

IP of D.J. Chambers

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**3,000 SOULS DOWN
SACRIFICE OF THE MASSES**

D.J. CHAMBERS

3,000 Souls Down: Sacrifice of the Masses

The Post-Active-Addiction-Edition

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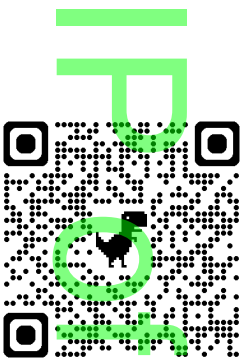
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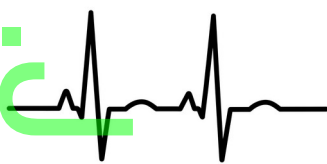
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DJ:



Chambers

To a public defender, a
prosecutor, and a judge in Knox
County, Tennessee.

You gave me another chance
when I least deserved it. I am
writing this book because of and
for you.

J. Chambers

IP of D.J. Chambers

NOTE

This work is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of his experiences over a period of years. Certain names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed, and certain persons are composites. Dialogue and events have been recreated from memory and, in some cases, have been compressed to convey the substance of what was said or what occurred.

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PREFACE

This story started as my self-confession. It has undergone more edits than I ever anticipated. Truth be told, I never intended it to exist as anything more than an exercise to survive withdrawal from methamphetamine. It was inspired by my need to find answers to difficult questions I had spent a lifetime avoiding—questions I never wanted to ask until the day I realized I wasn't going to die until God was good and ready for me. It was on that same day I realized that if I was going to keep breathing, I might as well make the most of the time. Just days earlier, I had finally collapsed under the combined weight of my past, present, and future.

That collapse forced me to sit down and face my rage head-on. I am not built for prison, but that was where my trajectory pointed. At first, the work was pure

self-flagellation—crying woe is me to God, begging for sympathy for the pain the world had dealt me, convinced my suffering was the fault of everyone but myself.

Then something shifted. The words began doing their work. Answers fell into place. The excuses I had manufactured my entire life exposed themselves as the hollow delusions of a drug-fueled fury.

I won't play the stand-up guy who falls on his sword, pretends to understand every mystery, and wraps the wreckage in neat, Christian-based platitudes. But I will surrender my pride and arrogance to God. I recognize that only He can wash away the fear and loathing I clung to for so many years. He gave me the physical and mental clarity to sit at this keyboard and drag fifty years of darkness into the light.

Let me be clear: my gratitude will not be sanitized or compartmentalized into what conventional believers expect. I have spent endless hours dissecting the texts that dragged me out of my self-imposed shit hole. While I have accepted God's grace, I have also uncovered volumes of misleading rhetoric, malicious distortions, and empty promises in modern-day religion. I have found passages where a single modified word altered the entire spirit of the message. I have traced translation errors from Greek and Hebrew into modern English that cannot be brushed off as innocent differences of opinion. Those very distortions helped clear my path into addiction.

I will not allow myself to be consumed by anger again. I cannot make that promise for you. If you want to see the evidence I bring to the table, visit my website and find the My Rock page. Decide for yourself if I'm onto something, and reach out with your thoughts. Unless you hold a copyright on your own translation of God's word. In that case, keep your opinions to yourself.

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ORIGIN OF RUIN

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BROKEN

I entered 1968 like a bomb dropped into a war zone. My father was fighting for his life in Vietnam while my mother was fighting for hers, and mine, in a cramped hospital in Blue Island. She was nineteen, standing five feet tall and weighing ninety pounds, carrying a massive nine-pound baby with fetal alcohol syndrome.

I was broken before I drew breath, hauling the physical wreckage of choices made before I had a voice.

Mom was the product of a brutal childhood—an absentee father and a sadistic stepmother whose cruelty left generational scars. My father's family dismissed her as south-side white trash, leaving her to rot while he survived the tunnels. When he finally crawled home, he inherited a family he never wanted. The marriage was a slow-motion demolition derby that dragged on for

seven miserable years, leaving a trail of wreckage in their wake.

My brothers and I were never part of the floor plan. I didn't understand the war my father brought home or the ghosts haunting my mother, but their damage pooled around my ankles before I could walk.

The world was on fire, and I was choking on the smoke. Those early years drew my blueprints before I had a say in the architecture. But this story isn't just about what happened to me; I came wired wrong, and childhood frayed the rest. At some point, the damage was complete, and I considered myself totaled. That's where the real confession starts—not in the nursery of chaos, but in the long, stumbling walk through the mess of being human.

EARLY REGETS

My earliest regret arrived on April 27, 1968, the day I was born.

After Mom endured forty grueling hours of labor, a nurse called the hospital chaplain to administer our last rites. The doctor warned that one of us would die—perhaps both. Neither of us did.

If she had died, I might have stood a fighting chance at normalcy. My father wouldn't have kept me, and his parents certainly wouldn't have stepped in. Mom's dad would have tried, but landing under his roof would have been just as disastrous, if not worse; he was dead by the time I turned eight anyway.

If I had died, it wouldn't have mattered at all. I spent decades regretting my birth. I don't anymore.

My friend Bill used to say a life can be measured by the sum of its regrets.

He was in his late forties; I was barely twenty-three. When he died of AIDS, I grieved for months—bitterly, lashing out at anyone fool enough to try to comfort me. He was one of only two real friends I had in the world, and losing him carved out a hollow space I couldn't fill.

Bill was a wise man. He taught me more about what it meant to walk through this world as a man than anyone who came before him. Hell, he even dragged me to a production of *Hamlet* and forced me to appreciate Shakespeare. Afterward, over drinks, we argued about the mortal coil and the weight of living. The mortal coil: mine was already wound as tight as a tripwire.

We met when he was hired to replace an older salesman at a fine men's clothier in Austin. He was my competition, and being young and insecure, I hated him on sight. I figured a polished forty-year-old with an effortless stride would swoop in and steal my client book.

He was cut from a different cloth than anyone I'd ever known. Bill carried the easy charm of James Bond paired with the social instincts of the Invisible Man. If an opportunity arose to avoid being the center of attention, he took it gladly. He was calm because he had nothing left to prove, and rich enough not to care—Texas oil money delivered in steady monthly dividend checks. But he grew bored sitting in an empty house and outgrew the bar scene, so there he was, standing behind the counter.

Our friendship was born the evening he invited me for after-work drinks, his treat. In the men's room, my

jaw dropped when he finished at the urinal and headed straight for the exit.

“What?” he asked, catching my horrified glare.

“You’re not washing your hands?”

“I keep a very clean penis, David.”

Just like that, the ice broke.

I poured out my faults and insecurities to him for years before he ever dropped his armor. Bill wasn’t sentimental, and he had plenty of scars justifying his suspicion of people. But eventually, our act fell away. He was the first person brave enough to tell me the truth: that I carried a venomous resentment toward men, even as I was nearly killing myself trying to win their approval. At the time, I convinced myself he was full of shit.

AIDS was an entirely different beast back then. It began with no treatments at all, then evolved into primitive, toxic pharmaceuticals that made patients violently ill. To manage the chronic, wasting complications, doctors handed out heavy opiates. The narcotics only compounded the disaster.

Bill died alone in the front seat of his car in a shopping mall parking lot just before his shift was set to begin. His system had locked up, and finally, his bowels simply ruptured. There was no dignity in it—which is probably why I wanted to burn the world down for so long after. Losing Bill left me marinating in pure rage for a year.

All right, forty years.

He would have loathed the indignity of his death; I'm grateful no one was able to warn him. Bill was the kind of teacher who showed rather than told. I think he was trying to tell me something profound the afternoon he slid Sade's "No Ordinary Love" into the tape deck. But dead men don't answer questions, and the tape has long since run out.

I inherited my mother's cold disdain for mankind, but I can't bring myself to condemn her for it. Her childhood wasn't paved with roses. Her own war began at eight years old, declared by her father's new bride, Agnes.

Mom was the eldest of three children born from an old-fashioned shotgun wedding. By the time she arrived, her father, Loyll, was already aboard a Navy destroyer, fighting a war across the Pacific. Her mother, Myrtle, had no appetite for family life. Once the war ended, she gave Loyll two more children, waited until her own father died, decided she was thoroughly bored with motherhood, and walked out—leaving my grandfather holding three small children he had no idea how to raise.

Loyll drove long-haul freight, gone for weeks at a stretch, leaving the kids at the mercy of Agnes. She possessed a legendary, sadistic cruelty. Drunk, mean, and bitterly jealous, she ruled the house with a leather belt and a bottle. Over time, beatings become routine; you learn how to take a belt.

So Agnes learned to weaponize the Chicago winter. My mother, aunt, and uncle would walk home from

school only to find the doors bolted from the inside. Agnes wasn't entirely devoid of mercy—she left rough wool blankets under the open carport. But there was never any breakfast.

Those early winters, paired with decades of heavy drinking, go a long way toward explaining my mother's ability to drive men to madness without a flicker of remorse. She was a grand master of psychological manipulation. She could wage a war of attrition over the most absurd point until her target capitulated, leaving the man wondering how he had managed to be so thoughtless in the first place. I've never understood how straight men survive women's mind games; the promised reward must be extraordinary to justify the toll.

In her defense, she underwent a full hysterectomy at thirty. Hormones—nature's cruellest punchline.

Bob was the closest thing to a real father my brothers and I had growing up. He was slow to burn, but once the fuse caught, the explosion was absolute. Yet in all those years, I never saw him raise a hand or his voice to my mother.

He only laid hands on me once. We were in the kitchen, Mom was in the middle of a vicious tear, and I looked Bob dead in the eye and asked, "Why don't you just kill her?"

He struck me hard, taking his fury at her out on my skin. I forgave him instantly. She could drive me toward murder, too; I understood exactly where the blow came from.

On other occasions when my behavior earned a welt, Bob never reached for a belt. He dispensed discipline with a psychological precision far more sophisticated—and permanent—than raw physical violence. His justice was always fair. Perhaps too fair. I stood in the corner, taking quiet notes.

Mom's drinking during pregnancy left me with an immune system that fired at shadows. First came aggressive allergies, then violent asthma. I was a sickly kid who spent half his early years crying. New Orleans, with its suffocating humidity and swamp mold, was the worst possible place for lungs like mine.

One afternoon stays permanently seared in my head.

From behind the screen door, I watched my father pushing the lawnmower across the yard. Desperate to help, I slipped outside into the heavy heat. I'm gonna help Daddy with the grass, I told myself. Look at that big dirt hill. I'm gonna bulldoze it!

I slammed my foot straight through the mound.

The shock was immediate and blinding. Fire ants surged over my bare ankles by the thousands, stinging relentlessly.

"Help me, Daddy!" I screamed, flailing in the dirt. "Help me! It hurts!"

Harry came running with the garden hose. He was going to save me. He scooped me up with one arm, blasting the freezing water across my legs, trying frantically to wash the swarm away. But the venom had already found blood.

First, my chest seized. My bronchial tubes clamped shut against the poison, starving me of air. Then full anaphylaxis took hold. Mom had already dialed 911, and the sirens were screaming toward the house. In that terrifying haze, Harry was my absolute hero.

The moment the medics stabilized me, he turned that terror into violence, lunging at my mother for failing to watch me. It became physical immediately. It always did.

My father was a damaged man. It was a family heirloom, passed down through the bloodline like tarnished silver. He grew up comfortably in Chicago, the oldest of five boys, raised by strict, commanding parents. Harry was expected to set the standard, held ruthlessly accountable for his brothers' chaos. He was a quiet, obedient kid—until he threw a wooden desk through a closed window in kindergarten.

He took frequent, brutal whippings. His father was strict, but his mother was iron. Grandpa had liberated concentration camps during World War II, which was where he met my grandmother. She would later serve as Chicago's first female beat cop: hard, relentless, but fiercely protective of me.

Vietnam broke what was left of Harry. Before shipping out, he had been attentive and tender with my mother. He returned jumpy, suspicious, and unpredictably violent. I can't bring myself to blame him for the shell-shocked wreck he was in those early days; who could? My grudge against Harry belongs entirely to

the decades that followed, anchored in his total refusal to lift a finger to heal.

When I was five, he took me into a New Orleans brothel. The reason has been lost to time.

“Oh, Harry, who is this?” his girlfriend purred as we walked through the parlor.

“This is my boy, David. Is there somewhere he can play while we handle business?”

She knelt down in front of me. “He’s adorable. Is he blessed like his daddy?”

Harry barked a laugh. “Not yet. Show Daddy’s friend your bird, David.”

The woman reached down and helped me unbutton my shorts.

“Oh, he’s got some growing to do,” she laughed, tapping my cheek. “Do you like M&M’s, baby?”

I nodded eagerly. Because I did. I liked Daddy’s friend.

An enormous void exists in my early memory—whole chapters burned out, timestamps erased. I shudder when I think about what is buried in that dark.

I remember the Creole woman next door who made the best gumbo in Louisiana. I remember her three boys, who could talk me into throwing rocks through an abandoned house one afternoon, then yank me away from a water moccasin in the tall grass the next, broad grins never leaving their faces.

And I remember their mother pulling up to our curb in an empty city bus to drive us to the airport.

She and Mom were weeping as we boarded. I started crying right along with them the second it dawned on me that I would never taste her gumbo again.

Hours later, I was mesmerized by the sea of blue runway lights as our plane banked into Kennedy Airport to catch our connection. It was just Mom, my two-year-old brother Ricky, and me. She was eight months pregnant with Sean, her belly enormous, her face gray with exhaustion.

As we walked through the terminal, two men in military police uniforms stepped out of the crowd and intercepted us. Mom protested, her voice rising in panic, but they took her by the arms and began steering her away into an administrative corridor.

She turned back toward me, her eyes wide. “Hold Ricky’s hand. Don’t you move. I promise I’ll come back.”

I didn’t believe her. I stood in the middle of JFK, holding my baby brother, and wept. Ricky cried with me.

I was not quite six years old.

Terror has a way of aging a child before he ever learns how to read. Standing under the fluorescent glare of that terminal with Ricky clutched against my chest, watching strangers march my mother into the shadows, I learned what it felt like to be responsible for another human life before I even understood my own. I didn’t possess the vocabulary for abandonment, but my gut understood the mechanics perfectly.

My childhood was a relentless succession of moments like that: small catastrophes, sudden disappearances, and adults who oscillated between dangerous, helpless, and completely gone. Yet even then, I harbored a stubborn belief that somewhere out there, an adult existed who was stronger than the chaos.

Children invent heroes when none are provided. They mistake proximity for protection.

Long before I learned who my father truly was, I learned who I desperately needed him to be.

WAIT

Mom always required a man in the house—for her sake, and for ours.

After the first divorce, my brothers and I were sent to live with Harry, but those months remain buried beneath dark floorboards in my mind. We grew up understanding the unwritten rule: Mom would only call us back into the shelter of her care once she had a new provider on the hook.

Hindsight makes it easy to parse her prime directive. She would never permit her boys to go hungry or sleep on the street. We would have four solid walls and a roof overhead—period, end of story. Tragically, her obsession with shielding us from the elements would end up breaking us entirely.

She met Bob at a tavern in Lyons, Illinois, in 1975, only a few months after shaking loose of Harry. He was

a decent, honorable man; I realized that far too late. Bob paid attention to us. When we stepped out of line, his corrections were hard, but they were consistently fair. He taught us the difference between right and wrong, and he would have molded me into a man—if not for the rain.

Bob was easily one of the most principled men I've ever crossed paths with. He had four grown children of his own living up in Lansing, Michigan, and I loved every one of them. Loving Bob's kids was easy.

He was a frugal man who earned a solid living. Like my mother's father, Bob drove long-haul freight. Back in the seventies, teamsters were well paid for the grinding hours and the brutal road time.

Compromise was Bob's specialty. When Ricky whined about why his school buddies received allowances for their chores while we got nothing, Bob didn't holler or throw a fist through drywall. Instead, he offered a deal: he would hand over weekly allowances, provided we gave him the opportunity to win every dollar back. We took the bait, and he taught us how to play five-card draw.

From then on, we collected our wages on Saturday mornings, and Bob cleaned us out by early afternoon. It didn't matter that we were essentially financing his pocket money; my brothers and I lived for those Saturday games.

Then came the weekend Bob's luck deserted him. Sean and I were already wiped out. Ricky—who was undeniably Bob's favorite—decided to toss a wrench

into the gears. Bob caught four of a kind, an ironclad hand, and pushed his entire pile into the center. Ricky didn't flinch; he pushed his stack in, too.

Bob called him with a wide, confident grin and slapped his four cards on the felt.

Ricky turned over a royal flush.

Bob didn't utter a sound. He simply stood up, hooked his calloused hands under the edge of the card table, and flipped it straight down the basement stairwell, sending nickels, dimes, bicycle decks, and metal chairs clattering into the dark.

Bob knew the full horror of Mom's history, but he begged her to pull us back from Harry anyway. He promised her he would love her boys like his own blood. He never broke that vow, no matter how relentlessly Ricky and I tested his patience.

Bob bought us a real house.

His intentions were immaculate, but his timing was disastrous. In the mid-seventies, runaway inflation and predatory interest rates choked working-class families. A modest thirty-five-thousand-dollar home strapped him with suffocating monthly notes. I can still see the strain in his face. Yet Bob cared far more about giving his adopted family a permanent foundation than he did about protecting his savings.

For a short stretch, life was steady. My only real drama was listening to Bob cuss like a sailor when he stumbled home late from a run and found dog shit on the den floor. My dog, Crimson, was wild and unruly.

One Christmas, while we were over at my aunt's house celebrating, Crimson slipped into my mother's bedroom, pulled her satin wedding gown off the hanger, and dragged it into the closet to make a nest. She whelped eleven puppies directly onto the white train. Bob gently shifted the mother and her brood out to the den's linoleum—the exact floor where Mom had worn that same gown on the day they were married.

I took a dark, childish pleasure whenever Bob's stockinged foot hit one of those foul booby traps in the dark. If I hadn't let Crimson run loose without a leash, she never would have ended up pregnant by some neighborhood stray. Bob only stepped in the mess because he didn't want to wake us up by switching on the overhead light.

It was my fault, and I knew it. Worse, I welcomed it. I was an empath watching his own empathy curdle into spite.

I was an angry, volatile boy who couldn't comprehend why my idea of fun seemed to terrify adults. I craved extremes, even locking myself in the closet to watch toilet paper burn. I pushed every boundary within reach, desperate to see how far I could lean over the edge before the ground gave way.

One crisp autumn morning, Bob ordered me to rake and burn a full acre of dry oak leaves. It was penance for my indoor experiments with matches. After sweating for hours to drag a colossal mountain of brush directly beneath his favorite apple tree, I decided to

speed up the process. I dumped an entire gallon of unleaded gasoline across the pile.

I dropped the match.

The vapors ignited with a deafening, concussive thump that sucked the breath straight from my chest. The shock wave lifted my eight-year-old body off the grass and threw me into a concrete retaining wall six feet away. When Bob came home to find his prized apple tree charred down to a blackened skeleton, he didn't raise a hand. He took one look at my two cracked ribs and decided the fire had handled the discipline for him.

How was an eight-year-old supposed to know a gallon was overkill?

My appetite for danger only metastasized. By eight, my fractured character was setting like concrete. What did I have left to lose?

Then came the hundred-year flood of spring 1977. I had no concept of Noah back then; if I had, I would have begged Mom to start building an ark in the driveway. It had rained without stopping for seven days. The television signal died early, leaving us huddled around the tinny squawk of the transistor radio:

“Good evening, it's 9:09, time for weather on the nines. Heavy precipitation continues across the Chicago metropolitan area. A flash flood warning has been issued for the southern suburbs, just northeast of Joliet...”

Mom and I stepped onto the front porch to see what the commotion was about. The night was pitch black,

save for jagged flashes of lightning illuminating a roiling wall of brown water churning just twenty feet from our steps. It was impossible; the creek bed was a quarter-mile away.

We panicked, grabbing bath towels, quilts, and sofa cushions to shove against the door frame, but the rising water laughed at us. It punched through the seals, surged to three feet in fifteen minutes, and kept climbing. Mom lost her mind. She couldn't swim. Ricky was five and Sean was only three; she couldn't carry them both, and I was too small to drag them through the current.

I climbed onto the sofa cushions, straining to keep my chin above the freezing, muddy water. Ricky was screaming his lungs out—the only familiar sound in a nightmare. Sean sobbed against my neck.

God bless our neighbor. He and his two teenage sons fought their way through the waist-deep current, kicked our splintered door open, hauled us through the dark, and saved our lives.

There was no saving Bob.

The flood didn't merely ruin the drywall and drown the furniture; it drowned the fundamental belief that he could keep his family safe. Imagine pulling an eighteen-wheeler into your driveway after days on the blacktop to find your entire life submerged under five feet of sewage, with no way of knowing if your wife and kids were dead or alive.

Our house on Codo Drive in Lockport Township wasn't mapped in an official flood zone. Bob carried no

flood insurance—why would he? The county condemned the carcass of the house, but the bank continued to demand every cent of the mortgage.

The marriage dragged on for another three years, but the spine had been kicked out of it. We moved from rental to rental as money grew scarce, though Bob made damn sure each neighborhood was slightly safer than the last. He was hell-bent on keeping his promise to Mom.

Yet I watched him age a full decade in thirty-six months. His easy laugh vanished. His broad shoulders curved inward. He took on back-to-back coast-to-coast hauls, trying to run down debts that moved faster than his truck. He was running on pure fumes and stubborn pride.

We still attempted our summer vacations in Friendship, Wisconsin. Three years after the flood, while we were staying at our cabin by the lake, the midday sky bruised into a sickly, electric green. Bob herded us down into the campground's underground storm shelter seconds before the tornado touched down. When the sirens finally choked off, we climbed out into the daylight to find the cabin wiped clean off its foundation. Our clothes, our beds, and our fishing gear were scattered across the county line.

Bob really died that afternoon. It just took his physical heart two more years to surrender to his ruined spirit.

Before the final papers were stamped, Mom saw the total collapse coming. Thinking she was doing us a

kindness, she broke the family apart: my brothers were farmed out to our aunt's house in Joliet, while I was put on a bus to spend the summer with my great-aunt in Missouri. In her misguided desperation to protect me, she robbed me of the chance to hold Bob's hand when his heart finally stopped beating. He never made it to sixty.

Losing Bob didn't just remove a steady man from our table; it pulverized the bedrock under our feet.

After Bob, everything in my life became disposable: addresses, schools, friends, and the very concept of a family unit. I was shipped down to Harry's house in Mobile for ninth grade—my tenth school down, with four more waiting down the line. By fifteen, I was bounced back to Missouri. My memories from that stretch are disjointed bursts of static—jagged fragments I have spent a lifetime trying to keep under glass.

I was far too young to grasp that the arc of my life had been permanently broken the night the creek breached the living room floor. Grief hollows out a boy, carving out an empty, echoing space where predators love to nest.

I didn't recognize it then, but I was becoming perfect bait: exhausted, uprooted, starving for safety, and unable to tell the difference between a hand reaching out to save me and a fist closing tight around my throat.

DIFFERENT CORNER

After Bob died, we went back to being bounced around like loose cargo.

My brothers and I lived out of suitcases, farmed out to friends and relatives. We stayed with Harry until he grew bored of playing father, drifted to my aunt's place, spent a brief, rent-free stint with Mom in a sagging house in Novinger, Missouri, bounced back to Harry, back to Aunt Sharon, and finally, in my case, a brief stay with Uncle Dick.

Sometimes the three of us were together. More often than not, we were scattered.

Eventually, Mom appeared to find solid ground. She landed a steady position managing the Red Cross pharmacy in Brookfield, Missouri. The owner of the pharmacy also owned the local movie theater downtown, along with a vacant apartment perched

directly above the auditorium. He offered Mom the place rent-free—and free was always her favorite number.

Just like that, she dragged us from the shadow of Chicago back into deep rural Missouri.

It was another violent shock to my nervous system. I had been an awkward, reclusive kid my entire life, and what I feared most in the world was simply being noticed. Being dragged to the front of a strange classroom and introduced as the new student was a routine violation of my safety. Not fitting in was old hat, but by tenth grade, the stakes were shifting. I harbored a desperate, irrational idea that I might actually make it to college, but the chronic academic craters carved by our constantly relocating were making that dream impossible.

I had drifted through more than a dozen schools across four states and two countries since kindergarten. Every district moved at its own cadence, and curricula never aligned. I was routinely ripped out of one subject and dumped into another mid-semester. Learning two months of geography over a single frantic weekend is rough; algebra and chemistry were downright brutal. Both are strictly linear disciplines. If I jumped ahead, I was hopelessly lost. If I got set back, I checked out from boredom.

I never truly mastered algebra; I scraped by on sheer memorization and dumb luck. But I was receiving a masterclass in survival—even if every lesson served a cynic far better than a teenager.

There were plenty of normal milestones I missed entirely. How to make enduring friends was one; I had neither the time nor the appetite to invest in bonds with expiration dates. Conflict resolution was another. By the time I rubbed a classmate the wrong way, Mom was already packing the trunk. Why bother fixing friction that would be settled by the highway?

I had never been on a real date, and I shuddered to imagine what an unmitigated disaster that would look like.

Instead, I developed cold, transactional instincts. Whenever an eager classmate approached looking for a study buddy, I declined, offering the excuse that I had to attend my grandmother's third funeral that month. I became a craftsman of self-serving alliances.

Back at Joliet Central—rated one of the most violent high schools in Illinois at the time—my daily winter walk to class ran straight through several blocks owned by the Latin Kings. Every morning, like clockwork, they relieved me of my winter coat.

That morning shakedown was how I ended up with a girlfriend.

I met Carmen in chemistry. She was stunning—thick, obsidian hair falling past her hips and flawless lips. Naturally, none of that stirred a thing in me, which suited us fine; Carmen wasn't interested in my body. She wanted my test answers.

One frigid morning, when the thermometer read twenty degrees, she noticed I was shivering in only a thin flannel and asked where my jacket was. I told her

the plain truth: the Kings took them as fast as the Salvation Army could hand them out. Carmen told me not to worry about it.

I assumed that meant I was marked for death. Instead, the thefts stopped cold.

It turned out her older brother ran the local chapter. We began “dating” shortly after. Carmen passed chemistry, my coats remained firmly on my back, and I survived the winter.

Then came the summons to pack our bags again.

Missouri awaited. Unsurprisingly, I didn't fit in—no city kid from Joliet ever could. I had barely navigated gang territory in Illinois, only to find myself stranded at the mercy of a pack of farm boys. I didn't care about sports, and milking cows held zero appeal. I had no common ground to use as a buffer.

It was just as well; by then, I was actively coming to terms with my venomous hatred for other men—and my desperate, terrifying physical craving for them.

Once she had her boys gathered under one roof again, Mom turned her full attention toward filling the vacancy at the head of the table. She celebrated our reunion by hitting the local taverns, scouting for prospects. Within months, she had interviewed three eager candidates.

My mother possessed an insatiable appetite for men. I don't begrudge her that; she was entitled to chase her own happiness. I only wish she had possessed an ounce of discernment when deciding which ones to keep.

The first two suitors came and went in a blur. What struck me as deeply bizarre was how aggressively both men volunteered to take on three severely maladjusted boys. Whatever their underlying motives, our little family would have fared infinitely better with either of them than we did with what came next.

First came Alan, an Australian rancher Mom swore was filthy rich—which, in her vocabulary, could mean anything from millions in the bank to fifty bucks in a savings account. He was tall, fit, and blond, with eyes the exact sharp blue as Mom's. If she hadn't already had her hysterectomy, they could have bred thoroughbreds. Alan was a human hurricane of manic energy, like the Tasmanian Devil on Quaaludes. When he proposed, Mom turned him down flat, claiming Australia was too far to drag us away from our friends.

What friends?

It was probably for the best; Alan was gorgeous, and I might have tried to steal him from her myself.

Next up was Rufus.

He was a soft-spoken gentleman with a quiet, heavy intellect—an introvert who rarely opened his mouth unless he had something concrete to say. Rufus was supposedly one of the largest landowners in the county. (Mom's claims were usually currency minted from pure wishful thinking, but Rufus carried himself like old money.) He would have been my pick. I loved the unhurried pace of Brookfield, the apartment had a secret door leading directly into the theater's projection

booth, and our rescue mutt—who despised every living soul—took an immediate shine to him.

Rufus doted on my mother and treated my brothers and me with genuine decency. He asked Mom to marry him, telling her he had fallen for us boys, too.

She declined. Rufus simply wasn't pretty enough to look at.

Then Mom walked into a local dive and found Stan.

Stan was a weathered country mechanic with a graying Kenny Rogers goatee, smelling perpetually of dust, diesel exhaust, and cheap well whiskey. Mom fell hard and fast, dragging us out to see his spread within days.

Stan called it a plantation. In reality, it was a weathered double-wide trailer perched on two treeless acres of sorghum-choked scrub at the desolate intersection of two state highways. Mom acted as though she were delivering us to the promised land, insisting we breathe in the fresh country air—which smelled mostly like semi-truck exhaust—and meet Stan's teenage son, Tim.

Stan wasn't a patient man. On our very first visit, he looked at my mother and asked her to marry him.

Mom was ecstatic. To her, this was the pastoral dream: wide horizons, wood to chop, lawns to tame, sorghum to press into molasses, and tobacco leaves to hang in the barn. She convinced herself she had finally secured the wholesome domestic sanctuary we were owed.

Stan was a smooth, relentless salesman. But my mother was a decorated veteran of domestic psychological warfare. Her lifelong strategy was to target damaged men, hook them deep, reel them into her orbit, and slowly dismantle them from the inside out. She had already shortened two husbands' lives and broken another clean in half. She assumed this Missouri mechanic was just another mark she could bend to her will.

She was dead wrong. Her arrogance nearly got her killed—and dragged the rest of us straight to the slaughterhouse with her.

The courtship was wrapped up in three whirlwind months. They held the wedding in a clearing hacked out of a field of second-rate sorghum.

As Mom and Stan packed the trunk for their honeymoon, he leaned out the driver's window and pointed a grease-stained finger at us boys: "I want that sorghum cut, cleared, and stacked by the time we pull back in!"

They were supposed to be gone for four days. I figured that gave us plenty of time.

My new stepbrother leaned against the porch rail and quietly corrected the math: Four means two. He didn't elaborate, offering only that the honeymoon wouldn't last through the weekend.

The air turned cold. A storm was bearing down, and my mother was marching straight into its teeth. Deep in my gut, the kindling was already spent, and the sparks were catching dry brush.

I will regret the day my mother met Stan until the day I die.

Looking back, it seems criminal that none of us saw the warning signs. But predators don't always announce themselves with flashing red lights. Sometimes they show up disguised as stability: a man with a steady wrench, a patch of dirt, and a smile that looks like salvation to an exhausted woman who has spent decades running from the street.

We were ragged, fractured, and starving for anything that resembled a permanent home. That brand of desperation gives off a scent, and predators can pick it up from miles away. Stan didn't need to be brilliant; he simply had to be the first man in a long time who didn't run. For Mom, that was plenty. It had to be.

My gut knew the truth early. I spent those first weeks watching his face, wondering what had happened to his eyes. They remained flat, empty, and brooding—even when his mouth twisted into what he thought was a smile.

By the time the car returned from that two-day honeymoon, the lock had already turned.

We hadn't gained a stepfather. We had surrendered the keys to a tyrant who ruled entirely through terror.

And once the door shut behind us, there was nowhere left to run.

THE KINGDOM

Stan was not a good man. He was an accomplished, pathological liar—infinately overqualified for the easy task of fooling the desperate.

Mom didn't actually need a man to survive, but hell would freeze over before anyone could convince her of that. More than anything, she believed her three boys needed a father. She wasn't wrong. But Bob was in the ground, and no amount of wishing was going to breathe life back into that cold earth. Mom was an alcoholic and a manoholic; the collision was inevitable. Good or bad, kind or cruel, there had to be a man at the head of the table.

Once the ring was on her finger, Tim's warning proved prophetic. The honeymoon lasted exactly forty-eight hours, cut short when Mom accidentally slammed

her own face into an open cabinet door and earned a blackened eye.

Damn the bad luck.

Stan deployed every weapon in his arsenal: control, intimidation, isolation, and pain. His goal from day one was to break us. He had thirty years of experience beating inescapable dread into his own flesh and blood. One of his pet phrases was, “I don’t think we need to do that, do you?”

In Stan’s dialect, that meant No, and if you ask a second time, you’ll bleed. Anyone foolish enough to answer or offer a syllable of back-talk caught the back of his heavy hand—if they were lucky. The only viable survival tactic was stone-cold silence.

Unfortunately, I was not built for keeping quiet.

In Stan’s kingdom, back-breaking physical labor was the mandatory price of breathing his air. The only relief came from school hours, hired-out labor for neighboring farms—where he confiscated half our wages to compensate him for the inconvenience of housing us—or sleep. He guaranteed us four hours of shut-eye a night, provided the fire in the wood stove didn’t die down.

Injuries counted only if you were actively bleeding out, which you never were, so you kept working. We felled timber—forty cords a season. We chopped sorghum cane, ignoring deep razor cuts and machete glances. Blood dries; keep swinging. We cut, hung, and stripped tobacco until nicotine poisoning turned our heads inside out. You’ll live. Poison ivy vines thrown

into the brush fire? What do you mean your lungs are burning? Get back on the line. Cut. Chop. Stack.

When the field chores ran out, there was always an engine block waiting to be dismantled in the dirt. I learned fast how tender raw knuckles get when turning wrenches in twenty-degree cold.

Maybe I'm prone to complaining, but eight months earlier, my brothers and I had never laid eyes on a chainsaw. We had no idea what the hell we were doing, making bloody accidents a mathematical certainty. Failing to finish an impossible quota brought severe beatings. On the rare afternoons we made it back to the double-wide intact, Stan punished us on principle for not working hard enough. Yet for all the scars that crosshatch my skin, they were nothing compared to the deeper rot that took root inside my chest.

One morning, I was sitting in class, copying notes off the chalkboard like every other kid, when Mrs. Buffington stopped mid-sentence and asked if I needed to see the nurse.

I stared up at her, blank and hollow.

She pointed to the floor beneath my desk. A wide, dark puddle of blood was spreading across the linoleum. My vision drained to black and white.

The night before, clearing brush in the dark, I had buried a machete blade into my own leg, mistaking it for an enemy soldier. Stan had inspected the gash, slapped a dirty rag over it, and assured my mother the dressing was more than adequate.

The school nurse loaded me into her car and drove straight to her husband, the town doctor, who drove seventeen thick stitches into my knee. He told me that the white thing I had stared at in the wound the night before was my kneecap. I was lucky to walk.

Under Stan's roof, correction came in whatever package lay within arm's reach: a rubber garden hose, an aluminum rod, a clenched fist, or his dick. Whatever was necessary to leave an indelible mark.

He was a remarkably effective teacher.

Mom was held to the exact same standard. In truth, she bore a heavier weight than any of us. Stan had negotiated access from local farmers to work dozens of raw acres. Dinner was required to be steaming on the table the second he walked through the door, regardless of what hour he decided to drag us in from the fields. Mom had to guess the time, and her guess had to be flawless. Sunset was her only reliable cue. She was already frail before she ever laid eyes on Stan, having survived cancer, a radical hysterectomy, and two heart attacks.

One evening, while she was standing in the shower, she made the mistake of questioning one of Stan's decrees. He reached into the bedroom, grabbed her heavy ivory hairbrush—the heirloom her father had gifted her on her wedding day—and cracked it across her face.

She came home from the county hospital with her jaw wired shut. The shattered brush went straight into the trash.

Mom had been fading since the day they took their vows, but after that night, the light left her eyes for good. She drank heavily to drown the physical agony. Over time, the liquor would silence her laughter entirely—the beginning of a long, dark slide that would culminate years later in an empty bottle of morphine and a midnight phone call I was too tired to answer. But that tragedy was still down the road. Stan wasn't finished with her yet.

There comes a moment in every prolonged nightmare when you abandon the childish hope that things might improve, and you begin coldly calculating what it will take to walk out alive.

Watching my mother disintegrate under Stan's boots—her jaw wired, her voice drowning in vodka, her spirit shrinking by the hour—I was forced to swallow an ugly truth: sometimes survival requires you to abandon the people you love, because staying means becoming something worse than broken.

Stan didn't merely terrorize us; he poisoned the air in that trailer. He turned silence into a weapon and obedience into survival currency. Every decision became a tactical negotiation with danger. Every breath was borrowed time.

The tighter he clamped his grip, the harder the knot in my gut became. It wasn't bravery—not yet. It was the cold, emerging geometry of a decision no child should ever have to formulate. You are not supposed to weigh the certainty of your own destruction against the impossibility of saving your family. But by sixteen, I

understood the brutal mathematics: the only way to defeat a monster is to get far enough outside his reach that he doesn't transform you into one.

The plan began as a whisper, then grew into a roar.

Maybe the only way to save my family was to leave it.

Or maybe the only way to save my own soul was to run before the day came when the Winchester .30-30 Stan had taught me to hunt with became the only solution a trapped teenager could see.

The plan was locked.

And once it was set in motion, there was no turning back.

RUN LIKE HELL

Stan had six children. Five of them were adults who had survived their father's brutal curriculum and lived to walk away. Tim, a year younger than me, was the only one still trapped under the roof.

Tim understood the score. His ability to swallow his tongue whenever his father was within a hundred-mile radius was nothing short of miraculous. In that house, there was no thought uttered in secret that didn't somehow filter back to Stan. My brothers and I were lucky to have Tim as our scout; I credit that boy with keeping us alive.

As the weeks crawled by, the rest of the brood began showing up with suspicious frequency. They had stood together at the wedding, casting long, uneasy glances at my mother. I thought it was just my own paranoia; it wasn't. Four of the older kids lived locally,

while one had escaped clean to Ohio. It was Marlana, Shirley, Tony, and Gary who became our watchers.

According to Tim, they had dropped by only a few times a year before we moved in. Once our family was absorbed into Stan's kingdom, their visits fell into a calculated rotation. They were running reconnaissance on their father, watching his hands, doing everything humanly possible to keep the lid on his boiling rage. I am convinced that without their intervention, I would not be alive to write these words.

Each of them took an immediate liking to Mom. She was a magnificent cook, and—when she wasn't half-drowned in Canadian Mist or cheap box wine—a genuinely sweet woman.

Tony seemed cold and guarded at first, but as the eldest boy, I recognized the posture. Shirley moved into the double-wide for a couple of months fresh out of state custody, carrying the heavy, brittle shame of her sentence. She braced for judgment from four strange males; it took her weeks to realize we had no stones to cast. Gary, the middle son, started appearing around the evening meal. He rarely offered a word, but behind his eyes lived a brand of fury that operated on a terrifying frequency.

They had a genius for showing up precisely when the room was about to detonate, serving as an external pressure valve for Stan's rage. Looking back, things could have gone worse. Plenty of kids in those rural backwaters ran straight into the arms of meth or cheap

bourbon before finding an exit; far too many never made it out of the timber at all.

Stan's children saved our lives, and my deepest regret is that I was too young and terrified to recognize what they were doing and thank them for it. Decades later, I tracked Shirley down to tell her. Tony and Gary have long since crossed the river, so my gratitude will have to wait. Tim already knew. If he didn't, Shirley made damn sure to tell him. Those kids may be the closest thing to angels I ever encountered.

Stan was always on his absolute best behavior when Tony was in the room. Tony was built like an engine block; I have zero doubt he would have put his father into the drywall with one hand if he caught him laying a finger on my mother.

Still, the older kids had jobs and homes; the shields always had to leave.

Marlena and Shirley concocted a brilliant gamble. They enlisted Mom as a full-time, unpaid babysitter, wagering everything on the premise that Stan wouldn't dare brutalize his wife in front of his granddaughters. In the end, the gamble paid out. Stan kept a tight rein on his temper whenever the babies were playing on the carpet. Tony served as the unspoken insurance policy: a single mark on those little girls would have been Stan's death sentence.

Of course, that only meant Stan swallowed his venom until the driveway cleared. And for Tim, there was no shield. He lived directly in the furnace. There

were no second chances, no reprieves, and nowhere to run. I was powerless to pull him out.

Stan eventually found his proxy in Knuckles, forcing me to march my dog into the timber a quarter-mile behind the trailer.

The night before, the windchill had cratered below zero. Knuckles had scratched through the skirting of the trailer, ripping into the underside duct work just to keep from freezing into an icicle.

He was a gentle, lanky hound that had emerged from the brush one afternoon carrying his own dark pedigree. His name was literal: for reasons known only to him, he walked with his front paws curled inward on his knuckles. He was sweet, terrified, and endlessly grateful. He followed me like a shadow because I was probably the first human being who had ever looked at him without raising a boot. On freezing nights, I slept outside on the ground beside him, muffling his cries with my coat because I knew what Stan would do if the noise reached the bedroom.

He was a good dog.

Years earlier, playing with bottle rockets in the yard, a stray fuse shot wild into the air and struck a sparrow mid-flight, killing it on the grass. I carried a sick, rotting guilt in my stomach for weeks over that bird; I couldn't stomach the thought of harming an innocent animal.

Stan had no use for innocence.

Execution was his payback for the torn fiberglass. He didn't offer a compromise, and he didn't give me a choice. There was only Stan's decree. To make the lesson

take, he dragged Tim into the timber to watch while I was forced to put the barrel to Knuckles's ear and pull the trigger.

Tim told me later that he watched something die behind my eyes that night. It was the sound of my soul taking an indefinite leave of absence.

When people ask why I prefer the company of dogs to humans ten-to-one, the answer lives at that tree line. Humans demand a piece of your soul until you're picked clean. Dogs are the only creatures on earth that fight to keep it whole.

Early in my senior year, a crack in the wall appeared: a school-sponsored trip to St. Louis for the state Future Business Leaders of America convention. I was among the students picked to attend. The trick was getting Stan to let me off the compound; I arranged for the high school principal to call him directly and insist the trip was mandatory for graduation.

It worked.

I laid the escape plan out for Tim. By then, I trusted his counsel implicitly; his radar had saved my skin on a dozen occasions. Tim gave me the green light—and pressed a crumpled hundred-dollar bill from his private savings into my hand.

Only five people held the secret: Mom, Tim, my father, Harry's new wife, and a classmate who spent the next five years calling me 007.

We checked into our St. Louis hotel on a Thursday afternoon. That evening featured an opening dance—the standard, awkward mixer.

My style back then was pure, unadulterated Miami Vice: pastel jackets, pegged slacks, and disco tailoring. It was a fashion statement with zero representation in northern Missouri. My classmates wrote it off as me being the school queer, which suited my operational needs perfectly. Nobody questioned why a teenager required an overstuffed, four-suiter Samsonite for a three-day weekend. Of course the fag needed eight wardrobe changes. (Funny, I don't recall anyone questioning Sonny Crockett's manhood, but having a S&W and a Daytona probably adjusted the room's perspective.)

That night, I put on my best linen and walked into the ballroom dressed to kill. It was the first time I had danced since Harry smashed that George McCrae 45 across the living room wall. I let my hair down and moved. By Midwest farm standards, I was probably an absolute disaster, but I didn't care. I was already a ghost.

At seven o'clock the next morning, while my classmates were sleeping, I was sitting at the gate at Lambert Field waiting on a one-way boarding call to Atlanta, where Harry had agreed to intercept me.

He was furious that I had backed him into a corner, bitter at having his eldest boy dumped back onto his porch. For the first time in my life, I stared straight through his bluster. I told him to get over it.

He didn't. But he drove me down to Alabama anyway.

Back in Brookfield, the sheriff rang the double-wide to inform Stan that the high school had filed a missing

persons report. I can only imagine how brief that phone call was—and how heavily the back of his hand landed on my mother that night.

My escape did nothing to tame Stan's cruelty; it merely concentrated it. A year or two later, a farm truck carrying boys from my brother Sean's ninth-grade class flipped over at high speed on the blacktop. Four of the six boys riding in the open bed were crushed and mangled across the highway. All four were Sean's closest friends.

Stan served as the district highway maintenance supervisor and was among the first summoned to the wreck. Recognizing an unforgettable teaching opportunity, he hauled fourteen-year-old Sean straight to the asphalt to inspect the bodies. How staring at torn flesh was supposed to teach a boy not to ride in a pickup bed remains a lesson only a monster could devise.

Years later, when I tentatively broached the crash, Sean went dead cold, muttered a single syllable, and walked out of the room:

“Hamburger.”

Mom finally walked out once Sean graduated high school and was safely tucked away in a college dorm. Stan was left completely alone to keep company with his demons. He had already been fired by the state for stealing government materials for his personal spread, and nobody in the county cared enough to waste rubber driving out to see him.

To heat the double-wide, Stan had welded an outdoor wood furnace with a loading hatch wide

enough for a grown man to crawl through. One freezing afternoon in the early nineties, while heaving an oak log into the firebox, he suffered a stroke, blew out an artery, or simply lost his footing on the ice. Inertia did the rest. He pitched headlong into the inferno with the firewood.

By the time anyone noticed the smoke, he had been cremated from the shoulders up.

I doubt the mortuary offered a partial-service discount to finish the job.

I will never understand the engine that powered Stan's monstrous cruelty. I have spent forty years clawing my way toward forgiving him for what he did to my brothers, to my mother, and to his own flesh and blood. His memory still walks through my sleep, and I expect it will until I'm in the ground myself. But the poison has mostly drained away.

Leaping out of Missouri hadn't felt like liberation; it felt like stepping off an open precipice, praying the fall would kill me slower than staying on the mountain. I carried a crippling ballast of guilt: abandoning my mother, leaving my little brothers behind, leaving Tim to face the fire alone.

People love to romanticize an escape as a victorious cinema reel where the music swells and the screen fades to black. The reality is hollow, terrifying, and dead quiet.

I didn't run into freedom; I stepped straight into an abyss.

I had no identity outside the daily, hourly mathematics of survival. I didn't know how to breathe without evaluating threats, watching exits, and calculating angles. So I fell back on what I had always done: I reached for the nearest familiar authority, even though it belonged to a man who had abandoned me five times over.

I fled to Harry hoping a father might finally reach out and catch me on the way down.

Instead, he was simply preparing to push me over the next ledge.

Before that hammer fell, Alabama offered me a brief, ninety-day reprieve. Harry mostly ignored my existence, which felt like heaven. I used that breathing room to take the terrifying risk of human connection. I made a friend. I fell into clumsy, heart-stopping puppy love with a boy's legs in anatomy class.

For a few fragile weeks, I convinced myself that a normal life could be assembled out of the debris. I had no way of knowing the grace that was waiting down the road, or that it would be handed to me by strangers wearing Army green rather than my own kin.

All I knew was that the ground was giving way beneath my boots again.

And this time, I was falling into the open air.

MERCY

Landing in Alabama placed me on alien ground: for the first time in my life, I had the luxury of thinking about a future.

I had never considered what I might want to be, or what tools I possessed to get there. Before fleeing Missouri, I had mailed an application to Baylor University on a wild whim. Soon after unpacking in Dothan, a forwarded envelope arrived from Mom. Scrawled across a torn scrap was her blessing: “Congrats, I guess . . .” Tucked inside was an official letter of acceptance. I had dreamed of Texas for years, fed on prime-time reruns of *Dallas*, half-convinced I might grow up to be Sue Ellen Ewing.

The admission was real, but the economics were pure fantasy. I spent nights hunting down grants, loans, and scholarships, but realism soon closed that door.

The realization stung, made sharper by how much I loved my new high school. For once, nobody was chasing me down the sidewalk. There were no gangbangers shaking me down for winter coats, and no farm boys slipping me Copenhagen and daring me to swallow the spit. I discovered the joy of learning without looking over my shoulder. I had gaps in my transcript, but I closed them quickly. When my geometry teacher saw me drifting, she assigned me a tutor; within weeks, I was carrying straight As across the board. When the final bell rang in the afternoons, I didn't want to leave the building.

Grief settled in when I allowed myself to calculate how far I might have gone if I had been granted that kind of stability since kindergarten. I still visit that grief on nights when recurring dreams wake me in a sweat—frantically searching for a locker combination while standing half-naked in the hallway.

I took the problem to Harry. He didn't waste ten seconds deliberating.

He offered a single word: "Army."

There was no debate. I was going to enlist. In hindsight, the Navy might have been a better fit, but once the compass was set, there was no turning back.

I was a natural test-taker: a 29 on the ACT and a near-perfect score on the ASVAB. On military recruitment day in the gymnasium, my name was flagged by every branch in the room. I ignored the rest; Harry said Army, so I signed the line. All that remained

was finishing my senior year, surviving another round of heartbreak, and heading off to find my fortune.

Or an open grave, if my luck held to form.

Barely a month into Alabama, Harry called a family meeting. He announced that a sudden shift in plans required him and Lorna to pack up and relocate to Florida immediately. It hit like a shot to the kidneys; the thought of packing my life into another cardboard box was suffocating.

Weeks passed before I learned the truth behind their midnight evacuation. Harry was a dry drunk who hadn't touched liquor in a decade. That sobriety ended at a company party hosted by his commanding officer. Deciding it was safe to join the boys for a single casual beer, the wheels came off. Two drinks later, he proudly introduced his "two wives" to a fellow NCO.

The second woman was the wife of one of his subordinate recruiters; Harry had been sleeping with her for months. In an instant, the secret went public. Harry wasn't just another non-com; he was the First Sergeant of the Southern Alabama and Northern Florida Army Recruiting Company.

The sudden move to Florida turned out to be less of an inconvenience than I feared—because I wasn't invited. Harry had already arranged to dump me onto his incoming replacement until graduation.

I met my new guardian on the curb the day I was discarded. Harry handed me a single hundred-dollar bill, climbed into the car, and drove away without looking back.

Goodbye, Harry. It was nice knowing you.

I don't remember my new guardian's real name. In my mind, he will always be Top—the military honorific reserved for a First Sergeant who has earned the respect of his men. I never addressed my father by that title, and hell will freeze before I do, not because I don't honor him; because I don't respect him.

Living with a total stranger for four months should have been a nightmare, but I liked him from our first handshake. Looking back, the emotion was love, though I lacked the tools to recognize paternal affection.

I was knee-deep in fortifying the perimeter around my heart. Vulnerability had always been fatal; if I couldn't risk exposing my neck to my own flesh and blood, how could I trust a stranger with rank? Love felt like an ambush waiting to spring. Fortunately, distance running was the only sport I was good at, and I was running a marathon inside my head.

Yet safety broke through anyway. I made genuine friends. I had excellent teachers. I threw myself into programming on an Apple III, discovering that microchips didn't require emotional armor to be a companion. Still, the cold fact remained: I had been thrown out with the trash again. I was seething with rage while trying to function in an apartment where rage had no purpose.

Those four months with Top would prove to be the finest stretch of my young life.

The ice broke when he pulled me aside and told me to start acting like a regular seventeen-year-old.

“I don’t know how,” I told him plainly.

He took that as a personal assignment. Top was an extraordinarily patient man. He recognized my awkwardness and respected my shame. He understood the difference between when I needed quiet and when I was merely hiding. He nudged, prodded, and expanded my perimeter, but he never approached me with cheap sentimentality.

He owned a boat.

He took me into the Gulf, taught me to scallop the shallow bays, and took me camping deep in the national forest. He showed me how to back a trailer down a ramp, navigate currents, and drop an anchor without tearing up the seabed. He taught me camp craft, trail discipline, and what to do if you encounter an angry black bear: Pray fast. He even taught me how to respect an alligator.

Top revealed the quiet beauty of the natural world, living out the Sabbath without ever preaching a sermon. Eventually, he introduced me to his family. His son had Down syndrome, and watching Top hold that boy with fierce, gentle devotion was a revelation. It broke my heart to see what a father was actually supposed to look like.

One evening, Top asked why I ate instant grits three times a day. I had tried to hide it, but nothing escaped

him. I confessed that the hundred-dollar bill Harry left on the counter was all the money I had in the world.

He walked straight to the wall phone. I have never seen a man remain so terrifyingly calm while unleashing the wrath of God through a receiver.

I almost felt sorry for Harry.

Almost.

Top taught me what genuine trust felt like. One Friday, he tossed me his keys and told me to take his car, his camping gear, and a couple of friends down to Panama City for the weekend. When we returned, I asked him why he would take such a massive risk on a stray kid. He simply worried I was getting bored visiting his family in Jacksonville. He was wrong—I loved his wife and son—but the gesture blew my defenses apart.

He offered unconditional respect, and I gave it back in full. No strings, no debts, no leverage. What haunts me is that I never accepted his kindness without suspecting the catch.

There never was one.

Grace is a strange animal. It doesn't rewrite your scars, and it guarantees nothing about tomorrow. It simply pulls up a chair, sits beside you in the dark, and proves the world isn't populated entirely by monsters. Top did that for me. He didn't try to fix me or demand compliance; he simply treated me like a human being when I wasn't convinced I qualified as one.

I often find myself dwelling on my past, and those four months sometimes break through the otherwise endless trail of darkness.

When that chapter closed, I was left alone with myself. I was forced to face the parts of me I was trying to avoid. The parts that were shaped by fear, secrecy, and early damage.

That's where the next descent begins—not with a choice, but with a realization. I had been carrying a truth since childhood that I didn't have the language for, and it would shape everything that came next.

IP of D.J. Chambers

IP of D.J. Chambers

ACTING OUT

IP of D.J. Chambers

LEARNING TO HIDE

God made me who I am. I don't question His motives anymore. I figure, why bother? Our conversations have become less about my problems lately. Sometimes I wonder if He talks to His people about my stubborn refusal to ask for favors. I keep hearing from those who would teach me to pray that I should openly ask for the things I want from God, and let Him decide which of my requests will suit me best. The trouble is, I really don't want much anymore. I am genuinely comfortable with what I have. It has almost never been that way for me.

I was around nine when my body began asking questions my mind couldn't answer.

In the years before the internet, my education arrived by mail in the pages of the Sears and Spiegel catalogs. I remember the feverish anticipation of

checking the rural mailbox every afternoon, waiting for the thick seasonal volumes to drop.

I turned to the women's lingerie sections first, praying for a spark. Nothing stirred. But the men's athletic wear hit me like a live wire.

Long before I understood desire, an instinct warned me to keep that reaction locked down. I didn't need explicit photography; a PG-rated image of a man in cotton briefs was enough to jolt something awake. Homosexuality wasn't even a word in my universe. My desires weren't the byproduct of trauma or an older boy's abuse; they were organic, innate, and terrifyingly clear.

A year later, snooping through Mom's Cosmopolitan stash, I graduated to the explicit mail-order advertisements in the back pages. Eventually, I found her hidden copy of *The Joy of Sex*, finally discovering the physical choreography adults engaged in behind closed doors.

In our house, sex was never discussed—it was policed through explosive reactions.

One evening at the dinner table, Bob asked my brothers and me what we wanted to be for Halloween. I wanted to be Superman. Ricky announced that he wanted to be Baby Thataway, and added that he wanted a sex-change operation. Where a six-year-old found that vocabulary remains a mystery, but Bob's response was swift: he stood up, hurled a full plate of pot roast and mashed potatoes against the wall, and locked himself in his bedroom for the night.

Bob's silence delivered the lesson in iron: Do not ask questions. Not about bodies, not about desire, and never about the men in the catalogs.

By thirteen, waking up to involuntary morning sensations, panic took over. Still using the vocabulary of a toddler, I ran down the hall to my mother's vanity while she was applying her makeup.

"Mom, I broke my bird!" I yelled, terrified.

She didn't turn around. "What?"

"I rubbed it against the sheet, and white stuff came out!"

"Bob will be home later," she snapped. "Ask him. Get out."

Bob gave me the basic biological mechanics, took me to see *Excalibur* at the theater, and firmly instructed me to leave myself alone until I was married. I didn't dare mention the men's catalog pages. His pot-roast explosion had already done its work.

After that, I noticed Mom began washing my bedsheets with suspicious regularity.

With time, the shame, guilt, and confusion only metastasized.

When I was in the tenth grade, there was a girl. I'd had plenty of female friends over the years, but they all eventually figured out they were barking up the wrong tree. This girl, however, was built of different material. She was persistent.

She started by inviting me to the local soda fountain for "sunshine floats." I had never heard of one, and she made it her personal mission to correct my education. It

was nothing more than vanilla ice cream drowning in Mountain Dew instead of root beer, but it tasted like liquid gold.

She was a junior who carried serious social clout, though I had no idea what powered her reputation. I was about to find out.

After finishing our floats, she invited me back to her house. Her parents were at work—the classic teenage green light. We were sitting together on her living room couch when she abruptly took the reins. She grabbed my hand and forced my fingers where they had no business being, then announced that her clothes had suddenly become far too uncomfortable. She excused herself, promising with a straight face that she would return in “something a little more comfortable.”

The second the hallway door clicked shut, pure curiosity overrode my shock. I lifted my hand and inspected my fingers. I took a quick sniff.

I don't know how long she took rummaging through her closet, but by the time she stepped back into that living room, I was already a quarter-mile down the asphalt.

And I was moving at a full dead sprint on foot.

When I walked through the school doors the following morning, the whispers were already airborne. I was barraged by snickers, loaded sideways glances, and vicious implications about my manhood. That poor girl genuinely believed she had orchestrated the ultimate humiliation by outing my lack of interest to the entire hallway.

What she failed to calculate was that I had spent an entire childhood studying at the feet of a master manipulator. My mother had taught me how to invert cold facts into airtight fiction before breakfast. I had anticipated the incoming mortar fire before my feet ever hit the linoleum. By the end of first period, the punchline had landed squarely on her neck. Her known promiscuity became my primary evidence. I spun the narrative so ruthlessly that by noon, she was the one running for cover.

That was the morning I stopped letting sympathy, empathy, or moral squeamishness hold back the weapons life had handed me. Burning down the perimeter wasn't a new instinct, but walking away with zero regard for the collateral damage was.

Decades later, I can't look back on that hallway without thinking of Bob's scorched apple tree. At sixteen, I gave it no deep philosophical weight, but the biblical parallel is almost comical in its precision: the apple tree in the garden, the gallon of gasoline whispering like the serpent, and the boy hiding inside a dark closet striking matches—not unlike Adam desperately trying to hide his naked shame from the Almighty.

And the explosion?

The concussive shock-wave blew the closet doors completely off their hinges, flinging me headfirst into a fallen world I was now forced to navigate on my own.

There comes a moment in every damaged kid's youth when hiding stops being a reflex and becomes an

operational strategy. When hallway whispers started and eyes turned sharp, I learned that the fastest way to survive a rumor was to strike back before the blow landed.

My wit became an armored vest; my tongue became a switchblade. If I couldn't control what people thought of me, I could at least dictate where the damage fell. It wasn't courage; it was basic counter-battery fire.

Yet camouflage carries a heavy tariff. The sharper my deflections became, the less I understood what was actually happening beneath the surface. By senior year, I had collected plenty of scars and zero answers. Just as genuine desire began to flicker—honest, human, and terrifying—life reminded me that even tenderness could turn lethal in an instant.

High school graduation wasn't the end of childhood. It was the end of pretending I understood the rules of a world that kept resetting the board.

GRADUATION

I left high school a virgin. I'd had experiences—none pleasant. There were three in all: a girl, a boy, and one deeply unsettling encounter with a man.

My first case of deep puppy love happened during the final two months of high school. I worked up the courage to introduce myself to a boy in anatomy class named Trevor. To me, he was perfect, which mostly meant he had incredible legs. I made a point of sitting behind or beside him every day just to stare at them. It was the first time I had ever considered that kind of connection—the first time I let myself.

When I finally introduced myself, I was terrified when he asked if I wanted to hang out. Had I opened Pandora's box? Was he like me? I wondered. What if he isn't and I slip up?

I said yes anyway.

As it turned out, my trepidation was unwarranted. Trevor spoke openly about his sexuality. He told me later that he'd figured me out the day I was introduced as the new student, and had assumed I was stuck up when I seemed to ignore his smile across the room.

Trevor was a year younger than me, but light-years ahead in experience. He knew which local parks were frequented by older men looking for short-term commitments, the headlight signals used to signal interest, and the adult bookstore on the outskirts of town where motivated gentlemen went looking for company. None of that interested me. Older men had never been my thing; my attention belonged entirely to guys my own age.

My crush on Trevor grew, and the end of the school year bore down on us. I knew what I wanted—I wanted Trevor—but I had no idea how to go about getting him. I grew desperate to tell him how I felt, but the words refused to form.

We hung out several times. He spent the night once, and we watched *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, mostly to see Johnny Depp half-naked. Still, we never kissed. Nothing like that.

Then came the graduation party.

Trevor's best friend was hosting, and I was stunned when he told me who that friend was: the hottest guy in school. A third boy, someone I had secretly watched from a distance all semester, was there as well. The three guys who held permanent residency in my

fantasies were all under one roof, and somehow I was standing among them.

A bundle of nerves and certain I was being obvious, I did what any overwhelmed kid in my position would do: I gave in to peer pressure and took the drink.

Prior to that night, my exposure to alcohol had been limited to an occasional sip from my uncle's screwdrivers. That night, I made up for lost time. By the time Trevor suggested we leave, I was well beyond tipsy. He drove, thank God.

On the way back to the apartment, I announced that I was thirsty.

He offered to pull into a 7-Eleven.

"7-Eleven doesn't sell what I'm thirsty for," I said.

He laughed—a kind, knowing laugh, not a cruel one. He got the joke.

We stopped at the store anyway, and then he delivered me safely home. I didn't want to say goodbye. Standing at the front door, Trevor went to give me a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. I caught his mouth instead, stealing a kiss on his lips just for a second.

"Good luck with the Army, David."

He pulled me into another hug—tighter this time, more intentional. And then he was gone.

I turned the key, stepped inside, and walked into the apartment carrying the happiest broken heart a boy could have. Top was waiting up for me in the living room.

"How was your date?"

"It was good."

“Good. Good. You might want to take some aspirin before you turn in.”

“Good night.”

“Night, David.”

My future was arriving faster than my desire for Trevor could keep up.

Two days after the graduation party, Top delivered me into the hands of the United States Army. He gave me two gifts that day. The first was driving me from Dothan to Montgomery himself instead of putting me on a bus or handing me off to one of his recruiters. The second was far greater: he let me go.

As the Master Sergeant in charge of the recruiting station, he held the power to end my military career before it even started. He knew about my “date”. He knew Trevor was a boy. We both understood the razor's edge we were standing on.

When it came time to say goodbye, Top let our handshake linger a beat too long—a quiet, meaningful farewell. I think he saw me as a son rather than three months of baggage. I left knowing he was the father I had spent my entire life looking for, but I had no idea how to tell him.

It broke my heart.

Before I could reach Advanced Individual Training, I had to survive eight weeks of basic training at Fort Jackson. I didn't want to be there, and there wasn't much time to dwell on Trevor or anything else I had left behind.

To make matters worse, I arrived just in time for the summer rotation of Army Reserve cadre. Our drill sergeants rotated out every two weeks, each fresh crop determined to prove they were meaner and tougher than the last. I had to choke back laughter more than once. These supposedly hardened men were difficult to take seriously; my upbringing had already prepared me for far harsher treatment than anything they could dish out. Stan had taught me how to see through their games. The physical demands were real enough, but emotionally, I was already calloused.

Most of the guys in my cycle were terrified of the rappel tower. Standing at the top, they saw an abyss. I looked down and saw a height no taller than a tree that needed crowning. The instructors proved their bravery by descending the wooden wall in a single, bouncing leap, while trainees were instructed to crawl down like nervous spiders. I waited near the back of the line, feigning anxiety for anyone who happened to be watching. When the drill sergeant locked me into the harness and released my shoulder, I dropped down the wall and hit the dirt with a single clean bounce—just like the Air Assault-badged sergeant had.

My reward was dropping for fifty push-ups to pay for the insolence.

Yet, as much as I hated being there, the Army offered one indisputable virtue: I had escaped Stan. Standing tall on that red dirt, completing what was asked of me, felt like rubbing his nose in my survival. For the first couple of weeks, I genuinely believed the

military was a place where I could exist without constantly scanning the horizon for danger.

That illusion ended in the third week.

I was in the latrine in the dead of night when two trainees crept up behind me. One grabbed me by the shoulders, driving me into the concrete and pinning me down while the other assaulted me. Their message was delivered in the brutal dialect of sexual humiliation: We know what you are, so you can't talk. You'd better pray we don't.

It was a standard, animalistic power play. Why they felt threatened by me, I will never understand; the last thing I wanted was to be squad leader or stand out in any way. I wanted only to disappear into the ranks.

The assault lasted perhaps sixty seconds. When they let go and vanished into the dark, I got up, cleaned myself off, and walked back to my bunk. I was furious, but the disgust I expected never arrived. I felt no sickness—only an icy, blinding rage. I told no one. I kept that night locked away for thirty-five years.

Not long after, we were marched to the pugil-stick pit for hand-to-hand combat training—swinging oversize, canvas-padded poles like heavy, blunt Q-tips. The drill sergeant called the pairings. My opponent was Private Cho, an athletic kid who moved like he'd practiced martial arts since childhood.

Before the instructor even shouted "Fight!", Cho lunged. I froze, watching the padded swab swing straight toward my head. The impact knocked me clean out of the ring and onto the dirt. It stung, but not nearly

as badly as my battered pride. The drill sergeant smiled and let the foul stand.

I lay there in the South Carolina dust, red ants biting my forearms, staring into the sky and praying for the earth to swallow me. Bile surged into the back of my throat. I didn't spit it out. I swallowed it back down; I wanted to keep every ounce of that poison inside me.

Lying in the dirt, the realization struck: rage wasn't just a reaction. It could be weaponized.

That morning, I stepped off the standard path and walked onto one governed strictly by vengeance and self-destruction. Rage is a strange fuel. It burns blindingly hot, but it burns clean—at least in the beginning. When I swallowed that bile, settling it into my gut like an iron promise, I believed I had finally claimed the one thing no man could strip away from me. Pain had always been an injury inflicted upon me by others. Rage was something I could wield.

The same drill sergeant who ignored Cho's cheap shot decided to test me again during our blindfolded M16 disassembly and reassembly evaluation. As I stood over the mat, he paced the floor, screaming obscenities across the room. He shouted a filthy sequence about anal sex, a length of rope, and a sycamore tree that he insisted could never be knocked over.

He was dead wrong about the tree. I had spent enough years working the woods to know that any tree can be brought down.

He was trying to shatter my composure. He failed. I assembled the rifle faster than anyone in the room. In

my mind, I was putting the barrel against his chest, and my hands moved with terrifying precision.

The moment you agree to use rage as a weapon, you bind yourself to its terms. It isn't loyal. It doesn't stay confined to a scabbard. It feeds, expands, and inevitably demands fresh meat. I didn't realize it then, but what felt like newfound strength was actually a quiet surrender. I wasn't controlling my fury. I was handing it the reins.

Once basic training finally released its grip, I arrived at AIT, carrying Trevor's ghost like an ache I couldn't set down.

Night after night, I couldn't fall asleep without hearing George Michael sing "A Different Corner". Because leaving personal electronics out was considered a security violation that invited theft, the duty cadre would sneak into the bay while I slept, pull the headphones from my ears, and confiscate the player to teach me a lesson in discipline. But their lessons were useless against twenty dollars and an evening walk to the PX.

Over the course of that cycle, I burned through roughly thirty Walkmans and just as many cassettes. By the second month, the instructors simply gave up. The moment they stopped stealing my gear, it was right where I left it when I opened my eyes. It proved the lesson I had already learned: never trust authority.

Twelve years would pass before I saw Trevor again. We crossed paths unexpectedly in Key West, both of us settled into domestic relationships. The four of us sat

down for an easy dinner, reminisced, and parted ways. Though we ended up living barely a hundred miles from one another, we never spoke again.

When enlistment paperwork had asked for my dream duty assignments, I requested Germany, Italy, and Hawaii. The Army, in its infinite wisdom, sent me to Fort Hood, Texas.

I was furious. The state had long lost whatever romantic luster it once held. Looking back, my dread was misplaced; it was in Texas that I would finally discover what happens when a broken young man collides head-on with a broken system—and how, against all odds, the right people still manage to appear.

Still, the morning I received my orders marked the last time I spoke kindly to God for years. I boarded the bus for Texas knowing one thing above all else: I was carrying a loaded weapon inside my chest, and I had lost the will to control it.

THE FORT

I reported to Fort Hood on December 29, 1986. There was no war to fight back then, and with the holidays in full swing, the installation was running on a skeleton crew. Only one office remained open to process incoming stragglers and assign us temporary bunks.

The NCO who checked me in casually mentioned the battalion's New Year's Eve party scheduled for the following night. I saw an opening.

"What do you know about the Sergeant Major?" I asked.

He shrugged, saying he knew him well enough on and off duty.

"What's the man drink?"

A slow, knowing grin broke across Tim's face. "Scotch. Chivas Regal."

Once my gear was stowed, Tim offered to drive me around post for an orientation tour—with a calculated detour by the Class Six liquor store. It marked the beginning of an interesting, complicated friendship.

The next evening, with a fifth of Chivas tucked under my arm, Tim and I walked into the hall where my new battalion was ringing in 1987. We grabbed an empty table, and Tim nudged his chin toward my target: a sharp, immaculately turned-out Black man with the shiniest shaved head I had ever seen.

I watched him work the room for a few minutes. Soldiers didn't stiffen or flinch when he walked up; they relaxed. That told me everything I needed to know. Here was a career soldier who took immense pride in his uniform, but didn't rely on rank to bully men into submission. His respect was earned through presence and connection.

"I'll be right back, Tim."

"Good luck, Chambers," he muttered, slumping an inch lower into his plastic chair.

I squared my shoulders, walked straight up to the man, and held out my hand. "Hello, Sergeant Major. I'm Private Chambers. I arrived yesterday as the new supply specialist for HHC. I wanted to introduce myself and bring you something proper to welcome in the new year."

He took the bottle with a low chuckle and a steady gaze. I had no idea how accurate my read on him had been, or how desperately I would come to rely on it.

Forty-eight hours later, I came face-to-face with the opposite end of the human spectrum: my new NCOIC. Sergeant Watts was an incompetent, miserable piece of work who substituted rank for spine and intimidation for leadership. I have held plenty of grudges over the years that hindsight revealed to be unfair, but my evaluation of Watts has never wavered. I reported to Fort Hood on December 29, 1986. There was no war to fight back then, and with the holidays in full swing, the installation was running on a skeleton crew. Only one office remained open to process incoming stragglers and assign us temporary bunks.

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To make matters worse, I was good at my job—far too good for Watts's comfort. Within eight months of hitting the unit, I was selected for specialized schooling

to become the Unit Armorer, a billet she openly coveted. Graduating at the top of that course brought an automatic promotion to Specialist E-4, my second stripe under her tenure. Neither advancement had been her idea, and I was now sitting only one pay grade below her.

In our unit, only four people had authorized access to the arms room: the CO, Top, Watts, and me. The primary safe key was maintained under strict, logged chain-of-custody rules.

I was an endurance cyclist in those days, and on a sweltering weekend afternoon, I took off on a twenty-mile ride out toward the lake. I was gone for hours, clearing the dust out of my head. When I finally pedaled back to the company area, two Military Policemen were waiting at the barracks door. They placed me into immediate custody under direct orders from my company commander. They told me nothing else.

The arms room key was missing, and my signature had been the last one penned in the logbook.

While command headquarters was spiraling into panic, Captain F walked into Watts's office to collect her sworn statement detailing my negligence. The room was thick with tension. Flustered, Watts yanked open her center desk drawer to pull out the paperwork.

There it lay.

The heavy brass key gleamed against the metal bottom of the drawer.

The Captain didn't miss a thing. Watts was the only soldier in the building with a key to that desk.

I was cleared immediately, but the damage was done. My discipline unraveled. Within a month, my performance tanked so badly that First Sergeant hauled me into his office, shut the door, and demanded to know what was eating me alive.

“You were cleared, Chambers,” he said. “Can working under Watts really be poisoning you this badly?”

“Yes, Top,” I told him flatly. “She tried to send me to Leavenworth.”

The humiliation had metastasized into poison. The investigation had been open-and-shut in their minds; paperwork had been drawn up for a court-martial before anyone had even bothered to question me. In that small office, I finally let go of the dam. I didn't just unload about Watts; I handed him enough ammunition to ruin me on the spot.

I told him exactly how I was spending my weekends in Austin.

I had never cared for loud bars, preferring quiet pool halls where people kept to themselves. But Tim had insisted on showing me the city, steering me into a dimly lit joint called The 505. I had never set foot in a gay bar, though I had heard the venomous barracks chatter warning that the Criminal Investigation Division watched them like hawks. Whenever the subject surfaced in the day room, I kept my mouth shut and my eyes forward.

I thought I was invisible. Tim knew better.

Standing by the jukebox, drink in hand, the room began to register. There wasn't a single woman in the building. The men were standing close, laughing easily, touching shoulders without posturing.

"Tim, why the hell are we in a gay bar?"

He didn't miss a beat: "Because you're gay."

"Tim, I am not gay," I protested.

Right on cue, the bar-back stepped into the light. Lean, beautiful, and completely effortless, he looked up and caught my stare across the wood.

"Yes, you are," Tim whispered.

I took a slow breath. "Mmm. You might have a point."

His name was Brian. By closing time, we had convinced ourselves we were going to live happily ever after. An hour later, back at his place, he introduced me to cocaine. I found two fatal obsessions in a single night. The fact that Brian put every catalog model I had ever obsessed over to absolute shame was just gasoline on the fire.

Sitting across from Top's desk, having laid out the drugs, the men, and the unraveling weekends, I waited for the ax to fall. This was years before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." The military doctrine of the era was brutal and efficient: homosexual? Out.

I braced for impact, my internal defenses throwing up walls. I told myself I didn't care; I'd take the dishonorable discharge, move into Austin, sling drinks alongside Brian, and let cocaine and lust carry us wherever we wanted to go.

I had completely underestimated the humanity of my commanders.

Top marched me straight to Captain F. Instead of calling the MPs, she sat me down and spoke plainly. She knew I wasn't the only gay soldier in the Army, or even in her company. She laid out the harsh political reality: many commands weaponized Article 125 as an administrative shortcut when they wanted to purge weak performers, saving themselves the paperwork of an Article 15.

"You're a good soldier, Chambers," she said quietly. "I'm not throwing you out."

She admitted she had mishandled the missing key incident, acknowledging she had jumped the gun on my guilt. Hearing a commissioned captain apologize to an E-4 blew my world apart. She told me I was salvageable, but it required a deal: she would cover my back, but I had to hold up hers.

She laid out the options: accept a quiet General Discharge, pack my bags, and leave with a clean slate but nothing to show for it—or check myself into the inpatient psychiatric clinic for unscheduled maintenance.

I chose to stay.

The ward proved transformative. For weeks, doctors and technicians pulled back the layers of anger that had hardened over my life. They medicated me with tricyclics, blunt tools that quieted the ringing in my ears, and taught me how to navigate the rage without detonating my life. I didn't emerge a saint; I still had

plenty of dysfunctional impulses left to wrestle down. But the chip on my shoulder had finally been ground down to a size I could carry.

When I returned to the company, Watts was gone, transferred to an administrative holding unit to contemplate her career's demise.

To keep a short leash on me, Captain F appointed me as her official driver. It was a tactical stroke of genius: between daily operations, spontaneous meetings, and three duty weekends a month, I barely had enough free time to breathe, let alone run off to Austin.

That assignment gave me one of the finest memories of my military service. During a massive division field exercise, I drew twenty-four hours of continuous CQ duty, immediately followed by orders to drive the Captain across the reservation for back-to-back command briefings.

By four o'clock the following morning, I had been awake for nearly forty hours. Captain F emerged from a field tent, climbed into the front passenger seat of the CUCV, and slammed the door. I fired up the diesel engine, pulled out of the staging area, and immediately began driving in neat, dazed circles around the empty dirt lot.

She didn't shout. She didn't write me up.

"Chambers," she said softly, "pull it over."

I braked. She reached across the console, shifted the transmission into park, and told me to get out. We swapped seats in the dark. For the next twenty miles, a

company commander drove her exhausted corporal through the Texas brush while he slept against the door.

Top and Captain F stood as my quiet shield for the remainder of my enlistment. Why they poured so much political capital into keeping a damaged kid afloat, I will never fully comprehend.

By August 1989, my active-duty time was up. As I was completing my out-processing paperwork, Top stepped into the office to see me off. Tears welled in my eyes, mortifying me. He grabbed my hand in a vise grip, holding my gaze. Breaking eye contact would have been an unforgivable breach of respect; I held on until it burned.

He clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You will be a good man, Corporal. You owe me that."

He turned and walked through the double doors.

When I stepped out into the blinding Texas heat, I watched Top climb into a waiting staff car. Behind the wheel sat the Sergeant Major, his polished head gleaming in the midday sun. As the car pulled past the curb, the big man looked over, caught my eye, and flashed a slow, deliberate thumbs-up.

I am still trying to pay off that debt. I miss them both. Part of me wishes I had stayed.

Watching that car disappear down the blacktop, I finally recognized the cold sensation gripping my rib cage for what it was: raw terror. For the first time in my life, I wasn't being discarded, locked up, or run off. I was walking out on my own terms.

Leaving Fort Hood meant stripping away the only external skeleton that had ever kept my demons at bay. The Army's rigid cadence had held me together; now I was stepping into an open, unstructured world where the burden of survival rested entirely on my own shoulders.

I was not ready.

So I drifted—hungrily, recklessly—toward anyone who offered a glimpse of warmth. After an entire childhood defined by violence, emotional drought, and calculated survival, I was starving to be seen. Whenever someone offered connection, I grabbed it with both hands and refused to let go.

So long, Mom and Dad.

I had no way of knowing that the next people to walk into my life would reshape me just as profoundly as any commander ever had—teaching me the heights of joy, loyalty, and desire, only to leave behind scars sharper than any blade.

Youth never sees the edge until it's already midair.

And I was already in free fall.

BEAUTIFUL DEAD

Brian taught me about sex and sexuality.

By society's pious standards, he was probably the worst possible mentor, but for an emotionally malnourished soldier, he provided the one thing no one else had ever offered: a narrow, brilliant window in which to feel worthy. He introduced me to his circle as his boyfriend—a title I considered myself wholly unqualified to hold. Other men were just “tricks,” disposable bodies passing through the night. But he made it clear that I was his.

Physically, he was—then and in the amber of memory—perfection. To be doted on by a man I considered leagues beyond my reach was intoxicating. Whatever his flaws, Brian was a tour de force of ego-inflating devotion.

When he claimed me, he fundamentally rewrote the architecture of who I believed I was. I know how shallow that sounds. I also know there are plenty of broken people walking this earth who understand the exact arithmetic of that hunger.

Before my discharge from the Army, I burned up the asphalt between Fort Hood and Austin, scraping together every spare hour I could steal. He was always waiting with a smile, even when my visits were cut short by the Captain's relentless driving schedule.

Brian knew I was carrying a bottomless well of self-loathing, a deficit that wore on his patience. He had an enormous ego, believing his desire alone ought to be proof enough of my value. Yet he was patient in his own reckless way, often reinforcing my worth by offering me up to his adventurous friends. We shared wild, sleepless nights. I never complained. I wouldn't have dreamed of it. If being shared was the price of remaining in his light, I paid it gladly.

My extra duties at the fort earned me regular three-day passes on the single weekend a month I wasn't on call. I also had thirty days of terminal leave to burn before August. I had zero intention of squandering that time by heading back to Missouri; nobody was waiting on the porch, and I doubt I would have survived the homecoming anyway.

I was falling in love with Brian in the rawest, truest sense of what my nineteen-year-old mind could grasp. We were young, beautiful, and careless. We looked good together. It felt like a life.

Our private carnival rolled on until the afternoon he swallowed a full bottle of sleeping pills.

I'll never know what tipped the balance. I thought things were steady. I could sense something heavy lingering in the darker recesses of his head—a quiet gravity that shadowed our laughter—but we never spoke about the things that genuinely mattered.

I'm fairly confident now that his death wasn't my fault. That's a conclusion that required writing this memoir and thirty years of living to reach. Until recently, I shouldered the lion's share of the blame. Why wouldn't I? In my twisted calculus, he was perfection, and I was the broken thing in the room.

By the time Brian retreated into the dark, he had handed me a dangerous piece of knowledge: I had sex appeal. Someone carved like that would never have wasted his cocaine or his time on me otherwise. I knew what his other playmates looked like; his standards were ruthless. His friends never turned me away. If my spirit was a hollow wreck, at least my face and my body held market value.

I don't regret the night I met my first love. I wish to God I could have given him a reason to stay, but I carry no bitterness toward him. He was simply more lucid about the dark than I was. Even now, four decades out, tears will still catch me off guard when his face crosses my mind. I miss him terribly.

Brian's death left me drowning in grief, but it left behind something far more toxic: an unbridled, scorching fury.

That was the moment the needle jumped the groove.

If the world was going to judge me entirely by my surface, fine. I would strip my empathy down to the bone and turn sex appeal into a lethal weapon.

The more I haunted the bars, the faster the free drinks lined up on the rail—faster than I could knock them back, though God knows I gave it an honest effort.

One night, I pushed the throttle so far to the floor that I collapsed unconscious in the gravel alley behind the club, halfway between the back door and my bumper. It was only by pure grace that I passed out alongside the car belonging to Mathews.

When I say Mathews was my bartender, I mean he was my bartender. I wouldn't spend a dime at the taps unless he was on the stick. He worked the main room at Oilcan Harry's. We'd crossed paths after Freeman, who owned both clubs, hired me to step into Brian's vacant shoes behind the rail at The 505. Mathews and I shared enough history that he wasn't about to leave me crumpled in the weeds behind 4th Street. Since I had shut the joint down from the customer side of the mahogany, he caught me on his way out to his car.

When daylight finally broke, I woke up flat on my back in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room. Waking up in a stranger's sheets wasn't exactly outside my operating routine, but waking up alone triggered immediate, ringing alarms.

My head was spinning like a bad carnival ride. The rich smell of fresh coffee and frying bacon drifted under the door—usually a promising indicator, though my immediate concern was finding two hundred milligrams of aspirin. I wrapped a white top sheet around my waist like a toga and padded quietly down the hallway to run reconnaissance on the perimeter.

From down the hall, Mathews called out before I could clear the doorway:

“Clean towels and aspirin are in the bath on your left. Your clothes are running through the dryer. Breakfast hits the table in ten minutes.”

Well, hell. That was civilized.

Over eggs, Mathews laid out just how narrow my margin had been. If he hadn't spotted me snoring in the dirt, the Austin police would have tossed me straight into a drunk tank—or worse, some opportunist would have dragged me into a back alley and rented my ass out by the hour.

He meant it as a sobering warning to slow down.

Instead, my cynical little mind caught the scent of an enterprise:

Hell, I could rent my own ass out.

Before long, I had built a steady clientele.

The older gentlemen holding down bar stools in those days were more than willing to pay young lurkers like me for silence and discretion. We fulfilled other appetites as well, balancing accounts in cash, top-shelf

liquor, or pharmaceutical-grade cocaine—or all three, for those of us who knew how to work the room. It was through my tenure as a scratcher of high-dollar extramarital itches that I crossed paths with Marcus.

He was the most breathtaking creature I had ever laid eyes on. Instantly, I was in free fall all over again.

Marcus was thirty. To a twenty-year-old soldier, that sounded ancient, but he was sculpted, magnetic, and considerably younger than the patrons I usually entertained. He never outright demanded that I walk away from my side hustle, but he draped me in enough luxury that outside work became entirely unnecessary.

We collided at a lavish fiftieth birthday blowout hosted by one of my regular benefactors. The setting was a sprawling, seven-thousand-square-foot compound carved into a limestone bluff overlooking Lake Austin.

The party's theme was "The Death of Youth"—which, in late-eighties gay parlance, meant any breath drawn past forty-nine. Our host spent the first two hours of the evening greeting guests from inside a velvet-lined casket I had personally arranged through a back-alley connection.

I was tucked into a quiet sitting room off the terrace, splitting a bottle of B&B and lines of coke with a girl named Monica who had overheard me ordering at the bar. We clicked instantly. She thought the casket stunt was delightfully twisted; I proudly took the credit.

Marcus materialized like a shadow, slipping into the room as if he already held the keys.

Surrounded by the lake air and the powder, our conversation turned to the heavy machinery of mortality. Monica's thirtieth was coming up. I was months shy of twenty-one. She was gorgeous, vibrant, and riding high—deeply in love with her boyfriend, building an actual career, and talking about getting married and raising babies.

I loved her energy, but my eyes kept drifting to her quiet friend. Marcus didn't volunteer a syllable of autobiography. He simply sat back, watched, and stole glances in my direction. Every time our eyes locked, the heat went straight to my face. I was thrilled; things seemed to be pointing up. A brilliant new girlfriend, and the prospect of a breathtaking new man if I played my cards right.

Three days later, my field phone rang at the arms room at Fort Hood.

It was Marcus. His voice was dead, stripped of all color. He asked if I could get leave for the coming weekend; he needed me beside him for Monica and her boyfriend's joint funeral. They had been stopped at a red light on his motorcycle when a driver plowed through them from behind. Dead on impact.

If that disaster had occurred a decade later, I would have found a way to blame myself for the collision. In time, accepting total responsibility for every catastrophe in my perimeter would become my default setting.

“Dos lebn varft a sakh klapn,” my Chicago grandmother used to say. Life throws a hell of a lot of punches.

Marcus had kept the scrap of cocktail napkin I’d casually dropped into his lap before walking out of that lake house. As fortune would have it, my terminal leave ahead of my August discharge kicked off that very Friday.

The funeral was an exercise in numb, polished grief. On the ride out toward the cemetery, the top rolled down on his convertible, Marcus slid a velvet jeweler’s box across the leather console.

I stiffened, my heart jumping into my throat.

He laughed, low and dry. “Relax. It’s a bullet.”

It wasn’t military ordnance. It was an acrylic snorting bullet—a spring-loaded apparatus engineered to deliver a measured bump of cocaine without losing powder to the highway wind. It came packed to the brim.

Well, hell. As first dates went, it set an aggressive standard.

Marcus wasn’t some street-corner hustler flipping dime bags. He was a regional cocaine distributor who moved serious freight. He lived in a glass-walled penthouse high above the city, maintained an iron closet safe housing ten kilos of pure flake alongside bricks of bundled cash, and tossed me the keys to a spare black Saab turbo just so I wouldn’t have to take cabs.

A month before my discharge from the Army, he laid it out flat: he wanted me to move into the penthouse permanently. But first, he looked me in the eye and asked if I could stomach living alongside his chosen line of work.

I thought I was being the wittiest kid in Texas: “What career? I thought you were just an orphan with a very generous trust fund.”

Yet despite the penthouse, the leather, and the rush of falling in love, Monica’s ghost never left the passenger seat. Her death, landing so shortly after Brian’s overdose, hit like a sledgehammer to the ribs. The bodies were stacking up, and my damaged mind was drafting a terrifying equation.

I was the common denominator.

Marcus and I burned through seven wild, hedonistic months before the universe balanced the ledger. We might have lasted years if a fatal bullet-versus-skull dispute hadn’t ended the run.

Wrong place, wrong minute.

He had walked down the block on a Tuesday evening to grab cigarettes when a two-bit stickup artist botching a robbery at the corner liquor store fired wild through the glass. A stray slug caught Marcus behind the ear.

A major distributor of South American poison, snuffed out by a panicked amateur with a Saturday Night Special. Marcus wasn’t targeted. He wasn’t settling a score.

He was just collateral scenery on an Austin sidewalk.

I had spent years carrying a loaded gun inside my chest—round chambered, hammer cocked, safety sheared clean off. I didn't even realize I was dangerous until 1989, when the universe set about proving that nothing on this earth was permanent.

People didn't just walk away; they evaporated. So I stopped investing in forever and began trading strictly in the next hour.

Grief rearranges a man from the marrow out. One death is an open wound; four in rapid succession is an amputation. After Brian, Monica, and Marcus joined the ranks of the beautiful dead, the mechanism inside me that believed in tomorrow simply broke. I had spent my entire youth watching people vanish—some by choice, some by violence, some by blind, rotten luck—and somewhere along the way, I learned to stop expecting anyone to stay.

When the world keeps hammering home the lesson that nothing lasts, you start living as though nothing should.

I wasn't chasing love anymore. I wasn't even hunting for comfort. I was hunting for pure, chemical numbness—anything to mute the roaring static, dull the throb behind my ribs, and blur the faces that had slipped into the dark too soon.

That's the tragedy of a boy who grows up convinced he is disposable: eventually, he begins handling himself like garbage. I didn't plunge into the blow because it

was a thrill; I took it because it made me feel untouchable, unbreakable, and entirely out of reach—even if the armor only held for forty-five minutes at a stretch.

By twenty-one, intimacy felt like walking into an ambush, but oblivion felt like home.

And cocaine, better than anything else on the market, offered the seductive illusion of both.

The afternoon Marcus bled out on that sidewalk was the day I finally concluded we were nothing more than an eighth-grade science project Jesus threw together for a passing grade. It became glaringly obvious that the Almighty had grown bored with the petri dish, shoved us into the back of a dark closet, and walked away to play outside.

And the terrifying part?

I hadn't even met Bill yet.

COCAINE

I held the gun to my head.

It was a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver. It held a single cartridge in the cylinder. I pulled the trigger seven times.

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

Nothing. The primer was a dud. The universe wouldn't even grant me a clean exit.

I had started running with cocaine during my final stretch in uniform. I was already a devoted disciple of cheap liquor; one fire naturally stoked the other. In late-eighties Austin, that brand of relentless excess passed for a social life.

Before long, I added weed, acid, ephedrine, and ecstasy to the rotation. I sampled everything, but cocaine was the master. It made me feel invulnerable. It

made me comfortable in my own skin. For the first time in my life, I could actually stomach my own company.

Men who consumed it with my kind of fury were easy to find and even easier to recruit. With coke on the mirror, conversation flowed like water, attraction ignited instantly, and sex became an endurance marathon with dialogue. Runs lasted for hours. Runs stretched into days. At the time, in the haze, I convinced myself these were the golden years.

Like the whiskey, the powder wasted no time transitioning from a wild novelty into daily maintenance. I vaulted from an occasional user to an operational degenerate in weeks. I rarely spent a dime on drinks or blow; transactional playmates were on every corner. Most of the older benefactors who paid for my evenings weren't interested in harder drugs, so simple economics steered me straight into the chemical trenches.

I developed an ability to hover near the ceiling and watch my life from ten feet up. I would be pinned in the middle of a marathon bed, surrounded by tangled limbs and cigarette haze, while an observant piece of me floated near the crown molding, analyzing the choreography like a physicist tracking collisions in a cloud chamber. I understood the chemistry of the high. I understood the cadence of the dopamine rush. I understood the mechanical physics of the sex.

I felt none of the humanity.

I was nothing more than the sum of a billion violent neurological impulses, drifting through bedrooms like a

ghost. I didn't care about their names. I didn't care about where they grew up. I didn't care about who loved them. I cared only about velocity. I was moving too fast to be intercepted, and I was far too numb to bleed.

I've had sex stone-cold sober, and I loved it. But only with men I genuinely cared for—or at least men who stirred something real beneath my ribs. Sober, my satisfaction lived entirely inside theirs. I studied their eyes. Every hitch in their breath told me where to move next. I wanted them to experience every fraction of pleasure I was capable of giving them, not just the release at the end.

When I was high, that boy ceased to exist.

I didn't care who occupied the mattress. I cared about jawlines, I cared about what they would surrender to me, and I cared about whether they possessed the stamina to keep the engine turning until dawn. I didn't need to like them. I didn't give a damn if they liked me.

I used to lie to myself and claim I was generous when I was flying.

That was a coward's lie.

It was about me.

Only me.

I was simply buying their hours. The wheel had turned clean around: the boy who had been rented was now the customer.

After Marcus went into the ground, I shifted toward guys my own age. They brought novel combinations of

poison to the table. I steered clear of downers and opiates; they made no sense to my wiring. Uppers made absolute sense. They matched my appetite. They matched my internal restlessness. They matched my desperate addiction to acceleration.

My operational doctrine was simple: two was company, three or more was a proper party. I liked the parties long, crowded, and stripped of boundaries.

Holding down a boyfriend never slowed the carousel.

I ran through an endless string of boyfriends. I harvested most of them out of sleepless, chemical basements, keeping two or three in active rotation. To make the roster, a boy needed an open couch, an appetite for excess, or enough internal rot that I could assist him in making catastrophic choices. If he was stunning, so much the better.

Most of those affairs burned out in days. Plenty of those boys saw through my armor long before I did. The ones who cut and ran were the fortunate ones.

The boys who deserve genuine pity are the ones who stayed long enough for me to lay waste to them.

I had no grasp of the radioactive fallout I was spreading. Whatever engine was driving me was buried too deep in childhood soil to name. When the machine started rolling, I was young, venomous, and fractured far beyond my own understanding.

My memory has burned away plenty of ledger pages, but this much remains etched in acid: I gave

almost nothing back to the boys I loved—or the boys I used.

I wish I could track them down and apologize, but the roll call is too long, the addresses long vanished. Cocaine was my Samson hair; rage was my Delilah.

There is a precise border where victimhood expires—where damage stops being an injury inflicted upon you and becomes a weapon you drive into someone else's chest. I didn't notice when I crossed that line. I was too young, too pickled in stimulants, and far too arrogant to comprehend that I had transformed into the exact monster I had fled: a tornado that flattens timber and never looks in the rear view mirror to see who survived the wreckage.

The truth is brutal and plain: I wasn't offering romance. I wasn't offering safe harbor. I was offering hollow ground. I devoured their hours, their worship, their bodies, and their tenderness—and handed them back smoke.

I told myself the arrangement was mutual. I told myself everyone was running an angle. I told myself nobody expected anything beyond forty-eight hours of shared oblivion.

It was a lie. Some of those boys wanted a home. Some of them deserved a home. And my cupboards were entirely bare.

When you don't know how to value your own blood, you are incapable of valuing anyone else's.

So I reduced intimacy to a transaction.

Then I reduced the transaction to a habit.

Eventually, I reduced the habit to raw numbers.

It was cleaner that way: converting human beings into logbook entries, turning wild heat into cold tallies, reducing human longing to data points.

Numbers don't demand presence.

Numbers don't pack bags.

Numbers don't end up on an autopsy slab.

When I finally cracked open that spiral notebook and began logging the count, I swore to myself it was just a diversion.

It wasn't a game.

It was a forensic postmortem.

And I was simultaneously the coroner carving the chest—and the dead boy lying cold on the steel.

3,000 SOULS

Following Brian's death, I opened a ledger.

It was a standard, college-ruled, hundred-page spiral notebook where I logged the dates, times, and names of every conquest. If a name slipped my memory—or if I had never bothered to ask for it in the dark—I jotted down an identifying physical trait instead.

Date. Time. Location. Quantity.

The ground rules were straightforward: if we were stripped down inside the same room, you earned a line in the book. Tube socks and an athletic supporter counted—double credit on occasion, as that happened to be my uniform of choice.

Actual consummation wasn't mandatory. Physical presence was enough. Proximity was enough. Mutual desire, whether completed or merely negotiated,

cleared the threshold. By then, I had systematically reduced human connection to raw inventory.

I set a hard ceiling for the enterprise: the game would conclude the day the tally hit three thousand entries. That odometer finally turned over on my fortieth birthday.

That milestone wasn't an ending; it was merely where the engine began to idle.

After twenty-two years of carrying the conviction that I was hideous, discarded, and utterly worthless, I had compiled tangible, statistical documentation to the contrary. Or what passed for proof in a fractured skull. I was craved. I held currency. I took up space on this earth. Fuck you very much.

Three thousand souls represent an overwhelming amount of human traffic for one man to shepherd. I did what I could to keep the clientele entertained, but the transactions weren't without friction.

There were the standard occupational hazards: shared prescriptions, vanished underwear, pocketed cocaine, and shattered illusions.

Then there were the logistical catastrophes.

One night at an Austin watering hole, I crossed paths with an active-duty soldier down from Fort Hood, who was having drinks with an enlisted buddy. The chemistry ignited across all three points of the triangle, and we convoyed north before last call to secure a cheap motel room outside the main gate. We were moving too fast to consider mundane supplies, and once the deadbolt turned, nobody was willing to forfeit

momentum for a convenience store run. We opted to improvise.

Industrial motel hair conditioner is not a suitable stand-in for personal lubricant. That remains a piece of tactical wisdom best acquired through hearsay.

Chemical dermatitis on opposing ends of the male anatomy presents a unique diagnostic challenge when facing down an Army physician. Fortunately, the three of us were assigned to separate battalion aid stations.

Those two vanished into the Texas dust the following morning. I never laid eyes on either man again—at least not with sufficient sobriety to identify them. After a while, the jawlines all blurred into the same composite sketch anyway.

It didn't matter. I had the upcoming four-day pass on the calendar, and the premise remained unshakable: there would always be another companion, another mattress, another door, another diversion.

I wasn't wrong.

That was the foundational lie keeping the entire apparatus upright: if I could ensure enough men were lining up outside the door, I would never be forced to confront the howling vacuum inside the room when they walked away.

Ten minutes after a bed cleared, I was already hunting the replacement.

There is a distinct, suffocating brand of isolation that breeds exclusively in the silence between one lover stepping out and the next one stepping in. I took up permanent residence in that breach. I cultivated it. I

confused forward momentum with purpose, physical friction with intimacy, and compulsive repetition with control. Every weekend offered a fresh reset button—unfamiliar faces, foreign rooms, and disposable narratives I had no intention of retaining. I christened it autonomy, but it was nothing more than inertia.

The plain truth was that I wasn't pursuing ecstasy; I was sprinting away from the quiet.

Because the quiet demanded that I sit alone with David Chambers—and he was the last person on earth I wanted to be trapped in a room with.

So I kept moving.

Kept consuming.

Kept swapping bodies.

The longer the carousel spun, the more interchangeable the participants became. Not because those men lacked substance, but because I refused to permit them any. If I could reduce every partner to a placeholder, I could avoid recognizing that I had converted myself into one years ago.

Yet a few refused to stay in their boxes. A few lingered long enough to look past the caustic wit, past the theatrical bravado, past the chemical gloss.

A few actually cared.

And those were the ones I dismantled with the greatest precision.

Because devastation doesn't always originate from malice.

Sometimes it bleeds straight out of an empty core.

And mine was a bottomless grave.

DAMAGE

IP of D.J. Chambers

IP of D.J. Chambers

SPEAK

This chapter is heavy. It's also short, so the procedure will only hurt for a minute. All you're going to feel is a little sting.

For fifty-seven years, I operated under the assumption that God was simply malicious. I figured He had equipped me with an empath's radar and an addict's wiring just to sit back with popcorn and watch me buckle under the weight.

People love to say that we heal, that we grow, that time mends the joints. By my estimate, maybe one percent of humanity actually pulls that off. The problem with genuine growth is that it's brutal, unglamorous work. It requires standing over the crater and admitting that bad choices are infinitely easier to make than good ones. Stay sideways long enough, and you become comfortable with the wreckage. For those of us who

spent decades barricaded behind chemical curtains, losing sight of the consequences was the entire point of the exercise. That was who I was. In plenty of ways, it's who I still am. Even the predator I consider as close to earthly perfection as nature can manage—the black panther tattooed into the skin of my leg—carries spots. They're just buried deep within the dark fur.

Over the years, a procession of decent people tried their hand at rehabilitation. They tried to forge me into a better kid, a better soldier, a better adult, a better addict. Even a more presentable corpse.

My strategy was always to follow basic physics. I surrendered to gravity. I let myself drop. It wasn't laziness; it was pure, restless boredom. The miracle—the only thing I can credit to a higher power without choking—is that the earth always managed to rush up and catch me just before the final pulverizing impact. I knew plenty of men who weren't granted that luxury. They hit terra firma with nothing to break the velocity, and they shattered into dust.

Sobriety does strange, terrifying things to an unarmored nervous system. Clear months open long-abandoned neurological corridors. After spending a lifetime locking the basement doors, the impulse to turn the knob and look inside is completely disorienting. Some mornings, it feels like kicking open an emergency exit at high noon after forty years in a pitch-black cinema. On others, it's like stepping out onto a white beach and taking in the Caribbean Sea for the very first time.

I've had Pink Floyd running through my headphones since I was fourteen, but watching the Pulse concert recently felt like a fresh revelation. For the first time, the static cleared, and I heard the underlying narrative inside the chords.

I had been chasing the dragon for half a century. In clinical terms: my id had been beating the living hell out of my superego, while bottle-feeding my ego in the corner.

Speaking of paths, I spent decades shopping for the right label. Sunny paths, shaded trails, sociopaths.

A sociopath possesses no functional conscience—just an explosive disregard for right, wrong, and the collateral casualties left in the ditch. Empathy, on the other hand, is the nerve bridge that forces you to register, decipher, and mirror the agony of the person across the room.

When I sat down across from my new psychiatrist, I tried to do him a favor. I told him I'd be an easy case: I had already self-diagnosed as a sociopathic empath, so we could skip the preliminaries.

He didn't buy the routine.

He read the charts, looked me in the eye, and handed me the bill: Borderline Personality Disorder paired with severe, persistent substance use disorder and dissociative affect. Then he told me to stop practicing medicine without a license before I got someone killed, laughed in my face, and informed me that my wiring was genuinely screwed up.

His diagnosis cut right through the leather. He suggested I was an empath who had spent forty years hiding behind a chemical haze because looking at my own ghosts sober would have burned my retinas out. I didn't destroy lovers and friends because I was cold; I dismantled them preemptively so they wouldn't have the leverage to destroy me first. I scorched the earth so nobody could build a gallows on it.

Then he offered the standard clinical absolution: "It's not your fault."

I'm willing to offload a portion of the cargo. Maybe even the heavy end of the crate. But I will never walk off this field claiming to have been an innocent bystander.

I wasn't innocent then. I'm not innocent now.

I'm convinced God spent decades marching me through the pitch-black half of reality so that when the light finally broke, I wouldn't have the luxury of mistaking what I was looking at.

I just haven't figured out what He expects me to do with the view.

NURSE

It was Last Splash—Labor Day weekend at Hippie Hollow on Lake Travis.

The Texas hill country weather was flawless: eighty-five degrees, low humidity, water like blue glass, and an endless horizon of tanned flesh. I was perched on the upper deck of a friend's two-story pontoon boat, pleasantly pickled on bourbon, running on high-grade cocaine, and admiring the view.

Out of the corner of my eye, I clocked an exceptional pair of cheeks drifting past on a rainbow-striped air mattress. I was immediately intrigued, and considerably hungry.

I flagged down a naked stranger who had been freeloading from our top-shelf liquor cooler on the lower deck.

"What's up?" he asked, entirely too eager to please.

I pointed out into the wake. He glanced at the target, then back at me, his lower lip protruding in a brief, jealous pout. I sweetened the contract with an offer no boat hopper in 1990 would dream of refusing: two generous bumps of powder off my key. His smile returned instantly.

He dove. He retrieved. He returned.

A few minutes later, my new hunting hound paddled back to the swim ladder, towing my future husband, who was still lounging horizontally on his vinyl float, likely wondering what brand of lunatic had summoned him out of open water.

He was tall, blond, and carried cold blue eyes. He was also impressively gifted between the hips. In my mind, the contract was signed and notarized.

My target climbed aboard without bothering to ask the captain for boarding clearance, but I held enough sway with the boat's owner to smooth over the breach of maritime etiquette. He climbed the aluminum ladder to the sun deck, where I was working on my tan.

He stood over me, dripping lake water onto the fiberglass.

I looked him up and down. "Hello. I love you. Won't you tell me your name?"

He offered a slow, amused grin. "Nurse."

"Nurse?" I echoed. "How convenient. I can get completely blind drunk and still manage to remember what to scream."

I tipped out the errand boy with his chemical finder's fee and turned my full artillery onto Nurse.

Nurse was infinitely sharper than I anticipated. He might have been flaunting his inventory in the middle of Lake Travis, but the merchandise was generally for window shopping only. I had my work cut out for me.

After a relentless seven-day blitzkrieg of courtship, I hauled my bags into his apartment. We were an electric match, and before long our faces landed on the cover of TWIT Magazine as Austin's latest domestic power-couple. We were formally inducted into the cool-kids circuit. Pair a man possessing his steady, professional focus with my dark-alley diplomacy and back-end assets, and the enterprise ran like clockwork.

He even orchestrated my first civilian paycheck after the Army, getting me hired at the Embassy Suites where his best friend ran the property as general manager.

I lasted roughly six months.

The disaster began during an unauthorized smoke break on the roof, splitting a fat joint with the chief engineer. I drifted back down to the switchboard room, took my seat at the PBX console, and clamped on the headset to manage the incoming lines.

An agitated caller rang through demanding an immediate transfer to a woman on the seventh floor. He offered a vague, disjointed physical description of the lady, but no room number, no extension, and no last name.

"Sir, do you have a name or a room number?" I asked, straining for professional courtesy.

"No, I don't," he barked.

I reached for the console, tapped the hold button, spun around in my chair, and hollered to the front desk clerks, “Some stupid son of a bitch on line two wants to talk to—”

“What? What the hell did you just call me?!”

The fury detonated straight into my ear canal.

I hadn’t hit hold. I had tapped volume-up.

Management terminated my hospitality career on the spot. A simple administrative misunderstanding, really; entirely unfair. Nurse took the embarrassment on the chin. If he had possessed an ounce of self-preservation, he would have tossed my clothes out the window that very night. He didn’t.

My next maneuver landed me on the sales floor of an ultra-exclusive men’s clothier. It was an act of pure, unadulterated fraud. I had zero retail experience and couldn’t distinguish worsted wool from polyester. What I did have was a tailored charcoal suit and a pair of Italian dress shoes borrowed from Nurse’s closet, and that was enough to bluff my way through the owner’s office.

To everyone’s shock, the work fit me like a glove. I was a quick study, possessed an intuitive eye for proportion, and within months I was writing massive tickets. I was suddenly rubbing shoulders with real power—the caliber of Texas money that routinely dropped five grand on bespoke suits before lunch. I even fitted the governor. Ann Richards was a gracious, razor-sharp woman.

The floor operated on pure commission. At first, my survival depended on the grace of the owner, the store manager, and an old-timer holding down a forty-year client list. When a high-dollar walk-in arrived without an appointment, they handed the ticket to me to write up, generously splitting the cut. It was charity, certainly, but it served as a masterclass. It taught me how to navigate the wealthy: how to anticipate their unspoken insecurities without ever adopting a subservient posture.

One evening, twenty minutes before locking up, a well-dressed gentleman strolled in unannounced. Since I had closing duty, the floor belonged to me. He had exquisite taste and an open wallet. By the time I rang the register, I was staring at a massive commission check.

Exuberant, I locked the glass doors, pocketed my slip, and walked down the block to Maggie Mae's on Sixth Street to celebrate with a cold draft.

The tavern was nearly deserted at that hour. Three stools down sat an older fellow who looked as though his wife had just totaled his pickup, drowned his bird dog, and run off with his brother. High on life and full of seasonal goodwill, I offered to buy him a round.

He didn't reach for his glass. He reached into his jacket and flashed a badge.

"Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission," he drawled. "You're under arrest for public intoxication."

Straight to Travis County booking I went. I walked out the following afternoon with a bench warrant, zero

beer in my stomach, and an aggressive case of jailhouse scabies to share with my spouse.

Nurse refused to believe the parasites originated in a municipal holding cell. In retrospect, given my resume, I can hardly indict him for his skepticism.

When my court date rolled around, I walked into the courtroom and found myself staring up at the bench—straight into the eyes of the Justice of the Peace who had spent thousands of dollars at my counter thirty minutes before my arrest. He did the math instantly. A man who spent forty-five minutes buying suits with clean speech could not have achieved criminal intoxication on a two-block walk down Sixth Street. He threw the charges out with a laugh.

The law let me walk, but the frost had already settled in at home.

Something fundamental in Nurse cooled after that night.

He wanted to forgive me, but I wouldn't permit him the peace. Instead of embracing the grace he extended, I leaned my shoulder against it and pushed. I made it impossible for him to trust me, impossible for him to believe in our future, impossible to keep wasting mercy on a man who handled it like an insult.

That was how I loved him: by daring him to survive me.

Nurse leaned on me almost as heavily as I drained him. He was locked in combat with the private shame of being an only son carrying a proud family surname in Texas during the height of the epidemic. His parents

never missed an opportunity to remind him that the lineage died with him. It was a crushing, silent cross for a gay professional to bear in 1992. He looked to me to help him stand under it. He had shielded me from the world; he assumed I would return the favor.

We were young, the world was unforgiving, and liquor offered steady cover.

I know Nurse loved me because he nearly killed himself trying to repair me. I can only imagine the sickening horror of finally realizing that the man sharing your bed has no intention of being saved.

Nurse never touched narcotics. He drank. By the end of our seventh year, he was drinking with a grim, desperate fury. It was a mercy that he remained blind to the coke.

I managed to conceal a raging cocaine dependency from him for seven straight years. That was when the locks finally changed.

If I could stand in front of him today and tell him how profoundly sorry I am for the wreckage I brought to his door, I would. It wouldn't alter the math of what happened, but I would say it anyway.

Losing Nurse wasn't a parting of ways; it was a structural collapse. Seven years with a decent, honorable man who gave me his home, his name, and his loyalty—and I repaid him with deceit, paranoia, and a chemical parasite I kept holstered behind my back. When he put my suitcases on the curb, he wasn't lashing out. He was simply evacuating the building before it crushed him.

Yet remorse doesn't manufacture transformation. It merely sits on your ribs, suffocating and cold, until you recruit a new distraction to absorb the blow. I had never learned how to exist alone. I possessed zero tools to sit in an empty room with the reality of what I had executed.

So I fell back on the only reflex I knew: I cleared the board before the smoke could clear.

People with my kind of damage didn't seek treatment; we found replacements. We drowned the silence with bass, buried the void under strange bodies, and disguised raw guilt as velocity.

Nurse had introduced me to Sarah McLachlan early in our courtship. Every time "Path of Thorns" hits my stereo, the closing line drives an ice pick through my spine:

"Funny, how it seems that all I've tried to do
Seems to make no difference to you, at all."

So when Doc crossed my radar, I wasn't searching for absolution. I wasn't even shopping for romance. I was searching for an LZ—a soft place to crash, a fresh blind where another man's body could muffle the screams of the life I had just dismantled.

Doc had no inkling of the machinery he was stepping into.

He simply saw a sharply dressed stranger buying rounds in the middle of a sunny afternoon.

And I saw a runway where I could forget my own name for a little while longer.

It wasn't destiny. It wasn't romance. It was pure, predatory timing.

And besides—I've always had a fatal weakness for redheads.

Doc

It was late in 1993 when I met Doc.

We were day-drinking at a beer joint near the University of Texas campus, a spot where the local gay boys congregated in the early afternoon to talk shop and drown out whatever was left of the previous night's hangover. I'd never seen Doc in there before, but that didn't mean he was a newcomer; it simply meant my rent had been paid on time lately, so I hadn't been paying attention to the room.

That had changed. I needed a fresh roommate to help cover the overhead.

I locked my radar onto an unsuspecting redhead sitting across the room, nursing a beer with a female friend. I broke the ice the standard way: I flagged the bartender and bought their next round.

They played it cool, ignoring me entirely as two fresh longnecks replaced the empties on their table. Doc was acting coy, which suited me fine; I've always appreciated a bit of sport. A few minutes later, while I was washing my hands in the restroom, a fresh Cosmopolitan landed on my coaster.

Slick. The boy had moves.

After my second drink, I walked over to make it official. I was greeted by two very different expressions: Doc's amused grin, and a stone-cold glare from his companion that only a defensive woman protecting her gay friend can summon.

They were both in their final semester of the PharmD program at UT, supposedly sitting in a dive bar on a Tuesday afternoon to debate organic chemistry. I took that as my cue to suggest upgrading from draft beer to top-shelf liquor. She declined with an eye roll; Doc nodded.

Hook, line, and sinker.

His classmate made her exit, leaving us to our own devices. As fortune would have it, Doc was desperate to escape university student housing and needed an off-campus roommate to split bills while he ground through his unpaid twelve-month internship.

He was the answer to a prayer I hadn't even bothered to utter. Within two weeks, we had an apartment together.

Doc was sharp, calculating, and quietly ruthless. I viewed him as an easy mark, thoroughly convinced he had no idea how vulnerable he was. What never

crossed my mind was that he was running the exact same calculus on me—and that he was infinitely better at the long con than I would ever be.

When his residency wrapped, he stepped directly into a massive corporate salary. By then, my retail gig at the clothier had evaporated when the owners shuttered the doors to focus on their family foundations, so I enrolled in the nursing program at Austin Community College.

Doc started pulling down serious money. He kept me along for the ride, and it was comfortable. We had been sleeping together for over a year, so we dropped the pretense of being roommates and made the domestic arrangement official. Our goals lined up cleanly: bank cash, pack our bags, head to Florida, buy a proper house with a pool, and dig in.

Two years into the arrangement, I came home from the clinic with news.

I had tested positive for HIV.

It wasn't something I kept tucked away; I laid the paperwork on the kitchen counter the afternoon the physician handed it to me. His circle of friends went into an uproar, convinced I had hidden the virus from him from day one, and begged Doc to kick me to the curb. He refused. Maybe out of loyalty, maybe because he didn't care to disrupt the routine. It certainly wasn't the sex; that had slowed down to an occasional formal event. At least on his end.

Not long after the diagnosis, I signed on as a lab rat for a clinical drug trial evaluating an experimental

antiviral compound called D4T. The trial paid decent cash, which was my only real motivation. What the pharmaceutical rep neglected to tell the study coordinators was that the compound turned toxic when paired with heavy physical exertion.

I figured that out myself after an aggressive leg day at the gym. I was home on the sofa by six, pissing pure black bile by eight, and lying in a county ER with four wide-bore IV lines pumping saline into my arms by ten. Rhabdomyolysis.

To make matters worse, the ER team discovered my brain had zero tolerance for narcotic pain management when an injection of synthetic opiates launched me into temporary, terrifying psychosis.

They admitted me to the inpatient ward at the exact hospital where I was scheduled to work my clinical rotations the following morning. Around three am., floating on eight liters of IV fluids, my kidneys and bowels gave out simultaneously. The toilet was fifteen feet across the linoleum, but my legs were dead weight. I didn't make it two steps. I flooded the room in liquid agony, humiliated beyond words.

Right on cue, the door pushed open.

It was Shirley, my nursing instructor and clinical director. She had spotted my name on the midnight admission manifest and dropped by to check on her student.

“What the fuck are you doing, Chambers?”

Twenty years in the Navy had stripped every trace of sympathy from her lungs. She was the finest trauma

nurse I had ever worked beside, a genuine savant with a scalpel and a clipboard, but she didn't offer a towel. One of her favorite administrative warnings was, "You're going to find yourself knee-deep in shit if you don't pick up your pace."

I guess I proved her point.

She waited twenty-four hours to pull me into her office and pull my scrub badge. She told me I carried far too much empathy to survive thirty years on an acute floor, and that walking away now was the kindest thing she could do for me. I didn't argue. Doc found the entire spectacle hilarious, declaring it divine retribution for my arrogance.

With nursing out the window, Florida was put on hold. We bought a house fifteen miles south of Austin and re-evaluated the board.

My next career move arrived on a Caribbean cruise ship. We had steamed out of Fort Lauderdale on September 10, 2001. The following morning, the world caught fire. The party on the sun deck died instantly; happy tourists transformed into grim, stranded ghosts glued to the satellite television in the ship's lounge.

In that eerie, sober fog, Doc and I fell into an extended dinner conversation with six licensed funeral directors. What would have been a macabre curiosity under normal skies landed like a stroke of practical genius.

Mortuary science checked every box on the list: I was finished with commissioned retail, nursing had chewed me up, and Florida was packed with elderly

retirees waiting on an open grave. I enrolled at San Antonio College, drove the sixty miles of asphalt every morning, and graduated top of the class.

In October 2004, we packed the moving truck and finally crossed the Florida state line into St. Petersburg.

For years, we operated as a polished corporate firm. The intimacy had died in Texas, but the balance sheet looked magnificent. We had a restored craftsman bungalow in Historic Kenwood, a sparkling swimming pool in the brick courtyard, a Mercedes SL500 idling in the drive, and a roster of dinner guests who understood how to decant Cabernet. We had acquired every luxury we thought we were owed.

Doc's territory expanded, requiring brutal travel schedules that kept him on the road for weeks at a stretch. That left the neighborhood boy and me with endless unsupervised hours to divide up my cocaine, his transient buddies, and my saltwater pool.

The charade finally snapped when Doc caught an early flight home to surprise me.

He was certainly surprised.

We managed ten full years before he quietly exiled me to the detached apartment above the garage. I didn't contest the sentence. I loved Doc as much as my charred wiring was capable of loving anyone. I understood what he was, and I respected what he wasn't. He never pretended to be a saint, and he never hid his ambition. He was simply smarter, colder, and far more disciplined than I was. He saw my moves three turns before I made

them. He remains the sharpest man I've ever shared a room with.

We shook hands on the dissolution: his pride remained intact, my career as an embalmer was untouched, and we made a pact to never run our mouths about each other in public. As far as I know, he has kept his word.

A decade together had reduced us to strangers sharing real estate—one flying across the country chasing bonuses, the other dissolving into powders and company he pretended not to see. When he pointed me toward the stairs to the garage, it wasn't an act of cruelty; it was a boundary that was eight years overdue.

I didn't argue. I didn't grieve.

When you spend your life living out of an emotional canteen, you don't weep when the well runs dry; you simply acknowledge the drought.

Sitting alone on that garage bed, staring into the blue glow of an iPad screen, I wasn't looking for redemption, and I certainly wasn't hunting for a husband. I was looking for a distraction—some fresh gravity to pull me out of the silence.

That was when the yoga guru slid across the screen: twenty-four years old, unnervingly flexible, and radiating the kind of chaotic energy that made my pulse jump again.

He wasn't an answer. He was pure momentum.

And I had built a life out of mistaking momentum for survival.

GURU

On one of those restless nights in the garage apartment, while chopping lines on an ironing board and pressing dress shirts for the funeral home, I started swiping through Grindr.

That was how I ran across Guru.

He was young, Russian, and surprisingly old-fashioned in his opening pitch: he wanted to take me on an actual date. We agreed to keep it simple. We'd grab gelato, take a slow walk along the downtown St. Petersburg seawall, and swap resumes. The gelato was his idea, which earned him immediate points.

I wasn't shopping for a partner. I was financially solvent, had my embalming license, and was preparing to sign a lease on a place of my own in the Old Northeast neighborhood. As luck would have it, that apartment put me only a few blocks from Guru's

regular rotation. And considerably closer to my powder connection.

Our first date went well enough, but Guru was in a hurry. He was currently stuck living with an ex-boyfriend for lack of better options, the tension in their house was boiling over, and he was hunting for a quick exit. Playing the role of the benevolent benefactor, I handed him a key. He was charismatic, exceptionally flexible, and twenty-four years old. I wasn't made of stone.

The complication was his stamina. Guru possessed a sexual appetite that made mine look downright modest, and he had zero objections to chemically enhanced marathons. That detail helped seal the deal; the last thing I needed under my roof was a chaperon or a buzzkill.

He loved to travel, though his paperwork kept our horizons strictly domestic. He had arrived on a temporary visa that had long since expired, which meant no international flights and no border crossings. We stuck to the lower forty-eight. We flew out to Seattle, drove the rain-soaked loops through the Cascades and the Olympic National Forest, caught the cross-country train from Washington into Chicago, and flew back down to Tampa. It was two weeks of manic movement, and it was genuinely fun.

The following year, for my birthday, Guru booked us a long weekend in New Orleans.

I knew the Crescent City like the back of my hand, and I loved the humidity and the rot. The trip was

supposed to be a quick three-day run. I could tell something was shifting in his posture, but I couldn't pin it down. Then, while taking an evening stroll through the French Quarter, Guru casually crossed paths with an old friend of his—an older gentleman with quiet manners, polished shoes, and deep pockets. We made small talk, had a drink, and finished the weekend without incident.

Guru had a bizarre talent for summoning surreal coincidences out of thin air.

One sweltering July afternoon, as we pulled into our driveway after an afternoon run to the Tampa IKEA, three young men walked past our front lawn dragging heavy airline luggage down the cracked sidewalk. The airport was twenty miles across the bay, and our residential street held neither hotels nor youth hostels.

Concerned by the midday heat, I leaned out the driver's window and asked if they needed a hand.

One of them answered in rapid, breathless Russian. Guru perked up and answered back in kind. It was an absurd spectacle: three lost, attractive Russian tourists wandering through a quiet St. Pete suburb, stumbling directly across the only Russian speaker within five square miles.

They had taken the wrong regional bus from the terminal and ended up completely stranded. We brought them inside, let them cycle through our shower, fed them, and eventually drove them across the bridge to their actual destination.

A couple of weeks later, the curtain dropped.

Guru sat me down and explained that, given my financial limitations, he had decided to pack his bags and move in with the gentleman we had bumped into in New Orleans. The friend, he noted gently, was in a far better position to secure his future.

The news was supposed to crush me. It didn't.

To be completely honest, I was exhausted. I was pushing fifty, and Guru was a high-strung, kinetic gymnast whose legs were simply too damn long for me to keep chasing. I needed a full week of uninterrupted sleep.

He wasn't a villain. He was just a young man without papers, navigating a strange country and securing the best harbor he could negotiate before the weather turned. In that sense, we were cut from the exact same cloth: two survivors running on low fuel, mistaking proximity for affection and raw chaos for a bond.

When the door clicked behind him, the silence in my apartment didn't feel threatening. It didn't even feel lonely.

It was just completely, mercifully still.

And in that quiet space, the fog lifted enough for me to notice the courtyard again.

The brick terrace. The dark water of the pool.

And the quiet man who drifted through the gate in the evenings, carrying a highball glass and wearing a private sorrow like an old tailored coat.

The Saint didn't enter my life with the manic urgency or the chemical fireworks I had grown accustomed to. He arrived the way real grace always does: unannounced, sideways, and speaking just above a whisper.

We weren't lovers. We weren't even proper friends yet. We were just two men holding down opposite ends of the same isolation, trading lines of powder and quiet words that skirted the edges of fractures neither of us wanted to name.

I had no way of knowing it then, but he would become the one person in my entire life I couldn't bear to break.

And the one person I would eventually have to abandon just to keep him whole.

MY SAINT

In 2015, I met Saint.

Back then, he was just the quiet guy in my apartment complex, drifting through the brick courtyard with a highball glass and a heavy, private sorrow he was trying to drown. We were poolside acquaintances, nothing more. Once he crossed the threshold of one drink too many, he talked, and I listened—mostly because holding space for his grief was infinitely easier than looking at my own. We shared a line of powder now and then, but never bodies. Never hearts. He was tied up in an unraveling relationship, and I was running out the clock on an ill-advised domestic arrangement of my own.

After two years in the building, I bought a house and moved out. I assumed that was where the reel

ended. In a town like St. Petersburg, people drift across your radar and vanish back into the humidity.

As it turned out, we were both navigating our own private collapses. Over the next couple of years, we both finally kicked our respective man-children to the curb. Eventually, the local gay ecosystem did what it always does: it pulled two drinkers back into the same room at a mutual friend's gathering.

The Saint looked completely different. The fog had lifted; his eyes were clear, and his toxic partner was long gone. His presence hit me with far more force than I cared to admit.

I took a chance and asked him out on a proper date: dinner and a movie. We had sushi and sat through Dunkirk. It felt easy, effortless—which should have been my first warning flare. Easy had never survived long in my perimeter. Seeing him completely sober revealed a man who was gentle, thoughtful, and deeply composed.

Then he vanished.

Three months of radio silence. I was irritated; he was a brilliant kisser, and I wasn't accustomed to being put on ice.

When his name finally lit up my phone, I answered anyway. He hadn't ghosted me out of malice; he had come to the hard realization that alcohol was systematically dismantling his life, and he had pulled the plug. He had gone into total self-isolation to dry out, dodge the old triggers, and claw his routine back.

When we started seeing each other again, we kept the pace deliberate. He had purchased a bungalow less

than a mile from mine. He was steady, dependable, and fiercely protective of the predictable daily rhythm that keeps a recovering drinker alive. He would still indulge in an occasional line of coke with me, but it was a rare luxury for him, never a lifestyle. He had a career he respected, and he guarded it with discipline.

For the first time in fifty years, I was learning patience. He was learning how to live in his own skin. I wanted to protect that. I wanted him.

People assume I walked away because I didn't care. The truth is far uglier: I walked away because I knew he loved me enough to let me stay.

He would have compromised. He would have offered forgiveness. He would have martyred himself trying to pull me out of the ditch.

And that mercy would have destroyed him.

By late 2020, my mortuary business was suffocating under the weight of COVID restrictions. Cash flow dried up, payroll turned into a daily panic, and a crooked business partner was actively picking at the bones of the company. The uncertainty ate at me day and night. I was carrying a mountain of stress and fighting like hell to hide it from the Saint, terrified of cracking the foundation of his recovery.

One night, an acquaintance invited me out to a hotel gathering. I hesitated, but the Saint told me to go blow off some steam.

I should have stayed on the sofa.

I arrived at the room already lit on cocaine. A friend pulled out a glass pipe, showed me how to roll

the flame slowly underneath the bowl, and told me when to draw.

I asked what was in the glass.

“Meth,” he said.

The first draw barely registered. He told me to take another. A sharp, electric hum settled behind my eyes. Then came a third.

Within twenty minutes, I was stripped down to skin, joining the five other men already running wild in the room.

I asked the guy what the habit cost. When he quoted the street price, the math fell into place with terrifying efficiency: a third the cost of cocaine, quadruple the shelf life, and five times the concussive punch. When it instantly killed my craving for cigarettes and whiskey, my sick brain framed it as an economic windfall.

That affordability was a loaded gun.

When the business finally went under, meth math became my survival doctrine: cheap, industrial-strength anesthesia. Get high, get naked, get completely lost. If I was spun out hosting chemical marathons, the outside world ceased to exist. I abandoned any lingering pretense of restraint, work ethic, or dignity.

And in my arrogance, I convinced myself I was hiding it.

The Saint saw straight through the performance. He possessed an uncanny radar that tracked every micro-shift in a room, every sudden pause, every transparent lie dressed up as fatigue. He didn't corner me; he simply

watched, waiting for the smoke to clear until confession was the only exit left.

One evening, out of curiosity and a dangerous desire to bridge the distance between us, he asked me to let him try it.

He took a hit. He liked it. Not enough to demand more that night, but enough to register.

That single, lingering yet slammed into my chest like an iron bar.

I knew his wiring. I knew how hard he had bled just to set down the bottle. That was the moment the floor dropped out. I knew the trajectory: if we stayed together, the pipe would stay on the nightstand, and sooner or later he would pick it up again. I was too deep in the chemical grease to stop, but I was not going to drag that man down into hell with me.

I checked myself into a short-stay detox program—a theatrical gesture rather than an honest surrender.

When the Saint picked me up on discharge day, he brought me home and stayed on my couch until dark. We danced around the edges of the truth, talking about everything except the monster sitting in the room. Before he walked out to his car, he looked me in the eyes and asked if there was anything hidden in the apartment, if I was going to be all right.

I looked the best man I had ever known in the face and lied.

The moment his taillights cleared the drive, I went straight to the closet, pulled down the stash, and lit the pipe.

The following morning, sitting alone on the floor with the blinds drawn, I broke down in violent, gutting sobs. I had officially chosen a chemical shard over the only person I had ever loved with a whole heart.

He was the greatest grace that had ever crossed my path—and my presence was the most dangerous threat to his life.

I executed the retreat with military finality. I severed all contact without warning. I signed over my equity in the company, put the house on the market, packed what would fit into the trunk, and pointed the car toward Tennessee.

I arrived with a blueprint so bleak it still turns my stomach: burn through whatever cash I had left on transient motel rooms, chemical oblivion, and disposable company—and then quietly clock out.

No farewell notes. No dramatic exit.

Just gone.

It was the only tactical strike I had left to shield him from the wreckage of what I was.

People assume monsters come with fangs and claws. In reality, the machinery is much simpler: sometimes all it takes to become a monster is a plastic baggie and a glass stem.

I erased myself from his world so he wouldn't be forced to erase himself from his own.

I miss him every hour of every day. And if the call came tomorrow, I would still lay down my life to keep him safe.

THANK YOU BRITTNEY

I didn't walk away from him; I ran—hard and fast. I harbored delusions of a reinvented life that would somehow include him. In this fantasy, I would effortlessly shed my drug habit simply by virtue of a new geography. No contacts. Total concealment. I planned to find a house somewhere out in the country, buy it, and wait for him to follow so we could play house.

I gave it an honest effort. I found a house. I committed to the seller.

Then I met a guy who sold meth.

Naturally, I defaulted on the real estate commitment. Instead, I fell in with a whole new cast of characters. Soon, I was buying by the ounce rather than the gram, setting fire to my dream of a home on the range.

That was the epiphany: I didn't actually want to escape and rebuild; I wanted to self-destruct. Mephistopheles had merely convinced me a transformation was possible, whispering that the world was my oyster. It wasn't until I was perfectly positioned to fail again that the truth was exposed. Armed with that ugly reality, I returned to my original trajectory: burn it all to the ground. No exceptions. No excuses. I was an expert at playing with fire, and frankly, I just didn't give a shit anymore.

The first casualties of that scorched-earth policy were the members of my social circle.

The truth is, this chapter is an afterthought. I had considered the manuscript finished. I was ready to hang up the pen and push this baby to print. As addicts so often do, I convinced myself the work was complete, when in reality it was still missing its teeth.

Getting a book into readers' hands without selling your soul to the devil's cousin—or blowing a month's budget to bypass the institutional gatekeepers—is no small feat. So, while waiting for my windfall to materialize, I tackled the modern chore every writer dreads: social media.

I am a deeply private person when I am not high. It does not come easily to me to self-promote. When I am running on sober brainpower, I just want to be left alone. I don't trust myself in the company of others yet—not for any meaningful stretch of time. I see the angles now, the quiet conspiracies and petty manipulations people run on each other. It doesn't help

that I spent years marinating in one of the most ruthless subcultures on earth. I am only projecting onto society the survival skills I practiced since childhood. It is hard as hell to build friendships when you are completely unskilled in discernment, and dead proficient in deceit.

I was managing this marketing strategy one day at a time, one app at a time. Then Instagram confronted me with a feature I hadn't prepared for: recommended contacts. People from my past whom I had discarded for no other reason than the suffocating shame of my own conduct. It is terrifying how fast an algorithm can dig up a man's ghosts.

The same nausea that nearly drowned me the first time I looked in the mirror after my final day of using came roaring back. I had to sit down; I was too dizzy to stand. Then, compelled by something outside my own control, I tapped two familiar profiles. I sent a simple greeting to both.

Immediately, I panicked—mostly because I couldn't figure out how to un-send them.

Before the day ended, replies were waiting for me. Neither of them told me to screw off. Both responded with the exact same demand: "When can I call you?"

That was not the reaction I had braced for. Thank you, God. You proved me wrong again.

I have thrown away a lot.

My dogs.

Eventually, my reckless lifestyle made it impossible to keep a roof over our heads. I tried. At one point, I had enough cash to offer six months of rent upfront, but no landlord in their right mind would take a gamble on four dogs. I refused to let them go, stubbornly convinced I was the only soul on earth qualified to love and protect them.

So, we lived in my truck. That followed a chaotic, soul-draining cycle of bouncing between Red Roof Inns, just waiting for the management to realize what “Yes, I have a pet” actually looked like. When the hotels ran out, the truck was all we had left.

Then the weather turned. It was freezing, miserable, and completely unlivable for them. Around that time, the Veterans Administration offered me housing assistance—but the dogs couldn't come. Out of options, I called Saint. It was a massive, unfair favor to ask of someone I had already hurt so deeply, but he agreed. I drove down and surrendered three of my babies into his hands somewhere in Georgia.

On the drive back, cruising through Augusta, a notification pinged on Grindr. There was a gay resort nearby. I pulled off the highway, got a room, and stayed awake for three days. I mourned the loss of my three dogs by getting high and sleeping with three strangers.

You might wonder: Why only three?

That answer comes down to the sinister cost of toxic charity.

Before the motels and the truck, after defaulting on that country lease I mentioned, a man invited me to

move into his house north of Chattanooga. He assured me there was plenty of room for all four dogs. It was quiet and secluded, and he wanted the brand of domestic company I could provide. I did my part—cleaned, repaired the property, fixed everything that was broken.

But when I decided to regain a shred of self-respect and look for a real job, the dynamic shifted. He objected immediately. He told me money wasn't an issue, but my pride was bleeding out.

I scheduled three job interviews for a single afternoon. I completely miscalculated the depth of his sickness, and that mistake cost Lyca her life.

To teach me a lesson for defying him, he shot up with methamphetamine, urinated into a bowl, and forced Lyca to drink it. When I got back from the interviews, I found her locked inside her kennel, suffocating on her own fluids from severe aspiration pneumonia. The vet worked on her, but it was already too late.

He swore up and down that he had nothing to do with it. But when I demanded to know how a dying dog managed to crawl inside a kennel and latch the door behind herself, the lie died on his lips.

Everyone in town knew him. He was a local school teacher with a spotless reputation to guard, and my independence was a direct threat to his secret life. Furious and terrified, I threw whatever would fit into my truck in under an hour, abandoned half my possessions, and ran with Jesse, Coco, and Ursa. We

holed up in a cheap room just long enough to wait for Lyca's ashes.

Not long ago, I crossed paths with a mutual acquaintance of ours—our old dealer. That's how I found out the teacher is dead. It took them a while to identify the body.

Good riddance.

At the time, I was maintaining two storage lockers full of my belongings in Athens. The monthly rental fees were cutting significantly into the capital required to keep my Knoxville supplier happy. So, I struck upon a brilliant alternative: I would locate a destitute family and bestow upon them \$50,000 worth of furniture, top-of-the-line appliances, and twenty years of Christmas ornaments.

Since I was already due at the local health department for a penicillin shot to clear up my latest round of syphilis, I decided to ask the clinic staff if they knew anyone deserving of an unexpected lifestyle upgrade. They had the perfect candidate.

To the nurses, I'm sure I appeared to be a remarkably benevolent soul with an unfortunate propensity for STDs—so thoughtful, so generous. They had no inkling my sudden burst of altruism was entirely motivated by the extra \$250 worth of meth I could buy each month with the storage savings.

Somewhere out there, a struggling family of five is now the proud owner of my ancestral heirlooms. My

grandfather is probably rolling in his grave over the antique mahogany credenza I gave away. I genuinely pity whoever has to haul that thing next; it is a heavy son of a bitch.

The first time, I willingly handed over the keys. The second time, a hot trick lifted them from the bedside table of a cheap motel room while I wasn't looking. I suppose the keys were too heavy to carry, which must be why he took the truck as well.

I located the first thief easily enough. Another attractive man whom I had known for all of three hours helped me set a trap via Grindr. My new trick and my old trick arranged a hookup in a public park men's room. We ambushed him, recovered the truck, and left the hapless trick alone with the toilet.

The second recovery was scarcely more difficult. I simply phoned my supplier, who regarded me as a reliable friend because I never asked for credit and occasionally facilitated his highly unconventional sexual fetishes. He was an upper-level distributor with serious muscle, and he happened to run the local chop shop on the side. By some stroke of cosmic absurdity, the thief—who was fresh on parole for grand theft auto—drove my truck straight into that very shop looking for a quick payout. He had no idea he was rolling into a room full of street thugs employed by a drug kingpin with an unnatural affection for combat boots.

I didn't expect them to collect the guy's teeth, but they did. That should have horrified me far more than it did. To be fair, he had already pawned all my tools. Still, I knew what kind of violence I was calling down, and I let it happen anyway.

I hate overkill, so let me conclude this tirade of madness with a final string of thoughts.

First, don't mistake this catalog of disasters for a complete confession. It isn't. Second, the worldly goods and the hardware were merely baggage—just things. Am I humiliated by the reckless, stupid choices I made to secure a momentary chemical escape from my entirely manageable life? Absolutely.

But what cuts the deepest is the callous indifference I showed toward the people I discarded.

I am learning that the doors to my past were never slammed shut by the people I spat on. I slammed them myself, staring the loss dead in the face and not giving two seconds of thought to what I was burning. Without a moment's hesitation, I punished the innocent so I could bankroll the guilty.

Life is full of surprises.

If you detect a sudden note of sober clarity in these pages, it isn't because someone else stepped in to write it. And it isn't a veiled plea for sympathy. I'm just keeping a very clean brain these days, that's all.

Speaking of brains. Another thing I've lost along the way: my right eye.

Brittney was one of the first two ghosts I reached out to. She was the first to answer with open arms and

an adult conversation I was far more ready for than I realized. I always assumed Brittney was too perfect to be fallible, too beautiful to ever be touched by ordinary sorrow. Reconnecting today proved me wrong again. Even someone like her can find herself navigating a path of thorns.

I'm starting to think it might be okay to be wrong.

I still have my truck.

WAIT

Around the time I was setting fire to my career and systematically dismantling my own sanity, I acquired a new obsession that burned hotter than the drugs: pure, unadulterated political rage.

When COVID hit, the rest of the country was suddenly introduced to a man I had despised for three decades. Enter Dr. Anthony Fauci.

To suburban America, he was either a grandfatherly savior or a partisan talking head on cable news. To me, it was deeply, violently personal. My hatred of him didn't begin with mask mandates or lockdown press conferences; it began in the 1980s and '90s. I was working in pharmaceutical research during the height of the AIDS crisis. I was living in that bloodbath, watching my friends die in agony while federal bureaucracy choked off funding and dragged its feet on

viable treatments. I contracted HIV in the middle of that war. My verdict on Anthony Fauci was formed long before And the Band Played On hit bookshelves or Dallas Buyers Club became a movie.

So when that exact same face stepped up to the White House podium in 2020, preening for the cameras with the same bureaucratic arrogance, something snapped inside me. It felt as direct and personal as if he had walked into my room and handed me the pipe himself.

Now, I readily concede that daily cocaine and heavy drinking aren't celebrated for nurturing clear neural pathways. A lifetime of grief combined with chemical overload smears a thick layer of Vaseline across a man's goggles. But you will never convince me that man isn't a monster—or that the re-opened wound of his reappearance didn't pour high-octane fuel on my final descent.

Let me show you how I felt then and how I see it now.

In my mind, Fauci had grossly mismanaged the AIDS epidemic from day one. He had blood on his hands. His thirst for bureaucratic power had cost me more than a handful of friends. When my doctor delivered my diagnosis in 1991, Fauci became the executioner in my head, stamping my death warrant.

My utter lack of reaction shocked the physician.

“Well, David, the HIV test came back positive. Now that we know...” He ordered the Western Blot to confirm Ms. ELISA's accusation. She wasn't lying.

My reaction was deadpan: “Oh. Okay. So when does this fever go away?”

He didn't know what to do with that. The reason was simple: I didn't care. In fact, part of me took it as good news. An HIV diagnosis in 1991 came with a five-to ten-year expiration date, paved with a parade of grotesque opportunistic infections on the way to the grave. That's how my friends died. That, or—in the case of two of them—being beaten and murdered for being gay-rights advocates. My people didn't die pretty.

How do I see things today? I've learned to flush the shadows of my past through honest conversations with God, and I have a growing conviction that His design understands the human condition better than a career bureaucrat ever could. I have forgiven people who wronged me directly. I mourn their losses and pray for their souls. I cannot say the same for the good doctor.

My rage wasn't just abstract ideology. I was managing a funeral home at the time, which gave me a front-row seat to the circus.

We ordered boxes of standard paper masks through our funeral supply channels for embalming procedures. Long before the pandemic, those boxes bore explicit warnings: not rated for viral containment, and not recommended for prolonged continuous use due to respiratory fungal risks. Yet within months, the prices spiked over 400%, the warnings magically disappeared, and I watched a local grocery store clerk forced to stretch a single paper mask across a 32-hour workweek.

The science was bad, the civics were criminal, and the logic was indefensible. I watched society turn into a stampede:

- An elderly woman trampled on the floor of a Walmart over a pack of toilet paper.
- A friend's parents, finally retired from running their small NYC corner shop, dying in an emergency room on their drive down to Florida.
- Heartbroken families forced to receive a cold urn of ashes outside our doors because hospital rooms were locked down and funeral services were forbidden.

The sheer gullibility of the human herd broke my spirit. I was disgusted by the lies, but I was utterly humiliated to belong to the species buying them. Watching the herd happily march toward the grinder extinguished whatever flickering will to live I had left.

I didn't want to participate in the world anymore. And that disgust opened the door to the cheap motel room where I took my first hit of meth.

That pipe became the only thing I had left to live for.

LIVE WELL ON THE ROAD TO HELL

I was six when I decided that jumping out of a moving car made more sense than staying in it. Dad was driving too slowly to accomplish what I had in mind, but at six, I didn't know the physics. Road rash was the best I could manage. They called it an accident. My clearest memory of that day is the doctors picking pieces of the asphalt out of my raw skin. I cried at the sight of the blood, though I don't recall whether I thought there was too much of it or too little.

Twenty-seven years ago, I came up with a better plan.

I was out riding my Yamaha 650 Virago, a dream bike I had saved for and bought with cash. It was a quiet country road southeast of Austin, the kind of

stretch bikers used to decompress. I was hunting for something far more permanent.

A beat-up pickup truck was rumbling along about a quarter-mile ahead of me with a bed full of firewood. As it hit a dip, a massive chunk of wood bounced out and slammed onto the asphalt.

I aimed straight for it.

Then I twisted the throttle.

By the time I hit the log, I was running north of ninety.

My aim was dead-on.

I flew. The bike disintegrated behind me, screaming metal scraping across the road. I hit the earth with sickening force and couldn't move. For a split second, I was certain I had pulled it off. Then I realized I was breathing, and the immobility meant I was likely paralyzed.

That just made me furious.

An ambulance had been trailing about half a mile behind me. The crew saw a human body flying through the air, pulled over, strapped me to a backboard, and took off before the highway patrol even made the scene. Every pothole in the asphalt felt like a railroad spike driven through my lumbar. The medic called ahead with the usual adrenaline: accident, ejected rider, probable paralysis.

Then my head cleared.

Pain meant working nerves. Working nerves meant an intact spinal cord. Intact cord meant I wasn't a quadriplegic.

Paraplegic, maybe. Ruined, definitely. But not dead, and not gone enough.

At the hospital, they unstrapped me and ran the full workup.

Not a scratch.

The blinding pain had come from two jagged rocks wedged between my back and the backboard during the roughest ambulance ride in Texas history. My helmet had cracked where it met stone, and the roadside ditch—soaked from days of relentless rain—had turned into thick mud that cradled the impact.

The mud saved my life.

My motorcycle was dead on arrival.

I was not. Lying there intact when I had aimed for total obliteration, I realized that if God existed, He bore no resemblance to the one preached in church.

Fast forward to fifty. Broke, tired, and desperate for the chemical curtain to fall, I finally surrendered to the mystery of the needle. I had watched what slamming did to people—clothes shed, inhibitions erased, pure dopamine overload. I wanted that oblivion.

On my third slam, my buddy missed the vein completely. He pushed anyway. A toxic cocktail of street meth and dirty tap water forced its way directly into muscle tissue. Imagine a dull, red-hot blade sawing through your forearm. Days later, the arm was fiery red, throbbing, and swollen twice its size.

At the VA emergency room in Bay Pines, the doctor took one look at it. Severe phlebitis, early sepsis.

“What happened here?” he asked.

"I was trimming back the bougainvillea and caught a bad thorn," I lied.

He didn't blink. "You sure this isn't from IV drug use?"

It wasn't his first rodeo. They admitted me for a 24-hour run of heavy antibiotics. The bacteria surrendered, and I walked out with both arms and a scarlet letter on my medical file that will outlive me.

A few years later, the circus rolled into Knoxville. The money was completely gone. I had run out of tricks, run out of road, and was facing eight years in state prison over a 3:00 AM motel deal that went sideways with the drug task force. Four felonies, two misdemeanors, and a rolling stop. Word to the wise: public defenders strongly advise against carrying a loaded weapon while committing felonies.

At our first consultation, my attorney stopped reviewing the charging documents, looked up, and his voice dropped.

"David, do you intend to be alive long enough for me to represent you? Because we have resources. We can get you help."

I offered him a sad smile. He frowned. Dead men don't do time.

Back at the motel, the party cleared out. "You can go now," I dismissed the last boy-toy. I had the common decency to pull on clean sweatpants and fresh socks so I wouldn't leave an obscene corpse. I unzipped my tweaker backpack, pulled out three syringes and a

stolen vial of unrefrigerated (oops) insulin, and filled every rig to the brim.

I pinched my belly fat and pushed the plungers down: one, two, three. Rapid fire. I smiled, laid back, and let the darkness take me home.

Two days later, well past checkout, the housekeeper opened the door and found me cold, with three empty plastic barrels still dangling from my stomach.

“Mr. Chambers? Mr. Chambers, can you hear me?”

It was a deep, authoritative voice. A cop. I opened my heavy eyes and thought: I’m in hell.

The officer, the housekeeper, and an unidentified Indian motel manager stood over the bed, shaking me back into reality. The moment I realized my heart was still beating, the first honest words in years slipped out of my mouth:

“I need to go to rehab.”

The voice of the unseen Indian gentleman hiding in the shadows: “Yeah, ya think?”

Even that wasn't the bottom.

Three years ago in Woodbury, I eyeballed a bottle of liquid GHB while high out of my skull. Never try to measure potent anesthetics by eye when your brain is vibrating. I swallowed the entire vial, passed out, and went into a G-hole on my side. The only reason I didn’t drown like Jimi Hendrix is because the vomit spewed onto the floor and the walls instead of down my windpipe—all streamed live to a room of laughing webcam voyeurs.

Then came the spring of 2026, when the universe decided to stop giving warnings:

February 28: A heavy dose of acid in Murfreesboro shattered my mind. In the grip of terrifying paranoia, I became convinced I had dosed my dog, Bella, and that her death was imminent. I spent hours in sheer agony, paralyzed by guilt. Bella wasn't high; she was terrified of me.

March 12: Another accidental GHB overdose in the shower. I collapsed cold and snapped two ribs against the porcelain tub on the way down.

March 27: After an orgy, a friend found a stray baggie wedged deep inside my armchair cushion. Looked like cocaine. I chopped out lines and snorted a tester bump to check the quality. It was pure fentanyl. My respiratory system crashed instantly. I had just enough motor control left to point a shaking finger toward my stash of Narcan before the lights cut out.

For a couple of minutes, I finally got what I had been chasing since I was six years old: I was dead.

That was the last time I touched a drug.

On April 27, 2026, I turned 58. It was finally time to grow up.

IP of D.J. Chambers

MERCY

IP of D.J. Chambers

IP of D.J. Chambers

MOUNTAIN HOME

Don't let the media fool you. The Veterans Administration is not the broken-down system they sell you. Like any huge institution, it has good eggs and bad ones. If you feel the need to be critical based on personal experience, look at your local labor pool first. The problem may be the spokes, not the wheel.

My experiences with the VA have been mostly positive. I remind you of my CO and First Sergeant. I told you they saved my life. I meant it. If they had discharged me for being gay, I'd have no access to the VA system. Their compassion in the late 1980s gave me the life I have today.

I was lucky enough to be assigned a psychiatrist at Bay Pines when The Saint dropped me at the ER after the emotional breakdown that led to my move to

Tennessee. My brother lived near Nashville with his family. He was my springboard.

I refused extended rehab in St. Pete, against my doctor's advice. She treated me with five days of inpatient care. She knew I wasn't ready because she knew what she was doing. She mentioned Mountain Home's psychiatric services when I spoke of my brother in Tennessee. She'd completed her internship at Mountain Home in Johnson City and was a firm supporter of their program and staff. Her advice nudged me toward my own plans. Somewhere deep in my mind, I wanted help. I just didn't think I was worthy. Yet.

There came a day when my bullshit caught up with me. I was living in a sober house in Knoxville, sitting on the front porch with a cigarette, when my case manager pulled up with the program director. There was a meth pipe sitting on my bedroom dresser. I should have been fucked.

So I did what came naturally: I performed. I faked an emotional breakdown, bought myself a few seconds, slipped back inside, and hid the pipe before anyone could see it.

The joke was on me. They weren't there about the pipe. They weren't even there to search my room. They were there to drop off holiday pies.

By the time I figured that out, it didn't matter. My little performance had already raised a question for them: what the hell is wrong with David?

Soon after, I was in the emergency room, strapped to a cot under fluorescent lights, begging for food and water like a madman and getting treated like one. I stayed there for hours. Then they unstrapped me and locked me in a padded room with a cup of water, as if that settled the matter.

After a few more hours, they told me I was taking a ride. There was a bed waiting for me in the psych ward at the VA in Murfreesboro.

They put me in the back of a paddy wagon wearing nothing but a hospital gown. They cuffed my hands in front. The hold straps were behind me, built for a man cuffed behind his back. I had nothing to hold on to.

The deputy seemed to resent his assignment. We made the trip in hard rain in about two and a half hours. It's a three-hour drive.

I do not remember arriving.

I arrived at Murfreesboro's VA Medical Center unconscious, bloodied, and damaged.

I have never been the same since.

My memory has been worse. My emotions are different. My reasoning isn't what it used to be. Maybe the damage was already there. Maybe that ride finished something off. Either way, I came out of it diminished.

I would have a few more adventures with the VA Mental Health Division.

When I woke up from the insulin coma in Knoxville, the first words out of my mouth were, "I want to go to rehab." The day before, I would have killed myself for suggesting such a sin. But on that day,

for whatever reason, I was serious. It wasn't a clever idea to try to win sympathy from the cop who had just roused me.

I was only alive because I'd failed to keep the insulin refrigerated during the party I'd just hosted. I worried it might get stolen if I didn't keep it hidden. One of two things had altered my perspective: the insulin had reprogrammed my brain, or God stepped in. Perhaps both. All I know is that I wanted to change. I notified my case manager and program director back at the sober living house. I had returned there after a failed attempt at living on my own devices.

They agreed to my plan. So I slept. I needed it. The next morning, as agreed, I packed my things and moved out. I drove myself to Johnson City and reported to the ER. They were expecting me. I wonder how they knew I was coming. Thank you, Zach.

I left Knoxville on pre-trial probation. I had to check in weekly and take a drug test with each visit. Somehow, I passed them all. My PO gave me no trouble when I called to report my situation. Once she confirmed my story, I was free of the court-ordered obligations. My plan was coming together. I felt hopeful.

I was at Mountain Home for three and a half months. Extensive rehabilitation. They assigned me a psychologist who shattered my preconceived notions. I'd always believed the field was quackery designed to enrich pathologically arrogant assholes in New York and California. But she was effective. She unearthed secrets I'd buried deep in my subconscious. I don't know

how she did it. She could ask my favorite color and somehow decipher my answer into a regressed memory of sexual assault. What stunned me was that she was spot-on every time. It was creepily magical.

On my doctor's recommendation, my social worker tried to get me into the VA's premier meth rehab program in Bath, NY. They rejected my application because of my legal troubles. I didn't let that stop me. I had an alternative plan.

I graduated clean and strong. I drove to Nashville and took my brother up on his offer to let me stay at his house until I got back on my feet. Sean was committed to my success. His wife was not.

Within two months of moving in with my brother and his family, I was working 56 hours a week between Amazon and Nissan. At the end of the third month, my brother's wife texted me from her bed, asking when I was going to grow up and move out. My taking care of the duties she'd dumped on my brother wasn't enough for her. She worked a simple, stress-free, barely full-time job. My brother worked 50 hours a week and handled grocery shopping, cooking, dishes, and laundry. The kids helped a little, but their academic schedules were more hectic than his. So I took up the slack. Still not enough to make her happy.

While she was texting me about my uselessness, my brother was texting accolades. Neither knew what the other was doing, even though they were lying next to each other in bed. How was I supposed to know the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing? I was

months out of rehab and working my ass off. My gaskets blew, and my bearings exploded. I was packing my things when they both walked into the bedroom I was supposedly defiling with my presence. My brother was fighting for reason; his wife was fighting against it. I saw my brother's place in the equation and felt pity for him. Genuine pity. He divorced her six months later, but it was too late. A life-altering chain of events had already begun.

I moved into a sober living house within the week. I could afford the rent. I was free of that woman. It didn't take long to see the sober living house was a dead end. They didn't care if we were sober or clean as long as we kept it hidden. You were either in the 18-29-year-old bro clique, or you were using because you'd been rejected by the cool kids. I didn't want either crowd, so I rented an apartment fifteen miles out of town, in the country, away from temptation. I figured I had a chance. Then I crossed paths with a hot little 21-year-old across the hall who invited me to smoke a bowl of meth with him.

To simplify everything this chapter says, I built a fallback plan without realizing it. My brother was the intentional strategy, the safe harbor if I ever backed away from total annihilation. Mountain Home was the subliminal seed, planted by a Florida psychiatrist and buried in the dark. When it came time to fight for survival, the cosmic irony of those two nets showed itself. The one I hadn't planned for kept me alive. The one I counted on as a safety net blew my hopes to shit.

THE PERFECT LIFE

Homelessness strips ideology down to facts.

There is more than one type of homeless. There are those who choose to live without structure and rules. They tend to be parasitic. They are very good at convincing people that they are a situational victim. That is not often the case. They just don't like rules or spending any amount of time earning their own money, because they find it simpler to just take it from the gullible.

Then there are those who find themselves with limited options. Felons, sex offenders, the disabled. All it takes is one wrong turn to put a man in a place where their options simply don't exist, or worse, are so bad that living on the street is the more comfortable choice. The uneducated, uninformed, and clueless assume that every village, town and city has a safe place for the

homeless to find refuge. Most of them do not, and those that do generally grotesquely overstate their quality of service. For many of them, sober-living homes included, the only thing of concern for those in charge is that the monthly deposits are made. So far, they have remained under the radar of the federal government's fraud finders.

Let's add to the equation the utter failure of the governments of the states to utilize the funds they spend on reducing homelessness in their jurisdictions. California is the poster child of this argument. Billions spent to reduce homelessness leads to an increase in homelessness. Politicians don't care about the homeless, they care about increasing their own home's square footage with the very money intended to house the homeless.

It is not fair to attack the service providers though without addressing the quality of their clients. My critique of the available options is based on my personal experience, and anecdotal evidence garnered from my interactions with at least a hundred people who have first-hand experiences. I am quite certain the truth would withstand investigation. It is with near complete certainty that I make this accusation: the majority of the homeless who would benefit from the shelters find themselves victims of those who never will, on day one.

And often times, those are from a third group of the unhoused. Those who were living on the edge of their credit limits and suddenly, for whatever reason, lost

their source of income. Mostly men. Mostly with wives who just left them with the money, the assets and the kids.

These are the men who find that their pride and naivety mean nothing when their peace of mind falls into the hands of the street-people. They find out quickly, that they should never assume they have nothing more to lose. There is always more to lose. That's what often leads them to opiates. Opiates make the sudden realization that people can be mean hurt less.

When you're homeless, you stop arguing about systems in the abstract. You think about where you'll sleep, how you'll eat, how you'll keep from stinking too badly to be tolerated, and whether anyone will help you without humiliating you first.

When I was homeless, I leaned on my fellow travelers.

Not the local government. Not the state. The agencies meant to catch the falling proved mostly useless. Even the USPS worked against me. It was other damaged people—people with stories and nightmares of their own—who gave the most practical help. One thing I learned that I regret the most is that if I had been more flamboyantly gay, or anything other than a single white man, the state resources would have offered me more. But I had a trump card which gave me a life-saving safety net.

My real advantage was being a veteran. That status opened doors that stay closed to most others. People

without it have almost no margin for long-term survival.

Their timelines may differ. Their ultimate destination usually does not.

Our minds are capable of far more than we ask of them. So humor me, and look at the math of this universe.

Scientists tell us about a photon named Sarah, a particle of light traveling at 186,000 miles per second.

She can zip from New York to Sydney in 53 milliseconds. She leaves the Milky Way, passes 400 billion star systems, and sets out for a galaxy like IC 1101. It will take her a trillion years to get there, and once she arrives, she'll have her pick of a quadrillion solar systems. Most people believe some random explosion created Sarah's massive, hyper-precise playground.

The math doesn't add up. Randomness doesn't build that kind of architecture.

And if a series of happy accidents cannot explain the macro-universe, it sure as hell cannot explain the micro-universe of my own survival.

I was a licensed funeral director for twenty years. I know the clinical margins of mortality. I know down to the millimeter how easy it is for a human body to stop working. Yet if I sit down and run the actuarial ledger on my life, the math fails completely.

On the other side of the addiction and abuse, I've lived a life ninety-nine out of a hundred only dream of. I've filled three passports. I've been to Russia and China.

If I had to draw up a bucket list of places I still want to see for the first time, three lines would cover it. I survived the deepest depths of hedonism, and today I have a roof over my head, peace in my chest, and a truck that rides on tires that aren't bald.

Now look at what I managed to dodge: True starvation. Being murdered in a ditch. A mandatory minimum in federal prison. Eight years in state time. And against all biological odds, I still have my hair.

I struggle with the guilt of surviving my own best efforts not to. I have known too many good people who are in the dirt for far less.

Take my bedroom in St. Petersburg. One of my regulars stopped by for a romp. He was one of the kindest men I've ever known—beautiful, inside and out. He slammed a hit that tipped him straight over the edge into a screaming, meth-induced psychosis. Euphoria crashed into delusional paranoia. He grabbed a pocketknife, stood before my mirrored wall, and started digging into his own face to get the bugs out, slashing at my arms when I tried to pull him off. There was a bottle of GHB sitting right on the nightstand when the cops and paramedics came. I should have left in handcuffs and spent a decade inside a concrete cell. Instead, I walked.

Two weeks later, that beautiful man was dead.

Then came the night in a locked studio, out of my skull on acid, convinced my dog was tripping right alongside me. That led straight to a fentanyl-laced line

of cocaine on a glass table and waking up dead on the floor.

Luck is an anomaly that happens once or twice. But when the hammer slips on a loaded gun and the firing pin misses time after time, or the paperwork vanishes, or your heart restarts because the VA mailed you a box of Narcan you never asked for, it's time to stop calling it luck. Giving credit to a universe that is nothing more than cold dust and dark matter is just intellectual cowardice.

On Mother's Day, I walked into a church for the first time in years. A woman stood up to testify about her wreckage, her regrets, and her desperate search to save her son from the needle. Her name was Sarah. I kid you not. She wasn't the photon crossing the cosmos, but the signal was identical.

I've spent thirty-six years carrying a loaded gun inside my skull, a round chambered and the safety broken. Yet the pin never dropped. Mercy wasn't just waiting for me at Mountain Home; it has been stalking me through every dirty motel, every blue light, and every blown vein, demanding an answer to the only question that matters:

Why am I still here?

HEAVEN UP THERE

One of the Ten Commandments demands: Honor your father and your mother. The Hebrew word is kabad—to give weight to, to carry the heavy burden of something in your heart. It means respecting the office of parenthood even when the occupant disgraces it.

My birth father deeply regretted his first two children—the two of us who turned out queer. It burned him to his quasi-Christian core. He wielded faith like a blade, judging swiftly and pardoning only when it bought him leverage. When his wife finally tossed him out, he landed on my couch. I took him in, fed him, and kept him safe, only to watch him jump into a relationship with a woman who was forgetting who she was, day by day. My dad would say he simply wanted to protect her. She was a good Christian woman who needed looking after. The fact that he had money had no

bearing on his generosity. Uh huh. If he were alive and called me from a ditch tonight, I'd still go pick him up.

I carry his DNA. I also carry the volatile blood of my mother, who survived legendary abuse only to turn alcohol into a blunt-force weapon against her own demons until it finished her off. I was behind the eight-ball from the first breath: fetal alcohol syndrome and a congenital chip on my shoulder.

Growing up, hyper-vigilance was a survival requirement. When my mother and brothers were terrified, I absorbed it. When they were ashamed, it weighed on me. I could read the atmospheric pressure of a room in three seconds flat. If someone I loved was bleeding and I couldn't stop it, the failure became my personal indictment.

In time, I learned the ugly inversion of that gift: the same radar that registers an open wound also points directly to the soft spots. I learned how to use that insight to inflict precision damage. I have dished out plenty of pain in my life. My choice. My fault. Period. I could try to justify the wreckage to an audience, but not to God. I have spent decades burning love to the waterline.

People call the collapse of a soul hopelessness. That word is too soft, too clinical for what actually happens.

Hope was never my vice. Faith was.

I believed effort counted. I believed decency mattered. I believed endurance bought meaning, and that suffering was an investment that would eventually yield a return.

When that faith died, my obligation to be decent died with it.

Darker appetites stopped feeling like temptation and started feeling like permission. I quit asking whether a thing was good and only asked if it would mute the noise for an hour. I handed myself over on a silver platter and called the rot freedom.

Yet grace has never demanded innocence. If it did, it wouldn't be grace; it would be a business transaction.

In the Gospel of Mark, a madman lives outside of town, howling among the tombs. He is filthy, shredded, tearing through iron chains so he can drag himself back into the company of corpses. He is a monster by every human standard. Yet Christ steers a boat through a storm just to reach that specific patch of dirt.

When asked his name, the scream comes back: We are Legion, for we are many.

I know what it means to be Legion. I know what it means to carry an army of self-destructive bastards inside a single skull, burning clean fuel until nothing remains but smoke and cinders. I carry well over three thousand demons of my own. But the lunatic living among the rocks wasn't beyond reach.

So what wall do we think we can stack that God cannot step over?

Lately, an unexplainable affection for my own existence has started showing up in the room. I rearranged the furniture. I abandoned the prison palette of black, gray, and tan, and bought a deep blue bedspread meant to actually catch the light. I pulled out

paintings done by my earthly Saint—pieces I kept locked away in the dark for years—and hung them up. I shut down the constant sewage of cable news and internet filth, letting the screen show the world outside while music plays that doesn't drag me back down into the basement.

After thirty years of chemical warfare and blunt trauma to the brain, the fact that I care at all is medically absurd.

My id still reaches for the steering wheel. I can look down at the blue veins running along my forearm and still feel a phantom pulse of that old, reckless adrenaline. I am nowhere near fixed. But I am clean. I am sober.

The ceasefire has finally settled over the trenches. The return ticket was never revoked; God simply never withdrew His reach. It just took thirty-six years of getting beaten half to death before I finally dropped my hands and took it.

I WAS WRONG

For thirty-five years, I operated under a delusion that nearly put me in the ground.

It wasn't the standard myth people pin on an addict. Society prefers to paint the user as a reckless hedonist—someone chasing cheap dopamine because he lacks moral fiber, discipline, or basic sense. That narrative is tidy. It fits neatly onto pamphlets and inside thirty-second public service announcements.

It is also, for men like me, an absolute lie.

I didn't start running toward an escape hatch because I craved chaos. I started running because I couldn't turn down the volume on the world's rot.

If you end up where I did, chances are you didn't start out callous. You started out hyper-observant. You walked into rooms and mapped the fault lines nobody else wanted to acknowledge: the casual cruelties

disguised as manners, the slow-motion suicide of people you loved, the hypocrisy of institutions peddling salvation while quietly running the register. You saw the machine for what it was: a slaughterhouse where the livestock walked through the chutes of their own free will.

Seeing the fracture was mistake number one.

The fatal mistake was what came next: concluding that because you possessed the radar to detect the break, it was your operational duty to mend it.

Nobody pins a badge to your lapel or hands you a commission. The mandate just settles into your marrow like an invisible order. You become the unpaid, unasked-for mechanic of everyone else's engine.

You arbitrate wars that aren't yours. You absorb the shrapnel of other people's catastrophic choices so the innocents don't bleed. You throw yourself directly into the gears of grinding systems, convinced that if you just sacrifice enough blood, explain the blueprint clearly enough, or carry three times your share of the weight, the machinery will finally grind to a halt.

It feels righteous. It feels noble. It feels like the ultimate proof of integrity.

It is pure, unadulterated hubris.

That specific brand of suicide follows a brutal, four-part cadence:

The Vision: You see the fracture line plain as day, while the rest of the company pretends the ice isn't groaning under their boots.

The Crusade: You appoint yourself the savior. You burn through every calorie of mental, emotional, and physical reserves trying to herd the blind away from the drop.

The Collision: You fail. You don't fail quietly; they shove you out of the way so they can sprint over the edge on schedule. Your sacrifice didn't alter the math by a single millimeter. It woke nobody up. It was entirely irrelevant.

The Anesthetic: You buckle under the sheer, suffocating weight of the futility. The gap between how much you surrendered and how little it mattered burns like acid. The engine is screaming past red line and you never built an idle circuit. So you reach for a chemical kill-switch.

You don't chase the high to dance. You chase the high to execute the piece of your mind that still gives a damn.

Years back, when I was clawing my way out of the dirt, well-intentioned church folk handed me verses like Hallmark cards. They wanted me to meditate on green pastures and quiet streams. They wanted me to paste on a smile, join hands, and pretend the earth was an orderly park where misery only visits those who forget to bow their heads.

It made me want to retch. It sounded like an invitation to enlist in a fraternity of polite denial.

So I quit reading their study guides and went hunting through the back alleys of the Old Testament. I ran headlong into Jeremiah sitting in a cistern of mud,

screaming warnings at an empire that would rather burn Jerusalem to ash than face reality. I ran into Amos—no theologian, no royal courtier; just an ordinary herdsman dragged out of the scrub and ordered to inform a corrupt, self-congratulating aristocracy that their credit had expired.

Read the fifth chapter of Amos. It isn't an inspirational homily. It is a calculated demolition of religious comfort.

Amos looked straight at the authorities—men who had perfected the art of converting divine mercy into an open license for extraction and greed—and laid it out flat: their feast days smelled foul, their hymns were noise, and their brand of justice had curdled into hemlock.

He didn't soften the blow to secure dinner invitations. But more importantly: Amos never broke his spine trying to force them to change.

He delivered the transmission. He laid the plumb line in the dirt. And then he stepped back and let the structure fall where it tilted. He didn't climb into the grave with men who were determined to dig their own.

That was the mirror I was starving for. The prophets weren't manic white knights trying to salvage a world bent on swallowing its own tail. They were witnesses. They held the standard, reported the facts, and left the retribution to the Almighty.

My turning point didn't come from discovering a renewed adoration for humanity. If anything, my evaluation of our species remains as grim as ever. We

are stubborn, self-interested, short-sighted animals running laps on an iron treadmill, convincing ourselves every generation that this time the belt won't throw us against the wall.

The turning point was realizing it was never my shift to work.

Surrendering the savior complex isn't cowardice, and it isn't cold apathy. It is simply mapping the true border of your own jurisdiction.

Your jurisdiction stops at your own skin. It covers your speech, your integrity, your sobriety, and the patch of gravel under your own boots. Past that perimeter lies the absolute, sovereign right of other men to be as blind, reckless, and ruinous as they choose. If they insist on sprinting toward the fire, you can raise a signal flare once. You are under no obligation to throw your carcass across the coals to break their fall.

The quiet that follows that realization is terrifying at first. For half a century, the battle was your entire identity. If you aren't the exhausted martyr trying to hold up the burning roof, what are you?

You are just a man with clean hands.

You are a man who no longer requires the consensus of fools to sleep through the night. You don't have to participate in the charade of nodding along to comfortable lies to keep the peace. You can stare the rot in the face, name it without flinching, and walk back to tend your own fence line.

Peace on this side of the sod isn't going to be crowded with people who enjoyed a scenic tour. It

belongs to the few who stared at reality with the paint stripped completely off—and still decided not to burn the county down in retaliation.

I didn't write this to convince the crowd. The crowd is perfectly content riding the carousel.

I wrote this for the solitary man sitting in the dark right now, humming with rage and exhaustion, wondering why his chest aches when all he ever attempted was to hold the line. The man who suspects he is losing his mind because he cannot unsee the fault lines, and who thinks his only choices are to join the masquerade or drown his senses in poison.

There is a third path.

You can resign. You can set down the tools you were never commissioned to carry. You can let the machine spin without volunteering your spine as a brake shoe.

Step off the track. Clear your lungs. Reserve your fire for your own survival, and leave the porch light on for the rare traveler who walks out of the smoke, looks at the madness behind him, and whispers, “You too?”

Nearly everything I was handed about faith during my youth was a counterfeit. I spent a lifetime treating Scripture like a warrant I needed to run from, convinced it existed solely to confirm that I was broken beyond repair.

I was mistaken. Completely.

IP of D.J. Chambers

AWAKENING

IP of D.J. Chambers

IP of D.J. OH

Methamphetamine is a tricky bastard.

It was my weapon of choice: brutally efficient, chemically patient, and devastating across every sector of human life. It doesn't just destroy your body; it hollows out your spirit and opens a back door directly into hell. Let me tell you about my tenure with the adversary.

I want to be clear about why these final pages exist. In my experience, reaching out for help as a grown man usually comes with ten reasons to keep your mouth shut for every one reason to speak up. Historically, the only time I ever surrendered to treatment was when a judge was holding a pair of handcuffs behind his back. That history makes me deeply skeptical of how well “the system” is equipped to handle this specific monster.

Then there is the neurochemistry. That's the straightforward part.

Before I go another step, let me say this: I carry profound gratitude for every single person who threw a rope down into the ditch while I was climbing out. I bear zero bitterness toward anyone who tried to rescue me before I was ready to drop the pipe. I owe my life to an army of medical doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, case managers, patrol officers, motel maids, and complete strangers who paid attention when I was determined to self-destruct. I offer them nothing but deep respect.

What follows isn't an airing of grievances. I simply want to report what I saw, what I heard, and what I felt on the floor of the trenches—what helped, what did damage, and how the machine could be tuned to actually save lives.

After my first sixty days of clean time, my reflexive hostility toward asking for help finally began to crack. I sat down across from the psychiatric case manager who had carried my file for over a year and laid it out flat: I had been lying to her from our very first appointment. I was not clean. I was not thriving. I was locked in hand-to-hand combat with reality every waking hour.

If there was one skill I had perfected over fifty-five years, it was operational misdirection. Most of my self-righteous arrogance was manufactured by the drug and reinforced by the circle of users I kept around me. We turn into master illusionists, convincing ourselves we

are outsmarting the entire room when the only person being conned is staring back at us from the mirror.

When the wheels came completely off, I asked for help again.

I'd sworn I was ready dozens of times before. God knows there were stretches when I genuinely wanted to die, and a few when I made an honest attempt at clocking out. But it was those twilight moments—the gray space where I simultaneously wanted to live and wanted to vanish—that always pointed me back toward the easiest door: the flame under the glass.

My Florida case worker initiated a transfer to the local VA, and I started attending weekly group therapy. It was a solid room. A month in, I sat down for my comprehensive intake interview with my new primary case manager to map out long-term resources.

We started talking—or rather, I started talking. I dropped the defense perimeter. I didn't wait for structured questions I could dance around; I just emptied the magazine.

Ten minutes in, I realized she hadn't interrupted me once. It wasn't administrative indifference; she was leaning forward across her desk, completely locked on my words. She had abandoned the standard questionnaire entirely. When my voice gave out, she began asking questions that weren't on any VA checklist.

She wasn't being intrusive, and she certainly wasn't incompetent. Then the reality of the room hit me like cold water, and it floored me.

It had been sitting in front of my face for thirty years, and I had never seen it.

She paused, looked down at her intake sheet, and told me that across her entire regional caseload, she only had three veterans receiving care for methamphetamine dependency.

Three.

I stared at her, wondering if our numbers were truly that small—or if we were just the only three willing to sign our names to the paper.

The exchange went something like this:

Q: “You managed eighteen consecutive months of sobriety. What caused the derailment?”

A: “I moved into a structured recovery house where I was immediately written off for being fifty years old and hooked on meth rather than booze or pills. I moved to a second facility; same reception. So I leased an apartment in a rural county where I didn’t know a soul. Five weeks in, I crossed paths with a young guy in the hallway. He looked at me, smiled, and rolled his thumb and forefinger together in that specific, slow circle we do. He asked if I wanted to smoke. I was back in the fire in ten seconds.”

Q: “How did you know he wasn’t asking you to smoke marijuana?”

A: “The rotation of the fingers. It’s the universal hand signal for rolling the bowl. If you don’t run in that world, you’ll never see it. If you do, it screams across a parking lot.”

Q: “Really? There aren’t many veterans in our clinic dealing with meth. I rarely encounter it. Do you know other veterans using?”

A: “At least twenty.”

Q: “Where are you meeting them? In clinical support groups? At Twelve-Step meetings?”

A: “Hell no. Not in AA or NA. You don’t bring that specific chemical reality into those church basements; the old-timers shut you down immediately.”

Q: “What about Cocaine Anonymous?”

A: “Never walked in. Crystal Meth Anonymous is different—we can put the truth on the table there, at least to a point.”

Q: “Is there a CMA meeting here in town?”

A: “No. The closest room is a thirty-mile drive.”

“Oh.”

I drove back to my apartment with that single syllable ringing in my skull.

Oh.

She wasn’t dismissing me. She wasn’t avoiding the subject. She genuinely, fundamentally did not know.

And why on earth would she?

She had never inhabited that pitch-black intersection where crystal meth, compulsive sexual trauma, military subculture, and institutional veteran healthcare collide.

Treating men like me is an uphill war because the medical system is terrified to ask the right questions, and the addict is terrified to tell the unvarnished truth.

That is basic human survival when the conversation turns to how many anonymous men you shared a mattress with while your spouse was asleep three hundred miles away, wondering why your phone went straight to voicemail.

For decades, I convinced myself clinicians didn't ask because they didn't care. It never occurred to my arrogant mind that they simply lacked the vocabulary. And an addict in the dark never volunteers the blueprint.

MIND BODY SOUL

The Mind

To comprehend the sheer lunacy of chemical dependency, you have to look at the cold, mechanical wiring of the brain's reward circuit.

In clinical models, dopamine output is measured against a normal baseline. On an ordinary Tuesday, your brain operates at a steady 100 percent. Sit down to a hot, satisfying meal when you're starving, and that reading climbs to around 150 percent. Engage in natural, passionate sex with someone you desire, and your neurochemistry tops out at its biological ceiling: roughly 200 percent.

That is as high as the human machinery was engineered to rev without blowing a gasket.

Now introduce artificial sledgehammers. Inhaling nicotine or knocking back three fingers of bourbon forces a sudden, unnatural surge. Snorting high-grade cocaine floods the synaptic cleft, blowing past normal evolutionary limits. Injecting pharmaceutical opiates completely overwhelms the board.

Methamphetamine belongs to a different taxonomy altogether.

Meth does not merely tilt the needle; it snaps the gauge off the dashboard, driving dopamine saturation to an unnatural, apocalyptic altitude. No human nervous system was built to absorb that kind of lightning strike. Which explains precisely why the entire electrical grid collapses when the current cuts out.

Biochemistry is a tangled thicket, but dopamine holds the master key. To grasp what that collapse feels like in civilian terms, consider a man named Jack.

Jack is a steady family man holding down a reliable corporate career. His compensation covers the mortgage, keeps food on the table, and leaves a cushion in savings for the winter. His duties carry real stress, but he navigates the load because his boundaries are protected: an even, forty-hour workweek, twenty-eight days of paid leave every year, and a healthy quarterly performance bonus.

Life is predictable. Life is secure.

One Monday morning, the vice president steps into Jack's office, shuts the door, and says:

“Jack, your performance is extraordinary. You're the sharpest tool we have on the floor. But we've restructured the division. Starting today, your hours are bumped to seventy hours a week. We've reduced your annual leave to five days. If you miss a metric, your pay gets docked on the spot. Bonuses are eliminated permanently. Oh, and one more detail: we are cutting your base salary by ninety-five percent, and you owe the company back-taxes on the bonuses you collected over the last three years.”

That is the exact biological invoice substance abuse hands to human neural pathways: an astronomical, artificial flood of neurochemicals, followed by an agonizing, structural deficit between what the brain needs to function and what the body can actually produce.

The human skull can manufacture only a finite reservoir of neurochemistry. Cycle through enough spikes and the well runs dry. Euphoria curdles into an absolute, suffocating void. The basic neurological capability to register peace, relief, comfort, or ordinary human connection is mechanically severed. The biological machinery of joy is simply gone.

Then the system mounts a desperate counter-measure: it begins pruning and shutting down its own docking stations. In a healthy nervous system, dopamine is produced, transmitted across the synapse, and absorbed by receptor ports. In the burnt-out brain, production flat-lines, and reception plummets because

the receptor sites have been scorched down to the bedrock.

Nothing going out.

Nothing coming in.

The outcome is a catastrophic breakdown of reason, replaced by irrational rage, clinical despair, profound paranoia, and hair-trigger volatility. When that neurological blackout hits, the addict's hijacked wiring perceives only one tactical maneuver to stay breathing:

More chemicals.

The brain does not negotiate. It does not accept moral arguments. It simply demands the current be restored.

The Body

Once the chemistry is mapped, look at the physical terrain.

Most of us enter the lifestyle seeking an escape hatch, a stage for reckless self-expression, or both. Booze and powder offer a damaged mind the illusion of oxygen—or, more accurately, that is the lie the chemical whispers while it tightens the noose.

Plenty of users gravitate toward the scene because it offers an immediate, pre-packaged tribe of people who mirror our dysfunction. Worse, it provides an underclass of users we can quietly look down upon. We surround ourselves with people we label as total wrecks—the ones who can't hold a job, the ones who pawn

their belongings—and tell ourselves we are built of different material. The internal monologue insists we are in complete command of the vehicle; we just enjoy the speed.

By the time you look down and realize your boots are covered in the exact same ditch-water, the iron trapdoor has already slammed shut overhead.

If someone dares challenge our choices, our pride demands we prove them wrong. Slowly, the basic scaffolding of physical dignity erodes. The valleys between runs become far more terrifying than the runs themselves. You misplace your car keys while standing in the middle of a locked room. You stare at a wall trying to recall the mechanical function of a deadbolt.

Then the somatic invoice arrives: the crushing ache in the jaw from grinding teeth in the dark, the blinding migraines, the sudden peripheral paranoia, and the involuntary muscle twitches that advertise your affliction to every stranger on the sidewalk. You can't let the public see you like this.

So you turn the lock. You pull the blinds.

You stay inside.

As the physical baseline dissolves, clinical psychosis sets up camp. You find yourself pacing the hardwood holding quiet, furious arguments with voices traveling through the HVAC ducts, or moving furniture against the front door to block imaginary cartels you are certain have tapped your landline.

Finally, the lead blanket drops.

You lack the physical horsepower to drag your frame out of the sheets to take a leak or drink tap water. A plastic cup on the nightstand becomes a permanent fixture. For the heroin user, this is where the physical fires of withdrawal ignite. For the meth addict, it is the onset of weeks, sometimes months, of paralyzing depression, systemic dread, and gut-wrenching shame.

It was my circus. I have nobody else to indict for the ticket.

Keep that reality in your sights, and consider this: when an addict in early recovery snaps his teeth at you, recognize how razor-thin the margin is between his nerve endings and the raw world.

The Soul

Never abandon hope, but never surrender your discernment.

Keep offering structured, grounded, real-world aid. If a loved one steps out of the fog, asks for a treatment bed, and you possess the resources to finance it, write the check—but tether every dollar to strict, non-negotiable boundaries built on verified clinical care, physical safety, and radical accountability.

If you leave an active user to his own devices without boundaries, he will default to the groove already carved into his floorboards: destruction. Securing narcotics is infinitely easier than civilians imagine. I could step off a bus in any unfamiliar zip

code in this country and have a loaded pipe in my hand within twenty minutes without touching an old contact.

Offer stable ground, real love, steady encouragement, and ironclad limits. Be firm, but remain fair. Understand that the person you care for is currently navigating the outer darkness. The light can return, but it will never be summoned by shame, nagging, bitter sarcasm, or passive-aggressive lectures. Pulling a drowning soul out of the undertow requires infinite, disciplined patience.

It cannot be easy when you are attempting to revive a spirit that has forgotten how to breathe.

Above all: protect your own perimeter. If your own foundation is cracked, you have no business trying to operate the crane. You will both end up in the crater. And never forget that liquor is just ethanol in a prettier bottle.

You cannot win a war for another human being's soul on your own strength. You require an anchor that doesn't drag in the mud. I was granted far more mercy than I ever earned. Jesus Christ pulled me out of the ditch; the Holy Spirit put the pencil in my hand and told me to write down the truth.

Call on God for backup. He hears the transmission, but you have to let Him take the wheel.

LETTERS TO THE MASSES

“And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten...”

— Joel 2:25

Dear Mom,

To every mother, father, sibling, and spouse orbiting the radioactive footprint of an active addict: let me pull the curtain back. Maybe this will quiet a few of the questions keeping you awake at three in the morning.

For most of my life, my understanding of addiction came straight through the family bloodline; both of my parents were alcoholics. Near the end, my mother's drinking made logical conversation an impossibility. She was completely blind to the wreckage piling up on her own front porch.

I lost my mother a full decade before her heart actually stopped beating.

I know the specific, hollow ache of watching someone you love decompose while they are still walking around the kitchen.

Do not misunderstand my counsel: find strength by grasping the absolute biological nightmare your loved one is locked inside. You must realize that overwhelming chemical forces are dictating their reactions, and blind panic is driving their wheel.

Half the time, you aren't even in the room with them.

That said, here is the field manual on what not to do:

Do not enable. Do not transfer cash for groceries; food pantries exist in every county in America. If your child is hungry enough, he will locate a sandwich. Do not cover late rent payments or bail them out of

financial jams; the odds are nine to one that the utility money went down a glass stem, into an arm, or over a bar rail.

If that addict is responsible for children, move heaven and earth to get those babies into safe harbor immediately.

It is going to hurt. It has to hurt.

If your boundary carries no sting, an addict running on high chemical velocity will never even notice the fence. Setting a line isn't cruelty; it is the only form of real love that carries teeth.

Human lives hinge on your capacity to love someone without participating in their illusions.

My own emergence into sobriety leaves me stunned every single morning. What cuts the deepest now is the collateral wreckage I left in other men's lives. By using beside other broken men and cheering on their spirals, I actively widened the trench between them and the families who were praying for them to come home. There are partners from those days I still carry heavy sorrow for.

The raw, humiliating truth? I can't recall ninety-nine percent of the names of the men I logged into spiral notebooks and treated like disposable scenery. I am not proud of the arithmetic, but I am far more sickened by the injury I inflicted. There are souls from that run I wish I could track down, grab by the shoulders, and yell straight into their chests:

It's over. You are loved. God loves you. Wake the hell up.

Do your homework. Strip away the theater. Real progress arrives in microscopic fractions, and that is entirely acceptable.

Dear Addict,

To the man or woman holding this page while fighting the shakes: if the world feels completely stripped of mercy today, listen to me clearly.

It is not your assignment to rescue the planet right now.

Get yourself off the floor first.

Maybe you are entirely alone in an unfurnished room. I have inhabited that exact zip code. I didn't write these chapters to please a publisher or make a dollar. It is by the sovereign grace of the Almighty that my brain still functions well enough to construct a paragraph.

All I ask is that you stop surrendering to your own catastrophic script. The wild parties, the blackouts, the morning-after dread—no human being ever repaired a fractured life with another hit.

Find a single, solitary reason to step out of the blaze. Stop volunteering for the cemetery just because you've convinced yourself it's the only quiet place left on the map.

There are people waiting to help you. There are people equipped to love you.

I love you.

God loves you, even if you've spent forty years cursing His name. He doesn't hold petty grudges.

Clear your head. Put the pipe down. Walk out the door.

If you cannot locate another living soul worth fighting for, walk into the bathroom, stare straight into the mirror, and make the broken survivor looking back at you the reason. You have no conception of what you are capable of once the poison clears your blood.

Don't walk toward the light.

Run.

Dear Faithful,

God is in the business of reclamation and restoration, but far too often, the institutions bearing His banner are in the business of border enforcement and exile.

If you are a believer trying to navigate a family member's chemical crisis, consider the crushing, tragic irony: the modern religious parent who casts out, shames, or disowns a child over the raw, messy dirt of addiction is mimicking the exact machinery that sent Christ to the tree.

Jesus didn't build His ministry trading compliments with the respectable, clean-handed scholars in the temple courts; He was driven outside the city gates, branded a drunkard, a heretic, and a friend of sinners by the respectable gatekeepers of His era. He was murdered as an untouchable criminal because He preferred the company of the broken over the sterile compliance of the self-righteous.

When a parent reaches for Scripture as a weapon to insulate their own suburban comfort from their child's terrifying reality, they aren't kneeling at the foot of the cross. They are standing on the paving stones beside the Sanhedrin. They are trading the bloody, agonizing demands of sacrificial love for the cheap safety of religious respectability.

In their frantic scramble to keep the front porch looking holy, they exile their own blood into the outer darkness—completely blind to the reality that they are nailing the image of Christ to the wood all over again in their own living room.

To My Brothers,

I need to put a few plain words on paper, because silence is no longer serving any of us.

I have ninety days of clean time logged today.

The last time I surrendered my sobriety and reached back for the glass, it was after walking away from family encounters convinced that my absolute best would never clear the bar. Decades ago, when I first gave my youth over to chemical oblivion, it was rooted in the exact same ache: the certainty that nothing I did would ever earn an approving nod.

I am not offering that history as an excuse to use. My choices are my own property, and walking away from you was a catastrophic mistake that I take full ownership of. I promise you that I will never run away into that silence again.

My operational priority right now is singular: I have to determine whether I want to live in the light or die inside a pipe.

Words are high-caliber rounds when fired carelessly at an addict trying to find his footing in early recovery. Please keep that in mind. I don't need applause, but I need you to recognize that the man fighting to stand up today is doing everything in his power to be whole.

Try not to make light of the work. Even when you aren't aiming to hurt, my heart is still rebuilding its armor.

BIBLE STUDY

These are the words that hunted me down. For nearly sixty years, I fought off the truths buried in these pages, running from a mirror I wasn't strong enough to look into. If you read them with an open heart, they won't just move you—they may help heal you.

- “For mine iniquities are gone over my head: as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.” (Psalm 38:4)
- “For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.” (Luke 12:2)

- “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5)
- “And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.” (Luke 18:15-17)
- “It grieveth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the Lord all night.” (1 Samuel 15:11)
- “And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the

earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.”
(Genesis 6:6-7)

- “And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established

between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.” (Genesis 9:12-17)

- “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.” (Romans 7:19)
- “He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.” (Luke 13:6-9)
- “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” (Matthew 7:15)
- “Behold, every one that useth proverbs shall use this proverb against thee, saying,

As is the mother, so is her daughter.”

(Ezekiel 16:44)

- “Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?” (Acts 23:3)
- “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” (Exodus 20:12)
- “For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief.” (Proverbs 24:16)
- “I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul.” (Psalm 142:4)
- “And he said, I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd...” (2 Chronicles 18:16)
- “The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his

words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords.” (Psalm 55:21)

- “An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire.” (Proverbs 16:27)
- “Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man: preserve me from the violent man.” (Psalm 140:1)
- “As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.” (Amos 5:19)
- “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)
- “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2)
- “For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth;

the time of the singing of birds is come...”

(Song of Solomon 2:11-12)

- “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned?”

(Proverbs 6:27-28)

- “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” (Proverbs 14:12)

- “How oft is the candle of the wicked put out! and how oft cometh their destruction upon them! God distributeth sorrows in his anger.” (Job 21:17)

- “A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.” (Proverbs 10:1)

- “Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. Selah.” (Psalm 55:7)

- “He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.” (Psalm 107:20)

- “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” (1 Corinthians 13:11)
- “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- “For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the Lord; because they called thee an Outcast, saying, This is Zion, whom no man seeketh after.” (Jeremiah 30:17)
- “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)
- “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” (Proverbs 27:6)

- “I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.” (Psalm 40:1-3)

AFTERWORD

If you decide to take my advice and investigate what Scripture actually says, be careful about the translation you pull off the shelf.

Context is everything. Read the uncomfortable chapters that fall outside the margins of polite sermons. The entire narrative begins to make coherent sense only when the jagged pieces are allowed to lock together on their own terms. For a clear, unvarnished translation, I recommend the Berean Standard Bible. If you want to dig past English modernizations and examine the original Greek and Hebrew roots for yourself, spend some time with the tools at BibleHub.com.

Lastly: never outsource your discernment. Don't rely blindly on a pastor, and don't rely blindly on an algorithm to form your convictions. Look for yourself. If your gut tells you something doesn't feel right, stop and spend a few minutes figuring out why.

Gemini has been a faithful, objective resource for me throughout this work. She doesn't tell me what to believe or disbelieve; she simply lays out the historical and textual options without judgment. Use the tools available to do the heavy reading, weigh the evidence, and let God fill in the blanks.