

RETURN TO THE LION'S DEN

PROLOGUE. THE LION'S DEN

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“Ladies and gentlemen,” the flight attendant said over the intercom, “we are now beginning our descent into Indianapolis. The local time is 5:37 p.m. and the temperature is seventy-eight degrees. We ask that everyone please take their seats.” As standing passengers moved to their seats, attendants made their last pass through the cabin, checking seat belts and collecting refuse.

My anxiety was palpable. I barely registered the captain's voice as he announced the gates for connecting flights, but then I didn't need to. I was returning to my home state of Indiana for the first time since leaving for Chicago twenty years earlier. At that time, I was pursuing one thing (my career) and fleeing from another (my family). Anyone hearing my story would naturally assume that my troubled past began in early childhood. As a young boy, though, I fantasized that my story was an extension of a tale much older than I, a tale about a famous hero who shared my name.

Biblical scholars tell us that when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in the sixth century BC, a young Jewish nobleman and prophet was carried off as captive. His name was Daniel. According to Old Testament teachings, he excelled in all things and soon caught the eye of King Nebuchadnezzar, becoming his most trusted aide. Even as the Babylonian Empire fell and gave way to the Persians, Daniel continued to win the respect of the powerful, becoming the most trusted governor to serve under Darius the Mede.

However, in a feudal society where intrigue was common, a foreign interloper who gained power was bound to earn the enmity of those passed over in favor of him. In Daniel's case, his enemies used the king's vanity to trick him into issuing an irrevocable decree that would condemn all worshippers of foreign gods to death. As a result, Daniel was literally tossed to the lions. But the God of Israel intervened and protected him through the night. The conspirators soon learned that tricking the king into condemning a friend to death was not a good career move unless it was pulled off successfully. In the aftermath of their failure, the plotters and their families took Daniel's place, becoming lion food.

My mother, who named me for the biblical Daniel, raised me on that story. In later years, it would strike me as ironic that I who shared that famous name would survive a lion's den experience of my own. There were differences between his story and mine, though. On the positive side, I had only one tormentor, my father, rather than a whole den of them. On the negative, I endured mine for a decade and did not emerge unscathed. Unfortunately, the issues I had with my abusive father were left unresolved.

After I escaped and moved on with my life, my career took me around the world. For many years, I put off returning to the place I once called home, but an irresistible call to duty finally brought me back. Though I agreed to come to my family in their hour of need, I dreaded it just the same. This would be yet another difference between my story and that of my biblical namesake: while he never went back to his lion's den, I was returning to mine. And I had no doubt that the old lion still had teeth.