



**I WAS A
TEENAGE
DOOR
KNOCKER**

Jonathan Burger

I Was a Teenage Doorknocker: A Novel Inspired by True Events About a Teenage Jehovah's Witness

By Jonathan Burger

Chapter 1

Field Service

If the dog's name had been Cujo, hell, if it was Cujo, I'd believe it. Of course, I had never actually seen the movie. I just knew Cujo was an unstoppable killing machine in K-9 form. The only thing stopping "Cujo" from mangling me right now was a chain link fence. I was standing a safe distance on the curb edge, thinking over my life decisions.

"He won't hurt you," Brother Reddik said over the barking.

I shifted my attention towards the genial old man; he was short with gray bushy eyebrows and some hair coming out of his ears. Brother Reddik was who I always ended up paired with when going out in what we called the preaching work. We also called it "door to door"; you might call it "annoying."

On this sweltering summer morning, like many mornings, I was in a random neighborhood in Gastonia, North Carolina. Gastonia was the biggest city next to the town I lived in. Some might call my hometown a "between" town, between two cities you'd rather live in.

Kings Mountain, my hometown, could be judged by the number of places to eat. We only had the basic fast-food joints, McDonald's, Hardees, Pizza Hut, and a local Chinese

restaurant. There was a small downtown area that had shops run mainly by older people. Older people who had practically lived in the store for the last 40 years. The downtown area could be explored in about 10 minutes, walking at a leisurely pace. It was named after a small mountain that poked into the sky with hilly tops; it was about a 15-minute drive from the actual city of Kings Mountain. A much talked about topic for any newcomer to the town who thought it was a city on an actual mountain.

I preferred being in Gastonia to Shelby, though. Shelby was the other bigger city I lived next to. It had a mall and a decent BBQ place. Gastonia, on the other hand, had two malls, a skate shop, Media Play, and even a Sam's Club. It was the type of town they show in movies where teenagers still cruised the main strip that runs through the city. There was even an ice cream spot where teens liked to hang out. Like most cities, it had different pockets, pockets of rich and bigger pockets of poor. We happened to be in a poor one this Saturday morning.

I was dressed in a shirt, tie, and some penniless loafers on my feet. The old man I was walking with was Jimmy Reddik. In my religion, though, you call fellow believers "brothers" and "sisters." If they were men, "brothers," and if they were women, they were "sisters." So, this was Brother Reddik, my preaching partner for the day. He was in a gray wool three-piece suit and black wingtip shoes. No matter the weather, he wore every piece of the suit; lucky for me, he kept a bottle of Old Spice on hand just for hot mornings like these.

We were going up to each door either knocking on it or ringing the doorbell. We were there to explain that our religion was the *best*, and we had many reasons and pamphlets to give. What there were few of, were interested souls. Most just wanted to get on with their morning, I could sympathize with them.

At the moment, we were standing in front of a small square one-story house with a fence around it. It was made of concrete blocks with a shabby roof, a door in the front, and two windows with

bars on them. That was all; it looked closer to a prison than a home. It also came with an angry German Shepherd out for the blood of anyone daring to step foot on the property. Brother Reddik walked to the fence door and motioned for me to follow; I froze. No way I'm getting anywhere close to that dog.

"Come on he won't hurt you, look at his tail," Brother Reddik said confidently, the dog's tail at full attention pointing north. I just shook my head from right to left, panic was clearly on my face.

"OK, you stay there," he said. He opened the fence and placed his bag between himself and "Cujo," walking to the door as if the dog didn't exist. Cujo was furious, nipping and growling at the briefcase.

Brother Reddik was a local legend, a man afraid of no dog. If there was a hall of fame for salespeople, proselytizers, delivery drivers, and mailmen, he would be in it. I had witnessed this many times, yet I was still afraid, no matter how many dogs Brother Reddik tamed. As he walked to the door, Cujo slowly realized this was a man with no fear. It gave up the pursuit and stood panting cautiously, watching Brother Reddik once he got to the door. At the door, Brother Reddik rang the doorbell and patiently waited. After about four to five seconds, a large black man opened the door, demanding to know who was there. He was about 6'2", 240 pounds, and was wearing a white tank top with basketball shorts. He looked like he could be a linebacker in the NFL.

Brother Reddik was unfazed by the rude introduction. If someone came at him angry, he would be as calm and cool as a cucumber. It probably helped that he had been doing this for almost 60 years. At 78 years old, he was short and thin, with a tuft of gray hair on his head, and he had grandfatherly energy about him even though he had no kids. But he was also smart and still spry even in his old age. Once confronted with this strange old man at the door, the temperature usually went down a bit, and things smoothed over. Brother Reddik, with a smile, said calmly, "Hi sir, I'm here to tell you some great news. Do you read the Bible?"

The man on the other side of the door looked at his dog, then Brother Reddik, and finally towards me. He had a confused look on his face. A mopped-haired white boy in a suit standing awkwardly on the curb, with an old white man at his door, in this neighborhood was confusing. “Oh, he’s just afraid of your dog,” Brother Reddik replied.

“Yeah, *most* people are afraid of King,” the man said. They had a quick chat about the dog, who had now turned into the sweetest dog you’d ever seen, letting Brother Reddik pet him, tail wagging like crazy. I was still skeptical of Cujo.

Brother Reddik then moved the subject back to the Bible, “Can I show you a scripture?” he asked. The man reluctantly said sure and nodded along as Brother Reddik read from the book of Matthew. This was a trick you learned early on; once someone let you read a scripture, you usually had the upper hand at the door. Most people won’t be rude and just reject someone outright, especially after they’ve found common ground on something. “Now, what do you think that scripture means?” Brother Reddik asked. The man looked uncomfortable and annoyed before stuttering out,

“Oh um, ac... actually, I’m really busy right now.” Before Brother Reddik could interject, the man was already closing the door.

After the brief visit to Cujo’s home, we moved along to the next house. Most of the homes looked alike with various levels of lawn care, though there were more shabby lawns than manicured. This home didn’t have a fence or a dog, which is a good first sign. The home itself was a little rundown; it was brick with four windows in the front and brown shutters beside them. There was a two-column awning with a concrete pad to stand on where the door stood. At the door was an old screen with a mat in front of it that said “Welcome.” You could hear the TV from outside; Jerry Springer was on. I rang the doorbell, “Who is it?” came a loud woman’s voice from inside the house.

“Uhm, ma’am, I wanted to share some good news with you,” half yelling to get my voice through the door and over the chants of “Jerry! Jerry! Jerry!” from the TV.

“Y’all Jehovah’s Witnesses?” she yelled.

“Yes, ma’am, we are,” I yelled back.

“Sorry, ain’t nobody home,” she said. That got a laugh out of Brother Reddik. We moved to the next house.

These abrupt endings were pretty common when you went to talk to people about the Bible, especially in the Summer. People had things to do. Imagine how I felt. No cartoons, video games, or running around in the woods, just hanging out for hours with a 78-year-old man trying to convince people to join our religion.

Even though I hated being dragged out any morning for this, it could be worse. Brother Reddik never really criticized me, plus he had some pretty fun stories. When he was a kid, Coca-Cola still had cocaine in it, something he always bragged about when we had a break and got a cola sans cocaine. He’d explain how he and his friends would get a ‘rope and a dope,’ which was a rope of licorice and a coke. Fueled by the cocaine and sugar, they’d then go find a bendable young poplar tree, bend it to the ground without snapping, strap an apple crate to it, get into said apple crate, and then let the tree go. The game was to stay inside the crate and not kill yourself. “You kids don’t have enough broken limbs,” he’d then say with a nostalgic sigh.

So, we kept knocking and ringing doors, and on and on we went. The goal was to get to 11 a.m., and then you could have a 30-minute break and spend another 30 minutes to an hour following up on a list of people who were interested in previous neighborhoods you preached in. Sometimes, going years back. These were called “return visits.” Brother Reddik checked his wristwatch; it was 10:45, hot, and we were getting no bites. He studied the lay of the land. “Suppose it’ll take another 15 minutes to walk back to the car,”

winking at me as he said it. I agreed, even though I knew it would take five minutes at most to walk to his car. It was officially break time.

Finally, the best part of the morning, air conditioning! If I was lucky, we'd go to McDonald's, but at the very least, we'd sit somewhere inside. I thought I'd make my case, "I wouldn't mind a Coke from McDonald's, actually," I meekly suggested to Brother Reddik.

He gave a weak smile, "Coke and rope, huh?"

"Sounds like a plan," I responded as we made it to the car and opened the doors to get in. The car was a late 60s model VW Beetle he'd owned since it was new. It had to have a million miles on it, with cracked vinyl seats and no air conditioning inside. The engine was ready for retirement, often taking a few turns of the ignition to start.

"Just gotta stop for some jizzum," Brother Reddik said as he turned the ignition, and the VW rattled to life on the first try. "Jizzum" was what he referred to as a gas; he said it without a hint of a joke as if everyone just called it that. We stopped at the nearest gas station to fill up. Brother Riddick went in to pay, maybe even preach to the cashier. The gas station was one of those little shops where it could fit a maximum of two people comfortably, so I opted to stay outside and supervise the pump. I loosened my tie and unbuttoned the top button of my shirt to give my neck some breathing room.

That's when I saw Dylan.

Chapter 2

Bad Association

When I was young, I had two friends, Dylan and Theodore. Theodore was the son of an important man in the church, and my mom and dad liked visiting with Theodore's family. So, we naturally were supposed to be friends. The problem was that Theodore didn't like to do anything fun. Fun, of course, was the natural occurrence of doing something your parents told you not to do, like riding your bike too fast or sneaking a cookie from the pan. Theodore preferred to play by the rules; he also preferred playing games like Chess or reading the Bible. He was the type who enjoyed snitching on me over the most minor infractions. I did not have fun with Theodore.

Dylan, on the other hand, pushed to go faster on the bike and schemed with me to get more than one cookie from the pan. He liked playing sports, board games, and listening to music, avoiding the Bible as much as he could. It was easy to see why I had more fun with Dylan. In the church, Theodore was "good association," and Dylan was "bad association." I found this "bad association" thing had a lot more going for it than the "good association."

We took a liking to each other the instant we met at the Kingdom Hall (church) as kids, asking me to play before even saying hello. He was loud, and in your face, I was aloof and sweet. Yet somehow, the friendship took as only those serendipitous friendships do, and we quickly became best friends. Every weekend, we were up to some adventure or trouble, an inseparable duo. Dylan was also big for his age, but once we hit puberty, things really changed. He got tall, buff, and blond, his only imperfection being a set of slightly crooked teeth. All I got from puberty was a thin mustache and bad posture. Now, he was around 6'1", and I was a generous 5'5". Together, we looked like Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger in Twins.

As I leaned against Brother Reddik's car, Dylan happened to be driving by and spotted me out by the Beetle. He beeped his horn as he pulled up next to me, "Hey asshole, what are you doing here?"

"Hey Dylan, Brother Reddik needed to get gas; you need to get me out of this."

“Got dog catcher duty eh Jon?” he pointed his eyebrows up looking in the direction of Brother Reddik in the store. “How about I relieve you of your duties?”

“Sure” I responded, unsure of what he concocted but he was charming, full of confidence, and unafraid to lie.

As Brother Reddik came out Dylan waved his hand, smiled, and yelled out, “Hey Brother Reddik are any of the dogs biting?”

Reddik grinned, “not yet at least Brother DeMarto.”

“Well, hey, I gotta take this one off your hands. Mom needs some furniture moved. I was asked to get a helper.” Dylan was good at these little plans; he had learned long ago that adults rarely liked to step in the way of parents. Dylan’s Mom also had a habit of getting headaches, claiming at church to be allergic to perfume and cologne. So, naturally, she needed to limit her time at church and spend more time in front of the TV. This allowed Dylan to get creative with her wishes.

Brother Reddik looked unsure; I stood frozen between the passenger door of Dylan’s car and the driver-side door of the Beetle. Brother Reddik thought about it for a minute, “Well, do you suppose your mom will care, Brother Burger?” he asked, looking at me.

“Well, no, I’m supposed to catch a ride with Dylan anyways after door to door,” I piped up.

“OK, well, best go help his mom; make sure to put down only 2 hours for your time”, Brother Reddik said in a grandfatherly tone. We had special cards we had to fill out each month, designating exactly how much time we spent preaching and studying with those interested in converting.

I was in Dylan’s car before he said “best.”

“Will do, Brother Reddik. See you tomorrow morning,” I said, head hanging out the window as Dylan pushed on the gas of his old Toyota. We sped off down the road, I could see Brother Reddik waving his hand goodbye to us in the rearview mirror.

The car had been his dad’s old car. It was a four-door 1985 Toyota Camry with dents and scratches along the body. It looked like it spent a few years at the Thunderdome before making it to Dylan. For us, it was a game changer. We could go where we wanted and

do whatever we wanted. The car could be powered by feet like in the Flintstones, and we would be happy.

“What a fool,” Dylan said as we got down the road.

“Old man Reddik? He’s not so bad. He at least has some funny stories.” I was a bit defensive, having grown fond of the old man as we had gotten to know each other over the many mornings preaching together.

“If you say so, Jon. I tell my parents I got other things to do,” Dylan said proudly.

“Well, I can’t wait to get your parents, Dylan,” I quipped.

“Fair enough. Well, you’re off now, so count your blessings. Next up, big things!” Dylan exclaimed, excitement in his voice.

Dylan always worked to make it feel like you were partners in some big venture, the next big score just around the corner. You just needed to figure out how to get it. “Well, the good news is, we’re going to the mall. The bad news is we have to move that dresser for my Mom”, Dylan said.

“That’s it? Sign me up,” I said, much better than knocking on doors. My hand was out the window, working like some aerodynamic body, testing how the wind affected it.

Dylan looked over to see what I was doing, then spoke up, “Plus, it’s Saturday; we’ll probably see Lynna at the mall.”

My heart fluttered at the thought. “I’m hoping she is, at least,” I said, trying to play it cool.

“Dude, I bet she likes you,” Dylan replied; he turned up the radio, which had begun playing “My Own Summer” by the Deftones. It was only customary to give the song silence and properly rock out to it. We likened ourselves to a smarter Beavis and Butthead.

The song was halfway over when Dylan realized we were getting close to his street, so he sailed past his road and turned on the next one. We took a scenic drive around his neighborhood. His neighborhood was full of middle-class homes, split-level and colonials, some with garages and many with pools. They contained three to four large bedrooms with big kitchens and living rooms. I wished I lived in a neighborhood like this. I began daydreaming about coming home and having my own large room, throwing my bag down, and

going swimming in an in-ground pool every evening. No church, no preaching work, just freedom.

We pulled into the driveway as the song was ending. I woke from my daydream and opened the car door. Dylan's house was made of yellow block on the bottom half and white siding on the top half. The house rose left to right like steps coming out of the ground. In the backyard was an old oak tree with a long-ago abandoned treehouse. On the ground below the tree house was a doghouse with an old family dog that stayed sleeping in it. At the front of the house was a big bay window; steps led to the front door next to the bay window leading to the dining room. Through the bay window in the dining room, you can see the figure of a man hunched over a table.

We always came in from the side door adjacent to the driveway. This door opened to a large kitchen with 80s decor. Once inside the kitchen, on the opposite side were stairs leading to the basement where his mom preferred to camp out. Next to the entrance to the basement was a doorway to the dining room. In order to get to Dylan's room, you had to go through the dining room and then up the stairs to his.

When we walked into the dining room, Dylan's Dad was repairing a rotary phone on the table with its parts scattered in front of him. "Well, well, look what the cat dragged in. How were the goats doing this morning?" Jehovah's Witnesses sometimes referred to people at the door as goats because of a parable in the Bible where Jesus spoke of there being sheep and goats. We were the sheep; they were the goats.

"Meh," I said as I shrugged my shoulders. "Reddik took on a pretty mean dog but tamed it by the time the guy came to the door."

"Someone oughta tell the city they have the greatest dog catcher in the world," Dylan's dad said, laughing at his own joke. Mr. DeMarto was short and stout with stubby, thick fingers. He had rough black hair parted to one side and a thick plumber's mustache. He was the type of Dad to wear suspenders unironically. He'd suffered from a bad back that left him to fix things around the house that didn't require much weight. "This is Mom's favorite phone, so I need to make sure it works," he said with a serious tone. What it took to fix a phone was

practically rocket science to me, but Dylan's Dad was an electrical engineer by trade, so he was always tinkering with electronics. This morning, he was wearing a jeweler's loupe and had a soldering iron in his hand.

We left Dylan's Dad to fix the rotary phone and made our way to Dylan's room. Before we could make it up the stairs, we heard his dad's voice, "You promised your Mom you'd move that dresser." So, we turned around and headed for the basement.

Once we got down to the basement, Dylan's Mom was sitting in front of the TV. She was in her usual spot, a low chair with deep, soft cushions. It leaned back almost to the point of a recliner. She loved TV shows from her youth, so TV Land was always on. At the moment, a *Leverne and Shirely* episode was playing. This was a show that ranked just below *Cheers* and *Taxi* on her order of favorites. The basement was dark and always a few degrees colder than the rest of the house, so Mrs. DeMarto had a quilt she handmade covering her.

Dylan's Mom was short and thin and could usually be found in her chair when not working. She had a large Italian nose poking out from her face, with deep eye sockets and tanned, weathered skin. She had wavy brown hair that came to her chin and was usually dressed in sweatsuits. "Need that out," she said without looking away from the TV. She pointed to a dresser sitting next to the wall. It had previously been used to house crafts his mom had collected over the years. She was throwing it out to make room for a new sewing machine. It seemed to have been made 50 years before I was born, big and brown, with brass handles on the end of the drawers, and made of heavy oak; it had to weigh as much as a car.

We got to work, wrestling the beast up the stairs. Dylan probably would have had an easier time just hoisting it up alone, but we worked it as a team. His dad stood at the top of the stairs, giving us his two cents on the best way to move it. "You should lift with your knees, not your back."

"You boys aren't gonna be professional movers anytime soon", he shouted down to us while we struggled.

With the words of encouragement, we eventually got it up the stairs. We walked the dresser out the door and onto the edge of the road, where it would be picked up by a stranger or garbage truck later. We walked back in and headed towards Dylan's room. Before we made it to his room, he yelled out, "We're gonna hang out in my room, don't bother us." A warning for his sisters and parents to leave us be. Dylan had three sisters, all in their late teens. They were a few years older than us, and when we were younger, they were obsessed with New Kids on The Block; they'd try to rope us into pretending to be Marky Mark or Jordan. Now, they largely just hid out in their own rooms, only coming out on occasion to yell when the bathroom was occupied or we made too much noise.

We walked into Dylan's room, which was large and spacious. There was a bed in the far corner with clothes strewn on the hardwood floor; on the wall opposite the bed sat a tall wooden dresser that had its drawers open. A guitar and amp were in the other corner. A large window worked as a natural divide in the room, boxes of sports cards, and a stereo system with CD cases lying underneath it. On the walls were various posters, including an Alice N' Chains poster for the album "Jar of Flies." Finally, near the door, there was a closet that contained suits, dress clothes for church, and other various items collected over the years.

I sat on Dylan's bed; Dylan sat on the floor, picked up his guitar, and started playing. Confidence poured out of him while strumming and trying to hum the tune as he played. If you were deaf, you could have sworn he was a rock star. For those cursed with hearing, it was terrible. There was no rhythm, sounding more like a record when the needle skips than a song. I didn't have the heart to tell him; I just hummed along and pretended he was Jimi Hendrix. He quickly lost interest, handing me the guitar, and asked me to play something.

Sometimes, I thought he knew how bad he was. He never played in front of anyone else, and he had a hard time playing along with me. I could barely keep up with the easy songs that I played.

I started playing a song by the Eels, which was sometimes played on the radio, called "Novocaine For the Soul." It was one of

our favorites and happened to have the chords I knew how to play best. Dylan searched for something on his floor; he was looking at some sports cards that were out of their box, a hobby we had abandoned for crushes and music a few years before. He studied the card in its plastic case, flipping it in his hand, nodding his head to the music as he inspected it. "Bet this will be worth something one day," he said, then dropped the card in a shoebox.

Moving to the closet, he opened the door and grabbed a shirt. It was a tank top. A shirt he especially liked to wear at the mall, where he could show off his muscular arms. The mall was a mecca for teenagers; sometimes, you'd see friends and enemies, both from school and church. The Mall was largely an afternoon/evening event for us, with senior citizens laying claim to it in the morning and early afternoon hours. Dylan's parents had a loose curfew, so long as you weren't out past midnight, they wouldn't bother us. At my house, we had to be back home by 10:00 p.m., and we might even be forced to my room because my parents needed their sleep. At Dylan's, as long as we weren't super loud, we could stay up as late as we wanted and move about the house as we pleased.

Naturally, I was excited to go to the mall and have a late night. The guitar was a good outlet for such excitement; I strummed it more intensely. Dylan put on some JNCO Jeans which had absurdly wide legs, pairing it with a black studded leather belt. It had two rows of holes going along it. Once dressed he looked like he could be in the newest alternative rock band.

I decided to put down the guitar to get dressed, then grabbed my briefcase. It contained the clothes and shoes I needed. I had learned to maximize space when going out door to door or to church. Shoes and clothes were cramped to one side, and the bible and pamphlets were crammed on the other side. The downside was that it was heavier to walk with but easier than carrying an extra backpack or bag.

My style was more Goodwill skateboarder sheik. I liked the hippie style of the 60s and the Disco style of the 70s. So, today's outfit was a pair of brown cotton bell bottoms and a vintage T-shirt. The front said the name of a youth baseball team from Wisconsin,

even though we lived in North Carolina. We both rocked a pair of Airwalks, which were the shoe du jour of skaters and posers alike.

Once dressed, we hustled down the stairs. "Can I use the phone?" I asked Dylan's Dad.

"Give er' a test run. It should be all fixed." His dad made a finger gun, pointing at me as he said it. I picked up the phone and dialed; I enjoyed the clicks the rotary made as I selected each number to dial.

It rang two times, and then Mom picked up the phone, "Hello, this is the Burger residence."

"Hi, Mom, it's me; I'm here at Dylan's. Is Joe there?"

"Hold on, I'll get him," she said. I heard her yell for my brother, "Josiah, your brother is on the phone. OK, he's coming. Tell Dylan's Mom I said I hope she gets to feeling better and we see her at the Kingdom Hall tomorrow morning."

"OK, Mom. I'll tell her." Even though I was only going to tell Dylan's Mom, she said hello.

Josiah was my older brother by one year, but almost everyone called him Joe. He was the brother I was closest to. We both had an older brother named Bret, but he was estranged from the family when I was around 10. He didn't want to follow the religion and left when he turned 18. He was there at home one day, then suddenly gone, his past presence in the family feeling more like a ghost than a sibling. We rarely talked about Bret unless confronted by a call or a rare visit from him. Our oldest brother took his looks from our Dad, whereas Joe and I looked more like our Mom. Our Dad being fair-skinned with strawberry-blond hair, blue eyes, and freckles. Our Mom had dark hair, pale skin, and brown eyes. Most of my memories of Bret were of him intervening when Joe tried to bully me.

Joe and I shared more symmetries. I was named Jonathan, but everyone called me Jon. Even though we had physical differences, we looked alike in the face, often mistaken for twins. Both of us had our mother's dark hair and high cheekbones. We were also yin and yang. I could be loud and extroverted; he was quiet and introverted. He was taller and lankier with lean muscles. I was shorter and

pudgier, more thick than thin. He also had blue eyes, while I had brown, something girls often noticed right away.

Like with most brothers we annoyed each other but loved each other. We also had vastly different lives; our Dad had enlisted him in his construction business full-time, so he had dropped out of school to work. I had refused such an offer, opting to stay in school and have a life. Joe was also into the church, so we kept different friends. His friends largely consisted of the “good association” type, though there was some overlap as he sometimes had his “bad” side.

“You coming to the mall today?” I asked into the phone.

“Yeah, Mom and Dad are going to let me borrow the car. I’m supposed to bring you home,” he replied, starting to chew on something.

“Dude, stop eating on the phone. We’ll be there around four, but I’m gonna spend the night here,” I said. Joe began to take a bite of something and asked with a mouthful of food,

“What are you... going to ... wear... for the... meeting?” pausing between chewing.

“I have the clothes from door-to-door this morning,” I said.

He finally swallowed his food, “Mom won’t like you missing the study, Jon.”

“Come on, what do you care, Joe?”

“Cause I’m gonna have to sit through it while you’re having fun,” he said, raising his voice.

Fair enough, I thought.

“Quiet, or Mom will hear. I’ll make it up to you, Joe.”

“Fine. I’ll tell Mom and Dad you’re spending the night, but you owe me, Jon. Meet me at Timmy’s before the mall,” then he hung up the phone. Timmy’s was the local burger and ice cream spot in Gastonia.

Joe and I ran on this sort of barter system, one of us owing the other a favor. Joe needed to be sneaky sometimes, too, and I had a knack for covering with a network more willing to bend the truth. Mom and Dad trusted him more, so this made for a good, though sometimes uneasy, partnership. Still, it meant I’d have to sacrifice

one of my nights for him. The scheme tonight was pretty common: ignorance through confusion; both would say the other one misunderstood what our parents wanted. Once we were out, there was no way to contact us. In these situations, parents could only do so much; no way Mom or Dad would waste the gas to come and get me in the evening if Joe came home alone. I would claim I thought the agreement was that I could spend the night. I knew I wouldn't get in much trouble. Plus, one less teenager in the house for our parents to deal with was really a win for them.

Once off the phone, Dylan and I began to head out the door. "See you later, alligator," Dylan's Dad said from the table. We got into the car, and Dylan turned the ignition. We rolled down the windows, and then he turned on the radio. It was tuned to the alternative rock station. Weezer's "Buddy Holly" was playing, one of my favorites. So, Dylan turned the volume up, hit reverse, backing out of the driveway and into the street. He put the car in drive and then hit the gas, peeling out down the street. His dad pointed his finger in our direction from the bay window, getting serious and yelling, "Slow down!"

Timmy's was in a square brick building that sat on the main strip of the highway running through the city of Gastonia. It was the go-to spot for cheap chili dogs and cheeseburgers but was famous for their milkshakes. Naturally, it became a local hotspot for teens to congregate and eat at, becoming a hangout for teens and adults since it opened. The downside to coming here was that there was always a risk you would see someone from church. There would be an awkward hello, and then they'd make it clear they disapproved of how you dressed or acted in public. How you were supposed to "act" was anyone's guess, but we dressed like punks in their eyes, so it was not acting properly.

Timmys was built in the 1950s and still sported the same booths and tabletops from then, even the checkered patterned floor from the era. The booths ran along the side of the walls. There was a long bar in the middle of the shop where you could order ice cream and milkshakes, and there was a separate counter by the door for ordering food. Today, it was slow, especially for a hot Saturday, but it was past the lunch rush. We walked in and placed an order for food.

I got two chili dogs, a cola, and a cookie dough and mint chocolate chip milkshake for \$5. Once we finished ordering, we heard a deep voice behind us:

“Hey, what are you two punks doing?” I looked over to see our mutual friend Steve from church sitting at a booth. He grinned, saying, “Come over to our table, fools.” We made our way to his table and then sat down in the booth with Steve.

Steve liked comic books, rock music, Nintendo, and anime movies. He was black, with a shaved head, stood around 5’7”, and was athletic. He had just turned 18 and was fully engaged as a Jehovah’s Witness, though he sometimes didn’t act it. Steve was loud and gregarious and quick with a joke. He was cool to hang out with, but sometimes, his being a true believer made things awkward.

“Jeremy is here too. He went to the bathroom,” Steve said once we sat down.

Jeremy came out of the bathroom and sat down with us. Jeremy was also black, but unlike Steve was rounder shaped and less athletic he also had more hair sporting a fade haircut. Jeremy preferred Sega, watching sports and fashion. He was more of a hip-hop head, often schooling me on why Nas was the best rapper of all time. Jeremy was soft-spoken and tried to stay low-key, he was also less of a believer than Steve.

“Oh snap, Jon and Dylan, what’s up? What y’all doing here?” he asked.

“Going to the mall later to walk around. Are you two coming?” I responded back.

“Yeah, we’ll be there, Jon.” Jeremy smiled and then ran a pick through his hair. We heard the woman from the counter say our milkshakes and food were ready. Jeremy patted his sides, “Oh, you know what, I forgot my wallet. Could y’all order me a strawberry shake while you’re up?” he asked matter-of-factly.

We both looked at Steve, “Don’t look at me. I’m broke; my parents don’t give me any money,” he said, shrugging his shoulders dramatically. This was suspect as Steve had a full-time job and still lived at home. As for Jeremy, his wallet seemed to be in a constant state of loss. Sometimes, we questioned if the wallet held some

magical properties that made it disappear at will because Jeremy knew one of us would help him out.

Dylan pulled a \$5 bill out of his wallet and waved it in the air, “You owe me, Jeremy,” he said, pointing his finger at him.

While eating we watched for any attractive girls our age to come inside. Some came through the doors; however, we admired them from afar. Instead of actually talking to them we just discussed what we would say if we had the courage. Thankfully, no Jehovah’s Witness adults showed up. Once done eating we decided to wait outside for my brother to show up.

You could hear my parent’s car before you saw it. At some point, something got trapped inside the hubcap and rattled around, making a loud noise as you sped up or slowed down. The sort of issue that only happens to people who can’t afford a nice car. It was a green Buick LeSabre, a four-door boat Dad loved. Some might call it a lemon, but to him, it was practically a Mercedes. As we waited outside, we heard the Buick in the distance and then looked toward the entrance to see the green beast rolling into the parking lot. A clunking and rattling noise came from the car as my brother parked it.

Joe stepped out of the car wearing jeans with a rip in the knee, a white tank top, and a shell necklace. He also had bright bleach-blond hair having figured out how to dye his hair the summer before with bleach and aluminum foil. “Y’all ready to go to the mall?” he asked as he danced towards us with a goofiness he liked to show off. We talked, then walked to our rides to head off for the mall.

We then made our way to the mall in three cars, one following behind the other. Jeremy and Steve led the way while Joe followed Dylan and me. The Mall had a big sign at the entrance announcing, “Eastridge Mall.” The parking lot was usually 80% full on a Friday and Saturday afternoon, this one being no different. Younger teenagers who couldn’t drive would get dropped off at the front by their parents and picked up later. We liked parking at the JC Penny entrance because it made leaving easier, and we thought it made us more mature than walking in through the front with those getting dropped off.

The mall itself had recently been renovated, with three floors of popular stores, a food court, an arcade, and a movie theater. You could play, people-watch, hang out with your friends, shop, and get something to eat. Then to top it off you could go to a movie at the end of the night. The teenage dream. It was the type of place a Jehovah's Witness would have an excuse to be but shouldn't want to be as it was full of devilish activities.

We walked through the JC Penny as one large group awkwardly getting past the women's lingerie section. Once we made it to the entrance of the mall Jeremy stopped us saying, "Steve and I are gonna go to the sneaker store, see you when we're walking around." We slapped hands and gave hugs then parted ways, Joe decided to hang out with Steve and Jeremy.

Dylan and I decided we were going to make a loop around the 2nd floor, which we were on. We began walking behind a couple as we entered the mall. It was a large woman holding hands with a skinny man. She was in a pink tank top and capris pants that were hanging well below her waist. A bright pink thong was sticking out of her capris. Dylan snickered and said, "That thong is doing a lot of work."

It was just loud enough for the woman to hear us. She stopped, turned around, and glared at us, strong-arming her boyfriend to say something, "You heard what he said to me! You're not going to say anything to defend me?" she exclaimed in a loud voice. The poor guy reluctantly approached Dylan.

Before he could get close, Dylan had already walked up to meet him, "You wanna fight? Let's go!" Dylan said, squaring up with the young man and putting his fists up. Dylan had a good foot on him and a weight advantage.

The boyfriend wanted nothing to do with this fight. "Man, I ain't got time for you," said the boyfriend, backing out of the confrontation and shrinking away to his girlfriend.

"That's what I thought," Dylan yelled back.

I stood shaking my head, embarrassed. The girlfriend looked at her boyfriend disgusted, and they walked away. As much as I loved my best friend, Dylan had an angry streak. He was happy to instigate

things too fast. Something that made me uncomfortable but also made for a good deterrent against bullies. Most of the time, nothing came of his teenage aggression; every once in a while, though, a scuffle would ensue. I had yet to see Dylan lose a fight.

We hit reset and began our walk around the mall. We went from Abercrombie & Fitch to Hot Topic then back to JC Penny making a full loop. Then we had to make a choice, the food court was on the third floor but instead, we decided to go down to the 1st floor. We wanted to pay a visit to the sunglass hut to see our friend Amy.

Amy wasn't a Jehovah's Witness; she was "worldly," a term used for anyone who wasn't associated with the church. She became friends with Steve when they both worked at Sunglass Hut last year. She looked like Fran Drescher from *The Nanny* and had the same disposition. From the north, she called things as she saw them, avoiding southern politeness and pleasantries. She was 18, so she was a full-on adult to us. I still had two years to go. She was thin, short, and had brown hair that went just above her shoulders. She had a sweet round face with small lips and almond-shaped eyes. We walked up to the Sunglass Hut and saw she was working. Her back turned to us as she looked to be repairing a pair of sunglasses. This was the first time I'd seen her in a few months because during school, I didn't get to the mall much.

"Amy, what you wanna do?" singing out the words to "Amie" as Dylan hummed along. Something I did every time I saw her.

She put up her hand, making the sign for "stop," but her back was still turned to me. "Shut the fuck up, Jon." She turned to her side, revealing a large baby bump extending out of her small frame. My jaw hit the floor as she rubbed her belly like a genie's lamp.

"Well, don't just stare; what do you want to know?" she asked.

"Who is the dad?" I blurted out.

"Oh, it's my boyfriend. We're moving in together. He'll make a great dad," she said confidently.

I had my doubts. She had constantly complained about how he was lazy and boring. If she was happy, though, that was all I needed. "Congrats," I said with a smile and gave her a warm hug over the

counter. Dylan gave a small clap for the moment. Once the moment died down, Dylan asked, "What are you gonna name it?"

"I think I'll name him Nathan," she said.

"That's a nice name, but Dylan might be better."

"I would never wish that on any child Dylan. His name's going to be Nathan. Now get out of here. I have sunglasses to sell, and I need to support this baby." She rubbed her belly again and shooed us off, all while grinning.

We decided to walk towards Belks, which was on the quieter end of the mall. Belks was a shop where older wealthy women shopped for church and business clothes. When we got to the entrance of Belk, I heard a familiar voice behind me. "Fancy seeing you here, sir," it was a woman's voice in a medieval accent. I realized it was Lynna and turned around to see she was with her best friend, Maria. Lynna was a sight for my sore eyes; she had straight blond hair that came to her shoulders and light blue eyes. She was thin and had a dainty quality to her, looking as if the breeze may blow her away. Her face had sharp features, almost fox-like. She was wearing a blue tank top, hip huggers, and Doc Martens. Lynna looked like she could have been from an episode of the TV show *Daria*, the out-of-state cousin that *Daria* got along with.

Lynna had moved here from Minnesota a few months back when her dad took a new job as a supervisor at the local factory in Kings Mountain. My parents had befriended them, so we found ourselves sitting across from each other during dinner the first night we met. As my parents were talking to hers, she took her steak knife and began pretending she couldn't control it, slowly inching it in the direction of her wrists. I was smitten immediately. She also had an older sister, but she was fully into the religion and tended to keep to herself.

Now, at the mall, I was flustered. "How a-do you -a do mi lady," I responded. It was all puberty instinct, and I was embarrassed as soon as it came out.

She laughed, changing the subject, "So, find anything interesting to buy."

“I found a shirt I liked that I may get, but I might go to TJ Maxx later to find something better.”

“Well, I like your taste, Jon, so you should get it if you like it,” she said earnestly.

“Thanks, Lynna. You’ll be the first to see it if I do.” I smiled, trying to play it cool, but my cheeks turned red while I was saying it.

“Hey to you two, too,” Maria said, looking at Dylan and me, annoyed that no one had noticed her.

Maria was Lynna’s best friend. She was also a Jehovah’s Witness but attended a Spanish-speaking church. Maria was around 5’3” with long black curly hair and a tan complexion. Her nose was slightly crooked, and she had two big, beautiful brown eyes. Her dark features created a mysterious look that went along with her intense personality. She was from Venezuela and spoke with a soft Spanish accent, neither thin nor heavysset; she had curves in all the right places. My brother had a massive crush on her.

At that moment, Dylan spoke up, “Hey *Maria*, what are you two doing later tonight? Wanna go to Hibachi with us?” Lynna paused and looked at Maria.

“Only if you don’t have any plans,” I said, trying to fill the space and make sure there was no pressure. She exchanged glances with Maria again.

“Yeah, I think we can do that. Can we eat at seven? I have to leave at eight,” she said.

“Woo-hoo!” I exclaimed like Homer Simpson. I jumped in the air and, for some unknown reason, decided to squat down as I landed. As my knees went low, I suddenly heard a ripping sound.

“Dude, did you just rip one?” Dylan asked loudly.

“I think I just ripped my pants,” I said, still squatting. I could feel my face turning red as a beet. Dylan burst out laughing. I was frozen with embarrassment and placed my hand on the backside of my pants. Sure enough, I could feel a flap of cloth from the rip in the backside of my pants.

Lynna burst out laughing, “I’m sorry, Jon, but it’s just funny.”

“Yeah, I’d be laughing too if I were you, Lynna,” was all I could think to say as Lynna and Maria covered their faces, unable to stop

laughing.

“I’ll see you at seven at Hibachi,” I said as I turned around and walked away, holding the back of my pants together. Dylan followed behind me, holding his hand to his face and laughing. Thankfully, we just had to go through Belks, which meant little foot traffic on a Saturday night, just a parent or two who couldn’t let their kid be alone in the mall. We made it out of Belk and walked to the entrance of JCPenney, where the Toyota was parked. I was holding the backside of my pants together the entire time.

Once in the car, I let out a sigh of relief. “You gotta drive me to your house and get me pants, Dylan.”

“You know my Mom is going to want us to eat dinner,” Dylan replied. He had a point.

“We just have to tell her, and we can’t waste any time. In and out,” I suggested.

Dylan turned on the car and began driving. “OK, in and out.” Foo Fighters’ “My Hero” came on the radio. We hummed and sang along, “There goes my herooooo, watch him as he goes.”

Dylan pulled into his driveway, opening the door before coming to a full stop. The cicadas were starting to sing in the large oak tree behind his house, the family dog in its usual spot lazed about underneath it. We stepped out of the car at full pace. Dylan’s mom was cooking in the kitchen, and we could see from the side door window. Dylan stopped and seemed to be contemplating if we should go through the front door, bypassing his mom. He opted to take on the obstacle head-on. He walked up to the side door and opened it.

“Hey, meatballs,” his mom called out as she stirred some tomato sauce; his mom was constantly reminding us of their Italian heritage.

“Sorry, Ma, we gotta go back out; we just came by because Jon needs new pants,” Dylan waved off his mom, walking past her. For a minute, I had forgotten about the hole in the backside of my pants. His mom raised an eyebrow, saying to me,

“What did you do to your pants, young man?” She looked me up and down, frowning.

“Nothing, I just don’t like these pants,” I quickly said, hoping to avoid embarrassment.

“Jon, you think I was just tossed off the turnip truck?” She held up her spatula, which was stained with sauce, and made a turning gesture with it. “Turn around,” she said. Dylan began laughing. All I could do was slowly rotate, exposing my ripped pants, which showed my underwear. “Go change your pants, Jon, and I’ll fix those later for you; I don’t want to know how you managed to do that,” she got back to her cooking. His mom was a talented seamstress who worked part-time at the local sewing store. She often made clothes and patterns for people in the church.

“Th...Thanks, misses DeMarto,” I said and ran towards Dylan, who was beginning to go up the stairs. As I got to the top of the stairs, I thumped Dylan on the back of his head, “You little shit.” He laughed and burst into his room, still laughing. “Give me some pants” I said.

Dylan looked around the room. “All I got are my JNCOs, my man,” he flashed a smile as he said it. It wasn’t the worst idea, but any of his pants would look cartoonish on me, especially the ones with wide legs. I thought it over and decided I couldn’t miss this dinner.

“Fine, give me the smallest ones you have, Dylan.”

He handed me a pair of dark blue JNCO jeans. I put them on, and they were massive. Thankfully, the style was to let your pants hang well below your waist, so oversized pants weren’t that abnormal. This, however, was extreme! “OK, let’s go,” I said after I put them on. Dylan looked me up and down, lifted both hands, shrugged his shoulders, and said,

“It could be worse.” He was right; it could always be worse. It could be dress clothes.

“I’m just happy to have pants,” I said. I walked out in front of Dylan, who turned off the light and closed the door.

We made our way back to the kitchen, where Miss DeMarto was waiting for us. “You boys aren’t going to eat this meal I made for you?” It sounded more like a veiled threat than a question from his

mom. Before we had time to answer, she looked at my jeans. "What are you wearing, young man?" she said, laughing.

"It's Dylan's; as long as I have my belt, it's fine," I said, hoping she wouldn't stop me from going out.

"Well, either way, I made Rug for you boys, and it'd break my heart if you don't have some." She knew Rug was one of our favorites. A hodgepodge of different pasta, all mixed with her special tomato sauce, then baked with three different types of cheeses. The siege was on.

"Mom, we don't have time for this," Dylan said impatiently.

"Just save some for us when we get home." Miss DeMarto gave us one last chastisement,

"OK, but I don't like you boys always going out to eat. You need home-cooked meals," she said, pinching Dylan's cheek in a loving manner.

"Fine, Ma, just not tonight," Dylan said, pushing her hand away and then kissing her on the cheek goodbye. I followed him as he walked out the door.

Once at the door, I said, "By Miss DeMarto, and thanks again for offering to fix my pants."

"Yeah, thank me by coming home by midnight, not a minute later. We have the meeting in the morning," she said as we headed out the door.

We hopped in the car, and Dylan quickly started it, put it in reverse, and we were on the road in no time. We had 15 minutes, and it only took 10 minutes to drive back to the mall. Dylan turned up the radio, waiting to hear what the DJ was going to play next. It was Goldfinger's Superman. We both liked this one, so we sang along to the top of our lungs as we raced down the roads.

The hibachi restaurant was in the mall parking lot. As we pulled into the parking lot, I spotted Lynna and Maria standing out front, waiting for us. Dylan parked, and we got out of the car. As we walked toward Lynna and Maria, he said, "Don't worry, I got you; just follow along." I almost couldn't walk because every step I took, the leg hole of my jeans went over my shoe, and I'd almost trip over them. I had to take long, high steps, making it look like I was walking

on stilts. Before I could ask what Dylan was up to, Lynna and Maria met us halfway.

“Nice pants, Jon,” she said, looking at my jeans quizzically. I immediately froze when she said it; I had to think fast. Before I could respond, Dylan stepped in.

“They were the only clean pants I had. Plus, wide is in, isn’t it?” Lynna and Maria laughed.

Lynna put her hands in her pockets and said, “Sure if you say so.”

Dylan then looked at Maria, saying, “Hey, I need to go to the mall and buy some shoes before it closes. Think you could help me, Maria? You two mind eating alone?”

Maria rolled her eyes and said, “Sure.”

Lynna said, “I don’t mind.”

“Me neither,” was my sheepish reply. Dylan and Maria walked towards the mall.

Lynna and I walked towards the Hibachi restaurant. My pants were making a swooshing sound as I walked; already a great start. Dylan yelled goodbye as he and Maria got further away. I turned around to wave to them, and he smiled like a proud Dad. I was lucky to have Dylan as a friend. Sometimes, he could be a little crazy, but he always had my back, even if he needed skinnier jeans.

So, this was my first date with a girl. Some girls had shown interest in school, but I just didn’t know how to get a girl to date you or was too scared to ask. Of course, you’re not allowed to date anyone outside of the religion, so that made dating a girl at school difficult. The other practical problem with dating someone outside of the religion is that you’re spending so much time in the religion. There isn’t much time to see each other, and it’s hard for them to understand what you’re going through. When dating someone in the religion, you don’t date until you’re ready to marry, usually after you turn 18. Even as adults, though, if you went on a date with another Jehovah’s Witness, you needed a chaperone. So, this was dangerous.

As we walked in, I asked Lynna, “Do you mind if we sit at a booth? I don’t have much money.”

“Me neither and I’d just prefer a booth anyway” she replied. Thankfully this was a hybrid hibachi restaurant, you could either sit at the grill where the chef did fun theater or sit at a booth. If you got the Hibachi at the booth it was a lot cheaper and the same quality. Eating at the booth also gave you extra privacy, the booths were tall and wide making you feel like you had a private table.

The restaurant was packed, but thankfully, most were there for the grill side, getting a show from the chefs. I walked up to the hostess, ignoring the other guests waiting; they stared at my absurdly large jeans. “Do you have a booth for two?” I asked while holding up two fingers.

“Right this way,” she grabbed two menus and led us to an empty booth. This Hibachi grill used to be an old Pizza Hut and kept the red booths, only changing the tables, which were black with Japanese decorations on them. The hostess sat the menus down on the table and then said, “Your waiter will be with you shortly,” before walking away.

We sat down smiling, trying not to make too much eye contact. In under a minute, a waiter appeared, giving us water and asking what we’d like to drink. We both said we wanted a Coke, and he rushed to get it. “So, do you like going to the mall?” was my dorky opening line.

She thought about it, “Yeah, it’s fun, but I don’t have a lot of friends here yet. Kind of tough when your Dad is an elder.” She had a twinge of anger in her voice. Elders were the leaders of the church. They were supposed to be the most pious and hardcore, though that was debatable. One thing that wasn’t was the power they held; they decided your fate when you broke a written or unwritten rule of the faith. A child of an elder was expected to be perfect and to never bring public shame on their parents. I was thankful my Dad wasn’t an elder.

“Well, I think you’re cool and want to be your friend. You can have my friends if you want, Lynna.” She blushed and thanked me.

Of course, I had a crush on her, so I wanted to be more than friends, but the fact that her dad was an elder and she was on a date

with me endeared her more to me. Just then, the waiter came to the table, “What can I get you two for dinner?” he asked in a smooth tone, looking at Lynna.

I knew what I wanted, so I placed my order first, “I’ll have hibachi steak and fried rice.”

The waiter coughed and looked towards Lynna again, “and for the young lady?” I realized I should have let her order and felt embarrassed. I mouthed the word “sorry” to Lynna, and she just shook her head, smiling.

“I’ll have a hibachi...” she began to say.

Before she could finish giving her order, Lynna’s father appeared next to the waiter. He was in his 50s and balding. He wore a pair of small frame glasses on his face and had on a black turtleneck even though it was summer. He looked like a mix between a professor and a Bond villain. “She won’t be eating here,” he said in an authoritative tone. Lynna turned beet red, staring down at the table. I was shocked. How did he even find us?

This wasn’t good; I would be getting talked to by three different people about this one. Mom, Dad, and an elder would likely give me the third degree for being on a date with an elder’s daughter. I had to think fast, so I blurted out, “We were just waiting for Dylan to come back. He forgot he had to buy some shoes; I was going to order for him.” Lynna nodded her head in agreement.

Her dad looked skeptical. “Lynna, you’re coming home with me now; you know about being with boys in public unchaperoned,” he said. I tried to bring up the defense again, but her dad stopped me, “As for you, Brother Burger, I’ll be contacting your parents. Have a good night, and see you and your parents tomorrow at the Kingdom Hall.”

“Yes, Brother Kashnur,” I said, trying to sound respectful.

Lynna’s Dad grabbed her by the arm and escorted her away from the table. The waiter had walked away from the scene, so I sat at the table alone, thinking. I could probably get away from this with a light punishment, but Lynna might not be able to. Plus, I was already going to be in trouble for the ‘spending the night’ stunt. This was just going to be the icing on the cake for my parents.

Thankfully I had time to plan and a best friend to plan with. A best friend who didn't mind breaking the rules. I was thankful I had a "bad association."

Chapter 3

The Kingdom Hall

The plan was that there was no plan. Dylan and I had stayed up as long as we could, trying to figure out the best course of action. In our opinion, I had done nothing wrong. We planned to all eat as friends, but Dylan had to get some shoes before the mall closed. So long as Lynna and Maria said the same thing, we'd be fine. It was basically the truth, a simple accident or misunderstanding; our parents didn't have anything on us. We wouldn't know if it'd work until we got to the Kingdom Hall. The Kingdom Hall was the central meeting point for Jehovah's Witnesses, our "church." You can typically find one in any medium-sized city in Western countries, and they're specifically made not to look like a traditional church. Usually, it is a rectangular brick building with a big parking lot around it, with no crosses or symbols on it or the roof. You'd probably drive by one and miss it. Sometimes, they'll have a sign that says, "Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses," so indistinct it needs a sign.

The inside of the Kingdom Hall was a bland affair, much like the outside. There was a large room with seating for 100 people and two small rooms in the back that fit around 15 chairs per room. On different days, different services happened inside. On Monday night, there was "book study," an hour of studying from a Jehovah's Witness book on a Christian subject. Wednesday night was Theocratic Ministry School, Kingdom Ministry, and Local Needs. This is where they trained the men on how to speak in public and talk about local issues affecting the hall. Finally, Sunday mornings were the public talk and Watchtower study, more like a standard Sunday church service. Sunday is when you would see everyone, and maybe even some new faces.

The Kingdom Hall was a lot like school. If you didn't enjoy following the rules, you preferred the back. Back of the classroom or back of the school bus. The point was to be away from the authority figures. That's why we always parked at the furthest end of the parking lot and sat at the back if our parents allowed us. Mine usually liked to sit near the front. As we drove to the end of the parking lot, Dylan turned down the radio. "Whose truck is that?" Dylan asked with

a shocked voice. He pointed to a bright orange low-rider pickup truck with chrome wheels. It had decals on either side of the back window. The ones that were the silhouette of a woman with large, perky breasts and wavy long hair sitting down leaning against an invisible wall.

Our guess was a borrowed vehicle or maybe a new “study.” A “study” is someone who accepted a pamphlet and was ready to take the next step and go to the Kingdom Hall. I got out of Dylan’s car, adjusted my tie, grabbed my briefcase, and began walking to the lowrider truck, checking it out. It looked like it was out of a hip-hop video. Something rarely seen at any Kingdom Hall, let alone ours. After inspection, we made our way to the entrance.

At the entrance, Brother Guderson was greeting people. He was best described as creepy. He was middle-aged, balding, and wanted to be close to you when talking. He would tag along to any event where kids and teenagers were. Often trying to give a girl a massage or staring at them for too long. He spoke in a soft, whispery tone, leaning in uncomfortably closer if you said you couldn’t hear him. He was someone most tried to avoid. He was also the son of an elder, so most spoke about him in hushed tones. Dylan and I put our heads down and hoped he was distracted. Unfortunately, we were the only ones at the door. He opened the door, “Hi, Brother Burger and Brother DeMarto,” he whispered.

“Hi,” we both said and kept walking before he could engage more. Close call. Once we got into the Hall, I looked for my parents. I had already seen the loud Buick in the parking lot.

As I scanned the crowd, I saw a strange sight. There in the back, sitting down and looking relaxed, were two young men. They looked like they came straight out of a surfing poster. Both had bleached blond hair split down the middle, and the sides of their heads were shaved. They were talking to Brother and Sister Elza. The Elzas were an interracial couple with a small son. Always super friendly and the first to greet any new stranger. They were also one of the least judgmental in the hall, so it was no surprise they initiated contact with what might as well be aliens among us.

The Surfer Brothers were wearing dark modern suits and had their briefcases with them. This indicated they weren't new to the religion. Dylan, standing beside me, also noticed the two, "Let's talk to them after the meeting," he said. "Meeting" was a slang term used for any church service at the hall.

"Yeah, get me a seat in the back. I'll see if I can sit with you." I heard no reply. I turned to look at Dylan, but instead, I saw him walking backward, mouthing the words "Sorry."

Mom stepped into my vision. "I've got a seat in the front with your family, " she snapped. Damn, I must be in trouble.

I sighed and made my way to the seat with my Mom. We typically took up the side row, which had five chairs. Dad sat on the aisle, Mom was next to him, and then Joe and I were at the end near the wall. I liked to sit at the end if I could as the wall made a hard pillow. This time, I was next to Mom in the third chair. We sat down, waiting for the service to begin.

"Were you out with Lynna on a date last night?" Mom asked, shocked at the very thought of it.

"No, it was supposed to be a group, but her friend left, and Dylan had to buy shoes before the store closed. Lynna's Dad happened to be there and got upset. It was just an honest mistake," I explained.

"Well, it's suspicious how it's always just an 'honest mistake' with you, Jon."

"Ask Dylan," I exclaimed.

Mom had a serious tone, "Just don't be seen alone with her again."

"I can't control when my friends leave. " I shot back just as Dad was sitting down. The meeting was about to begin.

The "overseer" or host came to say the service was starting. The service started with a song. Some songs were catchy, but most were boring and slow. I pulled the "Songbook" out of my briefcase. Every well-respected Jehovah's Witness carried with them a Bible, songbook, and Watchtower in their briefcase on Sunday. The "songbook" was a book of hymns you sang before most church services. Every member would get one. We turned to the designated

song number, and I pretended to sing along. Dad prided himself on being a good singer. This, of course, could be debated. His voice was deep and baritone, almost as loud as an opera singer. So, his singing was comical. Those near us would try hiding their laughter or looking thankful his voice was masking theirs.

Once the song ended, a prayer was said, followed by an hour-long talk from a visiting brother. This morning, the brother was from the largest city close by, Charlotte. He was black and in his late 20s. Wearing a double-breasted pin-stripe suit with a flashy tie. He looked dignified and wealthy. He spoke in a stiff, up-tight manner, wearing glasses that needed to be pushed up every five minutes or so. The subject of his talk was about not succumbing to the pressures of the world. He spoke about how Satan wanted to tempt us with money, sex, and misguided education, such as evolution. Only through Jehovah and his organization on earth could we be guided into salvation. This was the 100th time I'd heard a talk like this from a boring speaker. One saving grace was he wasn't funny, at least. My Dad had the loudest laugh known to man and refused to soften its volume. A laugh you could hear from outside. Deep and guttural. Something that brought Joe and me a lot of embarrassment during meetings.

As Brother Boring droned on, I turned to look at the clock. It felt like Brother Boring had been speaking for 30 minutes. The clock said it had only been five minutes. I had a look around. Dylan was half asleep, and Jeremy and Steve were sitting together, looking in a daze, trying to keep their eyes open. Theodore was at attention, taking notes. I scanned and noticed Lynna; she was looking down at her Bible, making an effort to pay attention. She glanced up and looked in my direction, likely feeling my gaze. I tried to dart my eyes away and pretend I was looking elsewhere. I glanced back and saw that she was still looking at me. I could feel my face heat up and my cheeks turning red. She smiled and looked back down at her Bible. I glanced over and saw her dad staring at me. He looked as mad as Cujo, and it didn't look like Brother Reddick's briefcase defense would work for me against him.

I elbowed Joe and whispered, “Am I in trouble with Mom and Dad?”

He whispered back, “I don’t think so. Why?”

“Cause Lynna’s Dad caught us eating together.” I gave a slight pause, then added, “Alone” as quietly as I could.

“Did you kiss her?” he elbowed me in the ribs, trying not to laugh.

“No, shut up,” I whispered back.

“You’re fine,” he said. My mom put her fingers to her lips and gave us a serious look to be quiet.

Given Lynna’s Dad’s death stares. I decided to look straight ahead during the rest of Brother Boring’s talk. After turning to his last scripture, Brother Boring pontificated how if we all listened to Jehovah, went to every meeting, and preached at every door, we wouldn’t have a chance to succumb to Satan’s world. We would live in a paradise earth after all the sinners had been wiped out by our peaceful, loving God. He said thank you, and the crowd clapped. No doubt, scaring awake a few in the audience who were in a deep sleep at that point. Now, it was time for another song. I opted to take a bathroom break just before the song began. So did Dylan.

The bathroom was where every male and female went to escape at some point during the service. The one spot to get away. Of course, if you stayed too long in the bathroom, someone would say something to you, or a parent would come snooping around. So, it was a cat-and-mouse game of how long you could stretch out your break. The mid-break song was the busiest time in the bathroom, but I was able to beat the rush. Dylan was at a urinal when I walked in. I took the urinal beside him.

“Dude, I saw you checking Lynna out,” he said to me.

“So did her dad. I am so dead.”

He flushed the urinal, zipped up his pants, and said, “Dead man walking.” Laughing, he gave me a light shove as he walked by. No doubt hoping I might get a loose hand and get pee on my dress pants. It didn’t work.

I washed my hands and made my way back to my seat. The song was just wrapping up. Next up was the Watchtower study. The

Watchtower is the monthly magazine Jehovah's Witnesses put out. It has articles on how to be Godly and how to stay a good Jehovah's Witness. Each Sunday, you'd study one of two articles in the Watchtower. There was a speaker and a reader. The reader would read each paragraph. At the bottom of the page was a question for each paragraph read. The speaker would read the question and call on someone in the audience to answer. Two men sat in the back with microphones ready to hand to whoever was called on. If you were a good Jehovah's Witness, you got microphone duty. It's a bit like getting "Employee of the Month" at a job. It was the first stepping stone in becoming an elder. Mom desperately wanted me to be given the honor of handing microphones to people.

On this Sunday, we had a fun reader. Brother Smith was a round, jovial, older black man. He had a strong Southern accent and read with feeling. As he read, he put emphasis on certain words.

"Shortly after Pentecost 32 C.E., **three** of **Jesus Christ's** apostles saw a memorable vision. According to the **inspired** record, '**Jesus** took Peter and James and John, his **brother** along and brought them up into a lofty **mountain** by themselves.'

Most readers just read in a flat, monotone manner, so Brother Smith helped make the time go by fast. Mom usually expected me to raise my hand on every question. I'd raise my hand a few times to appease her. If called on, I'd just read the passage that contained the answer straight from the Watchtower. Sometimes, I'd adlib the answer, which would get a smile out of Mom. This time, the speaker asked the question, and I raised my hand. Thankfully, he didn't call on me. Mom turned to me and gave me a thumbs-up for trying.

Like most Sundays, nothing problematic or exciting happened. The Watchtower ended with the last question being answered and the speaker giving his last remarks. Finally, it was time for the last song and prayer. The most anticipated part of the meeting was the end. As we sang a sad doldrum about King David, I looked over at Lynna and then looked over at the Surfer Brothers; the taller one raised his eyebrows at me in a way, saying he approved of what I was looking

at. I snapped back to looking forward, my face starting to burn from embarrassment. Thankfully, this was the last verse, and the song ended.

Brother Boring stepped back up to the stage. He adjusted his glasses one last time and looked around the room. He started to pray in a very serious voice, "Dear Jehovah God, we thank you for such a good day of learning on behalf of your faithful and discreet slave, the governing body. We pray that after this meeting, our brothers and sisters will join us in the door-to-door ministry..." Oof, rookie mistake. That meant either skipping lunch or getting something fast. In our Hall, one group will be designated to take the visiting speaker out. Meaning they would have to go door-to-door with him. That wouldn't win him any points. Thankfully, the group we studied with on Monday night was next week. The prayer continued, "... Finally, we thank you today for this Hall, which has shown such hospitality. We say this in Jesus' name, Amen." The audience reacted with an audible "Amen." I always said mine as quietly and as fast as possible. Then, a loud murmur began. Everyone began talking to each other at once, happy the meeting was finally over.

An older Sister sitting behind us grabbed Mom and began to talk. So, I started making my way down the row and out to Dylan. Before I could get to the aisle, a hand grabbed my arm. It was Dad; as I stopped, he said, "Hey, no spending the day out with your friends; you need to spend a day at home with your family."

"OK, but could Steve or Jeremy come over?" I pleaded. Dad was a softy at heart, and Joe and I knew he usually said, "Yes."

"Only if it's OK with your Mother," he replied. That probably was a "no." We'd just tell them they could come over and forget to ask Mom.

"What happened with Lynna last night?" Dad asked. I stuck to my story and pleaded the same case I made to Mom. "Well, use your head next time. Just go with Dylan to the mall and then eat," he said.

"OK, Dad, I will," I said apologetically. I turned and started making my way toward Dylan.

"Hey! We're leaving in 30 minutes," my Dad said just loud enough for me to hear as I was walking away.

To my surprise, Dylan was already talking to the Surfer Brothers. He waved me over, "This is my best bud, Jon," he said as I walked up.

I looked at the two taller brothers and put out my hand, "Hi, I'm Jon " assuming they were not the "Brother" with the "last name" types.

The shorter of the brothers shook my hand, smiling, and said, "Hi, I'm Thomas." Thomas had a goofy air about him. He talked with an elongated, almost California-sounding accent.

"Hi dude, I'm Miles," said the other brother, putting out his hand. He sounded more like a surfer than Thomas. Miles looked like a more handsome Crispin Glover. He was slimmer and taller than his brother, but both had sharp features and could be twins.

My slimmer, taller brother also joined the fray. I made the introduction, "This is my brother Josiah." They shook hands.

Over the next few minutes, we learned that the truck was Thomas's, and they had moved here from Ohio. Both were in their early 20's. My jaw was hanging wide when Miles told us he was into extreme sports and was a firefighter who parachuted into the western states to fight forest fires. "What kind of sports?" Joe asked in amazement.

Miles responded very matter-of-factly, "Rock climbing, base jumping, and bungee." I thought to myself, this had to be the coolest person I had ever met, supposing he was into those sports and not just saying it. The most extreme sport played in our hall was basketball.

"I'm going to the Gastonia airfield to do some skydiving on Wednesday. You guys should come," Miles said as if it happened daily. All of us could hardly say a word; we were in awe.

Dylan spoke up, "Do you mind if I come and watch?"

"No, come on out. Write your number down, and I'll let you know when." Dylan excitedly took the notebook and pen Miles handed him and scribbled his number down. Just then, I saw Dad going into a backroom with Lynna's Dad, Brother Kashner.

Since Brother Kashner was an elder, he was allowed to make decisions regarding the church. Typically, the church was made up of

six to twelve elders who would get together and decide on punishment for various issues. These issues could be someone seen going into a rated-R movie or smoking a cigarette. Or it could be about asking too many questions about the faith. If you weren't sad or repentant enough, they could tell everyone else you needed to be shunned until you proved you were sorry enough. Or they could give a public talk about the thing you did, essentially shaming you in public. Going on a date unchaperoned was a matter that could get you in serious trouble. I tried to keep up with the conversation going on in front of me but desperately wanted to know what was going on behind closed doors.

Lynna came walking by and gave me a sly smile. I turned to the surfer brothers and told them I needed to go talk to someone. They smiled and waved me off while Dylan and my brother continued the chat. Lynna had walked out of the door alone. Outside at the entrance was usually a busy spot as people were leaving or waiting for a car to pick them up. I stepped outside to hot and humid weather, a shock coming from the air conditioning of the Kingdom Hall. I spotted Lynna leaning against the brick exterior, watching the crowd in front. I leaned against the wall next to her, close enough to talk but with enough space not to be suspect.

"Did I get you in trouble?" I asked.

"I got myself in trouble," she responded in an almost proud voice.

"Your Dad is talking to mine now, so I'll know my fate soon," I said.

"What'd your Dad do when you got home?" I asked.

"Mainly just yelled at me and told me I'd be grounded for a month, but Mom stepped in and got that down to two weeks," she explained. Lynna's Mom seemed younger and tried to be a "cool" Mom. Well, as "cool" as you could be while still being a Jehovah's Witness, anyway. If she gave rides out in service, she would turn the radio to the modern pop station and sing along.

"So, I guess I won't get to see you anytime soon?" I asked, trying to play it cool.

“Probably not, but you can call me tomorrow at three,” she said. A phone call? Wow! I thought to myself.

“Yeah, I’ll call you,” trying to hide my excitement. “What should I do if your Mom picks up?”

“Just hang up. We don’t have *69.” *69 was a number you dialed on your phone to get the number of the last person who called you. It made prank phone calling friends difficult.

“Well, Sister Kashner, be expecting my call at three,” I said, pointing finger guns at her.

She giggled and moved away from the wall, then began walking towards her car, “I will, brother Burger,” she said, walking away.

My heart was pounding; I was on cloud nine. A phone call! Things were going great. I decided to take in the summer air, not minding the sweat that was starting to form on my back. The crowd was starting to thin out, and the door opened. Jeremy came walking out, “What’s up, Jon?” he said as we slapped hands, giving each other a “bro hug.”

“Nothing much, just waiting on Dad. Lynna’s Dad was pissed at us because he caught us eating hibachi...alone,” I explained. He had missed the drama the night before.

“Man, that’s why you gotta stay away from elder’s daughters,” he said with a grin.

“I can’t help myself. Hey, come over later today,” I told Jeremy.

“I’ll think about it. I might bring Steve,” he responded.

Whenever we had Steve, Jeremy, my brother, and myself, it was going to make for a fun day.

Just then, Dad walked out, “Hi Jeremy, I need to talk to my son,” he said, shooing Jeremy away with his hand.

“OK, Brother Burger, hopefully I’ll see you later, Jon,” Jeremy replied, waving and walking towards his car. Dad smiled and waved back. Dad was around 5 '6” and rotund. Not fat, but stout and sturdy. He had a large gut that protruded from his otherwise small frame. He kept his hair in a flat top and looked a little like Jack Nicholson.

We began walking towards the Buick. “Brother Kashner was not happy with you, let me tell ya,” Dad began. He continued, “He

was convinced you two were on a date. Word to the wise son, if you're gonna go on a date, don't get caught." One thing I loved about Dad was that he understood kids and teenagers needed to have fun. He always had a bit of a twinkle in his eye when we did these sorts of things, even if we got caught. He sometimes had a "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked softly.

"Well, your Mother is not happy. So, you'll be grounded during the week," he said. This wasn't too bad of a punishment. We could still go outside and use the phone; we just couldn't go out with friends. I could not handle not seeing my friends during the week as long as I had my weekend. "Just stay away from Lynna and her dad, OK?" he grinned and patted me on the shoulder.

"Sure, Dad. We're gonna get pizza?"

"You know what, son, that sounds good." He got in the front seat, and I got in the back. The engine came on, and Dad put the Buick in drive. As soon as we started moving, the rattle could be heard. We came up to the entrance where my brother and Mom were waiting. Mom sat in front, and my brother sat opposite me.

Mom opened the visor in front of her and slid the door open on the visor window. Making eye contact with me, she said, "We're talking when we get home," in a very serious tone.

Chapter 4

Bible Study

The ride home was uneventful. Mom, whether she would admit it or not, liked to engage in weird psychological warfare. Aside from a word or two, Mom would act like you weren't in any trouble at all until it was time for punishment. We had a 25-minute drive ahead of us to our small town just outside of Gastonia. Mom switched from an upset Mom to a loving Mom. On the way home, Mom asked us about how Saturday was and what plans we had for the Summer. Eventually, we pulled into Pizza Hut. It was a square brick building with a dark red metal roof that flared at the end on all sides. Inside were stained glass lamps, red vinyl booths, and black square tables.

Sunday pizza was a family tradition that stretched back since we were little kids. Anytime we got Pizza Hut, Dad would always order the same thing. Breadsticks and an extra-large Super Supreme pizza. The Sunday Meeting ended at 12, but sticking around socializing and the ride home meant we would get lunch at around one to two in the afternoon, just catching the end of the church rush.

As soon as we sat down at a table to order, Mom reminded us that church never ends. "Alright, boys, I want to have our family Bible study once we get home," she said in a warm tone. The two boys and one man at the table looked slightly annoyed. Thankfully, that couldn't bring the mood down at the table, as pizza and cola were on their way. The table moved to better subjects like Dad's work, my past school year, and the rumors of our church being renovated. A rumor that had been around since I was in short pants as a kid.

Once the waitress made her way to the table with the pizza, Dad made small talk with her, "How's your day going?"

"It's busy, and tips have been good," she said with a smile.

"Doesn't our God give us everything we need?" he asked more as a statement to the table than to the waitress.

"That he is," she said. This was Dad's chance to get in some preaching work.

"Do you read the Bible?" Dad asked suddenly, taking a serious tone. I slunk down in my chair, waiting for the exchange to be over.

The waitress looked a bit uncomfortable,

“I do, but maybe a subject to talk about later,” she responded politely.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Dad said, letting out a warm laugh. She smiled and moved to the next table.

“Maybe you can leave a Watchtower at the table along with the tip,” Mom suggested.

Thankfully, Dad paid and left a cash tip without the religious magazine. Likely because the walk to the hot car and back just after pizza was too much work for a Sunday. This stopped him from embarrassing my brother and me. Once we left The Pizza Hut, we made our way home. Home was a double wide in the middle of farm country. Even the “local” gas station was about a 45-minute walk. We pulled into the driveway, and we got out of the car. The house itself was all white vinyl siding and a perfect rectangle. It had four windows in the front, including a large window where the dining room was. It stood in the middle of a two-acre plot of land. Long stretches of grass on either side. In the front yard, Dad had planted two trees that were still young and thin. A long gravel driveway led to the house.

When we parked in front of the house, some of the neighborhood kids were waiting. My brother and I would usually play sports with them. For football, it always helped to have older kids like us as we could play quarterback and throw the ball further.

“Do you want to play some football with us?” Our immediate next door neighbor Nick excitedly asked.

“They have to do Bible study and then they can come out to play” Mom replied for us. They understood our schedule and biblical ways, so my brother and I were past this embarrassment.

I looked at Nick and said, “We can play around four.” At least my grounding didn’t include the neighbors and outside.

We made our way inside. The house was always in a state of slight messiness. Keeping the house clean was a war of attrition my Mom was often losing. Largely because Dad was ok with our chaos. The living room had a couch facing the TV on a stand with a VCR and speaker system under it. There was burgundy carpet throughout, and the dining room and living room were really just one big room. The

couch acted as a natural divider. There was a table right next to the front door for dining. There was a computer in the corner and a bookshelf with Jehovah's Witness books and computer programming books. Even though Dad was in construction, his hobby was home computing. We were one of the first families in town to have actual internet. My parents' bedroom was located just off the living room to the far end of the house. The dining room opened to the kitchen, which led to the other bedrooms on the other side of the house.

I walked through the dining area and through the kitchen. A small area with just enough space for a refrigerator, freezer, oven, stove, and a small island in the middle. I walked past my brother's room, which was next to mine. My room was small and cramped. There was a dresser next to the door, a single twin bed, and a closet that had my dress clothes and sports cards collection in it. My acoustic guitar and electric guitar sat in cases in the corner. Two people could fit comfortably in the room if they were sitting on my small bed. There were clothes around the floor, which I grabbed to change into. I grabbed a pair of basketball shorts and a Chemical Brothers shirt that had a grenade with a white feather in front of it. I wasn't a huge fan of The Chemical Brothers, but I did like the shirt.

I walked back out into the living room. Dad was on the computer and had his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose. Mom was sitting on the couch and had four copies of "The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived" on the coffee table. Still in church clothes, it was clear she was desperate for us to begin our study.

"Time for us to begin, come on, Nevada," she said. Dad's first name was Nevada. Paired with the last name Burger, it was a name almost no one could forget.

Dad let out an exasperated sigh. Clearly, I was more interested in what was happening on the computer than doing a Bible study. He turned off the monitor, sat down in his recliner, and then said, "OK, boys, you heard your Mother. Let's begin." This was at least better than studying in the evening when good TV shows were on. My favorite, The Simpsons, was sometimes missed because of Bible study. The Bible study was not studying the bible. We studied a book that was, in turn, a study of the Bible. This particular book we'd have

to study was called “The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived.” The greatest man who ever lived, according to this book, was Jesus. The book went over Jesus’ life and explained how everything he said tied back into what you, as Jehovah’s Witnesses, were supposed to be doing today.

The book itself had around 40 chapters. Each week, you’d study a chapter. Then, on Monday, you’d go to a meeting to study said chapter. The format was much like Sunday. You had the overseer of the meeting and someone who would read. Unlike on Sundays, this wasn’t one big group. It was broken into smaller groups that would meet either at the Kingdom Hall or someone’s house. There were around five to ten groups in a Kingdom Hall who’d meet up on Monday nights. These meetings lasted around 1 hour and were the shortest meeting you had to attend during the week. You also had to study for Sunday and Wednesday. All of these studies could be wrapped in 30 minutes, but Mom liked us to spend at least an hour on each one. So, this one also lasted an hour.

Dad began with a prayer and then started reading the first paragraph of the chapter we were on this week. Typically, we alternated reading paragraphs as a family. This chapter was on how Jesus was in a battle with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the leaders of the church in Jesus’ day. They wanted God’s people to follow every law to the letter. If you didn’t, you were harshly punished. This chapter dealt with Jesus curing a woman of her period. A dicey subject for Jehovah’s Witnesses as most topics around females weren’t discussed. In this case, Jesus had cured a woman of her period when she touched him. This would theoretically make Jesus the greatest ladies’ man who ever lived. The law at that time, however, was that you couldn’t touch a woman on her period as it was considered “unclean.” So, of course, the Pharisees wanted Jesus punished for this. Jesus explained how doing good deeds should never be punished. The question for this paragraph was, “Who are modern-day Pharisees?”

Dad asked the question, and I gave my response. “The elders.”

Mom looked flabbergasted, “What?” she exclaimed, “Why would you say that? She demanded an answer.

“Because they have a bunch of rules, and no matter why you break the rules, you get in trouble for breaking them,” I said.

This was just honestly how I read into it, especially since I had just gotten in trouble for simply being at a restaurant alone with Lynna. Many of the rules felt completely unfair and based more on personal opinions than anything Jesus or the Bible said.

“No, no, no, no...” Mom said, trailing off. She then piped back up, “Elders are there to help us and shepherd us. The modern-day Pharisees are the leaders of other churches,” she said confidently.

“But Jesus was calling out the leaders of his followers, not some other religion,” I said with a tone of frustration in my voice.

“This isn’t a debate, Jonathan; you know that it’s not elders, it’s other religious leaders.” Mom ended the debate.

This was a common tactic of Jehovah’s Witness parents. Answers were simply answers, and there was no reason to think too much about it. This particular answer didn’t sit well with me at all, though. The answer made no sense, but I also wanted to go outside to play football. So, I shook my head in agreement and said, “OK, I understand.” This was enough to move the study forward. It seemed Dad’s need to be on the computer was taking over the need to spend an hour on Jesus. We were about 60% done in 20 minutes. Because the answers were always in the paragraph, there was only so much to discuss.

In another 15 minutes, we were on the last paragraph. As my brother was reading the summary of how curing a woman of her period was an example of why we should always help our fellow Jehovah’s Witnesses. We heard the faint sound of a car parking in front of the house and car doors opening and closing. Everyone looked up, curious, except my brother, who was focused on reading the last paragraph.

Before he could finish, a knock came on the door. Dad looked annoyed and loudly said, “Come in.”

In walked Jeremy and Steve, who looked a little surprised to catch us mid-study. “Oh shoot, we didn’t know you were studying,” Steve blurted out.

“Have a seat at the table; we're just about done,” Dad said. Mom did not look pleased.

We finished the last paragraph and discussed it. Jeremy and Steve sat in silence at the table, waiting for us to finish. Dad said a prayer, and our Christian duties were over for the day. Before I could greet Jeremy and Steve, Mom said, “Now you boys should know Jonathan is grounded, so he can't go out.” This was still a victory because, really, I shouldn't be hanging out with any friends at all. My friends and I also figured out that if a friend was in trouble and you just dropped in, you usually got to hang out. Most parents wouldn't tell you to just turn around and go home.

Unfortunately for me, they wanted to go out. I couldn't blame them. We went to my brother's room and talked. My brother changed into some jeans while I sat on the floor. Jeremy and Steve sat on the bed. “Oooo you're in troubleeeee” Steve said jokingly. “I told him not to mess with those elder girls,” Jeremy piled on. “That's OK. She wants me to call her tomorrow,” I responded.

“Ooooo someone's got a second date”, Steve said teasing me.

“Where are y'all going?” I asked, annoyed I had to stay at home.

“To the Cleveland Mall I want to get some wax for *down there*,” my brother pointed to the general direction of his crotch while saying the “down there” bit. He had become obsessed with getting rid of body hair when he turned 17. We had seen ads on TV about a product called Nair which you simply applied, and it magically removed your hair.

Our neighbor Nick who wanted to play football had two sisters our age who lived next door. We would often hang out together when we were stuck at home. We'd seen the commercial, and my brother commented that he wanted to buy some. Lyndsey, the younger one (my age), had told Josiah that it didn't work like it said. You needed to wax the hairy areas then apply the Nair.

“Will you help?” my brother said half-jokingly.

Lyndsey responded with a laugh, “Sure.” Unbeknownst to her, this was a contract to my brother. One he expected to cash in on tonight.

When my brother was ready, we headed outside. I said my goodbyes, expressing how tragic it was I couldn't come, but I'd wait for my brother to get home. "Will you help when I'm back with the wax?" my brother asked before closing the car door.

"You got it, bro." I watched as they drove away. Before I could come back inside, Nick came over and asked again if I could play football. I wasn't in the mood, so I let him down easy and told him to let his sister know she could drop by the house around 7:30 p.m. after dinner. Neither of us had really hard curfews while at home during the Summer. He quickly ran off with a football in hand to let his sister know, then continued to play.

I went back into the house. My Mom was waiting to greet me. Aside from her religious zealotry, she was a good Mom and we got along. She was generally sweet and patient. Also, "smart as a whip," Dad would say. She watched Jeopardy every night and was good enough to win. We regularly questioned why she wouldn't just go on it and win us some money. She had short, dyed black hair that ended below her ears. It was cut in a bob and accented her high cheekbones. She wasn't fat or thin, just your average middle-aged Mom. Her hair was constantly going gray, something she blamed on me every chance she got. She was getting into her late 40s, having me in her 30s. She was still wearing her Kingdom Hall clothes, which made her look older. It was a long green dress with white lapels going down it. The dress ended at her ankles.

"So, Jon, I have your week all planned out for you." These were possibly the worst 12 words on the planet for any teenager with a religious zealot for a parent to hear. "Let's sit," she said enthusiastically. Mom's profession was a schoolteacher. It was her firm belief that she could convince kids of anything if it was done in a positive and enthusiastic tone. "I think you're gonna really enjoy this week. Now, I don't want you to feel like you're grounded. You can do a week without seeing your friends and hanging out with your Mom instead." Yeah, sure, Mom. I sat down at the table and waited for her to hand down my sentence.

She had a notebook opened to a page that had the days of the week listed and words beside it in cursive. I glanced at it and saw

what it said on Monday: "Field service." The technical term for door-to-door preaching. "So, Monday, we're going out in field service. Then we have the meeting on Monday night. On Tuesday, you're going to work with your Dad, and then we have the meeting on Wednesday night. Don't forget you have a talk to prepare for at the meeting. Thursday, you work with Dad. On Friday, we're going to do field service, so I thought we could rent a movie and watch it Friday night. Saturday morning, you're going to field service, and then we're going to go to Sister Smith's to help clean out her shed. Sunday is the meeting, and study for Monday night," she finally finished. "See, that's not so bad," saying it all with a cheerful tone. "OK, you're free to go. Try to read a Watchtower if you can," she said, officially ending the sentencing hearing.

"Sure, Mom," I said and then darted to my brother's room to watch TV. In reality, this was just a normal week in the Summer. Plus, the afternoon was free to call Lynna. The only punishment was not seeing friends, doing some extra chores and having a forced time with my Mom.

My brother's room was slightly bigger than mine. It had a twin bed in it, a large cabinet for a TV and a sound system at the end of the wall, and a dresser next to the closet door. Like my room, clothes were strewn about on the floor. I watched TV for a few hours until I saw headlights shining through the window, indicating a car was pulling up. Likely my brother. I pulled the blinds aside and saw it was Jeremy's Chevy Tahoe. It was a tan two-door and had nice brown leather seating inside. He had the nicest ride of my friends. They hopped out of the truck and walked into the house and then into the room. My brother was holding a large bag in his hand.

"Man, move over," Steve said to me as he walked into the room. I changed positions on the bed to give him room to sit on it. Jeremy and Joe came in next, sitting on the floor.

"Anything fun happen at the mall?" I asked. "

You'll have to ask him," Jeremy said, pointing at my brother.

"Yeah, I got that Nair, wax and wax strips," he said, pulling each item out of the bag.

“Josiah, Lyndsey is here to see you,” Mom yelled at anyone who could hear. We knew Mom would send her in, so we waited. About a minute later, Lyndsey walked into the door.

Lyndsey was our Polynesian neighbor. She and her family were from Hawaii but had moved into the house next door when she was a kid. She could be bubbly and sweet but also one of the boys. She was stocky and had curly black hair, when she smiled she had dimples in her apple shaped cheeks. Unfortunately, she was a bit naive and would often agree to things without realizing what they entailed.

“Well, I’m here; what did you want, Joe?” Lyndsey asked, sounding almost annoyed.

“You said you’d help me use the wax. Well, I bought some,” Joe replied.

“I’ll tell you how to do it. Just apply wax, put the strips on the wax, then pull the hair off,” she said earnestly.

“I know that, fool, but how am I supposed to reach the areas back there?” saying the last half in hushed tones, bending over and pointing to his undercarriage as everyone else in the room tried not to laugh.

“You can’t be serious,” Lyndsey said, shaking her head.

“You said you’d help; now you’re going back out of it after I bought all this stuff?” Joe said in an accusatory tone. He knew that Lyndsey would often say yes if you gave her a guilt trip.

“Fine, but you have to be in there too, Jon. No way I’m alone with you with your pants down, Joe”, Lyndsey said, her face turning red. This got the whole room cracking up.

Joe got up and said, “Let’s go.” He walked to the bathroom, and we all huddled around the bathroom door. We then got to the math of how this was going to work. Joe got on his knees, kneeling on the toilet seat, his face pointed towards the water tank, his butt pointing in the air. “I think I’ll have to sit like this, and then you just wax it back there, Lyndsey,” he said.

This was enough to make Jeremy and Steve remember they had other plans. “Sorry y’all, but we gotta go,” Jeremy said, shaking his head no and backing away from the scene.

“Go ahead and go; we don’t need you here anyways,” Josiah said, waving them off. I started to walk out to say bye to Jeremy and Steve when Joe said, “Where are you going? Stay in here.” Jeremy and Steve waved goodbye and walked out the back door. I went into the bathroom and closed the door.

My brother was still on his knees, kneeling on the toilet seat. He pulled his pants and underwear down. This was a scene no brother ever wanted to see. I also could not turn away, knowing what was about to happen. Lyndsey shrieked and closed her eyes. This was likely the first naked boy she’d seen in her life. I think she severely underestimated just how much hair boys get during puberty. My brother had a werewolf-like fur suit going on in the back.

Lyndsey opened the wax jar, put some wax on a stick and began smearing it next to his balls and up his butt crack with his eyes half open. She placed the strips on just enough to where they would sit on the wax. “You have to press it on there,” she said, looking at me. “I shouldn’t even be in here!” I said, making it clear I wasn’t going to do that. Treating his ass as if it was a biohazard, she took the stick and pressed the strips more into his hair. “OK, now Joe, this is going to hurt; you can’t make any noise,” Lyndsey said, aware our Mom was a room away.

“I’m fine; it can’t hurt that much,” Joe said confidently.

The first strip she ripped off was the one closest to his balls. The hairs ripped out, and my brother's knuckles turned white. He let out a noise that sounded like a muffled animal being wounded. He almost fell off the toilet. Lyndsey and I almost fell into the bathtub laughing. “Shut up, this hurts. Just get it over with,” my brother begged. We got our composure back and calmed down. My brother assumed the position again, and Lyndsey let the next strip rip. Another garbled yell. My brother took a rag and shoved it in his mouth. More hair, more wax, and more noise. Eventually, the hair was removed. Along every wax area were what looked like razor cuts and spots of blood where the hair had been ripped out. I handed my brother a wad of toilet paper while Lyndsey threw away the strips. My brother put his clothes back on. Lyndsey and I walked out of the bathroom. Somehow, my Mom and Dad never heard anything.

My brother walked gingerly to his room, thinking through each step. I was holding back tears of laughter along with Lyndsey. "I can't believe you talked me into this. I'm going home to tell Rachel." Rachel was her sister, and she was my brother's age. She walked out the backdoor. I could hear her laughing even after the door closed. I walked into my brother's room.

"I'm taking a shower," my brother stated. He grabbed some underwear and then went to the shower. I leaned against the door. Once the shower began running, I heard random noises, "Damnit," "Ahh," and so on. I tried my hardest not to laugh.

Once he was finished with the shower and dried off, he marched into his room and fell on the bed. He was lying on his stomach, face in the pillow. "Are you OK, dude?" I asked him sincerely.

"Dude, that hurt so much," he said. He turned his head towards me, wincing. I got him some water, then sat and watched some TV until Mom came in and said it was time to go to sleep. I got up and walked to the door to hug her and say "goodnight," a ritual we both liked.

"OK, Mom, just wake me up in the morning," I said as I was hugging her.

"I will Jon and I love you. Oh, and we're going to visit The Jenkins at 3:00 p.m. they wanted to do a Bible study together" Mom said.

I don't know which was worse. Two Bible studies in two days or not getting to talk to Lynna. The thought of my brother having to work the next day at least cheered me up.

Chapter 5

Book Study

Monday lived up to its reputation. Instead of going door to door in Gastonia, Mom opted to meet with the group to do some local preaching work. If enough Jehovah's Witnesses lived in the surrounding town they would meet as a group at a meeting point there. The main church was still a meeting point every morning but doing it like this allowed us to cover as much ground as possible in our sub-region. The goal was always about quantity with conversion not so much quality.

We arrived at the meeting point. Brother Moody's house. Brother and Sister Moody were a black couple that lived just on the edge of town in an area Mom always called the "boondocks." Sometimes, making the joke, "We're seeing the Moody's in the boonies." They lived in a wooded area at the bottom of a hill, in a quant-looking home with a stone exterior. Inside, the home was dark and clean, with a great big grandfather clock to greet you as you entered. Making a loud "dong" sound every hour.

Sister Moody was portly and gray. She was always nice and carried a beaming smile, showing off her white teeth. Brother Moody was short and round, wearing glasses and a bald head. He, like his wife, was kind and often in a good mood. Both took their religion seriously, hosted meetings, and offered their home as a meeting point for field service.

We were meeting at 8:00 a.m. to get an early start. As usual, with Mom driving, we were the first ones to get there. When we knocked on the door, Brother Moody opened the door in jeans and a blue golf shirt. "Sorry, Sister Burger, but Sister Moody is sick, and I have to go to work this morning," he said with some guilt in his voice. "But please feel free to wait inside for the others." We walked into the dark house; it smelled like mothballs and stale air. Once out of the entryway, it opened up to a cozy living room. There was a large Persian rug on the floor that was red and had blue and white weaves in a pattern. A fireplace sat empty to one side, with an old black and white TV in the corner. A big brown couch had been pushed back to allow for two rows of four metal folding chairs in the middle of the

room. A comfortable lounge chair sat at the front for the speaker this morning.

We took our seats and waited for about ten minutes. Mom suggested I read my Bible to kill the boredom. At around 8:15, I heard the door open, and in walked Lynna with her mom. Some good luck, finally. Lynna walked in first, wearing a light blue dress that came to her ankles, the top covering her arms and chest. On her feet were a pair of Mary Jane shoes. Her mom was tall and wispy with medium-length blond hair; she looked like an older, more sophisticated version of Lynna. She was wearing a tan dress that also went to her ankles and buttoned at the neck. Her shoes were just plain flats. All the women were to dress modestly, including Mom, who had a burgundy dress that went well past the knees and short sleeves for the summer.

Lynna's mom greeted my mom with a smile and was directly in front of her. She turned around and began to chat. Lynna sat in front of me. I could almost smell her hair. "Nice shoes", I whispered. She turned around with a grin on her face, and I pointed in the direction of her shoes.

"Oh my god, we got in a big fight over what I was going to wear, so she compromised on the shoes."

"Didn't wear Doc Martens?" I joked. I glanced at the moms; they were deep in a discussion about a new family at church.

"I wish," Lynna said, rolling her eyes.

This was also a battle Mom and I got in constantly. The compromise between me and Mom was a funky tie at church, but she was slowly relenting as my clothing got more modern. This morning, I was wearing a short-sleeved white button-up shirt, black cotton slacks that were a size too big for me, and a brown belt, keeping them attached firmly to my waist. One thing that almost never changed was my penny loafers. The cheapest dress shoes my parents could find. They were worn and weathered from the constant stress put on them.

"I can't call you at three; Mom is taking me to the Jenkins," I said in a hushed tone to Lynna as our parents talked.

She frowned, “Well, that sucks. I’ve got nothing to do today.” Unlike my mom, who tried to fill my entire week, her mom took the opposite approach, trying to kill her with boredom.

“What are you doing at the end of summer? Want to see No Doubt?” I asked as quietly as possible.

Her eyes lit up, and without hesitation, she loudly blurted out, “Yes,” doing a poor job of hiding her excitement. Both of our moms turned and gave us a suspicious look. Lynna quickly composed herself and said, “Yes! I’m ready to go out in field service,” keeping up the excitement. Mom looked a bit dubious, but she continued to talk.

Dylan and I had hatched a plan. No Doubt was one of our favorite bands, and Lynna's was, too. No Doubt was going to be playing in the “big” city, Charlotte. Charlotte was a metropolitan area with skyscrapers, clubs, and big rock shows. It was also almost an hour away by car. Tickets were going on sale that Saturday and Dylan had agreed to go to the record store in Charlotte early to buy them. He’d buy four tickets. A possible double date if we played our cards right.

The plan was to figure out a way to get Lynna to the concert with me. As long as she would go along with it, we could scheme our way into the show together. It was a safe bet no one from our church would be at that concert aside from other like-minded brothers and sisters who probably didn’t want to be seen. Concerts were allowed, but certain types of shows were “frowned on.” No Doubt was on the edge. If you happened to see someone you didn’t expect, mutually assured destruction was in play. They also could be overwhelmed by guilt and tell on you, so it was a dice roll. Something I had yet to experience when seeing my fellow witness doing something fun, so Dylan and I felt pretty safe.

The initial plan was for Lynna to go with Maria, whose parents weren’t as strict. I would go to Dylan’s; then we’d go to the show. His parents weren’t very strict either. That meant if he wanted to go to a show, he’d just lazily tell his mom he was going and when to expect us home; she’d say OK, and that would be that. So long as she didn’t

talk to Mom, we could get away with it. We felt the plan was perfect. The question would be if Lynna could fulfill her end.

Lynna's Mom finished talking to my Mom, and an awkward silence took over. We waited for more people to show up. After a few minutes of sitting in silence, Mom said, "Oh, we should be starting soon." Indeed, starting later than 8:30 was considered tardy and frowned upon. The only reason I could think of was to catch people before they went out. Best to get 'em out of bed then not get 'em at all.

Brother Moody stepped in to say his goodbyes, "Have no brothers shown up? I really need to go; do you need me here?" he asked.

"No, that's OK - do what you need to do; we'll wait another five minutes," Mom responded.

Brother Moody asked because only baptized men could officiate the service for these meetups. You were baptized when you decided you were going to dedicate your life to Jehovah. Most witnesses got baptized in their teen to adult years. Even for field service, it wasn't as simple as showing up, getting your area to preach, and then going. There was a prayer, and then you read from a book called *The Daily Text*. These were daily affirmations in scriptural form. You'd have a five-minute conversation about how that scripture tied into going door to door, then you'd have another prayer and could head out.

The process for when no baptized man could officiate was that a baptized woman would officiate, but only if she covered her hair. Many women carried scarves or bandanas with them just in case of such an emergency. One time, a sister had to wear a fancy tablecloth because there were no scarves or bandanas anywhere. This was something that puzzled me. God needs a woman to cover their hair in order to talk to Him? But I had learned long ago that some answers just wouldn't make sense, and it was better not to keep asking.

Mom pulled out a scarf she always carried with her in her "field service" purse. An oversized cheap leather purse that could carry pamphlets, brochures, and a Bible. She put the scarf on her head and looked like a Russian Babushka. She gave a quick prayer, read the

text, and discussed it, asking Lynna how it related to us going out this morning and foregoing the hand raising. Lynna gave a canned response. "Very good, Lynna," Mom said, encouraging her.

Mom said the final prayer and it was time to head out. In these situations, teenagers of the opposite sex paired together was almost never done. It was hard enough to pair two teenagers of the same sex together as the religion felt you needed an older wiser person at the door. Not for any safety reasons but in case some evil person tricked you into following some other form of Christianity.

At least I got to be close to Lynna. These were moments you had to steal as often as you could. Mom was determined to ensure I was closest to her, though. She drove as I sat in the front seat. Lynna and her mom sat in the back. I tried casually seeing if I could see Lynna in the mirrors but could only catch glimpses. The screaming Buick made its way to a middle-class street with wealthy homes. A largely white neighborhood with two-story homes and picket fences out front. Dogs were still common, and it was a toss-up if they would be aggressive or not. Something I found didn't change no matter what neighborhood you were in. We parked next to a curb and stepped out of the car.

"OK, Jonathan, come with me, and let's do what we can for Jehovah," Mom said, putting her hand in the air in an excited tone. She was trying to make it sound like we were going to secure some great victory. "You two take that side, and we'll take this one," she said, instructing Lynna and her mom. I think some part of her relished getting to be the leader in spiritual things once in a while. She was smart and a good teacher, so it was only natural to feel that way.

We walked up to the first house. It was a long ranch home with a big front porch. Two brown rocking chairs sat in front of two big windows, and a bench swing was at the end of the porch. The door was dark mahogany with glass panes on the front. "OK, you're up, Jon," Mom ordered. I got my brochure ready in my hand and stood slightly in front of Mom.

I rang the doorbell, and a pleasant "ding dong" came from inside the house. Nothing stirred through the glass of the door. Doing this long enough, you know the signs to look for. Window blinds were

slightly moving, and figures through the glass appeared to be frozen or hiding. My favorite was the TV that mysteriously goes mute at the first knock, then comes back on as you're walking away. I hit the doorbell again. Still nothing. I turned to Mom and shrugged my shoulders. We were about to turn around when we saw a figure coming towards the door.

The door opened, and a sleepy teenager greeted us. To my sheer horror, it was a kid I went to school with. His name was Joey. We weren't really enemies or friends. Just another kid you passed in the halls. Joey was a little taller than me and sported a short haircut with a rat tail in the back. Something he sometimes caught shit for at school. This morning, he was wearing an oversized "Big Johnson" t-shirt and basketball shorts. The shirt had two buxom women on the front sitting at a poker table in tiny bikinis with a nerdy pimply man playing poker against them. He held a Royal Flush in his hands. On the poker table, he was pushing all his chips with one hand. On the bottom of the image, it said, "Poker in the front, liquor in the back." If I wore that shirt, Mom would have a heart attack right on the spot.

Joey's Dad was also well-known in the city as the owner of the local Karate dojo. Joey had bragged constantly that he could kick anyone's ass due to his dad's training. No one really tested him, but no one really believed it either, having never actually seen him in a fight at school. He lived somewhere in the high school hierarchy, which was not really cool but not really uncool, either.

"No way; what are you doing here?" Joey asked with a look of shock and amusement painted on his face. This was my worst nightmare: running into another kid I knew at the door. I froze and then felt Mom's finger in my back. As if she had grabbed a string and pulled, I jumped right into my pitch with about as much vigor as a patient in a coma.

"Hi...uh... Joey, I'm here to tell you the good news of the Kingdom," I sputtered out.

Joey looked even more bewildered and amused, "No freaking way," he began to laugh.

"Maybe I could share this brochure with you," I said, clearly embarrassed. The shock of seeing him at the door stopped me from

jumping into my prepared speech about the brochure. Instead, I just shoved it in his hand. Hoping he'd take it and close the door.

"Dude, you can't be serious," he responded; he stared at the brochure and then looked at me. I stayed silent, praying he'd just close the door. "So, do you like, do this every morning or something?" he asked while trying not to laugh.

"We do as much preaching as we can," Mom said in a cheery voice. "What was your name?" Mom asked Joey.

"Joey, ma'am," was his response. This seemed to break him out of his laughing fit. "My name is Linda; I'm Jon's Mom. Is your Mom or Dad at home, Joey?" asked Mom.

"No, they're at work."

"Well, Joey, make sure to read the brochure my son gave you and give it to your Mom and Dad to read. Maybe we can come by another time when your parents are home." It was nice she had jumped in, but she spoke to Joey the way a third grade teacher would to a student. This, unfortunately, made me even more embarrassed.

Finally, Joey said, "Uh...OK. See you in school, Jon," then abruptly closed the door.

The good thing about doing preaching work in the Summer was if you did happen to run into a friend from school, they had time to forget about it. Or, at the very least, too much time passed to get bullied over it. I tried hard to hide my religion in school as it was a constant source of shame. I couldn't take part in any activity during the holidays. Usually, I was moved to a corner to do a non-holiday activity on my own. Kids whispering or coming up after asking for an explanation. If there was a patriotic-themed event in the gym, I was sent to the library. Often being pulled from the long line into the gym and escorted to the library. A spotlight I never asked for. An alarm saying, "Pick on me, open for business." Mom, of course, would have me hand out brochures in the homeroom each morning if she could.

Thankfully, the rest of the morning was less embarrassing. People at the doors were scant because it was a Monday. We went to every house on three streets covering a decent-sized block. During break time, we went to the local Hardees. Hardees was one step

below McDonald's and Burger King. We went inside and sat at a booth. Mom and I on one side, and Lynna and her mom on the other. Lynna's Mom and I never chatted much. Just the usual pleasantries like how the other's day was.

"So, Jon, what sort of music do you like these days?" Lynna's mom asked. This surprised me as I expected more "spiritual" talk during the break.

"Uh, I like a lot of music, I guess. I like the oldies," I sputtered out. This was true, but I actually preferred to listen to hard rock and alternative music.

Lynna's mom raised her eyebrow in a funny manner and said, "So only old music, huh?"

"Oh, he really likes rock music; it's too loud for me," Mom interjected. I was a bit embarrassed.

"I like it too, but I prefer pop. Do you like the Spice Girls?" was the next question from Lynna's Mom.

"Mooooom," Lynna bemoaned out loud trying to stop the discussion.

"So, tell me what you want, what you really really want." I began to sing, and the table started to laugh. Lynna's Mom started laughing and clapping her hand to the beat. Honestly, I loved all types of music, including catchy pop songs.

"Well Jon, maybe you and your brother could come over one afternoon," Lynna's Mom said. I was in shock. Clearly, I made a good impression. Lynna looked at me and shrugged her shoulders, trying to play it cool, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

"Yeah, I'd like that," I said.

"Well, so long as they aren't trying to sneak off to any restaurants together," Mom chimed in. Her voice sounded a bit critical of this new invitation.

"I'll make sure to keep an eye on them. No funny business, right Lynna?" her mom said in a joking tone.

"Sure, Mom, Lynna said and shook her head at me, embarrassed.

Could it be that her mom *was* actually cool? How could her dad be an uptight elder and her mom be so relaxed? There wasn't much

time to think as Mom declared break time was over. “Do you think you could drop us off at the Moodys?” Lynna’s mom asked.

“Yeah, no problem. I actually have to drive to Gastonia, and we’re studying with the Jenkins’ so we can end our time here.” We got back into the car and drove to the Moody’s to drop off Lynna and her mom.

Once we got to the Moody’s, we parked the car. We all got out to say our goodbyes. Lynna and her mom made their way to their car. Mom and I walked with them. Mom and Lynne’s Mom walked to the driver’s side door of Lynna’s car. Lynna and I were on the passenger side. As we were talking, I noticed her mom glancing over and smiling, then getting in the car. “God, our moms are so embarrassing, I can’t even,” Lynna said.

“I know, but I’m glad I was able to talk to you at all today since I won’t be around at three,” I said, trying to hide my enthusiasm. “Want to come see my talk on Wednesday?” I jokingly asked her.

“I’ll be there with bells on,” she said, stepping into the passenger seat. “Bye, Brother Burger,” her mom said, waving with a big smile and getting into the car.

“Bye,” I said, waving more to Lynna than her mom.

The rest of the day went by slowly. We did more door-to-door, went home to eat lunch, and had an hour’s break before going to the Jenkins’ house in Gastonia. The Jenkins lived in a two-story home, the bottom half of which was red brick and the top half white with wooden siding. It was in a lower to middle-class neighborhood of Gastonia. They were a large black family. The oldest brother looked like a bodybuilder and could dominate on the basketball court. The most popular sport for young men in our church. There were even rumors he was being recruited by the University of North Carolina to play basketball for them. This was a bit scandalous as playing organized sports was “frowned upon.” Every time he saw me, he’d take his giant hand, grab me by the shoulder, and ask how I was doing, flashing a giant smile. He was the true definition of a gentle giant.

His younger sister and brother were both nice and affable, though a little too young for me to really connect with. They also had

a brother who was mentally handicapped. Since I had never really been around any severely handicapped people, I always felt a little awkward and scared around him. He would yell and bang his head against things. He wore a protective helmet that looked like he should be an amateur wrestler.

The only Jenkin there today were the Mom. Meaning it was just me, their Mom, and my Mom. I sat at the table while they caught up. It was like I wasn't there, which was fine with me. Sister Jenkin was overweight and had short, curly hair. She looked older than she was due to the stress of kids. She had brown eyes and expressive eyebrows that moved the more excited she got.

Then, the study finally began after the small talk. So, we did the same exact study as we did the previous day. This time, I didn't compare our religious leaders to the ones who hated Jesus. Mom and Sister Jenkin had some tea afterward, and then we headed home. The afternoon was almost over; we got home just before five. Dad and Joe would get home from work at around six, and then it was a rush to eat and get ready to be at the "book study" by 7:30 at the latest. I decided to get the shower over with, so I hopped in as soon as I got home. My shower ritual was to be as fast as possible. Scrubbing soap on me, putting shampoo in my hair, rinsing off, then grabbing the nearest towel, dirty or not, and drying off.

As soon as I stepped out of the shower and into my room, I heard Mom yelling from the kitchen, "Iron your clothes now so we're not rushing when your father gets home." Ironing was something that was mandatory. If Mom saw wrinkled clothes for any type of church service, she'd shake her head and say something like, "Did you just roll out of bed?" in a sarcastic tone. Not the end of the world, but if she could help it, she'd make sure we ironed.

Dad and Joe arrived home from work, tired and beat from the hot sun. I was lying on my brother's bed watching T.V. "Dude, I gotta get ready," he said without a hello or anything.

"Then do it," I said, still paying attention to the Simpson's re-run that was on.

"*Dude*, I'm so freaking tired, and my crotch hurts like hell; I want to lay down for a little bit; just get out of my room." It suddenly

dawned on me that he had done the night before.

“You stink, you better shower first,” I warned him before he fell next to me.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said and headed to the shower.

I, of course, could not miss this moment. Any type of burn, cut, scar, or wound would burn under hot water like the night before. My brother was by far the most dramatic of the boys in a family full of dramatic boys. I turned down the TV to listen for the shower. I jumped off the bed and put my ear to the door. Within about five seconds, I heard a loud “Wahrghhh,” a noise hard to explain but a mix of surprise, shock, and pain. “Ugh damnit,” then “God freaking dammit” loudly was next. My guess was he had moved to the soap. It was worse than the previous night. I stood by the door, almost crying from laughter.

“What are you up to?” Mom asked suspiciously as I was standing at the closed bathroom door.

“I played a prank on Joe with the water,” I answered back. An excuse to stop suspicion as we always played pranks on each other.

Mom just shook her head and said, “Don’t you have anything better to do than be mean to your brother?”

“Nope,” I replied, the laughter subsiding a bit.

“Nevada, those boys of yours are gonna end up killing each other one day.” Dad at the table watching the news responded with,

“Stop it, boys,” a sure indication he wasn’t actually paying attention. Mom just shook her head again and got back to finishing dinner.

The door opened, and my brother was in a towel right in front of me. He moved quickly past me, walking like a duck as I broke out into laughter. “Dude, it’s not funny!” he said, half angry but the other half knowing just how funny the situation was. I looked in the bathroom and noticed some small specs of blood on his underwear. I quickly grabbed them, walked outside, and tossed them in the garbage cans. Hiding them under some trash. No way Mom wouldn’t notice that if she happened to do laundry.

Dad sat on the couch, focused on the news as we ate. Usually, we ate as a family, but with time being short, Mom allowed for an

exception. Mom was in a stir-fry kick. It was easy and cheap to make, which meant we'd had it nightly for about three weeks in a row. "Can't we have something else?" I said disgustedly.

"When you work for a living, you can buy us all food," Dad snapped back. Somehow, my remark cut through the local news and into Dad's ears. I poked at my food, choked it down, and then got dressed for the meeting. Dad was first in the car, waiting impatiently for us to come out one by one.

It was fashionable to be at the Kingdom Hall around 7:15 on Monday nights. Giving you enough time to get your seats and talk. Monday nights were a smaller affair as smaller groups would meet in homes. Around 25-30 would attend Monday night at the Kingdom Hall. Just like with the study to prepare for this meeting, there was a speaker and a reader. The speaker asked the questions, and the reader read. If Sunday was the A squad of speakers. Monday was the C squad. Usually, the speaker was a newer elder, and the reader could be any male who was a Jehovah's Witness and expressed an interest in moving up. These often were called Ministerial Servants, the elders in training. One step above the average Jehovah's Witness. The only power they had was the power of pride in doing whatever chore the elders doled out.

My friends all attended meetings in private homes on Monday, so all I had for entertainment was my brother. We took our seats and began to talk, "You want to go to No Doubt?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I do," he exclaimed. My brother loved music as much as I did, and Tragic Kingdom had been in the CD player nonstop for weeks for both of us. While I would have preferred the privacy of fewer people, I started feeling guilty, so I didn't ask him. Not asking him was also a risk as it could be used against me in the future. We usually always had each other's backs.

"OK, tickets are \$15; I'll let Dylan know," I said. "We're gonna try to get Lynna and Maria to come too," I added. His eyes lit up when I mentioned Maria.

"Cool, I'll give you the money tonight after the meeting," he said. We sat in our seats, waiting for the meeting to begin. This meeting was run by Brother Gunderson. He was the dad of the

creepy Brother Gunderson, who greeted people at the door on Sunday. There was also another Brother Gunderson, who was the creepy brother of Gunderson. This always made for funny situations when you wanted to talk about any family with more than one man in it. "Wait, which Brother Gunderson are we talking about again?" I would always be asked. Followed by "Brother [first name] Gunderson."

Brother Father Gunderson was an elder who was somewhat laid back and quiet. He had wavy gray hair and stood about 5'7". Speaking with a Midwest accent, he stood out in a church full of Southerners. Brother Gunderson's family were from Indiana and had been in our church for the last ten years. He was what you might call a background elder. Some elders were loud and in your face, calling out the slightest infraction and making themselves a public leader. Others are quieter and more reserved, less likely to say anything in public. However, the rumor was he was a hardliner and a bit mean behind the scenes.

The reader was a single middle-aged man named Brother Kaminsky. He was the church's long-time eligible bachelor. He was neat and clean-cut, talked with a slight lisp, and had a well-paying job as an engineer. Many brothers and sisters speculated why the best single man in the church wasn't married. He was 28 up and coming, likely to become an elder and good-looking. A combo that drove the sisters wild. The fact that he had money was even better, as most witnesses worked in construction or menial blue-collar jobs that allowed them to go to church and door to door on a regular basis and afforded little else.

The meeting began with a song and prayer, and then we got to studying "The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived" book. Paragraph read; paragraph answered. My attention was focused more on the clock behind me than the study in front of me. After all, this was the third time I'd studied this damn chapter. We got to the third paragraph, and Mom nudged me. Time to answer.

I raised my hand, "Yes, young Brother Burger, please speak," Brother Gunderson said, calling on me. Since this meeting was smaller, no roving microphone men were needed. I half yelled out the

answer so everyone could hear me. After I was done, Mom gave me a pat of approval on my shoulder.

“Very good, Brother Burger. Does anyone else have anything to add?” asked Brother Gunderson. The room stayed silent. “Let’s move on to the next paragraph,” Brother Gunderson said. Then Brother Kaminsky began reading. My duty for the night was complete. Mom learned that to get me to engage even that little bit was a victory. I tried to focus on anything but the book in front of me.

Near the end, the speaker asked a simple question about a paragraph. This paragraph was tying Jesus' example of healing the woman's period with acts to get into paradise earth. See, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that when God smites all the haters, the remaining faithful will either go to heaven or stay on earth. Heaven is allocated for 144,000 of the most holy Jehovah's Witnesses to rule over the people on earth. For the rest of us? We get to stay on earth with the animals, as in the pamphlet I often handed out. The question was, “What awaits us if we follow Jesus' lead?” The answer was supposed to be that the 144,000 will rule in heaven, and we will be on paradise earth.

I was half paying attention when I heard the answer. My eyes went wide when I heard Brother Hill give his answer, “We all have the hope to go to heaven,” and he said it with the confidence of Brother Reddick, who was facing a rottweiler at the door. An audible murmur was heard from the small crowd; then, you could hear a pin drop. What had we all just heard? This was sacrilegious! It was the total opposite of everything I had ever been taught. Brother Gunderson, clearly taken aback, responded with, “Interesting theory, Brother Hill.” Then, he asked the question again. Finally, a sister raised her hand and gave the correct answer. Everything moved on.

Brother Hill was an older white man, bald on the top with white hair on the sides of his head, making a nice U-shape. He had a certain self-confidence about him that was hard to pin down. He also wasn't at meetings much. So, I didn't know him well. I did know that he had a BIG construction business, though, having tried to recruit Dad to work for him. He often used it as an excuse to miss meetings. He had previously been an elder but stepped down years before.

Anytime an elder stepped down, the scuttlebutt was either they cheated on their spouse or did some other heinous thing that forced them out. I had never gotten the story about Brother Hill.

Once the meeting was over, we got in the car. I just couldn't get over the answer given. After all, I had come up with my own theory and was treated like I had grown a third head and claimed the earth was flat. "What did Brother Hill mean by that comment, Dad?" I asked as soon as we started driving home.

"Oh, Brother Hill has some strange theories sometimes," he just said matter-of-factly. I couldn't believe my ears.

"But is his theory true?" I asked back.

"No," Mom shook her head. "Some people just believe anything they want, Jonathan, but it's our job to help them see the truth," Mom said in a sympathetic tone.

"But that doesn't make sense," I said. "Don't people get disfellowshipped for that?" I asked. Disfellowshipping was what Jehovah's Witnesses called it when you were kicked out and shunned. It had a nicer ring to it than "shunning." Any sin could be punished if you weren't repentant enough. The worst sin, however, was saying that the Jehovah's Witness theology was wrong. No matter how minor. This was going against what God himself had commanded through his church leaders, for Brother Hill to say that in front of everyone at church was a whopper of a sin. One that couldn't be overlooked.

"Did you know Brother Hill owns the property the Kingdom Hall is on?" Dad asked with a bit of intrigue in his voice.

"No," I responded, dumbfounded. My assumption was that the Kingdom Hall and its land were owned by, well, the church.

"Son, sometimes, if you have enough money, instead of turning the other cheek, Brothers can turn their entire heads," Dad said with some bitterness.

"So, because Brother Hill is rich, he can believe what he wants?" I asked, shocked.

"Apparently so," was Dad's response. Mom was visibly upset at the conversation going on.

“Jehovah’s organization isn’t perfect, Jon; we have to wait for him to weed out any bad influences,” she tried to say, convincing herself of the logic. My brother seemed to not be bothered by any of it.

Once we got home, I tried to watch some professional wrestling with my brother. Wrestling was one of the few “bad” shows with adult content Mom let us watch. Her mom, our grandma, loved wrestling, so she had a soft spot for it. Every Monday night after church, we’d flip between Monday night Raw and Monday night Nitro. This Monday night, Stone Cold Steve Austin was angering Vince McMahon with some blue-collar redneck antics. My mind was elsewhere, though.

“Why can Brother Hill say whatever he wants, and because he’s rich, he can get away with it, but I can’t even wear a chain wallet around Mom and Dad?” I asked. My brother simply looked at me and said,

“I’d stop asking questions like that, or you’ll really get in trouble.” So, I let it die, but I couldn’t let it go.

Eventually, Mom came in and said, “Don’t stay up too late, Jon. You’ve got work in the morning. Jon, I want to listen to your talk tomorrow.” I got up and gave her a hug and a peck on the cheek goodnight, as was tradition.

I laid in bed that night but couldn’t sleep. All I could think about was Brother Hill and how I didn’t want to give a talk in front of everyone about the Bible. Meanwhile, he could just say whatever he wanted.

Chapter 6

Theocratic Ministry School... And “Local Needs”

I woke up Tuesday morning to Dad abruptly opening the door, turning on the light, saying, “Up and at ‘em,” and starting to walk into the kitchen.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Six,” he said, walking out into the living room. I rubbed my eyes and accepted my fate. Dad wasn’t too bad to work for, and most of the jobs were city projects, which meant they didn’t need to look pretty; just done. We could easily do three a day, but usually, he just did one or two. Dad would drink about a pot of coffee in the morning; then we’d head off to the job site, but usually not before stopping somewhere for a to-go cup of coffee. As soon as we got to the job site, he’d usually find the nearest porta-potty.

Dad’s job was to lay bricks and blocks while minimizing waste of material. My job was to make sure he had masonry concrete, or “mud,” as we called it, and bricks and blocks near him at all times so he could finish the job. While my brother loved working for Dad, I did not. It was hot, dirty, and tiring. The only upside was we sometimes got to change the radio from Dad’s go-to of light rock to the alternative rock station. I put about 60% of my effort into the job, and that was something. This frustrated Dad to the point where he decided one or two days a week was usually all he could handle of me. A win on my side, for sure.

So, I took the win and bore the suffering of hard labor once in a while. We arrived at the job site and began to set up. It was on acres of dirt. The forest that once stood there had been leveled for more commercial real estate in Gastonia. At this job, there was a six-foot hole with a concrete pad at the bottom of a square. Jutting out of the concrete pad was metal rebar spaced two feet apart. This hole was dug, and concrete was laid for Dad to build a catch basin, the thing on the side of the curb that collects water from the street. Just four walls of blocks six feet up with spaces for a pipe at the bottom and a ladder built into the inside. Concrete would be poured into the block once finished. We would build the first half of the box, then move to start the next one. Once dry, this one would be filled with dirt, and we

could pour concrete and finish the second half of it. We could usually do three halves in a day.

Dad was wearing a plain white t-shirt that accentuated his gut hanging out and a pair of blue jeans hanging on for dear life, a brown belt cinching the jeans in place. Over it was a larger leather belt that hung on his hips. It held his brick hammer, a foldable Mason's tape measurer, a normal tape measurer, and an empty spot where a jointer would normally go. He typically had two moods: happy and loud or sensitive and quiet. Today, he was in a good mood, humming along to the music as he worked. By lunch, we had finished the first half and had moved a tenth of a mile down the dirt field to the next half and started again.

We broke for lunch. Dad had made us ham sandwiches and brought some chips. We ate in silence, and then Dad lay against the truck tire, resting his eyes. I lay under the truck and drifted off to sleep. I awoke to Dad shaking my foot and saying, "Wake up, let's get this one and the next one done by five." I begrudgingly got up and made a new batch of mud while Dad used the rest of the mud in his pan. Then, I set three blocks on the edge of the pit. Focused more on music, I didn't realize how close to the edge they were. As I was walking away, I suddenly heard Dad yell, "SON OF A BITCH...GOD DAMNIT!"

I turned around to see a block had fallen off the ledge and right on Dad's lower back. He clutched at his back. I ran to the edge, peering down at my angry Dad. "Sorry, I thought they would stay up there." I tried to use an excuse.

"Just get the mud and make sure next time the block won't fall," Dad said in a slightly calmer voice.

As I wheeled the mud over to the hole, I noticed a white Chevy truck driving towards us. Dust plumed behind it. It was the site supervisor. This was a welcome sight as the supervisor enjoyed talking. Talking seemed to be the bulk of his work. Dad also enjoyed talking. The supervisor parked his truck and got out.

"Hey Nevada, how's the weather down there?" he asked as he walked up to the hole and peered down. He was a tall, older, wiry

man with a white mustache and long, straight hair. He was usually in a good mood, and he gave Dad room to work at his own pace.

“Hot and humid I’m afraid, how’s the weather up there?” Dad asked back, letting out a short deep laugh.

“Not much better for us up here either, plus we gotta deal with the bright sun. It’s practically a fridge down there, Nevada.” The supervisor looked at me, winking. I let out a laugh and shook my head, walking off to get some drinking water and letting them talk. They talked for around an hour. The upside: I got an hour’s break. The downside was working later. I listened to the convo.

“Can you believe that President Clinton?” the supervisor said, changing the subject from work. I knew what was coming next.

“Doesn’t surprise me. The Bible said these sorts of things would happen. I’m not worried about any of it. Soon I’ll be on a paradise earth,” was Dad’s totally normal response to this observation. The supervisor raised his eyebrow. “I’ve got a brochure in my truck that talks all about it.”

The supervisor looked at his watch then said, “Maybe next time, I’ve got to check on the earthmover. Good talking to you, Nevada.” He said goodbye and rushed to his truck.

Once the supervisor left, Dad started working again. “Looks like I got an hour of field service in today,” Dad said once the supervisor had driven away. This was a common tactic. Spend two minutes asking someone about the Bible and counting it as an hour. Dad then focused on going as fast as he could. By 3:00 p.m., we were finished with the half box. He handed me the tools that remained in the hole and then climbed out. Instead of moving on to the next site, he sat studying the hole. Then he eyeballed the skyline and looked towards the next hole. Clouds were beginning to form on the skyline; a thunderstorm was brewing far away. Hope began to grow in my heart. When Dad started waffling, it usually meant we were going home.

“Looks like it might be a storm later. Let’s get the next site set up, pack it up, and go home. The next one will be waiting for me and

your brother tomorrow,” he said and headed for the truck. We set up the next site and then headed home.

When we got home, the thunderstorm had arrived. Josiah was in his room watching TV. Mom was working on a crossword puzzle. I hopped in the shower, dried off, and then came into the living room.

“I hope you’ve worked on your talk, Jon,” Mom said.

“I have, don’t worry. I always do good in my talks,” I said with confidence, even though I hadn’t looked at my task.

“OK, tomorrow you need to recite it to me for practice,” she replied back.

“OK,” I said. After all, I’d have all day to practice. We ate dinner and then went to sleep. Tomorrow, I’d get to relax a little.

Wednesday morning, I was on housework duty because Mom had to work. I was up at an ungodly hour because Dad continued his game out of how much noise he could make in the morning doing the dishes. He opened the dishwasher, and the symphony began. I was awoken by dishes being stacked in cabinets and pots moving around the sink. Dad was immune to my plea for peace and quiet, so I just lay in the darkness thinking. *Fuck*, I thought to myself, *I have to give a talk tonight*.

“Talks” were part of the Wednesday night meeting. The majority of the church on Wednesday night was dedicated to letting up-and-coming male Witnesses show off their speaking abilities. It was called the “Theocratic Ministry School”, the idea being that you would be assigned a topic or scripture, and then you were to stand in front of an audience and speak about it for five minutes or more. Depending on how gung-ho and experienced you were, you could be given a “talk” assignment of fifteen minutes. For each assignment, you were given a skill to work on. The skill is correlated to a book written by the Jehovah’s Witnesses that explains how to properly do each skill. You’d then be judged by an elder and given a grade depending on how good you did. Talks were given in three rooms at the same time: the main hall and two smaller back rooms.

This week, I was assigned a five-minute talk on Matthew 5, verses 1-15, in the main hall. The skill I was given to work on was “hand gestures.” I was naturally prone to dramatic flair, so this wasn’t

something I had to think about that much. I waved my hands in the dark as Dad clanged some pans together. As long as you were OK with public speaking, the talks were pretty easy. There was a simple formula to follow. A short intro, read the scriptures, explain how this relates to the intro, and finally, the outro.

I actually took a bit of pride in giving talks even though I didn't care about the subject matter. I felt I was a natural speaker, and usually, when I was given an assignment, I did well, getting a lot of attention from other churchgoers. This, of course, was a double-edged sword as I was assigned to give talks more than others. I'd also be assigned to give my talk in the main hall, meaning more people would watch it than in the smaller rooms. More visibility put a lot of pressure on me as others would comment about what a bright future I'd have in the church.

I heard Dad close the dishwasher, and a gentle hum came from the kitchen. I closed my eyes. I began to get nervous, thinking about having to give a talk in front of a large audience. If I were lucky, it'd be a slow night, and not many would attend. The average attendance was around 70-80 people. Around 50 people were in the main hall during the talk. I wondered if Brother Hill would be in the audience. Maybe I could ask him to give me an out-there theory to discuss. The next thing I knew, I was back to sleep.

"OK, Jon, time to get up," I heard Mom say from the doorway. The room was filled with sunlight filtered through the curtain at the window next to the bed. I rubbed my eyes before opening them.

"Five more minutes," I begged.

"Nope, you have lots of cleaning to do this morning, and then you need to practice your talk," she said with some urgency. "I'm going out in field service, then work. I want you to vacuum and finish the laundry. I started to sort the magazines on the table. Up and at 'em," she said, still standing at the doorway. She was already dressed for field service.

"Fine, let me get dressed," I said in an annoyed voice. She turned around and headed for the living room,

"OK, get dressed," she said as she walked away.

This wasn't so bad; I got the house to myself in the morning, didn't have to go door to door, and could get most of the chores done in an hour. Leaving me plenty of time to use the computer or hang out with the neighbors. I put on my pajama bottoms and a shirt that said, "Mulligans Family Eatery" in a 70s yellow font, and then headed for the table. On the table were about 50 magazines. In every Jehovah's Witness family, there was a box or some other storage device that held magazines collected over the years that couldn't be given away. The causality of preaching work. Periodically, you'd organize the magazines and try to get them out in circulation around the world. A favorite of Mom's was to take these and place them in waiting rooms. Dentists, doctors, and even mechanics, no waiting room was spared. If you sat there for more than five minutes, the room wouldn't be safe against Mom.

"Sort these by date and type, then put them in the box on the bookshelf," Mom said as I walked into the living room. She was sitting comfortably in her recliner, reading the Bible. "I'm going to try to place these by the end of next month," she continued, never looking up. Of course, just due to how the magazines were placed in the box half the work was already done.

"OK, Mom," I said while yawning.

She yawned right after I did, "It's contagious, Jon." We shared a small laugh. This was the type of humor that often flew over Dad's head. These little moments felt like an inside joke only we two got. "Well, I better get up and go before you put me to sleep. Make sure everything is done when I get home. I made you a list," she said, standing up. She grabbed her oversized bag, checked that she had everything, then went out the door. I listened for the car door to close, then I heard the car start. Soon, I heard the car driving up the driveway towards the street. I ran to the kitchen window and watched the car turn onto the street.

On the table was a piece of paper on it in blue ink pen. It said in cursive: "*Jon, please make sure the following items are taken care of before I get home:*

- *Order and organize magazines.*
- *Wash and fold towels and clothes.*

- *Wash and dry dishes.*
- *Prepare for the talk.”*

Finally, freedom! I turned the TV on to MTV and weighed my options for the morning. I decided to organize the mess of magazines, but first, I put on a load of laundry. Once the magazines were in order, I thought it might be early enough to call Dylan. I picked up the phone, laid across the couch, and dialed his number.

“Hello, this is the DeMarto residence,” his dad answered in a friendly tone.

“Hi, Mr. DeMarto. Is Dylan there?” I politely asked. “Good morning to you too, Brother Burger,” his dad said sardonically.

“Dylan went out to see Brother McCullen jump out of an airplane this morning. Hopefully, our new brother doesn’t kill himself. You know what they say about the graveyard, though, don’t ya?” his dad asked. This was a joke his dad pulled out when we went by any cemetery.

“The people there are just dying to get in,” I said, faking a chuckle. He laughed,

“Alright, I’ll tell him to call you when he gets home. I’m hanging up now. Bye.” He hung up the phone.

Dylan was watching the surfer brother jump out of an airplane, and I was stuck at home. Just great. After about 10 minutes of MTV, my mind began to wander. I had to focus on maximizing my day. Might as well get my talk out of the way. I grabbed the Bible and took a look at Matthew 5: 1-14. Jesus’ sermon on the mount. I could probably do this talk in my sleep, but I still had to show Mom the evidence. Evidence that I worked, prepared, and practiced. Doing it in the main hall added a little more pressure. If I hadn’t put some effort into it, I would never have heard the end of it. This was the game: give just enough to keep *some* freedom.

With that, I gave a loud sigh and grabbed a pen and paper. I began to write.

INTRODUCTION

use hand gestures

Good evening

Matthew 5: 1 -14

Sermon on The Mount

Advice from Jesus

READ VERSES

CLOSING

My favorite verses 4 - 5

OK to be sad

Meek will inherit earth

Revelation 2: 1-4

Soon wicked system will end

We will live in paradise

Thank you

This was my finished outline. I had developed a good method for giving talks over the years. I also had a good teacher. Mom was a good public speaker and a public school teacher. However, she rarely got to employ these skills in the church, as women were only allowed to do one section during the Theocratic Ministry School. It was less focused on teaching about the Bible and more on showing other women how they should act when going door to door. Mom cherished and adored the five minutes she was afforded once every few months. She'd want to prepare the day she got the notice and was critical of the woman she was paired with if that woman seemed to be procrastinating. Afterward, on the ride home, she would get our critiques. Asking and accepting honest feedback.

Her coaching of me sometimes felt more like she was hoping to prove she could give a better talk than the men. Thankfully for me, I was a bit of a natural at it. Most of the subject matter wasn't new to me, and it was easy to make everyone happy. Just stick to the formula and what they want to hear. "OK now, to get the talk down itself," I said to myself. I heard the washing machine beep and moved the load to the dryer. I went to sit back down at the kitchen table. Suddenly, I heard the buzzing noise of a small engine racing nearby. It was close to my house and going across the yard. I bolted out of the table chair and jumped to the nearby front door. As I opened the door, I saw a blur of black go by. I got onto the small concrete porch in front of my house, and the blur came into focus as it slowed to a stop.

My neighbor Rachel, Lyndsey's older sister, and their younger brother Nick were in it. Rachel was driving a go-kart with her brother Nick in the passenger side. It was a new black go-kart with roll bars and a black bench seat in the front. The engine sat exposed in the back. It had off-road tires on it. Roger, their stepdad, stood looking on approvingly with his arms folded.

"Come on over, Jon, check out what I got the kids." He smiled and waved me over. He reminded me of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde between his behavior now and what I'd witnessed at night when he thought only his family could hear. He often yelled and berated the kids for the smallest of infractions, something my brother and I got a front-row show for when we'd sneak over to Rachel and Lyndsey's window to talk some nights.

"I'm getting some shoes," I yelled back. *A go-kart? Hell yea!* Despite the angry stepdad, they had a lot of things my brother and I took full advantage of. They had a trampoline and an above-ground pool. Something they never cared about if we used. I quickly threw on some socks and then my airwalks to go with my basketball shorts and a blue Weezer shirt. I ran out and closed the door, locking it behind me. A spare key was always kept in an old toolbox under the back deck. I made it to the go-kart. Roger inspected the engine while Rachel and Nick looked on with excitement. Lyndsey wasn't outside, which meant she was likely grounded.

"What do you think, Jon?" Roger asked while still focused on the small engine.

"Wow! Looks fun to drive," I said enthusiastically.

"Yeah, you should give it a drive after they have their fun with it," he pointed at Rachel and Nick, who were grinning ear to ear.

"I'm just happy to take a ride in it," I said.

"Well, you three have fun," Roger said. He stopped looking at the engine and walked into his house.

"This is crazy," I said to Rachel and Nick.

"I know, right? I can't believe Dad bought this," Rachel said in genuine shock.

Rachel was older and slimmer than her sister. While Lyndsey had long, semi-curly hair, Rachel had long, bouncy curls. She looked

like she could be on the box of one of those women's hair dye products. While Lyndsey was shy and quiet, Rachel was loud and outspoken. It was a good mirror of my brother and I. Nick was ten years old. He often acted older than his age and played sports with a chip on his shoulder. His sisters usually always went out of their way to look out for him and include him. He was short for his age and had a tanned complexion with a puma-like face.

For the next two hours, Nick and Rachel took turns driving, and I took turns riding in the Go-Kart. We took a break for lunch and promised to meet each other in an hour back outside at the front of their house. I ran inside, grabbed the clean laundry, and folded it; probably not up to Mom's standards, but since it was towels and Dad's work clothes hopefully it'd be overlooked. I had worked up a surprising appetite for riding around in a go-kart and standing around waiting to ride. I looked through the fridge. My parents were always trying fad diets. This month, it was Atkins. This wasn't so bad since there was always a hamburger or bacon around. I opted for a hamburger, and in 15 minutes, I had eaten. I washed and dried the dishes, then grabbed the list. I had everything done except for the talk, which just needed a little practice.

I went outside and waited by the go-kart. After about 10 minutes, Rachel and Nick came out. "Let's go out to the cow fields," Nick suggested. It was a good idea as the fields were big and vast. Lots of straight, fast driving could be done. Rachel yelled back at the doublewide, "Hey Roger, we're going to the cow fields. We'll be back later."

"OK," Roger yelled back.

Rachel looked at me and asked, "Wanna drive?"

"Yes," I exclaimed. I hopped in front of the wheel. Rachel sat next to me with Nick in her lap. The Go-Kart was straightforward. It had a gas pedal, brake pedal, and a steering wheel. I stepped on the gas, lightly pushing the acceleration.

"Go faster!" yelled Rachel over the engine. I hit the gas and turned the wheel, driving across the grass and onto the road. We drove down the road for about five minutes and cut into a grass field.

We went another ten minutes until we got to a large cow pasture with low rolling hills.

I slowed down to a stop, "Who wants to drive?" I asked.

"I do," Nick yelled.

"Me first, then you can drive," Rachel yelled back. Nick frowned. I moved onto the grass.

"You can ride with her," I offered.

I stayed in the grass as Rachel drove wild over the cow pastures. Making wide turns and taking long straights as fast as she could. Nick was grinning from ear to ear. She eventually pulled up next to me and stopped. "OK, Nick, sit in my lap and steer." Nick hopped in her lap, and I sat next to Rachel. She pushed the gas and let Nick take the wheel under Rachel's supervision. She made him take wide turns. "Let's go the back way home," Rachel yelled. I wasn't too familiar with the area as my family only lived there for a year.

"As long as you know the way," I yelled.

Rachel pointed toward the direction we needed to go for her brother. We headed away from the field and towards a road that went into a trailer park. Just before, it was a small hill. Rachel hit the gas, and we flew forward. As we came over the hill, it was actually a culvert. We flew for a second in the air, then headed south and landed at the edge of the other side of the culvert. I grabbed onto the roll bar and slammed forward. I slide sideways, my knees avoiding the go-kart frame. We all sat in the seat for a minute, stunned into silence. Rachel still had her foot on the gas as the back wheels spun and the engine whirred. I was afraid I may have broken a bone, but I was thankful when everything still worked and came out somewhat unscathed.

After the shock of wrecking, I looked over to see Nick with blood pouring across his mouth. His lip was severely busted, and a tooth was loose. When we wrecked, his face met the steering wheel. Rachel seemed to be unscathed. Nick got out of the go-kart and looked down at his black shirt, which now had dark streaks on the front due to the blood.

“Whoa,” Nick exclaimed. Instead of crying, he looked almost impressed with himself.

I took off my shirt and handed it to Nick, “Here, put this up against your lip and hold it tight,” I said. “I’ll see if I can start the go-kart.” We pulled the cart out of the culvert and tried to start it, but with no luck. I pulled on the drawstring, but the engine wouldn’t crank. The next priority was to get Nick home.

I looked at the go-kart engine, then looked at Rachel, and we made eye contact. She looked over everything and said, “Can you stay here and watch the go-kart? I’ll walk back with Nick and get Roger to come and pick it up.” If their stepdad freaked out over some spilled milk on the table, who knows what would happen when he found out about this go-kart?

“Sure, should we say I was driving?” I asked. I figured if it was me driving, she might get a less harsh sentence.

“No, I’ll tell Roger the truth.”

Rachel was braver than me, that’s for sure. So, she walked off with Nick, and I waited.

I waited for around an hour. Finally, Roger and Rachel showed up. Roger assessed the damage, “So, you drove a little too fast, huh?” he said, nonplussed. I was shocked he wasn’t upset. I looked over to Rachel, and she shrugged her shoulders. We lifted the go-kart into his truck and then headed to their house. As we pulled into our street, I saw that Mom’s car was home. A sense of dread came over me. I had to give a talk to her that I didn’t really practice for.

I walked into the house shirtless, “Where have you been, and where’s your shirt?” Mom asked.

I told her the story, with a few changes, of course. I had only just gone out with them when the wreck happened. “Well, you got a phone call from Dylan, and I want to hear your talk, so get ready,” she said.

“OK, let me have a shower, and then you can listen to my talk,” I said, stalling.

“Well, you’re lucky you’re alive; I don’t want you riding that go-kart if they get it working,” Mom added.

“OK Mom,” I said. I headed for the shower and tried to memorize my talk while showering.

Good evening

Today, we'll be reading Matthew 5: 1 -14

Sermon on The Mount

Advice from Jesus

READ VERSES

CLOSING

My favorite verses 4 – 5

OK to be sad.

Meek will inherit Earth.

Revelation 2: 1-4

Soon, the wicked system will end.

We will live in paradise.

Thank you.

I repeated it over and over again. I got out of the shower and dried off. Put on some clothes and walked over to my Mom, her Bible in hand. “OK so like, this is what I was going to say” I said then began my talk.

I quickly gave an intro about how I was happy to talk about this Bible scripture and then read the verses. Once I was done with reading the verses, I closed with my analysis that Jesus was promising that we would all live on a paradise earth soon. Then I referenced some verses in Revelation about how Jehovah would wipe tears from our eyes. Then I ended the talk saying Jesus gives us the ultimate advice on how to live forever.

I finished proud of my winging abilities, especially after a crash. “You didn’t use your hands at all, and you used the word especially too much at the front ” Mom offered as a critique. “Other than that, it was pretty good. Just make sure to practice a few more times,’ ‘ she finished. I went back to my room to practice. After three times, I had it timed at five minutes and removed the “especiallys.” Dad arrived home at around six. Usually, we’d have a little study to go over everything. Since Dad was late, it meant we needed to eat, get ready, and then leave.

Dad and Josiah took showers, and then we ate. I had already ironed my suit. It was a 1960s Mod suite that was a light brown color. The color of a brown suitcase from that era. It was a simple cotton two-piece suit; the jacket had two brown buttons. The pants were straight and slim. On the inside of the jacket was a patch on the breast pocket that said, "Levi's Action Suit." It fits tight to me, and I paired it with a thin brown tie. I always felt like I looked like an eccentric college basketball coach in it. It was also a little alternative for my fellow Jehovah's Witnesses, who dressed in more modern suits that were double-breasted and made of silky-looking polyester.

I got dressed and then put on my penny loafers. I went to Dad's coin jar and fished out two dull pennies, and placed them into the top of my shoes for good luck.

I replayed my talk in my head and started to get a little nervous. I really didn't do much preparation or practice, but it was in the main hall. Dad was running late to get ready, which was a rare occasion. By about 7:10, we got in the car, and Dad rushed to the Kingdom Hall. We made it by 7:25. The parking lot had a few more cars than usual. As we walked in, we noticed about 20 strangers in the two back rows. Brother Duckworth walked up to me before I could get a good look at the strangers.

Brother Duckworth was one of the top elders in the church and one of the wealthiest. His construction company was lucrative and was called Kenny's Kunstruction Kompany. His first name was Kenny. He also had two giant black labs named Amos and Andy, which raised many eyebrows from the black members of the hall. When Steve complained about it, I asked what the big deal was. He explained how Amos and Andy were characters from a show in the 40s called Amos and Andy. A show where white people pretended to be black and acted in obnoxious and offensive ways. It was hard to justify, especially given the name of his construction company. The dogs also seemed to be unusually antagonistic towards black families in the hall.

Brother Duckworth was serious and straightforward. Tall and balding on top with a tuft of short blond hair in a combover. He had a

wispy mustache across his lip. He looked a bit like the bald character from the board game Guess Who if he had a comb-over.

“Brother Burger” he said in a deep voice. “The local college sent their religious studies students here to take notes on our meeting. We thought it might be better to just have everything in the main hall for them. Would you mind still giving your talk?” he asked.

Before I could answer, Mom answered for me, “He’s got a great talk ready, don’t you, Jonathan?” Brother Duckworth looked at me, and I nodded my head in agreement despite my brain telling me not to.

I looked over at the students, of which a few were attractive young women. Why did I agree to this? *Fuck*.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, “Well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Big Shot,” Dylan said with a smile. Word got around fast when anything new or unusual was happening.

“Dude, I have to give a talk in front of everyone,” I shot back.

“Well, don’t look at me ‘cause I’m gonna try to make you laugh,” he said with a chuckle. A common game we played when our friends gave talks.

“How was skydiving?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

Dylan’s eyes went wide, “It was awesome! Miles jumped out a few times. If I can get Dad to agree, I’m going to try to do it.”

“You’re crazy,” I said.

“Well, I’ll let you prepare. Good luck, I’m going back to my seat. Make sure to look at me,” Dylan said, then turned around and walked to his seat just two rows in front of the students.

Now I was really nervous. I sat in my seat, reviewing my outline and going over the words in my head. My family sat down beside me, and the meeting began. Brother Duckworth started the meeting and announced the new visitors and the new format for the Theocratic Ministry School. Then we sang a song, and Brother Duckworth gave a prayer.

The ministry school began. It started with a 15-minute talk about how Ezekial is still relevant in modern times. It was given by Brother Duckworth’s youngest son. A dweeb in training named Jim. Jim was around 20 years old and did everything by the book. I didn’t

pay attention to his talk. Instead, I just repeated my talk in my head and read the Bible scriptures assigned. Soon enough, I heard the clapping of the audience. One more talk than I'm up.

The next talk was by Brother Gannon. A young brother who moved to the area from the northwest. He loved basketball and drinking wine. He was also a decent speaker, but I didn't have time to listen. Soon enough, I'd be speaking to around 100 people. Brother Gannon finished his talk, and everyone began to clap. Next up was me. Brother Duckworth got up to the stand, "OK, next up is a young brother who has shown great potential as a speaker. Brother Jonathan Burger will give a talk on Matthew 5: 1 – 14." He then began to walk off the stage.

I got up and shuffled past Mom and Dad, walking up to the lectern. It was a brown oak stand with a microphone at the top. I placed my outline on the lectern so I could see it. I looked over the crowd. Dylan made eye contact with me, and I quickly looked away. I noticed Lynna in the audience, who was paying full attention, her eyes sparkling as I looked down on her. I averted my eyes so I wouldn't freeze. I took a breath and then began to speak in a nervous voice.

"Uh.. Good evening, I'm happy to talk to you tonight about Matthew 5:1-14. Um, this was the .. uh.. start of the Sermon on the Mount and in these scriptures Jesus gives us especially good advice. If you can, open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5 and follow along with me as I read these important scriptures."

I moved my hands around every few seconds to match what I was saying. Then I started to read from the Bible,

"1. When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 Then he opened his mouth and began teaching them, saying:

3 "Happy are those conscious of their spiritual need since the Kingdom of the heavens belongs to them.

4 "Happy are those who mourn since they will be comforted.

5 “Happy are the mild-tempered since they will inherit the earth.

6 “Happy are those hungering and thirsting for righteousness since they will be filled.

7 “Happy are the merciful since they will be shown mercy.

8 “Happy are the pure in heart since they will see God.

9 “Happy are the peacemakers since they will be called sons of God.

10 “Happy are those who have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake since the Kingdom of the heavens belongs to them.

11 “Happy are you when people reproach you and persecute you and lyingly say every sort of wicked thing against you for my sake.

12 Rejoice and be overjoyed, since your reward is great in the heavens, for in that way, they persecuted the prophets prior to you.

13 “You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its strength, how will its saltiness be restored? It is no longer usable for anything except to be thrown outside to be trampled on by men.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city cannot be hidden when located on a mountain.

That was great, wasn’t it? You know what, though? I want to take you back to verses 4 and 5. Let’s read those again, shall we?

4 “Happy are those who mourn since they will be comforted.

5 “Happy are the mild-tempered since they will inherit the earth.

By the time I finished reading the Bible portion, I started to feel normal. No more “ums” or “uhhs.” I began to close my talk making eye contact with some of the newcomers in the crowd. I noticed many were taking notes.

“Isn’t that comforting? Happy are those who mourn because they will be comforted. Jehovah will comfort us, and it’s OK to mourn. Then, in verse 5, we see that happy are the mild tempered, for they shall inherit the earth. If we stick to Jehovah’s principles, we will inherit the earth. It won’t be easy because we will mourn, won’t

we? But it's worth it because what is awaiting us on this earth we inherit?

Turn your Bibles to Revelation 21:4. It reads:

With that, I heard a loud voice from the throne say: "Look! The tent of God is with mankind, and he will reside with them, and they will be his people. And God himself will be with them. 4 And he will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be anymore. The former things have passed away."

That's right, every tear will be wiped away, and death will be no more.

We'll be living in a paradise earth. Jesus gives us the ultimate advice here on how to live forever.

Thank you"

I stepped away from the lectern as the crowd started to clap. It was an enthusiastic clap, so I was relieved. I made my way to my seat and then looked up at Brother Duckworth, who was about to give me his verdict.

He began to speak while looking at me, "Well, it was a little choppy to start, huh? No wonder with such a big crowd, even I'm nervous." he smiled warmly as he said this. "But you soon got into your rhythm. It was a great talk, and you really tried to use hand gestures. For that, I'm giving you an A. One thing to keep in mind is that you didn't utilize the full 5 minutes, so just make sure to think about that. OK, let's move on to Brother Burnett," he continued to talk, moving on to the next speaker. I stopped listening. My talk wasn't five minutes because of the nerves. For the remainder of the school, I zoned out and let my heart rate slow down. All in all, a good result.

Once the theocratic ministry school was done, it was time for the Kingdom Ministry. This was a monthly booklet that covered more broad topics. Things like "The Bible: Its Power In Your Life" where it asks you numerous questions about how the Bible can help people in their lives. There would be two 15-minute talks going over a topic in it. These talks were usually snooze fests. The battle was not getting

caught snoozing. For me, I was still buzzed by the talk in front of such a large crowd.

Brother Rumsvelt was a recently baptized brother who had studied with the Witness at the age of 60. He was extremely eager to spread his faith. He gave the first talk about the power of the Bible in our lives. He used himself as an example of how the Bible can change a man's life before he was living in sin and unemployed. Now, thanks to Jehovah and the Bible, he had structure and a job. It was a job for an elder in the hall who was notorious for underpaying his employees. Eventually, he ended the talk, and everyone clapped. That's when I made my move. I went to the bathroom.

I parked in the last stall, closing the door. Pulling my pants down, I sat on the stall, pretending to poop. The bathroom was empty. I was staring at my hand when the bathroom door opened, and a familiar pair of shoes came walking in and went to the urinal. "Nice talk, hot shot." As I guessed, it was Dylan.

"I was just happy I didn't choke," I said back, staring at the tiles.

"The sky diving might be easier," he said with a chuckle, and then he flushed the toilet. The door opened, and a pair of white dress shoes walked through the urinal. The tap turned on, and Dylan pulled the towels from the dispenser. He threw them in the trash and then walked out the door.

I decided it was about time my parents might get suspicious of me being in the bathroom too long. So, I got up and flushed the toilet. I washed my hands and then walked to my seat.

I had managed to miss most of the second talk. It was being given by a Brother Stants. He was part of a large black family that was all baptized and active Jehovah's Witnesses. They were well respected across the area. He was the patriarch of the family and a good speaker, but tonight, the mixture of nerves and boredom left me largely in my own head. Before I knew it, the talk was over, and Brother Stants was leaving the stage. The audience clapped, and then Brother Duckworth came to the podium. "For our final talk, Brother Kashnur will be giving the special needs talk, youths, act according to the Bible."

The local needs talk nine out of ten times was just a generic talk about some subject like showing more love to your neighbor. But that one time, it will be about something troubling that happened in the church or some witness who sinned. Brother Kashnur came to the stage. He started his talk by saying, "We know that the youth of today face difficult challenges. Music videos that show sex and drugs are appealing. Movies that glorify adultery and violence. Schools that want to corrupt our children. It's easy for our youth to get dragged into wanting to be like the youth of the world. They may even want to go on dates, but the Bible shows that marriage is for adults. Let's turn to the scriptures," he continued, but I was embarrassed and couldn't pay attention. I glanced over at Lynna, who looked mortified.

Dad looked annoyed, and Mom sat straight-faced, paying attention to the talk, nodding her head in agreement with every word.

Brother Kashnur continued, "We see how Jehovah views this. If our children try to date, it could lead to immorality and bad habits. So, what can we do to ensure we're focused on Jehovah?" He then went on to explain how we should be out in the preaching work and focused on studying Jehovah's Witness' literature. The worst about these talks is that no one knew anyone did anything until a talk like this happened. Then, the speculation would begin. Eventually, everyone would know the story because of an Elder or the elder's spouse letting the cat out of the bag. I was worried about Lynna; I was never in any big trouble over it as the boy. It was expected we would get into trouble. Women, however, were always supposed to be chaste and proper.

By the end of the talk, I felt deflated and worried my parents might try to retroactively punish me. Worst of all, I probably wouldn't be going over to Lynna's anytime soon. When the final song and prayer were over, Dad let us know he was tired and wanted to get home early. We tried making our way to the exit. As I was walking past the students, a young male student stopped me, "I liked your talk. Do you have to do that often?"

"I... uh, I do it sometimes. Tonight was a little different," I sputtered out.

"You could say that," he said.

Then a young woman came up next to him, “Oh, I’ve got a question, do you *really* believe you’re going to live on a paradise earth?” it was clear she thought we were weird.

“You don’t have to answer that,” the male student said. The woman looked embarrassed, realizing she was too forward.

“It’s OK. I do believe I’ll be on a paradise earth,” I replied with confidence.

Since there were some elders around and Mom was next to me, this would earn me points. I turned around and began walking towards Dad, who was heading out the door. As I walked out the door, Mom caught up to me, “I’m proud of you, Jon.”

During the car ride home, there wasn’t much conversation. Mom eventually turned around and said, “So, Jon, I thought your talk was good, but you could have slowed down like Brother Duckworth said. Those students were impressed. One day, you’re going to make a good elder or even go to Bethel.”

Bethel was the dream of every Jehovah’s Witness. The headquarters of the Witnesses were in New York City and called Bethel. If you were faithful enough, you could work there for free in exchange for room and board. Usually doing jobs like cleaning or fixing things on the premises. Like the talks, Bethel was Mom’s dream, not mine. “Thanks, Mom,” I said as I watched the streetlights streak by the car window. I wondered what Lynna's ride home was like.

Chapter 7

Hall Builds

A month passed. The same routine. Work, field service, meetings, friends, and repeat. My brother and the surfer brother Miles were hanging out more. Dylan wasn't brave enough to jump out of the plane, and Miles was a little too quiet and sensitive when not doing something extreme. My jealousy of their friendship lasted a whole two weeks until Dylan got bored. Lynna and I had set up a nice routine of talking on the phone at 11:30 at night. Since both of our parents went to bed before 11 and we had cordless phones, that meant we could talk without prying ears.

We had created a pretty ingenious plan. On meeting nights, we'd let each other know which nights we would talk. On the night of the call, I'd countdown the seconds. With 10 seconds to 11, I'd dial. Hitting the last number at 11:29:29. We each had a working watch and synchronized them. This way, the phone could be picked up right when it rang, ensuring her parents wouldn't hear the phone. Typically, I called her since her parents only had one phone.

We'd talk for hours about anything and everything. Sometimes, we'd tune the radio to the alternative rock station and listen along, discussing which songs we liked and which we didn't. Mostly, though, we listened to No Doubt's "Tragic Kingdom." Singing "Spiderwebs" or dramatically singing to the end of "The Climb" flirting with the risk of one of our parents hearing us. Then we'd laugh and talk about how we were going to see them in concert. Tonight, though, I was hoping to tell Lynna about a new scheme to see each other. This one was pretty much foolproof. All she had to do was convince her mom to go to a nearby "hall build."

The "hall build" was one of the few uniquely fun things Jehovah's Witnesses did. Well, it's fun if you don't mind a little work mixed in. It was a three-to-four-day period where around 200 witnesses would get together and build a new Kingdom Hall. A well-built one, too! In order to achieve this, they needed locals who were talented in the building trade. Dad was one of the better brick masons in the area, which meant he was invited to most of them and even

helped organize hall builds. Sometimes, we'd drive hours to other states, allowing my brother and I to meet lots of different Witnesses.

We also were part of a little artistic clique that would meet at night in the parking lot. We'd all sit around a fire, bringing our guitars and other instruments and putting on a show for the locals. This gave us a bit of VIP status there. Most of the weekends, my brother and I would walk around talking to different people we knew and pitching in here and there. One thing we learned quickly was how easy it was to get lost in the crowd while 200 people were trying to build a church in one weekend.

It wouldn't be difficult for Lynna and me to hide in plain sight at a hall build. This hall build was in Charlotte, which would mean lots of people going. This could be a game-changer! I was sitting in my room looking at my watch. Two minutes to 11:30. Time moved slowly as each second ticked away. Finally, at 11:29:45, I began to dial. As soon as the clock turned to 11:30:00, I hit the last number. The phone started to ring, but it was busy. I called again, and it was busy. My heart started beating faster. Was her mom on the phone? This late? We had a contingency plan for this. I'd wait for five minutes and then call again.

I waited for 11:34:50 and began to dial. It began to ring. After a half second, I heard someone pick up, "Hello?" Lynna whispered.

"It's me," I said. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Mom went to the bathroom, so I kept the phone off the hook," she explained. I was impressed as that was smart indeed.

"What are you doing this weekend?" I asked.

"I was going to hang out with Maria."

"See if she'll take you to the hall build this weekend," I suggested.

"Hmmm... maybe we'll do that. What's in it for me?" she teased.

"Well, someone who likes you will be there," I playfully said back.

"And who would that be?" she asked. I began to sing the lyrics of No Doubt, "Don't speak, I know what you're saying."

“Jonathan, are you on the phone?” Mom's voice came from behind the door, snapping my attention away from Lynna. Suddenly, the door was open, and Mom was standing in her nightgown, looking sleepy. Why do parents always seem to have a sixth sense when their kids are up to no good? I was caught red-handed.

I said in a loud voice so Lynna could hear me, “Just talking with Dylan and joking around.”

“Well tell him goodbye and give me the phone you need to be in bed” she ordered.

“Bye, Dylan; Mom says I have to get off the phone. Don't forget about the hall build,” I said.

I heard a whispered laugh, and then Lynna said, “Sweet dreams, Jon.” I hung up the phone and handed it to Mom.

I really should be in bed; tomorrow was the first day of the hall build. We'd leave around 7:30, but in usual Dad fashion, I'm sure I'd be up by six. I went to sleep, looking forward to having fun over the weekend.

To my surprise, Dad woke me up at seven, “Rise and shine, Jon, get ready for the hall build.” I wiped my eyes and then made some cereal to eat in the kitchen. My brother was already up and dressed.

“Let's go, fool; we're ready when you are,” he said, half joking.

“Calm down,” I said back in a sleepy tone. I ate and then decided what to wear.

Dressing for the hall build was just like dressing for school. I couldn't wear any wide-leg jeans or band T-shirts, but I could still make a statement. I grabbed some baggy khaki cargo pants, some Vans shoes I didn't mind getting a little dirty, and an oversized vintage t-shirt. At most hall builds, everyone is dressed in work clothes. There was a small contingency that dressed alternative, and my goal was to associate myself with that crowd.

I grabbed my guitar and put it in the back of the truck, then my brother and I packed into the truck. Dad drove us to the hall build. Once we arrived Dad commenced with his usual ritual and made his way to the porta-potties. As he walked off, he said, “You boys behave and find me at the brick line.”

We were parked in a field about 20 yards from the site where the Kingdom Hall was going up. This would likely be turned into an asphalt parking lot on Monday. Most volunteers had to park in another field about 100 yards away, but since Dad was helping run the brick crew, one of the most expensive and important aspects of the building, we got to park closer on-site.

The porta potties were at the edge of the site on the far north end. We were on the south end, so we made our way to the food tent which was nearby. It was a large white canvas tent, so it was easy to spot.

The food tent was the most popular spot on a hall build. It was a somewhat large catering tent that could fit around 30 people in it at a time. In the middle was a line of four long tables. Behind the tables were ten women who were cooking eggs, bacon, fried ham, biscuits, sausage gravy, and grits on gas stoves. A line of men and women were walking along the tables buffet style, adding what they wanted to their plates. There was a small service entrance on the side of the tent. We walked past the line to the service area.

“Hi, Sister Martin. Could we get a plate for our Dad?”

Sister Martin was at almost every hall build in the area. She was in charge of catering for the volunteers. She had dyed blond hair with streaks of gray in it and a weathered face. She was short and stout. She was probably in her 50s but looked more like she was in her 60s. This job meant working 12-hour days, but it also made her one of the most important people on the site. Thankfully, she didn't let this go to her head and had a soft spot for our Dad.

“Where is Nevada?” she asked.

“He's checking out the site,” my brother said quickly. Dad was likely still in the porta-potty.

“OK, well, you tell him to come see Sister Martin when he has time. Grab some plates and get what you like. You boys stay out of trouble,” she said, winking.

I liked Sister Martin; she never gave me a hard time and seemed to encourage me to be mischievous. Before we could get food, she stopped us, “Am I going to see you two tonight at the campfire?” Sister Martin asked in a serious tone.

“Yea! I brought my guitar.”

“Good,” Sister Martin responded. “Now go,” she said, then tussled my hair. My brother and I piled food on our plates.

The day before, the wooden frame had gone up on the foundation. Today, it was ready for the brick to start going up. We headed towards the frame. We spotted Dad with a coffee in his hand, talking to Brother DeRijk, the head of brick crews for our region, on the side of the building.

Josiah took Dad’s plate and his plate and headed towards Dad and Brother DeRijk. Brother DeRijk was almost 80 years old and had three sons who also laid bricks. He was a master bricklayer. He was Danish and old as an oak tree, but he seemed to be just as strong. He looked a bit like Lloyd Bridges from Airplane. Dad was like his fourth son.

I grabbed a masonry block that was lying around and sat down on it to eat food. I scanned the area, looking for old faces but taking note of the new ones. My eyes stopped at an interesting site. A teenage girl who had a short pixie haircut, jet black colored hair, a black leather jacket, jean shorts cut off at the knees, and a pair of black Doc Martens. She was drinking a coffee and standing next to a man who appeared to be her dad. We made eye contact; she didn’t look impressed and began talking to her dad. She looked like she could be in a Bikini Kill video. Certainly, someone on my list to talk to.

I finished my food and then joined my brother in helping Dad and the other brick mason’s setup. Thankfully, there was no shortage of help. My brother and I arranged the mud buckets where the bricks would be set up. Then, we organized the helpers and got them working. In about 10 minutes, everything was ready. I was deciding what to do next when I got a tap on my shoulder.

When I turned around, it was Brittany, a girl a year younger than me who harbored a crush on my brother. She was short and tomboyish, wearing overalls and a long-sleeved shirt under it. She had short, sandy blond hair and big brown eyes. “Heya Jon, is your brother here?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’s around here somewhere; want to go look for him?” She smiled, nodded her head yes, and we took off.

“Let’s go inside; maybe he’s in there,” she suggested. So, we headed to the entrance of the hall and walked inside the frame. Inside was a hustle of people hammering and nailing studs, getting drywall organized to be hung later, and picking up trash. We made our way into the main hall and looked around. A few men were on stilts checking out the braces for the ceiling. We made our way to the backrooms. In the first room, two men were discussing the next steps for the room. Then we went to the next one, which was empty. The windows in the front of the room hadn’t been cut out yet, so the room looked like a really big closet. I walked over to the end of the room and sat down with my back against the wall. Brittany grabbed a block of wood laid on the ground and began to toss it in the air and catch it.

“You going to the campfire tonight?” Brittany asked. “I am, and I brought my guitar.”

“Cool,” she said, focused on the wood block.

“Brother Burger and Sister McRea, what are you two doing back here?” a deep voice came from the doorway. I looked up to see Steve with a big giant grin on his face. Brittany was distracted and missed catching her wooden block, which almost landed on her face.

“Steve, what’s up?!” I was surprised to see him. He didn’t make it to many hall builds, which would make this one even more fun. “Are you here the whole weekend?” I asked.

“You know it,” he said back. “I’ll be here all weekend too, and Lynna might be coming.” Steve put his hands together, rubbing them while tilting his head, making an exaggerated huff, and then said, “Ohhhh, it’s on like neckbone,” then laughed.

“Who is Lynna?” Brittany asked.

“Oh, it’s Jon’s new girrrlfriend” Steve said mockingly.

“We’re not boyfriend and girlfriend,” I shot back. Brittany was usually cool, but you never know what rumor can get around.

“Oooo, you gotta a big crush, huh?” Brittany said, laughing and pointing at me.

“Not as big a crush as you have on Josiah,” I said in a sarcastic tone.

“Take that back,” she said, turning red.

“If we find him, maybe I can convince him to give you a kiss,” I said, raising my eyebrows.

“Ohhhhh snap,” Steve said in a dramatic tone.

Brittany clinched her fists, walked up to me, looked up, and said in an angry voice, “Take it back.”

“Are you gonna try to kiss me, too?” I asked, laughing. I looked over at Steve, who was starting to laugh out loud. Suddenly, I felt a sting on my face and saw a bright light. Brittany had slapped me straight on the face and hard. I was stunned. Steve was doubled over laughing and almost fell to the ground.

“What the hell was that for?” I asked, not believing what just happened.

She marched off, but before she could get to the exit, my brother appeared in the doorway. “Hey Brittany,” my brother said with a smile. She turned beat red and pushed right past him without saying a word.

“What was that about?” my brother asked.

Steve tried to respond, “He...he.... I can’t.” Steve laughed harder now. “She slapped the bejeezus out of your brother,” he finally spat out.

“What? Why?” Joe said in shock.

“Because he said he was going to get you to kiss Brittany,” Steve said, sitting down and laughing even more. I was still in disbelief.

“Yeah, I made a joke, and she just slapped me.”

“Well, you push things too far sometimes, Jon. You’re lucky you don’t have a black eye,” Joe chastised me. This was true, I had taken it too far. “You want to come with me and help do some drywall?” Josiah asked Steve and me.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m going to walk around for a bit,” I said.

“Come on, fool, I’ll go with you,” Steve said, then he got up and walked out with my brother.

I walked around pretending to be busy. If a brother or sister asked what I was doing, I made up a story about running an errand for Dad. That day, everyone focused on their work and left me alone.

I ran into a few regulars and talked to them for a while; by then, it was lunchtime.

I walked back to the brick area to check in on Dad. He was laying bricks and had around four middle-aged women around him laughing at every joke. This was a common scene at hall builds. Dad attracted middle-aged women like bees to pollen. I wouldn't call it flirting exactly, but there was no doubt that some of the women had big crushes on my Dad. I made my way to him.

"Hey, Dad, do you want any lunch? Also, don't forget to let *Mom* know I'm spending the night with Dylan," I said, putting extra emphasis on the word Mom. Just in case Dad forgot to mention her to one of these women.

"This is my son, Jon," he said, introducing me to his new fanbase.

"Hi," I said sheepishly. The women smiled and said their hellos.

"I'll get some lunch later, don't worry about me," Dad said.

"OK, I'll check back later," I responded.

"OK, son, stay out of trouble," Dad said with a billowing laugh, causing the women around him to smile and laugh. He got back to talking to the gaggle of women around him.

I walked towards the food tent. This time, I decided to keep it fair and stand in line. For lunch today, we had BBQ, Mac n' Cheese, green beans, and Hawaiian rolls. At the far end of the table were desserts. I spotted the banana pudding immediately. I stacked my plate with BBQ and fixings and then got a separate plate for the banana pudding. I grabbed a bucket and got a spot about five yards away from the tent where I could watch the line. I started eating, then looked up to see the mystery girl in the leather jacket walking towards me with a plate of food in her hand.

She walked up, smiled, asking, "Mind if I grab a bucket and eat with you?"

"Sure, I'm Jon," I said to her.

"Hi, I'm Claudia."

I was getting nervous. Very rarely did girls my age ever initiate conversations at a hall build. "So, what hall do you go to?" she asked next.

“I go to Gastonia South, about 30 minutes away from here; what about you?”

“I go to the Albemarle Hall.”

“I like your leather jacket, Claudia.”

“Thanks,” she responded. We then began to exchange what hobbies and music we were into. She was into reading feminist zines and liked female singers I hadn’t heard of, like Ani DeFranco and KD Lang. I pretended to have knowledge of them, shaking my head in approval as she listed them off. Claudia was also one year older than me and didn’t hide her disdain for the religion. Her dad made her come to the hall build, and she didn’t know anyone.

“Well, now you know me,” I said.

She smiled and said, “Thanks, dude.”

“So, see any hot chicks?” she said matter-of-factly. I froze and turned red. “Chill out dude; I don’t like you. I’m just genuinely curious,” she said reassuringly. I liked how candid she was, so I decided to be candid myself.

“There’s a girl I like coming tomorrow; I know most of the girls here, but I’m not really interested in them,” I said.

“Well, well, well... you’ll have to introduce me, and I’ll tell you what I think of her. If you’re lucky, I’ll give you a song or two you can use to get her to like you back,” she said with a confidence I rarely saw in girls, even at school.

“I’ll come find you tomorrow for sure. Are you going to be here tonight? We all play guitar and sing around a campfire. You should come,” I told her.

“Afraid not, I’ll just be here tomorrow. Maybe I’ll bring you a whole mixtape. If you’re lucky,” she said casually while getting up and turning away. “See you around, Jon,” she said, then walked away. I liked Claudia immediately; she seemed too cool to be at a hall build. There was something about her, though, that was different. I didn’t have a crush on her, but I admired her. I knew she was honest when she said she didn’t like me, and I was fine with that. It made a friendship with a girl much easier.

I was curious about Claudia meeting Lynna. I had a feeling they’d get along. As I finished my banana pudding, I saw Brittany

making her way to me; she was walking up to me slowly with a hangdog look on her face.

She put her hand up and started to talk, “Hey Jon, I’m really sorry for hitting you. That wasn’t nice of me.” Her voice was sad and wracked with guilt.

“Ah, it’s OK, Brittany. I shouldn’t have been making fun of you.” Her slap didn’t leave a mark and only stung a little; the shock was the most memorable aspect of it.

“Really? Thanks, Jon. I feel really bad about it,” she said sheepishly.

“Good, I hope you felt really bad about it,” nudging her shoulder while laughing.

“Shut up,” she said, letting out a little giggle. “Who was the girl in the leather jacket? It’s like 90 degrees out.”

“Her name’s Claudia. She was really cool, actually. She may even give me a mixed tape.”

“Oh, do you two like each other?” Brittany asked now in a mocking tone.

“No, it’s not like that. Anyways, where are you working this afternoon?”

“Roofing. Dad said I could help him,” she said, bragging a bit.

“Can I come?” I asked excitedly. Roofing was a fun job. You have to be on roof number one. Number two, sometimes you have to use a nail gun. Most of the time, though, it was just setting roofing shingles up to be nailed down.

“Sure, let’s go,” Brittany said, walking towards the entrance of the hall. We found a ladder on the side of the wooden frame and began to climb.

In a few minutes, we were walking along the spine of the roof. A 25-foot drop on either side. Brittany’s dad was a roofer, and his whole family helped him with the family business. She was practically born on a roof. So, she skipped along the spine. I took more sure steps and was extremely focused on not falling.

“You scared up here?” Brittany asked, giggling and pointing while walking backward.

“Yeah, some of us didn’t grow up dancing on roofs.” Finally, we made it to our destination; she stopped in front of her dad.

“You two get me those roofing shingles lined up along the spine here,” he pointed with his nail gun at a line drawn on the OSB board along the spine. We grabbed a hammer and nails and then began to lightly nail the shingles down. We worked for around an hour in the hot sun, nailing shingles down in preparation for her dad to shoot them with this nail gun. Unfortunately, there was no nail gun for me today. Brittany's Dad decided it was time for a water break, and Brittany and I both obliged.

“Well, that’s enough roofing for me; I’ll see you later,” I said to Brittany once we were off the roof and drinking some water. I was done with work. I walked back to Dad’s truck, grabbed a bucket out of the back, and had a rest. The rest of the day, I walked about and then spent some time with Steve and Dylan.

At the end of the workday, I said bye to Dad, and then I grabbed my guitar out of the truck before he left and met up with Dylan again. We made our way to the food camp, ate dinner, and then found the cream-colored camper where we were meeting up to play music. The camper looked more like an oversized tent on wheels, a square-shaped metal frame with a canvas tent jutting out of it. In front of it was a large dirt area with a campfire in the middle that was already blazing.

There were about six people in lawn chairs and a few more sitting in the dirt. Two had guitars. One was Sister Martin, who played on a 1964 cherry red Gibson Hummingbird. The body of the guitar had faded to its original wood color on the top and bottom edges of the body from years of play. She could play bluegrass and folk exceptionally well. The other with a guitar was Micheal. He played on a Guild D40 that was naturally colored with a tortoise-colored pickguard on the front of it. He went to a hall in Shelby, the city next to my hometown, home of the Cleveland Mall. He was around 30 years old, clean-cut and thin, carrying himself more like a hippie than a witness. He also was a good guitarist who could play lead on almost anything.

We sat down, and everyone nodded to each other. I pulled my guitar out of its case. My guitar was a natural-colored Takamine EF508; I had bought it from a pawnshop for about \$300 with the money I had saved up the previous Summer. It was the nicest guitar I owned and sounded much better than the cheap beater acoustic guitar I started on. The strings on the beater guitar set a few inches above the neck, forcing you to press down with the grip of a rock climber and causing buzzing noises as you strum. The Takamine was smooth and clear sounding.

I asked Micheal to play the bottom E string, and he obliged and struck the string with his guitar pick. I tuned my guitar to his. "Wish You Were Here?" Micheal asked.

Sister Martin nodded her head yes, and I said, "Sure."

"A 1, a 2, a 3, and a 4." Then Micheal began the lead section of the song, and Sister Martin and I came in on rhythm. G to Em, then A to Em, then back to G. All playing in harmony. Alternating verses, myself and the others around the fire would sing in harmony along with Micheal. At the end we played an extended version alternating our cadences, three slightly different rhythms playing in harmony to a unique coda. A truly spiritual experience.

We finished the song and spent the rest of the night singing and playing, with breaks of stories and laughter in between. By the end of the night, we had 12 people around the fire; a bottle of moonshine had shown up and was passed around. Dylan and I were allowed to have a swig. I took as big of a swig as I could and swallowed, almost spitting it back. It was like drinking rubbing alcohol, burning like a fire going down my throat. A few minutes later, I felt hot, and my face was flushed. Everyone seemed just a little bit happier, and we played looser.

Dylan and I decided to spend the night on the dirt floor. We both had extra clothes with us, and there were small showers on the grounds. Dylan also had good news; his sister confirmed that Lynna was coming with Maria on Saturday. I went to sleep happier than I'd ever been in a witness environment.

We spent the night on the hard ground with coats as pillows. Saturday morning, I woke up to the sound of hammers and engines

starting. Dylan was still asleep, his arms wrapped tightly around himself. I grabbed my clothes, took a shower, got dressed, and headed to the breakfast tent. I was hungry but moved slowly, my back hurting from sleeping on the stiff ground. Breakfast was pancakes, waffles, eggs, bacon, and biscuits. Yummy. I walked up to Sister Martin, hoping to cut in line. "And what do you think you're doing?" she asked with a serious tone.

"I was hoping to get some breakfast."

"Let me think about it," she joked and then looked me up and down.

"OK, grab what you want but be fast about it."

"Thanks, Sister Martin." I really was thankful I didn't have to stand in line. I got my food and made my way back to Dylan.

Dylan was just waking up as I was sitting down to eat. "Oh dude, did you get me any food?" he asked, still half asleep.

"The early bird gets the worm," I said, pointing my fork to the sky, finishing off with, "Get your own breakfast."

"Dude, you know Sister Martin won't let me cut in line; she barely even knows me," Dylan said now more seriously.

"Well, maybe you should have gotten to know her better," I responded back, shoving a piece of pancake into my mouth. Dylan grumbled and stood up, stretching.

He yawned, then said, "Well, I'm gonna have a shower and then get some food. Meet up where your Dad is in an hour?" it sounded like less of a request and more of a demand.

"OK, good luck," I said with a mouthful of food.

After eating, I decided to look for Lynna. I walked around the site and parking lot, but Lynna was nowhere to be found. I stopped by and said hello to Brittany, who was wearing a different pair of overalls and a short-sleeved shirt. She had decided against working on the roof and was instead going to help her mom with the painting inside. This was another job I'd check in on as sometimes they had the paint machines with spray guns to quickly paint the base coat. Basically, any gun-related tool was usually the most fun.

I made my way to Dad, who already had a crowd around him. Three women and one of Brother DeRijk's sons, Hans. Hans was tall,

muscular, and blond with a serious look. He had short-cropped blond hair and bright blue eyes. He could be a European boxer Rocky faces in a movie, the one who never smiles or laughs. Only focused on pummeling Rocky's face with his gloves. However, this morning, he was smiling and laughing as Dad let out a deep belly laugh at whatever subject they were discussing. I started piling bricks in advance, knowing how Dad preferred things set up. Within about 30 minutes, Dylan showed up. "Hey, good news, Lynna and Maria are here. I just saw her after I finished eating. She was headed towards the food tent."

"Let's go," I said enthusiastically; someone else could help my Dad.

"Where are you guys going?" I heard my brother's voice come from behind.

"To meet Lynna and Maria," I said to him, turning to face him.

"I'm going too," he said excitedly. We made our way to the food tent.

Once we got to the food tent, we looked around, but Lynna was nowhere to be seen. "Are you sure they were coming here?" my brother asked.

"Yes, I told you I ran into them. They said they were coming here," Dylan responded.

"Well, they ain't here," Joe said, rolling his eyes.

I looked around the tent again, then walked towards the parking lot, Dylan and my brother following behind. I scanned the area and then spotted Lynna's blond hair standing with a plate of pancakes next to Maria, who was talking intently to Lynna. "There she is," I said to Dylan and Josiah, pointing in their general direction. I waved at Lynna while walking towards them; after a few paces and more waving, she saw me. Her eyes lit up and she ran up to me giving me an inviting hug. Her body next to mine made me feel warm and happy. I stole an extra second with my embrace. Dylan and Josiah stood by me and began talking to Maria. Joe looked bashful as he talked to his crush, while Dylan looked bored.

Lynna took control of the conversation. "What are we doing today?"

“If you want to work, we can work, or we can just walk around,” I said.

“Let’s do a little of both,” Maria chimed in.

“Work or walk? Which first?” Joe asked.

“Work,” Maria responded.

“Let’s get to work then,” Joe said with a goofy grin. Maria locked eyes with him and smiled; Dylan rolled his eyes at both of them. Interesting, maybe Maria liked my brother.

“This way,” I said, pointing to the scaffolding outside of the Kingdom Hall.

Maria and Lynna took the lead. Josiah, Dylan, and I walked behind them. “Uh, I think she likes you, Joe,” Dylan whispered.

“Really?” Joe asked and blushed.

“Yeah, dude, good luck. I’m gonna walk around for a little bit; I didn’t come here to work,” Dylan said.

I shook my head, “Well, you’ll probably just end up getting bored.”

“Yeah, I’m fine with that,” Dylan replied, then changed directions moving away from us and yelling out, “See ya suckers later.”

Lynna turned around to see what the commotion was. “Dylan ditched us,” I said. She just chuckled and kept walking. We made our way to Dad, who now had four middle-aged women around him while he laid bricks. He was happy to see us and winked at me when he said hello to Lynna. We kept Dad stocked with bricks, forming a line from the brick to him. Maria and my brother talked the entire time; he was keeping her laughing, a quality he picked up from Dad.

Eventually, we broke for lunch. Lunch was burritos with chips and salsa. Fresh-made lemonade was on hand for drinks. For dessert, there was a variety of cakes and pies. After lunch, we decided to walk around to see if we could get lost. Lynna and I walked together. My brother and Maria walked slightly behind us. I took us down a path near the end of the parking lot. There were no people in sight, and the cars were empty. Lynna and I got closer to each other, our shoulders touching with alternating footsteps. Maria and my brother had vanished, and we were alone.

We slowed down, and Lynna moved her hand to mine. Our fingers touched, and an electric surge went up my spine. We slipped our hands into each other's, fingers interlocking. I was actually holding hands with her!

We both grinned from ear to ear. As we slowed down, Lynna put her head on my shoulder. I tried to soak in the moment. We got to the end of the line of cars and turned towards each other. We both nervously looked around. We were all alone. For a second, we stared at each other. There was an awkward silence where all you could hear was our breathing. Lynna leaned in, closed her eyes, and put her lips to mine. I had my first kiss a few years earlier. It was the one and only kiss with tongue, but I remembered every moment of it, so I knew what to do.

We kissed more, letting our tongues get to know each other. Soon, our bodies were pressed against each other. When she stopped kissing me, she looked down. To my horror, I was sporting a boner pushing through my pants. The boxer shorts were a weak line of defense. She laughed, and I turned around, trying to put my embarrassing hard-on in the band of my boxer shorts to hide it. When I turned back around, her face was beet red.

"Where did it go?" she asked, surprised. Oh my god, this went from the best day of my life to the worst.

"I uh... I'm sorry," I said.

"Does it always do that, Jon?"

"It's... uh...difficult to control," I said, my face red as a stop sign. There was a long silence. I was almost dying of shame. We were now in a game of chicken. Who would talk first? Thankfully we were saved by my brother.

"There you two are," Joe said, coming around the corner. Maria was next to him.

"I can't believe we lost you," Maria said. "What's up with you guys?" she asked inquisitively, sensing something was in the air.

"Oh, nothing, we were just a little lost," Lynna said while locking eyes with me, slightly grinning.

"Yeah, you'd think I'd know my way around," I said.

“You’re always getting lost, fool,” Josiah said, then turned to Maria, “I’m basically a map; I know this site like the back of my hand,” sprawling out his hand and pointing to it with the other. Maria laughed and gave him a look of admiration. We decided to head back to the hall build.

Lynna and I walked shoulder to shoulder, touching and brushing our hands together secretly. As we were walking back towards the Hall I spotted Dylan sitting down on a bucket.

“Hey dude, what are you doing?” I asked him.

“Nothing. How long do you guys want to stay tonight. I was thinking of going home.” I actually wouldn’t mind also having a room to sleep in.

“Lynna leaves at eight and wants to listen to us play guitar. Could we stay till then?” Lynna looked up with puppy dog eyes to Dylan. I was doing the same.

“Alright, but you two owe me,” Dylan said with a long-exasperated sigh.

Maria and Lynna wanted to explore the site, so we decided to meet back up at 5:00 p.m. at the entrance to the hall. I told Dylan the good news about my kiss. “Ladies’ man,” he said, tussling my hair. We walked around as I told him the details. I didn’t tell him about my embarrassing appendage. Then we talked to a few different people I knew from previous hall builds before helping Dad again.

When 5:00 p.m. rolled around, we made our way towards the entrance. There, we met my brother, who was eager to meet up with Maria. We spotted Lynna and Maria headed our way. Once we were all together, we weighed our options for what to do next. Before we could decide, I spotted Claudia walking towards us.

Her jet-black hair was styled and pointy. She had on her leather jacket and a Ramones shirt. Her plaid green and red capris with Doc Martin boots on finished the look. She walked up directly to me and said, “This is yours. I put some cool music on it along with a playlist.” She handed me a cassette tape and a folded sheet of paper.

“Thanks,” I said, looking at the tape.

“This is really cool,” I blurted out.

She put her hands on her hips and said, "I know," nonchalantly. She then turned to the group, looking first at Lynna, and said, "Hi, I'm Claudia."

"I'm Lynna, how do you know Jon?" Lynna asked. Was that hint of jealousy I heard?

"Oh, we met yesterday. He said he was looking forward to seeing you today." Both Lynna and I blushed a little. Claudia moved on, making introductions to the rest of the group. She spoke to Lynna and Maria while we boys stood by. Once they finished talking and exchanged numbers, she said she had to leave. After saying her goodbyes, she asked if I'd walk her to the parking lot.

"I'll be back in a minute; wait for me here," I yelled to the group. Claudia and I began walking. "I like her; you two seem like a good match."

"Thanks, Claudia, I really like her too," I said back sheepishly.

"I can tell she likes you," Claudia said, smiling at me and punching my arm. I laughed and thanked her. "Listen to that tape; it's got a lot of good bands on it. Might even find some that remind you of that cute girl back there." Claudia then gave me a high five, "Hope to see you around, Jon." Then she got into a black Honda Accord and drove away. I turned around and walked back to my group.

At dinner, we had hamburgers and hotdogs along with homemade egg salad. Afterward, we made our way to the camper, where a large crowd had already assembled. We started playing guitar around 6:30. One man even showed up and played the spoons, click-clacking along to our guitars in rhythm. The entire night, Lynna and I sat next to each other, stealing touches with our fingertips and our shoulders. I was on cloud nine. Joe and Maria seemed to be rather cozy, too. Dylan was enjoying the music and even tried playing my guitar with the others.

By 8:30, Dylan lifted up his watch, pointing it at me, and then he tapped it, signaling it was time to go. I let Lynna know I had to leave. First, she walked off, then after a few minutes, I followed so as not to raise too much suspicion. Everyone was in their own world, so I doubt they would have even noticed if we walked off hand in hand.

We met at the edge of the parking lot and then made our way deeper into it. Now emptier as many had already gone home for the night, we found ourselves in silence. The fireflies were coming out, and the sun was fully down.

“I hope you had fun,” I said to Lynna.

“I had a lot of fun, Jon.” We stood there, not knowing what to say, so I went to give her a hug. Her face met mine, and we kissed. This time, we were more used to each other, making out more passionately. I avoided pressing too close to her. After a few minutes of kissing, I heard Dylan coughing loudly. Lynna and I stopped kissing and began laughing.

“I’m going to miss you,” I said.

“I’m going to miss you too, Jon.”

“Don’t worry, you two will get lots of each other at No Doubt,” Dylan said with a smile. We then gave each other a last hug. I squeezed her tight.

Then Dylan and I went to his car and drove home.

Chapter 8

Baptism

“You’re *going* to study with Brother Prince,” Mom said firmly to me.

“I don’t want to get baptized,” I said defensively.

For years, my parents told me that getting baptized or officially becoming a Jehovah’s Witness was up to me. Now, it seemed like Mom was going to speed up the process whether I wanted to or not. Mom’s sixth sense was likely activating when I kissed Lynna at the hall build. “You won’t know if you want to get baptized unless you study first. Plus, you can work for Brother Prince and earn some money.” She was at the table organizing new Watchtowers.

I was actually interested in working for Brother Prince. He was known to pay well, and the work was slightly easier than working with Dad. “Fine,” I relented. Mom smiled and got back to her brochures.

Jehovah’s Witnesses had an entire baptism process. Instead of getting baptized shortly after birth, you had to prove it was something you really wanted. That meant undergoing a study with an already baptized Jehovah’s Witness, and then you were taking before two or three elders for a test. They would ask your questions to make sure you were truly committed to being baptized. Almost 99% of people who went through the question process passed.

The baptized brother I would be studying with was Brother Prince. He was new to the Kingdom Hall and had quickly risen up the ranks, becoming a ministerial servant after a few months. He had a booming construction business and hired a few brothers as his business expanded. He even employed the surfer brothers. They worked directly for him, which I knew because of my brother, who was quickly becoming best friends with the taller, quieter brother, Miles. He was known to be a drinker but also one of the more down-to-earth leaders in the church. Of all the people I could be paired with, this wasn’t so bad. He was slightly heavysset, of medium build, with blond hair that he parted to the side. He still had a baby face even though he was in his mid-30s.

After a few days, I had my first study with Brother Prince. We agreed that I would work for him three days a week, and we would

do two studies a week. This way I could be finished in time for the upcoming district convention. A yearly summer meeting of thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses across North and South Carolina and baptisms were held. The district convention was happening the first week of August, just before our planned No Doubt concert.

The way Jehovah's Witnesses were organized was like a professional sports league based on region. In the US, there would be the Southeast, Northeast, West, etc. They were comprised of "districts," which in turn were composed of "circuits." Circuits were made up of about 10 – 20 Kingdom Halls. There were around five to ten circuits in a district, making around 50 – 100 Kingdom Halls in a given district.

Every year, these circuits of Jehovah's Witnesses gather in sports stadiums around the world for three days. Usually, attendance is in the 5,000 – 7,000 range, sometimes close to 10,000 on good years. Once there, you would spend three days listening to talks and singing songs, starting at 9:30 a.m. and ending at around 4:00 p.m. For the majority of witnesses, it was an exercise in staying awake as you only got an hour's lunch break each day. If you were lucky, there would be a funny or charismatic speaker, and once in a while, a speaker would be sent from the Jehovah's Witness headquarters in New York to give a talk. When this happened, most people paid attention as we rarely saw the real leaders of the church. Just before lunch break on Saturday, they would march out 30 – 50 zealous people who had finished studying and baptize them in front of the crowd.

During our first study, Brother Prince told me to call him Jeff. We studied "The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived," which is also what we studied on Monday nights. Jeff quickly read through the first chapter, and I answered the questions asked. Within 30 minutes, we were done and off to Chi Chi's, the Mexican food restaurant at the mall.

The server sat us down, and before the waiter came, Jeff said, "Hey, sweetheart, get a Michelob Light, will ya"? She looked annoyed but said she would let our waitress know. I pretended to be interested in the giant sombrero hanging on the wall.

“So, Jon, I heard you got your eye on Lynna,” Jeff said with a mischievous grin. My cheeks began to redden, and I started to panic. Before I could get a word out, he bailed me out. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to say anything. Boys need to be boys,” winking at me. The waitress came with a beer, and I ordered a sweet tea. “So, you two go on a date yet?” he asked after the waitress went to get my drink. I thought about whether I should tell him or not.

“Well, you know that talk that Brother Kashner gave? That was about me.”

Jeff almost spat out his beer and gave a laugh. “Making friends and influencing people, I see.”

He ordered us queso dip and chips and proceeded to drink two more beers before we ordered the main course.

He drank another beer as we waited for the main course. After about 10 minutes, his mood began to change. “Where is our food?” he sneered at our waitress. She politely let him know they were a little behind. Two minutes later, he flagged her down again. “Where the hell is our food? We’ve been waiting at least 20 minutes. We want our food *now*.” He looked and sounded visibly angry. Suddenly, the sombrero became very interesting again.

Eventually, our food arrived, and we woofed it down. Jeff had one more beer, and as he paid the check, he complained about the bad service, demanding that the meal be comped. They offered to take half off.

By the time we got to his van, I was embarrassed and hoping he didn’t want to go somewhere else to drink. Thankfully, he said he’d drive me home. As we rode in his van, he spotted a man walking down the road. He was thin and gaunt, and his shirt was tied in a knot showing off his stomach. As we rode by the man, Jeff slowed down. “Look at this faggot; if I had a baseball bat, I’d smash his head in right now.” One thing he didn’t know about me was that not only did I have an openly gay friend at school, but bullies had accused me of being gay more times than I could count.

“You think Jesus carried around a baseball bat to beat up gay people?” I asked. The words just came out without thinking. I tensed up, worried he might decide to bash in my brain instead. His hands

tightened on the wheel, and he looked like he was trying to figure out how to respond.

“I wasn’t serious, Jon; you’re right. We should try to think of what Jesus would do,” he said, defeated. We didn’t talk the rest of the way home. We got to my house, and he dropped me off; before I could say bye, he said, “Your Mom will drop you off in the morning for work.”

I walked into the house eager to call Lynna and tell her about what happened. She spent most of the days with Maria, who had her own phone line. My brother and I had a good system where Lynna would call and talk to me for an hour, and Maria would talk to my brother or vice versa.

“How was the first study?” Mom asked as I walked through the door.

“It was good. Brother Prince said you need to drop me off at work tomorrow.”

“OK, Jon, I’m proud of you for trying. I think you’ll want to be baptized. You just needed the right teacher,” she said self-assuredly. If she only knew my teacher was a moody drinker who wanted to violently beat up gay people.

I headed towards my brother's room. He was on the phone with Maria. He gave me a nod, “Give me 30 minutes.” After 30 minutes, Lynna and I talked. I told her about my day and Jeff’s behavior. She was thankful her mom and dad weren’t forcing her to study and told me I should be careful around Brother Prince. I went to bed that night, thankful I could speak to Lynna about everything.

The first day of work was an unusually hot day, even by North Carolina standards. Mom dropped me off at Jeff’s who dropped me off at a job site where the surfer brothers were working, letting them know that I was there to help them. I hung around Miles during the day, fetching him tools and mixing concrete.

“So, you got a girlfriend yet?” Miles asked after some small talk. Seemed everyone was interested in my love life. I knew Miles was “cool,” so I was honest with him.

“Lynna and I are dating,” I beamed with pride as I said it.

“Oh, wow, she’s cute Jon. I’m dating Heather Stoffers.” This time, he wasn’t so cool with his tone; he was more excited. I raised an internal eyebrow.

Heather was 18. Like me, she was a bit of the black sheep of the family. She was also known for being boy-crazy. She was from a large family who was well known at hall builds. It consisted of around eight kids, and Heather was the middle in age. She had sandy blond hair that fell to her shoulders in thick waves, and she often wore it in a tight ponytail. She was around 5’4” and petite. A stark contrast to Miles, who was tall, lean, and muscular.

“Where did you meet Heather?” I asked.

“At the hall build a few weeks ago. I think I’m in love.” It seemed someone must have dropped some love potion at our hall build. I hadn’t seen either one of them there, which was a little odd.

“Hey, fetch me the ID-10-T lubricant out of the truck, will ya?” Miles asked, switching the convo.

Off I went searching for the lubricant. I searched the back of his lowrider pickup.

“I can’t find it,” I yelled back.

Jame’s brother Thomas shouted back to me, “It’s in there. Look for a long bottle. It should say I, D, 10, and T on it.” I kept searching, getting frustrated. Where the hell is this damn lubricant? Eventually, I accepted they had run out. We were close to a Home Depot, so I walked up to Miles and Thomas and gave my solution to the problem,

“You’re out. I can go to the Home Depot and get some if you want me to?” They looked at each other, and Thomas grabbed the notebook out of his pocket, wrote down “I-D-10-T,” and handed me \$10.

“Go pick it up and get yourself a snack while you’re there. Keep the change if there’s some leftover.” I started to walk towards the big shopping center across from the apartment complex we were working in. “Hurry up, pick up the pace,” I heard Miles say. So, I started jogging. I could swear I heard some laughing from them.

At the Home Depot, I made my way to the sealants, grease, and lubricants. I looked all over but couldn’t find the “I-D-10-T”

lubricant. I stared at my notepad and then looked at the range of grease and lubricants. Checking each one methodically, row by row. I was starting to panic since I couldn't find it.

As I was looking at my notepad, resolved to the fact they didn't have it, a store employee came up to me. He was a short, pudgy older man wearing jeans, a button-up, and his bright orange apron over it. "Can I help you with something, young man?" he asked me. "Yeah, I'm looking for some 'I-D-10-T' lubricant." I looked at my paper again just to be sure I was saying the right thing. He looked at me quizzically. So, I handed him the paper. A sharp smile came over him.

"Did your co-worker give this to you?" he asked, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah," I said, confused.

"Afraid you were sent on a wild goose chase. I-D-10-T lubricant doesn't exist." He handed me the paper and then asked me to look closer and see what the other words looked like. I studied the paper. Suddenly, it hit me. I had been sent to get **IDIOT** lubricant.

Before leaving the store, I got two colas and two Snickers bars. Pocketing the rest of the money. Then, I slowly walked back to Miles and Thomas. As I walked up to the surfer brothers, who were busy working, Thomas noticed me and asked, "So, did you find it?"

"Really funny. I actually showed this to an employee because I couldn't find it." I pointed to the piece of paper as I talked.

Thomas and Miles completely lost it, almost falling to the ground laughing. "I've tried that a million times, and no one...no one has ever gone to a hardware store to find it," Miles said, laughing as he talked. I couldn't help laughing either. I had to admit that the situation was funny, even if it was at my expense. I would not be telling Lynna or anyone about this. But something told me my brother would find out and have a field day telling everyone he knew.

Over the next weeks, I got to know Miles and Thomas better. I preferred Miles; Thomas seemed more like an actual adult. I could see why Miles and my brother had become fast friends. They were both introverted and had a goofy side. Miles was like the older version of my brother. He could also be prone to mood swings, some days not saying much of anything when probed about why; it was

usually an issue with Heather. It seemed they had a much rockier relationship than Lynna and me. My brother eventually found out about Miles and Thomas's little prank. All our friends had heard. Whenever I did anything even remotely embarrassing or dumb, out would come the "I-D-10-T." Lynna at least never joined in, and never brought it up over the phone.

I continued studying with Jeff. It seemed both Jeff and I were there for the same reason. Not because we wanted to be there but because we had to. He was angling to be an elder which required he have an active study, and I just wanted Mom off my back. Usually, we'd breeze through the study and then go out to eat while he had a few beers. Sometimes, even catching a movie after. One thing was clear: the man liked to drink and, often, not stop until his cheeks and nose were a rosy red.

We breezed through *The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived*. Usually, spending about 30 minutes on a chapter, sometimes getting two chapters in one sitting so we could finish in time. By the last week of July, we had finished the book, and both Jeff and I were thankful.

After our last morning study, Jeff finished praying and then said, "Now's the next step," while patting me on the shoulder. I just nodded and faked a smile. "I'll talk with the elders and see when we can schedule your questions for baptism," he said. We went to lunch, and Jeff dropped me off, wishing me good luck and goodbye. I got the feeling that since he had done his duty, I wouldn't see him as often.

When I walked into the house, I knew I would have to tell Mom. She was on the couch watching a rerun of *Law and Order*. "Well, we finished studying, and Brother Prince said I'm ready for the questions," I said to her back.

She turned off the TV, turned her head towards me, and beamed a big smile. She got up, hugged me, then put her hands on each of my arms. She looked me in the eyes and said, "I'm so proud of you." I didn't have the heart to tell her this wasn't something I wanted to do. So, instead, I just hugged her back.

“Is it alright if I spend the night at Dylan's?” I asked. Mom, clearly in a good mood, continued smiling,

“Yeah, as long as you go out in field service tomorrow. You two have fun; just don't stay out too late.” It was a good compromise, but now I had to convince Dylan to wake up at 7:30 and go out in service.

I ran to the phone and called Lynna first. She was at Maria's. Maria picked up the phone and then handed it to Lynna. “Hey, I'm going to Dylan's tonight. Want to meet at Media Play?” She covered the phone with her hand, but I could hear the muffled conversation on the other end.

Lynna got back on the phone, “Can you meet us at Media Play at seven, Maria is meeting your brother at Outback at eight.”

“Yea, we can do that”, I was taking a gamble that Dylan would just say yes.

“OK, we'll see you there, we're about to watch some MTV then do some shopping at the mall” I could hear the excitement in her voice.

I called Dylan. He picked up, “Oh dude, glad you're home,” I said.

“What do you want fuck-face” he asked.

“I can come over and spend the night, but I have to go out in service in the morning.” I waited for the response,

“Well, I guess you can go with Dad,” Dylan responded.

“Come on, man, it'll only be for two hours, then we can leave; I'll owe you one,” I said with some desperation in my voice.

“OK, fine, but you owe me about four now. What time are you coming over?”

Shit, I thought to myself. “Well, I also need a ride.” I braced for a bad reaction. From Dylan's, my place was a 30-minute drive.

“What?!?” Dylan exclaimed. I knew I'd have to do some selling.

“I'll give you \$20 for gas, plus Lynna wants to meet at Media Play tonight.”

“So, I have to pick you up, drive you to see Lynna, *and* go knock on doors in the morning,” he said with an air of shock in his voice.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” I said in a dry, casual tone, copying Jerry Seinfeld.

Dylan laughed, “OK, asshole, but you really owe me for this one; I’ll be over in about an hour.”

I let Mom know I would be leaving in an hour. “OK, have fun. Oh, how would you feel about a magnetic pillow?” she asked. She was in the recliner, deep into a book. The title was “How Magnets Can Cure You.” It seemed to be about healing with magnets. Her reading glasses rested on the edge of her nose, with the book sitting on the middle of her legs. It made her look about 30 years older than she was. Mom and Dad were constantly trying to find some new miracle cure for general health. They detested doctors unless it was a life-or-death situation. Even though Mom had survived cancer thanks to doctors and modern science, she was skeptical of them. This likely had more to do with a general lack of money, but it meant that they would try anything that looked less expensive than a doctor’s visit. This was pretty common amongst Jehovah’s Witnesses in general.

A few months back they and their friends in the hall had jars full of Kombucha mushrooms that had made the house smell like smelly feet. It was supposed to be a game changer for modern medicine. It could cure anything from obesity to cancer. I tasted it once and confirmed it tasted like it smelled. I thought cancer might be a better option. The fad lasted about a month then suddenly the mushrooms had vanished. Now, it was magnets, but at least they wouldn’t smell.

“Magnets?” I asked more as a skeptical statement than a question. Mom put her book paper side down, letting it rest on her legs.

Then she took her glasses off and let them rest in her hand, gesturing with her hand as she talked, “Yeah, a woman came by the herb shop and told me about them. Do you know that the earth has a magnetic field and it’s been known to cure loads of things? She suggested this book to me.”

“OK, well, how does it work in a pillow?” I asked.

“Oh, there are these special pillows they make. You can’t even tell it has magnets in them, but I think if you use it, you’ll feel better.

I'm thinking of buying some pillows and blankets. It will energize us." She was getting excited, her hand with the reading glasses in it was moving back and forth.

"OK, sure, I guess. I'm going to take a shower now." I walked over and kissed her forehead.

"OK, say goodbye before you leave; I'll order us the pillows and blankets tonight," she said.

I hopped in the shower. Then I threw on my JNCO jeans, chain wallet, a long-sleeved shirt with two stripes going down the top of the sleeves, and put on some airwalks. I waited in Joe's room because of the TV and a window with a view of the driveway. Joe was hanging out with Miles after working with Dad. Evidently, he and Miles were going to Outback Steakhouse tonight. I was suddenly hit with a realization. If I was going to be baptized this summer, it could be the last fun one. Baptism meant more preaching work, more talks, more studying, and less hanging out with all my friends in general.

A dread I had never felt before left me frozen. My heart began to race, and my stomach started feeling like there was a wave of electricity going through it, but not in a good way like when I was with Lynna. Aside from the positive attention I got from adults because of my public speaking skills, I didn't care about meetings, field service, or anything related to Jehovah. I guess I had made it this far by pretending maybe I could still make it. Plus, I had Lynna, and we'd probably get married, and then we could do whatever we wanted.

Eventually, my mind moved on to other things, and I soon heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. I peeked out the window and saw it was Dylan pulling up. I got up, grabbed my dress clothes for the morning, and headed out the door, yelling goodbye to Mom. She said a quick goodbye while still reading her book. I hopped into Dylan's car. He popped in Korn's self-titled debut into his CD player. Dylan was getting more into metal music lately and was playing the album non-stop. We didn't say anything to each other, letting the intro of drum cymbals and electric guitar play. Soon, we both yelled, "Are you reaaaady" along with the intro to the song and Dylan turned up the volume. We sped along the country roads, then onto the highway,

eventually making it to Dylan's house, getting about halfway through the album.

We walked into Dylan's house around 4:30. Dylan's mom was preparing to cook. As I was walking in, I asked, "What's for dinner?"

"Baked ziti, I hope you boys brought your appetite," Dylan's Mom responded. Baked Ziti was one of Dylan's favorite meals. I was also fond of it as it was something that never appeared on the menu at home.

Dylan looked worried and then asked, "Can you cook a little early? We gotta leave at 6:30."

"Of course, my little prince." Dylan's parents would usually bend over backward if he asked nicely.

We went downstairs and watched TV until we heard his mom yell down, "Dinner's ready, come and get it." I tried to beat Dylan to the stairs, but with his large frame, he bullied his way in front, passing me on the first stair, "gotcha," he said and pushed up the stairs.

A plate of hot ziti was waiting for us at the table. We sat down and started wolfing down the beautiful blend of cheese, red sauce, and pasta his mom had perfected. The Beatles, "Here Comes The Sun," was playing on a radio in the kitchen. His mom was a massive Beatles fan. As a teenager, she had been infected with Beatlemania. She taught us everything about The Beatles, from how Ringo Starr wasn't the original drummer to how she spent the night at Strawberry Fields in Central Park when John Lennon died. She hummed along to The Beatles, watching Dylan and I eat the food she'd prepared.

I was focused on the food when I was suddenly snapped out of it. "Hey, close your mouth when you chew. You're not a cow; I'd think you'd been raised in a barn," his mom said sharply. I constantly smacked my mouth while I ate, getting on her nerves. With a mouth full of Ziti, I tried to apologize. She stopped me halfway through. "Finish chewing your food, then apologize."

I chewed, swallowed, and then said, "Sorry." She just shook her head in a disapproving manner and tried to enjoy the music. Dylan's Dad and sisters were eating later.

We finished eating, and then Dylan took our plates to the kitchen, "OK, Mom, we're leaving. We'll see you tonight." I got out of

my seat and then put my chair back under the table.

“You boys don’t stay out too late,” his mom said as we both made our way to the front door and left.

We got in the car, and Dylan drove to Media Play. “Here’s your \$20. Don’t get in any fights,” I said, half joking. I put the 20-dollar bill I owed Dylan in the cupholder of his car.

“Only if some fool tries to test me, Jon.” He took his hand off the shifter, grabbed the money, and stuffed it in his pocket. We continued listening to the Korn album the rest of the way there. It wasn’t that I disliked Korn, but it was also tough music to carry a conversation to. I tried to get into it, the guitars screaming along with the vocals, but I preferred something softer.

We pulled into Media Play at around 6:45. Media Play was a large store that carried various forms of multimedia, including DVDs, VHS, CDs, and even some musical instruments. It was giant and square, about the size of a small Wal-Mart. We walked in and browsed the CDs. I found a bargain bin that had CDs for \$5. This had started to become a habit of mine. I liked buying cheap random CDs. Usually, the music was something I didn’t like, but I still looked. I noticed an odd-looking album. It had a guitar with pink and purple filters over it. In the bottom left-hand corner, it said, “My Bloody Valentine.” I had never heard of the band, but I liked the name, and it had a cool cover. It was also only \$5, so I bought it.

As I was checking out, I saw Maria and Lynna walking into the store. The sliding doors opened to my not-so-bloody Valentine. She spotted me, smiled, then walked over.

“What are you buying?” she asked. I showed her the CD, which was sticking halfway out of the small Media Play bag.

She grabbed the CD carefully, studying it. “Looks cool but seems dark,” a contemplative look on her face. Lynna liked more pop-oriented music, so dark music and metal bands were usually out.

Dylan noticed us and walked over, “What did you buy?” Lynna and I both looked at each other and smiled, sharing a moment.

“Well, like I just told Lynna, I don’t know. It’s a band called My Bloody Valentine.” Lynna took the CD out of her hands and showed it

off like one of the models on the Price Is Right. We had a laugh, and then Dylan asked what we wanted to do. I had one more thing to do.

Media Play sold cheap guitars, and I liked playing them there sometimes. We walked over to the guitars, and I grabbed a small, bodied guitar, then sat on one knee and propped the guitar on the other knee. "Play Novocaine For the Soul," Dylan said in a half-yelling voice as if we were at a concert. Lynna and Maria stood about a foot in front of me, and I struck an E chord, then an Am chord, and launched into it. We all began singing.

Soon enough, we got to the chorus and started to yell it. A customer looked up, giving us an embarrassed smile, but about halfway through the second verse, an employee came up. He was an older man who didn't look amused. Dylan turned to him and screamed along with the guitar, "Life is white, and I am black...Jesus and his lawyer are coming back," putting extra emphasis on the word Jesus. A small inside joke we had because if an elder heard us singing such a lyric, we'd be in trouble.

To our surprise, the employee waited and allowed us to finish. Once finished, in a calm tone, he said, "Alright, rock stars, we've got some complaints. You'll have to go elsewhere if you want to put on a performance." I set the guitar back on the stand. Lynna grabbed my hand, and then we ran out of the store laughing.

We all walked over to Dylan's car. Just then, Miles pulled up with my brother in the passenger seat. "Oh, I told them to meet us here," Maria said.

Miles parked his truck. He and Joe got out, and then Miles yelled to us, "Want to go into Media Play? I want to look around." Dylan nodded yes.

Dylan tossed me his keys, "You two don't do anything I wouldn't do," then winked at me. Maria and Joe also hung back near Miles Truck.

For the next ten minutes, we made out in the front seat of Dylan's car. Occasionally, looking out the window for perverts, friends, or police who might be interested in why there was steam on the windows. We checked the time. It was 7:45, so we ended the make-out session. I asked for some time to allow my boner to die

down, embarrassed again of this damn thing I couldn't control. Lynna blushed and laughed, saying it was ok. We made our way into the Summer night, cheeks flushed and holding on to the secret we were doing something bad.

The rest of the night, I felt like I was gliding in the air. We ate dinner at Outback, where Miles told us more about his extreme sports and firefighting. Maria and Joe held hands under the table, and Lynna and I did, too. Then Miles told us more about his relationship, saying that he was smitten as a kitten. Truly, a summer of love was taking place. I had never felt so alive.

At the end of the night, Lynna and I kissed for a few minutes while Dylan and Miles stood next to the lowrider, making small talk. Maria and Joe had conveniently disappeared somewhere. Lynna and I said our goodbyes, and then Dylan came to the car. We got in and made our exit. I waved at Lynna and Miles. Miles just gave me an approving head nod. Lynna blew me a kiss as we drove out of the parking lot.

"I think I owe you \$40 for the night I had" I said, sinking into the passenger seat relaxed and happy.

"I feel like some weird pimp" Dylan smiled and gave me a soft punch to the shoulder. I remembered the CD.

"Mind if we listen to this?" I asked, taking the cellophane off the CD case.

"No, pop it in." We only had about a 15-minute drive, so we couldn't listen to much.

I put the CD into the CD player. The opening song sounded like someone had mixed violins, guitar, and a chainsaw together. I had never heard anything like it before. It was some weird blend of metal, pop, and alternative rock. Soon, an ethereal female voice began singing, and the guitars and drums cascaded over. I didn't know what to make of this band. It was exciting and different. We listened to three tracks, two of which I really liked.

"A little too weird for me, but it does sound cool," Dylan said as we pulled into the driveway. We made our way into Dylan's house. His sisters had already gone to their rooms for the night. His mom

was doing her nightly routine of watching “Nick At Night” on the television in the basement, and his dad was already in bed.

We made our way to Dylan’s room, where we listened to the new album. I was amazed by it. It was the first time I had bought something I didn’t know anything about and had been blown away. I had never heard anything like it on the radio. It stirred feelings of excitement in me. The clashing of sounds felt like they shouldn’t work together, but they did. It almost felt like a musical representation of how I felt in the religions. There was lots of clashing, but somehow, I was still moving forward.

I asked Dylan if we could listen to it again. By about 1:00 a.m. he had grown tired of it and asked me to turn it off so he could go to bed. 7:30 a.m. came and Dylan’s alarm went off. We got up, took quick alternating showers, and brushed our teeth. We put on our dress clothes then drank some Carnation Instant Breakfast.

I grabbed The My Bloody Valentine CD just before we were leaving. Dylan saw it in my hand as I got into his car. “Nope, you’ll have to listen to that on your own.” Instead, he popped in The Offspring’s album and clicked on “Self Esteem,” which had been his favorite for a while. I guess he needed something to clean the pallet.

We rode quietly to the hall, where a handful of cars were in the parking lot. “OK, no matter what, we’re working together this morning, right?” Dylan asked more as an order.

“Of course,” I said; that’s what I wanted anyway.

The good thing about having no parents was that as long as you stood your ground most in the hall wouldn’t try to be your parents. We came in and sat in the back. In the end, we got paired with Brother Brockton and his wife. Both were older and neither dogmatic in their faith nor weak. A couple my parents didn’t talk too much because both were in their 70s and tended to keep to themselves. Normally, you’d ride as one large group, but Dylan stated after the break, he had some return visits to go to.

Return visits were people you placed literature with who you thought might be interested in talking to again. Most Jehovah’s Witnesses would spend 1 to 1 ½ hours of preaching work and then use Return Visits as a kind of break since, the majority of the time,

the person who was “interested” wasn’t home or would make up an excuse not to talk that morning. Some people had return visits all over town, so riding as a group and trying to square away who was going to see who and where wasn’t very convenient.

We were assigned a sleepy street in South Gastonia, a largely middle-class and white neighborhood. That morning, Dylan was wearing slacks that were too big for him. A shirt about 75% tucked in and his tie loosely tied on. He looked more like a desperate alcoholic shoe salesman than someone pushing Jesus. I was in better shape, with everything fitting and in place. Brown slacks, a white shirt fully tucked in, and a black tie fully tied on. Together, it was anyone’s guess what we were selling.

The good news was that if Dylan and I teamed up together, we would have a system. The system? Just pretend to knock and ring the bell. If it was obvious someone was home, we’d just sleepwalk our way through the pitch, which almost always ended in the person at the door being uninterested. The first couple of houses worked like a charm. We’d press our finger next to where the doorbell was or would be. Stand for a minute or two and then make our way to the next house.

We walked up to the door of a nice-looking white ranch-style home with wood siding. It had blue shutters and tan roof shingles. In the driveway was a spotless Ford F250 that looked new. The last door I had faked ringing, so now it was Dylan’s turn. We got to the door, which was an all-glass screen door with a beautiful wood door behind it. Dylan pretended to push the doorbell. I looked around to see if the Brocktens were watching, as you always had to be vigilant. They were at the door on the other side of the street, their backs turned to us.

“Maybe I should knock,” Dylan said jokingly, then began to fake knock on the door. I started laughing. He then faked ringing the bell again. Suddenly, the door swung open, and a large man was standing in front of the screen door. He pushed it open aggressively, causing Dylan and me to take a step back, almost falling off his porch.

“What the hell are you two doing to my door?” he demanded in a suspicious and angry tone. He looked to be around 50 and in good

shape with a military haircut. We both looked shocked. What were we doing at his door again?

There was a long, awkward silence. “Well, I saw you doing something. Were you trying to destroy my doorbell?!” the man barked at us.

Suddenly, Dylan went into his spiel, “Have you heard the good news of the kingdom? I’m Brother DeMarto, and this is Brother Burger.” Suddenly, the man looked confused, and Dylan shoved a Watchtower into his hands.

“Oh, you’re just Jehovah’s Witnesses; I’m not interested,” he said, staring at the Watchtower, a wave of embarrassment no doubt hitting him. Dylan saw his chance to get the hell out of dodge. Before the man could hand us back the Watchtower, Dylan had turned around to leave, and I followed.

Dylan yelled out, “Have a good day, sir,” as we were leaving.

We quickly made our way to the next door before laughing. “Holy shit, that was wild,” Dylan said.

“Dude, I was legit scared,” I admitted. All over pretending to ring a doorbell. “Maybe we should just actually try the rest of the way,” Dylan offered. I agreed, and for the rest of the morning, we actually rang doorbells and knocked. As usual, no one was interested in what we were offering. We worked doors until 11. By that point, the Brocktons wanted their coffee at McDonald’s. We told them we were going to work through the break on return visits and said our goodbyes. We got in the car and drove off. Once we were a safe distance away, we ripped our ties off and cranked up the radio. Dylan opted to listen to the local alternative station. On the radio was Radio Head’s Creep. He turned it to full volume, and we put our hearts and souls into signing it.

“You mind if I drive you home? I want to chill alone today,” Dylan asked. *Well, all good things come to an end*, I thought to myself.

“Yeah, dude, no problem.” He drove me home, and we sang along to the tunes on the radio. He pulled into the driveway, and I said goodbye, letting him know I’d call later.

He flipped me off and smiled a big smile, "See you tomorrow at the hall, asshole," he said as he put the car into reverse and drove away.

I walked into the house where Mom and Dad were on the couch. "Hey, son," Dad said. He was watching High Noon, which was on AMC. Gary Cooper was talking to a woman, convincing her he needed to stay behind to take care of the bad guys. Mom didn't like violent movies but put up with Dad's love of westerns. She was reading her miracle magnet book.

She popped up off of the sofa, putting her book down, and turned to me, "Great news! I spoke to the brothers, and they can ask you the questions tomorrow. You can get baptized at the district convention next week." It was said with the enthusiasm of a labrador retriever finding out they got a new ball. She gave me a hug. "I'm proud of you, son," Dad said, still focused on what Gary Cooper's Marshall Kane was up to.

"That's short notice isn't it? I think I need time to prepare" I blurted out.

"Oh, nonsense, you'll be fine. The questions are easy," Mom barked back confidently.

Shit, shit, shit. This is not good. Joe had stayed at Miles, so I told Mom I wanted to study and went to his room. I closed the door and turned on the TV, keeping the volume low. My heart began to race, and I panicked, unable to focus. It was finally happening. I had avoided it for as long as I could. A sense of doom fell over me. Getting baptized meant that I could end up like my oldest brother, Bret, if I made a mistake or didn't comply. A ghost.

I turned the TV off and walked out of the room. I decided to get some air.

I stepped out on the patio and sat down on the patio chair, looking out over the large backyard of grass we had. I had less than 18 hours before my life was going to change. I walked back inside and grabbed the phone, first trying Maria, who didn't pick up, then Dylan. He was sleeping. I was on my own for this one.

That night, I didn't get much sleep. I had reluctantly accepted my fate. What was I supposed to do? Realistically, I couldn't run

away. Mom had me right where she wanted me. There had never been more of a rock and a hard place. I couldn't say no. I couldn't make up any lie that would stop what was happening. The minute I gave in to study, my fate was sealed.

Once I was able to sleep, I had a recurring nightmare from childhood. I was standing in a circus tent. The tent itself was massive and decorated with red and white stripes. The floor was dirt, and the tent was completely empty, except for a red knee-height metal ring that made a circle on the ground in the middle. In front of me was a metal pole holding the tent up. Above me was a highwire going across the huge tent that looked like it was 50 feet in the air. Directly in front of the pole was a rope ladder leading to the highwire. Instinctively, I began to climb the ladder to the highwire.

I slowly made my way up, checking below as I gained elevation. About 75% of the way up, everything changed. Suddenly, the floor was on fire. Huge flames rose from the ground, and soon, the top of the tent and sides were also in flames. I froze, holding on to the rope, having nowhere to go. My only option was to keep climbing. As I climbed, I finally reached the highwire with one more rung to go on the ladder. I grabbed onto the top rung, but my grip slipped. Suddenly, I was falling into flames in slow motion. I was both inside and outside of my body, and at once, I could feel myself falling and see myself falling. Helplessness set in as I accepted my fate of landing in the flames.

I woke up in a cold sweat, my heart about to beat out of my chest. It was early morning, and I could hear Dad clanging dishes around. I lay in the darkness contemplating my dream, thankful that Dad was playing dish drums, which likely woke me out of the nightmare. I climbed out of bed and made my way to the kitchen. I shuffled into the cramped kitchen and looked at the clock on the microwave. It said 7:15.

"Oh hey, son, I was about to wake you up. It's a big day for you today. Just remember to be honest," he said sincerely.

"OK," I said, then he came and gave me a hug, pausing to say,

"No matter what, I'm proud of you for trying, son," then squeezed extra tight.

Mom soon emerged from the bedroom and gave me a smile. She was energetic and perky. I made a bowl of Raisin Nut Bran while she and Dad ate eggs. Dad liked his scrambled, while Mom preferred sunny side up. Mom drank a plain black coffee while Dad had his usual milk with a splash of coffee.

“So, you ready for today?” Mom asked.

“Yes,” I said. Now, I understood the nightmare. The helpless feeling slowly sinking in.

“Just answer with your heart,” Dad reiterated. Mom was practically beaming. Her boy was going to get baptized.

I got dressed to go to the meeting. There was something ironic about the fact that I was about to answer questions to dedicate my life to this religion, and I hadn’t even studied for the Sunday meeting. I have no clue what the Watchtower study would be about or what the public talk would be about.

Once in the car, I was in a state of catatonic silence. I stared out the window, watching the other cars pass by, wishing I could hitch a ride with them. As we got closer to the Kingdom Hall, my stomach was tied in knots. I was hoping I could make myself puke, but I knew that wasn’t going to happen. As we pulled into the Kingdom Hall I resolved myself to defeat. It was over now.

We walked in, and I spotted Lynna with Maria and made a B-line to them. Before they could say hello, I just jumped right into it, “I’ve got my baptism questions today.” Both looked at me with pity in their eyes.

Maria had already been baptized and tried to give me words of encouragement as quietly as she could, “Don’t worry, it’s not so bad,” she said with soft eyes. Lynna looked at me like a wounded animal she couldn’t save. It was too much for me, so I saw where Dad was sitting and sat down in my seat, staying there.

The Kingdom Hall began to fill up, and with about five minutes to go, Dylan sat down beside me, “What’s up with you? Why are you just sitting here?”

“I’ve got my baptism questions today, Dylan. Mom set it all up,” I said dejectedly.

“Oh, that’s a bummer, dude. Dead man walking,” he joked, trying to cheer me up, but nothing could cheer me up short of a bomb threat being called in. “I’ll sit here with you, and can give you a ride after if you want,” he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I turned to Dad and asked if, after the questions, I could leave with Dylan.

“It’s your day, son. Just come home after; we’ll want to know how it goes. You sitting there, Dylan? Joe is sitting with Miles, so you’re welcome to stay.”

“Yeah, Brother Burger, I’m gonna sit with Jon for his *big* day.” I cracked a smile, and Dylan pushed his elbow into my arm, “Finally, a smile,” he said.

The clock struck one, and Brother Putnam made his way to the podium. He was a wealthy, older black man who had a lot of respect in the Hall. He had been an elder since I was a kid but seemed to not like taking the limelight. Before the song started, he said there was an announcement.

“Unfortunately, the speaker today is not able to make it, so we’ll have the Watchtower study. Then we invite you to go out in service since the meeting will end early. Now let’s turn to song 108 and give praise to Jehovah.”

This was an exciting time. Getting out an hour early! Normally, I’d be overjoyed, but it’s a bit like a death row inmate hearing that the chef has decided to cook your last meal early.

“Well, at least you’ll get it out of the way sooner,” Dylan leaned to me, half whispering. Mom looked over with a frown on her face, no doubt hearing him.

After the song and prayer, the Watchtower study started. It was on the subject of family. Specifically, you could only have a good family if you followed everything you were instructed to in the Bible and publications by the Witnesses; it also went into detail about how the man was the head of the house, and women should be submissive and faithful to Jehovah. Listening to your husband equaled being faithful to Jehovah. Even if the man was abusive or had bad qualities like alcoholism, a woman’s role was to be patient. The man’s role was to lead the family, punishing children for being bad and

ensuring everyone in the family lived up to Jehovah's standards. I couldn't focus on much, though, as all I could think about was how I was now officially going to join the religion. I would have to pretend to love it.

The meeting passed by faster than expected and right at 11 o'clock the song was starting. Then Brother Putnam gave a prayer and it seemed everyone in the hall was happy and excited except for me. I could overhear some people talking about what they would do now that they had an extra hour. Going out in service was not part of their plans.

As I was about to ask Mom what was next, Brother Putnam walked up to me, "Young Brother Burger. I understand you'll be doing your baptism questions today. Congratulations. Meet us in the library room in 15 minutes." he slapped me on the back and gave a large grin when he finished talking.

"Yes, Brother Putnam, see you there," I said, faking enthusiasm.

Dylan turned to me, raised his eyebrows, and said, "See you in the parking lot, Brother Burger." I sat down, too nervous to do anything else while he talked to our friends.

After fifteen minutes, I made my way to the library room. One of two rooms in the back of the Kingdom Hall was used for smaller study groups. It was the smaller of the two, as it had around 200 Jehovah's Witness publications on a giant bookshelf that took up the entire back wall. Some of the publications dated as far back as 70 years or more. If you needed to do research, you could use the room, though it was rarely used for that. I think it got the most use out of Elders reprimanding brothers and sisters who had "sinned." Or, in my case, for people wanting to join. Brother Putnam and Brother Mills were who would administer my questions.

Brother Mills was also black and wore thin wire-framed glasses. He was one of the youngest elders and had close to a high top with a slight fade. We knew each other but not well. He would often play basketball on Friday nights with the larger group of men and boys who played in the hall. He was considered one of the "cooler" elders, so I was happy to get a lucky draw.

I sat down, and the two elders took their seats directly in front of me. They both had their Bibles, so I instinctively grabbed mine. We started with Brother Mills giving a prayer. Once it started, Brother Putnam took over, "So Brother Burger, we're here today because you've decided you want to be baptized as a Jehovah's Witness. We're going to ask you some questions. Just answer them honestly, and if you answer, well, you'll be baptized next week." he finished speaking and looked at me, waiting for a response.

"Yes, Brother Putnam, I'm ready." I probably would have been more nervous, but maybe because I had just accepted what was going to happen, it calmed me down.

"OK, Brother Burger, for the first question." Brother Putnam then started asking the questions. With each answer, I gave the standard response exactly as I knew they wanted to hear it.

Brother Putnam: "Who is the true God?"

Me: "Jehovah God is the one true God."

Brother Putnam: "How should we view and treat God's personal name?"

Me: "God's personal name is Jehovah, and the Bible teaches us it is the most respected name in the world. We're not to use the name in vain and always give praise to his name."

Brother Putnam: "Why is it important for us to use God's personal name in worship?"

Me: "The Bible commands us to use God's name. His name is to be exalted, and it shows we're the one true religion as others refuse to use his name."

Brother Putnam: "Who is Jesus?"

Me: "Jesus is God's only son whom he sent to earth to die for our sins."

Brother Putnam: "What is the Kingdom of God?"

Me: "God's Kingdom is his rule in heaven and on earth made up of his faithful servants."

Brother Putnam: "Who is Satan the Devil?"

Me: "Satan is an angel who turned against Jehovah. Feeling he could do things better, he wants to turn us away from the one true

God, Jehovah.”

Brother Putnam: “What is the human soul? Can the soul die?”

Me, “The human soul is our life force, and it can die.”

Brother Putnam: “What hope is there for ones who die?”

Me: “There are two hopes. One for a paradise earth for those who follow and practice Jehovah’s teachings. There is also a heavenly hope for the anointed 144,000.”

Brother Putnam: “Why should we hold firmly to our hope in the resurrection of the dead?”

Me: “Because we know that no matter what happens to us on earth, as long as we are following Jehovah’s teachings, we will live in paradise on earth.”

Brother Putnam:” Are Christians under the Mosaic Law and its requirements regarding sacrifices and the sabbath?”

Me: “We are no longer under the Mosaic Law as Jesus did away with the law, but we still must work to follow the principles of the law such as the ten commandments as they still apply today. However, we don’t need to make sacrifices or follow the sabbath.”

Brother Putnam: “In addition to confessing his own sins, each Christian has what responsibility regarding serious wrongdoing by others that could threaten the spiritual or moral cleanliness of the congregation?”

Me: “We are to also tell our brothers when they sin, even if we feel it’s minor. If that brother doesn’t change, then we must let you, the elders, know, as they need serious help to see their wrongdoing.”

Brother Putnam: “What is the only religious ceremony that Christians are commanded to observe?”

Me: “We are to observe the Passover as Jesus commanded.”

Brother Putnam: “What birthday celebrations are mentioned in the Bible? How does this affect your view of birthday celebrations?”

Me: “John The Baptist is mentioned as having attended a birthday, so his head was chopped off. This shows that we shouldn’t celebrate our birthday as it is not the humble thing to do and could lead to our own downfall.”

Brother Putna: “Are there any circumstances under which a Christian would refuse to obey worldly rulers?”

Me: "When worldly rulers ask us to go against Jehovah's teachings, we must make a stand to be no part of the world."

Brother Putnam: Who is the head of the Christian congregation?

Me: "The head of the Christian organization is Jehovah through Jesus, who uses the faithful and discreet slave today."

Brother Putnam: "How can you identify "the faithful and discreet slave" today?"

Me: "We identify them by their actions and by whether they are teaching what the Bible teaches."

Brother Putnam: "What is the Governing Body of the Christian congregation?"

Me: "They are the modern-day faithful and discreet slave."

Brother Putnam looked at Brother Mills, and they both looked pleased. Brother Putnam spoke up, "Well, very good, Brother Burger. I think you're ready, but we have just one more question. Is there anything from our teachings that you don't understand?"

To my surprise, words came out of my mouth. "Well, I don't really understand disfellowshipping. I mean, why am I not even allowed to talk or say hello to someone?" I asked.

Disfellowshipping happened when a baptized member decided not to be a Jehovah's Witness anymore or committed a sin so bad the elders decided this was the only course of action. If you were disfellowshipped, you weren't to be talked to. Not even a friendly hello. Your family couldn't talk to you or hang out with you. You were considered persona non grata. You were shunned. Your only option was to show penance by attending meetings faithfully, usually for a year or more. This was one of the rare beliefs Dad rebuffed on occasion. He'd sometimes be seen talking to recently disfellowshipped members living with the odd stares and backroom admonishments from the elders he'd receive after. So, it was not a belief that ever took hold of me. I also didn't feel it made any sense, given how Jesus acted.

This was an especially raw subject because of my estranged older brother, who was disfellowshipped. It left me with a feeling like I had been robbed of a brother. He was always talked about like a

family member who died under shameful circumstances. The only bad thing he did was decide he didn't want to be a witness, and for that, I wasn't allowed to talk to him. Meanwhile, men could threaten to kill gays or drink in excess and propped us a hero in the church.

"What do you mean, Brother Burger?" Brother Mills jumped in, having been silent the entire time.

"I just don't understand how that fits the teachings of Jesus. He hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes. He would never refuse to talk to anyone. He even engaged with Satan the Devil," I said in a very confident voice, gaining confidence.

Both of the elders looked surprised. Brother Putnam began to open his Bible and then spoke up, "Brother Burger, are you familiar with how the Apostle Paul handled a brother who was living in gross sin?"

"Yes, I am familiar with it, but it doesn't say anything about not talking to someone. Paul just suggests that they take him out of the congregation. Paul doesn't set up any rules or tell anyone they will be in trouble." I raised my voice now.

"Brother Burger, Paul didn't have to say it specifically; it's clearly implied," Brother Mills said.

"Show me where Jesus said anything like that?" I asked back in a smart tone. "Sorry, Brothers, I just don't think I'll ever understand this rule," I responded, trying to calm my feelings.

Brother Putnam put his hand on my knee and tapped it, "Do you really feel that way?" he implored with his hand resting on my knee.

"Yes, I do feel that way."

"Well, Brother Burger, I don't think you're ready to be baptized. You need to go back to the Bible and our publications and do some deep study on this. I'm confident you'll figure it out," he tapped my knee again, then asked to say a prayer to wrap things up. He said a quick prayer then asked me to wish my parents well.

I walked away like I had just been spared from a killing. Somehow, I had talked my way out of being baptized. I didn't even consider that a possibility. One simple answer stopped everything.

I found Dylan waiting in his car, listening to music softly, “So when is the big date?”

“They said I wasn’t ready.” I smiled a big smile, and he shook his head in disbelief. On the drive home, I explained how it had happened. We had found a new hack that none of us were aware of.

We pulled into my driveway, “Alright, I’m going home, good luck,” Dylan said. I got out of the car and waved him goodbye, then nervously walked into the house. I wasn’t sure how my parents would take it.

As soon as I walked in, Mom and Dad were on the couch. Dad had a calculator and box full of receipts tallying up the monthly bills. Mom hopped up and came directly to me as soon as I entered the door. She was glowing, “So, how did it go?” she asked enthusiastically.

“Well, I’m not getting baptized,” I said, trying to hide my happiness.

“What?” Mom was frozen in disbelief.

I started to unbutton my shirt and then gave them the details, “They said I wasn’t ready because I didn’t agree with disfellowshipping.”

Mom’s mouth was hanging open in a state of shock. “Why would you tell them that?” she implored.

“Because it’s how I feel. You told me to be honest, so I was honest.” I made my way to my room.

Mom gave chase, “You know what the right answer is. You’re going to do those questions again and give the right answer.” She suddenly got a militant tone as she said it.

“No, I was honest,” I said.

Mom gave out a gasp, but before she could say anything else, Dad’s voice came from the room. “Linda, he answered honestly, this is his choice, and he has to do it. That’s final. I’m the head of this household, and he’ll decide. End. Of. Story.” Dad put extra emphasis on the ‘end of story.’

Mom walked away in a huff with tears in her eyes, with nothing else to do after having been defeated by Dad, whom she was reminded of today as the head of the household. I couldn’t believe it.

Just yesterday, I had a death sentence. Now, it was like some new evidence came out to prove I was nowhere near the crime. Dad even had my back. It was every Christmas and birthday party I had never gotten to celebrate rolled into one day.

I was going to live.

Chapter 9

Parties

I woke up Monday morning with a newfound freedom I had never experienced before. Just knowing that it was my decision whether I wanted to be a Jehovah's Witness or not made the usual clanging and banging of Dad in the kitchen less annoying. Best of all, no nightmares. Once Dad finished, I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke to Mom in the doorway; she spoke before I could fully wake up, "You need to wake up. I'm going to work at the herb shop. I expect the laundry done when I get home." It was clear she was still upset over the events of the day before. Her tone was sad and defeated. Mom would usually put on a strong face during adversity, but we were both the same in that we simply could not hide when we were upset.

She turned and walked out the door without saying goodbye. "Goodbye," I yelled. I heard the door close and sauntered out of bed.

After some cereal, I put on MTV. They were playing a rerun of Spring Break, which consisted of a bunch of older teens and adults partying. N-SYNC was on stage performing "Tearing Up My Heart" on a round catwalk next to the ocean. Supermodels walked the catwalk as the boys sang and danced. Off-stage hot women in bikinis moved seductively. Men with six packs would do a simple jig, raise their arms with a red solo cup in their hand, and scream at the camera. The crowd was overwhelmingly white, and with so many straight frat boys, the latter seemed a bit unbelievable for NSYNC.

I couldn't relate to these scenes at all. I had never even been to a party. Jehovah's Witnesses did have parties, but they were tame affairs. They weren't even called parties; they were called "get-togethers." As if calling it a party would somehow make it sinful. Get-togethers were really just potlucks with music. People would bring their home-cooked meals; then, you would mingle until some music came on. The funnest part of the party would be when everyone got together to do the electric slide or the cha-cha dance.

My Jehovah's Witness friends, while bad, were never bad enough to throw a real party. My school friends were mainly theater nerds with the random stoner mixed in. I rarely could spend a night

with a non-Jehovah's Witness friend, so partying with them was out of the question. I imagined Lynna in a bikini with me next to her at a spring break party. It was a good thought.

I decided to do the laundry so I could have the rest of the day off. Oddly enough, Mom made no mention of studying for the meeting tonight. After the laundry was finished, it was lunchtime, so I made myself a bologna sandwich with some potato chips on the side. I heard a knock on the door. I opened it and felt the heat from the hot Summer day, feeling lucky I wasn't working. Lyndsey was standing with her little brother Nick, who was sweating from the walk next door. He was creating a visor with his hands.

"Hey, wanna play some football?" Behind them were two other neighbor kids, Chris and Sarah.

They stood in the hot sun behind Nick and Lyndsey. Chris was around 12, lanky, and constantly had a chip on his shoulder. Sarah, his sister, was 11 and was a speedy runner even though she wasn't great at catching the ball. "We need you to play quarterback; we'll play at Chris' house," Lyndsey explained.

"Yeah, sure," I said, threw on a different shirt, and then headed out to play.

The road we lived on was about 2/10ths of a mile long; it had single-wide and double-wide trailers along each side of it. In total, there were around eight trailers along the road. It was a lower-class white neighborhood, the yards littered with old children's toys, cars, and lawnmowers in various states of repair. Chris and Sarah lived in a double-wide with tan siding and a long driveway. The yard was around 1/2 of an acre and perfectly flat. Perfect for playing sports.

The only downside was sometimes their stepdad would come out after one too many beers and try to talk to you. Almost always, it was about the dark arts and how he could kill you with one punch or curse you with a demon. Mysteriously, he never wanted to show his skills in action. Thankfully, he was at work.

We played football for around an hour in the hot sun. Sports were a good distraction from everything. Here, I didn't have to think about religion, family, or anything else. Just throwing a ball. Much like my guitar playing, it was a welcome distraction from the world I lived

in. After the game I went home and vegged out on the couch exhausted.

A few hours later, having fully sprouted on the couch, I heard a vehicle coming down the driveway. I popped my head up just in time to see Dad's white truck. Joe and Dad were home early. Usually, before entering the house, Joe and Dad would throw away any trash and lock up their tools. A process that took around five to ten minutes. Today, however, as soon as the truck stopped, I heard the truck door slam, and within about five seconds, someone was racing into the house, going straight to the bathroom. Odd, but maybe Joe or Dad had a bathroom emergency.

I heard a shriek come from the bathroom. Now I was really curious. I walked across the kitchen and made a left turn down the hallway facing the back door. I stopped at the bathroom door. "You OK in there?" I asked through the door.

"No, leave me alone." Joe's voice came through the door. He sounded like he was in agony. Then Dad opened the backdoor and came walking in. He had a ritual of removing his dirty boots and pants as soon as he walked in.

As he was removing his boots, I asked, "What's wrong with him?" pointing at the bathroom.

"Oh, he had a little accident with the mixer," Dad said with a pained look on his face.

The mystery was soon revealed by Dad. Joe was operating the cement mixer. At the end of the day, it was usually cleaned. It had a big drum for mixing cement with paddles that moved the sand, water, and cement mix around to make a consistent mix of concrete. The drum could be pulled down with a long handle on its side and put in a locked position with a latch. Once down, you could spray it with water and properly clean it so it didn't build up residue. Sometimes, a rock or an old piece of cement would come between the paddle and drum, locking up the gear. When that happened, the drum would jolt. In order to properly clean the mixer, you needed to get at it from all angles. It was good to clean the mixer a few times a day before giving it a thorough cleanse at the end of the day.

Early in the afternoon, Joe cleaned the mixer. He had pulled the drum down, and in order to clean the side of the mixer, he stood with his legs on either side of the handle of the drum; this turned out to be a huge mistake because he didn't latch the lock on the drum.

What happened next would surely be talked about for years. While he was standing over the handle, the mixer caught a rock. But instead of jolting as it would have in a locked position, the paddles caught, and the drum flew backward and went upright. All of the torque and horsepower from the engine lifted the handle right into Joe's testicles, lifting him up and tossing him about five to ten feet in the process. Luckily, he landed right into the sand pile.

The poor guy, just a couple of months ago, had ripped all the hair from the area, and now this. Dad winced as he explained how Joe flew through the air. Of course, Dad, not believing in doctors, inspected the area as much as Joe would let him and determined most of the pain was his imagination and he'd be OK. As soon as Dad finished with the last bit of the story, we heard Joe almost scream through the door, "My freaking balls are bleeding, Dad."

Dad didn't respond, choosing instead to walk to his bedroom, saying, "Let me know if you need anything, son."

I leaned against the door, "Dude, do you need any help in there?" I asked softly.

"No, I'll be out in a minute," a response came back. I went to his room and grabbed some underwear and a change of clothes.

"I've got some clothes for you." He opened the door just enough for me to pass them through the door.

"Thanks, can you throw these away?" came from the other side of the door. He handed me a pair of white underwear that had blood in the crotch area. I looked at them horrified and quickly stuffed them in the trash can.

I walked into the living room, where Dad was sitting on the couch with a big glass of sweet tea. "Dad, I think he needs to go to the hospital; you should look at his underwear."

Dad looked up, "He just needs some rest, but you should stay home from the meeting tonight just in case." Well, I certainly wouldn't argue with the last part, but I also knew our heads had to be

practically severed from our bodies for Dad to take anyone to the hospital.

He once worked through a massive heat stroke, almost killing himself in the process. He only went to the doctor when he passed out on the job site. When he came to the hospital, he tried to cheese it. A true believer in not seeing doctors. I heard the running water of the shower coming through the living room wall and walked back across the kitchen into the hall, where I waited by the shower door. No sounds of pain or anguish came through the shower.

Hearing the front door open, I made my way back through the kitchen. As I was about to enter the living room, Dad greeted Mom, "Hi Linda, how was work?" Mom and Dad made small talk, and then Dad told her what had happened. Joe was still in the shower.

Mom immediately ran to the shower door, knocking on it with a fast rap. "Josiah, are you OK?"

"I'm fine," he yelled from the shower. She didn't believe him, "Let me have a look."

"Mom, leave him alone," I interjected. She shot me a look that told me to stay out of it.

"No, Mom, I'm fine," Joe yelled back. Mom hadn't grasped a 17-year-old boy who may not want his mom inspecting his genitals.

"OK, but if you need to go to the hospital, you let me know," she finally relented.

"He doesn't need to go to the hospital, Linda," Dad yelled from the living room.

Mom rolled her eyes and walked past me. "I'll get the food ready," she said.

Dinner was stir-fry. Again. Recently, It had taken a backseat to other easy-to-cook meals, but Mom was understandably not in the mood to cook something complicated. As we sat at the table, Mom was giving Dad death glares. She had lost me to the world since I didn't want to get baptized, and now the son who did like being a Jehovah's Witness may not be able to have grandchildren.

I broke the silence, looking at Joe, and asked, "So what happened?" He shook his head from side to side while swallowing the food he had in his mouth. He explained what happened in his own

words finally ending with, “Then I heard a grinding noise, and the next thing I knew, I was flying in the air. If the sand pile wouldn’t have been there, I probably would have broken my damn neck.”

Mom frowned when Joe said “damn” but decided to give him a pass. “It really threw you that far?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, it was freaking crazy.” Joe threw his hands in the air as he was talking. This got a laugh out of Dad. “It’s not funny! I could have died,” but even Joe saw the humor in it and couldn’t help but give a grin.

Once dinner was over, my parents left for the meeting. Joe stayed in his room, and I spent some time on AOL in a chatroom where every other message was A/S/L. An acronym for Age/Sex/Location. The room was full of men, all ignoring each other. Only interacting when a 14/f/California appeared. I was bored, so I logged off and turned the TV on. In about an hour, Monday Night Raw will be on.

I heard the phone ring, “Are you getting it?” I yelled to Joe.

“Yeah, the phone is in here,” yelling back from his room. He had absconded with the cordless phone at some point.

I walked over, curious who was calling, as most people knew we weren’t home on a Monday night. As I walked into the doorway, Joe glanced up at me. He was lying in nothing but boxer shorts on his side with his legs spread open, allowing air to flow through the shorts. He didn’t seem bothered by me there. He was going through what had happened to him. I could hear the person on the other end laughing. “It’s not freaking funny,” Joe responded. Then, the person started talking about something else. “Yeah, I’ll invite him,” I heard him on the other end in a reluctant tone, Joe looking up at me. He hung up the phone, ending the call with “peace.”

“What was that about?” I asked.

Joe put the phone down next to him and focused on the TV while talking to me, “Oh, that was Miles; he’s having a party Friday night and wants you and me to come. He said he just invited Dylan.”

I was a bit puzzled; on Friday, we had to go to the district convention. So, I asked the obvious question, “Is he not going to the convention? How are we going to convince Mom and Dad?”

“I don’t know, that’s up to you; I’m gonna tell Dad I’m going to go with Miles Saturday morning. Dad owes me.”

He had the perfect leverage. I was about to turn to leave, but he stopped me, “I’m gonna try to get Maria to go. She’ll probably bring Lynna with her.” He needed Lynna to go as much as I needed Maria to go. My heart skipped a beat. I had to get to this freaking party.

I jolted toward the phone and grabbed it before Joe could react. “Hey, I’m gonna call Maria, you jerk,” he said harshly.

“I just need it for ten minutes,” I responded.

“Yeah, well, I’m in pain.”

“That’ll work on Dad, but not me,” I said with no remorse in my voice. “Ten minutes; I need to make a call.” I walked back to my room and dialed up Dylan.

Dylan’s parents were lax about him going to meetings, too, so it was no surprise when he picked up, “Yo,” he answered.

“You at home too, huh?”

“I’ll bet you want to go to that party, don’t ya fuck-face.” Dylan had the drop on me.

“Can I spend the night at yours and ride with you to the convention?” I had desperation all over me as I asked it.

“Hmmm.... let me think about it. Can... you? My best friend. Can you come to a party with me? Then I have to take you to the convention where we have to sit all day trying not to fall asleep? Hmmm.” He trailed off at the last “hmmm.” I knew one thing, though: his parents were making him go to the convention.

“Come on; you gotta go anyways; much more fun with me.”

“OK, fine, I’ll drive you. I don’t think you’ll ever be able to pay back all you owe me.”

“I’ll find a way.” I knew there was no real way to pay him back.

Dylan continued, “Dude, this party is going to be awesome. Miles is getting a keg and no adults.” I was already getting nervous.

“Nice! I’ll let Joe know I’m going too. Oh, by the way, he got hit in the balls with the mixer; it hit him so hard he flew in the air and landed in the sand pile.” I heard the phone drop and laughter coming

from the other end. One thing about Dylan was that he loved immature humor.

“Hey, now everyone will know!” I heard Joe from his room yell, the TV show he was watching now muted.

“I’ll call you later about the party; Joe needs to use the phone.” Dylan choked his way to a goodbye through laughter. We hung up, and I brought the phone back to Joe so he could make his calls.

A party, a party without adults. A party with booze. Was I finally going to get to experience what I saw on MTV spring break? Wild thoughts raced through my head. Lynna was in a bikini with a drink in her hand as we danced to Ludacris. Hell, I would dance to NSYNC. If I was lucky, I could convince the crowd that My Bloody Valentine was worth dancing to. It was going to be the first time Lynna and I were truly alone together with no rules. I had seen porn online, but I still had no clue how sex worked or how one even got to the end result. Could I get closer? I felt a tingling in my loins and decided to leave the fantasies for tonight. Mom and Dad would be home as soon as the meeting was over. I went to the freezer and made myself a bowl of ice cream. Dad, a lover of ice cream, always kept a one-gallon drum of Neapolitan in stock. I made my bowl half chocolate and half strawberry.

My parents walked through the door well after the ice cream was eaten. “How’s your brother?” Mom asked as soon as she saw me on the couch.

“He’s sore but seems to be doing OK.”

“Joe, come in here. We have to tell you boys something,” Dad said before they had put their bags down. Joe came limping into the living room.

“What’s up?” he asked in pain. He was likely hamming it up to avoid work as long as he could and milk the guilt. There were, after all, no labored breaths when he was talking with Miles.

“Your Mother and I have decided we’re going to change Kingdom Halls. The Shelby Hall needs help, so we’re going to start going there. You boys can decide which hall you want to go to since Joe has his driver’s license now.” Joe and I exchanged curious glances. This was news, but not huge news. The hall in Shelby was

about the same distance away as the hall in Gastonia. I knew zero people in Shelby other than Greg, whom Joe would sometimes talk to at hall builds.

Next, Dad looked at me, “Jon, it's up to you if you want to go. We can't make you get baptized or go to the Hall, but I'm just asking you personally to go sometimes to make our lives easier.” Joe's eyes grew big, and he stared at me. We were both in disbelief. Mom looked like she had just witnessed her son being executed and went to their bedroom. I managed to get out a shocked, “OK.”

“She's just a little upset you don't want to get baptized, but I meant what I said, Jon. This is your choice,” Dad patted me on the shoulder. He went to console Mom.

He would let us die rather than go to a hospital, but at least he wasn't going to force me to change my life for something I didn't believe in. Joe looked at me and mouthed, “Wow,” before limping to his bedroom. I followed him to talk about the news we just heard. He assumed the position on his bed. I made sure to keep eye contact with him. He was excited to be checking out a new hall. I was excited to no longer be going, and we both were excited to go to a party.

That night, I went to sleep happy even though I was unable to talk to Lynna since she had to go to bed early. Things finally started to feel like they were falling into place. Is this what happiness feels like? I faded off into a dream.

I was walking along a dirt road; the sun was bright and hot overhead. I didn't see the brightness as much as I felt it. I bent down and grabbed a handful of dirt; I could feel every grain as I rubbed it with my fingers between my palms. A bird squawked overhead. It was a big bright green and red parrot. The kind you see in a pet store that can say funny phrases in repetition. It squawked louder and louder until I was awake.

When I woke up, I could hear sirens. Faint red lights flashed through my window. They were coming from my street. I jumped out of bed and ran into the living room, where I could look out the larger window in the back in the direction of the lights. Soon, Joe, Mom, and Dad were all up. Mom was rubbing her eyes, “What's going on?” she asked, standing in her oversized nightgown.

Joe hobbled over to me next to the window. "Look," I said and pointed. There, we could see a huge roaring fire; a double-wide was ablaze with a firetruck in front of it. There were numerous trucks with flashing red lights beside the fire truck. The trucks belonged to volunteer firemen.

I threw some pants on, and Joe followed suit more slowly. Dad and I were out the door first. "That's Chris' house on fire," I told Dad.

"That doesn't look good," he responded. We made our way to the edge of the road just in front of the house. You could feel the heat from the fire. It whipped across my face like a blow dryer was pointed at me, going off and on.

A volunteer fireman appeared, "Can't get any closer," he said, putting his hand up in a stop motion. Dad began chatting to him.

I saw Lyndsey, Rachel, and Nick standing on the side of the road, watching the fire. There was someone crouched down, sitting on their ass with a fire blanket over their shoulders. I walked over and saw it was Chris. His house was in flames, and he had the blanket loosely on his back, watching it. I walked up to them.

"What the hell happened?" were the first words that came out of my mouth. Lyndsey grabbed me by the arm and escorted me a few feet away.

In a very quiet and serious voice, she told me exactly what happened. "Chris was smoking a cigarette in his room when he dropped it on his blanket. It went up in flames. Then, the wall caught on fire. He was lucky to wake everyone up and get out of there alive. He has some burns on his back but seems to be OK." I winced, and then a wave of pity washed over me. This poor family was going to lose everything.

"Where is the rest of the family?"

Lyndsey pointed at the end of the cul-de-sac, where three people were talking to a fireman. Chris' Mom was crying, and his sister looked stunned. Their stepdad was flailing his hands in the air, yelling something I wasn't able to make out. "Why isn't Chris with his family?" I asked Lyndsey. "He says he wants to sit there. I think he feels guilty for starting the fire," she explained.

That night, we didn't get much sleep. Instead, we watched the fire slowly be put out, talked to other neighbors, and then went to bed. Dad took the rare day off of work.

By morning, the double-wide made of vinyl, plastic, and wood was no more. Only the brick foundation and a few bits of unburned things were laid around. A piece of wood frame here. An unburnt TV there. The chemicals in the vinyl and plastic acted as an accelerant. I was thankful no one smoked in my house.

As a family, we gathered clothes we weren't wearing and put them in bags. Mom made sure to drop some tracts and magazines in our bag just in case the family might be in need of religious conversion. Every neighbor did the same thing sans the Jehovah's Witness literature. Lyndsey's mom collected the bags and brought them to the family, which was staying with a friend. I couldn't help but wonder if their stepdad did some black magic, compelling a spirit to push the cigarette out of his stepson's hand. Looking at the burnt wreckage the next day made me thankful I had a home to sleep in and clothes in my closet; it could always be worse.

If the first part of the week was eventful and dramatic, the middle part would have been pretty tame. The only exciting news was finding out Lynna and Maria were going to the party. I went to work with Dad on Wednesday, and Joe slowly recovered. Having basically worn nothing but boxers every day, he finally put on a pair of basketball shorts by the time I came home from work.

After work, Mom asked if I was going to the meeting in the new hall. I decided to test my freedom and told them I wasn't going. My parents were not thrilled, but they stuck to their word and let me stay home. My first true taste of freedom. I was getting to decide what I wanted to do, and it felt glorious. Joe decided to brave his injury and check out the new hall. He put on his dress clothes, wincing. I laid out on the couch as they walked out the door, saying goodbye just before the door closed.

The downside of freedom? There was nothing to do. One benefit of being a Witness was that everything was scheduled for you. Even being a "bad" Witness meant you had to schedule around your already packed schedule. So, having no schedule at all felt odd.

All I could think about was Friday when I'd get to see Lynna. The minutes felt like hours. I decided to rummage through Dad's records and listen to some music for the rest of the night. He had a small collection of 70s rock albums. I put on his Boston record, "More Than a Feeling," and I sang along. When my parents came home, it was the time to spring on them. I'd be spending the night at Dylan's on Friday so I could go to the party. Their only request was that we sit at the district convention as a family.

As Joe gingerly made his way into his room, I followed him. I was curious about the new hall they were attending. "So, what was it like?" I asked.

"It was smaller than Gastonia South. Greg was there, and I invited him to the party. There are also some girls there that he's friends with, but they're younger than us."

"Do they seem cool?" I asked.

"Hard to say, but Greg said they were. They may be at the District Convention this weekend." That was about all I got out of him. Just that there may be some cool people there. I was still on the fence about Greg; I had limited interaction with him, only knowing about his sister, who died in a tragic skiing accident. Rumors swirled around the local halls that drugs were involved. Something common when any young person passes away under anything but natural circumstances. Maybe I could get to know Greg better Friday night.

Chapter 10

The District Convention

Dad woke me up on Friday morning at 5:00 a.m.. since we had to be on the road by 6:30 a.m. Normally I would be annoyed but with a party coming up tonight I had some pep in my step. Joe seemed to be back in action too. He was still a little sore but could move normally. Dad had been exhausted from working all week but there was a convention to go to. Mom was still groggy but chipper, nonetheless.

The District Convention was the event of the year. So, there was some energy in the morning. Everyone got dressed quickly. I had decided to wear a checkered pair of white and red slacks. I had found at a thrift store with a white button-up shirt and a thin brown tie. Mom raised an eyebrow when she saw me but decided not to make a fuss. Everyone was in the car right on time.

As we got on the road, Mom turned around in the front seat, looking back at us, “You boys, make sure you take notes and no playing around. That includes you, Jonathan; even if you’re not ready to commit, you should still focus. You might learn something that really pushes you towards Jehovah.” She turned back to face the road, forever the optimist. Joe and I exchanged glances, having learned to speak with our eyes long ago.

My expression said, *Fat chance*, he said, “I know.” We both shared a silent laugh.

Our District Convention was in Columbia, South Carolina. It was an almost two-hour drive, and the big highlight was seeing the giant peach along Highway I-85 before getting on I-77. I-85 and I-77 were pretty standard highways along the south, with trees lining each side broken up by the occasional chunks of farmland or a small town off an exit.

The only thing I had gathered about Columbia was that it had a homeless problem. This was because we didn’t spend any actual time in Columbia, only what we saw from the car window as we drove to the indoor arena, which was located in a bad part of the city. Mostly, men in tattered clothes on the sidewalk with sleeping bags or at every corner with a makeshift cardboard sign asking for money.

By 8:15, we had arrived. We pulled into the arena parking; a volunteer attendant was ready to direct us where to park. Something I didn't understand about being a Witness was why anyone thought it was an honor to wake up at six in the morning and stand out in the morning heat directing cars where to park.

Being selected was treated as a great honor. So, they took their job seriously; this attendant seemed to think it was equal to showing actors where to sit at the Oscars. Dad rolled down the window and made small talk with him. The attendant laughed at the small talk and then waved us to our parking spot, which was about a five-minute walk to the arena. At the entrance were young men stationed at the door to greet you and act as soft security. I say soft security because in all the years I had gone to conventions, the only incident was some protestors on one occasion who stood about 40 feet away with signs. They waved to the attendants coming through the door, including us, and we made our way into the concourse.

Dad turned to the right, and we came to the first hallway leading to seats. Dad always preferred sitting on the upper levels at these conventions, which was welcome news to us. It made it much easier to goof off. He also brought a pair of binoculars with him to every convention under the guise of seeing the speaker, but outside of Mom, we all used them to find where other people were sitting or generally spying.

"Remember, we're in section 205, boys," Dad said as we walked into the arena. He turned up the stairs and went about halfway up to an empty row, and we sat in our seats. Before we could leave to go find our friends, Dad had one last warning for us, "Be here before the song starts." Joe and I headed for the concourse.

The concourse was bustling with witnesses all dressed to the nines. This was the time to show off either in style or piousness. With my white and red checkered pants, I stood out like a sore thumb, so it wasn't a surprise when Steve and Jeremy spotted us first. "What are you wearing, Jon?" Steve asked, holding back laughter.

"Found them in a thrift store, Jeremy."

"Well, you should have left them there," Steve concluded. Jeremy shook his head, laughing, acting as if he couldn't believe I would wear such a crazy get-up.

Both were wearing double-breasted suits that looked new, with silk shirts underneath and Florsheim wingtips in which you could see your reflection. Steve's suit was gray with pinstripes, and he had on a black tie with diamond patterns on it. Jeremy's suit was navy blue with a black tie. Jeremy had a tight fade haircut, having gotten a trim before the convention; he ran a pic through the top of his hair. Steve's head was shaved smooth the night before. Before walking, we all made sure our outfits and hair were in the best working order.

We started to walk. "Yo, Jon, where are you sitting?" Jeremy asked.

"205 in the middle, what about you?"

"I'm at 217, near the bottom row with my Mom."

Steve chimed in, "I'm at 242 near the top." Steve's parents always choose seats high up at every convention.

We walked by a group of girls who looked to be our age. All three were white and wearing long flowing dresses with short sleeves. Two had tops that went to their necks, and one was wearing a strange necklace with what looked to be an Egyptian symbol that hung between her cleavage. She had a bob haircut and a slender neck, forcing your eyes to the necklace. I couldn't help but look at it, and she caught me staring. She smiled as they walked by.

"I think she likes you, Jon, better not tell Lynna," Steve said, teasing me.

"I was just looking at her necklace; it was weird," I said defensively.

"Sure, you were" Joe added to the mix.

"Uh oh, here comes Lynna. You better hope we don't say anything, Jon", Jeremy said, having spotted Maria and Lynna.

Both Joe and I checked our hair with our hands again. My hair was spiked, and Joe's was slicked back.

We all met up near a seating entrance away from the crowd. There was safety in a large group. At these events, you really couldn't spend much time mixing sexes as pairs of friends without

raising eyebrows. If it was a large group with one outnumbering the other, it raised fewer eyebrows. I gave Lynna a handshake, and we tickled each other's palms with our fingers, sharing a brief moment. "Where are you sitting?" I asked Lynna.

"I'm at 117 near the back row."

"I'm at 205 near the middle; I'll see if I can find you." Joe and Maria were having a conversation, and I noticed Maria twirling her hair with a finger as she and Joe were locking eyes. Steve and Jeremy watched the crowd go by.

After about five minutes Steve gave us a warning the meeting was about to start. One last moment with Lynna, "I'll see you tonight; what time are you going to Miles' party?" I asked Lynna.

"We should be there around 7:30."

"OK, well, maybe we can talk at lunch. Can't wait to see you tonight," I said with a longing in my voice. Steve was listening in; he raised his eyebrow, then looked back at the crowd of people.

We said our goodbyes and took one last walk around the concourse. Steve and Jeremy checked out the girls. Joe and I tried to hype them up to go talk to them, but neither wanted to make a move. Soon, the convention was about to begin, so we got to our seats. Dylan hadn't yet arrived, and I was starting to get nervous.

The convention started just like a normal meeting at the Kingdom Hall with a song and a prayer. Unlike the Kingdom Hall at the convention, they handed out programs that had the theme and each talk along with times listed. This year, the theme for the convention was "Always Walk With Jehovah." The opening talk was "Walking With Jehovah" and was to be 45 minutes long. The brother giving the talk was introduced as Brother Grey from the Salisbury West congregation, and he lived up to the name.

From our vantage point, he looked to be in his mid-60s with gray hair and wore glasses. He was thin and had on a gray two-button suit. He began his talk by expounding on what walking with Jehovah means. After about 10 minutes, I began to look for Lynna. She was sitting next to her mom, taking notes and paying attention to the talk. I found Jeremy, whose head was resting on his hand, dangerously close to sleep already. Steve spotted me after I spotted

him and gave a short wave with his hand. I waved back, and I could just make out a smile.

By the second talk, I was fading, and the brother giving the talk had a slow southern drawl that was perfect for counting sheep. He was an older black brother who was wearing a burgundy suit and burgundy shoes. Quite stylish for a witness; it was just a shame his speaking style didn't match the suit. Mom nudged me to take notes, so I scribbled a few words.

Jesus always walked a righteous path.

Must walk with faithful and discreet slave.

We must follow their lead.

Always follow behind them.

Mom got back to her note-taking, and I began to scan the crowd for Dylan. The good thing was that his family usually sat near the top, and his blond hair and large frame made him easy to find. I found him sitting diagonally from me a few sections over in 214. I made it obvious I was lookin' in that direction. I got another nudge from Mom.

Lunch break finally rolled around just before my eyes were at their heaviest. My parents had packed us tuna sandwiches on wheat. Something neither I nor Joe wanted. We told them we'd come back five minutes before the start and eat. "Suit yourself," Dad said, all smiles, ready to dig into his sandwich.

I met up with Dylan, letting him know I had my clothes in the loud Buick, so I had to grab them before we left. We decided he should sit with me so it would make leaving easier. Our row was still empty, so there was plenty of room. Then we met up with Steve, Jeremy, Joe, and his friend Greg from the new Kingdom Hall my parents were attending.

Greg was 18 and extremely attractive. He looked like he stepped out of a Sears catalog. He had natural jet-black hair that was cut stylishly and sharp features with piercing blue eyes. He had long sideburns and could have been a host on MTV. Like most witnesses, his dad was a tradesman, which meant his summers were spent working in the sun, so he had a lean, athletic body and a nice tan.

Up until this point, I really hadn't talked to him much or gotten to know him. He turned to me, "Hey, what's up, Jon? Joe said you can miss meetings if you want; you're so lucky, dude." I looked around, making sure no one was around to hear us. A bit forward, given we didn't know each other, but it proved he was more worldly than spiritual. He was "cool."

As we walked, we decided we were going to be a gang and jokingly call ourselves the Gastonia South Mafia. We pretended other groups of teens were rival gangs making up stories about the territory. Soon, we spotted Lynna and Maria, who were walking with Lynna's sister. We said hello briefly, but Lynna's sister wanted to keep walking. Lynna gave me a wink as they left, and my heart skipped a beat. Only a few more hours and we'd be at a party. Before going back to sit for lunch, we all agreed we'd get to Miles at around seven. We hadn't seen Miles there. Perhaps he stayed home to prepare for the party. Once we got back to our seats and ate, the second part of the convention began. The challenge after lunch was to not fall asleep.

This was an especially difficult challenge for Dylan. He respected my parents, but there is only so much you can ask of a rebellious teen. Dylan had little to lose, but Mom might decide it was better that I didn't spend the night with him if he stayed asleep. I had to elbow him throughout the afternoon as he dozed off. There was also a risk he might decide he was annoyed with my elbows and opt not to give me a ride.

At around 3:15, the last talk lasted an hour. The name of this talk was "Imitate Jesus' Meek Attitude." The speaker was a younger man who looked to be around 30. He had red hair and spoke with a northern accent. He told a few jokes, which got the audience laughing. He tried to work in a walking metaphor that didn't quite land for the subject matter. Dylan continued to steal snoozes as much as he could. Once the meeting ended, we were ready to go. I grabbed Dad's car keys and told my parents goodbye. Joe caught up with us and asked if he could catch a ride with us since Miles had never shown up before. He didn't tell our parents about the no-show. I told

him he could so long as he ran back and gave my Dad the keys to the screaming Buick back.

Dylan drove over the speed limit while blasting Rage Against The Machine. We listened to their album almost two times before we got back to Gastonia. There was something nice about driving down the highway with an awesome band at full volume and windows down, knowing you were about to embark on a party. We got to Dylans and changed. I put on my JNCO jeans, a green Weezer t-shirt, and my patent green leather Sheep skateboarding shoes. I was impressed with my look. Dylan had wide-leg Kikwear jeans and a simple white tank top, which showed off his broad shoulders and muscled arms. Joe was wearing a crisp, clean white shirt and his jeans that had rips in the knees. He put on a silver necklace. We all spiked our hair. We decided to head to Miles and Thomas' apartment. It was the first time I had been there.

The surfer brothers lived just outside of the center of Gastonia in an apartment building with gray vinyl siding and a brown roof. We came to the door and knocked. Miles answered the door, "Dudes, you're here early, awesome, come on in."

He looked at Joe, a guilty look on his face, "Sorry man, I tried to call but couldn't get a hold of you; we decided to go to the convention next weekend."

He grabbed Joe's shoulder, "We cool?"

"Yeah, man, no worries." We walked in and Nas was playing on the stereo. Sean asked if we wanted a drink, and we said yes. Before I knew it a red solo cup was in our hands filled with Bud Light. Miles showed me a tour as I hadn't been there.

The apartment had a living room, two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The living room had a TV and sound system against the wall with a black futon opposite it and a tall lamp in the corner next to it. A cheap coffee table sat in the living room for cards and drinking. We walked into the kitchen, where I noticed the refrigerator; on it were pictures of the brothers in various locations. I focused on the picture of Miles climbing a rock face. His hand was thrusting up to grab a rock, and one leg pushed up from below. He was wearing tight

revealing shorts that accentuated his ass. It would make an elder blush.

In the kitchen was a big rubber trash can. It had a keg sitting inside with ice all over it, "This is where the magic happens," Thomas said, pointing to the keg. I took a sip of my beer, pretending I did it all the time. After some small talk, Steve and Jeremy arrived. After them, Greg was at the door. Then more showed up, including Miles' girlfriend Heather. He made introductions to those who didn't know her. I asked how she was doing, but she didn't seem in the mood to talk. Finally, Lynna arrived with Maria.

It was happening. Our first party! I played it cool and let her say hello to our mutual friends. Then I made my way over to her. We looked at each other, speaking with our eyes. I asked if she wanted a drink, and she obliged. I offered to give her a tour. We held hands, and I walked her to the kitchen, first showing her the keg. I explained how to operate it. Thankfully, Thomas had given me the 411. "See, you give it a few pumps, then hold your cup at an angle like this, and then you hold down the handle to pour." The beer came flowing out, and within a few seconds, her cup was filled. "Now pump it a few times for the next person." She gave it a few pumps. She put the cup to her lips, took a sip, and smiled. God, I loved that smile.

We went back to the living room where Wu-Tang was playing. The partygoers were dancing in the center of the room. The room was mostly dark, with some light coming from the hallway and kitchen. Lynna asked if I wanted to dance. I had anticipated this but was still nervous. I had a few dance classes when I was 14, doing classic and ballroom dancing, but I had never actually danced intimately with a girl. We joined the group in the middle of the living room. Thankfully, it wasn't like I had seen on MTV, where dancing consisted mainly of grinding.

We kept space between us while we danced. Dylan gyrated towards us, throwing his thumbs up like a disco dancer. Lynna and I both laughed. He threw his big arms around us and pulled us tight, telling us how great the party was and how much he loved us.

As the night went on, the drinks kept flowing, and electricity went through the party. There were around 15 of us there, all singing,

dancing, and laughing. Lynna and I got closer. I felt good, and my cheeks flushed from the beer. I got brave and went in for a kiss. Lynna kissed me back, and a loud “wooo” went from the crowd. We both turned red; Dylan slapped me on the back, lifting his hands in the air, cheering. The music stopped, and Thomas went to put on new music. He put on “Now That’s What I Call Music,” which had all the top pop hits. The first song was Chumbawamba’s “Tubthumping.” We all began to sing along, Lynna and I looking into each other's eyes as we sang and swung our bodies to the music.

The party continued with Lynna and I growing more comfortable in public. The dancing was turning into light grinding, and I was desperate to control what was going on in my pants. Periodically, I’d make my way to the bathroom to adjust and do my best to hide the tent in my pants. At around 10:00 p.m., it seemed everyone was getting close to being drunk. Over the revelry, we heard a commotion. It sounded like two people screaming. The music turned down, and we heard yelling coming from a bedroom. I looked around and noticed Miles and his girlfriend were missing. So was Thomas, Joe, and Maria. Once the music was down, we could clearly hear that the yelling was coming from a man or a woman.

The group huddled together, moving towards the sounds of yelling coming from Miles’s room. I was bold enough to go directly up to the door, “I HATE YOU!” I heard a woman yell. Very distinctly, I heard Miles’ voice, “YOU’RE SO FUCKING STUPID,” and a loud thump could be heard. “SO *MATURE* FROM MY *MATURE* BOYFRIEND WHO LIKES PUNCHING WALLS,” came the response to the thump from Heather. We all leaned in to listen more. As we listened, the front door opened. Thomas, Joe, and Maria walked in. Maria’s hair was messy, and Joe had a grin on his face. It wasn’t difficult to put two and two together. Thomas was either playing lookout or had accidentally caught them in the act of making out.

Thomas asked what was going on, and no one said anything, “WHY DID YOU EVEN HAVE THIS PARTY ANYWAYS?” Heather yelled out.

Thomas clapped his hands together, “OK, shows over kids, let's get back in here and let them have their privacy.” He put the

music back on, and we made our way back to the living room.

Lynna raised her eyebrow, “Trouble in paradise?” That made me laugh. I was definitely falling in love with Lynna. I was so thankful we didn’t yell at each other like that. Their fight sounded like the type of fight my parents got into two or three times a year, something I wanted to avoid in relationships. Lynna asked to take a break from me to hang with Maria. I obliged, wanting to get the scoop from Joe.

I walked up to Joe, “What were you doing outside?” I asked.

“Nothing, we were just hanging out talking.”

“Uh-huh, real convincing,” I said. Joe had a bright red hickey on his neck. “What’s that on your neck, huh?”

“What are you talking about?” he rubbed his neck.

Greg was standing nearby, “Yeah, Joe, what is that on your neck, dude? Looks like Maria might be a vampire.” Greg looked at me and offered his hand in a high five. I slapped his hand, and he pulled me towards him, laughing. Joe ran to the bathroom, and we followed.

He looked in the mirror, examining his neck, “Man, what the hell?” he yelled out.

Steve and Jeremy had noticed us all around the bathroom. “What you fools doing?” Jeremy asked. Joe closed the door, giving himself privacy and shifting the spotlight away from him. Greg and I told Jeremy and Steve about the hickey, and they both laughed. Now the secret was really out.

Eventually, Joe exited the bathroom. I stopped him before he could get back to the party. “What’s going on with Miles?” He was closer to him, and I had never heard Miles get angry.

“Dude, I don’t know. Evidently, they’re always fighting. She was going to break up with him last weekend, but they stayed together.” This was news to me; I thought they were both happy. I made my way to the living room and found Lynna. She told me about Maria and Joe sneaking off to make out.

“Maybe we could do the same,” she said seductively. I almost choked on the beer I was drinking. Suddenly, I had an idea.

There was another bedroom that was totally empty. I looked over towards Thomas, who was dancing and laughing with Jeremy,

“Hey Lynna, I want to show you something.” I grabbed her hand, and we walked through the crowd.

We walked down the hallway and could still hear Miles and Heather fighting, “Are you trying to eavesdrop on them?” Lynna asked.

“No, but I thought maybe we could use Thomas's bedroom.” I opened the door and put out my arm as if I was showing her a long-lost kingdom. For a split second, I was worried I had overstepped; this was a bedroom, not a car or a dark parking lot. She giggled, pushing into me. We stumbled into the dark, empty bedroom, almost landing on the ground. I closed the door, opting to keep the lights out.

We fumbled our way to the bed in the dark and began making out. It took a while for our eyes to adjust, but there was just enough moonlight coming through the window blinds that I could see her delicate figure. Our hands moved all around our bodies, tongues intertwined. I leaned back, and we fell into the bed. She was lying on top of me and moved her legs around my hips, straddling me. My boner was now pointing into her jeans. I was in a mixture of ecstasy and embarrassment. I slid my hand underneath her shirt, and she made a moaning noise. My turn-on levels were now at 11. Everything was new and exciting. I moved my hands to the pockets of her jeans and squeezed. She grinded into me, and then I moaned. Surprised by the noises coming out of me, I tried to hold back my excitement, but it proved to be futile. Lynna asked me to take off my shirt, and then she took off hers. We could hear muffled yelling mixing with the sound of thumping bass.

Our hands were making their way further south on each other, and I unbuttoned her jeans. She unbuttoned mine, and we decided it was best to just take them off. There it was. I was in my boxers, and she was in her bra and panties. It was like a bikini on MTV spring break, but a hell of a lot better. I could see most of the details of her body, and it was delicious.

After our pants were off, we switched positions, and I climbed on top of her. I was so nervous I thought my heart might jump out of my chest. Was this what sex is? As we were about to kiss, suddenly, the door sprang open, and light came flooding through the door.

Dylan fell to the floor, laughing hysterically. The rest of the party was in the hallway, hooting and hollering. Lynna jumped across the bed, hiding between it and the wall. I didn't have that option. I jumped down, grabbed Lynna's clothes, threw them in her direction, and stood up. Unaware of my boner poking through my boxers. It had slipped through the slit there for everyone to see. Suddenly, the entire group saw it in all its glory.

The girls ran, shrieking and laughing at the same time. The boys were almost on the ground dying of laughter, hiding their eyes, "Man, put that thing away," I heard Steve yell. The commotion was enough for Miles and Heather to leave their fight. As they opened the door, the crowd split in half, giving them a direct line of sight to me. I covered my erection with my shirt. Heather rolled her eyes at me and then left. Miles chased after her. Lynna put on her clothes and ran into Maria's arms. Her face was as red as mine, but she looked like she was about to cry. I put on my jeans.

After my clothes were on, like Miles, I gave chase to my girlfriend. She was in the parking lot next to Maria's car. I tried to talk to her, "Lynna, I'm sorry."

"Leave me alone," she said and turned her back to me, but I could see tears streaming down her face. Maria just looked at me with a mixture of sadness and compassion.

She had her arm around Lynna, "It'll be OK," she said in a motherly voice. Turning to me, she said, "Just give us some time."

I walked back into the party. The partygoers were staring at me like a fish in a bowl. My cheeks reddened again.

Dylan was waiting for me, "Dude, your boner was going straight through your boxers." he was still laughing and fell to the floor, clearly drunk.

"Yeah, thanks for that, by the way," I said to him angrily.

"I was just going to have a peek inside. I swear I had no clue what you two were doing." he was laughing even harder now.

Joe chimed in, "Yeah, thanks, Dylan. Now Maria is mad at me too. We told you not to do it." At least Joe had my back, even if it was for his own selfish reasons.

After about 20 minutes, Maria came back inside to get her and Lynna's purses, which were on the kitchen table.

Maria came up to me, "Look, she isn't mad at you. She just, like, needs some time. We're gonna go home." She kissed Joe on the cheek, and then they bumped foreheads, smiling as she mouthed "bye."

My night had hit its peak and now was in its valley. Was Lynna going to break up with me? This is Dylan's fault, not mine. So many thoughts ran through my mind. Dylan put his hand on my shoulder, "Sorry, dude, I didn't mean to make her mad ". He was genuinely sorry, and it was difficult to be mad at him when he felt my pain.

I grabbed another beer, sat on the futon, and drank. Before I knew it, it was 12:30 a.m. Miles sat down beside me, "So we're both alone for the night, huh?" He looked more depressed than me.

"So, what happened with your girlfriend?" I asked.

"Oh, just the usual; we'll figure it out." We drank our beer, watching the party wind down.

Eventually, it was two in the morning, and all who were left were me, Joe, Dylan, Steve, Jeremy, Miles, and Thomas. Miles and Thomas went to their bedrooms. The rest of us parked in the living room. We pulled the futon out and argued about who would sleep on it. In the end, it was decided that Steve and I would sleep in it. The rest slept on the floor. My futon reward was paid for by the most embarrassing night of my life.

I closed my eyes and went to sleep. The next thing I knew, Joe was shaking my shoulders. "Dude, wake up. We gotta get to the convention. It's already eight." I jumped awake. Jeremy and Steve were milling about. Dylan was still lying on the floor on his back, arms outstretched and snoring. I pushed him with my foot until he woke up and explained what was going on. Thankfully, we all had our clothes with us. Dylan had decided he didn't care about wearing the outfit he had planned. Instead, he just kept on his tank top and put on the same dress slacks from the day before. A very bold choice.

I asked if he was sure he wanted to wear the tank top, and he just shrugged his shoulders, "Dude, I feel like I shit. I don't care." Jeremy and Steve looked just as bad; they threw their clothes on and

headed out the door.

I felt like I'd been hit by a ton of bricks. I had forgotten about this; the last time I drank enough to feel drunk, I had a hangover, but it wasn't as bad as this one. Joe and I got dressed and jumped into Dylan's car. Dylan came out and looked ridiculous. His bulging muscles were coming out of his tank top. He looked like a weightlifter businessman. We drove as fast as we could to the convention. We jumped on the highway, but after an hour, we were at a dead stop. A car was on its side in the middle of the lane, and another car was smashed up next to the shoulder. Dylan tried to go on the shoulder of the highway, but a police officer threw his hand up and yelled for us to stop. Suddenly, we heard a loud, low, whooping noise overhead, and a helicopter landed on the highway. This must have been a bad accident. We had a firsthand view of EMTs running out of the helicopter and then putting some poor soul on a stretcher and taking them back to the chopper. It took off, and we were back on the road. I was dreading my parents' reaction; the only good excuse would be if I was on that helicopter.

Eventually, we made it to the convention about two hours late. We all decided it was better to just sit together. Luckily enough, when we got there, a song was playing. That meant we could at least get to our seats without a spotlight being on us. We made our way to section 252; Dad was a stickler for habit and would likely be around 205 like the day before. We climbed all the way to the top and took our seats. We looked like the three stooges had been put in a blender.

After the song, the drama began. The drama was the most entertaining moment of the weekend at the convention. It was the theater part of the show. Every year, they would reenact some dramatic moment from the Bible. This morning, the drama was about Sodom and Gomorrah, focusing on how Lot walked with Jehovah by not allowing himself to be tempted by partying and sex. It would have been a great learning moment if all of us wouldn't have been hungover and in various states of sleep, especially due to partying and almost having sex. Dylan had stretched out across the seats, lightly snoring.

We were in the empty section, so you couldn't really hear us, and with the lights out, it was difficult to see the Renaissance art scene playing out on our row.

Before the drama ended, I woke up Dylan. We all sat in our chairs in various states of discomfort. The lights came on, then we stood to sing, and the prayer was said. Lunch was next. Joe and I went to find our parents. We explained we were running a little late, so we decided to just sit together. "Did you get any sleep last night?" Mom asked.

"We went to bed a little late." I pushed out in a monotone voice, clearly tired.

"Well, you'll get sleep tonight and sit with us tomorrow." We got our food and sat for the rest of lunch. During the afternoon, we openly snoozed. I decided I'd look for Lynna; she was taking notes and paying attention to the talk. My heart was aching for her, but she didn't look away from the speaker. Dylan indeed stuck out like a sore thumb due to his tank top. Getting looks from everyone when he went to the bathroom.

At lunch, he saw his parents, who demanded he sit as far away from them as possible. Oddly enough, just as lunch was ending, we spotted Dylan chatting up an attractive young woman in a tight-fitting brown dress. Dylan came back to his seat looking as cocky as ever, and told us he had gotten her phone number, but she lived two hours away.

Saturday night, I tried to sleep but instead thought about Lynna and our sexy time. Then, I remembered Dylan bursting through the door. I couldn't escape Lynna, who was so embarrassed she had to leave. Tears streaked down her face. Eventually, I drifted off to sleep, hoping she'd be over it and forgive me and my idiot friends.

Sunday was the last day of the convention. The day when everyone was more laid back and ready for it to end. Mom had a bittersweet temperament and talked to us about what our favorite parts were in the car ride over. We gave standard answers, and I stared out the window, watching the trees go by. Once we arrived at the convention and got to the concourse, I looked for Lynna. Just before going to our seats for the final day to begin, I saw her. She

looked at me, averted her eyes, and kept walking. I didn't know what to make of it. Maybe she was still upset. Maybe she didn't like me. Or maybe her dad was behind me. Too many maybes.

The rest of the day was a standard affair. I tried not to sleep, took minimal notes for Mom, and waited for the convention to end. The talks were boring, and I felt like I had walked a marathon with Jehovah by the time it was over. On the final talk, a brother gave a talk about how runners hit a "brick wall." How we must learn to break through the wall even when it's hard. I had hit my brick wall the first day, and unfortunately for Jehovah, I was not going to bust through. I had decided running or walking simply wasn't for me. I much preferred a car. The biggest question I had was whether I would be alone or have Lynna with me.

Chapter 11

Changing Territories

With the convention over, Summer was starting to come to an end. I only had a few weeks to enjoy the long days of doing nothing and earning some money from work. The last weekend before school was the No Doubt concert, so at least Summer would end with a bang.

Lynna was still distant since being embarrassed at the party. With my parents changing halls and Joe going with them, I didn't have a chance to see her. I called her on the phone after the convention and apologized, explaining how stupid my friends were and how I'd make it up to her. She accepted the apology and told me how she was deathly afraid it could get back to her dad and make her life a living hell. If her dad did find out, you could bet he would likely lock her up in her room and there would be talk about how youths shouldn't be at parties. The rumors would spread like wildfire. Something I didn't have to worry about so much anymore at a new hall, but it was very real for her. She told me she was going to lay low and think about things. It hurt, but if she needed space, I'd give it to her. I decided the next time I saw her, I'd think of some way to make it right.

Since failing the baptism test, I had fallen out of favor with my study mentor, Jeff, who now required me to catch a ride to the job site if I wanted to work. This meant I was working less as both Mom and Dad worked during the week and weren't able to drive me. It was not a big deal, but having some money in my pocket was nice. Occasionally, I could hitch a ride with Dad to one of Jeff's employees in Gastonia or spend the night at Dylan's, begging him to give me a ride, but I had already piled up many IOUs, so I tried not to abuse his charity.

The following week after the convention, I talked to Thomas and asked if I could meet up at his for work. He agreed. That Tuesday morning, Mom gave me a ride. When I arrived at the door, Thomas answered and let me in. Miles was sitting on the futon staring at the TV, which wasn't on. He was fully dressed for work. "Hey, what's up, man?" I greeted him as I walked in. He just nodded

his head and kept staring straight ahead. Thomas pulled me into the kitchen.

“Miles is a little upset because he and Heather are having problems. He’s like this sometimes, just give him his space.”

“OK,” I replied.

We rode to work largely in silence with the radio on. That day, Thomas was in a fun, chipper mood, but Miles stayed quiet, only speaking up when he needed me to grab something. I had never seen him like this, so cold and distant. When he did smile, it seemed more of an act than genuine. You could see there was sadness in his eyes, and he was trying to hide but couldn’t. When I asked him for help, I’d have to repeat myself; he’d suddenly come to me, acknowledging what I said and mumbling to himself under his breath. He’d help but barely say a word while doing it. It reminded me of a few rare moments Dad would have.

Once every few years, Dad would come home in a bad mood. He would be despondent for days at a time, Mom telling us to avoid him because he just needed time to process things. Something we didn’t really understand, but we did as we were told. One of those times, he even got drunk, dragged us out of bed, and told us how he thought of driving his truck into the highway barrier. The rest of the family just sat in silence, looking uncomfortable as Dad manically rambled on. Eventually, he got tired and passed out. Mental health was not something talked about at home or in the church. It was supposed to be cured by faith in Jehovah and his organization. I wondered if Miles also thought like Dad. In Dad’s case, he would snap out of it and go back to being happy and jovial.

After work, Dad picked me up, and I crammed into the bench seat between him and Joe. An uncomfortable spot because the truck was a manual, and the stick shift was dangerously close to my crotch. Thankfully, Dad would give me a warning when he had to make a shift.

Once we arrived home, Mom was preparing dinner; we packed into the mud room, taking off our boots and dirty clothes. “Y’all get clean, and once dinner is over, we need to study for tomorrow night’s meeting.” Low grumbles came from each of us; studying was a

chore, especially after work. It was an hour of reading. Mom seemed to be the only one in the family who took joy from studying for the meeting, which was a study. I jumped in the shower first, followed by Joe, then sat on the couch while Mom finished. Mom was cooking one of my favorites, meatloaf. She made hers with olives and spices, which created an aroma that made my stomach growl loudly. Once ready, we sat at the table and devoured the meatloaf. Little conversation in between other than Mom asking about our days.

Once I finished eating, Mom focused on me, “Jonathan, you need to go to the meeting tomorrow; people in the hall are asking about you.”

“Do I have to, Mom?”

Dad jumped in, “Now Jon, I know we said it’s up to you, but you still need to go on occasion; once you move out of this house, you can do what you want, but while here, that’s our rules.” Once Dad ruled, that was final.

I didn’t take the defeat well, staring down at my plate and mumbling, “Fine.” Mom looked somewhat smug even though it was really just a moral victory. In the end, it seemed like a true compromise.

Mom, not happy with the win, came in with the crushing blow, “You’re also going out in service with me tomorrow morning in the new territory.”

Before I could protest, Dad put up his hand, “You’re going, and that’s final.” The sinking feeling of defeat washed over me again. I tried to put on a strong face in front of Mom.

I picked up my plate and dropped it into the sink, planning to retreat to my room. “Come back in here, Jon; we need to study,” Mom said in a firm tone. “I’m just using the bathroom,” I yelled back, lying. I went into the bathroom, sat on top of the toilet, and thought about how miserable my life was. In the back of my mind, though, I thought about the neighbor’s doublewide burned to a crisp, trying to push my problems to the front. Having a hard time justifying my troubles. After about five minutes, I decided that the better plan of action was to accept the short sentence and deal with it.

The study went painfully slow. All of us were sitting in a circle in the living room, having to read Bible verses and then going over the Kingdom Ministry. I divided my time between studying the clock and the window that overlooked the backyard. The clock was a cruel mistress that seemed to click slower each time I looked at it. Through the window was green grass that was fertile for playing sports or catching fireflies, which were both activities I'd give my left leg for at the moment. Occasionally, I'd be snapped out of my daydream by Mom or Dad calling on me to answer whatever question they had cooked up or read from the publication. I bullshitted my way through with a boilerplate answer. The one easy thing about being a witness is that after a while, you can answer just about anything. Just praise the religion and drop something about following Jehovah with the question baked in.

Question: *"How do we know that we are living in the time of the end?"*

Answer: *"Jesus said all of his preaching work would be done on earth. We're the only organization preaching all around the world, proving we're following Jehovah and living in the time of the end."*

Even something like that could usually pass the smell test for Jehovah's Witnesses. The trick was saying it in an eager way. Dad didn't want to spend a lot of time studying, so at around the 1 hour and 15-minute mark, he called it to a close. Everyone but Mom was thankful it was over.

We watched some TV as a family. A made-for-TV version of *Pretty Woman* was the "Matinee of The Night" on WJZY. It took out the racy bits and softened the curse words. This was one of the few "bad" movies Mom put aside her strict moral code to enjoy. She smiled and laughed, commenting on how good of an actress Julia was. As for Dad, anytime Julia Roberts found herself a fish out of water in Richard Gere's world; he would almost laugh us out of the house. The deepest and loudest laughs he had saved for his private life, like now. It made watching comedies difficult but also funnier just due to his reaction.

Once the movie was over, I made my way to bed. I had a hard time sleeping, knowing in the morning I'd have to go door to door.

Plus, I had to find a way to see Lynna, which was going to be much harder now. We lived in the same city, but I lived too far away to walk to her. I couldn't see her at the Kingdom Hall, and she was upset with me. The Holy Trinity of problems, for me, which was ironic since they didn't believe in the Trinity.

Eventually, I fell asleep. I dreamed that I was in a hotel that felt familiar. It had red carpet along the walls and floor. I was with my family, checking in at the front desk. Once checked in, we walked into the foray, which was the size of an auditorium. I noticed my friends walking around. I could see Lynna, who had her back to me, talking to some elders. I tried to yell at her, but no sound came from my mouth. I tried yelling harder, but nothing came out. She started walking away from me with the elders. Suddenly, Dylan grabbed me by the shoulders, shaking me. He looked me in the eyes while shaking and told me I needed to put my bags in my room. He released his grasp, and I turned around, my bags suddenly in my hands. Stairs were in front of me.

The stairs zigged and zagged like an Escher painting. When I thought I had reached my floor, I realized it was the wrong floor. I went up and down, but every floor was wrong. I decided to walk to the top of the stairs. An exit sign was there. I opened it, but instead of the roof leading to the outside, I was on my floor. I checked my room key, 205, it said. I walked up and down the hall; there was no room 205. I set my bags down and decided to go back to the front desk.

When I walked back down the stairs to the front desk, the hotel was empty and looked dilapidated. At the front desk was a note, the paper folded perfectly in half, sitting like a tent on the desk. On it was written, "closed." I looked for my family, who were nowhere to be seen. I searched for Lynna in the auditorium-sized foray, but I only found emptiness and dust, as if the hotel had been closed for years. I sat down on the floor waiting. Panic began to set in, and I heard the fire alarm go off. Before I could get up, the sprinklers came on.

I awoke abruptly from my dream to the rattling of dishes and running water. My heart was still beating from the feeling of being abandoned. I listened in the darkness to my brother and Dad getting

ready for work. Sometimes, I was jealous that they got to avoid field service because they worked full-time. Inevitably, I always came to the same conclusion: I could suffer through two hours of walking vs. eight to ten hours of hard manual labor. I fell back asleep and was woken up an hour later by Mom notifying me I needed to get ready for field service.

Once dressed and in the car, Mom explained we weren't going to the Kingdom Hall or someone's house, but she had been given a street to meet on the edge of Shelby and Kings Mountain. There, an elder from the congregation would meet us, and then we'd commence with the preaching work. We took Highway 74 a few miles towards Shelby, then turned on a windy road surrounded by forest to a housing development. This area was a little risky as I knew some students from my school lived on the outskirts around here.

Once in the development, we turned on Bridges Road; I didn't know what the significance of "Bridges" was in the area, but about 50 streets seemed to be named after it. At the top of the street, a rather fat black man was standing in a black pinstripe suit. His stomach was bulging out, and the buttons of his shirt were stressed to capacity. His jacket looked like it wouldn't cover his stomach if he tried to button it, so it stayed open. He had short, graying hair and a gray mustache. "That's Brother Furr," Mom said just before parking.

We got out of the car, and he introduced himself, "Young Brother Burger, I'm Brother Furr. I've heard so much about you." he flashed a genuine grin, showing off a big set of teeth. He gave off a very friendly aura that sometimes only men of his size could pull off. We shook hands, his giant hand engulfing mine in a firm grip. There was no sign of his wife. "Well, let's get to it; my wife has already started, so I'll catch up with her. You two take that side, and we'll get the other," he said to my Mom. Mom and I said OK, and we were off.

The neighborhood was the average middle-class home for the area. Single story ranch style houses made of bricks sometimes red, tan, or white colored linked the street. The yards were well maintained with a car or truck in the driveway. Likely the stay-at-home Mom taking care of the house while Dad worked. These

neighborhoods could be hit or miss but most people here were polite and Christian which meant you at least wouldn't be chased off or something else bizarre happen to you.

We came to the first house, an aforementioned ranch-style home with a big, detached garage. Likely holding some sort of construction equipment. "OK, you take this door," Mom said. I groaned internally. I hit the doorbell and heard a loud "diiing doooong." I had long ago familiarized myself with every doorbell. Some accented the "ding" while others accented the "dong. Some went "bing bong" while others sounded like a phone. The exciting ones played a little tune or made animal noises. Within about 15 seconds, I was about to hit the bell again when a middle-aged woman came to the door. She stepped completely outside, forcing us to take a step back. She had blonde curly hair and was wearing a white apron with strawberries printed on it. She looked like she could be a Stepford wife.

"Can I help y'all?" she asked in a perfect southern drawl. I launched into my spiel about living on a paradise earth and offered her the tract I had in my hand. She studied it and then looked Mom and me up and down. "Y'all are the weird ones that don't believe in heaven, right?"

She was half right; we believed in heaven, but only 144,000 could go. Before I could answer, Mom took over and told her the stock response about how we had an earthly hope while others had a heavenly hope. The woman cocked her eyebrow, "Well, sorry, but I got some desserts cooking in the oven I have to get back to," she tried to hand the tract back to me.

"Oh no, you keep that, but maybe we can come back another time," Mom said to her. She looked frustrated and said, "Sure, I guess you could."

Mom, a seasoned Jehovah's Witness, knew when to take a victory, "OK, maybe I'll come back this Saturday. Enjoy your day." Before the woman could contest this, we were already walking away. She didn't say goodbye; she just closed the door behind her.

"This will make a good return visit," Mom touted as she marked down the house number and "RV" on her card. We had acronyms for

all occasions. There was even “HBH,” my favorite, which stood for “Home But Hiding.” What you wrote down when you suspected someone was pretending not to be there. It wasn’t an official designation, but lots of witnesses used it. As for the woman at the door, deep down, I think Mom knew that the woman wanted nothing to do with us. Her being polite and not cursing at us or slamming the door in our faces was enough to warrant a second attempt.

The next hour of walking door to door resulted in talking to a total of four people out of twenty-five doors. No bites, just polite rejection. Just as we were about to take our mid-day break, we came up to a small cottage-style house that stood out in the neighborhood. It had yellow wooden siding with brown wooden shutters on the windows. It looked newer than the other houses. The lawn looked like it got mowed on occasion versus the very manicured lawns most had here. In the driveway was a green Volkswagen Jetta with a COEXIST sticker on the back spelling out COEXIST with different religious symbols. There was no doorbell. Inside, I could hear alternative rock music playing loudly. I tensed up immediately, and there was a chance someone cool lived here whom I might want to hang out with. Mom nudged me to knock.

There was a glass screen door with a gold frame in front of a large green door that had a peephole. There was no doorbell; instead, there was a brass door knocker that slung over the peephole. I prayed that the glass screen door was locked. Unfortunately, it wasn’t, so I opened the screen door and knocked softly, hoping Mom wouldn’t notice. The music blared, and no one came to the door. “Use the door knocker,” Mom ordered. I tried to hold in my sigh and grabbed the brass handle of the knocker, giving it two loud thumps against the door. The music stopped, and we heard footsteps shuffling to the door. I could clearly hear what sounded like two female voices giggling. Out from behind the door came strange sounds.

At first, it seemed to be Native Americans being imitated, “Ho wow wah wa! Ho wow wah wa!” came from the other side of the door. I looked at Mom, confused. She took the initiative and knocked again. Then the sounds of ghosts came from the door, “Oooooo...

woooooooooo” the “oos” and “woos” modulating in pitch. Then, more laughing. Finally, Mom had enough, given a huff, and turned her heel, but before we could turn away, the door opened, and two young women who looked to be a little older than me were at the door with huge grins on their faces.

I was mortified. Both of the girls looked like someone I'd have a crush on in school. One had blond hair, and the other had her hair dyed blue. Both were wearing hip-skater clothes. One of the girls had on a Korn shirt. After looking us up and down, the blond finally spoke, looking right at me, “You're cute.” Then she looked at my mom, “Can you leave him with us?” The pink-haired girl tried to contain her laughter, but the laughing won.

I turned beet red, wanting to turn and run. Mom, without missing a beat, just said, “I'm afraid not, young ladies, but I have a brochure you might be interested in.” she grabbed a Watchtower magazine from her bag and put it in the blond girl's hand. The girl looked it over, “Sure, we'll read this,” she said then slammed the door.

“Yeah, riiiiight,” one of the girls said behind the door. I turned around as fast as I could, trying to leave. Mom trailed behind me. The last time I was this embarrassed, half of my friends saw an erection coming out of my boxer shorts.

As we got away from the house, Mom put her arm on my shoulder, “Let's go on break, then do some return visits.” I think I could still hear the girls laughing even well away from the house. I went to the car while Mom told Brother and Sister Furr we were leaving. The rest of the morning was easy, and none of the return visits answered the door. There was no doubt some “HBH” hiding behind a couch or pretending not to hear us at the door. Even though Mom could be a tough hardliner, she was still a Mom and decided, to my embarrassment, that we could go out to eat. She asked where I wanted to go, and I asked for Taco Bell to go. It was a Wednesday, and I was in church clothes. I didn't want to be embarrassed again, just in case a school friend was visiting Shelby and eating there. She obliged. We ordered our food and then went home to eat. I had soft tacos.

After Dad and Joe arrived home, we ate dinner. I had almost forgotten I had to go to the new hall that night. I got dressed and put on brown dress slacks, a white shirt-sleeve button-up, and the usual penniless loafers for shoes. That was practically what I was wearing that morning, save for one difference: my tie. Since this was a new hall, I wanted to add a little drama. I had a tie that I loved that was found in a thrift store. It was almost psychedelic looking and had Elvis figures all over it with the words Burning Love in random places. Mom hated it, Dad laughed at it, and Joe just thought it was weird. I had, however, won the battle on if I could wear it, getting into a heated debate when I bought it. Tonight, Mom just frowned when she saw it, then said, "Don't you want to dress nicer, Jon? It's a new hall."

"No, I'm happy with this, Mom." She frowned again, and then we packed up and headed to the new hall.

The hall was about a 25-minute drive, well past the mall in Shelby. It was on a nondescript road in the middle of nowhere with long stretches of grass and forest between it and any other civilization. It was built within the last five years, so it had the newer modern layout of all Kingdom Halls. A carport at the front with a single entrance for people to be dropped off and a large parking lot. Once you entered, there were bathrooms to the left and an area to pick up publications on the right. The hall itself was smaller than the Gastonia South Kingdom Hall, holding around 80 people and having less comfortable chairs stacked in rows. At the back of the hall were two smaller rooms, one of which was a library. At the back of the hall portion, there was a stage, and on the sides of the hall, we had a window. It was practically a carbon copy of the hall we were previously in, just newer.

Once inside, I opted to stay seated. After all, I didn't really know anyone. While sitting down, a few brothers and sisters came to meet the new addition. "That's an interesting tie, Brother Burger," one brother said to me in a judgmental tone, then began talking to Dad. I guess I had asked for that.

Eventually, Joe brought his friend Greg over. "So, you're one of us today, huh?" The first words coming out of his mouth had a playful tone.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” I responded. Greg shook his head, smiling; he had the disposition of a labrador retriever.

“Well, after the meeting, I’ll introduce you to my friends here who are cool. Also, sweet tie,” he said again, smiling and shaking his head, saying it almost like a hippie would. He and Joe went off to find a place to sit together. The plus side of being a witness was that you tended to make friends pretty fast, especially if you didn’t seem problematic like my brother. My tie, of course, screamed problematic, but no one was going to say that to my face other than the previously passive-aggressive brother. For the most part, I just sat by myself while the rest of the family was social.

Once the meeting started I had a good look around. Nothing really stood out. Compared to the old old hall this had skewed slightly blacker but Jehovah’s Witnesses had a rather large black population anyways. Of course, when it came to leadership it was usually white. There also weren’t as many teenagers in this new hall. I noted two others in my age group outside of Joe and Greg.

Once the meeting began, a young, dweebish-looking man who looked to be in his twenties got up to give a talk. He was wearing a gray suit with a red and white striped tie. He tried really hard to be charismatic, but it didn’t land. He did seem to be genuine, getting truly excited when the subject of Armageddon came up. Once his talk was finished, the response was lukewarm. Every Hall had their Brother Dweeb, an up-and-comer who was a *real* witness. Someone who truly believed and was fast-tracked to be an elder. Usually, he wasn’t well-liked.

The rest of the night went slowly by. I pretended to pay attention but found ways to distract myself. I wished I could look over and see Lynna, her bright eyes locking with mine, secret smiles creeping across each other’s faces. I wished I could see Dylan making faces at me and trying not to laugh. If my parents were hoping to trick me into going to the hall again by taking me someplace new, it wasn’t working.

Once the meeting ended, I stuck to my seat. After a few minutes, I stood up to look for Greg and Joe. As I turned around, a young girl who looked to be about 12 or 13 was in front of me,

waiting to talk. I had spotted her as one of two people close to my age in attendance. She had black curly hair and brown eyes. Her face looked like it had never shed the baby fat, with brown freckles sprinkling her cheeks. I almost had flashbacks to the girls I'd met at the door in the morning. Her dress was burgundy and short-sleeved, more modern than traditional, and she had on black Mary Jane shoes. At least that was a good sign.

She introduced herself, "Hi, I'm Jenny; Greg and Joe said I should meet you. I like your brother a lot." She laughed, but it came out like a snort. It was clear that Jenny had a crush on Joe.

"I'm Jonathan." We shook hands.

"Why is this your first time coming with your family? Were you sick or something?" I thought about how to answer that and decided to make a joke.

"Actually, I've started my own church. It's called the Church of Burger, and I go there more than here." I laughed as the words came out, clearly intending to be a joke. Her eyes went wide, she crooked her head and gave a nervous life, no snort this time.

"I'm going to find your brother and Greg," she said, then left. I hung around the seat until my parents were ready to leave, never getting to meet the "cool" ones in the hall.

Once we got home and undressed, Dad and Mom plopped on the couch to watch Law and Order. Right after a body was discovered in a grimy NY apartment, the phone rang. "Who's calling at this time of night? Better not be for you boys," Dad said, annoyed. He went to pick up the phone. We all listened in, Joe and I exchanging glances, wondering if it indeed was one of our friends. "This is the Burger residence... he said what..... Oh, it was just his sense of humor... it was a joke..... No, don't worry, I'll talk to him... yeah, as soon as I hang up the phone... OK, thanks, Brother Berry. Have a good night."

Mom, Joe, and I all looked confused. Dad looked exasperated and stopped next to me before sitting back down. "Did you say to that Jenny girl you started your own church?"

I looked at Dad dumbfounded. "Yeah, but it was clearly a joke; she asked why it was my first time coming to the hall."

“Well, son, her dad is an elder, and she didn’t take it as a joke.”

“She actually thought I created my own church, Dad?” I started laughing as the words came out.

“It’s not funny, Jon,” Mom chastised me.

“It’s a little bit funny,” Joe jumped in.

“OK, it is a *little bit* funny, but you need to be careful, Jon.”

Mom let a little smile slip. Dad, Joe, and I all looked at each other, surprised Mom indeed found it funny.

“Jon, please think about your jokes. This is the last thing your mother and I need at this hall.” Dad let out an exasperated sigh.

“Well, starting today, the Church of Burger is officially closed,” I announced like an official proclamation. That got a chuckle out of the family. Detective Briscoe was interviewing a confidential informant who looked squirrely when we focused back on the TV.

As the rest of the family watched Law and Order, I couldn’t help but think about how insane what had just happened was. This poor girl thought I had actually started a church, told her dad, who also believed I had started a church, and called my parents to warn them of what their son was up to as if I had built a church and gotten followers all while my parents were none the wiser. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witness was not a place for jokes, no matter how outrageous.

Chapter 12

Funerals

With only two weeks of Summer break left and the No Doubt concert on the horizon, Dylan came up with a foolproof plan. I'd spend the last week at his, essentially living there. He had already cleared the concert with his parents, so it was up to me to get the OK from ground control to stay for the week. This would help me bypass Mom getting involved. She didn't like us going to any big worldly functions, and we had to keep any "bad" CDs hidden.

What constituted as bad was a mystery. Once she found Weezer's blue album and confiscated it, going on a rant about how it was immoral and demonic because in the lyrics to "The Sweater Song," Rivers Cuomo sang the line, "watch me unravel I'll soon be naked." We explained in vain how it was a metaphor, but she refused to listen. Thankfully, Dad ended the madness and told her to give us the CD back.

All my worries were for 'naught. Mom and Dad both gave approval with the caveat that she would call Dylan's Mom then and there to ensure that we were at the meeting on Sunday. "Put Dylan on the phone when you're done talking with his mom. I'll be in my room," I told her. I heard the phone dialing Dylan's number as I walked to my room. As soon as I closed the door, I did some fist pumps, put No Doubt's "Tragic Kingdom" on my portable CD player, and then put the headphones on. I imagined Lynna and me at the concert holding hands, singing "Spiderwebs," "The Climb," "Just A Girl," and "Don't Speak," with a lot of kissing in between. I sat on my bed, grinning ear to ear. Nothing could stop this.

After a few minutes, the door swung open, and Mom was standing in the doorway with a look on her face that said I was in trouble. I stopped the music and pulled the headphones from my ears. Shit.

"Are you planning on going to a concert with Dylan? Don't lie to me," she said in an authoritative tone. I froze. I didn't think Dylan's Mom would even mention the concert. I raced to think of something, anything, but no big lies or workarounds came. "Yeah, we were going to go to the No Doubt concert that Saturday. Here you can listen; it's

not bad music,” I sheepishly squeaked out, pointing the headphones in her direction. Honestly, I thought this could be an easy out. There wasn’t any cursing on the album, and it was a female singer who sounded more pop than rock. Something Mom might not be opposed to.

“Alright I haven’t made up my mind yet.” I handed her the CD then followed her to the living room where she put it on in the stereo. “Spiderwebs” began playing. Mom listened intently to it and then told me to go outside and play. She’d make her decision later.

I went outside into the hot sun. It was early August, and the days were still sticky and hot. I didn’t see any of the neighbors outside, so I grabbed a baseball bat and some tennis balls we kept under the patio and began hitting them. The tennis ball made contact with the bat and sailed to the far end of the yard. After about 30 minutes, Mom came out and called me in. She had me sit on the couch; there was a paper that she had printed in her hand. “I’m going to read you some lyrics, and tell me what you think they mean.”

She began reading.

“They pay homage to a king.

Whose dreams are buried in their minds.

His tears are frozen stiff.

Icicles drip from his eyes

Welcome to the tragic kingdom.

Cornfields of popcorn

Have yet to spring open.”

She put emphasis on the words “King” and “Kingdom” and then stared at me, waiting for a response. “I don’t know; I think it’s just about Disney or maybe just based on a fantasy novel.” I really had no idea where she was going with this.

“It’s about Satan, and it’s demonic.” Her voice was serious and stern. My jaw almost hit the floor. “You’re not going to this concert. It’s too worldly; when you’re out of this house, you can go to any concert you want, as many as you want.” I

was still shocked. I almost laughed out loud, “You can’t be serious,” I said.

“Also, you’re not spending that night at Dylan’s, Jon.”

“I’m grounded?”

“No, but you’re not spending the night at Dylan’s. His mom doesn’t mind if he goes to the concert, but she knows you’re not supposed to.”

“But I can spend the week with him?”

“Yes, but you won’t be going to any concerts.”

“I’m talking to Dad when he gets home; this isn’t fair,” I blurted out angrily.

I stomped out of the living room with tears in my eyes and slammed my bedroom door shut, cursing under my breath. I walked to my bed and fell forward face first. I shoved my face into the pillow and began to cry. This felt like my last chance to make things right with Lynna, and it was slipping through my fingers. I didn’t want to lose her; if my parents decided they could no longer talk to me like they did with Bret, then at least I would have her. Now, Mom was trying to ensure I was isolated.

When Dad and Joe arrived home from work, the game would be on to curry favor from Dad. Joe had skin in the game as he was going with Miles and meeting Maria there, which could work in my favor. I cornered him as soon as he went to his room, “Joe, Mom found out about the concert. She doesn’t know you’re going, but she won’t let me go.”

“How’d she find out?”

“She called Dylan’s Mom because I asked to spend the week with him.”

“That was dumb, Jon.”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know? Maybe you can help.” Joe just shook his head from side to side, then said, “Well, you better get Dad to let you go, or you’re gonna be screwed. It’s not *my* problem” he emphasized my problem bit just to drive home. He wouldn’t get involved. I thought about threatening to rat him out but couldn’t bring myself to do it. I walked out of the room and into the living room, waiting for Dad to shower and sit down.

As soon as Dad sat down, Mom immediately told him about my plans and how the music was demonic and worldly. He looked like all he wanted to do was enjoy his sweet tea and the news on the TV. I

made my case that there was no cursing on the album, and all she found was one lyric that was probably about Disney World. I had no idea if that was true, but it was a rumor I had heard about the album title, and it seemed to line up. Dad deliberated for about 30 seconds, then let out a sigh before doling out judgment. “Jon, listen to your Mother and find something else or someone else to hang out with that weekend.”

I was crushed. I sat down beside the couch and grabbed Dad’s arm and dropped to one knee. In what was not my finest hour I pleaded with Dad, tears in my eyes to let me go. “That’s final Jon now let me have some peace and quiet.” My brother was sitting at the table with a pitiful look painted across his face. I went to my room and cried. Then I called Dylan.

“Dude, that fucking sucks, but parents are stupid. We’ll figure something out. We’ll have the whole week. I’ll pick you up on Saturday.” I was trying to hold back tears as Dylan reassured me that this really wasn’t a big deal. Good ol’ Dylan, who always had my back. My partner in crime and best friend. If there was a team that could pull it off, it would be Dylan and me.

After the call, I wiped my eyes and began to devise a plan, but it would require another friend. A friend whose parents would be unknowingly complicit. The first one who came to mind was Brandon.

Brandon was a friend whose Mom attended the Kingdom Hall. We didn’t see each other much because he almost always stayed home, and she was hit or miss with attendance. He never went out in field service, either. We were friendly enough, though. He was around 5’6”, a little chubby, and had a buzz cut like Bobby from King of the Hill. His stepdad had a bad temper and a bad stutter, which often caused humorous scenes at his house. Like Dylan, Brandon never shied from a fight, and sometimes, I felt like Brandon was too tough for me. He was never a bully, but you always felt like there was danger lurking around the corner with him. The few times we did hang out, he wanted to pull a prank like egg houses or bash car doors with a crowbar. I was always the reluctant accomplice. Bad, but not *that* bad. If I could spend the night with him, he might go to the concert, and he could tell his mom we were going out, and no one would be

the wiser. I called Brandon, telling him the plan. He was in, as long as I bought the ticket and paid for drinks and snacks.

That week, I kept the act up, and I was disappointed. Both Mom and Dad treated me with kid gloves. Mom offered her sympathy, saying I'd thank her later if something bad happened at the concert. It took everything in me not to stick my tongue out and tell her where to shove the sympathy. Instead, I just kept my head down and mumbled, "Sure."

Mid-week, I updated Lynna on what happened. She was in a better mood, but I still felt she was a little distant and short. She assured me it was because her parents would be home anytime and that we would see each other at the concert. She said she also needed to study for the meeting, something she usually only did if her parents forced her to. Maybe she was trying to keep them off her back. My parents stuck to their end of our religious bargain. I didn't go out in service or go to the meetings. Only having to sit in on family studies.

When Saturday rolled around, Dylan picked me up, and we spent the evening listening to music, playing guitar, and eating junk food. Then, as promised to Mom, we went to the Kingdom Hall that Sunday morning. Because I was with Dylan, we got there with about five minutes to spare.

Once inside, some older sisters rushed up to me to ask how I was doing, but really, they wanted to know about my parents and the new Kingdom Hall. I explained what I knew and gave them a glowing but fake review about the Kingdom Hall and the brothers and sisters there. Dylan made his way to find seats. Once I was done, I went to find him. He had been cornered by Brother Renter, a man notorious for being a space invader with bad breath. He was about two inches from Dylan's face, talking. Dylan looked desperate to get out of the situation and still had his bags, which meant he hadn't found a place to sit yet. *Better Dylan than me*, I thought. I made eye contact with him, then backed away, trying not to laugh. Then, I looked for a good seat and hoped to see Lynna. Her family was there, but she wasn't. I saw Miles sitting in the backroom at the front in the first chair in the

row. These were as good as any. Sitting in the back gave you a bit of anonymity and made bathroom breaks less conspicuous.

As I walked into the back room, Miles and I made eye contact, and he gave me a subtle head nod. The meeting was about to start any minute now, so Dylan would at least get an escape one way or another. “Hey dude, how’s it going?” I asked Miles.

“Good Jon. Hey, how are you and Lynna doing?” his voice was more monotone than usual, and his eyes had a wild look to them.

“Good, I think anyway. She was embarrassed at the party. How’s Heather?” Miles didn’t answer, maybe because the meeting was about to begin. Instead, he just sat looking at the stage through the congregants. I got the feeling things were bad with his girlfriend because I was still in a bad mood like the last time I saw him.

The talk that morning was given by a visiting brother. He was black, middle-aged, and slightly overweight. He was eclectic for someone giving a talk. He had small round glasses and wore a double-breasted purple suit with a pink silk pocket square jutting out of the coat’s front pocket. He had a pink silk shirt underneath and a bright pink tie. He wore green alligator wingtip shoes, a truly interesting outfit. He spoke in a thick southern accent and leaned more towards a charismatic preacher than a normal Jehovah’s Witness. It wasn’t the usual sermon you got, but he still stuck to the script and focused on Jehovah and how salvation was only through Jehovah’s organization on earth. It wasn’t a special talk, but at least he didn’t put me to sleep. I did, however, doze off during the Watchtower study. Miles stayed focused on the stage, only occasionally nodding during the meeting.

Dylan and I had decided we would leave as soon as the study ended. He’d use the excuse his mom had a migraine, and he needed to get her medicine. She did have a migraine, but she was probably already zonked out in front of the TV. No additional meds were needed. Dylan got up, said hi to Miles, and explained how he was getting out of there. Before I could leave, Miles grabbed my arm and asked me to sit with him for a few minutes. Dylan shrugged his shoulders, “See you at the car,” he said, then headed for the exit. I

sat back down as the few stragglers in the back emptied out of the room.

“So, you think you and Lynna will be together forever?” Miles asked as soon as the room was empty. It was a bit of an odd question for Miles to ask and me to answer.

“Yea, I hope so; I really like her, Miles.”

“Hmm,” Miles put his fingers to his chin as if lost in deep thought. He turned to me, eyes getting big and wild, “Don’t ever forget this: she’s got long legs. She’s a keeper. Don’t let her slip away.” This was an even stranger thing to say.

So, I thought for a minute before replying, “Yeah, she does. Thanks, Miles.” I smiled and got up, but something didn’t feel right. Miles was speaking in a distant monotone, almost as if talking to himself instead of me.

“You, OK?” I asked. He shook his head like he was shaking cobwebs loose.

His wild eyes calmed, and he smiled, “Yea, don’t worry, Jon, I’m fine.”

Something still seemed off. I just couldn’t put my finger on it.

I said my goodbyes to Miles. On the way out, I played a game of avoiding eye contact and moving just fast enough not to be stopped. I met Dylan in his car. “Did Miles seem a bit weird to you?” I asked Dylan.

“Yeah, he seemed a little sad, but I didn’t talk to him. So, who knows? Let’s see if he wants to hang out later; maybe we can cheer him up.” Dylan turned on the ignition, and we drove out of the parking lot to his house. We turned on the radio to the alternative station. Sugar Ray’s “Fly” was just starting. A song neither Dylan nor I were excited about, but it was almost impossible not to sing along with. He turned the volume up, and we yelled about how we wanted to fly.

Once at Dylan’s, we played guitar and listened to The Deftones. Occasionally, we’d hear a banging coming from the floor when we were too loud. His mom’s muffled voice, “You rugrats, keep it down up there.” At about 4:00 p.m., we called Miles.

Dylan did a spot-on Cartman impersonation from Southpark and left a message on Miles and Thomas’s machine, “Hey fat ass, we

want to come over and hang out. Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone, fat ass.” He almost didn’t get through it without laughing. I was sure you could hear me snickering in the background. We called again at 5:00 p.m. and then at 7:00 p.m. We guessed he was away or with his girlfriend. We made plans to sleep in late Monday morning and then go to Timmy’s for hot dogs and milkshakes. Then we’d go where the wind blew us.

We went to sleep at around 12:30 that night. At four in the morning, we were awoken by Dylan’s Mom. She came in and gently woke us up. “You boys need to come down to the dining room,” she said with a warble in her voice. Dylan’s Mom was not the type to be soft and kind at 4:00 a.m., so something must have been wrong. She started to say something, then turned around and walked down the stairs. We got up, rubbed our eyes open, and threw on a shirt and a pair of shorts. We walked into the dining room. I was shocked to see Mom sitting at the table. Her eyes were red, and she was wiping tears out of her eyes with a piece of tissue.

Never in my life had Mom ever shown up to any of my friends’ houses at four in the morning. Dylan’s Mom stood in the corner, arms folded, bracing for some invisible impact. “Boys, sit down,” Mom said, half asking, half telling, in a soft, low voice.

We pulled out the chairs at the dining room table and sat facing my Mom. Mom took a deep breath and began speaking in a labored tone, “I have some very bad news to tell you.” Dylan and I were frozen with suspense. Mom sucked in some air, exhaled, then spoke, “Yesterday, your friend Miles killed himself.”

“What?” Dylan asked loudly. I thought I misheard her. “Miles is dead. Yesterday, he killed himself. We don’t know why.”

“How?” I asked, shocked, searching for the right words to say next.

“He hung himself. I had to go to the coroner’s office and ID him.” Mom began crying, “He was so young. I saw him on the table and had to call his mom and confirm it was him.” She couldn’t stop the flow of tears, heavy sobs overwhelming her. Dylan’s Mom walked over to console her, rubbing her back as she grabbed for tissues. Tears began streaming down Dylan’s mom’s face, which had been

somewhat stoic until then. Dylan and I, still stunned, glanced at each other. We had just seen him yesterday. He was living, breathing, and talking. How could he just not exist anymore? How could he take his own life? It didn't make sense.

I knew the concept of suicide; sometimes, we even joked about how we would do it to show our parents, to prove we would be missed, but I never knew anyone who actually did it. So many feelings raced through me. Mom was crying at the corner of the table. I got up and gave her a hug. Her face rested against my side as deep sobs continued to come out. Tears began to well up in my eyes. He was really dead. I immediately thought of Joe. He was closest to Miles out of all of us. I knelt down and grabbed Mom by her shoulders, giving them a soft rub.

"How is Josiah doing?" I asked.

Mom tried to regain her composure, "He doesn't know yet, Jon, he went to bed early."

"We have to go home and tell him," I said to her.

"I know, but I don't want to," she said, starting to cry again. Dylan came over and put his hand on Mom and I's shoulder. Dylan, his mom, my mom, and I all huddled together. One big mass of hugs and tears.

Once we had come to terms, I said goodbye to Dylan and gave him a long hug. Then hugged Dylan's Mom, who was still weeping. She squeezed me extra tight and whispered in my ear, "Take care of your mother; she needs you right now." We went to the car, and Mom drove us home.

On the car ride home, Mom gave me the details of what she knew. Around 7:00 p.m., Thomas came home. Miles was nowhere to be found, and Thomas waited for him for an hour. He then called Heather, who said she hadn't spoken to him. After an hour, he thought he would look in Miles's room. Earlier, he had knocked and asked if Miles was there but heard no answer. When he opened the door, he came upon a horrible sight. There, in the closet, Miles had hung himself. Thomas called 9-1-1, took him down, and then called his mom.

By midnight, the body was ready to be identified. Thomas was so distraught he didn't want to go. My mom was the only number his mom had, so she called and begged her to ID the body so it could be released. Thomas had refused to see his brother lying on the slab.

Mom obliged. At around 1 in the morning, she went to the morgue. There, she saw Miles, his lifeless body on the cold table. She explained the trauma of seeing the marks on his neck. It had been bruised from the rope used to kill himself. She explained how he looked peaceful, lying there with no breath coming out of his body. Too peaceful. Then she called Dylan's Mom to give her the bad news: Miles' mom drove to North Carolina from Ohio to pick up her dead son and console the living one. She stayed with Thomas for a few hours until his boss, Jeff, showed up. Then she came to get me.

She grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Please don't ever do that to yourself."

I had never seriously thought about it and had no intention to ever do it. "I won't, Mom, I promise." I wasn't always honest with mom, but this time, I intended to be. I also thought of my Dad, could he do the same thing as Miles when he had his moments?

The rest of the drive was in contemplative silence aside from the sniffles coming intermittently from both of us. As Mom drove, I thought about how I never *really* knew Miles. Only superficially. Who was he really? He was like a comet passing in the night sky, seen for a short time, then gone. I choked back tears thinking about him. Then the guilt came. Why didn't Dylan and I try harder to do something with him yesterday? Why didn't I try harder to talk to him in the hall? All questions there were no answers to. Mom held my hand tight the whole way home.

When we got home, Mom woke Joe up. She made him sit on the chair in the dining area. He wiped his eyes and sleepily asked what was going on. Dad was standing in the doorway. Mom looked at Dad as if to silently say she didn't have the strength. "Son, your friend Miles killed himself yesterday. I know you two were close."

"What? What are you talking about?" He looked as shocked as Dylan and I had.

Mom came up to Joe and pushed his hair back; in that way, only a mother could say, "Honey, I'm afraid it's true. He killed himself yesterday evening." Joe continued to look shocked.

"It's true" was all I could manage to say, tears rolling down my cheeks. It was somehow harder to tell the news than it was to hear it.

Joe got up and went straight to his room. Mom and I began to follow, but Dad stopped us, "Let him process it, Linda ". After about 30 minutes, I walked up to Joe's room. I could hear sobbing noises coming from inside. I lightly knocked and turned the doorknob.

"Go away, Mom," he said, voice muffled and panged. As I opened the door, he was lying face down on the pillow. He looked up, and there was a visible wet spot on the pillow. His eyes were red, and his face was still wet. "Oh, it's you." He sat up, leaning back into the wall next to his bed. I went and sat down on the bed beside him. I put my arm around him, and he turned his head into my neck and began crying. "Why did he want to kill himself?" Joe asked between sobs.

"I don't know." It was all I could manage to say. I tried to fight back the tears, to be stronger, but they came anyway.

Dad came to the room, "Time to get ready for work, Josiah; it's better you go to work and take your mind off things."

Oh, hell no, I thought, this time, Dad was going too far. What kind of monster makes someone go to work after finding out one of their best friends killed himself? I stood up to protest. "Dad, you're not going to make him go to work."

Suddenly, Mom was on the other side of Dad, "Are you crazy, Nevada? He needs time to grieve."

Dad, under siege from both sides, stood his ground, "The boy doesn't need to sit around sad all day. If he goes to work, he can forget about it. The same goes for you, Jonathan."

"I am not going to work today, and neither is Josiah," I definitely said.

"I agree with Jonathan; there's no way you're taking those boys to work." Mom's voice became more frantic as she said it. Before Dad could say anything, Joe lifted his head and wiped away his tears.

“I want to go to work.”

Dad just turned around and said, “That’s that then,” walking off to put on his work clothes. Mom and I tried to talk Joe out of going to work, but he sided with Dad. They left, and Mom and I tried to catch up on sleep.

Sleep came in fits and spurts. I kept reliving the day before. James’s wild eyes, his monotone voice. The staring straight ahead and the bizarre speech he gave me about women with long legs. Why didn’t I do more? My dreams were chaotic and short. I was trying to run, but it felt like I was running in quicksand. I’d fall forward and jump awake. Between the fits of sleep, I’d think about Miles’ face, his square jaw, and blond hair, laughing or smiling. A face I’d never see again. At around 11, I got up to find Mom on the phone; she was calling the rest of the congregation to give them the news.

I thought about Lynna. Once off the phone, I asked Mom if she had spoken to Lynna’s family. She said she had and that she told her parents I would call to check up on her, “It’s good if you kids talk about it among yourselves and be there for each other,” she said. Mom’s eyes were bloodshot, and she looked like she had aged a few years in 12 hours.

Once Mom was done with her last call and had laid down for some much-needed rest, I called Lynna. Her mom gave me her condolences and then handed the phone to Lynna. Lynna was crying, “I can’t believe he’s gone. I didn’t know him that well, but I just can’t believe he’s dead.”

“I know; I just talked to him yesterday, Lynna.”

“Sorry, I was at the Spanish hall with Maria. I wish I could have seen you. What did Miles say to you?” I contemplated the answer. In the end, I thought it was better, just to be honest. “He seemed odd; he told me he hoped you and I stayed together, that you had long legs, and that I needed to hold on to a woman with long legs.” Lynna gave a light chuckle. It was funny in a strange way. “I wish I could have talked to him. Maybe I could have said something... I... I...” she began crying without finishing. That brought me to tears; once we had composed ourselves, we promised each other we wouldn’t do what

Miles did. We tearfully said bye to each other, and then I hung up the phone.

Later in the afternoon, Mom told me that a few of the moms thought it would be a good idea to have the kids meet up and talk about how they were feeling. Now, it seemed there was anxiety that one of us might think what Miles did was a good idea. This way, we could talk about it, and if we felt that way, we could get help. We'd meet that next day on Tuesday, then on Thursday, there would be a funeral. It felt like everything was moving too fast. I never knew anyone personally who had died. My grandparents on Mom's side died when I was young, but I didn't remember them. One or two people died in our hall, but again, I didn't really know them. Did we really only have a few days to grieve?

That night, Mom informed Dad that, under no circumstances my brother would be working the next day. Joe was sad and despondent, sticking to his room in silence. I joined him in his room, trying to cheer him up. I turned on the TV, and we watched some Friends reruns, one of his favorite shows. I asked if going to work helped. He told me it didn't. Sometimes, Joe was a puzzle to me; I was yin, and he was yang. Sometimes, his mind was a trap you couldn't get open. Tonight, he was a puzzle set in a trap. It was clear in the end, though, that he wanted to be left alone. I obliged and wished him a good night.

The next morning, we got more details about Miles' death. A notebook had been found with pages and pages of deranged strange text. Evidently, Miles was on medication for a mental illness but stopped taking it. He was clearly not in the right frame of mind; on top of that, there were rumors that he had asked Heather to marry him, and she said no. They had gotten into a huge fight, and she was thinking of going to the elders because they had been having sex. Something that would kill his social life and might even affect his work. There was even a rumor she had cheated on him, but our Mom reminded us that rumors are just that, and we would likely never know what actually happened.

Later in the day, we drove to the meetup. It was at sister Lito's home. Sister Lito's husband was an elder and owned a successful window-washing business. Their house was a two-story modern brick

home with a two-car garage on the side and a long concrete driveway. When we arrived, Sister Lito was waiting in the doorway; cars were parked in the driveway, indicating we weren't the first there. She greeted my mom and then gave me a sideways glance.

Sister Lito was short and round; she wore clothes that were somehow both revealing and modest. She was dark and Italian with black curls flowing to her shoulder and, most importantly, was not a fan of mine. I got the feeling she thought I was the devil incarnate out to corrupt her son. Her son was our age and named Victor, but we didn't hang out much with him. He was pudgy and a tattletale. Both he and his mom acted as if the world revolved around them; she was the trophy JW mom, and he was the doting son. Of course, her son had the spine of a jellyfish, which made him a perfect JW child. She and I both made it clear we disliked each other, and she was one of the few people in the hall I openly disrespected from time to time. Today, I would have to put that aside. Something more important was happening.

The meeting took place in the living room, which was spacious and big. The leather couches had been moved to the back to accommodate chairs that were placed in a circle. Most of the teens from the hall were there. Lynna and her sister were already sitting down next to each other. Brandon was there, standing next to the wall; he gave me a sad look. Steve and Jeremy were both sitting, looking down at their feet. I asked where Dylan was; Mom said that he had decided not to come. I didn't realize it was optional, but I thought it was probably a good idea to be there. I'd check up on Dylan later.

Sister Lito took control of the meeting, "We brought you all here because, of course, your friend Miles committed suicide." She held a dramatic pause and looked around the room; a Bible was in her hand. "Do you know what Jehovah thinks of suicide?" She started to open her Bible. "Exodus 20:13 says murder is a sin, and what Miles did was *murder*." I couldn't believe my ears. We came to talk about our feelings, and instead, we were getting a lecture on how Miles, our friend, was a murderer and sinner in God's eyes.

She looked around the room slowly, trying to make eye contact with each of the kids in the circle. “So, I just want to make sure that you understand, if you commit suicide, you’re murdering yourselves. You won’t be able to join each other or your families in paradise.”

I couldn’t hold it in any longer, “Sister Lito, do you know what Miles was going through? How can we judge what sort of pressure he was under? He was supposed to be on medication but wasn’t. How do we know it was really his decision?” I was trying to hold back my outrage at her.

She glared at me and then said, “I’ll tell you what I know: the Bible and Jehovah say that suicide *is* a sin. That’s what I know. I...”

I cut her off, “I thought you brought us here to talk about our feelings. Well, *my* feelings are that I feel bad for Miles. Maybe he couldn’t live under the pressure of mental illness. Maybe I would do the same thing in his situation. I think Jesus would have understood and have pity for Miles. He wouldn’t call him a murderer.”

Sister Lito began to get red in the face, her voice getting higher, “That’s not what the faithful and discreet slave says. I think you should do a little more studying in your Bible, Brother Burger.”

That was it, I couldn’t sit through this bullshit anymore. I got up and walked out. Mom followed behind me. “Jon please try to stay; those kids look up to you and you should set a good example. I agree Sister Lito isn’t taking the right approach and I don’t disagree with you.”

“Then why didn’t you defend me, Mom?”

Mom looked embarrassed and ashamed. “I don’t know, you can wait in the car” was all she said. I spent the rest of the hour in the car.

Eventually, Lynna came out and stood by the car next to me. She gave me a long hug and we shared tears. It didn’t last long as Sister Lito came out, her watchful evil eye over me.

Lynna rubbed my shoulders. “I know it’s hard and you were right. Sister Lito is a bitch.” I perked up and smiled at the unexpected insult. “I do hope we see Miles in paradise though,” she said. I wasn’t sure if I believed I would see anyone on a paradise earth, but I wasn’t

going to say that now. "I'll see you at the No Doubt concert; you're still going, right Jon?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, Lynna"

"Good" Lynna said, flashing me a smile then giving me a goodbye hug. With Lynna's back turned to Sister Lito she blew a kiss at me, and I smiled. Then Steve and Jeremy came to check on me.

Once I said my goodbyes, I asked Joe how the rest of the group therapy went. He explained how Sister Lito went on for another 15 minutes and then they went in a circle and talked about if they had suicidal thoughts. "It wasn't right what she was saying about Miles" I said.

"Wrong time, wrong place dude she's just doing what she thinks is best for us. Running out like a baby didn't make you right." He sounded angry at me, and he had a point but for now we'd have to agree to disagree.

I called Dylan and explained what happened. "Dude, I didn't go because I knew it was gonna be bullshit. When I heard it was Sister Lito hosting, that was all I needed to decide not to go." His logic was sound, but I had wished he'd been there. He continued, "Man, fuck this religion. As soon as I'm 18 I'm getting an apartment. We should move in together." It sounded like a good plan.

After talking to Dylan, I had some time alone. Somewhere in the back of my mind after dealing with this death some guilt snuck in. I didn't agree with the stance on suicide but what if they might be right about the other things? What if I could see my friends after they died? What if we could sing kumbaya and hang out with dangerous animals that acted like kittens? This whole ordeal brought up a lot of confusing feelings in me and I'd need to chew on it for a while.

Thursday was the funeral. There was much debate as to whether the service should be held at the Kingdom Hall. Active Jehovah's Witnesses almost always had their funeral service at the hall but in the case of a suicide many felt it shouldn't take place there. In the end the elders decided that the service should be held elsewhere. This meant the family would have to foot the bill of the service.

The service was held at a small funeral home in Gastonia. When we arrived, we went inside. Soft music was playing and there was a sign that said, "Clintock service" in front of open doors that led to a small hall with white pews. There was a big round floral arrangement at the front a few feet from a lectern. There was no body as Miles had been cremated. On the side of the hall against the wall was Thomas, his mother, and some close relatives. We made our way to them. I hugged Thomas and offered my condolences. I then hugged his mom. She knew I had spoken to Miles last and asked how he seemed. I didn't know if I owed her details, but I just said he seemed at peace and how we spoke about having fun. She smiled at that, and I didn't feel quite so guilty about withholding some details.

When the service started Brother Duckworth gave the talk. Around 30 people had shown up including Dylan, Lynna, and most of Miles' friends. A few non-Jehovah's Witnesses were there too including a firefighting buddy of his and a rock-climbing friend. Heather, his ex-girlfriend, was there too, getting some sideways glances from attendees due to the rumors.

The service was more of a talk at the hall than what you'd see at funerals in the movies and TV. Brother Duckworth barely even mentioned Miles by name. The talk revolved largely on how being a Jehovah's Witness gave people the ultimate hope to see their dead loved ones again in a paradise earth and Brother Duckworth urged those who weren't Jehovah's Witnesses to attend a meeting so that they might see their dead loved ones in the future.

Near the end of the talk Brother Duckworth said, "Of course we know what the Bible says about suicide but only Jehovah can determine if someone should be in paradise so we will pray that Miles' mother and brother see him there." I was horrified. How could they do this to my friend and his family? He wasn't perfect but he tried his best. This was how they treat him? They wouldn't even let him have a proper funeral. The entire service was just an infomercial for how great Jehovah's Witnesses were.

After the service, after even more tears were cried, I made a decision. I would plan my exit. I'd rather have no funeral than have

this. If I were stuck with this, I might actually take the same path Miles did. Now was the time to live. I'd do whatever it took. Hopefully Lynna would come with me, and I wouldn't have to do it alone. I'd find out at the No Doubt concert.

Chapter 13

Dissociation

Once back at home from the funeral I begged Mom to let me go to Dylan's. I told her I needed the comfort of my best friend, and she agreed with one caveat. She made me promise I wouldn't go to the concert. "I promise," I said. She took my word with good cause. I'd always held promises as a sacred bond. Sure, I lied from time to time or misrepresented the truth but once I promised it was unbreakable. For the first time though, I was willing to break it. I was owed this concert. No birthdays, no Christmases, no parties, not even Thanksgiving, only constant Kingdom Hall attendance and going door to door. Constant rules. The cherry on top was the funeral.

I wasn't a bad kid; I even made an attempt to get baptized. The worst part was that it wasn't like concerts weren't allowed by the church. Mom had just connected dots that weren't there to stop me from going to something she didn't personally like.

After my false promise, she offered me something she thought was better than a concert, "You should come with us to the get-together Saturday night at Sister Lito's'." I feigned interest, saying I'd think about it. No way that was happening. This did give me an idea, though. If my parents weren't at home, it would wrap up the final piece of the puzzle.

I ran to the phone to call Dylan. I told him I could come over and he asked what the plan was for the concert. I told him I'd let him know my plans in the car, not wanting Mom to somehow overhear. I packed my clothes for three days, then went to bed happy and with a purpose. In reality, it was the first time I didn't care if I was caught. I would try to avoid the fallout of my friends getting in trouble, but I was going to that concert come hell or high water.

On Friday, Dylan came to pick me up. In the car, I explained the plan for No Doubt. On Saturday, we'd hang out until he had to leave for the concert. Then we'd go to Brandon's to pick him up. I'd call home and leave a message that I was spending the night at Brandon's. He'd tell his mom I was spending the night and that we were going out. He had no curfew, so we could come home when we wanted. If we played our cards right, she wouldn't know who we had

left with. No one would be in trouble. Dylan and I agreed it was the perfect crime. We'd accounted for everything.

Once back at Dylan's, I called Brandon and explained the ins and outs to him. He complimented my planning and reassured me he would take care of everything on his end. Which was easy for him to say because he could detonate a nuke on a major metropolitan area, and his mom would just pat his head and say, "Don't do that again, sweetheart."

I called my brother and told him I was a go for the concert. I was starting to tell him my plan, but he said it was better if he didn't know. I agreed as he'd some plausible deniability. The good news was this was mutually assured destruction since he wasn't supposed to be there either. I told him to pass the message to Maria that I would be there. He agreed. I asked what his plan was now that Miles was no longer with us. Greg had offered to go with him and bought a ticket.

Dylan and I bided our time. Friday night, I had a hard time sleeping. It was always difficult at Dylan's because I'd usually sleep on a cushioned mat on his floor, barely getting much sleep. However, I wanted to be rested, so we shared his bed, sleeping head to toe. It was a full-sized bed, but Dylan was a big guy who sometimes moved in his sleep and battled with athletes' feet. It forced me to be well acquainted with the wall his bed was up against.

Once asleep, I slipped into yet another dream. I was at the Kingdom Hall cleaning the bathrooms. This wasn't out of the ordinary, as every month, groups were told it was their turn to clean the hall. In the bathroom was an elder whose face I couldn't quite make out; he told me to start vacuuming. I told him I needed to use the bathroom and asked for privacy.

Once he left, I noticed a strange noise emanating from the stall. I opened the stall door, but instead of a toilet, there was a portal. It looked like it had gone into space, and stars were swirling around it. It spun with red and yellow brilliance while a strange voice could be heard from it. "You must decide," the vortex said in a deep, distorted voice. As I stared into it, I experienced extreme vertigo. I was scared and overwhelmed. I was so scared I questioned if this

was a reality or a dream, looking away from the vortex and then at my hands. It suddenly hit me: this was a dream.

I tried to wake myself up. I closed my eyes and tried to focus as hard as I could to wake up, but I couldn't. I thought that maybe I could make my body move, so again, I closed my eyes and thought hard about moving it. All the while, the voice was getting louder, "You must decide," its low, deep guttural voice echoing off the bathroom walls. I screamed as loud as I could, but no sound came from my mouth. Again, I closed my eyes and tried screaming, hoping that maybe I could scream myself awake.

I opened my eyes, but I was still in the dream. I accepted I wasn't going to wake up. As I stood in front of the stall, I noticed the bathroom door was open, and people from the Kingdom Hall were huddled around the door. They all smiled and motioned for me to leave the bathroom. Mom stood in the door, "Come on, Jon, this is so much nicer here." My Mom moved aside, revealing Lynna was there; she was smiling and motioning with a finger for me to come towards her. For a second, I took a step towards her, but something in the void of the vortex called me to it. I stepped back in front of the stall. I waved goodbye to Mom, Lynna, and the others, deciding to jump into the vortex.

It was dark and empty, and I was more alone than I'd ever felt in my life, but a calm, warm feeling washed over me. Something deep inside of me knew I made the right decision. As I was falling, a light came from below me and engulfed me. Suddenly, I was awake, and Dylan was shaking me, "Dude, wake up!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?" I responded sleepily and brushed my eyes, which were wet; I noticed my cheeks were tear-stained.

"Dude, you were moving all over, crying and yelling. I've been trying to wake you up for the last minute; you suddenly went silent, and then you woke up."

As my eyes adjusted to the morning light streaming into the bedroom, I noticed the look of horror on Dylan's face. "Dude, what the fuck were you dreaming about?"

I explained the dream to Dylan. We sat on his bed, and he listened intently; when I was done, he simply put his hand on my

shoulder and said, “That sounds fucked up Jon; if I were you, I’d never go to the Kingdom Hall bathroom again,” he laughed, squeezing my shoulder. Somewhere deep down, though, I knew there was a kernel of truth to what he had just said. I guess the day before, I had already made my choice.

Like my dream, that was the first step into the unknown void, feeling so sucked in I was willing to break a promise. I knew it was wrong, but also, nothing ever felt so right. I decided to take a shower, hoping no vortexes showed up at the toilet.

Once in the shower, I let the warm water rush over me and soak it in. I washed my hair with shampoo and then grabbed conditioner, which I almost never use. I should look and smell as good as I can tonight. While in the shower, though, I couldn’t stop thinking about my dream, which felt more real than any dream I had. I gave my body a shake, but something inside of me changed. I decided the dream was trying to tell me that. I had taken the right step into the unknown.

Once out of the shower, we put on some clothes and went to 9th Planet, the local skate shop. I wanted to buy a new shirt for the show to impress Lynna. It was a small-sized skate shop with a small men’s and women’s clothing section. On the wall behind the cash register was an assortment of skateboards and skate shoes, Vans, Airwalks, Etnies, and DCs. They had just about all of them. In the men’s clothing section, there were JNCO and Kikwear jeans and various brands of shirts. I looked at the shirts and landed on a shirt from Vans. It was short-sleeved and had orange, red, and yellow stripes going across the front of it, with two buttons and a collar at the neck. I chose a large one, so it was baggy and loose. It fit well. Lynna liked color, so I hoped it would play to her sensibilities.

Dylan was aimlessly looking around and found a wallet he liked. The wallet had the letters SMP on the front and was made of brown suede with a chain attached to it. “Know what this stands for?” he asked.

“Nope, I haven’t seen that brand.”

“It stands for *Sex, Money, and Power*. You should get it, dude.” he paused after the words sex, money, and power. *What the hell*, I thought, so I grabbed it and bought it. I had about \$200 saved up from working over the Summer, and the shirt and wallet set me back \$70. This was why I preferred to buy my clothes from thrift stores, but I had a girlfriend to impress.

Afterward, we hung out at Dylan’s, counting the hours until the concert started. Ticket holders could get in at 7:00 p.m. with a special guest opening the show at eight. We never bothered to find out who was opening, but I figured we should get there a little early anyway. At six, we made our move.

Dylan told his mom I was spending the nights at Brandon’s, and he’d drop me off. I called my parents and left a message, happy they were at the get-together. Then I called Brandon and told him I was on the way. Dylan’s Mom was cooking next to me the whole time. “Have fun at the concert, Dylan; you have fun at Brandon’s, Jon.” She tussled Dylan’s hair, then mine as we walked past her. Both of our hairstyles were short and spiky, so a good tussle only improved the look.

We put the “Tragic Kingdom” on in Dylan’s car and turned the volume up so everyone outside could hear, then drove to Brandon’s. Brandon lived in a lower-class neighborhood of Gastonia; it was largely a poor white neighborhood with blue-collar workers. The houses were small compact brick rectangles with two windows in the front and the maximum number of bedrooms being three. His house looked a little run down, with a van parked in the driveway on blocks. Dylan honked, and Brandon came out. He hopped in the backseat, looking happy and excited for the show. This was going to be pretty much everyone’s first real concert.

As we backed up and got on the road, suddenly Brandon yelled out, “Oh my god, I’ve got the wrong shoes on.”

“What?” I turned back, trying to figure out what he meant.

“These are my good shoes for school; we’re going to be in the grass. Dylan, you have to drive me back. I can’t wear these.”

Brandon’s shoes were new and were made of white patent leather. Not a spot on them. How he ended up wearing them out was a

mystery. We weren't far down the road, so Dylan started to turn around. This was a deviation from the plan, and my years of scheming had taught me that was never good.

"Dude, just wear them; they look fine. You won't get any stains on them," I said, turning back to Brandon.

"Mom is going to kill me, and these are the only good pair of shoes I have for school." Brandon pleaded his case.

Dylan looked at me, "Fine" I said. We pulled into Brandon's driveway, and he got out and ran into his house.

About two minutes later, Brandon came running out holding a different pair of sneakers in his hand; he was running to the car in his socks. With the shoes in one hand, he was waving with the other hand, "dude, go go go!" he exclaimed. He jumped in the car, and Dylan pulled out of the driveway in reverse as fast as he could. Suddenly, Brandon's Dad came running out of the house. "Ya-ya-ya-you ba-ba-ba-boys get ba-c-ck hi-hi-hi-here," he stuttered while yelling. Dylan put the car in drive and punched it. I could see Brandon's Dad in the rearview, shaking his fist at us. "Ba-ba-ba-br-aandon" his voice trailing off as we sped away.

"What the fuck Brandon?" Dylan asked, looking in the rearview.

"Blame Jon's Mom for that one. I went back inside, and *his* Mom had called," Brandon said in an accusatory tone, pointing at me before continuing. "She told her you needed to come home and that Dylan was going to a concert. Then she said you weren't allowed to go. Mom asked me if I knew anything about it, so I just grabbed my shoes and ran."

Shit, this was going to mean I was in big trouble, but nothing they could do about it now. It wasn't like they were going to buy tickets for this concert and show up, yanking me up and taking me home. At least, I hoped they wouldn't. It was nearly a two-hour drive. Dad wouldn't want to waste the gas.

We laughed about the crazy situation, then Dylan and Brandon discussed how much trouble Brandon might be in. Brandon said he might get grounded for a day and didn't seem bothered.

My fate was sealed already. The window was down, and No Doubt was playing loud enough that we had to yell to hear each

other. I put my face in the wind and my hand out like some sort of aerodynamic testing device fluid against the wind, trying to find the most optimal spot. It was freeing to do what I wanted. It was the first time I could remember making a decision on my own with no guilt. Not caring about the consequences or who found out. I looked in the door mirror. It felt like a mask was slowly coming off, and I was seeing my true self for the first time.

Before the concert, Dylan suggested that we meet at the main entrance. When we arrived, Joe, Maria, Greg, and Lynna weren't there yet. We waited around 15 minutes and saw my brother and Greg coming in. I told him the bad news: Mom had found out Brandon and I were with Dylan. He just shook his head, "If she asks, I didn't know anything, Jon." I agreed. I introduced Dylan and Brandon to Greg. Greg sweetly offered his condolences to us and brought up how his sister had passed away not too long ago and how it took him a long time to start to feel better, but we needed to enjoy days like today. It was a lesson I was happy to take in and embrace.

We waited for another 20 minutes and finally saw Lynna and Maria walking in. Lynna was wearing Doc Martens, hip-hugger jeans, and a green No Doubt t-shirt, which had the same artwork as the Tragic Kingdom album artwork on the front. She had her hair in French braids going down each side of her face and ending at her shoulders. Her cheeks were rose-colored with some light glitter sprinkled onto her make-up, making her blue eyes sparkle. She looked radiant and happy.

Butterflies formed in my stomach as she strode towards the group. Her confidence beamed, and she was the only person I could see in the crowds streaming in. She walked up, hugged me, and gave me a kiss on the cheek. We held hands and walked towards the lawn area. Then we found a spot near the front of the lawn where you still had a good view unobstructed.

To our surprise, Weezer opened up for No Doubt. I couldn't believe my luck, two of my favorite bands. Also, the two bands Mom was sure were demonic and immoral. She might be having a heart attack right now if her sixth sense was working. Weezer played all their hits, and I sang along to them. "The Sweater Song," "Buddy

Holly,” “The World Has Turned,” “El Scorcho,” “No Other One,” and “The Good Life.” It was amazing. I had almost forgotten that Lynna and my friends were there. Lynna was dancing and singing along, too. She had a huge smile on her face, and as the sun went down, I couldn’t help but think of how beautiful she was. I had decided then, and there I was, in love. I was lucky to be in love with someone like her.

Weezer finished their set with “Say It Ain’t So.” The entire crowd sang along to almost every line. Lynna and I put our arms around each other and swayed to the rhythm. When the song was over, I went to give her a kiss, but she simply gave me a peck on the lips. Maybe she wanted to clap and yell encore with the rest of the crowd.

During the break, we sat down and talked about how amazing the Weezer set was. Dylan and Greg went to get us drinks. Maria and Joe canoodled in the grass. Brandon sat awkwardly, the fifth wheel of the group now. When Dylan and Greg returned, we tried to guess what No Doubt songs would be played. I squeezed Lynna’s hand, but she didn’t squeeze back. Before I could think about it, Gwen Stefani came marching out, waving at the crowd, and we waved back.

“Charlotte, North Carolina, how are we doing?” Gwen Stefani looked radiant and happy. We all screamed back that we were amazing now that she was here. They launched right into “Tragic Kingdom,” the song Mom was convinced was demonic and about Satan. The coincidence was delicious, and I sang with extra energy. Lynna swung her arms and legs to the music; Dylan pumped his muscular arms, and Joe wrapped his arms around Maria from behind, and they swung back and forth together in harmony.

Next came “Excuse Me Mr.,” “Different People,” and “Happy Now,” and then she took a break to tell a story. She began telling the crowd about Brad Nowell. He was the lead singer of Sublime, a band Joe and I both liked. Gwen told the crowd he was a dear friend, and he let her sing some of his songs, helping give her a start. He had died the year before due to a heroin overdose. It reminded me of Miles. Another soul gone too soon. Both had demons. She did a

cover of “DJs” with which Joe was familiar, but I didn’t know. It was a sweet send-off to a friend, and I felt a pang of sadness. Then they played “The Climb,” one of my favorite songs. It was poignant to my current situation, a song about the difficult task of getting somewhere and reaching a goal. So many things are in your way, but once you're set on your path, you can't turn back. I sang it with more emotion than ever.

They kept playing, and it was amazing. I had never seen a live show before, and this blew me away. I had always felt a connection to music, but seeing this band here right now felt more spiritual than I had ever felt at any Kingdom Hall or campfire sing-along. The warm glow of guitars washed over me in my own kind of baptism. I had seen the light, and I couldn't ever go back into the darkness now. Lynna was also enthralled, focused on the show, and dancing almost nonstop.

As the night went on, the energy didn't slow down. Gwen and the crew rocked our asses off. We never stopped moving, only having a break for the encore. When they walked off stage, we screamed “encore, encore, encore” over and over again to the top of our lungs. Gwen came back, and we went wild. For the last song, she played a cover of “Heartbreaker.” I was vaguely familiar with the song as it came on classic rock radio stations.

Finally, she played “Spiderwebs.” The band gave everything they had running around the stage while Gwen jumped up and down, leading the crowd into synchronized jumps. The entire crowd sang along in unison while jumping in rhythm. Much better than a Kingdom Melody and with much more crowd engagement.

“Good night, Charlotte, you've been amazing.” Gwen took a few bows and blew kisses to the audience, and then she and the band made their exit. I was still amped with adrenaline flowing through me. I grabbed Lynna's hand and asked if I could talk to her alone. She nodded, and I let the group know we were going to go on our own for a few minutes. Dylan slapped me on the back, smiling from ear to ear. I think he was convinced I was going to ask her to lose my virginity.

We made our way to a patch of grass that felt private. The drunks and concertgoers had thinned out, ready to beat the traffic. Only a few partygoers were still hanging around. I sat down with Lynna facing her. "I've been thinking a lot lately. I love you," I said, grasping her hands and looking into her eyes. She pulled her hand back slightly, looking confused and then sad. I don't know what I expected, but I kept speaking, "I know we're still young, but I want to be with you, and I don't want to be a Jehovah's Witness. Maybe we could leave together."

I waited for her to respond, "Where would we go? Have you thought this through?" there was skepticism in her voice, and she didn't bring up my confession of love.

"I don't know Lynna; all I know is that the religion isn't for me, and I've made the choice. I'm never going to be a witness. Tonight, with you, it's the best I've ever felt, and I want to feel that way as much as I can," a small tremble in my voice.

"I don't think I can do that, Jon. I don't really know if I want to leave the congregation. I think I really believe in it." She looked and sounded sincere. It hit me like a sledgehammer. "I think we're in two different places right now," she added softly.

I could see her eyes start to tear up. I placed my hand on her face and felt the tears welling in my eyes, too. She put her hand over mine. "What does this mean for us?" I asked.

"I think... I think we should break up; this is something you need to do on your own without me." She started sobbing and put her hands to her face. My dream came rushing back to me. The sudden feeling of vertigo. Of weightlessness and falling. All alone.

I tried to be strong, to act like I didn't care, but it was impossible. I began crying, too. "It's okay, Lynna," I said, "I understand," between the sobs and tears. She wiped her tears away, then wiped at mine. When we regained our composure, we looked into each other's eyes. Both of us tried to hold back tears. I could see the tears starting to come down her face again.

"I'll always love you. If you ever get to where I'm at, there's a place right next to me," I said. She put a finger to my lips and then said the lines from "Don't Speak," "hush darling." I laughed, and a

smile came across her face. She turned her body towards the stage, and then I followed. She put her arm around my waist and rested her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her shoulder, and then we sat staring straight forward, wiping tears from our eyes.

Before too long, Dylan, Maria, Joe, and Brandon came and sat down next to us. Dylan put his hand on my shoulder. I looked over at him, and he just gave me a comforting smile. We sat for a few more minutes, then got up and said our goodbyes. As I got back in the car feeling dejected, I also felt like some spark had been lit.

Lynna was right, at that moment we really were in two different places. I had been so preoccupied with my changes I hadn't realized I moved too fast for her. This summer had been the most profound of my young life. She had been through changes too. Different parents, different rules, and different experiences. All things I selfishly hadn't noticed.

As we drove away from the venue, I wondered what would happen with Lynna. Would we talk? Would she stay in the religion? Would we be friends? I'd table those thoughts. For now, I'd be happy the summer went out with a bang, even if I felt a slight wound from this particular bang.

In the end, this was my journey. The first steps were already taken on the long climb. I wouldn't stop until I reached the peak.
The End.