs*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996. 193-204.

This excerpt from Tobias Wolff's memoir deals with his reasoning behind, desire to attend, and the scheme he concocted in order to make his way to prep school. There is the underlying tone throughout this essay that he feels that without the ability to attend a respected prep school he will never achieve the life that he desires. He forges letters of recommendation on stolen school stationery, and uses these letters to justify all of the great accomplishments he lied about on his applications. Although he lied on his applications, he was still careful enough not to make the lies too big, and keep them believable to a point. After receiving rejection letter after rejection letter, he finally receives a phone call at school from a Hill alumnus who lives in the area and wanted to speak with him. He successfully bluffs his way through the interview.

## **Curriculum Vitae**

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### **Education**

#### **Master of Arts**

Indiana University, May, 2010

#### **Bachelor of Arts**

Indiana University, May, 2002