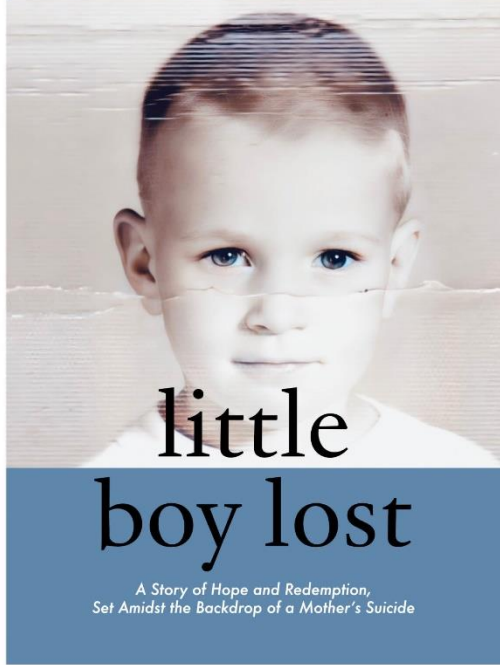


DAVID W. PETERS



12 West Circle Books

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To my mother, Julia Ann Peters, who gave me life and love.

"To live in the hearts of those left behind is not to die."
Thomas Campbell



Mom and me, spring 1961

Foreword

If you were to read the headlines from the mid-1960s to 1979 – the years my brother David covers in his impressive memoir – you’d learn about big events like race riots and student movements, the war in Vietnam, assassinations of leading public figures, the Cold War, and the disgraceful resignation of a sitting American president. But to a young boy – to David Peters – those serious, divisive events paled in comparison to the events at home in a small town in East Tennessee.

David has written an observant and ultimately heartfelt book about his childhood during this era. It’s about the many pleasures of small-town life: holidays and high school sports, campouts and dirt bikes, sleepovers and fishing with friends. He remembers everything positive with an admirable clarity of detail and real pleasure: what he got for Christmas in 1969, his (excellent) batting average when he was a senior in high school, what he ate during summer Boy Scout camping trips.

But in his book, David also remembers, vividly, how his childhood went horribly wrong: Our mother Julia had a serious mental illness that led to the first of many hospitalizations, starting in 1954. She attempted suicide several times. She killed herself in 1974. *Little Boy Lost* is more than just a look back at an American childhood; it is a searing, questioning, and angry book about our troubled family and the events that make his title so resonant.

I say “his childhood” though of course it was, in most ways, my childhood too (and the childhood of our older brother, Ben). But our memories of the facts, and even more important, of their emotional reality, diverge considerably. David remembers our mother, our father, and our life in a way that, at times, feels almost surreally different from my own for the simple reason that his experience of our family and our troubles was vastly different from my own.

His bond with our mother was much deeper, more truly loving, and longer lasting than I ever understood until I first read this book in manuscript. His pain and his subsequent anger at the whole of it – her illness, decline, and death, of our father’s retreat from “normal” life, and of the enormous cruelty of our stepmother shocked me profoundly. David’s book has made me think and rethink, face and re-face some old wounds of my own. This book is his truth, but some

of it has become my truth too, and for that, I thank him wholeheartedly.

I do want to echo one very positive note in David's book: the incredible compassion and love many people showed to us, particularly in the years just after our mom died. For David, those people included Mom Johnson, his many friends, sports coaches, and our high school guidance counselor, Don Bratcher. I too benefited from the kindness and guidance of folks in our small community. For me it was my teachers, every one of them, along with the many families who fed me on a regular basis, particularly in my last years in Norris (like the Elmores, the Forbeses, and George and Leslie Archer, to name a few). And I also owe a tremendous debt to Don Bratcher for acting both as the therapist I didn't realize I needed and a guidance counselor who moved mountains to find opportunities — a life-changing man for both David and me, and for every student who ever encountered him.

At the age of 13, when our mother died, my brother was indeed a "little boy lost" in the uncharted, bewildering landscape of our life. But by writing *Little Boy Lost*, David offers a powerful and compelling narrative of his journey to reconciliation and healing, a book I believe will help many readers find their own path to understanding and insight.

Tim Peters
Writer
Los Angeles
April 2023

Preface

On St. Patrick's Day, 1974, my mother committed suicide. I was 13 years old. This wasn't her first or second attempt. It was her fourth attempt in 17 years. What happened? How did this woman get to the point where she thought ending her life was the only option? As I type this, I look back with sorrow at what was, and ultimately, would never be. Why were my children denied a loving grandmother, a woman who, at her core, was sweet and kind? Could she be cruel? Yes, but that was the exception, not the rule.

Was there a definitive moment where her mind snapped? Was she born with this, or was there something specific that triggered her slide into schizophrenia? Was it a series of events that were the catalyst for her mental illness? There are no definitive answers, which makes it all a bit maddening. As a child of a mentally ill mother, I've learned what I could and come to the realization that some questions remain just that: questions.

This memoir is the story of my mother's illness and subsequent death, its effect on our family, and more specifically, its effect on *my* life. It has affected me every day of my life and has been an Achilles heel in my place in the world. It's also the story of growing up in the wonder years of the sixties and seventies and how aspects of that era helped compensate for problems and shortcomings I had in my home life. A significant part of my story is the various surrogate parents that picked me up along the way and helped me immensely. Finally, it's a story of hope and healing after trauma.

Julia

My mother, Julia Ann Burgess, was born December 8, 1926, in Coalfield, Tennessee. She was one of fifteen siblings (four died in infancy) and was born into extreme poverty. She grew up in a three-room house without electricity or plumbing. Most everyone in that area was poor in those days, but the Burgess family had practically NOTHING. Her siblings were good people and hardworking but suffered from the sin of being poor. The plague of poverty would haunt Julia for her entire life. It was something that she was never able to mentally shake.

This was three years before the Great Depression, but rural East Tennessee in the early 20th century was in a perpetual state of depression. Education was limited and the only real jobs were coal mining and share cropping. Locals used to say there were three jobs: coal mining, moonshining, and gettin' on down the line. Both Julia's parents, Sib and Ethel Burgess, died before I was born.

Sib (my grandfather) was a farmer who share cropped and occasionally worked in the mines. In the depression era, the bigger the family, the more labor you had available for farming. This was typical for the rural poor, and the Burgess family was certainly that. Virtually nothing was purchased in stores. Food was grown at home and livestock was raised and slaughtered on the land they sharecropped. Clothes were handmade and everyone wore hand-me-downs.

Julia's childhood was not a happy one. Besides poverty, she experienced mental, emotional, and physical abuse with very little nurturing. By all accounts, Ethel (my grandmother), didn't even like children, and relied on older siblings to raise the young ones. Julia was a middle child. As such, at a young age, she spent a great deal of time raising babies.

There is some evidence that Sib was not Julia's biological father, and this might've been the case for some other siblings. Julia loved her brothers and sisters (four boys and seven girls) but felt no love for her parents. She longed to escape the bleak existence of her childhood, and one way she did that was at the library. A voracious reader of books, one year as a teenager, Julia read every "whodunnit" in the little Coalfield library. A self-described ragamuffin, she went

to the only school in town, which housed grades 1-12. As she often said, "EVERYONE was poor."

Julia graduated from Coalfield High School with honors in the spring of 1944 and left home. She moved to Clinton, a half hour away. Compared to Coalfield, Clinton was a metropolis with a population of about 3,000. She moved in with her older sister, Hazel (and her husband) and quickly found employment in a secretarial pool (at a wage of 48 cents an hour) in Oak Ridge. She was an excellent typist and thrilled to be out of her childhood home. She didn't make much money but was happy. This was her routine for the next couple of years. Little did she know at the time, but fate would intervene one night at a local drugstore.

Ben

My father, Benjamin Harrison Peters, Jr. was born March 19, 1923, in Clinton. His dad was Ben senior, and his mom was the former Cleo Edna Stair. He had two older sisters and two younger sisters.

By all accounts, Ben had an idyllic childhood, in spite of the depression. His dad was a manager at Magnet Mills, a company that made upscale women's hosiery. Cleo was a homemaker. My grandfather made a good living and Dad's family lived a comfortable middle-class life, especially considering the times.

From 1929-1941, the national unemployment rate averaged over 15% and, at various times, was over 20%. Times were hard and work was scarce, so many people gathered at soup lines for their daily meal.

Dad told me several stories of the benevolence of my grandfather during this unprecedented era of economic hardship. Years later, several people told him how his father had saved their family from starvation. Statements such as, "If it wasn't for your Dad, my family would've gone hungry" were ones he heard often. Dad said my grandfather was one of the nicest people in the world and "one in a million." Sadly, he died in 1956 at the age of 67.

By his own admission, Ben was a poor student in school with no real interest in what the teachers taught. He was, however, naturally curious and loved learning about things that did interest him. The Peters clan was a family of readers. The whole family would sit around on weekends, reading whatever they could get their hands on, which was unusual for people back then. He played sandlot baseball and football and liked fishing and hunting.

After graduating high school, Ben went to work at Alcoa, a job he hated. He worked 77 hours a week for 50 cents an hour. The work wasn't challenging at all, and he said, "Any idiot could do it." His escapes were fishing and camping on weekends. He and his buddies would fish all day and sit around the campfire at night and smoke Life Everlasting, also called rabbit tobacco. Occasionally, they'd also drink a little moonshine, a common thing in that era. Anything to get a little buzz. Such was life for eighteen-year-old Ben Peters. Long hours at work for little pay and carefree weekends.

In 1941, there were growing tensions around the world, but the United States had, so far, avoided military conflict. This would all change on December 7, the day that would “live in infamy.” The Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service launched a series of surprise attacks on the naval base in Honolulu, a territory of Hawaii. The United States was launched into World War II.

Like millions of young men, Ben soon enlisted. His buddies were supposed to meet him at the enlistment office, but none showed up. Nonetheless, he enlisted in the Army Air Force and headed to basic training in Panama City, Florida.

After basic training, he took an aptitude test for radio mechanic’s school and had the highest score of all candidates. He was sent to Reno, Nevada for sixteen weeks of training. He also spent 22 weeks in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, learning electrical and radio training. After over 8 months of training, he was shipped overseas. He was stationed in India as part of the 1304th AAF Base Unit Air Transport Command, and his primary duties were making daily flights from Chabua, India, over the “Hump” of the Himalayan Mountains, and landing in Kunming, China. They flew the C-46, also known as the “Curtiss Calamity,” loaded with 55-gallon drums of gasoline. Ben often got nauseous before flights. He was convinced the plane would be bombed, or the volatile cargo would ignite, and he’d be nothing but vapor. Like all enlistees, he filled out the requisite paperwork for government-issued life insurance and named his parents as beneficiaries. Like most men in WWII, he never thought he’d make it back to America.

In the Air Force, he made some lifelong friends and learned a great deal about the world, and about life. More importantly, he learned what he wanted to do if he DID make it back. When he had a down day, he wrote his folks and played with a dog he and a buddy “adopted” in India. His mom worried the whole time about her only son and prayed nightly for his safety. Ben Sr. kept the home fires burning with his job at Magnet Mills. And so, life went on for 1943, 1944, and 1945.

Against all odds, Ben did survive the war. When his ship finally sailed into Seattle Harbor (it took him thirty days to get from India to America), he was overcome with emotion. There was a band playing to welcome the soldiers and he broke down crying. When the ship docked, he got down and kissed the ground.

Upon returning to Tennessee, he began getting reacclimated to the world he'd left behind. Going to radio mechanic's school had made Ben realize he was pretty smart and could maybe do better than menial labor. He took advantage of the G.I. Bill and quickly enrolled in classes at the University of Tennessee (UT) in Knoxville. Unfortunately, shortly after starting college, the magnitude of what he'd just experienced came rushing back to him.

Today, we'd call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but for Ben, his mind just wasn't focused, and he quickly withdrew from classes. For the remainder of 1945, in his own words, he accomplished very little. He sent away for plans and built a rowboat (he named it Pete) and spent most of his time whiling away on the Clinch River, close to home. He ran trotlines on the river, which kept his family supplied with catfish and turtles. Days floating on the river helped calm his mind and, eventually, he felt ready to reenter the world.

Ben and Julia

Ben was midway through his first year at UT and living at home when he took a break from the books one night. His baby sister, Joyce, worked with a young lady in the secretarial pool named Julia Burgess. That night, Joyce and her older brother walked to Hoskin's Drugstore, and there sat Julia. Joyce introduced Ben to her friend from work. Unlike Hollywood movies, this wasn't love at first sight. They both said it took about ten minutes. And thus began the story of Ben and Julia.



Ben and Julia in 1946

Emotionally, Julia was in a good place in 1946. She'd survived her childhood and was working and making friends. She was almost 20 years old and in love with 23-year-old Ben Peters. While Ben and Julia were courting, money was tight. An occasional movie or ice cream soda was the highlight of their dates. Ben taught Julia how to flyfish and they would often go to the tailwaters below Norris Dam to fish for rainbow trout in the Clinch River. They went to Norris Lake for picnics and swimming and walked along the shores of the lake and talked of their hopes and dreams. Both wanted college educations and Ben aspired to have his own company someday. He wanted to be his own boss and create things people wanted. Life was good. They were young and in love. It was time to pop the question.

In the fall of 1946, Benjamin Harrison Peters Jr. asked Julia Ann Burgess to be his bride. Financially, they weren't prepared for

marriage, but were in love and ready to take the plunge. He bought his fiancé a platinum engagement ring (on credit) for \$475 (about \$6,500 in 2023). On a chilly March 15, 1947, they exchanged vows at Loveland Baptist Church in Knoxville. Neither of them attended that church, but Julia liked the name Loveland and picked it for that reason. The church is still in operation.

They spent their honeymoon in the Smoky Mountains at the Greystone Hotel. Seven nights lodging and three wonderful meals a day, all for \$77.

Upon returning from their honeymoon, they set up house in an apartment in Clinton, not far from his childhood home. They bought all the necessities (again, on credit) to set up housekeeping and began married life. Julia worked full-time in the secretarial pool and Ben worked part-time while taking a full load of classes at UT. He was motivated to finish school quickly and start his career.

In the spring of 1949, Ben graduated Cum Laude with a double major: Electrical Engineering and Marketing. He took an engineering sales job with Honeywell. The next few years were the happiest of their lives. Ben worked hard to give Julia anything she wanted. By all accounts, Julia seemed happy and well-adjusted. As Ben began moving up the ladder at Honeywell, they decided to look for a house. One day, on a drive with Julia's sister and husband, they came to the relatively new town of Norris.

Norris, Tennessee

Norris was built in 1933 as a model planned community by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to house workers that were building Norris Dam on the Clinch River. The dam was the first major project for TVA and part of the New Deal launched by President Roosevelt. The goal of the dam was to provide flood control for parts of East Tennessee that were routinely ravaged by springtime flooding. The project also brought much needed economic development to a region that was still third world-like in many aspects. The construction of the dam achieved both objectives and, based on the success of it, more dams were planned and built throughout the Tennessee Valley.

TVA chairman Arthur Morgan envisioned the city of Norris as a model of equal living that addressed all the needs of its residents. Every aspect of the town was planned: house designs, schools, town center, common areas, etc. It was truly a unique town. In 1948, Congress decided the town should be sold at public auction. The entire town was sold to a Philadelphia investment group, who in turn, resold individual homes to residents. Many of the people who'd worked on construction of the dam ended up purchasing homes.

In 1949, Julia had a miscarriage due to a tubal pregnancy, and had to get one of her fallopian tubes tied. The pregnancy wasn't planned, and neither she nor Ben were ready for children. With only one fallopian tube left, Julia's chances of getting pregnant again were cut in half, which wouldn't have devastated her. Her experience with raising her younger siblings hadn't endeared her to motherhood, and she'd felt little love from her own parents. At some point, her husband would definitely want children. She'd cross that bridge when she got to it.

One day in 1952, Ben and Julia and her sister Beulah and husband Shelton drove to Norris to check out homes for sale. They found two houses next to each other on West Circle Road and took the plunge. Julia and Ben lived at 47 West Circle and Uncle Shelton and Aunt Boots lived at 51 West Circle. The purchase price for each was \$5,000. Today, those homes are probably worth \$200,000 each.

The next few years were a great time for the young couple. They traveled and enjoyed fishing and camping around East Tennessee. They joined a bowling league and a bridge club. Ben joined the Lions Club, Julia joined the Great Books Discussion group, and they became charter members of Norris' First Baptist Church.

In 1953, Ben was 30 years old, and Julia was 26. They decided they were ready to become parents. Julia wasn't as enthusiastic about the prospect as her husband but wanted to make him happy. Ben grew up in a loving close-knit family and wanted that for himself. With only one fallopian tube, it wasn't a given that Julia could get pregnant, but it didn't take long.

In May of 1953, the town's only doctor, Doc McNeeley, told Julia she was pregnant. And so, parenthood began. Her pregnancy was uneventful, but something happened in November that would be a precursor of things to come. Ben and Julia drove to Texas one weekend to visit her sister. The visit was pleasant, and they started back on Sunday. About halfway home, they were traveling through Arkansas and Julia started shaking uncontrollably. She told Ben to pull over because she was going to die. Understandably petrified, he quickly found a local doctor in the first town he came across.

Visibly worried, Ben sat in the waiting room while the doctor examined his wife. A short time later, Julia emerged, and the doctor said she was fine. Ben was relieved, but in the back of his mind, he thought the whole thing odd and unsettling. Nonetheless, Julia appeared all right, and they resumed their journey home.

It was soon Christmas 1953, and Ben's family was excited about the upcoming baby. It was an exciting time for everyone, and everything seemed promising.

Benjy

On Sunday, January 31, 1954, Benjamin Harrison Peters III (Benjy) arrived. Doc McNeeley delivered a healthy 8-pound boy at St. Mary's Hospital in Knoxville. As was normal in those days, mother and infant son remained in the hospital for a week. Ben was beyond thrilled about becoming a father and brought his wife and new son home the next week. Physically, mother and son were fine; but emotionally, Julia was not.

She quickly began exhibiting signs of postpartum depression. She was listless and showed little interest in the baby. This seemed like it was more than the "Baby Blues." She felt completely inadequate and overwhelmed in caring for a newborn. It was probably a combination of factors that will never be fully understood.

Her history of caring for siblings from a retched childhood was probably a factor, and becoming a mother was possibly the second trigger for something she most likely was born with. Schizophrenia can often be a combination of genetic factors and environmental conditions that converge in early adulthood. I "believe" Julia was born with this gene. The combination of her bad childhood experience, being a pseudo-parent for siblings, and actually becoming a mother triggered this illness. Regardless of the cause, for Benjy, this meant a poor maternal-infant bonding experience. Postpartum depression typically kicks in in the second week after birth, and this coincided with Julia coming home from the hospital.

Ben was excited to be a father and optimistic his new family would be just as happy as the one he'd grown up in. As a sales executive, he was under a lot of pressure. Most days, he left for work early and didn't return till late in the evening. The money was good, but as a salesman his pay was 100% commission based. He was under a lot of pressure to meet quotas.

In Benjy's first three months, Ben was stretched to the limit, but remained optimistic everything would work out. He knew Julia wasn't herself and took her to see Doc McNeeley. During a routine examination, Doc was dismissive about Julia's blues and thought it was temporary. He was confident she'd bounce back. From a pharmacological standpoint, there were few options. Lithium was not available yet, and Thorazine had just come on the market.

Thorazine, touted as a miracle drug, was essentially a babysitter drug. It protected the mentally ill from harming themselves by basically turning them into zombies.

In the first few weeks of Benjy's life, Ben was concerned about his wife's struggles adjusting to parenthood. He talked to his parents about the situation, and like Doc McNeeley, they thought this was only temporary. In his gut, he didn't think so, but hoped things would turn around. Ben had a lot on his plate. He was under pressure at work, had a struggling wife, and an infant son who wasn't getting proper care and nurturing.

The Day Everything Changed

The situation came to a head in early April when Ben was getting ready for the morning commute. He got Benjy up, changed his diaper, and fed him. Julia was unusually listless that morning, but Ben had a busy day ahead and had to get cracking. He asked her, "Are you okay, hon?" She didn't respond. Reluctantly, he got in his car and started for Knoxville.

Driving down the road, he had a bad feeling, and something gnawed at him. He pondered the situation. His wife had radically changed in the last two months. She wasn't interested in anything, and his son was being neglected. That, and the fact that she was unusually lethargic this morning gave him an ominous feeling. When he crossed the Clinton Highway bridge (about 15 minutes away), he got a horrible premonition - that Julia was going to kill Benjy.

Years later, he still didn't know where this foreboding thought came from, but he felt it in his gut. Without hesitating, he whipped his car around and headed home. He had several deliverables that day but couldn't dismiss this feeling. For several minutes, he had a series of mini panic attacks, as horrible images flooded his mind. A few minutes later, he pulled into his driveway and ran in the house. Ben had mentally prepared himself for the unthinkable. Was his infant son dead? Had his wife committed infanticide? What would he do? What could he do? His blood pressure was racing.

Thankfully, the first sound that greeted him was the sound of a crying baby. "Thank God!" He looked in the crib and Benjy was fine. He just needed his diaper changed. Julia was lying on the sofa in the living room. Ben walked over there but didn't see his wife. There was someone that looked like his wife, but in her face, something was different. She was catatonic, blank, expressionless. It was a look that would haunt him for the rest of his life. He tried to get her to talk, but mentally she just wasn't there. The lights were on, but nobody was home. Regardless of what he tried, she was unresponsive.

Their house was next door to Doc McNeeley's office, and Ben ran and got Doc to come over. Julia was still on the sofa. Doc examined her as best he could and told him, "Ben, this might be serious. Julia needs to be seen by a psychiatrist." They got her into the car and Ben took her to Oak Ridge to see a doctor. After examining her, the

psychiatrist went to talk to him. He said, "Mr. Peters, I think your wife has experienced a break from reality - a total nervous breakdown. She needs to be admitted to Eastern State Psychiatric Hospital. This is NOT postpartum depression. This is more serious."

Information was coming at him too fast. What'd happened? Just months ago, everything was great. He'd done the right things. He'd served his country, gone to college, studied hard, fallen in love, and got married. He had a good job and a healthy son. These were supposed to be the wonder years. How had everything derailed so fast and so horribly?

In 1954, the treatment of mental illness was very much an inexact science. There were no real psychotropic answers for mental illness. Some of the best practices, such as they were, were pyrotherapy (artificial fever) and electroconvulsive therapy (shock therapy). Pyrotherapy involved raising the patient's temperature to 105 degrees. This was achieved by exposing the patient to hot baths, warm air, or electric blankets. Pyrotherapy was spotty at best in treating mental illness.

Electroconvulsive therapy involved electrically inducing a seizure to manage refractory mental disorders. This procedure was done under general anesthesia and administered two or three times a week until the patient showed improvement. For people with prolonged catatonia, shock treatment could be effective.

The psychiatrist told Ben that Julia's treatment would not be a quick fix. This was a marathon, not a sprint, and he was going to have to make changes in his life. He was in a high-stress job and there was no way he could adequately care for an infant by himself. He had to find a place for Benjy. His sister Toni lived close by, in Oak Ridge. She was married with two young children. Essentially, Ben loaned Benjy to Toni to raise him temporarily. For the next several months, Ben often stayed at Toni's house and spent evenings with Benjy after a long day at work. Benjy had never bonded with Julia, but he did bond with Aunt Toni over the next eighteen months.

Julia was transferred to Highland Psychiatric Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina in May 1954. Highland was considered the premiere mental health facility in the South at the time. The clinicians administered shock treatment to her repeatedly, but the results were

not great. She met daily with professionals for psychotherapy (talk therapy) but that didn't help much either. The professionals at Highland stayed the course and continued trying to reach this troubled 27-year-old woman.

Shortly after getting to Highland, the doctors tried the newly FDA approved "wonder drug" Thorazine. It was an antipsychotic medication, developed in 1950. Its primary use was for the treatment of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar. It was effective at calming the patient but worked too well. It essentially turned them into the walking dead.

Years later, I vividly remember visiting Mom on Sundays at Eastern State in Knoxville. Seeing the patients was truly like watching *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Everywhere you went, there were patients wandering about with lost, vacant looks in their eyes. It was a terribly sad place.

After examining Julia for several days, the doctor sat down with Ben to give him his assessment. He said, "Mr. Peters, your wife's condition is serious, and I'll be honest with you. In my opinion, you can spend the rest of your life and all the money you'll ever make, but she'll never get any better."

Ben was not satisfied with this assessment and thought the doctor was wrong. At 31 years old, he was optimistic he'd find help for her. He just had to find the right doctor that could reach his wife and bring her back into the world.

Julia was transferred back to Eastern State in Knoxville. It was close to his office and Ben thought she could get the same level of treatment there as in North Carolina. She remained there for seventeen months. There was some improvement, but no real breakthrough. In the fifties, medical insurance plans paid very little for mental health care, and the stays at Highland Psychiatric and Eastern State had depleted the coverage in Ben's healthcare plan. It was time to bring her home and reintroduce her into the world.

At 12 West Circle Road in Norris, Tennessee, Julia Peters was reentering the life she'd left eighteen months earlier. She hadn't improved much but was happy to be home and Ben was ecstatic to have his wife back. Her psychiatrist kept her on Thorazine, which sapped her energy level and left her feeling lethargic. She had to get reacquainted with her, now almost two-year-old, son. For eighteen

months, Benjy had lived with his Aunt Toni. Toni was heartbroken at returning “Tornado Benjy” (her nickname for him) to Julia, but it was time.

It wasn't only Aunt Toni that was heartbroken. Benjy was heartbroken, too. Living with Aunt Toni and Uncle Chuck and his cousins Kathy and Jeff had been a healing experience. He identified himself more as a Schmit than a Peters. Nonetheless, Benjy came home. In the intervening eighteen months, Julia's interest in parenting hadn't really changed. Her mental state wasn't much better than it was when she'd suffered her breakdown. She was home because of economic necessity and Ben hoped things would return to some semblance of normalcy.

To help Julia, Ben hired a housekeeper to come in three days a week. The cost of a housekeeper wasn't in the budget, but he'd have to cut spending in other areas. Life resumed, but Ben knew his wife wasn't doing well. All he could do was remain upbeat and hope for the best. Benjy wasn't getting the care he needed but Ben had to focus on those things he could control. Benjy was growing up in a dysfunctional environment. There was no denying that. Julia struggled with depression for all of 1956. She was NOT getting better.

First Attempt

For most of 1957, Julia struggled with depression and grew increasingly despondent. On November 9, 1957, she attempted suicide. She swallowed several spoonfuls of ant poison (boric acid) and passed out in the kitchen. Ben found her and rushed her to Doc McNeeley's office. Thankfully, the amount she'd taken wasn't lethal, but there was an elephant in the room that had to now be acknowledged.

His wife was sick, and things were not trending in the right direction. He thought of the cautionary words the psychiatrist in North Carolina had said a couple years earlier: "Mr. Peters, you can spend the rest of your life and all the money you'll ever make, but your wife will never get better."

Ben was starting to think this guy might've been right after all. He would lie in bed at night and fantasize about how he could make his problems go away. Since Julia's initial breakdown, he had trouble sleeping, a condition that would plague him for the next two decades. Julia took powerful sedatives at night that conked her out. If Benjy awoke, Ben had the parental duties.

After the ant poison episode, Doc McNeeley referred Julia to a new psychiatrist in Knoxville. In the initial meeting with him, she said she was relieved the suicide attempt had failed. She admitted she was depressed but was remorseful at trying to harm herself. Regardless, she was readmitted to Eastern State for another stay. While she was gone, Ben kept Benjy at home instead of sending him back to his sister's house.

During the day, he'd leave Benjy with various babysitters or housekeepers. Returning at night, exhausted from his responsibilities at Honeywell, Ben would feed and bathe Benjy before tucking him in. By now, Ben was probably struggling with his own depression but didn't have the luxury or time to get help for himself. He had to soldier on.

Because of the sales territory he covered, it wasn't unusual for Ben to commute as far away as Atlanta, only to return the 200+ miles back home the same day. He couldn't find housekeepers who would stay overnight. This was not the life he'd envisioned.

That fall, Benjy started kindergarten. His classmates described him as quiet and sweet. He “seemed” happy. Being bounced between his own home and his Aunt Toni had to have been confusing. I don’t think he ever felt comfortable with his place in the world. Julia still struggled handling life on life’s terms and being a housewife and mother to a four-year-old.

Ben made over \$8,000 annually at Honeywell, equivalent to about \$80,000 in 2023. Regardless, Julia worried incessantly about finances. Maybe because of the poverty she grew up in or maybe because she didn’t like being a housewife. Regardless of the reasons, she was fixated on money. Although she hadn’t worked in years, she pestered Ben about returning to the workplace. Perhaps she felt working would be an escape from the mundane world of parenthood.

In the fall of ’58, the couple got unexpected news. Julia was pregnant again. She couldn’t properly take care of four-year-old Benjy. How in the world could she handle him and a newborn? Ben was excited to have another child but was understandably concerned about how his 31-year-old wife would cope with this. Things remained the same for the next several months, and physically Julia had a normal pregnancy.

On June 10, 1959, Timothy Burgess Peters was born at St. Mary’s Hospital. Life changed a lot with a new baby in the house. Ben and Julia got help from both of their families, and they needed it. The days were pretty well taken care of, but the nights were different. Julia managed to get dinner on the table, but after that, she zonked out. When Ben came home from work, he took over the household duties. He had to give Tim nighttime feedings and put him to bed. He helped Benjy get bathed and ready for bed. He always spent a few minutes playing with the baby and the five-year-old. He finished his duties by nine and was exhausted.

Insomnia continued to plague Ben. Thanks to tranquilizers, Julia was conked out, but sleep would not come to him so easily. After wrestling with sleeplessness, he would eventually nod off, only to quickly wake up and do it again. The days were long, the nights were longer, but that was his cross to bear.

It was the dawn of a new decade and changes were coming to the Peters family. Tim’s birth had surely been an accident, although Ben

had been excited about another child. Around March of 1960, Doc McNeeley had some shocking news for 33-year-old Julia Peters: Once again, she was pregnant – with me.

I was definitely a surprise. At the time, Julia had a six-year-old and a nine-month-old. Mentally, emotionally, and physically she was ill equipped to handle two kids. “How could she possibly handle three?”

Shortly before this development, Ben made a major career decision. After several successful years as a top salesman at Honeywell, he decided to be his own boss. During his time there, he’d scratched the marketing and sales itch, but had never manufactured the products he’d sold so successfully. He wanted to build electronic control panels. These machines were the precursors to the computerized wastewater systems of today. They were huge (think multi-door refrigerators) devices with thousands of wires, resistors, and cables. Each one required thousands of man hours and were unique, customized engineering devices.

Ben rented a building in Clinton and began the process of retrofitting the place to manufacture control panels. He named the business Valley Instrument Company and went to work. He missed the lucrative and steady pay Honeywell provided but had a dream to be an entrepreneur. He never envisioned getting rich but wanted to be his own boss and see if he could make a go of it.

At Valley Instrument, Ben had a handful of employees, and the work was laborious and painstaking. Revenue didn’t come in until a device was delivered and installed at the customer site. As far as building a quality product, the company was a success. Unfortunately, his performance as a business owner was not as successful.

The small details for running a company were not his forte. He neglected the financial aspects of the business. Cash flow, accounts receivable, payroll; none of these things were a priority for him. Undeterred, he put in long hours at his new venture. One benefit of self-employment was that Ben could duck out at a moment’s notice and attend to any issues at home. Unlike his years at Honeywell, he worked most weekends, a necessity for a startup company.

After two boys, Doc McNeeley thought Julia would have a girl. She was excited about that, and she and Ben picked out a name - Barbara. Her estimated due date was around Christmas, 1960, but I showed up almost two weeks late.

On the night of January 9, 1961, I entered the world. After a week's stay at Fort Sanders Presbyterian Hospital, Mom and I joined the boys at West Circle Road. To say Mom was in over her head would be a colossal understatement. The same could be said for Dad.

Mom's condition wasn't good, and Dad was stretched thin, wearing lots of hats at home and work. I don't know how he handled it as well as he did. Through therapy, I have learned that my brothers and I most likely suffered serious neglect in our formative years. That's the reality of having three young sons with a schizophrenic mother and a father under the pressure of running his own company.

To maintain Mom's equilibrium, she was prescribed a new drug, Valium. Affectionately nicknamed "mother's little helper" by the Rolling Stones, it was considered a breakthrough drug for quelling anxiety. She was now taking Thorazine and Valium daily. At night, she took Librium. This cocktail of mood-altering sedatives smoothed the edges of extreme behavior, but essentially made her a zombie. Most of the time she did very little housework and cooked the same meals on a regular basis. She also chain-smoked cigarettes.

Dad worried constantly about the effect and lack of care we received from Mom, and also worried that she might harm us. He hoped and prayed for the best but knew there were problems in his family. Besides working all day, and often cooking dinner, Dad still gave each of us undivided attention every night. Benjy was big into music and drumming, Tim was the brainiac, and I loved playing ball. Somehow, he made time for each of us. He was Superman. Under the category of "every cloud has a silver lining," Dad discovered a cure for his chronic insomnia: physical exhaustion. Fatigue triggered sleep quickly.

Out of Bounds

I started kindergarten in 1964 at age three (yes, that's how we rolled in Norris, Tennessee). The kindergarten teacher for decades in Norris was Agnes Snow. She was a wonderful lady with amazing insight into children. Kindergarten was great fun, and we also learned a lot. Riding tricycles around kindergarten was a blast. Mrs. Snow wrote a letter to parents at the end of each school year, and I still have my letter from 1965 when I was four:

David is in the "out of bounds" stage of development. Almost daily he does something that necessitates correction. He finds it heartbreaking to be corrected, even when I just talk to him in a calm, controlled manner. However, he gets over these upsets quickly.

He has a great sense of humor, and his eyes just dance when he is happy and laughing. He initiates most of the boy's activities. He has enjoyed his association with the other children and his good behavior far outweighs his unacceptable.

Julia, I loved having Benjy and Tim in Kindergarten, but I must say, I do have a soft spot for your youngest. When I have to correct him for acting up, he looks at me with those eyes and I usually give him a pass. I suspect he gives you and Ben the same look and it probably works at home as well.

I looked at his knees recently and didn't see any scars from the impetigo [which I'd had the previous year]. Thank goodness for that, especially considering how bad it was in the fall. I am so looking forward to having David for the full day next year.

Happy summer days to all of the Peters family.

Agnes Snow



1965 family portrait - I'm on Pop's lap

The crazy thing is, today, I'm STILL in that "out of bounds" stage of development. Agnes Snow nailed it in 1965 and it still applies. If it's constructive criticism, I'm fine. If it's destructive criticism, I go to pieces. Still not sure what that stems from, but that scar has never healed.

In the midst of everything going on, Dad decided to embark on a major remodeling project. When my parents bought our house, it was two levels, but the second floor was just one big room. Dad hired a local contractor, Donald Dew, to convert the upstairs into three bedrooms and a bathroom.

Mr. Dew went to First Baptist Church with his family, and that's how Dad knew him. My parents were active there, and we went to church almost every time the doors opened - Sunday mornings, Sunday nights, and occasionally Wednesday evenings. Both my parents had strong faiths and were actively involved in church. Dad served as church treasurer, deacon, and taught Sunday School. He mentored a lot of kids that grew up in First Baptist. It amazed me how much he accomplished and was exceptional at most things he took on. Quite a guy.

During Sunday morning services, young children went to the nursery. That's where I met Mr. Dew's oldest son, Jeff (aka Dewboy). He and I met at age four, hit it off immediately and became best friends. Today, outside of my family, he's my best friend in the world.

After the remodeling was done, Benjy, Tim, and I each had our own bedrooms. As was typical of the style at that time, the upstairs had linoleum floors and plywood paneling. There was no air conditioning upstairs.

That summer, I was worried about transitioning from kindergarten to first grade. I was certain I would never learn how to read. As a child, I would watch people read and wonder how in the world they did that. To help that summer, Mom got me a subscription to *My Weekly Reader*, a magazine with short stories geared towards kids. When a new issue arrived, she spent time with me and would read it to me several times. Although she could often be impatient, when it came to this important job, she was exceptionally composed and spent many hours going over stories with me. I DID learn how to read that summer, and by the middle of first grade was one of the better readers in class.

In September, I started first grade at Norris Elementary. My teacher was Mrs. Rosenbaum and there were about thirty kids in my class. Like most kids in town, my brothers and I walked to school or rode bikes. The world of small town 1967 was radically different from today. I loved school and made several new friends. I enjoyed the delicious cafeteria food (lunch was thirty-five cents, and most food was made from scratch), and loved my new favorite sport, kickball. Ricky Ray Miller and I were the undisputed kickball kings of first grade.

That Halloween I went trick or treating for the first time. Dad bought me a Superman costume, complete with the cheap plastic mask secured by that tiny rubber band. He took me to five houses in the neighborhood. He wanted me to go up to each door and knock by myself, but I was having no part of that. At each house, Dad would physically place me on the front doorstep and then hurry to the side of the house, away from view. Invariably, when he vanished, I turned to stone. No matter how much he whispered to me to knock, I wasn't doing it. I was a shy six-year-old and would just stand there until he reluctantly joined me on the porch. Alas, the best laid plans of mice and men.

At school, things were going well, but at home, Mom was spiraling downward. She had barely been treading water the last couple of years and was slowly losing the battle to stay afloat. Besides being on Thorazine and Valium (and Librium at night), her psychiatrist prescribed her a new anti-anxiety medicine, Haldol. The combination of these meds made Mom catatonic-like at times. She slept a lot, was inattentive when awake, and existed in a continuous state of lethargy. Our housekeepers (there was a revolving door of different ones as Mom could be quite demanding) maintained a clean house and kept the household intact during the day.

After school, I was busy playing at friend's houses. I was active in all sports, rode bikes, and generally enjoyed life. But home was a different proposition. Being quiet at home became an essential life skill, especially on Mom's bad days. No one wanted to upset her. At times, she could be a powder keg. For my brothers and I, staying away from Mom during these times became instinctive.

Benjy, Tim, and I moved into our new bedrooms after the remodel was finished. Dad splurged and bought new furniture for each of us and included something uncommon for the mid-sixties. We each got 13" TVs. We were living the dream (at least on the surface).

Fire

It was a normal weekday in mid-October 1967. My brothers and I got up and dressed for school. Mom made us a typical breakfast, probably scrambled eggs, sausage, toast, and Tang (because the astronauts drank Tang). After breakfast, we grabbed our books and headed to school. After heading out, at least on typical days, Mom cleared the table, straightened up, and took a nap; she was always drowsy because of the medicines she took daily.

But this day, she altered her normal routine. This time, she took additional sedatives, which would completely knock her out. After taking them, she went upstairs and set the house on fire. She then went downstairs to lie down and sleep. In hindsight, it probably wasn't the smartest suicide attempt, but she was schizophrenic. Her thinking was not always logical.

The big problem with her plan was that our house was practically across the street from the fire department and town center. It was mid-morning and people were out and about. It wasn't long before someone saw smoke billowing from the upstairs windows. Within minutes, the fire engine arrived. They found Mom passed out downstairs and safely rescued her. The firemen extinguished the fire, but not before our newly remodeled upstairs was destroyed.

Dad was notified and left work to put out this latest fire (pun intended). With the help of Doc McNeeley and Mom's psychiatrist, Dad got her readmitted to Eastern State.

His wife had just attempted suicide for the second time. His home was badly damaged, and now he had to find living arrangements. How had things gotten off track so badly? I'm sure he asked often, "Why God? What did I do to deserve this?" Even though he had a strong faith, his beliefs were surely put to the test. I think he probably lost his faith in God, at least for a while. If I had to endure what he did, I would have too.

After getting Mom checked in at Eastern State, he hurried back to Norris and picked us up from school. Normally we walked home, but on this day, the principal told us Dad was getting us. I didn't give it a second thought. Around 3:30, Dad pulled up and Benjy got in the front seat and Tim and I climbed in back. Benjy asked, "Why'd you pick us up?"

“There was a fire at home this morning.”

I blurted out, “That’s funny, Dad.”

I really thought he was teasing. He didn’t say a thing. The drive home was only a couple of minutes. When we got within eyesight of home, I saw the smoke stains on the bricks upstairs. He wasn’t joking. As we pulled into the driveway, Dad cautioned us to be careful going upstairs. Most everything downstairs had water damage but was basically the same. Going upstairs, my lungs inhaled the acrid smell of burnt wiring. I wasn’t prepared for the devastation.

When I left for school that morning, I had a brand-new bedroom with my very own TV. About eight hours later, I was essentially homeless. So were Benjy and Tim. I didn’t care about the burned-up dresser, the bed, my clothes, books, and toys. The only thing I really noticed was my prized possession, my TV. It was ruined. I cried like any child would do in the same situation. Eventually, I went downstairs, and Dad was waiting for us. I hadn’t even thought about Mom, but Tim broke the ice. Dad looked shaken, like a man that’s been fighting battles a long time and was resigned to the realization that he was losing.

“What caused the fire and where’s Mom?” Tim asked. Dad replied, “An electrical fire started upstairs this morning, probably related to the new wiring. Mom hasn’t been doing well and was really distraught, so she’s back at Eastern State. She’s been depressed lately and was very shaky this morning. She realized she needed help, so she’s gonna be there awhile.” I began quietly weeping.

Because of the fire, our house was now uninhabitable. My brothers and I only had the clothes on our back. Dad took us to JC Penney that afternoon and bought us new clothes.

For the next few nights, Dad parsed us out to friend’s homes till he was able to find temporary living arrangements. My world was spinning out of control, but it paled in comparison to the challenges Dad must’ve faced. He rented a house at 82 Pine Road, about a half mile from our fire-damaged home. Once again, Dad hired Mr. Dew to rebuild the upstairs at our house on West Circle Road. Many years later, I learned from Dad that the cause of the fire wasn’t electrical. Mom, of course, had started the fire in another suicide attempt.

My Family is Different

This wasn't the first time Mom had been hospitalized for an extended stay. Unlike my best friends - Dewboy, Ricky Morgan, Bill Henry, and Jimmy Moore, my mom was often absent for months at a time. Their moms were always home. However, when they came to my house, Mom was often gone. I worried what my friends thought about that, and if they wondered why she wasn't home sometimes. I knew something was different in my family but didn't exactly know what or why.

Even in first grade, peer pressure was a huge factor, and since I knew the dynamics in my family were atypical, I tried to pretend my life was normal. Outwardly, I pretended our family was the same as everybody else's, but inwardly, I knew we were *not* the same. At times, I was harshly reminded of the differences.

Occasionally, I would ask a kid to come over to play. One day, I asked Darrel Scott to come over after school. His response surprised me.

"Sorry David, I can't come to your house."

I immediately asked, "Why not?"

"My parents said something was wrong with your mom." Ouch, that left a mark. Nothing like brutal honesty from an unfiltered child. "My mom has an illness, but she would never harm you."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I'd love to come over, but I can't."

Sadly, this wasn't the only time this happened. Every time it occurred, it was a jolt of electricity to my senses. As much as I wanted to think we were like the Cleavers, we weren't.

Mom came home from Eastern State around Thanksgiving. Christmas 1967 was entirely handled by Dad. He bought the tree, did the decorating, and handled all the Santa Claus duties. One of the things I asked Santa for was a Bonanza 4-in-1 wagon, a toy from the hit TV series. The jolly old elf didn't let me down. I got that and several other things. Tim got an Exacto knife, a woodcarving set, and a chemistry set. Benjy got a very expensive Ludwig drum set. The set cost \$500, which would be over \$4,000 today. Dad must've had a

successful year at Valley Instrument because he spent an awful lot that Christmas.

Mom was in good spirits on Christmas morning. Dad got her several nice things and she still had one gift under the tree. He said, "Hon, you have one more present." Mom opened the package and inside was a toy Ford Thunderbird. For as long as I could recall, that was her fantasy car. She would often jokingly ask Dad, "Ben, when are you getting me that Thunderbird?" To which he would laugh and say, "It'll never happen." It became a running gag. Anyway, Mom pulled out the toy Thunderbird, laughed and said, "Very funny, Ben. Ha, ha."

Dad said, "Look at it closely."

Mom picked up the car and turned it over. On the bottom was a note that said, "Give this to David. Your gift is outside!" Mom set a world record for getting up and out the front door. Parked in the driveway was a 1966 blue Thunderbird. I don't remember ever seeing her that excited. She insisted we all get dressed and take a ceremonial spin around town. It was a happy day.

In January, I turned seven and Mom let me have a slumber party for my birthday. This became a tradition for several years. That first year, I invited Dewboy, Bill Henry, Ricky Morgan, and Dennis Hess. We came home after school and played football outside until suppertime. For my birthday supper, Mom always made my favorite meal: fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and biscuits. For dessert, she made me a chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. After supper, we'd retreat to the living room and play tackle football on our knees.

By now, Mom had taken her tranquilizers and conked out. Dad would return to the office to work a couple more hours, so we pretty much had the house to ourselves. After hours of playing football, we'd watch the Friday night creature feature on television, a great segue for lights out and ghost stories. We'd get in sleeping bags on the living room floor and tell scary stories. In the morning, after getting virtually no sleep, Mom made us a big breakfast and afterwards, the guys would head home. To this day, Dewboy and I still talk about those sleepovers. They were really fun.

Summer of '68

The summer after first grade, I started Little League baseball. Little League was an institution in Norris. Games were played biweekly from late May till the end of July. My brother Tim and I both played for Norris Creamery, sponsored by the local dairy. Our coach was Chuck Strong, and he worked at Norris Creamery. He was a great guy, and all the boys loved him. I was pretty good, Tim was not. In Norris, there weren't age classifications, so a six-year-old could be facing a twelve-year-old pitcher. During my first year, I played quite a bit, but didn't start. Creamery had a veteran lineup, and several guys were in their last season. One of those veterans was our catcher, Steve Weaver. Tim lobbied all season to be Steve's successor the following year, but he just wasn't any good. I, on the other hand, wasn't remotely interested in being the new catcher.

In an ironic way, Coach Strong was inadvertently responsible for my future success in baseball. After our final game that first season (Tim's second), he came up to me, put his arm around me and said, "David, next season, you're going to be my catcher." I don't know if coach was confused, or if he really meant for me to be the new catcher. Regardless, I was dumbfounded, and Tim was heartbroken. Growing up, Tim and I bickered constantly, and that night was no exception. On the walk home, Tim was crying, and I was laughing, saying, "Isn't that crazy? You bugged coach to be the new catcher all season and I wasn't interested at all, yet he's giving me the job." Nothing like brotherly love.

One last incident about my first season of Little League. Dewboy was on my team, and he was pretty uncoordinated when he was young. In terms of improvement from where he started to where he ended up, he'd get the gold medal. But at age six, he was a work-in-progress. During a key game late in the season against Pyatt's (a local grocery store), coach needed a pinch hitter. He called on Dewboy to bat. This was his first (and only) plate appearance all season. Coach was crystal clear with him. "Dewboy, try and get a walk. Don't swing at anything. Just stand at the plate and do nothing." Dewboy took him at his word. He didn't move a muscle. He stood in the batter's box like a statue - a petrified six-year-old facing Brian Fuis, the

hardest throwing pitcher in the league. Brian could throw smoke. This was David versus Goliath stuff.

Dewboy stood there like a statue and watched the first fastball fly by. Strike one. Second verse, same as the first. Another fastball, another strike. The count was 0-2 and it looked like Dewboy's debut would be short-lived. All the time, he hadn't moved a muscle. The third pitch was another fastball, but it missed the strike zone - barely. Brian threw the fourth pitch (another fastball) and it was wild and inside. It came close to hitting Dewboy and might've killed him if it'd hit him, but he still hadn't moved an inch. Apparently, pitching to a statue was unnerving Brian. Another fastball and another wild pitch.

What was going on here? Brian's coach called a timeout and went to the mound to calm him down. Even during the timeout, Dewboy remained frozen in place. It was hilarious. He was literally a statue. It was now full count, 3-2, and here comes the sixth pitch. Another errant fastball. Against all odds, Dewboy faced the best pitcher in the league and ended up on base. We still talk (and laugh) about that today.

It was great growing up in a small town in the late sixties. I was seven and rode all over Norris on my bike. You could ride anywhere in town and be perfectly safe. It was truly another place and time. It seemed like every kid in America had a 20" bike with high handlebars and banana seat.

That summer I discovered the town's recreation program. This program, sponsored by the town, provided activities all day long during the week (and occasional nights too). One activity I loved was archery in the Commons. This was a large open field (right behind my house) with several towering white pines in it and was a communal space for Norris.

The concept of the Commons was based on the English garden's movement of the 18th century and is what would now be called a park or greenway. Besides archery, other recreation activities included roller skating and dodgeball in the Community Building, tennis, softball, kickball, Wiffle ball, arts and crafts, a little bit of everything. On Wednesdays, we rode a bus to the municipal pool in Clinton for the afternoon. On Fridays, we took field trips to various places in East Tennessee - Big Ridge State Park in Union County, Lake

Winnepesaukee in Chattanooga, and Chilhowee Park in Knoxville. One Friday night, we went to the Clarence Brown Theater at UT to see the play, *1776*. The recreation program was a real treasure for Norris.

Little league ended in late July, and I had to have surgery a couple of weeks later. I had a birthmark in front of my right ear. In first grade, I went for a physical at Doc McNeeley's, and he thought the birthmark had changed colors. Concerned that it might be cancerous, he thought it needed to be surgically removed. I had one nonnegotiable condition regarding surgery - Mom *had* to stay with me while I was hospitalized. I had separation anxiety and refused to stay without her. I was hospitalized for a few days at Fort Sanders Hospital. After surgery I looked awful, with my head wrapped in bandages. Mom never left my side.

I just went to pieces if I was ever separated from either parent. Perhaps Mom's frequent hospitalizations gave me separation anxiety. On two different occasions in my childhood, I got separated from a parent in public. Both times, I became completely unhinged, albeit temporarily. It didn't take but a second to descend into full-blown panic mode.

One Sunday, after visiting Mom at Eastern State, we stopped at Kmart on the way home. I was looking at Hot Wheels cars in the toy section, and I turned around and Dad was gone. I panicked and started crying uncontrollably. In my eight-year-old mind, I thought he was gone forever. A lady saw me crying and asked what was wrong. I told her and she took me to the front of the store. She told an employee I was separated from my dad, and he got on the PA system and said, "Mr. Peters, your son is at the front desk."

It was probably only a minute, but it seemed like the longest minute of my life. I honestly thought he was gone forever. When I saw him, I ran up and hugged him and would *not* let go. He said, "Hon, why were you so worried? Did you think I would leave without you?" He could tell by my emotions and reaction that, in fact, I *did* think he'd left without me.

The second time was when I was eleven. Mom and I went to a Knoxville Symphony concert. At intermission, we got up to use the bathroom. She waited outside the men's restroom for me, and then I

waited while she went. Just like with Dad at Kmart, it wasn't a minute before I thought Mom was gone forever. I don't know why I panicked like that, but it happened almost immediately, and it was real and terrifying. I started crying, and once again, a lady saw me and asked what was wrong. I explained to her that I was worried about my Mom, so she said she'd go in the restroom and find her. Once again, it seemed like an eternity, but in just a minute, Mom and the lady came out. Once I saw Mom, all was right in my world. Getting separated petrified me, even if only for a second.

No doubt having Mom frequently away at the hospital and Dad working all the time made me unsure of the stability in my life. Regardless, I was clingy to my parents, especially Mom.

By the winter of '69, I was old enough to run errands for Mom. She would send me down to the store (a five-minute walk) to get milk, eggs, or a carton of Winston cigarettes. I didn't need money because all I had to say was "charge it" and Mrs. Jones would write it down in her book. Nothing was computerized in those days. Again, a different place and time.

There were no plastic containers for milk either. The largest container sold was a wax cardboard half-gallon. One day Mom sent me to get two half-gallons of milk and Mrs. Jones put them in a flimsy bag. On the walk home, the bag split open, and one container burst on the sidewalk. I started crying because I just knew Mom would blame me and give me a whipping. Embarrassed and scared, I picked up the surviving carton and hurried home.

When Mom saw me crying, she asked what had happened. When I explained to her and showed her the bag, she got pissed - not at me, but at George Archer, the store owner. She called the store and chewed him out good, and then sent me back for another half-gallon. George was waiting for me and apologized profusely, but I wasn't angry. I just told him Mom was pretty upset. He gave me the look that said, "Yes, I know the wrath of Julia Peters."

At home, emotionally, Mom was struggling again. She hadn't been hospitalized recently but wasn't functioning well at all. She cooked meals but did very little else. Housekeepers kept the place

clean and did the laundry. Mom did the grocery shopping at Archer's Food Center, and on her way to the market, would occasionally join towns folks at the drug store for coffee. There was a table in the back, next to where prescriptions were filled. This was the hangout where adults congregated in the mornings and talked about world events and caught up on gossip. Coffee was 10 cents a cup and refills were a nickel, a bit less than a Macchiato at Starbucks today. Virtually everyone smoked, so the back of the store was always a haze of smog.

Outside our troubled home, I was all about riding my bike, little league, the recreation program, just hanging out with friends and having a good time. This was my third season of Little League, and I was now one of the better players on the team. Tim quit baseball before the season started. He'd played three seasons and failed to get a single hit. Baseball was not his bag.

Fourth of July

For the Fourth of July in 1969, our town started a Founders Day, which was aptly named Norris Day. The Fourth of July for a boy was one of the most exciting times of the year. Why? One word: FIREWORKS!! For boys, fireworks were figuratively and literally, the bomb. Fireworks were illegal in the county, but local laws were never enforced. The closest place to buy them was Roy's Fireworks, located about fifteen miles outside of town. Roy had the good stuff: firecrackers, ladyfingers, whistling Jupiter's, smoke bombs, Roman candles, bottle rockets, skyrockets, etc. He also had the illegal stuff, but it wasn't out on display. You had to specifically ask for M80's, Silver Salutes, and Cherry Bombs.

Supposedly, these devices were equivalent to a quarter stick of dynamite (this is not actually true, of course; they only contain 80 grains of flash powder, about 5 grams). Regardless, they could easily blow a finger off! These were sold by the half gross (\$7) or gross (\$14). When we were little, Dad wouldn't let Tim or I buy those, but everything else was okay. A pack of firecrackers was only a dime, so five bucks would net you quite a haul.

That Friday, July 4th, started out sunny and warm. Before heading out for the day's events, Dad gave us money for the barbecued chicken dinner. These were cooked by the Lions Club on large grills in front of the high school, and they started serving around three. The first event of the day was a bike race around Deer Ridge Road. There were two divisions, eight and under and nine and up. In the eight and under, only three people entered: Ricky and Russ Morgan, and me. The race began and I took off like a rocket. About halfway through the race, I turned around and couldn't see either Ricky or Russ.

I won the race by a landslide. For first prize, I got a bike speedometer. After about five minutes, I still hadn't seen Ricky or Russ, so I began backtracking the course to see where they were. When I got over the first hill, I discovered the problem. Ricky had crashed, and Russ was looking petrified, afraid to come down the same hill his brother had wiped out on. Ricky's chin was cut badly. There was blood everywhere. A neighbor saw Ricky's wreck and called Doc McNeeley's house. There are no days off for the town's

only doctor. We got Ricky to Doc's office, and he got nine stitches in his chin. Afterwards, my buddies and I met in front of the high school and enjoyed the festivities of this new town holiday.

There were dunking booths, homemade ice cream and concession stands, potato sack races, tug of war, all kinds of fun. If there was a lull in activities, we'd sneak down to the elementary school and shoot off fireworks. All day long we smelled the chicken cooking on the grills, and by late afternoon we were ravenous. We ate our chicken dinners on the grass in the commons, just sitting around with our buddies. After dinner, the high school band held a concert, and the town honored an exemplary citizen. The honoree for the first Norris Day was an easy choice: Doc McNeeley. After Doc was recognized and gave his speech, everyone hurried behind the high school to the baseball field. This was where the Optimist Club fireworks show was held, and it was fantastic. The finale was around ten o'clock and most people headed home afterwards.

Everyone except the teenagers. In this first year, there was a rock and roll concert on the tennis court at ten thirty. The group that performed was called Revolution and they had a drummer named Benjy Peters. Yes, my brother was a rock star. Like countless other kids impacted by the British Invasion, my brother and a couple of buddies had formed a band. The group consisted of Cary Grieve on lead vocals, with Dwight Percy, Leslie Sellers, and Joe Krewson on guitar. Revolution mainly did cover songs of Cream, the Stones, the Beatles and The Who. I remember a girl Tim's age coming up and asking if I could get her into the concert. I told her, "Why would you want to see them? They suck."

Nothing but love for my oldest brother. Nothing but.

One Small Step for Man, One Giant Leap for Mankind

Little League ended on July 10, and the next day, we embarked on the 1969 Peters family vacation. This trip forced all of us to shed any illusions about Mom's prospects. When we usually went on vacation, it was Florida, but this year was the big Kahuna, the entire Eastern Seaboard. I don't know what Dad was thinking, taking a mentally ill wife and two young boys on a long vacation. Benjy was fifteen and got to stay home alone. The trip was supposed to last three weeks. Up through Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan, and finally into Canada. Every night, we'd stop at a Holiday Inn, and it had to have a pool. As soon as we got checked in, Tim and I would change into swim trunks and hit the water. Mom would sit by the pool and smoke while we swam. Occasionally, she would get in the water with us, but Dad never did. One night in Canada, the temperature was in the fifties, but that didn't deter us. We still swam, just like it was the mid-eighties.

After a couple of days in Canada, we came back through Michigan, across Ohio and into Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia, we visited the U.S. Mint and the Liberty Bell, which wasn't nearly as big as I'd imagined. From there, we went into New York City, which was an eye opener for a kid from a town without a traffic light. I couldn't believe how tall the skyscrapers were, and I'll never forget seeing clotheslines strung several stories up between tenement buildings. In upstate New York, we went to Niagara Falls. A couple of things I remember about that. Like the Liberty Bell, the falls weren't nearly as big as I'd imagined. Secondly, I saw a group of nuns and the only nun I'd ever seen was on television in *The Flying Nun*.

Continuing northward, we went into Vermont and admired the gorgeous maple trees. Of course, we had breakfast one morning with real maple syrup. Our final northern destination was Maine. We feasted on fresh lobster, which was awesome. What wasn't so awesome was Mom's condition. After nine days in a car with two boys bickering in the back seat, she'd had enough.

It all came to a head on July 20, 1969, a famous day in history. Mom was in a foul mood, and it'd been a long day. It was Sunday, and after traipsing around all over Maine, we could not find a hotel anywhere. Two or three Holiday Inns had no vacancies, and around nine, Dad finally found a room at an independent hotel. Tim and I knew Mom

was irritated, and as we'd been conditioned to do so many times before, we tried to be invisible.

I don't remember the exact tipping point for Mom, but shortly after getting settled in our room, she lost it. She threw a tantrum, the likes of which I'd never seen from her or any adult. After a while, she went to take a bath. We were a thousand miles from home with a completely unhinged mother, and we were scared. Dad went into the bathroom to try and calm her down, but this didn't work. We heard her shouting and knew an altercation was taking place. A few minutes later, a very shaky and wet Dad emerged from the bathroom. Mom must've splashed water all over him and he'd been hit in the eye with something (I think a bar of soap). His eye was swollen, but that wasn't as surprising as the look on his face.

My father was scared - scratch that: petrified. I'd never seen that look before. At that moment, I think he realized the vacation had been a mistake. He was stuck in a motel in Maine with two frightened boys and a wife who was on the verge of yet another nervous breakdown. I can't imagine the thoughts that must've been going through his mind.

What happened next was unusual. Dad bribed us, which he never did. With Mom still in the bathroom, he sat on our bed and said, "Boys, Mom is upset and I'm afraid she might do something bad. Please, please behave tonight and for the rest of the trip. If you do that, I'll buy you each a football when we get home."

I was scared and confused and didn't know how to handle the situation. I wept quietly, and Tim turned on the TV. We watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. I wept as he stepped out of the lunar module. Seeing my sadness, Tim put his arm around me as I continued silently sobbing. As Armstrong said those immortal words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," I kept weeping.

Nothing made sense in my family. Why had God let Mom become schizophrenic, and why were we suffering so much for it? What had we done to deserve this? Did God hate our family? As I'd learned before and would learn again and again, life just isn't fair. You play the cards you're dealt. As the group LeRoux sang in the eighties, *Nobody Said It Was Easy*.

Mom emerged from the bathroom, took a sedative, and conked out. The bribe worked. We were quiet as a mouse the rest of the night.

Thankfully, she slept well and seemed okay the next morning. Since we were already there, Dad decided to continue doing some vacation things on the way home, although the trip was abbreviated. Heading southwards, we spent a day in Boston at the Franklin Park Zoo. We traveled through New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington DC. In DC, we visited the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. After seventeen days, and approximately three thousand miles, we rolled back home to Norris, Tennessee.

Back to Reality

I had a couple of weeks left of summer vacation and one week would be spent in the hospital. I had an ugly scar from last summer's surgery and Mom wasn't pleased with it. She scheduled me for plastic surgery (a relatively new procedure) to make the scar look better. Like last year, I had one nonnegotiable. Mom had to stay with me in the hospital. The vacation had been taxing on Mom and her overall mental condition was not good. Regardless, I was her baby, and she *did* stay with me. The surgery was successful, and the scar was minimal compared to the original. On the day before being discharged, Mom went for a coffee break. Dad was visiting and sat down to talk to me.

"David, you're coming home tomorrow, but Mom isn't. She's going back to Eastern State. I think she had another breakdown when we were on vacation, and, emotionally, she's not in a good place. I'm sorry hon, but this is for the best." I began to cry. "Why Dad, why? This isn't fair. Mom can't help that she has problems. Why are you punishing her? Why are you punishing me?"

"David, you're 100% correct. It's not fair. It's not fair that Mom has schizophrenia. However, the reality is, she needs help. As I've told you before, there's no cure for her illness and she's never going to be like your friends' mothers. It breaks my heart, and you're right, it's not fair, but unfortunately that's your cross to bear. I don't know how long she'll be gone, but we'll leave that to the doctors to decide."

A short time later, Mom returned and could tell I'd been crying, and instinctively knew why. She said, "Don't worry, honey. I won't be gone long, and when I come home, I'll be all better." This wasn't my first rodeo. I'd been schooled before by Dad about this speech and knew the reality of her disease. Whenever she would return from Eastern State, Dad would sit us down and give us the same spiel. "Your Mom's coming home soon, and she's likely to tell you she's cured. If she does, you should go along with that and act happy about it. But make no mistake. She'll never be cured because there is no cure for schizophrenia. At some point, she's likely to hurt your feelings or upset you. It's okay to be mad but try to be mad at the disease, not her. Her illness is not her fault. Remember that." That's asking a helluva lot from an eight-year-old.

To placate my dismay at returning home without Mom, Dad bought me a new bike. It was a sweet ride, 20-inch, high handlebars with banana seat, five speeds and handbrakes. But of course, it wasn't enough. A bike is a poor substitute for a mother.

In the fall in the South, people's minds turn to football. Dad was a UT alumnus, and we were Big Orange fans, and went to many UT Vols games. As much as Dad had on his plate, he still took time out of his evenings to practice sports with Tim and me. During football season, Dad got interested in a new contest sponsored by Ford Motor Company. It was Punt, Pass and Kick and local competitions were being held across the country. Dad entered Tim and I in the county competition, which was held in late September. I did great. I not only won my age division, but my score was better than all the nine-year-olds and all the ten-year-olds.

By Halloween, Mom was finally home from the hospital. She and Dad came to a Clinton High School football game one Friday night to see me get my first-place trophy. Mom was always proud of our accomplishments. I still have that trophy.

In the fall, my buddies and I had epic tackle football games in front of the high school. At least two or three times a week, we'd play for a couple hours after school. For the next decade, until we left for college, we played every fall.

As Christmas 1969 approached, Mom was doing okay, and was actually looking forward to the holidays. Despite the dysfunctionality in our family, for the most part, my Christmas memories are good ones. Once again, Dad did the heavy lifting for the holiday season. The poor guy never had a moment's rest. The official kickoff for the holidays was the arrival of the Sears Wishbook in the fall. It was always a fight to see who got ahold of it first, and we'd stare at the toy section like it was the apex of heavenly delights. For kids, the toy section of the Wishbook was the closest thing we could imagine to heaven.

Dad had us make a list that he'd give to Santa Claus (which was actually Sears on Central Avenue in Knoxville). Dad cautioned us not to ask for too many things, as Santa had lots of children to get toys for. We asked for one big thing and some smaller items. Dad used

great psychology for Christmas, so we never expected too much, and invariably, got twice as much as we asked for.

My earliest Christmas memory happened when I was four. On Christmas Eve 1965, my brothers and I slept in the same bed. We were in Benjy's room. Benjy was eleven and hip to the Santa Claus thing and Dad cooked up something really neat. Shortly after Tim and I fell asleep, Benjy snuck out of bed and told Dad it was time. Dad said, "Give me ten minutes". Right on cue, Benjy woke us from our slumber and said, "Hey guys, I think Santa's on the roof. Listen and see if you hear him." Dad had tied empty soup cans to some fishing line. He then tossed them up on the roof. When Tim and I heard the clinking sound of those cans, we were convinced Santa Claus was literally on top of our house at that very second. I was SO EXCITED I practically wet myself. I'll never forget that.

For Christmas 1969, I was all about Hot Wheels. The big gift I asked for was the Hot Wheels 4-in-1 Supercharger, and if Santa didn't have that, I wanted the Hot Wheels Snake-Mongoose set. I was brought up with the notion that if you weren't a good boy, Santa would bring a bag of switches instead of toys. I don't know about my brothers, but I totally believed that. I worried about getting switches right up to the moment we got downstairs and saw the massive pile of toys in the living room. I got both Hot Wheels sets that year. Santa came through once again.

January 1970: a new decade. What would the decade mean for our family? What would happen to me in the seventies? Only time would tell. On January 9, I had my birthday sleepover. Mom was great that night, but in the weeks afterwards, started spiraling down once again. She was increasingly short-tempered and very depressed. When she got like this, my brothers and I would vanish into our own little worlds. The main thing was not to upset her.

Third Attempt

On a Friday afternoon, in February 1970, I asked my buddy, Jimmy Moore, if he could spend the night. We walked home after school, and upon entering my house, the smell of vomit was overwhelming. I told Jimmy to stay in the living room and I went into the kitchen for signs of Mom but she wasn't there. Down the hall, I noticed the open bathroom door. Upon entering, I was overcome by the smell of vomit. There was puke on the floor and various pills scattered amongst the mess. By now, I was freaking out and cautiously crept into my parents' room.

What would I find? Was Mom dead? The thought DID cross my mind. There she was, passed out in bed. I gently shook her, and she sluggishly came to. She was groggy and listless, and I asked, "Mom, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, just leave me alone." I knew she wasn't, but hoped for the best and asked if Jimmy could spend the night. Her response was succinct. "No, dammit. Leave me alone."

I knew something was really wrong. The vomit, the pills, her demeanor, all told me to get help ASAP. I went into the kitchen and called Dad at work. I told him everything I'd witnessed, and he said, "Don't worry, hon. Mom will be okay. Just go to Jimmy's house and stay there. Don't worry."

After I got off the phone, Jimmy and I walked to his house. I walked with a heavy heart, knowing something bad had happened. Was Mom going to die? What would happen to me if she did? Why had she done this? Why was she sick? These questions entered my head frequently over the next few years. It was quite a burden for a nine-year-old.

Dad raced home and found her. She had swallowed over one hundred Valium and sixty Haldol pills. He called an ambulance, and she was rushed to Oak Ridge Hospital. On the way, she threw up a couple more times, which probably saved her life. When they pumped her stomach, most of the pills had already come up. She was stabilized and her psychiatrist was paged to come to the hospital. Dad had no choice but to send her back to Eastern State. It had become a revolving door for Mom.

Home for a few months, Eastern State for a few months. It was chaotic for all of us. In a never-ending quest to find a pharmacological answer, upon discharge, Mom was prescribed two more medications – Mellaril and Navane. Both were antipsychotic medications used for the treatment of schizophrenia. Her previous prognosis when she was discharged from Eastern State was “guarded.” This latest prognosis was downgraded to “poor.” At this point, I think Dad realized there probably wasn’t going to be a happy ending to this story. He had spent sixteen years and a small fortune, but she’d never really improved. The years had taken a heavy toll on him, both emotionally and financially.

The beautiful girl he’d met at Hoskins Drug Store after the war had been sick for a long time. Sadly, by now, Dad had fallen out of love with Mom. He empathized with her illness, but no longer had romantic feelings for her. I learned this from the Eastern State hospital records. Reading it made me cry all over again. In one of the admitting interviews, he said he didn’t love her anymore. Even today, it saddens me to write that, but it is what it is. Living with schizophrenia comes at a steep emotional cost.

Jean

With Mom back at Eastern State, Dad made changes in our living arrangements. He had demands at his company and had to work night and day to meet customer commitments. He found us a place to stay at the Neumanns. Paul and Jean Neumann lived at 19 East Norris Road, about a half mile from our home. The connection between our family and the Neumanns was that their youngest son, Mark, was good friends with Benjy. The Neumanns were empty nesters except for Mark, so they had space for three boys.

Shortly after Mom was readmitted to the hospital, Benjy, Tim, and I moved in with the Neumanns. Mr. Neumann (Paul) was quiet but seemed okay. Mrs. Neumann (Jean) was nice to us initially, and I liked her immediately. She wasn't as good a cook as Mom was but seemed to care a lot about us. Tim bonded with Jean quickly, but I was a bona fide momma's boy and loyal to my mother.

There was a disconnect between Mom and Tim and he didn't have much patience for her. I think he got worn out from her mood swings and instability. He got easily irritated at her. It wasn't long before Tim thought of Jean as his new Mom, but I never did. During our extended stays at the Neumanns, Dad worked constantly and eventually crawled home to crash for a few hours. At night, he'd visit us there, but we didn't see him much during this time. I missed both my parents, but there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I just had to suck it up and deal with it.

By now, Benjy was sixteen, and struggling with life. He'd never bonded with Mom and had experienced neglect in his early years. He just got lost in our family. Right, wrong, or indifferent, Mom and Dad's focus was on Tim and me. Benjy had become rebellious. He had a weight problem, and his hair was down to his shoulders. He smoked pot daily and was heading nowhere fast. Benjy and Dad butted heads at times, and he struggled with depression. He self-medicated with pot and alcohol. Shortly after his birthday, Benjy quit school for good. It was a poor decision, and he'd pay for it later, but at this point, he was rudderless in life.

Sometimes “Mistakes” Are Perfect

In the spring of 1970, Dad, my brothers, and I were visiting Mom at Eastern State one Sunday. I was always scared to go there. The patients looked like zombies walking around. It was not a happy place. Going to visit Mom was a mixed bag for me. She was *everything* to me, so that part was great, but Eastern State was really unsettling.

As was typically the case, Mom looked stoned out of her mind. Usually, the patients were heavily sedated on Thorazine or a similar antipsychotic. It was difficult seeing Mom so out of it but those were the best practices of the day, such as they were.

Although Mom appeared hazy, she was happy to see her boys. A new therapy they were trying her on was Arts & Crafts and she'd made gifts for each of us. From oldest (Benjy) to youngest (me) she started handing out her handiworks.

She reached into her knitting bag and gave Benjy a ceramic turtle and it looked perfect. Then she handed Tim a ceramic Calico kitten, and it was also perfect. Two down, one to go.

As Mom got mine out of the bag, she was on the verge of tears and said, “David, I’m sorry, but I messed yours up. I spilled the wrong color paint on it.” She handed the ceramic kitten to me, and I loved it. I was like, “Mom, this is awesome. It’s psychedelic (a popular thing in the seventies).” Through her drug-induced haze, she smiled and said, “Thanks for seeing the positive, hon.”

I DID mean it. I thought it was cool, although my brothers thought I was just sucking up to her. There’s probably some truth to that, but I couldn’t stand the thought of hurting her feelings. She was so emotionally fragile then.

On the drive home, Tim continued teasing me, saying, “Your kitten looks stupid.” I was the youngest, so I couldn’t argue much, or I’d get beat up. I just said, “I don’t care. I like it.”

Benjy's turtle and Tim's kitten were lost decades ago, but my psychedelic kitten is alive and well. It has a place of honor in my trophy case in my home office.



The psychedelic kitten

Mom always strived for perfectionism. It was a byproduct of her schizophrenia and appealed to her meticulous nature. She thought the ceramic kitten was a mistake.

I recently showed the kitten to my business partner, and he loved it. Later, he sent me a quote from the cinematographer Conrad Hall. "There is a kind of beauty in imperfection." I couldn't have said it better myself. I still think of that day in 1970 at Eastern State.

In June, Mom returned home. She wasn't much better but bringing her home was really a financial necessity by now. At this point, extended hospitalizations were probably more a break for Dad than they were therapeutic for Mom. When my brothers and I returned home from another stay at the Neumanns, I was the only one happy to be home and see Mom. I'm sure it hurt her feelings, which made me sad. I could understand Mom's illness better than my brothers. It should've been the other way around. Weren't the older brothers more mature? I think the reason centered around the different relationships Mom had with each of us.

Benjy was angry at life and spent most of his time stoned. There was always tension between Tim and Mom, not so much on Mom's side, but on Tim's. There was no doubt Mom favored me over Benjy

and Tim. Tim was Dad's favorite (both brainiacs). One reason could be that I look more like Mom than my brothers. Maybe because I was the baby. Regardless, everyone in the family knew I was the apple of Mom's eye. I didn't do anything special to warrant this favored status. It was just the way it was.

Because of the love I felt from Mom, I think I escaped my adolescence with fewer emotional scars than Benjy and Tim. I was a momma's boy and did anything she wanted to do or go anywhere she wanted to go. Oftentimes, it was just the two of us, but I didn't mind. When it was just Mom and I, things seemed less stressful, as Tim could argue with her about most anything. I didn't always want to go with her, but I went to keep the peace and make her happy. She could get really angry, but it was seldom directed at me.

We could see the town center from our house. It was only a couple minutes' walk away: the fire and police station, the local diner (Norsonian), gas station, post office, drug store, grocery store, hardware, dentist, barbershop, laundromat, and bank. Mail wasn't delivered to houses in Norris (it still isn't) and people dropped by the post office to pick up their mail. The drug store was the old-fashioned kind, with a soda fountain and grill where they made a little bit of everything. Besides stools at the fountain, there were several booths facing the street, which were a popular hangout for kids.

After school, you had to quickly secure a booth to hang out with your buddies. They filled up fast. Cokes cost a dime, but vanilla or cherry Cokes were twelve cents. An ice cream cone was a dime, and jumbo cones were fifteen cents. Milkshakes were thirty cents, a hamburger thirty-five cents, cheeseburger forty, and french fries were twenty-five. The most expensive item was a banana split, which would set you back sixty-five cents. Behind the booths was a magazine rack with comics.

On Saturday afternoons, Mom and I would sometimes walk down and grab a booth and have pineapple sundaes (thirty-five cents). After finishing our treats, she'd read True Detective (guilty pleasure) and I'd read Marvel comics (Fantastic Four, Captain America or Spider-man). Those little excursions for ice cream sundaes with Mom and me were fun.

That summer, for me, was a normal one, and unlike the previous two summers, I didn't have surgery. I continued to play well in Little League as catcher, although our team wasn't very good. I was ultra-competitive and not a particularly good sport. If I didn't hit a homerun, sometimes I would barely run towards base. One time, I was so frustrated after popping out that I almost broke a bat on the telephone pole next to our dugout. I did grow out of that phase but wasn't a good sport when I was young.

Mom didn't make it to many games. She typically nodded off early in the evening but one night when we were eating supper, she told me she was coming to my game. I said, "Mom, since you're coming, I'm gonna hit a homerun for you." I actually hit two that night. She was so excited and bragged to everyone in the stands, "David hit those for me!" Aww, a proud mama.

Regardless of whether we won or lost, the coach treated us to snow cones afterwards. The Lions Club ran the concession stand, and sold three items: cokes, snow cones, and Crackerjacks. Everything cost a dime, so treating the team to a snow cone didn't break the bank. They had three flavors: cherry, orange, and grape. Most of us got psychedelic, which was a mixture of the three. And we always pleaded for "lots of juice."

The previous summer had been Coach Strong's last year coaching. I loved him, and he'd given several years to kids in Norris. Those of us who played for him remember him fondly. Our new coach was Joe Maddox, an engineer at TVA and an African American, which was unusual for Norris in 1970. His wife, Vivian, was a teacher at Glen Alpine Jr High. They lived on the outskirts of town. No Blacks lived within the city limits of Norris, but I think a few are living in town today. My parents despised racism and raised us to treat everyone the same. In the history of Norris, there was only one Black who attended school. Her name was Defawn Kimble (she now goes

by Selena). She was a year younger than me, and as far as I know, everyone treated her fine. Defawn entered the Miss Senator High School Beauty pageant one year and placed in the top five. I recently talked to her, and she said everyone in school was nice to her. That was my recollection as well, that fellow students were friendly to her.

Just as we loved Coach Strong, we loved Coach Maddox too. I learned a lot from him. I think he only coached that one summer, but he was great.

Striking Back

My Mom spoiled me. That is indisputable. Besides that fact, I also knew how to manipulate her and get her to do most anything for me. When I was in fourth grade, I went through this period where I had her make me a dessert every day. When I got home from school, she had to have it finished. That probably explains why I started getting chubby. Regardless, she made me something every day: chocolate chip cookies, fudge, brownies, cake, whatever.

One day, she forgot to make something for me, and honestly, I didn't really care, but for whatever reason, I decided to make a big deal out of it and hurt her feelings. I told her how disappointed I was that she hadn't made a dessert. I immediately knew it upset her, but I wasn't content with just that. I felt compelled to keep hurting her, and I knew I wouldn't be satisfied until she broke down. It hurts my heart to even write this. My precious mother needed a snot-nosed kid laying a guilt trip on her like she needed cancer, but I kept pushing.

I finally saw a tear slowly start making its way down her cheek and immediately regretted it. I said, "Mom, I am SO sorry. Please forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." It was a total lie. Hurting her feelings was precisely what I set out to do. Maybe I was being vengeful for the times she'd disappointed me or been mean to me. Maybe I did it because I was a bratty little shit, but regardless, I felt like a complete heel. I still don't know why I did it, but I sure do regret making my fragile mother cry that day. Shame on me for that.

1970 was a year of change for Dad as well. He changed his company name from Valley Instrument to Tennessee Instrument and Machine Company (the acronym was an homage to my brother Tim, TIMCO). He bought an industrial building in Norris and set up shop close to home, on Sawmill Road, which was the "haunted" street in town. There were no houses on Sawmill, just industrial buildings, and storage places, but the area had a spooky vibe, especially after dark. Older kids used to tell ghost stories about The Hand, which was a local legend about something grabbing kids at night on Sawmill.

That summer, the town's recreation director was Sharon Perkins. She was a junior in college and really nice. I liked her immediately and followed her around like a puppy dog to the various activities all summer long. She took a special interest in me, and I nicknamed her Perk. During that summer I found out she and I were actually second cousins.

I told Mom about Perk and how much I liked her, and she invited her over for lunch one day. When Mom wanted to, she could really get fancy in the kitchen, and on this day, she cooked a fabulous meal. Perk loved the lunch and enjoyed getting to know Mom. She came over for lunch again during the last week of summer. Perk and Mom got along great.

By now, Benjy was one of the hippie stoner dudes in town. He and his buddies would hang out by the high school and smoke dope after school. They were within eyesight of the police department, but never got caught. He got high daily, and his hair was almost down to his waist, which wasn't accepted in a small town in the South then. By now, he'd quit playing drums, and was just self-medicating to avoid feeling his feelings. He was in emotional pain and completely lost. Mom and Dad loved him but didn't understand him or know how to reach him.

I don't know what Tim was going through during those years, but I know he was unhappy. He'd grown his hair out to shoulder length and wore the same T-shirt every day to school. We all struggled (and coped) in our own ways. Tim continued getting straight A's and had friends but was struggling to find his place in the world. Academics were his sanctuary. Drugs were Benjy's. Sports were mine.

Praying for a Miracle

One Sunday morning in the winter of 1971, I was eating breakfast and watching TV. At that time, the only thing on air were religious programs. It wasn't my preference, but heck, it was TELEVISION, the be-all and end-all for kids. The program was a broadcast from Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Oral Roberts, the man, was a revered televangelist at the time, (before the term became synonymous with con man) and had a weekly nationwide program. ORU had a new "prayer tower" that he promoted that morning, and they scrolled the long-distance number across the screen for people to call with prayer requests. In my ten-year-old mind, I thought if I called that number and asked someone to pray for Mom, maybe she'd be cured. Ahh, the unfettered optimism of a child who desperately wants his mother to be well. I made a mental note of the phone number, finished breakfast, and got ready for church.

That afternoon, Mom went across the street to visit Mrs. Niles. With Mom and Dad both gone, I picked up the phone and called the prayer tower. In those days, long-distance calls were rarely made because they were prohibitively expensive. The phone rang and a lady answered, "Oral Roberts Prayer Tower, what is your prayer request?"

"Yes ma'am, my name is David Peters and I need someone to pray for my mom. If you can't pray, maybe Mr. Roberts can."

"Hi David, I'm Gloria. What's going on with your mom?"

My emotions had been bottling up and I began crying and couldn't talk. Gloria said, "It's okay sweetheart. How can I help you?"

"My Mom has a disease called *skits-o-frenia* and recently took a bunch of pills. I love her very much, but I know she's not happy. I just want her to be happy and I REALLY don't want her to hurt herself again. That's all."

Now the tables had turned. I heard sobbing on the other end.

"Aren't you a sweet little boy. Your mom is lucky to have a son like you. Let's pray." And so, she did. She prayed while I wept. The call only lasted a few minutes, but felt like forever, and I was petrified I'd get in trouble for making the call.

A few weeks later, the phone bill arrived. At supper that night, Mom mentioned that a long-distance call had been placed to Tulsa, Oklahoma and asked who'd made it. No one fessed up and I kept quiet. After supper, Mom was at the kitchen table having a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. My conscience was bothering me, and I had to come clean.

I walked in and said, "Mom, don't be mad. I made that phone call."

"Who do you know in Oklahoma?" I explained that I'd called the prayer tower at ORU to ask someone to pray for her.

She didn't say a word, but her eyes welled up with tears. She motioned for me to come sit beside her. She said, "Let me tell you something, David. First, I'm not mad at all. Second, that might be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. I'm proud of you and I love you for doing that. Lastly, I believe God hears our prayers and gives special emphasis to heartfelt ones. I think God heard Gloria's prayer, and I think I'm going to be okay." Oh, how I wanted that to be true. Alas, it was not to be.

Around this time, Dad seemed to be getting a little too chummy with Jean Neumann (our occasional caregiver). Mom was in and out of Eastern State for months at a time and we bounced back and forth between the Neumann's house and ours. When Dad was at the Neumanns to visit us, he seemed to spend an awful lot of time talking and drinking coffee with Jean. This, not surprisingly, coincided with the demise of Jean's marriage as well. Like my parents, the Neumanns had been married for almost twenty-five years. I don't remember when things started changing, but I wasn't blind. Even though I don't recall the timeline and specifics, I started questioning Dad's faithfulness to Mom.

One day my parents had an awful argument, and it sounded bad. At some point, Dad stormed off and headed to work. I went into the kitchen and Mom looked really sad. She'd been crying, which made me sad. I asked, "Are you and Dad going to get a divorce?" Mom said, "David, don't worry about Dad and me. I know you worry a lot, but I love your father. I hope things work out, but regardless, always know that we both love you very much. Whatever happens between Dad and I, don't let that poison your thoughts on marriage. Marriage

is beautiful, and your Dad is the best thing that's ever happened to me. At least, until you boys were born." Her speech, although heartfelt, did little to assuage my fears about their marriage.

Don't Ignore That Little Voice

At some point, I strongly sensed the relationship between Dad and Jean wasn't platonic. I tried telling myself I was imagining things, but my gut instinct told me otherwise. At some point, Jean started working with Dad in his business, so they were spending a lot of time together. I don't know how she could help manufacture control panels, but there she was, working every day.

During one of Mom's stays at Eastern State, I woke up early one Sunday morning. Because of this latest hospitalization, Tim and I were once again staying at the Neumanns. Sometimes I felt like a ping pong ball, being bounced back and forth between homes. By now, Jean was divorced. Many days, when I woke up, Dad would already be here. I wondered if he was sleeping over but dismissed the idea as crazy. After all, he was married to Mom, and would never do something like that. Or would he? Surely not.

That morning, I tiptoed to the top of the stairs after hearing the front door open. Dad had just arrived. Maybe my fears of him sleeping over were irrational, after all. Regardless, I quietly crept downstairs to see if anything was really going on between them. Without them seeing me, I saw their reflection in a glass bookcase in the living room. Through the glass, I could see them in the kitchen. Hoping my fears were ridiculous, I saw Dad take his hat off and hug her. Then they kissed passionately. My heart sank. It was one of the single worst moments in my life. That little voice had been right after all. That hurt so bad. Dammit to hell!

Right then, I learned a painful lesson in life. My father was mortal, subject to temptation. I wanted to march right into the kitchen, and scream, "How the hell could you do this to Mom? You are revolting and I'm ashamed to be your son." But I couldn't do it. I didn't think I had the right to confront him. That moment really screwed my head up. In the short-term, it damaged my relationship with Dad. Kids shouldn't have to pick sides with parents, but, right then and there, I picked Mom. I still loved Dad but was very disappointed in him. As children, we look at our parents as superheroes who do no wrong. Despite Mom's schizophrenia, I also saw her as a superhero. Yes, she had a horrible illness, but she was my superhero. I just loved her so much.

I never told Mom about the incident, and never confronted Dad about it. That morning still haunts me. From that point on, I was done with Jean. I tolerated her and was respectful and obedient at her house, but I hated her.

The years of handling everything had obviously taken a heavy toll on Dad. His wife had now been sick for seventeen years. His business was struggling. He was physically and mentally exhausted. And all these things had changed him. He grew his hair longer, stopped dressing nice, and stopped attending church. I have read the medical records from Eastern State and the overwhelming takeaway from those records was that Dad suffered immeasurably during those years. I can now appreciate the fact that he held it together as well as he did, for as long as he did. A person can only take so much.

At the time, however, I was angry at him for committing adultery with Jean. I now know he was human. He wasn't Superman after all. He was Ben Peters, who not too long before, had been a kid, building a boat to fish on the river after the war. He'd tried to do the right things, and nothing had worked out. His wife was ill, Benjy had dropped out of school, Tim was unhappy and didn't like Mom, and then there was me. I think Dad sensed I knew of his infidelity with Jean. If anything, I felt it was my duty to be kinder and more understanding of Mom. I felt she had gotten the short end of the stick. At some point, Mom also sensed something going on between Dad and Jean.

Initially, Mom was grateful that Jean cared for her boys, but as time went on, Tim and Benjy seemed to prefer Jean over Mom. She became jealous of Jean. Mom found out about the affair between Dad and Jean, and it broke her heart. A bad thing about growing up in a small town is the awful gossip, and the rumor mill had cranked up regarding Dad and Jean. I think most people knew of the affair. By now, Mom hated Jean, and I despised her as well. I realize it takes two to tango, but I was mainly pissed at Jean.

Mom was barely treading water. The medical records from Eastern State concerning her latest stay were not encouraging. Whenever she was readmitted, they would interview Dad about her. He told them he was concerned Mom might harm us physically. We

were spanked hard at times, but I don't think she ever physically hurt us.

Occasionally she would wail on the backs of our legs with a switch from a tree, but I don't think it was child abuse. That's just the way things were back then. The staff at Eastern State felt Dad was on the verge of his own nervous breakdown. He was just at wits end with what to do, but probably for financial reasons, he made the decision to keep Mom at home. Neither option was good, but at least keeping her home was cheaper.

Other things I learned from Mom's medical records at Eastern State was that she was a shopaholic. She'd run up large bills at several department stores and had over fifty pairs of shoes she'd never worn. She also apparently had a hang-up with Catholics. She felt nuns were out to get her (I don't believe there even was a nun in Norris) and didn't trust the Catholic church. I have no clue where that irrational hatred came from.

My brothers and I had mastered the art of steering clear at the first signs of Mom losing her temper. We still had part-time housekeepers, but they only came a couple days a week. Mom cooked breakfast and supper but did very little else around the house. Her medications made her perpetually drowsy, and she was asleep more than she was awake.

Tug of War

Later that winter, Mom was acting strange one day. She was talking about the hopelessness of life. I suspect she had these thoughts often, but rarely articulated them in front of us. This time was different, and she sounded unusually downbeat. It concerned me greatly, and I hopped on my bike and rode down to Dad's company. I told him what had happened, and he calmed me down, put me in his office with some magazines and continued working. After he finished for the day, we went to Jean's house. Although I didn't like her, she was empathetic to this situation and could tell I was worried. At some point, Mom figured out where I was (I knew she would) and came to get me.

The events that took place next were extremely traumatizing to me, both then and now. Mom was knocking on Jean's front door, and Dad and I were inside, on the other side of the door. I could see Mom and she could see us. Dad had his arms draped over my shoulders, as if he was shielding me. For some reason, I was afraid to come with Mom. I wasn't afraid she'd harm me but was worried I might see her harm herself. I had discovered the overdose scene in third grade and did NOT want to witness anything like that again.

I was (and still am) a people pleaser and didn't want to disappoint either parent. Dad was worried, and understandably so, that something might happen to me. On the other hand, Mom wanted me with her. I was going to have to choose a side.

Mom was pleading with me to come with her, and Dad was holding me fast, telling me I didn't have to. It was a Mexican standoff, a tug of war, and I was the human rope. At some point, Jean came out from the kitchen and told Mom to go home. Although she probably meant well, this was the wrong thing to do. It sent Mom over the edge. She screamed at Jean to shut the hell up and stay out of this. Jean went back into the kitchen and called the police.

By now, tensions had further escalated, and Mom was at her boiling point. At this point, I'm conflicted, scared, and don't know what the hell to do. I didn't want to disappoint Mom, but Dad was understandably worried and thought I should stay with him. If I saw Mom hurt herself, it would traumatize me forever. And then it happened. Tired of waiting, Mom smashed one of the glass windows

in the door, which cut her hand badly. Apparently, that wasn't shocking enough. She took a broken piece of glass and slashed open the top of her wrist. As blood gushed from the wound, the police arrived. Blood was EVERYWHERE and she proceeded to wipe the gushing blood all over every window on the porch.

By now, I'm petrified and just want this madness to stop. I told Dad, "I'll just go with her. It'll be okay." And so I did, accompanying Mom to Doc McNeeley's office so she could get stitched up. When I went with Mom, it was like flipping a switch. She quickly cycled down from her manic state. After Doc stitched her up, she seemed fine. We went home and she fixed supper as if it were just another Saturday night.

Another day in the life of schizophrenia. It was a horrifying experience that still haunts me to this day.

Despite all the dysfunctionality at home, I was enjoying another summer of the recreation program, again led by Sharon Perkins and another season of Little League baseball. At home, however, changes were afoot. My parents' marriage was beyond salvaging. By now, Dad had pretty much moved on from Mom. He was "not so secretly" having an affair with Jean and working all the time.

Our family was in utter turmoil. Dad's business had taken another downturn and money was tight. We could no longer afford a housekeeper, so cleaning was left to Tim and me. Mom didn't have the energy or desire, so she didn't do any housework. Besides running the vacuum, we washed the dishes each night and learned how to do laundry. Tim and I alternated nights with the dishes, and we hated it.

A Day in the Life

On days when the recreation program didn't have anything special scheduled, my buddies and I would have our own fun day. After breakfast, I would ride my bike to Ricky Morgan's house on Reservoir Road. Several buddies would meet there: Bill Henry, Dewboy, maybe Dennis Hess and Jimmy Moore. Once we left Ricky's, we would ride the quarter mile over to Clear Creek Road. This was the only unpaved road in town, and it was all downhill from this end. It was almost a mile to the bottom. Going down that long hill was awesome. You built up a ton of speed and I rode wide open down that hill. At the bottom of the hill was the "car wash," where the creek crossed the road.

For years, people parked there on weekends and washed their cars (hence the name). Since the car wash was at the bottom of this long hill, we'd hit the water at full speed. The impact made a huge splash and we got thoroughly soaked. So much fun. After getting drenched, we'd pedal the remaining half mile to the Grist Mill. This was a tourist attraction and an actual working grist mill, built in the late eighteenth century (it's still there today). The gears and cogs that enabled the water to turn the giant wheel were all made of wood. As water diverted from the creek to the sluice, it tumbled over and made the giant wheel turn. It was really cool. There was a gift shop inside with a Coke machine (Cokes were fifteen cents).

After our soda break, we'd get busy, playing in the creek. We'd either catch crawdads, build dams, or skip rocks. Crawdads were plentiful, but the big ones were scarce. They were dark green with tiny red dots and looked like mini lobsters. The regular crawdads were opaque in color and more plentiful. Being disturbed boys, sometimes we'd get rocks and build a little arena where we would "encourage" crawdads to fight each other.

Building dams in the creek was also great fun. We'd take rocks, leaves, mud, and moss from the area, and start building a wall. After a while, water started backing up, making a deep pool. In a couple hours, if we were industrious enough, we could, essentially, bring the creek to a standstill. By now, the water would be knee-deep, and it was cold, even in the middle of summer - it felt great. Then came the fun part. We would break the dam apart and watch the backed-

up water come rushing downstream in a torrent. Around 4:00 we'd start heading for home. The trip home, for me, took over an hour. Those day-long trips to Clear Creek and the Grist Mill were an absolute blast.

After supper, if I didn't have a Little League game, we'd often have epic games of Capture the Flag in the Commons behind my house. The Commons had a clear demarcation point down the middle, created by kids walking from the town center on their way to and from school each day. That path has been gone for over thirty years. Kids don't walk to school anymore. Again, another place and time. Some nights, we'd have twenty or more kids gather to play and the game wouldn't end until dark (9:30 or so).

Another popular activity in the evenings was using makeshift butterfly nets and catching fireflies (aka lightning bugs). On a good night you could catch forty to fifty bugs. After coming in for the night, we'd empty our nets into a Tupperware container and put the fireflies in the freezer. One Saturday a month, a man would come to the town center and buy the frozen fireflies. Apparently, the substance that causes their glow was used for medical research. They paid about a penny per firefly. If I was industrious, I could easily accumulate enough over the course of a month to earn four or five dollars - good money for a kid in 1972.

Because of our financial struggles, Dad took over the grocery shopping from Mom and curtailed her spending. He cut up her credit cards and put her on an allowance. With Dad doing the shopping, the quality of our food suffered greatly. He bought day-old bread, and we rarely had decent cuts of meat (if we had meat). We had lots of tuna helper, and Kraft macaroni and cheese dinners. One thing I remember was Palmetto margarine. It came in one-pound blocks and only cost a dime - and it was overpriced. It was basically hardened lard, colored with yellow dye. Toast was a staple for us, and toast with that crap sucked. Mom did a decent job cooking the food Dad bought, but it was a far cry from what we were used to.

When times were good (financially), which was most of my childhood, we went to Regas Restaurant once a month. Regas was the best restaurant in East Tennessee. Most of my friends never ate there, let alone monthly. When we went, Mom and Dad usually

ordered lobster, and Tim and I had spaghetti in a skillet. Spaghetti in a skillet doesn't sound special, but the Regas family was Greek and knew how to make great sauces. It was delicious. The other restaurant we frequented was Davis Brothers Cafeteria in Oak Ridge, where we ate weekly. I always got the same thing: country style steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, and Jell-o. But at this point, we never ate out. Things were different now.

Christmas 1972 would be the last Christmas with Dad at home. Mom bought Dad an expensive gift, a ham radio set (he loved ham radios) on credit because she obviously didn't have the money to pay for it. The radio cost \$2,000 (\$14,000 in 2023). Dad loved it, but we knew he'd never keep it. He returned it shortly after Christmas. The main thing I wanted that year was a 1/10 scale gas-powered dune buggy. The model I wanted was the Cox Sand Blaster.

That Christmas, I got the dune buggy, and many other things. Dad spoiled us at Christmas. Regardless of our economic situation or the craziness surrounding Mom, he spoiled us every December 25th. Maybe he thought we were dealt a bad hand in life, dealing with Mom's illness and all that that entailed. Maybe he delighted in watching his kids get excited about something. I tend to think he just loved making his guys happy, if only for a little while. Amongst my peers, I always got more toys than anyone else.

I turned twelve on January 9, 1973. Changes were in the air for the Peters family. Mom was tired of having no say so with finances. She also knew Dad was having an affair, so she filed for divorce shortly after my birthday. I didn't really blame her, although it saddened me greatly. Initially, they were legally separated, and Dad moved out. I strongly suspected he was living with Jean, which disappointed me to no end. As a child, you're powerless in these situations. You're just along for the ride. Hang on folks, there's turbulence ahead, and it's going to get bumpy.

Once Dad moved out, he dropped by a couple nights a week and took Tim and me down to Valley Drugstore for a candy bar. It was a far cry from him living at home, although in the past couple of years, he'd rarely been around anyway. On one such trip, Dad said he couldn't understand why Mom had filed for divorce. As we rode

along, I thought to myself, "I have a pretty good idea, Pop. It might have something to do with you screwing Jean Neumann!"

As a result of their separation, Dad had to pay child support and alimony, which actually improved our standard of living. Since Mom now had some money and was back in charge of shopping, we ate much better. We didn't have steak every night, but we no longer ate day-old bread or Palmetto margarine.

Since Mom had filed for separation, we now qualified for government assistance and started receiving food stamps. When she received her first coupon booklet, I was shocked and mortified. It just seemed like yesterday we were comfortably ensconced in middle class. Now we were poor. "How'd that happen?"

One day, Mom was getting ready to go down the street to Archer's Food Center with her new food stamp booklet, and I quickly put the kibosh on that. Living in a small town, prone to gossip, I would NOT allow her to use food stamps locally. After all, I still had some pride, even if she didn't. Thankfully, she acquiesced and didn't use them in town. If we needed bread or milk, Tim or I would walk down to Archer's and pay cash. When Mom went to a grocery store out of town, I'd let her use food stamps, so my friends wouldn't discover we were poor.

With finances tight, Mom decided to get a job. Emotionally and mentally, she was *not* equipped for employment. Undaunted, she got a job at a hardware store in Clinton. I don't know what happened there during the week she worked there (yes, she either quit or was fired after one week). At the best of times (and these were far from those), she wasn't patient. Additionally, the medications she took kept her in a perpetual state of drowsiness. I can't remember a day that she didn't take a nap, so I couldn't fathom her working all day. I give her credit for trying, and the fact she tried was probably more indicative of our dire financial straits than anything else. To make matters worse, the hardware store paid her week's wages in store credit. At week's end, I think she came home with a plunger, some tools, and other items. Go figure.

Salvation

In the spring of 1973, our church, First Baptist, held a revival. Revivals are weekly events where a visiting pastor preaches every night. For a twelve-year-old, it's not the most exciting thing, but Mom was deeply religious, and I knew we'd be going nightly, whether I wanted to or not. By now, the only people in our family that attended church were Mom and I. Benjy and Tim were done with church. I suppose Mom could've forced Tim to continue going, but in life, you pick your battles. She'd thrown in the towel on that one.

Nonetheless, Mom and I attended nightly. The visiting pastor was Ben Baird, and each night, I would sit impatiently with my buddies, hoping the sermon would finally end. For a kid, sitting through a forty-five-minute sermon is torturous. One night, however, Pastor Baird's message resonated with me, and I began to think of my salvation (or lack thereof).

Where would I be spending eternity, Heaven, or Hell? In the Baptist church, at the end of the sermon, they hold an altar call (aka an invitation). It's a moment where the congregation sings hymns, and the pastor asks if anyone wants to come forward and accept Christ as their savior. That night, I was ready to walk down the aisle, but just couldn't. I froze. The invitation ended, the service ended, and apparently, I was going to Hell. The thought was haunting me.

When we got home, I couldn't get it out of my head, and told Mom I needed to be saved. She rejoiced at this news, because being saved is a big deal for Baptists. I poured out my heart to Mom, and she picked up the phone and called Reverend Christopher's house. I guess Pastor Baird was staying there because a few minutes later, they both came over. With Mom's encouragement, I explained to the pastors that I wanted to be saved. We talked some, and they read some scriptures and prayed with me. That night, I was saved right there at the kitchen table. As a sign of my new covenant with Christ, I was supposed to come forward during the altar call the next night and show the congregation that I was, in fact, born again. At school the next day, I saw Dewboy and told him the good news. That night at church, at sermon's end, Pastor Baird extended the invitation. Dewboy accompanied me up front, and I formally accepted it.

On Sunday night, a week later, I was baptized. Even though Dad hadn't stepped foot in church in a couple of years, he was there that evening, probably because his absence wouldn't look good. In a couple of years, his status as a respected member of the church had taken quite a hit. There were allegations of infidelity, and he was a long way from his days as church Deacon and treasurer.

At the time, I was ashamed of his behavior, but with age comes wisdom. I know he was under an unbelievable strain. He was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, he had an ulcer, his business was struggling and so on. I don't think Dad ever seriously considered it, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't thought of suicide himself. His life was in ruins, although for most of it, he'd done the right things. It wasn't fair, but life is rarely fair.

That spring, I started mowing lawns and delivering papers and saved up enough money for a motorcycle (with Dad's help). It was a 1973 Honda XR75, and I loved it more than life itself. The Knoxville News-Sentinel was the daily paper and it cost ten cents (Sunday edition thirty cents). Stacks of papers were dropped off for each kid in front of the grocery store every afternoon (and Sunday morning). Eight kids covered the whole town. My route encompassed West Circle, East Circle, parts of Reservoir, Dogwood and Dale Roads.

Delivering papers took two hours each day and if you collected all the money from your customers, you would net about ten bucks per week. That amounted to roughly seventy-one cents an hour, crummy pay even then. Apparently, me and my eight compadres were suckers. On Sunday mornings, due to the size of the paper, most dads helped their sons deliver it (mine did). Let me be perfectly clear: I sucked as a paperboy. I didn't keep track of collecting from customers, I was slow, and always one of the last kids to finish my route. My career in the newspaper business was brief.

A Life Lesson

My other job was mowing lawns. I had three or four lawns I mowed weekly, and the average pay was about four bucks. My cheapest customer was the Bollinger's yard, who only paid two bucks. It was a small yard, but "c'mon man, two bucks? Seriously?" My best yard was the Pfeiffer's house on East Circle Road. It was relatively flat with only a couple of trees. That lawn only took an hour, and they paid five dollars - a sweet gig. In total, I made fifteen bucks a week (much more than my paper route and it only took half the time). In early July, I got a call about mowing a new yard on Orchard Road.

The man's name was Evans and he warned me it was a big yard. He would pay six bucks, which would be my most lucrative job and I told him I'd be there the next day.

The next day was ridiculously hot, and it was almost a mile walk (pushing my mower) to his house. I stopped at the gas station and filled up with gas (ten cents) and off I went.

When I got to the Evans house, I understood what he meant. The yard was big, and the front yard was basically one long hill. Undaunted, I fired up the engine and started mowing. Each lap was an uphill grind, and the hotter it got, the hotter I got. My buddies were going to play at Clear Creek that afternoon, and I really wanted to go. It would've been a great day to play in the water. I stopped for a minute to gulp some water from the hose and soldiered on.

I was only halfway done with the front yard, but I'd had enough. "Heck, I ain't finishing this stupid yard." I left Mr. Evans' house and pushed the mower home, knowing this would not end well with my mother. My parents weren't quitters and didn't raise us to be either. When I walked in the house, Mom asked how it went.

"Not good. It was super-hot, and I quit!"

My mother looked at me like I'd lost my mind, a reasonable assessment, to be honest.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?" Then this woman did something she hadn't done in a long time. She spanked me, pretty hard, and I deserved it. When I settled down, she calmly spoke to me.

"David, when you start a job, you finish it. Period."

Then she disappeared into her bedroom and emerged a few minutes later in old clothes. She said, "Let's go."

"Where?"

"I'm finishing that man's yard and you're gonna watch." My initial reaction was, "Dang, Mom, have you lost your mind?" When I realized she was serious, I begged and pleaded with her to stop. I told her I would go finish it, but she wouldn't hear of it.

On one of the hottest days of 1973, my forty-six-year-old mother, carrying her purse, walked with me across town to the Evans house on Orchard Road. We looked like Mutt and Jeff, me pushing the mower and Mom primly carrying her purse. Once we got there, I begged her, once more, to let me do it, but she was resolute. As I sat in the shade next to her purse, my mother mowed the rest of that yard. I felt like a heel, and deservedly so. As we walked to the front door, Mr. Evans met us on the porch, money in hand.

He said, "Gee Mrs. Peters, I didn't expect you to mow. I hope David is feeling all right. Anyway, here's your money."

"Oh, he's fine, and this is on the house." She turned and winked at me and said, "David's already been paid." And I smiled.

That lesson has stuck with me throughout my whole life. While spending late nights working on a paper in college, when friends wanted to go out to clubs in my mid-twenties and I had to study for the CPA exam, when I worked a long day at the office, only to still have three hours of night classes in graduate school.

What I witnessed that day was a middle-aged woman, with a debilitating mental illness, roll up her sleeves and show an immature twelve-year-old the value of finishing a job.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED, MOM!!

Junior High

In the fall of '73, I started seventh grade at Glen Alpine Jr. High. The school was located three miles outside of Norris, so that meant riding the bus. Most kids hated the bus, and it did suck, but we were all in the same boat. In late September, the school held basketball tryouts. The team consisted of seventh and eighth graders, so first-year players (like me) would probably be riding the bench. Unlike previous sports teams, not everyone would make the team. There would be roster cuts, which was uncharted territory for us.

I wasn't too worried because I was one of the better seventh grade players. The coach was Paul Taylor and he and his wife Connie lived next to the Neumanns, the house where I sometimes lived when Mom was at Eastern State. Basketball tryouts lasted all week and at week's end, the roster was posted outside the gym. Everyone checked to see if they'd made the team. Thankfully, I did, but several buddies didn't. I felt awful some friends had been cut but was thrilled to officially be a Glen Alpine Warrior.

In junior high, perhaps for the first time, I learned what a status symbol was. I submit for evidence, the basketball warm-up jacket. We were the Glen Alpine Warriors, and our colors were green and white. Each player got a warm-up jacket to wear before games, and most of us wore them every day to school. There wasn't anything special about them, but in junior high, they were the ultimate status symbol. I learned this shortly after getting my jacket. One morning, an eighth-grade cheerleader, Janine Owens, came up to me in the hallway and asked if she could wear mine that day. I was like, "Sure, okay." I had zero romantic interest in her, but apparently, she reveled in wearing the jacket, regardless of who it belonged to. For the next few days, Janine met me in the hallway early each morning to get my jacket.

I obliged for a week or so but began to rethink the situation and decided to reclaim my jacket. I gave Janine the news and, unfazed, she went up to another player and asked to wear his. Seems comical now, but it was a big deal then.

I hated seventh grade. I suspect my miserable home life was the biggest factor, and the dissolution of my parents' marriage was a big part of that. Regardless, I wasn't happy, at home or school.

Additionally, I knew Mom was in a really bad place emotionally, and I had struggles of my own. I was chubby, unfocused at school, and things, for me, were not great at all. My parents always called me the worrier, and I did worry about everything. I especially worried about Mom and our family in general.

I could barely fit into my basketball uniform. Besides that, I had terrible personal hygiene. I was going through puberty and didn't even know what it was. My parents hadn't taught me that changes were happening to my body. Mom, at this point, was totally detached from the world, and Dad no longer lived at home. Until puberty hit, I only took baths every other night. The notion of washing my hair every night was completely foreign to me. My school picture was a disaster that year, chubby and greasy hair. One classmate, Carrie Owens (Janine's younger sister), teased me incessantly about my oily hair. I was just emotionally detached from everything.

One problem was my parents' divorce. In their divorce hearing, Mom's lawyer asked Dad (on the witness stand) if he'd committed adultery with Jean. He lied, and Mom told me about it. I loved my father but at the time, wasn't particularly proud of him.

Except for Jimmy Moore, none of my buddies' parents were divorced. It was imperative for me to fit in and be like other kids, but my friend's parents were all still married. My entire psyche was dependent upon my life resembling a "normal" family. Even though I knew (and everyone else knew) my family was not a "normal" one, I felt it imperative to "look the part."

Another thing I hated in seventh grade: my teachers expected me to be like my brother, Tim. He was a straight A student, and I was not. In the first grading period, I went from the honor roll at Norris Elementary to a D and F student at Glen Alpine. It wasn't that I was dumb, but that I just didn't give a shit. Internally, I was suffering from the trauma at home and the madness going on all around me.

Tim started high school in the fall of '73. One of the first things he did was to find the guidance counselor, Dr. Bratcher. Tim went into his office and introduced himself. Within a few minutes, he confided to Doc (his nickname) that the reason for meeting him was to get help getting our mother recommitted to Eastern State Psychiatric

Hospital. Doc empathized with Tim, but alas, there was nothing he could do. That's just not something a guidance counselor does.

The relationship between Mom and Tim hadn't been good for years. It appeared to be more on Tim's side than Mom's. He was wound a little too tight, and it didn't take much to piss him off. Intellectually, he understood she had an incurable illness, but he wasn't tolerant of her mood swings. He frequently got agitated at her, and his frustration would set her off. There were frequent altercations, and I hated them. I was a peacemaker, and the best way to keep the peace around Mom was walking on eggshells. As a child of a mentally ill parent, you either master the art of eggshell walking, or you suffer.

I know Mom deeply loved my brothers but struggled showing affection to them. For whatever reason, she didn't have that problem with me. She showed me lots of affection, much more than Benjy or Tim received. I think I instinctually read her moods better. I played up to her good moods and vanished when she was on the warpath. Tim and Benjy had an uncanny knack for pushing her buttons.

The previous spring, Tim won the school spelling bee and advanced to the county competition. Mom and I went to cheer him on, and he won again. For the victory, he won a dictionary and got his picture taken for the Clinton Courier. Mom was super proud of him and wrote a letter to her sister, bragging about his accomplishments. She might not have known how to show her love for Tim, but she DID love him, just like she loved Benjy.

My parents' divorce was finalized in October '73, and it made me very sad. I don't know if I held out hope they'd reconcile and get back together, but the divorce eliminated that possibility. I was disappointed Dad had committed adultery, and thought he'd let us all down. He'd been under a tremendous strain for years, and made mistakes, but the divorce still devastated me. I understand things better now, but it has been a long journey to arrive at a place of acceptance.

Around this time, Tim also got a dirt bike, a Suzuki 100. He saw how much fun I was having on my XR75 and wanted in on the action.

Every weekend, several of us went trail riding for hours and hours. Trail riding was the most enjoyable thing I did then. Tim started riding with us, and, although slow, improved quickly. We both kept our bikes on the plastic runner in the living room. Homes in Norris were all built with similar footprints, which didn't include garages. I'm sure Mom was underwhelmed at our "garage."

A national news event affecting everyone was the oil embargo in October 1973. This was a ban led by OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries). The embargo targeted all nations supporting Israel during the Yom Kippur war. As a result, there wasn't enough oil. The nation was desperately trying to curtail oil consumption. Some changes implemented included lowering the interstate speed limit from 75 mph to 55. Also, most public buildings weren't allowed to use heat after normal business hours.

The embargo changed lots of things in the world, even in East Tennessee. I remember going to the movies in Oak Ridge one night and the lady in the ticket window looked frozen. Before purchasing tickets, she told us the temperature inside was 55 degrees! No thanks. In Norris, like most places, gasoline was hard to get. On Saturday mornings, cars at Bill Black's Union 76 station lined up out to the street, waiting for gas. At the time, Mom still had the Ford Thunderbird Dad had gotten her for Christmas, years earlier. It was a gas guzzler with a 390 cubic inch engine, and it only got 12-14 mpg.

The embargo lasted six months, and during those months, the price of crude oil rose 300%. As a result, big cars that people had loved for decades were now passe. Everyone wanted fuel efficient cars, and foreign car companies capitalized on this opportunity in a big way. Suddenly, sales of Toyotas, Datsuns (now Nissan), and Hondas skyrocketed. Detroit tried to cash in on this paradigm shift by introducing such "classics" as the Vega, Pinto, Gremlin, and Pacer. Most were crappy but did get better mileage and sold well.

Mom wanted to save money on gas, so she went to a Toyota dealership and bought a new red Toyota station wagon. We were living on alimony (and food stamps), so I have no idea how she qualified for a car loan, but somehow, she got it. It was cool having a new car.

Thanksgiving 1973 was awful. Five days earlier, my only grandparent, Cleo, died at age 81. She was a sweetheart and, even though she technically was no longer Mom's mother-in-law, Mom was very sad about her passing (as was Dad, of course). This was the first thanksgiving since Dad had moved out and that made me sad as well. It seemed everything was going down the tubes at this point.

I have no idea where Benjy was that holiday, so it was just Mom and Tim and me. Tim and I alternated days washing dishes, and as luck would have it, Tim's day was Thanksgiving. It was the biggest cooking day of the year, and, subsequently, the most dishes to wash. Tim was livid. I think he whined all morning about how unfair it was, and he did have a point. Mom should have divided up the duties between both of us for Thanksgiving, but she didn't.

We had the traditional feast that day: turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, several side dishes, and angel biscuits. Additionally, Mom made two or three desserts: pecan pie, pumpkin pie, and fresh apple cake. It was a wonderful meal, but there was a mountain of dirty dishes afterwards. Tim pissed and moaned about it until Mom had had enough. She finally said, "Timmy, just shut up and wash the damn dishes. Next year, it'll be David's turn." That did little to appease him, but he sucked it up and took care of it.

Blue Christmas

Christmas 1973 was even worse than Thanksgiving - much worse. It just wasn't the same without Dad, and Mom wasn't doing well at all. She was more depressed than usual and wasn't remotely interested in the upcoming holiday season. She was really down in the dumps and seemed emotionally checked out of life. She had a vacant look that was worrisome to me, but I was afraid to ask her what was going on. At this point, Tim and I were pretty much raising ourselves. Benjy was living at Jean's home, which was another disappointing thing for Mom.

I was busy with school and basketball, but still excited for Christmas, even if nobody else in the family was. I've always been a huge Christmas fan, and Christmas had always been magical in our family. Unfortunately, everything was different at 12 West Circle Road this year. I was almost thirteen now, and too old for traditional toys, but I had a relatively new toy: my Honda XR75. I could always use stuff for my motorcycle. I asked Mom for a blue-jean Bible. Those were popular with church-going kids in the early seventies and I'd seen several kids at First Baptist with one. Besides the Bible, I asked Mom for a toolkit, and I asked Dad for a tire for my XR75.

Back then, holiday decorating occurred much later in the season and wasn't nearly as elaborate as today. We typically put up our tree the week before Christmas and took it down shortly after Christmas. We always had real trees, and they were usually white pines. Fir trees weren't available in the south back then, or if they were, I never saw one.

Even though our family was split up and Mom was cycling downward, I held out hope this might be one more magical Christmas. Being nosy, I started looking around the house for presents (something I'd done before but hadn't been successful at). This time I struck pay dirt. I found the toolkit in Mom's closet, but it was not the one I'd asked for. It was disappointing, but there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I'd just have to open it Christmas morning and fake it.

With the divorce and everything, I felt bad for Mom and wanted to get her something nice for Christmas. Dad gave me twenty bucks, and I bought a portable heater for her bedroom. She always

complained that her bedroom was cold and I thought she would like it. I also got her an Agatha Christie paperback, some perfume, and a Christmas tree pin for her blouse.

We bought a tree for seven dollars (a buck a foot) from the Boy Scouts and decorated it the week before Christmas. Mom managed to do some holiday baking and I thought, just maybe, it might be another nice Christmas.

Around 10:30 Christmas Eve, everyone hit the sack. I was excited, just like previous Christmas Eves, and didn't think I'd ever fall asleep, but eventually did. Typically, in years past, we'd get up around 6:30, but this year I got up at 4:30 and insisted Tim and Mom get up. Neither were excited, but they begrudgingly arose, and we went into the living room for the festivities.

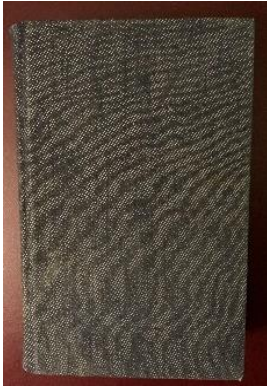
How can I best put this? Christmas morning sucked. I don't remember what Tim got, but he wasn't thrilled with his gifts and Mom didn't seem too excited with what I'd gotten her either. I opened my toolkit and acted happy but hated it. I did get the knobby tire from Dad, but my other "big" gift from him was weird. It was a toy Hammond organ, probably better suited for a third grader. Not a clue what he was thinking, and I had neither the talent nor desire to learn how to play it. Dad just sort of mailed it in that year. That might've been the most disappointing thing of all, that Dad hadn't put any real effort into what he'd gotten us. He'd set the bar so high in past Christmases, that this was a big letdown. It was bad all around. Christmas had sucked and there was nothing left to do but go back to bed. What a buzz kill.

Before going back to sleep, I glanced at Mom and noticed she was on the verge of tears. "Why was she crying? Was it because Christmas had sucked, or because Dad wasn't there?" I didn't know the reason, but it bothered me. I asked her, "Mom, what's wrong?" She sadly said, "You didn't even open your most important present." I looked closely again at the Christmas tree and noticed a small package, wrapped in plain white paper. The skirting around our tree was also white, so the package was practically invisible, and the reason I'd missed it. I unwrapped it and saw that it was from Gateway Books (a Christian bookstore) and immediately knew it was the blue-jean Bible. I was thrilled because it was something I'd asked for and because I knew it meant a lot to Mom. I said, "Oh Mom, thank you

so much,” and went over and hugged her and kissed her cheek. She said, “Open it and read the inscription.”

On the back of the front cover, she’d written:

***Christmas 1973
To David W. Peters
From Mother With Love
Julia B. Peters***



My blue-jean Bible

That little Bible would become important to me in the not-too-distant future and beyond.

On the day after Christmas, Mom returned every gift she received for a cash refund (except the pin for her blouse. I still have that). I don’t know if our financial straits were that dire or if she just didn’t like her presents, but it hurt my feelings.

Christmas break ended and I returned to school on Wednesday, January 2. It was 1974 and I was almost a teenager. The holiday season was, thankfully, in our rear-view mirror. For the past few days, Mom had, surprisingly, been in a pretty good mood. For the last several months, she’d been in a prolonged spell of depression, so this was a welcome change.

Becoming a Teenager

Living with a schizophrenic is an emotional roller coaster. You savor the flavor of good days and try to disappear on bad days. I didn't think Mom's good mood would last, because it never had before, but I was enjoying it, nonetheless. The following Wednesday, January 9, we celebrated my birthday at home. For the first time in years, there was no slumber party with the fellas. It was just Tim and Mom and me, which was fine because it was a school night. I was a little old for slumber parties, anyway. As in years past, Mom made my special fried chicken supper and chocolate cake.

I still have the birthday card I got from Mom that year. In it, she wrote:

David, please know that whatever you do...or wherever life takes you...that I'm proud of you and love you with all my heart. My life hasn't worked out the way I'd planned, and I've had lots of regrets...but I will never regret the night you came into the world at Fort Sanders Hospital. Before I had Benjy, Tim, and finally, you, I thought I knew what love was, but I now know that wasn't true. I knew nothing about love before becoming a mother. Now, I think I do. That has been your gift to me, and I thank you for that.

Happy 13th birthday sweetheart. I can't believe my baby is a teenager.

Where does the time go?

Love, Mom

At this point Mom's good mood had lasted two weeks. We were in uncharted territory here. Fingers crossed for continued good days.

As January progressed, I started getting more playing time in basketball. We played our home games at the high school, which was only a short walk from our house. Mom had actually made it to some recent games. When I got into the game, I had a knack for making things happen. I would grab a couple of quick rebounds or score a couple of buckets. Coach Taylor liked me and the better I played, the more minutes I got. By the end of January, I was averaging ten minutes a game and making a bit of a difference.

It was cool that I was playing more, but there was a bigger story happening in our family. The good mood Mom exhibited shortly after Christmas had continued. It had even gotten better. I was

ecstatic. Had my prayers finally been answered? Had the prayer Gloria made at the Oral Roberts prayer tower years ago finally come to fruition? Emotionally, I so wanted to believe Mom was cured of schizophrenia. Intellectually, I knew there was no cure, but I hoped. Oh, how I hoped.

Regardless of the reasons, Mom was on a roll. She'd dropped some weight, stopped smoking, and seemed to always be in a good mood. It was great. Adults would stop me at the town center to tell me how good she looked and seemed to be doing. Maybe our fortunes had finally turned.

We were still struggling financially, so Mom decided to do something about that as well. Ricky Morgan's dad was an executive at TVA, the organization that had created Norris and the dam and was the town's biggest employer. Mom had a background in administrative skills (she'd worked in a secretarial pool in Oak Ridge during and after the war) and Mr. Morgan brought her in for an interview. It must've gone well because she got the job. When she came home late that afternoon, she was positively beaming. To celebrate her new employment, Mom splurged and took us out to eat at an old haunt, Davis Brothers Cafeteria. I got my usual - country style steak, mashed potatoes, gravy, and Jell-o.

When Saying Goodnight Means Saying Goodbye

It was Saturday morning, the 16th of March and Mom had been working at the new job for a few weeks. Every day she got up, fixed us breakfast, gave me a ride to the bus stop and headed to TVA. Life was good. Happy to have the weekend off, Mom made Tim and I a big breakfast. Tonight was my last game of the season. Around 4:30, I walked to the high school to board the bus for the road trip. We lost in overtime, but I had my best game of the season. I played fifteen minutes and had eight points and three rebounds. It'd been a successful first season. I planned on getting help from Mom to drop a few pounds before eighth grade. After getting back to the high school around 10:00, I got off the bus and walked home.

Walking through the front yard, I didn't notice Mom's car missing from the driveway, but soon realized she was gone. After unpacking my gear bag, I went upstairs and asked Tim where she was. He was engrossed in a book, and dismissively said, "She went for a drive." I didn't think a thing of it and went downstairs and changed into my pajamas. I hadn't eaten since 4:30, so I went into the kitchen to make a sandwich. I sat at the table, eating and watching Carol Burnett when I heard the door open. It was Mom returning from her "drive." At that moment, I hadn't given a thought to the fact that she hated driving at night. I was just happy she was back.

Mom was always interested in my athletic accomplishments, so I told her all about the game. We talked of me losing weight and she said she'd help, and that I'd have no problem getting in shape. I finally said, "Mom, I love you, but I'm beat. I better hit the sack if I'm going to get up for church." She said, "Okay hon, off you go."

I climbed into bed, and she kissed me goodnight. Her last words were, "Hon, don't worry about a thing. You'll lose that weight. I know you worry a lot, but you don't need to. You're fine just the way you are. Goodnight." On many nights, when she tucked me in, she'd say, "Tomorrow will be a better day and you will be happy." She didn't say that this night, and it would be a while before I realized the significance of that omission. For now, I was just tired. She turned out the light and went to the bathroom. To get back to her room, she had to pass back through my bedroom. I watched her tiptoe through my room and said my prayers. I thanked God for a loving mother and closed my eyes and fell asleep.

The next thing I knew, it was morning. I stumbled out of bed to go to the bathroom. Normally, I would wake to the smell of breakfast cooking. Mom made muffins on Sunday mornings. She'd combine White Lilly strawberry and blueberry muffin mix and make "psychedelic" muffins, which were delicious. Alas, no smells were coming from the kitchen. I went to get a glass of Tang and noticed it was 9:45.

Mom must've let me sleep in and gone on to church without me. I always went with her, so this was unusual, but awesome. Now I had a couple hours to get my XR75 ready for trail riding that afternoon. Sunday afternoons were a blast, and Tim and I met up with friends to ride the trails for hours and hours each weekend. I took a shower and went into the makeshift garage, our living room, to prepare my bike. We were supposed to meet at Ricky Morgan's house around 1:45. To get there on time, we would have to leave around 1:00.

Church services usually ended before noon, so Mom should've been home by 12:15, but 12:15 came and still no Mom. I still didn't think a thing about it. I just assumed she'd gone to eat with a friend. Mom had many female friends, and the fact that she was without me would've given her a chance to go out to eat with one of them. At 12:45, Tim and I started towards the trail head on Deer Ridge Road.

As we got close to the trails, we heard a siren behind us. We turned around and saw the town's only police car, approaching with lights flashing. It was Chief Hamilton.

"Boys, I'm looking for your dad. Do you know where he's at?"

Tim said, "Nope, sure don't. Have you checked his shop on Sawmill Road?"

"No, but that's a good idea. I'll run down and see if I can find him."

I asked, "Is anything wrong?"

"No David, everything's fine. I just need to talk to him. You guys have fun and be careful." I gave Chief the thumbs up sign and we started our engines.

Off we went up the trail. We came to the first fork and turned right, heading towards Observation Point. We were a quarter mile down the trail when Tim came to a stop. I pulled alongside him, and he said his bike was running rough. He was worried about fouling a spark plug and didn't have any spares. I thought his bike sounded fine and that he was nuts. I loved trail riding, and intended on riding

all afternoon, regardless of whether Tim went or not. He said he didn't want to get too far from home and have engine trouble. As he turned his Suzuki around, I looked at him and thought for a second he'd been crying (he had goggles on, so it was hard to tell). I looked at him oddly but just shrugged my shoulders and said, "See ya," and took off by myself. I continued on towards Ricky's house.

About twenty minutes later, I rolled into Ricky's carport. Several guys were sitting on their bikes. Mrs. Morgan was standing there too. I said, "You boys ready to scoot?" Nobody said anything, and no one started their engine. Mrs. Morgan walked over and put her hand on my shoulder and said, "David, your dad is coming to get you." My radar immediately went off.

"Why would he come get me? That makes no sense. He knows I ride Sunday afternoons and could care less what I'm doing." She was silent, which did nothing to allay my fears. I blurted out, "WHAT is going on? Why is my Dad coming?" I could tell she was hesitant and remained silent.

"Mrs. Morgan, tell me what's going on. PLEASE!"

After a minute, she broke the silence. "Honey, I think your mom was in an accident."

I screamed, "WHAT KIND OF ACCIDENT?", but that's all she would say. I thought of Mom's new Toyota and assumed she'd had a car wreck. The thoughts of her wrecking that little car worried me, and I was afraid she might be badly hurt. A couple minutes later, Dad and Tim arrived. Tim had obviously been crying, which freaked me out even more.

Dad got out and I said, "WHAT IS GOING ON?" He quietly said, "Just get in the car, hon, and we'll talk about it." We loaded my bike into the VW bus and pulled out of the Morgan's driveway. The first words out of my mouth were, "What hospital is she at? We've got to go see her."

Almost immediately, it all came together for me. In that moment, I thought back on the last eighteen hours.

Mom had been driving when I returned from the basketball game. Why was she driving at night?

When I woke up this morning, she was gone. After church, she still hadn't returned.

Chief Hamilton had pulled us over.

Tim stopping on the trail and turning around (he must've figured it out).

It all crystallized in my mind. It was the unthinkable. I now realized what had happened.

I thought of the hospitalizations, the suicide attempts, the entirety of my life and I just knew. She wasn't at a hospital, and we wouldn't be going to see her. Tim was crying again, and Dad looked devastated.

I blurted out, "SHE'S DEAD!"

My father turned around and said, "Yes hon, she's gone!"

It was the worst moment of my life, and I broke down. I was inconsolable and cried uncontrollably. Julia Ann Burgess Peters, my mother, was dead. My life was essentially over, or in that moment, it sure as hell felt like it. I was in shock and could NOT believe it. "How was this possible? Hell, I thought she was cured. She'd seemed better than ever." I had been on cloud nine with my "new" Mom and thought we'd finally turned a corner. The past two and a half months had been awesome. She looked good, and genuinely seemed happy. She'd lost weight, quit smoking, and had a job she loved. All this and she kills herself?? WHY?? It didn't make sense then and it doesn't make sense now. These thoughts were driving me nuts, but one thought trumped all others at that moment. It wasn't what you'd expect after hearing such devastating news.

I realized I'd never eat another of my mom's home-cooked meals. Just yesterday, she'd made two cheeseburgers and french fries for my pregame meal. Nothing fancy, but like everything she made, it tasted good. The last meal that I'd ever eat, made by my mom, were those cheeseburgers. I thought of the hundreds of meals she'd made, and that made me even sadder.

Shortly after finding out she was dead, we got home, and I had another good cry. It would not be my last. I was in shock. Physically I was present, but mentally, I was somewhere else. Dad was talking,

but I didn't really hear him. I finally heard him say she had drowned in the Clinch River, close to the Highway 61 Bridge. Apparently, she simply walked into the water and was taken away by the current. It was mid-March, and it wouldn't have taken long to succumb to the frigid waters. I have no idea when she did it, but suspect it was shortly after midnight.

Around 6:30 a.m. some fishermen spotted her body and contacted the sheriff's department in Clinton. They located her unlocked car and found her pocketbook, saw that she was from Norris and contacted the county sheriff, who in turn eventually called the Norris Police Department. That's why Chief Hamilton was looking for Dad. That's what happened. And it sucked!

At some point, I realized the significance of her coming home after I returned from my basketball game. I'm convinced Mom was ready to commit suicide earlier that night when she went out for a drive but returned to say goodbye to me. When I returned from the game and she wasn't there, it didn't register that she hated driving at night. Maybe because I was tired, but when Tim said she'd gone out for a drive, it didn't faze me.

Although I was the baby, I was always more patient and understanding of Mom's ever-changing moods. Not because I was so wonderful, but because a calm Mom made for a calm home. When my brothers would get irritated with her, I would plead with them to cut her some slack: "Why don't you give her a break? She can't help the way she is."

Unfortunately, it usually fell on deaf ears, and they would storm off, frustrated. I'm not judging my brothers. I love them and we all suffered in our own ways. Regardless of the reasons, I think Mom returned that night to say goodbye. I've often wondered what went through her mind when she kissed me goodnight. I now realize she wasn't kissing me goodnight. She was kissing me goodbye. In hindsight, it's probably better that she didn't tuck me in like she had so many times before, when she'd say, "Goodnight, hon. Tomorrow will be a better day and you will be happy." That would have stuck with me for a long time. The next day was not better, not at all. It was the worst day of my life. As she kissed my cheek, she must've known she would be dead in an hour or so. It's still hard to believe.

People have asked if I knew Mom would, eventually, kill herself. The short answer is no. I didn't think she would and there are a

couple of points worth mentioning. For starters, at the time, I only knew about two of her suicide attempts. Before I was born, there was the ant poison incident, and I didn't find that out until I was grown. Additionally, when the house caught fire in first grade, Dad told us it was an electrical fire. Again, I didn't learn she set the fire until several years later. I never entertained the notion she would actually kill herself. I mean, seriously, who thinks a parent will do that? I knew she had a debilitating and incurable illness, but, as a child, I didn't know suicide was so widespread. I just assumed I'd grow up with a mentally ill Mom and she'd always be there.

The other shocker was her personality change that occurred at the first of 1974. To go from seemingly being cured of schizophrenia, and then committing suicide was something I could not process or imagine. It made zero sense and made me question the very existence of God. If things would've continued the way they were tracking during the Christmas season, I wouldn't have been nearly as shocked.

But this didn't compute. I agonized over this for years, trying again and again to make sense of it. The more I tried to understand, the more frustrated I got. If you're happy, why kill yourself? It didn't add up. Sometimes you just have to let go of unanswered questions.

Another thing I never understood was the way she died. There are many ways people kill themselves, but suicide by drowning is pretty unusual. Usually, it's an overdose (she tried that), a self-inflicted gunshot (we didn't own a handgun), or something similar, but drowning is atypical. Drowning by jumping off a bridge is more common, but I'm pretty sure she simply walked into the river. We'll never know, but I would've expected more trauma to her body from jumping (over 100 feet), and the open casket funeral indicated this was unlikely.

In the South, when someone dies, people cook. They bring casseroles and desserts. People from the church and neighbors brought all manner of dishes, which probably tasted good, but I didn't eat any of it. I didn't want their food. I wanted Mom's food, but that wasn't going to happen. I'd eaten the last meal she ever cooked.

Mom died on St. Patrick's Day, two days after what would've been her 27th wedding anniversary and two days before Dad's 51st birthday. The next day, Monday, I was tired of crying and decided to

go outside and get some fresh air. I walked to the hardware store and bought a 25-cent kite. I brought it home to assemble it. As I was putting the kite together in my room, I glanced over at my desk and saw the birthday card Mom had given me just two months earlier. How on earth had that only been sixty-seven days ago? One sentence jumped out at me:

My life hasn't worked out the way I'd planned, and I've had many regrets...but I will never regret the night you came into the world at Fort Sanders Hospital.

Had she already planned her death? As heartbreaking as it sounds, I think she had.

Monday, March 18, was an overcast day, and, like my mood, the skies looked sad too. I started running furiously across the Commons, trying to get the stupid kite aloft, but there wasn't much wind. Undeterred, I remained persistent and finally got it up in the air. It started taking out lots of line and I stared up at the sky and started crying again. While this was happening, there was one dominant thought in my head. "WHY GOD? WHY DID YOU LET THIS HAPPEN? You're supposed to be omnipotent. You can do anything. Why couldn't you stop this?" I believed in God but did not understand why he would allow this to happen. 49 years later, I still don't.

For years, I used to lie awake at night, and agonize about why I didn't wake up and prevent Mom from taking her own life that night. To leave the house, she had to walk past my bed. In my young mind, I thought I should've awoken at the precise moment she walked through my room and stopped her. It would take years (and lots of therapy) before I realized the futility of this. In a perfect world, perhaps I might've prevented her death that night, but that would've just been temporary. At some point, my mother was going to kill herself, and sadly, that was the inevitable outcome.

When I tell people I was thirteen when it happened, they say, "Oh, geez, what an awful age to lose a parent." And they're right. It's a shitty time to lose a parent, but let's be real. "Is there a good time? No, there isn't." In spite of her illness and occasional mood swings, Mom was, at her essence, a kind and loving person. She really was. The memory of flying the kite that day and questioning why God allowed this to happen still haunts me occasionally.

That Tuesday night was visitation at Holley-Gamble Funeral Home in Clinton. Over a hundred people came to pay their respects. Several of my buddies came as well. Aunts and Uncles on both sides of the family came. It was a sad and emotionally draining night.

Wednesday, March 20, was the funeral. That morning, some of Mom's siblings came to our house to visit. It was probably uncomfortable for Dad because they despised him. Everyone in Mom's family thought Dad had committed adultery and was bitterly disappointed in him. Thankfully, no one wiggged out.

I was sitting in the living room, idly looking at my blue-jean Bible, when one of Mom's brothers, Sib, came in to talk to me. He asked if he could look at it and saw the inscription,

To David W. Peters
From Mother With Love
Christmas 1973
Julia Ann Peters

He got emotional, and asked, "Son, is this the only thing you have of your Mom's?"

"No Uncle Sib, I have one other thing." I went into my bedroom and got my psychedelic kitten.

"Mom made this for me when she was in the hospital," and handed it to him. He looked at it and just lost it. He started crying, hugged me and said, "Son, I'm so sorry this happened. I'm going to be praying for you. Julia sure loved you boys."

Before getting dressed for the funeral, Dad sat us down and talked about what the next few hours would be like. He encouraged us to let our tears out now, as Mom wouldn't like it if we cried at the service (she and Dad were old school). We should honor her with our reverence. I began to cry (again) and retreated to my bedroom to put on my church clothes. Even Tim and Benjy dressed up, although at the time, I doubt they even wanted to attend the funeral.

Today, they feel different, but this has been a long and winding road for all of us. Tim and I recently had lunch in Costa Mesa, and we talked for a couple of hours. He's much more empathetic towards Mom now and simply said, "I feel sorry that Mom suffered so badly. She was just a troubled soul." My oldest brother, Benjy truly misses her now and regrets his distant relationship with her. Those years were an awful time for him (and for all of us). Benjy accomplished

very little during those years, except to stay high. He was in his own Hell.

Mom's funeral was held in the chapel of the funeral home. It was packed with people. I remembered Dad's instructions and maintained composure throughout the service. There was a soloist there and she began singing "It Is Well With My Soul."

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

This was the cue for my brothers and me to walk up and place a white rose on the casket. Benjy went first and then Tim. I went last and when I laid my rose on her casket, I broke down. The dam burst and I cried uncontrollably. I ran into Dad's arms and continued sobbing. He held me tight and whispered in my ear, "It's all right, hon."

After the funeral, we headed to Norris Memorial Gardens for the graveside service. There was a cold wind that day that chilled me to the bone. The service was brief, which was fine because I was freezing. I hugged relatives and family friends and shook my buddies' hands. Mom was gone.

When I got home, I went into my room and closed the door. I noticed my blue-jean Bible on the nightstand and grabbed it. I started thumbing through it and at some point, came to the book of Psalms. I began to read a section under the heading "A prayer for help." Chapter 147, verse 3 spoke to me:

He healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds.

That verse connected with me on some deep level. It helped me look back at the last few days with some modicum of perspective. Was it possible God could heal my broken heart? At the time, I didn't think so, but that verse stuck with me.

I still have those two items from my mother: the blue-jean Bible and the psychedelic kitten. They're both significant in their own ways. The Bible has been therapeutic and there have been hundreds of times when I've scrolled through a few verses in Psalms. Whenever I'm confused, sad, happy, worried, lost, whatever: I can always find some comfort in that book. In 1973, those Bibles were hard to find, and I know Mom went to several different bookstores before finding it. Knowing the awful emotional place she was in, and

that she moved Heaven and Earth to find it makes it all the more special.

I have mixed emotions about the psychedelic kitten. On the one hand, it was a gift of love made just for me. She even engraved my name on the bottom. It's also a sad reminder of how awful Eastern State was, and the place she called home for so long. It's also been a lifelong example of doing the best you can with what you have. Mom did her best, and that little ceramic figure means an awful lot to me.

After she died, I wondered where she'd gone. Did she go anywhere? Was there a Heaven and Hell, or was it game, set, and match when she took that last breath? I was raised with the notion that suicide was the unpardonable sin, so did that mean Mom was burning in Hell for eternity? I didn't want to believe that, but it bothered me. How could a loving benevolent God condemn someone to eternal torment for being sick? It didn't make sense, but I believed there were people in my own church who thought she was in Hell.

Over the years, I've spoken to many people, including clergy, and they've assured me she is in Heaven. My mother was a committed Christian and strong believer. The other thing I've learned is that the brain is an organ, just like the kidney or liver, and like those organs, can become diseased. People with mental illness do nothing to deserve their affliction, they suffer immeasurably because of it, and even to this day, are viewed by many people with disdain. I hope that narrative changes.

Later that afternoon, I was playing in the front yard, and, a neighbor, Mrs. Huff, was walking to the grocery store. As she walked by our house, she saw me and gave me a hug and told me how sorry she was and how much she loved Mom. She was thankful Mom had been so kind to her son, George (one of my buddies). She broke into tears, and just held onto me. This was something I soon got accustomed to.

The people in Norris collectively wanted to adopt me. In the ensuing weeks, months, and years, I got lots of hugs and lots of love.

George delivered the Knoxville Journal, the morning paper. On Saturdays, after he finished his route, he'd come to my house, walk right in, climb into bed and we'd watch cartoons. In those days in Norris, people didn't lock their doors. Again, another place and time. While watching cartoons, Mom would make us a big breakfast. Like all my friends, he loved Mom, and was heartbroken when she died.

Back to Life

I returned to school a week after Mom died. I was glad to be back and had missed my friends. Everyone was happy to see me, and all my classmates were sympathetic to what I'd just experienced. At lunch that Monday, my friends gave me a jar filled with change. Dewboy and Ricky Morgan had taken it around school and collected money (about fifteen dollars). It was such a thoughtful gesture.

A couple of weeks later was spring break, and surprisingly, Dad took Tim and I to Florida. We hadn't been on vacation since the ill-fated trip in 1969, when Mom had a nervous breakdown in the Maine motel room. This trip was quite unexpected. I think Dad did it because of what we'd just experienced. Regardless, we were stoked to visit Disney World. The theme park had only been open three years, and everyone wanted to go. There was one aspect of the trip I wasn't crazy about. Jean Neumann went. I despised her and still believed she'd been instrumental in destroying my parents' marriage. I now realize there were several factors at play, but at the time, I resented the hell out of her. Jean's son, Mark, had moved to Orlando, and thankfully, she stayed with him that week.

Dad and Tim and I stayed at my Aunt Tincy's in Cocoa Beach (an hour away from Orlando). Aunt Tincy was Dad's older sister, and her husband Clyde was one of the nicest guys on the planet. They were empty nesters and lived a couple blocks from the ocean. They had a pool, which was heaven for Tim and me. We swam every day, even if it rained. Unlike Dad's other siblings, Tincy could actually cook. Every morning, she made homemade biscuits with orange-blossom honey. Tasty. On Wednesday morning, we picked headed to Disney World. The magic kingdom was truly magical, especially experiencing it for the first time. We ran Pop ragged that day, and the park was packed with spring breakers, but we still got to ride most of the rides. It was a fun week.

By now, Dad and Jean were "officially" a couple. The thought sickened me. I didn't blame her for Mom's death, but the knowledge that Dad had cheated certainly hadn't helped Mom's emotional fragility. We expect our parents to stay together, for better or worse. It hurt, knowing Dad had serious feelings for another woman. It was a slap in the face to everything I'd grown up believing. Every time I

saw or thought of Jean, it reminded me of that morning when I caught them kissing. It cut me to the core.

For the longest time, Dad had been madly in love with Mom. What the hell had happened? Literally, I knew the answer, but emotionally I struggled with that truism. As much as it hurt me, I can't imagine how much it must've hurt Mom. Was it the straw that broke the camel's back, the catalyst for her suicide? I don't think so, but it didn't help.

I've already mentioned that one of the pitfalls of small-town life is gossip. It's pervasive and cruel, and Norris was, unfortunately, immersed in that pastime. I love my hometown, but gossip was awful at times. Shortly after Mom died, I rode over to Michael DeFord's house. He loved riding my Honda XR75, and I loved doing donuts on his Honda Z50. While taking a break, Michael said, "David, there's a rumor going around that your Dad drove your Mom to the river the night she committed suicide." It didn't anger me so much as shock me.

"That's ridiculous. It's not true and it doesn't make sense. Why would he do that, and why would her car be parked by the river, where her body was found? It's illogical." I thought about that rumor a lot, but never gave it much credence. It didn't make sense then, it doesn't make sense now, and ultimately, Dad wasn't capable of that.

Mom's family also gossiped and speculated about her death. Although they didn't suspect Dad was responsible, they considered his infidelity deplorable. I don't know where Dad was the night she died, although I'm guessing he was with Jean at her house.

That summer was a hard one for me. I'd lost Mom three months earlier, and now, Dad decided to sell our house. That upset me greatly. It was my home, and I loved it. Sure, there were bad memories, but a lot of good ones too. It was where I felt safe, where I'd grown up, where Mom had lived, where friends had come over to play and sleep over. I was upset about it, and I'd already had the shittiest year of my life (and the year wasn't even half over). But I was only thirteen and had no say so in these matters. I just had to suck it up and roll with the changes. Dad sold the house to a man named Longmire, who planned on flipping it.

Dad sold it for \$16,000, which is hard to believe when compared to current overvalued real estate. The fact that the house was already sold made for an even crappier summer. Tim and I no longer felt like it was our house. Most days, Mr. Longmire and his crew came in and worked on fixing it up. We had no privacy and there was a constant barrage of construction noise.

Mom Number Two

In July 1974, I went to Vacation Bible School (VBS) at First Baptist, the church I'd grown up in. It was my last year for VBS (it ran from preschool to seventh grade). It was something to do that week, and a break from construction noise at home. My teacher was Chris Johnson, a lady who'd recently moved to town with her three children and husband from Kentucky. I liked her immediately and could tell she liked me too. Maybe she felt bad I'd recently lost my mom, but, regardless, she paid special attention to me. On Wednesday morning that week, she had to run home and get something.

She asked if I wanted to go with her and I said, "Sure." Her house was five minutes away. When we got there, she asked if I was hungry. I was thirteen. I was always hungry. She told me to help myself, and I spotted a strawberry pie in the fridge and got a slice and some milk. It was delicious, and I devoured it. She came downstairs a couple minutes later and told me to have another slice. I happily obliged and thought, "This lady might just be a keeper."

We wrapped up VBS on Friday morning and had closing ceremonies Sunday night. That night, after the ceremony ended, Mrs. Johnson had me over for supper. She made my favorite dinner, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and biscuits. It was the best meal I'd eaten since Mom died.

From that moment on, I became a *de facto* member of the Johnson family. I was friends with her kids (Angela, Herbie, and Traci), but I was really close to Mom Johnson (my name for her). It was still summertime, and I would ride over to their house in the morning and hang out there all day. Mom Johnson worked across the state line, in Kentucky, and didn't get home from work until 5:30. She still made a home-cooked meal most nights. She served supper around 6:30 and afterwards, I'd stay in the kitchen with her and Angela while they cleaned up. We'd talk for hours, and she loved listening to me ramble on about the trials and tribulations of being David Peters.

I don't know what I'd done to deserve this lady, but I loved her dearly, almost from the get-go. Her love was a healing balm and began to renew a sense of hope in my heart. When my real Mom died, part of me died too. Mom Johnson helped me begin the healing process. She meant everything to me and loved me as much as she loved her own children. Many nights, she and I would talk so long that it was too late for me to ride home, so I'd sleep over.

Dirt Bikes, Camping, and Showing Off

One day in August, some buddies and I decided to have a dirt bike campout at Observation Point. It was Michael DeFord, Steve Forbes, Ricky Morgan, and Bill Henry, all friends I rode dirt bikes with. The Point has a fantastic view of Norris Dam, the East Tennessee valley, and the Clinch River. Steve and Michael strapped coolers to the back of their bikes, and we each hauled our own sleeping bags. We got to the Point around 3:00 in the afternoon, got camp set up, gathered wood for a fire, and walked to the edge of the Point to take in the view. Although it was a fun time, I couldn't help noticing the rushing current in the river, far down below - the same river Mom had drowned in, five months earlier. I couldn't get that image out of my head. For the briefest moment, I got really sad, but quickly suppressed the feeling.

We hopped on our bikes and tore off, riding the labyrinth of trails in the area. It was so much fun riding with a group that day. We rode till seven o'clock and broke for supper. We started a campfire, roasted hotdogs, and devoured them while drinking Shasta sodas. When darkness set in, the guys with headlights went out on a night ride. Ricky and I had true dirt bikes (no lights), so we could only ride during daylight. Our riding day was over.

Around 8:30, Ricky and I settled around the fire and started talking. We talked about our bikes, girls we liked but were petrified to let them know, Atlanta Braves baseball, Tennessee football - anything, and everything thirteen-year-old boys talked about in 1974. It was dark, so the only light was the flames of the fire. Ricky asked me what it was like, losing a parent. I wasn't expecting that question. He confided to me that Mom's death had really bothered him, and he'd thought of it a lot.

"David, I saw your face this afternoon when we were at the lookout, and I noticed you staring down at the river. You looked so sad for a moment. Were you thinking about your Mom?" I was angry I'd been discovered and angry at what was going to happen next. I lost it and broke down, crying. Ricky put his hand on my shoulder and said, "It's okay, buddy." That was a reminder that my grieving would be a long journey. At Observation Point that night, I just knew I was still hurting badly.

When the guys got back from their moonlight ride, they told Ricky and me all about it. It sounded awesome. We settled into our sleeping bags and spent the last hour telling ghost stories. Around midnight, we drifted off to sleep.

An hour later, we were awakened by a loud noise. The campfire had died down, so it was pitch-black dark. After a few seconds, we could tell the sound was some sort of motorized vehicle coming uphill, right in our direction. Not knowing what to do, we imitated easter bunnies and hopped into the woods, still in our sleeping bags. None of us had a plan - we were just scared shitless.

Visions of the movie, *Deliverance*, came to mind. I was certain this vehicle (whatever it was) had inbred mutants who would take turns sodomizing us. Finally, the vehicle came over the crest of the hill. It was a Jeep, and we recognized the owner, Joe Feeman, an older kid, and his buddy, Pete Jolly. When we realized we weren't going to be someone's bitch, we came out of the woods and told Joe and Pete about our bunny hop, which cracked them up. After they departed, we went back to sleep. The next morning, we broke camp and rode home. Despite my brief period of sadness that night, it was a blast and I still remember it fondly.

A month later, I was back on the trails (close to Mom Johnson's house) and showing off on my XR75, riding wheelies in front of friends. On one wheelie, I went too far back and wiped out. I held onto the bike but dragged my right knee several feet along the ground. When I stood up, my jeans were torn, and I feared my knee was badly cut. I needed help, so I rode to Mom Johnson's house. Thankfully, she was home, and instantly saw that I was hurt. I still hadn't looked at my knee, but she did. She said, "Oh honey, this is bad. We need to get you to the emergency room."

That scared the crap out of me, but I trusted her and off we went. My pant leg was soaked in blood. A half hour later, we got to Oak Ridge Hospital. When the nurse called me back, she asked if Mom Johnson was family. Without hesitation, she said, "He's my son. I think that qualifies." She came in with me. Dragging my knee across the ground had lodged a bunch of pebbles and dirt into the wound and they had to be removed. They gave me a shot of Novocain, and the doctor took tweezers and extracted the pebbles, one by one. After

extraction and cleanup, they sutured me up. Final tally: thirty-five stitches, and the sutures were in a precarious position.

Bending my leg pulled on the stitches, and if they tore open, it would have to be redone. Because of that, I walked pegleg for the next month.

In late August, we moved out of our childhood home and into Jean's house on East Norris Road. I was pissed about the move. Theoretically, Dad didn't "live" at Jeans, but we knew he did. They were living in sin, at least in the eyes of the town's many gossipers. He must've known, but I don't think he gave a shit. He'd pretty much checked out of societal expectations by then. I guess he was surviving as best he could.

He continued putting in long hours building control panels but wasn't making much money. In a few short years, we'd gone from solid middle class to abject poverty. I did NOT share the "I don't care" sentiment that Dad seemed to possess about almost everything. I was embarrassed and ashamed of what he'd become. He'd been a pillar of the community but was nothing like that now. He had abandoned his faith, his wife, and, for the most part, his family. I was extremely disappointed in him, but it was what it was. I was stuck in a situation I had no control over. Today, I have a better understanding of the emotional pain and psychological trauma Dad endured. He made mistakes, but I now realize he did the best he could.

In eighth grade, I became good buddies with a classmate, Jeff Hesoun. His dad was the assistant scoutmaster for Boy Scout Troop 134. One day Jeff was playing at my house and invited me to come to a scout meeting with him that night. I had a blast and decided to join the troop.

My first campout was the Fall Jamboree at a local park, and there were dozens of scout troops from the region in attendance. Being new to scouting, I didn't have any camping equipment, but I packed a sack with some clothes, grabbed a sleeping bag and took off. On that campout, our patrol slept under a large plastic fly. This was October, and it was cool, but not too cold. Once camp was set up, we gathered

firewood. Afterwards, I went to find my buddies in Troop 73, the other troop from Norris. My best friend, Dewboy and his brother Joel were in that troop, as well as several other friends.

It got pretty cold that night and I woke up, chilly, around 6:00 Saturday morning, and helped rebuild the fire. In no time, eggs were scrambling, bacon was sizzling, and we wolfed down breakfast. After kitchen patrol was finished, we headed out for the day's activities. There were all sorts of demonstrations, and contests, none of which I participated in. I was just observing for now. In the afternoon, a bunch of us had a big football game on the park's ball field. Around 5:00, we returned to our campsites to fix supper. Nothing fancy, just burgers and fried potatoes, but after a long day, we were starving, and it hit the spot. That night, there was a giant bonfire in the middle of a big field. There were hundreds of scouts there, and we listened to the leaders talk about scouting. The bonfire concluded with the Order of the Arrow ceremony (a Boy Scout honor society). We broke camp Sunday morning after breakfast and returned home around noon. It would be fair to say I liked scouts from the start.

For the next couple of years, I would go on over twenty Scout camping trips - backpacking, fishing, canoeing, floating the river on inner tubes, spelunking in caves - they were all great fun. An added bonus was having a weekend away from Jean, as well as a week each summer at scout camp.

Christmas 1974

It'd only been nine months since Mom's suicide, and I did not have the Christmas spirit. Although I'd always loved the holiday, I was sad at facing Christmas without Mom. It just didn't seem right. The only good thing about the holiday was getting some camping gear for my new Boy Scout obsession. This was my first Christmas being a *de facto* member of the Johnson family and Mom Johnson got me just as many gifts as she did her own children. She got me some clothes and that did NOT sit well with Jean (understatement), who felt it wasn't her place to buy me clothes. Personally, I thought it was none of Jean's business. The clothes she and Dad got me were embarrassing. Jean used the excuse that times were tough, and they couldn't afford the clothes other kids wore.

My clothing requirements were pretty basic - Levi's jeans, $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve T-shirts, and tennis shoes. I soon learned it wasn't really a financial issue. It was Jean. She didn't want Tim and I to fit in. Why would she do this? Because she was just a bitch. She got pleasure from being emotionally cruel. That's how she rolled. She might've been the first person I personally encountered that was like that, and it sucked that I was stuck with her. Over the course of my life, I've encountered a few like-minded people who just enjoy being assholes.

Besides a wardrobe upgrade, Mom Johnson got me a Primus camp stove, which I really wanted for Scouts. After Christmas, Dad agreed to take Jean to Duluth, Minnesota to visit her father. Unfortunately, I had to go. I'd have rather had a root canal. Dad let me invite someone and I asked Jeff Hesoun to come, and thankfully, he said he would.

The day after Christmas, the weather was unseasonably mild, so I decided to go trail riding on my Honda. I was filling my tank at the gas station when Dad pulled up in his crappy VW bus to get some oil. I went inside to pay for my gas and there were some locals sitting around, whiling away the time. One guy, Ben Cobb, (who didn't know who I was), said, "That Ben Peters is an idiot. He's planning on taking that jalopy all the way to Minnesota. Hell, I wouldn't take it to the end of town." While he was talking, Bill Black, the station owner, was looking at him and motioning in my direction with his eyes. The

guy finally figures out I'm Ben Peters' son, and says, "Oh, I'm sorry, son. I didn't mean anything by it." I was so angry I wanted to kill him. I replied by saying, "Take your apology and shove it up your ass, old man." He said, "Listen kid, I apologized" to which I responded by saying, "Yeah, I heard you the first time. Sorry's not the magic word and you can kiss my ass." And with that, I stormed out and went trail riding.

To prepare for the long trip to Minnesota, Dad prepped the VW for cold weather. His solution? Line the inside of the bus with Owens-Corning fiberglass insulation. I kid you not - using duct tape, he wrapped the inside of that bus with pink insulation. It worked beautifully. Beautifully, that is, at keeping the cold air inside.

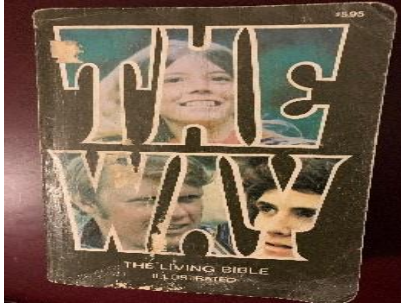
The next morning, we swung by Jeff's house and hit the highway. On a good day, the VW wouldn't go 65 mph, and loaded down with luggage and four people, Dad was lucky to get it up to 50. VW heaters were crappy, and this old bus put out virtually no heat in the back. Jean and Dad were upfront, sipping hot chocolate, smoking cigarettes, and having a grand ole time. Meanwhile, Jeff and I had blue lips in the back and were counting the miles as our core temperature dropped. We got to Duluth after a couple of really long days, although it seemed like a month. I give mad props to Jeff. He never complained.

Jean's dad was the quintessential grumpy old man (apparently, the apple didn't fall far from the tree). Despite everything, Jeff and I managed to have fun that week. We found a cool hobby store in Duluth and went to see *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*. Within walking distance of her Dad's house was an ice cream parlor and we walked there daily for root beer floats. One day, we went to visit Jean's brother Dave, in Taconite Harbor, on the north shore of Lake Superior. The wind chill was 56 below, but that didn't stop Jeff and I from sledding down an awesome trail run all afternoon. After several days, we headed south and finally made it home. It was a long trip. Thank God for Jeff Hesoun that week.

Returning to school after Christmas break, I turned fourteen a few days later, on January 9, 1975. Dad and Jean didn't do anything for me, but Mom Johnson made my birthday special, just like my own Mom used to. She knew this was my first birthday after Mom's death, so she made the same dinner Mom always made me: fried chicken, mashed potatoes, biscuits, and gravy - and chocolate cake.

After dinner, she gave me my present. Although my own Mom had given me a blue-jean Bible only a year earlier, there was a new popular Bible several friends had. It was called *The Way*, commonly referred to as the groovy Bible. That night, Mom Johnson gave me a copy. On the first page, she inscribed:

***January 9th, 1975. To David W. Peters,
Stay the same sweet boy, ever trusting the Lord.
Chris L. Johnson.***



The Way (Living Bible)

The parallels between my own mother's precious gift a year earlier, and this gift from my "new" Mom were not lost on me. Afterwards, she took Angela, Herbie, and me to see *The Towering Inferno*. She truly made my birthday special.

Mom Johnson didn't replace my birth mother (no one could), but she was so special. So much of what I am and what I became, I owe to this angel. I'm convinced God sent her to me after Mom died to help me navigate through the difficult years ahead. And they were difficult - very difficult. Until I graduated from college, she was the most important person in my life. She loved me so well, and always had my back. Just like my real Mom, she was my biggest cheerleader, throughout high school, and college.

I have been a person of faith my whole life, and although I've struggled periodically in my walk with God, I've never doubted his existence. My prayers haven't always been answered in the manner

or timeliness I've wanted, but there have been a few definite signs throughout my life that reaffirmed my beliefs. The arrival of Chris Johnson in my life in the summer of 1974 might just be my biggest sign of the existence of God. She was my angel. She died on March 6, 2022, and it was like losing my own Mom all over again. I miss her terribly and will never forget her.

Mommie Dearest

In March 1975, Dad married Jean at the Anderson County courthouse. They tied the knot while Tim and I were in school. The irony of the timing was not lost on me. It was right around the one-year anniversary of Mom's death. They'd been together (although illicitly) for a couple of years, so the fact they got married didn't shock me. I despised Jean, and wished we had never met the Neumann family, but such is life. My familiar refrain: You play the hand you're dealt.

When Tim and I got home from school that day, Jean sat us down for a little chat. She said, "I want to tell you boys something. I married your father today - I didn't marry you. As far as I'm concerned, you're on your own!" There was a new sheriff in town, and HIS name was Jean. We quickly learned who was in charge around here.

Unbeknownst to us at the moment, Tim and I were embarking on a journey of emotional abuse that would last years. I was fourteen, just one year removed from the death of the most important person in my world. As an adult, Tim has been in therapy, and his therapists have struggled to understand how this woman was initially nice, only to turn into a complete bitch.

I think one factor was the classic stepparent trap. She was nice while pursuing Dad, but once she landed him, she had no use for us. We were living reminders of the "other" parent, even though that other parent was dead. The other reason, and the one I put the most stock in, is that she was simply cruel. Her talent was mental and emotional abuse. We were too old and too big for her to physically hurt us, so she went the mental, and emotional route. In that area, she was quite skillful.

Much like the tactic I used with Mom - disappearing when she was upset, Tim and I disappeared when Jean was around. To limit exposure to her, we stayed away from home as much as possible. For most of my four years of high school, I felt like I was practically homeless. Yes, I had a roof over my head, but the only time I spent at home was to sleep (and on countless nights I slept at Mom Johnson's). It wasn't a home for Tim and me, not in the traditional sense - just a place to crash.

Tim hung out with Steve Forbes, Scott Keith, and Keith McCarty, and I had my friends and Mom Johnson. When we came home at night, we went to our rooms and stayed there. It was better than being around Jean and being subjected to her crap.

Initially, Dad and Jean seemed to get along pretty well. It's hard to believe, but I do think he loved her, and honestly, they only had one sticking point in their relationship. She felt Dad spoiled us, which was ludicrous. That was the basis for every one of their arguments, each one initiated by her. It was usually some innocuous kindness Dad would do for us. It could be as insignificant as treating us to a candy bar, but if Jean was in one of her moods, it would set her off. She'd say something hateful to Dad (about us) and he'd try to sweep it under the rug.

This would quickly cause a heated argument. Inevitably, the argument would escalate to shouting, and Dad always ended up losing. He'd go down in flames, just as Jean was getting ramped up. At some point, Dad would inevitably play the pity card. Something to the effect of, "Geez, cut them some slack" or "These boys have had a terrible life." Whenever he played that card, she pounced on him. I don't recall exactly the words, but the inference was clear - "I don't give one shit about their horrible childhood." Sometimes the fights would last hours, but whatever the length, Dad lost them all. At some point, he saw the writing on the wall, and threw in the towel. Giving up was ineffectual because, when Jean was pissed, she was pissed.

Come Hell or high water, she was going to extract her pound of flesh. Even after he caved in, she remained in a bad mood for a few days. To placate Jean, Dad, occasionally, did something I thought was reprehensible. He would actually be mean to us to get back in her good graces. It wasn't anything egregious, but the premise was just pathetic. He was a coward for doing that, and Tim and I saw right through it. I wanted to say, "You're being an asshole towards us to get back on her good side? Seriously? What's wrong with you?" Unfortunately, that was our reality.

At the end of May, I finished Glen Alpine Junior High School. It had not been a good time in my life. On to high school.

Working Man

The rest of that summer, I mowed yards, hung out at the Johnsons, and did farm work. My buddy, Jack Bumgardner called one morning and said a local farmer needed help hauling hay. "Hauling hay? What was that?" Jack said it was simple but required lots of lifting. The job paid \$2.50 an hour, good money for a fourteen-year-old in 1975. Jack wasn't lying. It WAS a lot of lifting. I didn't mind it though. I was with my buddies, making money, and building muscles.

Hauling hay was simple. You walked behind a tractor and baler and picked up bales (they weighed roughly fifty pounds) and hoisted them up to a couple of guys on the wagon, who stacked them. After a couple of hours, I was soaked with sweat, and the man in charge let us take a break. He brought out a basket of ice-cold Cokes and told us we could each have two. Man, did they ever hit the spot on a hot day. After lounging in the shade for fifteen minutes, I was ready for a nap. Unfortunately, it was time to get back at it. We worked six hours, and I made the princely sum of fifteen bucks.

Over the rest of the summer, I got more jobs hauling hay and one job cutting tobacco. Cutting tobacco made hauling hay seem like a piece of cake.

One Saturday morning, Rodney Allen called and asked if I wanted to cut tobacco for a local farmer. I'd planned on goofing off that day but didn't have anything else going on. Working would get me away from Jean, and I'd make some money, so I said, "Sure, come pick me up." A little while later, we headed to a farm alongside the Clinch River. There were seven other guys there. The farmer showed us how to cut tobacco stalks and stake them on poles. To cut the plant, you bent the stalk over and chopped it close to the bottom with a machete. Once cut, you skewered the stalk down on the stake. It was hard on your back and hands. After an hour, I had several blisters, but kept on trucking.

Around twelve-thirty, we broke for lunch. The farmer's wife and some ladies put a spread of food out on picnic tables which was not to be believed: fried chicken, ribs, meatloaf, cube steak and several side dishes. And there was plenty of sweet tea to drink, along with several pies, and a coconut cake. I'm usually a picky eater, but I was starving and ate a ton of food. After lunch, we walked to the river

and laid down on the riverbank. One minute I was watching the current take the water downstream, and the next minute I was sound asleep. In a little while, Rodney shook me awake and said, "C'mon man, we've got more tobacco to cut." And so, we did, for five more hours. At the end of the day, I was beat. My back was killing me, and I had blisters all over my right hand, but I'd survived and was thrilled when the farmer handed me \$30. I was rich!

Gone Fishin'

I became obsessed with fishing that summer. Part of the attraction was hanging out with buddies, but I really loved catching fish. Two of my best friends, Ricky Morgan and Jack Bumgardner were into fishing, so it was a natural fit for me.

Jack lived out in the country in Hillvale, close to Dwight Walker's farm. Dwight was married to my step-monster Jean's daughter, Linda. Unlike Jean, Linda was always nice to me. They had a pond at their farm, which was stocked with bluegill, catfish, and largemouth bass.

Hardly anyone fished there, so we had the place to ourselves, and it became a favorite hangout for the next couple of years. Ricky, Jack, and I met there all the time for a day of fishing. Each of us had two fishing rods, one for bait fishing and one to walk around the pond to fish with lures. To catch catfish, we'd put big juicy nightcrawlers on a hook and weigh them down with a sinker. We'd cast them out in the middle of the pond and let them drift to the bottom.

Over the next couple of years, we practically caught every fish in that pond. Oftentimes, while fishing there, I'd bring along my radio and we'd listen to top 40 hits on WRJZ or WNOX. Good times.

Sometimes we'd camp overnight at the pond, which was even more fun. We'd bring a Coleman lantern, flashlights and sleeping bags. I don't know if fishing was better at night, but it seemed more exciting. We'd cast out worms (or chicken livers) and set the fishing rod against a willow branch, tied to a Coke can. In the stillness of the night, the world was alive with the sound of crickets and bullfrogs, only occasionally interrupted by the sound of the can hitting the ground. That meant a fish was on and we'd race to our poles.

The pond was a short walk from the only store in Hillvale. It was a little country store, with a deli slicing machine. The old man who ran the place would slice us baloney and cheese for cracker sandwiches and he always gave us more than we had money for. If we fished during the day, we'd sometimes take a break and walk down there and get a soft drink and Dolly Madison fruit pie. They were cheap and filling. If staying overnight, we'd get hot dogs and buns and roast the hotdogs over a fire by the water's edge of the pond. If it was a nice night, we'd sleep on the banks of the pond.

Sometimes we'd keep the radio playing all night and fall asleep to music. To this day, whenever I hear the song, *Thank God I'm A Country Boy*, it reminds me of fishing at Walker's pond. If it was cold or raining, we'd sleep in the barn on stacks of hay.

One Sunday at the pond, I hooked - and nearly caught - the biggest largemouth bass of my life. I was walking along the bank, using my favorite lure, which mimicked a bluegill. On one retrieval, I got a massive strike, and the fight was on. As I was reeling him in, my buddies got excited because they could tell it was big. I got the fish close to the bank and my reel locked up. I don't know what happened, but the handle would NOT turn. I walked backwards up the bank, trying to just drag the fish out of the water. I got him within a couple feet of shore, and he shook his head in one last attempt to get loose. The sucker broke my line and got free. My fish was gone, which sucked, and my favorite lure was gone, which really sucked.

Dejected, I got the reel working again and tied on another lure. A few minutes later, at roughly the same place where I'd lost the bass, a fish broke the surface and made a big splash. Besides the sound of fish breaking water, I heard a sound like keys rattling. A second later, I looked at my feet and there was my favorite lure. The same bass I'd almost caught, moments earlier, had jumped out of the water and violently shaken his head to free the lure from his jaw. Not only was he successful at getting the lure free, but he also returned it to me. My prized lure landed right at my feet. I thought that was mighty decent of him.

I couldn't make this story up if I tried. Later that afternoon, I caught a three-and-a-half-pound bass, probably the same one I'd hooked earlier. My buddies congratulated me as I put him on the stringer. At the end of the day, I took the fish home and showed it to Dad. Pop wasn't one to needlessly heap praise on us. We knew he was proud, but he didn't constantly tell us. He wasn't a participation trophy kind of guy. On that day, however, he was really impressed. He said, "David, that's really something. I never caught a bass that big. I tell you what. You clean him, and I'll fry him for us." Dad fried him up and we had a great meal. It made me proud and happy. Lord knows, at that time, moments like those were rare.

Country Life Ain't for Me

In the summer of '75, we left Norris. A couple years earlier, Dad had purchased a ten-acre farm, four miles outside of town. It was a total dump. The land was hilly, and unfarmable. There was a long dirt driveway leading up to an eighteenth century decrepit old log house. I have no idea why he bought the place. Part of the reason was probably wanting to escape the small-town gossip in Norris. Dad had been a leader in the community but had fallen far from that precipice. I think he'd just chucked it all by now. He was in his own emotional pain at the time, and it was a miracle he survived with his psyche as intact as it was.

Looking back, I still don't know why Dad did some of the things he did. At the time, I thought they were stupid, misguided, and a copout from the trauma we were all experiencing. Today, I realize he had his own demons, and did the best he could. He wasn't perfect, he was human. He must've felt God had let him down or abandoned him. Most of it wasn't his fault, yet he was expected to shoulder burdens that few individuals could handle. It wasn't fair, but he got caught in the path of a tornado, and no one could've ever imagined how long that storm would last.

Being an entrepreneur had not been Dad's forte. He made great products but didn't nail down the details required to run a successful company. Sometimes, customers would owe him thousands of dollars, and he wouldn't pursue debt collection. He was too naïve, too trusting, and, ultimately, too gullible to make money.

Dad probably looked at the farm as an escape, sort of like Oliver Douglas in the 1960s sitcom *Green Acres*. I was fourteen, still a kid who didn't know shit, and I thought buying the farm was a joke, and at the time, I thought Dad was a joke as well.

The 200-year-old log house had been a party place for locals forever. When he bought it, the main level was littered with newspapers, beer cans and liquor bottles. There was no running water or electricity. The house had just two large rooms, upstairs and the main level. Before moving out there, Jean had to sell her house on East Norris Road and Dad had to make this place suitable for living in modern times. I give him a ton of credit. He was a brilliant man who could literally do anything. Fix a car, build a house, raise bees,

operate a ham radio, and so on. Even with all his skills, his task to make the house livable was going to be quite a challenge.

First, he had a well dug and ran water lines up to the house. He built a kitchen, a bathroom, and installed plumbing throughout the place. He wired the house for electricity. He converted the upstairs into a bathroom and three bedrooms. Somehow, he pulled it all off and it looked pretty decent. Heat was provided by a wood-burning stove (which he also built) on the main level. Shortly before moving, he took me out there one night and showed me what he'd done.

For what it was, and all that he'd done, it wasn't bad at all. For many reasons, I hated leaving my childhood home on West Circle Road and didn't much like living at Jean's house either. But moving to the country really sucked. When I lived in Norris, I could be anywhere in town within 30 minutes. Living on the freeway was altogether different. My motorcycle wasn't street legal, and it was way too far to walk. I was stuck, and I hated it.

Every day, I desperately wanted to go into town, where my friends were, but it wasn't easy. Because of Jean, Dad wasn't permitted to give me a ride to Norris. If Jean and Dad were heading that way, they'd give me a ride to the outskirts of town. Even writing this today makes me wonder what the hell was wrong with my father. For the life of me, I don't understand why he was so submissive to Jean. He should've told her, "Screw you, David's friends are in town, and it's no problem to give him a ride. He hates it here. What's the crime in doing something nice for him?"

Looking back now and thinking of all the times they dropped me off at the outskirts of Norris, it's absolutely ridiculous that I actually walked into town, looking like a vagabond. Everyone in town knew everyone, so thankfully, I'd often get rides from people, but they must've wondered why I was walking from the city limits into town. If Jean had never entered the picture, Tim and I would have been much happier.

If Dad had to run an errand by himself, he would gladly give me a ride into town. He was two people - Jean's husband, and our father. Jean's husband was henpecked beyond belief, and for the life of me, I don't know why. Maybe because he grew up the only boy amongst four sisters. I don't really remember him being that way around Mom, but because of her illness, it was a different dynamic. He did his best to placate Mom whenever possible. He hated confrontation

and tension, and I suspect he got plenty of that from her. Even during the good times, before she got sick, Dad was still submissive to her.

In his memoir, he wrote, "I was completely in love with Julia. Anything she wanted to do; we did. For the first time in my life, I was completely happy, and so was Julia." He did it because he was in love with Mom and wanted nothing more than her happiness. He wrote that the first six years of their marriage were the best years of his life.

Dogs and Filth

Another “joy” of living in the country was the intolerable dog situation. I don’t ever remember not having dogs around and both Mom and Dad were dog lovers. When I was a toddler, Mom had three dachshunds: Rudolph, Donner, and Blitzen. Before I was born, Dad had dalmatians, so we always had dogs, and for the most part, I liked them.

Somewhere along the way, the cute purebred dog concept fell by the wayside, and Dad and Jean started collecting vagrant dogs. Over time, they amassed six or seven mongrels. I didn’t care that they were hounds, but I DID care that they lived inside. For all my high school years, these dogs lived in the house. None were house broken, and they crapped and pissed everywhere, all the time. If you walked barefoot downstairs, you better watch out. And my Lord, the crap they ate. Dad and Jean bought the cheapest dog food available and mixed it with whatever crap was left over from their supper. The stench from the dog bowls was repulsive, and they all lapped it up like it was manna from Heaven.

Most of the dogs were in bad shape and probably would’ve been removed if Animal Control knew of the situation. Several had mange all over their bodies, and it was revolting. I did feel sorry for them. The mange caused their skin to be really dry, which necessitated Jean rubbing petroleum jelly on their skin. While Dad and Jean watched TV in the evening, she rubbed petroleum jelly on their bodies. Occasionally, she’d find a giant tick on one of them and pick it off and toss it in the wood-burning stove. Nasty doesn’t begin to describe it. The heat of summer really ratcheted up the abhorrence and stench. Fleas were everywhere.

The log house was disgustingly filthy. If this were today, it wouldn’t just be the dogs that would be removed. Tim and I might have been removed by the Department of Human Services as well. It was the epitome of squalor, and Jean or Dad just didn’t give a shit.

What the hell happened? How’d I go from middle-class to this? In a matter of a couple of years, I’d gone from a nice home to a filthy dump in the sticks. It’s hard to imagine such a fall. I hated living there. I tried to stay away from home as much as possible, and when I was there, I steered clear of Jean. This meant staying holed up in my

room. In the summer, it was so hot upstairs that I just laid around in my own sweat. Even with windows open, it was stifling hot. Conversely, in the winter, it was freezing in the mornings.

In the wintertime, before going to bed, Dad would build a roaring blaze in the stove, and it would be pretty warm. Unfortunately, as the fire died down, temperatures began dropping. By the time I woke up for school, it would be in the mid-fifties in my room. Unlike the early pioneers, we had electric blankets, which were essential for living in an old log house.

One day, I opened my chest of drawers to get some clothes and discovered several dead mice in there. It was revolting, but not surprising. The house was full of mice and other critters. There were mice that lived around the stove and oven. When Jean cooked something, you could see mice scurrying away to escape the heat. When I turned off my light at night, it wasn't long before I'd hear the pitter patter of mice running around. It was creepy, and I always worried about a mouse scurrying across my face while I slept.

One morning, I was taking a shower. In the middle of washing my hair, I felt something on my shoulder. I glanced over and saw that it was a snakeskin. I looked up and noticed a little hole in the ceiling. Apparently, the snake had hibernated up there and just shed its skin. Another time, I was heading upstairs, only to be greeted by a seven-foot black snake slithering down towards me. What the hell was this, an episode of *Wild Kingdom*?

And because there were so many dogs living inside, there was dog hair EVERYWHERE. You had to look carefully before using a glass or plate, or you might inadvertently eat or drink a dog hair. Occasionally, I would empty an ice tray and see a dog hair frozen in an ice cube.

We had well water, but it wasn't safe to drink. It hadn't been tested for parasites or bacteria. Dad put a water filter on the kitchen faucet, but it wasn't long before the filter turned black, and, of course, he never changed it. We didn't have a dryer, so laundry was hung outside. Jean hung clothes on the line while we were in school. She would take her and Dad's clothes down when dry. Not surprisingly, she didn't extend the same courtesy for Tim and me. I usually came home late at night and forgot to take my things off the clothesline. As a result, there were many mornings where I had to run outside and grab frozen jeans off the line. They would be stiff as a board. I would

grab them, run back inside, and hang them above the wood-burning stove. If I got lucky, they would dry quickly. If not, they'd end up warm and wet. I put them on anyway. What choice did I have?

Freshman Year

I started high school in September 1975. I looked quite a bit different than I had at the end of eighth grade. Working on farms all summer resulted in me losing twenty pounds. My baby fat was gone, and my hair was clean (I'd learned from Mom Johnson that I had to wash it nightly). Carrie Owens, the girl who'd teased me unmercifully about my greasy hair, saw me on the first day and said, "Wow, David, you look pretty good."

On that first day, my freshman buddies and I received red bellies as an initiation into high school. This involved two upperclassmen holding you down while another guy pulled up your shirt and slapped the shit out of your belly until it was beet red. It didn't hurt much, and it was best to just go with the flow, or it'd be worse. Much worse.

I liked most of my teachers, but my favorite was Joe Hollander. Fresh out of college, he was the new algebra teacher and Junior Varsity (JV) basketball coach. I liked him immediately. He was only a few years older than me, a sports junkie, and we often talked baseball.

In late September, the school held basketball tryouts. I hadn't made the eighth-grade team, so I decided to skip basketball. There weren't cuts on the JV team, so it wasn't fear of failure. The main reason was that I didn't want to put the time in. I was one of the better freshmen ball players and Coach Hollander encouraged me to go out, but I passed. Basketball required daily practice from 3:30 to 6:00, and the season lasted from October through mid-March. I wanted to do my own thing instead of being stuck in the gym every day.

Christmas 1975 sucked. For whatever reason (our financial situation, Jean being Jean), we didn't get much of anything, and this would now be the norm from now on. Thankfully, once again, Mom Johnson came through for me. She got me some clothes that I desperately needed. Dad and Jean could've afforded to get me a pair of Levi's and a shirt or two, but they didn't see it that way. They did buy me clothes, but it was crappy shit from Kmart (as Tom Cruise says in *Rainman*, "Kmart sucks!"). I drew the line at that crap. Looking back

at it today, it does seem trivial, but was vitally important then. Peer pressure is a bitch. Mom Johnson understood this and made sure I looked like any other guy in school.

I spent most of Christmas Day at her house. When I returned home that night, I hauled my gifts upstairs. Jean looked suspiciously at my bags but didn't say anything. The next morning Dad was heading to Knoxville, and I decided to ride along. I came downstairs and Jean noticed my new sneakers and Levi's.

She said, "What are you wearing?"

"These were gifts from Mrs. Johnson."

"Why the hell does she buy you clothes? Does she think we can't afford them?" I tried but couldn't suppress a giggle. She pounced on that. "Something funny?" I'd had enough of her crap.

"Yeah, that's actually funny." Jean looked at Dad and said, "You better straighten your son out."

Dad looked at me as if to say, "thanks for nothing."

"Well, let me tell you something, smartass. I forbid you from wearing any clothes she bought in this house. I won't allow it."

"Go to Hell, Jean." I looked at Dad and said, "I'll be in the car." I felt sorry I'd put Dad in a bad situation, but I was pissed. I knew he would catch it from Jean, but I intended on letting him know how I felt.

We got in the car and Dad said, "I wish you hadn't done that." I had had enough. I went off and said, "I'm sorry Pop, but she started it. It's none of her business what Mrs. Johnson does for me. Jean treats us like shit, and you damn-well know it. Why do you allow that? It's not right. Mom would never have allowed this, and you shouldn't either. Do Tim and I not count for anything? Geez, where are we in the pecking order around here?"

Then silence. I didn't have to say anything else. Dad knew the real score - Jean was queen of this castle. He knew it wasn't right, but, unfortunately, nothing changed while I lived there. To circumvent Jean's dictum, I started changing my clothes in an abandoned 1949 Packard that was rotting away on our property. For the next year and a half, I would leave for school a few minutes early, stop at the Packard on the way down the driveway, and swap out my sneakers and clothes to wear to school.

During the winter, it was especially fun, stripping down to my skivvies with temperatures in the teens, and putting on freezing cold clothes. At night, I had to do it in reverse. It still ticks me off that I had to do that. It was ridiculous. After the summer of 1977 (my sophomore year in high school) I made my own money and bought my own clothes, so the clothes changing routine came to an end.

Play Ball

In February 1976, Norris announced they were resurrecting the baseball program. They couldn't find a coach the previous year, so there was no team. I was thrilled they were bringing it back. Although I'd skipped basketball, I was definitely playing baseball. That was my sport. The school had to spend some money on new equipment and uniforms and find a coach. Our algebra teacher, Joe Hollander offered to coach, and I was thrilled about that too. His assistant was Don Forbes, an executive at TVA. Don's son, Steve, was the best basketball player in school and a good all-around athlete.

We had tryouts in early March, and there weren't a ton of guys going out for the team, so no one was cut. There were just three freshmen on the team (Ricky Morgan, Eric Jackson, and me). I had my sights set on playing second base. I wanted to play third base, but my fifteen-year-old arm couldn't make the long throw from third to first. Steve Forbes (a junior) was our third baseman and Johnny Alley (a senior) played shortstop. I liked second base but quickly learned that turning the double play didn't come naturally to me. Undaunted, I worked at it daily. Coach Forbes rode my butt hard. He'd frequently get frustrated and say, "C'mon David, you're better than that. Do it again and do it right this time!" At the time, I thought he unfairly singled me out. Regardless, I busted my hump every day.

Our first game of the season was against Maynardville and the day before the game, starting lineups were announced. I was thrilled when Coach Hollander said, "David, you're starting at second base." I was excited to be one of the first freshmen to start in a varsity sport at Norris. When I got home that night, Dad and Jean were watching TV.

"Dad, coach named me starting second base, and we're playing Maynardville tomorrow in front of the school." Dad was happy for me, but Jean paid me no attention. As I headed up to my room, he said, "I'll be there tomorrow, hon."

The next day, I was rarin' to go. The game started at 1:00 and classes were dismissed at 12:45 so the student body could attend. I was in the locker room changing into my uniform and excited about my debut. After getting dressed, I went up the steps from the locker room and trotted onto the field for warmups.

My high school career finally began. Let the games begin. In the top of the first inning, I caught an infield fly, which bolstered my confidence. "Yep, I belong here," I thought to myself. In the bottom of the inning, we came up to bat. I was on deck, taking practice swings and thinking I looked pretty darn impressive. Not really, just trying to avoid looking like a moron. Dad was standing behind the fence and said, "David, get your bat around quick. Their pitcher has a good fastball." I brushed him off like, "Whatever. I got this, bro."

When I got up to bat, the first pitch was a fastball down the middle, and I swung way late. Strike one. The next pitch was high and outside. The count was 1 and 1. Next pitch was another fastball, and I was late again. I was not used to this guy's velocity. Dad was right. This guy did throw heat. Next pitch was another fastball and I swung late but managed to foul it off. Next pitch was a breaking ball that missed the inside corner. The count was now 2 and 2. Next pitch was more smoke, a fastball down the center and I swung late again. My first time at bat and I'd struck out. Dejected, I jogged back to the dugout, tail between my legs. My teammates told me to shake it off. I sat down and felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and there was my father with some unsolicited advice.

"I told you he threw hard. You have to get your bat around quicker." He was right, but this wasn't the time or place.

I was fifteen and embarrassed. Peer pressure is tough, and I didn't feel like getting pointers from "Daddy." I stood up, turned around to face him, pointed towards the parking lot and simply said, "GO!" He got the message, quickly left and went home. I knew I'd hurt his feelings but was embarrassed he'd singled me out in front of the fellas. The game continued, but not in our favor. At 2:50, the students had to head towards the buses. Shortly afterwards, we lost.

I felt bad I'd been short with Pop, and we talked about it that night. "David, I won't come to any more games unless invited."

"Pop, it's cool. You can come to any of them." He was adamant.

"Nope, unless you invite me, I won't be there." For the next four years, I invited him to every game, and he came to many of my road games. That was the only home game he ever came to. After our talk, he gave me some tips on how to get my bat around quicker. The tips worked. I started regularly getting hits. The pointers he gave me were a big part of my success that first season.

We finished our inaugural season with a record of 2-12. Pretty underwhelming, but we were young, and had improved a lot as the season progressed. In our last eight games, we won two and were neck and neck in several others. By season's end, the Norris Senators were no longer the joke of District Two. After going hitless in my first game against Maynardville, I finished the season with a .320 batting average, and made All-District.

After the season, we had a little celebration during lunch one day. The first thing Coach Hollander and Coach Forbes did was award lettermen sweaters to everyone. There were two trophies to give out and Coach Hollander said, "Don, you want to handle this one?" Coach Forbes began talking about the Most Improved Player, and it was a nice trophy. He said, "This player is easily the Most Improved. He's been fun to watch, and I can't wait to see his progress over the next three years. David, come get this."

I was floored. Forbes had rode my ass all season. I guess I impressed him after all. Unfortunately, that was the only season he helped us. I learned more that year from him than I did from all other coaches combined. The guy REALLY knew his baseball. Year one of baseball was in the books and I had played well. I was on my way.

That summer pretty much sucked at the log house, but I did something with Dad I enjoyed. We built porches on the front and back of the house. When he asked if I wanted to help, I was lukewarm about spending so much time and energy at that hell hole. But a funny thing happened. I got my Dad back, if only for a few weeks. Building those porches was hard work, but I had a lot of one-on-one time with him, and we had some good heart-to-heart talks.

During the time building those porches, I learned a lot of carpentry, and was reminded once again of how brilliant Ben Peters was. I still resented things he'd done and was still allowing to happen, but I admired how smart he was and enjoyed hanging out with him. He could literally do ANYTHING and was easily the smartest man I've ever known. After a few weeks, we finished both porches, and they looked good. When I wasn't working on porches, I was at the Johnsons. At Mom Johnson's there was always food in the fridge, and I could help myself to anything. It was my safe place - it was my happy place.

Boy Scout Camp

In mid-July, our scout troop went to Camp Buck Toms for a week on Watts Bar Lake in Rockwood, Tennessee. It was a beautiful location, and hundreds of scouts from the region attended. There was a dozen or so of us from Troop 134. We arrived Sunday afternoon, found our assigned campsite and got set up. The tents had wood floors and canvas tops. There were two scouts per tent, and I bunked with my buddy, Jeff Hesoun. After settling in, we walked down to the lake to try our luck at fishing. Jeff and I fished for an hour or so and caught and released a couple of small bluegill. Afterwards, we returned to camp and washed up for supper.

Around five, all the scouts throughout camp headed to the mess hall. The food at scout camp was pretty good, and if there were leftovers after the first servings, they'd list them on a blackboard, and we'd send a couple of young guys back to grab the remaining grub. We usually left the mess hall with full bellies. At night, our troop had campfires at our site. Around ten, we'd retreat to our tents. Jeff and I would stay up talking about stuff - life, girls, you name it. After breakfast each morning, we'd split up and head out to the various camp activities. Some guys went fishing, some went swimming or canoeing, but most of us worked on merit badges at various stations throughout camp.

My first year, I earned four badges: First Aid, Leatherwork, Basket Weaving and Wilderness Survival. The two Arts and Crafts badges were easy, but First Aid and Wilderness Survival were tough. The Wilderness Survival badge was fun. Jeff and I earned it together and learned a lot about surviving in the wild. The final exam was surviving a night out in the woods. We built a lean-to from a branch hanging down from a tree and started our campfire with flint and steel. The leaders provided us with ground beef, oranges, and onions (in hindsight, not much survival required when they gave you food).

The instructors told us to eat the orange or onion and leave the outer shell and pack ground beef into it. Then cook it in the coals of the fire. That sounded stupid, so Jeff and I scrounged through the trash and found a couple of lids from industrial-sized cans used in the mess hall. We cleaned the lids in the lake and used them as makeshift skillets. Everyone else had tiny hamburgers that tasted like

oranges, and we chowed down on hamburger steaks. We slept okay that night and, although it rained, we didn't get too wet. We survived just fine and earned our badges.

Scout camp had a couple of canteens (outposts) that sold supplies and stuff. They sold frozen candy bars, which I'd never had, but instantly loved. Every afternoon, I'd go to an outpost and buy a frozen Milky Way bar. A tasty treat on a hot summer day.

On Wednesday night, our campsite was raided by a neighboring troop from Knoxville. Jeff and I had just settled down in our cabin and a couple of their guys ran by, flung open our tent flaps and tossed a bucket of water into our sleeping quarters. It happened in an instant, but I recognized one of the Knoxville scouts and knew where their troop camped. While those guys were soaking our cabin, other guys from their troop were bombing other tents in our troop's campsite. It ended quickly, and we all gathered around the campfire to assess damages. Jeff and I were lucky. The bulk of the water landed on the floor and our sleeping bags stayed dry. Around the campfire, we planned a revenge mission for the next night, but we put a twist on the water bombs.

In the past year, Ricky Morgan, Jack Bumgardner, and I had really gotten into catfishing. We fished primarily at Walker's pond and Norris Lake. Ricky had discovered Bowker's Catfish bait at a local tackle shop. Catfish love smelly crap and Bowker's was the pinnacle of stink baits. It was a thick white paste that smelled like rotten cheese. It was so pungent that you couldn't even touch it (you had to put it on your bait with a stick), or you'd never get the smell off your fingers. Catfish loved it, and we caught lots of them with it.

That week, Ricky brought a jar of Bowker's to camp to catch catfish in Watts Bar Lake. Jeff Hesoun came up with the idea of mixing buckets of water with the nasty stuff. This would pay back the punks from Knoxville for their raid the night before. When all was said and done, we had six buckets of the foulest-smelling shit on earth. Around eleven that night, several of us crept up to the Knoxville troop's campsite. Moving quickly, we pulled open their tent flaps and slung buckets of nasty liquid into every one of their tents. We were right on target and soaked the scouts and their sleeping bags. Afterwards, we hauled ass back to our campsite. As we were running away, we heard several of their guys saying, "Damn, what is this shit?" "Karma's a bitch, boys!" On Saturday

morning, we broke camp, packed up and headed home. Camp Buck Toms was awesome.

That fall, our scout troop took a weekend trip to Tellico for trout fishing. The Tellico River is in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We arrived at our campsite late Friday afternoon. After getting tents set up, we went and gathered firewood. When we returned to camp, we heard rustling leaves near our tents. We stumbled upon a baby boar, eating someone's cookies. We gave it plenty of space. If you've ever seen an adult-sized boar, you'd know why we didn't want to run into Momma.

The next morning, we got up to cook breakfast. We often made donuts in the morning on campouts. They're easy to make. You take a can of biscuits and poke a hole in each one. Then you pour about 3" of oil in a pot and heat over the fire till sizzling. Carefully place a "donut" into the hot oil. It doesn't take long to cook. After it turns golden brown, carefully remove it and place it in a bag filled with powdered sugar. Close the bag, shake till coated, yank it out and chow down. Delicious.

After breakfast, we gathered our fishing gear and hit the river. For trout fishing, I preferred spinnerbaits, but most guys used corn. I didn't have any luck that morning, but after lunch, landed a 13" rainbow. Now that I'd caught my supper, I spent the rest of the day playing with my buddies.

Around 5:30, we returned to camp. That night, I pan-fried my trout over the campfire, and it was excellent. We hung around the fire till ten and climbed into our tent and sleeping bags, and Jeff and I talked the night away. I loved all aspects of scouting, but my favorite activity was probably hanging out at night in the tent, talking to a buddy.

In the darkness of the tent that night, I opened up to Jeff about the moment I realized Mom had died. It was an emotional talk, and I guess I needed to discuss it. He listened intently. I broke down (quietly) a couple of times, and then we just laid there in the stillness of the night. Jeff finally broke the silence by saying, "I can't imagine losing my Mom, especially in that manner. I'm so sorry, David."

Afterwards, we lightened the mood by talking about Jeff's favorite show, *Movin' On*. It was a show about trucking and Jeff was obsessed with eighteen wheelers. Eventually we both nodded off.

I was now a sophomore, and Tim was a senior. In the afternoons and Saturdays, he worked at Archer's Food Center. He'd saved up \$800 and bought a Chevy Vega GT. It was a pretty cool car and upgraded his nerd status considerably. It also provided me with a ride to school. Thanks to Tim, we didn't have to ride the dreaded bus every day.

Unfortunately, shortly after the school year began, Tim totaled his car one night after work (he wasn't hurt). Even though we rarely got along, I felt really bad for him. Once again, we were without wheels. For the remainder of the school year, Keith McCarty picked Tim up in the mornings and gave him a ride to school. I rode with a friend from across the street, Steve Foster.

Doc Bratcher

That year, I became good friends with my high school guidance counselor, Doc Bratcher. I frequently dropped by his office to tell him about my daily problems. I'd see him in the hall, and say, "Hey Doc, I got probs. Have you got any openings today?" It was a bit of a joke, but sometimes, it was serious, and he always gave me his undivided attention. He was my favorite faculty member.

One day in October of my sophomore year, Tim was in Doc's office, and they were talking about college. Earlier that fall, Tim had been named valedictorian. The previous year, he'd taken the ACT test and made a 35 out of 36 (a real brainiac). Based on that and his GPA (4.0), he was sure to get a college scholarship. Tim was interested in science and engineering and planned on going to the University of Tennessee (UT), Dad's alma mater, and studying physics.

Doc asked Tim, "Have you thought of MIT?"

"What is that? I've never heard of it."

"The Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, the finest engineering school in the country."

"Sounds great, but how much? We don't have any money." MIT was one of the most expensive schools in America.

"Let's just fill out the paperwork and see if we can get some scholarship money." Like he'd done with countless other kids at Norris, Doc did all the heavy lifting for Tim. He helped him fill out the requisite financial aid forms and sent a letter of recommendation with his grades and transcripts to MIT. They crossed their fingers.

The week before Thanksgiving, Doc saw Tim in the hall and told him to drop by his office. When Tim walked in, Doc handed him a letter from MIT. Tim opened it, read it, and put his head down on Doc's desk. For the briefest of moments, he broke down in tears. At a time when a \$1,000 scholarship was considered significant, Tim was awarded scholarships and financial aid worth \$8,000 per year, at a school he hadn't even heard of a month earlier. He didn't grasp the magnitude of it then, but his life had just changed forever. He was going places a kid from Norris wouldn't have dreamt possible. All the studying had paid off big time. I was proud of him.

Doc Bratcher did that for many kids at Norris. He changed future generations of family trees. That's no exaggeration. Doc was many things, and chief among them was being a friend and ally for kids. Outside of school, he was also a successful businessman and competitive bodybuilder. He owned a couple of sporting goods stores and a successful body-building gym in Knoxville.

Before Christmas break my junior year, Doc had me drop by his office one day. I walked in and he pulled out a big box from under his desk, handed it to me.

"Merry Christmas, DW!"

"What's this?" Without missing a beat, he said, "It's a present, dumbass!" We both laughed, and I opened it. It was a Wilson T-5000 tennis racket. Doc knew how much I loved tennis. That racket retailed for \$60 (\$300 in 2023), a heck of a gift in 1977. I was overjoyed. "Gosh Doc, I don't know what to say but thank you. You have no idea how much I love this."

"Merry Christmas, brother."

When I got home that afternoon, I couldn't wait to show it to Dad. He was happy for me, but Jean, not surprisingly, wasn't quite as thrilled.

"Mr. Bratcher must be a wealthy man, buying tennis rackets for every kid in school." I knew where she was going, but just said, "I was the only person who got one, Jean."

"That's not fair. Why would he single you out like that?"

"I am not getting into this bullshit. I guess it kills you that someone would do something nice for me. Well, he did, and I'm thrilled to have it. If you don't like it, kiss my ass." And I stormed out, ignoring her rants as I went upstairs. As far as I was concerned, Dad could deal with her.

This brief exchange was a textbook example of Jean. If there was EVER a chance to make us feel guilty or inferior, she took full advantage of it. She was masterful in trying to shame us, even for something as ridiculous as my guidance counselor giving me a gift.

A couple years later, Doc moved on to bigger pastures. He became the head of student life at Roane State Community College in Harriman. Norris High School was lucky to have this guy as long as they did. Many kids got college educations because of his efforts. When I was at Tennessee Tech, I came back to East Tennessee one weekend and dropped in to see him at his new job. It was great seeing

my old friend who had been so helpful in high school. He was enjoying his new position and seemed genuinely interested in what was happening in my life. He continued to help me (resumes, networking, interviews) throughout my college years. Sadly, that meeting at Roane State was the last time I saw him in person.

After a few years in Harriman, Doc moved up the ladder again, this time becoming head of student life at Georgia Tech. Those of us who remembered him from Norris were proud of our former guidance counselor. He'd come a long way.

In 1987, I was dating a girl in Nashville. Her ex-husband was a bodybuilder and promoter and had promoted bodybuilding events around the state. When she talked about her ex, I mentioned my high school guidance counselor was into bodybuilding and had also promoted events. When she asked who it was, I told her and she said, "Oh yeah, I know Don. He's gay." I was shocked and told her she was nuts. She then said, "Well, he must be bisexual then, because I know he's been with men." I couldn't believe it, but I wasn't disappointed. Surprised, not disappointed.

Five years later, I got a call from Dewboy. Sadly, Doc had contracted AIDS and had already lost his vision. He died on January 28, 1993, in Atlanta. He was only forty-five and had accomplished incredible things in his abbreviated time on earth. I miss my guidance counselor and, more importantly, I miss my friend. He was a shelter in the storm for some turbulent years of my life. I loved him and am grateful for his stewardship. I never dwell on how Doc died. I focus on how he lived. And he did LIVE!

In January 1977, I turned 16. That's usually a milestone for a kid, but it was just another day of the week for me. Most kids get their driver's license on their 16th birthday, but I didn't have a car, and Dad's cars were junkers. Mom Johnson took me out to Bonanza Steakhouse for my birthday dinner. Although turning 16 meant nothing to Dad (I'm sure he told me happy birthday, but that was it) and Jean, Mom Johnson made it a special day. She always made me feel loved and valued and was the only person that consistently gave that to me. As we ate dinner, I thought about my own Mom and how pleased she would have been to know this lady had basically adopted me. I thought of all the sleepovers I'd had at my house when Mom

was living and all the trouble she went through to make those special every year. Both my mothers made my birthdays special.

Out On the Water

For spring break my sophomore year, Ricky Morgan, Jack Bumgardner, and I spent the week on Norris Lake. Ricky's parents had a boat, and we spent every day on the water. In the mornings, we fished close to either Sequoia boat dock or Norris, catching bluegill, largemouth, and smallmouth. We'd eat lunch on the boat and spend hours cruising the lake. The weather was nice, the lake was beautiful, and it was a great time to hang out with your buddies.

Motoring down that gorgeous body of water at 40 mph with the wind in our faces and the sun on our backs was an absolute blast. To quote Red from *The Shawshank Redemption*, we felt like "we were the lords of all creation." Late in the afternoon, we'd set up our campsite and cook supper. Whatever we caught, we cleaned and fried in a skillet over a campfire. We were lucky that week and caught plenty of fish. After supper, we'd hop back in the boat and jug fish at night in various coves.

Jug fishing involved tying about fifteen feet of heavy monofilament line to Clorox jugs and baiting the hooks with worms or chicken livers. In the darkness of night, we'd be quiet and listen to the stillness of the lake. It was peaceful and serene. Other times, we'd talk, and it seemed like our quiet voices reached all the way across the lake. Occasionally, the utter silence was interrupted by the sound of a jug plopping under the surface. We'd then use a Coleman lantern to locate the action and retrieve the jug to see what had taken the bait.

It might be a blue catfish or channel cat, a carp, a gar, or possibly a salamander or snapping turtle. It was always exciting, seeing what had taken the bait and how big it was.

Around midnight, we'd gather up the jugs and return to shore. Whatever we caught, we'd clean and put on ice in our cooler. Afterwards, we'd restoke the fire, roast some marshmallows and have an A&W root beer before calling it a night. After turning off the lantern, it was pitch-black on the lake, which was creepy. Before falling asleep, we'd talk about scary stuff. In the blackness of those April nights, we were, at times, terrified, excited, but thrilled to be alive. Fishing at night was so much fun that week.

In the mornings, we'd restoke the fire and fry whatever we'd caught the night before. Except for an occasional candy bar or honey

bun at the marina bait shop, we ate nothing but fish all week. After breakfast, Ricky would start the outboard and we'd get back on the water. We'd fish wherever there was activity, or just cruise the water until we found a honey hole. Norris Lake is one of the most beautiful lakes in Tennessee. The water has a gorgeous deep green hue. This was our routine for five days and nights. So much fun and the best spring break I ever had.

In April, we had a three-day weekend because of in-service training for teachers. Our scoutmaster, Mr. Feeman, decided it would be a good time to earn our 50-mile afoot-afloat award. It was a LONG canoe trip on the Powell River and would require that extra day. As in prior canoe trips, I floated with Jeff Hesoun. The first night, we camped close to the water so we could get an early start on Friday. We were in Claiborne County, sixty miles from home. In the morning, we cooked breakfast, packed our gear, and started the journey. For most of the first day, we had a decent current to help with the paddling. We traveled almost twenty miles that first day.

Saturday was grueling. We ran out of current around lunchtime, so there was lot of paddling that afternoon. That night, we stopped at an island, made camp, and gathered wood for a fire. As we played in the shallows, we stumbled upon some freshwater mussels. We'd heard they were delicious, so we thought we'd have a seafood feast. We collected a couple dozen and asked Mr. Feeman how to cook them. He suggested steaming them. We placed a pot of water on the campfire. When the water was boiling, we put some mussels in and patiently waited for the deliciousness. We didn't have a clue about cooking them, so we let them boil for almost an hour. We drained the water and waited for the mussels to cool enough so we could eat them. When we finally extracted the meat from the shell, it tasted like cooked rubber. Oops! We cooked them way too long. Later that night, we were sitting around the fire when the song, *Sister Goldenhair*, came on my radio. To this day, whenever I hear that song, it takes me right back to that night on the Powell River.

After breakfast Sunday morning, we packed up our gear again, and got back on the water. The Powell River is a tributary of Norris Lake, and the river was now miles behind us. The weather was unseasonably warm for April, and we were working our butts off, paddling with no current. From here till the end, it was all lake, and each mile was human propelled. We still had several miles to go to

reach the end, and we were exhausted. The sun was beating down as we slogged through the water, stroke after stroke.

Around eleven o'clock, someone took their paddle and splashed a nearby canoe. In a flash, the water fight was on and poppin'. It didn't take long for everyone to get drenched, but it was fun, and the water felt good. Soaked, but with renewed vigor, we soldiered on and finished the last couple of miles.

We pulled onto the bank where the pickup cars were supposed to meet us. They hadn't arrived yet, so we lounged around, drifting lazily in the lake, splashing water on each other. Some of us just laid back in the canoe, soaking up the sun. In three days, we had traveled fifty miles (roughly the length of nine hundred football fields) in canoes along the beautiful East Tennessee landscape. It was quite an accomplishment, and every one of us definitely earned those 50-mile patches. I still have mine.

Sophomore Season

In the 1977 season, our young baseball program took a giant step forward. Our shortstop from last year, Johnny Alley, had graduated, so our third baseman, Steve Forbes, moved over there. I was bigger and stronger than my freshman year, and now strong enough to make the throw from third to first base. For the next three seasons, third base would be my home. We went 8-8 that season, a big improvement from our two wins my freshman year.

A couple memories from that season. In the second week, we played Maynardville on the road. Offensively, I was "in the zone" that day. I went five for five hitting, with three doubles and a triple. It was the best hitting day of my high school career.

One day at practice, the former baseball coach, Larry Brewer, walked over to watch us for a few minutes. I was taking infield practice at third base, and Brewer was watching me closely. After a few minutes, he said, "Hell, son, you ought to be pitching. You've got a heck of an arm." From then on, I started bugging Coach Hollander to let me pitch. It became a running joke, and he would always laugh and say, "David, you're not a pitcher. You're my third baseman."

One day, in the middle of the season, we hosted Claiborne County in a double header. They weren't exactly a juggernaut, and we easily beat them in game one. We had a short break between games, and coach walked up and asked how my arm felt. An odd question, but I said, "Feels fine. Why?"

"Awesome, cause you're pitching the second game."

How's that? David Peters, a sophomore, was pitching the second game? Faced with reality, I suddenly didn't want any part of this.

"Coach, I was just joking about pitching. Thanks, but no thanks."

"Listen pal, you've been flapping your gums for weeks. It's put up or shut up time, and you're putting up. Besides, I've already filled out the lineup and I'm not changing it." Ready or not, I was pitching, so I got on the mound and started warming up.

I didn't know jack squat about pitching, and only had two pitches in my arsenal, a fastball and a sidearm curveball. My fastball involved throwing the ball as hard as possible without breaking my shoulder and my other pitch, the sidearm curve, had quite a bit of break in it. The game started, and thankfully, I had decent control.

My fastball was too fast for their bats, so there were lots of late swings by their hitters. When I threw the curveball, it broke so much that, occasionally, right-handed batters jumped out of the batter's box. I pitched a complete game, had five strikeouts, and more importantly, we won 6-0. I couldn't believe it. My first-time pitching, and I threw a shutout. "Heck, this was easy."

The following week, we had a home game against Powell Valley. They were much better than Claiborne County. That morning at school, coach asked how I was feeling. I told him I felt great, and he said, "That's good, because you're pitching again." After the success in my first outing, I was overconfident. I said, "No problem" and went on to class. I was excited for my second start.

Unfortunately, reality set in this time, and I quickly got in trouble. Powell Valley batted first, and I walked the first two batters. My control, which had been decent against Claiborne County, was missing today. I managed to strike out the third batter, so there was one out and men on first and second. Their cleanup hitter came up to bat. My first pitch was a fastball down the middle. I threw it as hard as I could, but this guy was waiting on it and he crushed it. Homerun, score 3-0. After a couple more batters, I knew my pitching career was over. Coach mercifully called timeout, walked up to the mound, took the ball from me, and sent me back to third base. Thankfully, he never asked me to pitch again. I finished the season strong, batting .342 and made All-District again. Baseball was my best sport. No doubt.

Tim graduated at the end of May. When scholarships were announced, there was a gasp from the crowd when Doc Bratcher said, "Tim Peters will attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and will receive \$32,000 for his studies." I was quite proud.

That spring, Tim received several accolades and awards (some of them monetary) from local Civitan groups, town leaders, friends, and faculty. From Jean, he never received a single word of praise. How petty.

That summer Tim worked at a factory in Clinton for \$3.50/hour. Since he no longer worked at Archer's Food Center, they had an opening, and I wanted that job. I walked in after school one day and filled out an application. George Archer was known for being hard

to work for, but there weren't many jobs around town. He was pleasant enough but said, "Tim was really good. Do you think you can do as good a job?"

"Sure, no problem." A few days later, I got the job. I would start when school ended.

I began working at Archer's on the first Saturday of summer vacation. I was a stock/bag boy and my duties included restocking shelves, bagging groceries, and taking them to customer's cars. I made minimum wage, which had recently been raised to \$2.30/hour. In my first week, I worked forty-five hours, and my check was \$98, easily the most money I'd ever had at one time. I now had money, so I bought my own clothes and stopped having to change clothes in the old car every morning and night. I bought several pairs of Levi's, some $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeve shirts, Adidas T-shirts, etc. My big splurge was a pair of Adidas Superstar tennis shoes. They were the Ferraris of sneakers and cost \$44 (over \$200 today). They were sweet.

Each week, I came in at six a.m. on Monday to unload the food truck. The first three days were busy, restocking shelves, and Saturdays were always super busy days for bagging groceries. Ray Jenkins was the butcher and had been there forever. I believe he worked there almost fifty years. He was always nice to the kids that worked there during the summers.

One day, I wheeled a customer's groceries out to the upper part of the parking lot. As I unloaded them into her car, gravity took over and the shopping cart got away and careened downhill into another car. The cart hit the other car's back door and slid against the paint. I ran and retrieved it and pushed it back inside. There wasn't much damage, so I rolled the dice and didn't tell George. Unfortunately, he saw the whole thing. When I came inside, he said, "Son, we have insurance for those kinds of things. Please let me know if this happens again."

A Rite of Passage

In July, I finally went to get my driver's license. This normally happy "rite of passage" wasn't anything special for me. Even though I'd turned sixteen several months earlier, there had been no rush to get my license. The day I finally went to take the test, we had to borrow a car that would pass inspection. Dad's jalopies were a road hazard and would never be approved.

I'd taken Driver's Ed in school and was prepared for the written and road tests. I passed both parts and got my license.

Dad's current "running" car (I use that term loosely) was a '68 Dodge Monaco station wagon, and it was huge. It probably got less than twelve miles to the gallon. That night, I asked him if I could take it into town and see a buddy. He said, "That should be all right, just be careful and don't stay out too late." By now, all my friends had cars of their own, or access to their parent's cars. Life for them had radically changed, now that they were mobile. I was always the person riding shotgun in friend's cars, never the driver. Tonight, I was finally the captain.

In a few minutes, I was heading towards town and loving life. Sure, the car was a piece of crap, but I was finally driving. I pulled into town and went to Eric Jackson's house. Picking up Eric, we headed to Terry's Market for a hoagie and a Yoo-Hoo. Then we headed to Norris Dam State Park. We stopped at the visitor's center, found a picnic table, and ate. We talked about the box office phenomenon that summer, "Star Wars" (Eric loved it, me not so much), baseball, and girls. After supper, we walked across the dam. It was a nice night to be sixteen, just enjoying summer in a small southern town in 1977. After a couple hours, we headed back to Dad's land yacht (that Monaco was huge). I dropped Eric off at his house and headed home. I got back around 10:30, went upstairs and fell asleep.

Around 11:30, I was awakened by an argument between Dad and Jean. It didn't take a genius to figure out the cause of it. It was simply because I'd driven the damn car into town. I'd probably driven fifteen miles total, but apparently, that was unacceptable to Jean. The fight went on forever, and, as always, Dad lost. This pattern repeated itself over and over, all the years Tim and I lived there. He fought

valiantly for a while, but eventually things quieted down. When that happened, I knew he'd caved in again. This was always the outcome. I stayed out of it because I was tired and knew it was pointless.

The next morning, however, I was pissed. I went downstairs to get some milk and asked Jean what the commotion had been about. I don't remember exactly what she said, but the gist of it was that I wouldn't be driving their car again. I asked, "Is that really necessary?" We exchanged a few barbs, I called her a bitch, and stormed out on the porch to confront Dad.

I knew I was wasting my time and I'd never drive their car again but wanted to let him know what I thought about it. I said, "Help me out, Pop. I want to make sure I'm clear on this. So, because that bitch said so, I can't drive the car anymore? Is that it? All my friends have their own car, or at least, access to their parent's cars, but I'm shit out of luck? How fair is that?" Dad hemmed and hawed but had no explanation. I summed it up by saying, "I love you Pop, but you have no backbone. Tim and I are flesh and blood, and Jean is just a bitch. Why the hell do you let her do that?" I never drove one of his cars again. I never went on a solo date in high school because I had no wheels. It sucked, and I was pissed he allowed this to happen.

The next day, he took me to work at noon and I worked from 12:00 to 7:00. I was still angry but had shelves to stock and groceries to take to folk's cars. When I finished work, I walked to Mom Johnson's for supper. I was welcome there and she always made sure I had a good meal. I had thought about the "car injustice" all day and was still upset. Unfortunately, there wasn't a thing I could do.

Mom Johnson sensed something was wrong, and we sat down to talk. She gave me a piece of cake and some milk.

She asked, "What's wrong honey? I know something's bothering you." I broke down while telling her and cried my eyes out. I kept saying, "What did I do to deserve this? Why does Jean hate me? It doesn't make sense."

"No honey, it doesn't, and I hate that she's mean to you." We sat in silence for a while, and I quietly finished my cake. The next thing she said shocked me. This woman, who'd done so much for me the past three years, that had, in many ways, saved my life, and loved me just

like her own, asked, "Do you want to live here?" Surprised, I asked what she meant.

"I'll do whatever it takes, even if it means adopting you." I couldn't believe it, but I knew she meant it. I seriously considered it, too, but knew it would hurt my father. Ultimately, I couldn't do that to him and decided to tough it out. I had a chance to escape but let it go, all out of love for a father I was disappointed in. By passing this up, I'd resigned myself to two more years with Jean. I hoped I'd make it.

In mid-August, Tim left for college. He left at the crack of dawn, stuck his head in my room and said, "See ya, Big Dave." I nodded sleepily, and Dad and Tim headed to McGhee Tyson airport. He had never flown before, and an excited, nervous eighteen-year-old boarded a plane for Boston. Tim was on his way, and the miserable years of his youth were finally in the rear-view mirror. He had survived a tough three years with an emotionally abusive stepmom after Mom's death.

To be certain, for Tim, there were still scars festering inside, and some would manifest themselves in traumatic ways in the future. Some would linger forever. For Benjy, Tim, and me (and, of course, for so many others in this world), not all scars heal. You just do the best you can to survive the adolescent trauma you were subjected to.

As summer wound down, I assumed I'd continue working after school at Archer's, just like Tim had. Right before school started, George called me into his office. He thanked me for working that summer but said he wasn't retaining part-time kids during the school year. He said I'd done a good job but was disappointed I hadn't told him about the incident with the shopping cart hitting the car. In closing he said, "David, I appreciate your efforts and attitude, and thanks for helping us out this summer. I thought a lot of your mother, and she would be proud of you. You're a good boy and a heck of a ball player, and you'll be fine. If there's anything I can do for you, just ask." Just like that, I was canned from my first job. Son of a gun.

Years later I visited the store and talked to George in his office. He was close to retirement, and I brought him up to speed about what I'd done since high school. He was proud I'd graduated from college

and had a good job. In closing, he said, "Thanks for stopping by, David. It was great seeing you. Tell Tim and your Dad I said hi and keep in touch." We shook hands and I started walking away. A second later, he said, "Oh David?"

"Yes George?"

"Be careful with those runaway shopping carts!" We both laughed, and as I walked to my car, I thought, damn, he never forgot.

In September 1977, I started my junior year in high school. I had no job and no car. Tim had gone off to college, and I hated school, so I spent a lot of time during the week at the Johnsons. I'd walk over there after school and stay until 9:30 or so and Mom Johnson would give me a ride home to the nasty log house. Many a night, I'd sleep over at the Johnsons, so I kept some clothes over there for that. Most every night, regardless of where I slept, I would think about Mom before falling asleep. I missed her so much that sometimes I'd cry a little in bed. There were a million times when I wanted to talk to her or get advice. Her death left such a hole in my world, still to this day. It'd been three years, but it was still hard to grasp she was gone.

Affirmation Through Sports

I think God gives each of us individual gifts. One of my gifts was athletic ability. It wasn't anything I earned - it was just something I was born with. Naturally, since I had an affinity for sports, I spent a lot of time playing them. In Norris, amongst my peers, I was one of the best athletes. Again, it was just a gift, but it was very important to me and helped my self-esteem a lot. Sure, maybe my Mom had a mental illness and was frequently gone, but when we lined up to play football, kickball, basketball, or baseball, I was equal to or better than my peers. It meant a lot to me that I excelled at those activities.

After Mom died, sports were just as important - maybe more so. Sure, my family lived in squalor, and I had no car, but when we got on the playing field, I was just the same. That was a huge thing for my psyche, and my ability to outperform my friends in competition did a lot to bolster my feelings of self-worth. I think it's incumbent upon each of us to find our gifts and use those to the best of our abilities. My athletic prowess helped me immensely when I was growing up.

In my last two years of high school, a popular hangout opened in the neighboring town of Clinton. The Civic Center was a new rec center that had a bowling alley, swimming pool, weight room, and two indoor basketball courts. It was the "happening place" to hang out for kids from all over Anderson County. I went there several nights a week for pickup basketball games. I had no transportation, so I was beholden to friends for rides there. It was usually either Scott Turner, Dewboy, Mike Armstrong or Eric Jackson. I felt like a heel, bumming rides from friends but had no other option.

Scott Turner lived on West Norris Road and was a year younger than me. He was a good guy that, unfortunately, got picked on sometimes. He was a big kid, probably 6'3" and over 250 pounds. He wasn't a bad athlete at all, just slow.

At the Civic Center, there were four basketball games going on simultaneously, so you had to get in line to play the winner of whatever court you were waiting at. Guys formed pickup teams and waited for the current contest to finish. It didn't take long for word

to get out about who had legitimate skills and who just took up space. I was pretty good and usually got snatched up quickly for a new team.

Status was dictated by skill on the basketball floor. I could hold my own amongst the best players in the region. I was a decent shooter, good rebounder and passer, and an excellent ball handler. We usually played a couple of hours a night, and there was a strong incentive to win because winners kept playing. If you lost, you had to get back in line to wait your turn and try again.

After a couple of hours of basketball, we'd start for home. On the way, we'd stop at Burger Queen, the only fast-food restaurant in Clinton. I liked their fish and chips with malt vinegar. While we ate, Scott would start debating anything and everything. I loved him like a brother but sometimes he was boring. Scott didn't have his own car, but in the evenings, he could drive his Mom's car and we'd hit the road. Most of my friends weren't allowed to go to Knoxville, but Scott could, so we cruised around K-town, the big city, on weekends.

Academic Excellence

One of several classes I sucked at was geometry, which I took my junior year. It was taught by Melba Guynes, who'd been teaching at Norris for most of the twentieth century. One day in early December, we had a test, and I decided to "get" a good grade. I sat behind a brainiac, Zach Marken. Before Melba came into class, I told him, "Listen Marken, I'm cheating off you today, so lower your shoulder so I can see your answers."

"No way man, I'm not getting caught."

I simply said, "No problem."

Melba comes in a minute later, hands out the exams and sits down to do her crossword puzzle. She's not paying attention at all, and I nudge Marken to let me see his paper. He acts like he's not going to comply, so I jam my middle knuckle right into his spine. From that point on, he was totally submissive, and I copied most of his work.

Here's the part where I show my stupidity. The next day I saw Mrs. Guynes in the hallway and asked (which I would normally NEVER do) if she'd graded the geometry tests. She had a suspicious look on her face and said, "Why yes David, I have."

"How did I do?"

"You did very well. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Aces, see you tomorrow." The next day, she handed out the tests and Zach Marken made a 90. I sat right behind him, so she handed out my test next and looked at me suspiciously. I'd made an 85 (roughly 40 points above my average). I was thrilled.

It was customary to go over the test and rework problems on the chalkboard. Melba asked who wanted to solve the first problem. All the brown-nosers held up their hands and I slunk down in my seat. After what seemed like forever, she settled on one of the geeks, or so I thought.

"David, will you do number one?"

"What the heck? I hadn't raised my arm. Was she onto me?"

I stammered out, "You know Mrs. Guynes, honestly, I don't think I could recreate it correctly. I just messed around with some formulas and the answer just happened." There were several snickers in the room, and she called on someone else to solve the problem. I let out

a sigh of relief and thought I'd dodged a bullet. When she got to the next problem, I figured I was home free.

"Who wants to do number two?"

Once again, the nerds raised their arms. She looked around, and finally said, "Okay, David, surely you can do number two." I was busted. When you're caught, you're caught.

"Mrs. Guynes, do you really want to know how I did it?"

"Yes, I think we'd all like to know." By now, everyone was laughing. I reached forward, grabbed Marken's shoulder, and pulled it back so I could see over his shoulder. "That's how I did it." People were laughing hysterically.

"Would you see me after class please?"

"Sure thing, no problem."

As the class reworked the rest of the problems, I sat back without a care in the world. When class ended, everyone spilled out into the hallway, and it was just the two of us - Melba and David.

"What are we going to do about this, David?" I just shrugged my shoulders and said, "You tell me Mrs. Guynes, you're the teacher."

"Well, we can do one of two things. I can call your dad and have him come in for a parent conference, or I can give you a zero on the test. What'll it be?"

Easy decision. "I'll take the zero Mrs. Guynes."

"Okay, David, you be good now."

"You too, Mrs. Guynes (with a wink). You too."

Bethel Baptist

In the fall of 1977, I switched churches. My parents had been charter members at First Baptist in Norris and it had been an important part of my life. I'd grown up there, been baptized there and met Mom Johnson there.

I was baptized the year before Mom died, and I believed in Jesus Christ. Most of my friends were regular church goers, so it was a social thing as well. One thing I liked about Sundays was that, after church, I often had the house to myself. Dad and Jean had gotten into genealogy and spent Sunday's traipsing around cemeteries and stuff. At the time, I could care less about our family's history. My assessment of the Peters family was, "We're screwed up. The end."

Regardless, when they were gone, life was less stressful for me. I'd get home from church around 12:30 and fix some chili dogs. I'd make two hot dogs and smother the chili all over them. It was quite tasty, and I'd kick back and watch a fishing show, *Bill Dance Outdoors*. Afterwards, I'd watch whatever sport was in season. For those few hours, I was just a normal kid. It was nice, having a break from Jean. When she got home, I was back on edge. It was not pleasant.

Several of my friends went to Bethel Baptist Church, just outside of town. The reason I started going there was one word - girls. Bethel had more girls than First Baptist. That was the draw for me. The Seals sisters went there. The oldest, Maxine, was a year older than me and a batgirl on our baseball team. I had a mad crush on her. I'm not sure if she knew, but I think she did.

I'd been visiting Bethel for a few weeks and was eating at Mom Johnson's one night when she asked why I was attending church there. I kind of stammered around and said, "Well, I'm just visiting, and they have several pretty girls."

"Well, you can visit, but you're not joining that church."

I'd never challenged her on anything, but had already decided to join Bethel, and did so a few weeks later. I hoped she wouldn't be angry, but in hindsight, it was a pretty big roll of the dice. As I've said many times, Mom Johnson was everything to me. She loved me, bought my clothes, gave me money, listened to me, and fed me most nights. I owed her so much and certainly didn't want to upset her.

Thankfully, she ended up being fine with my decision. I joined Bethel and our relationship remained fine.

At Bethel, I joined the Youth Choir, which practiced late on Sunday afternoon. Afterwards, we often led worship on Sunday night. One night in December, our Youth Choir went caroling. We met in the church parking lot to map out our route. We planned on going to some older members' homes and singing a couple of Christmas carols.

Over the next couple of hours, we stopped at several homes and the old folks really enjoyed us singing to them. At a couple of homes, they gave us hot chocolate or cookies. Our last stop was a nursing home, close to church. I had never been around a bunch of really old people, and it freaked me out. These folks were ancient, and they looked so sad. It was just depressing.

There were a couple of old ladies sitting close to me and I wished them a Merry Christmas. One started crying and said, "Honey, it won't be a Merry Christmas for me until I get to Heaven. I'm ready to meet Jesus." After that, she cried harder. It really bothered me. I was just a kid with my life ahead of me and I wondered, "How'd she get so old?" It was hard to imagine she was a teenager once, like me. Life goes by in a flash.

Tim had been in college for four months and flew home shortly before Christmas. Over the next couple of nights, we talked a lot. He gave me the lowdown on college life and how awesome it was. One thing he said was, "BD (nickname for Big Dave), the day you leave for college will be the happiest day of your life. Escaping Jean's bullshit is such a relief." He loved college and told me how smart students at MIT were.

Tim was valedictorian at Norris, but that didn't make you special at MIT, which had the highest per capita of valedictorians in the country. Although he was a physics major, he loved literature class. For physical education class, he tried lacrosse and really liked it. Tim must've had an affinity for it because the teacher (who was also the varsity coach) encouraged him to go out for the team. "Hold up a second. My brother played three years of Little League baseball and never got a hit. He goes to college and now he's a jock? Was this the

twilight zone?" He ended up playing two years of varsity lacrosse at MIT.

Tim had also pledged a fraternity, Sigma Phi Epsilon. He told me about the wild parties they had, and it sounded fun. Tim's roommate was Carl Awh, and they quickly became best friends (still to this day). While talking and studying at night, Tim started telling Carl about his childhood and the struggles we'd faced, etc. Mom's death and the emotional abuse Jean had laid on us was a major theme of those talks.

Another change for Tim was his manner of dress. He'd become a preppie, and in 1977, I'd never even heard the word. Tim dressed like a bum growing up, and now he was wearing button down collars, khakis, and penny loafers. "No doubt, this WAS the twilight zone."

Not surprisingly, Jean hated Tim's new look. Because of Mom's death, Tim received Social Security benefits in college, and he used some of that money to buy decent clothes. He looked successful, and Jean did not like that at all. It pissed her off to no end that Tim received a monthly Social Security check. I guess she wanted him to look like a street urchin out of *Oliver Twist*.

I separately talked to Benjy and Tim about this recently, and none of us could understand why Jean wanted to keep us down. What purpose did it serve? For inexplicable reasons, Jean resented the fact that Tim was going to college. I honestly think she didn't want us to be successful. Some people build themselves up by tearing others down. Jean was one of those people, at least she was to us. They get something from making those around them miserable. It's a strange psychological phenomenon and I don't understand it, but I've seen it (sadly) in others throughout my life.

I was angry at Jean for a LONG time, but I finally realized it was taking too much energy and effort out of me to continue. There's a quote from Buddha that says, "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace." I think that works for me, but it took a LONG time to get here.

Birger and Betz

In the spring of 1978, I ran an ad in the Norris Bulletin, advertising my services for any type of yard work. I got a call from a retired TVA forester named Birger Ellertsen. Mr. Ellertsen was super nice, and I did all manner of jobs for him during the next two years. His wife was nicknamed Betz and she'd always bring me fresh-squeezed lemonade when I took a break. They quickly became surrogate parents to me, like so many others before and after. For the rest of that spring and summer, anytime Mr. Ellertsen needed something done, he'd call me up. Whether it was mowing, gardening, raking, whatever, I was his boy. He liked being outside and working with me, but he had allergies, and if he got hot, he'd start wheezing. When that happened, Betz would come out on the deck and shout, "Birger, you're wheezing again. Come in and cool down." He'd reluctantly say, "Yes dear, I'm coming." Betz had a strong Michigan accent, and her voice cracked me up.

Oftentimes, Mr. Ellertsen would tell me to take a break and we'd sit and talk. He enjoyed hanging out with me, and I valued his guidance. After a couple of months, I started opening up, concerning struggles I was experiencing regarding Mom's suicide, Jean, finding my way in the world, etc. He cared and was sympathetic to what was going on in my life.

Birger and Betz were kind people and treated me just like their own son. I'd only been working there a few weeks when we took a break one Saturday. I told Mr. Ellertsen I wanted to ask a girl to the prom but didn't have money for the tux rental.

He said, "Listen David, I'm happy to give you an advance for that." "Are you sure, Mr. Ellertsen?"

"Of course, I'm happy to do it. Now mind you, you'll have to pay me back, but you can work it off as your schedule permits." When I left his house that afternoon, I had a check for \$40, enough for my tuxedo. Now I had to find a date.

I didn't have any real romantic interest in anyone at the moment, but the prom is a rite of passage, and "most" people went. I talked Dewboy into double dating, so I'd have a ride. Even if I could have used Dad's car, I wouldn't take a girl in one of his crappy clunkers. But first things first. We had to get dates. In the winter, I spent most

of my lunch hour playing basketball in the gym. Girls watched guys play and some played with us. One girl that was always in the gym was Angie Stokes. She was a freshman: tall, blonde, cute and I'd talked to her several times in the gym.

One day, I decided to take the plunge and ask her to the prom. I was nervous but finally mustered up enough courage to ask her. I stammered out, "Angie, would you like to go to the prom?" I sounded like a dork, and I think she was messing with me when she said, "Are you serious David?" Inside I'm thinking, "geez, it was hard enough asking you the first time. Now you want me to do it again?"

I nervously said, "Yes, I'm serious. How 'bout it, yes, or no?"

"Sure, I'll go with you." And just like that, I had a date. Dewboy asked a sophomore, Donna Seals to go, and we were all set. The next step was getting fitted for a tux. Mom Johnson took me to Oak Ridge to a formal-wear shop to get measured. I chose a conservative navy-blue tuxedo. The rental was \$39. Angie would be wearing a long white gown.

Prom Night

The prom was on a Saturday in late April. I started getting ready around 4:30 that afternoon. Once dressed, I had to carefully walk through the house, so I wouldn't get nasty dog hair all over my tux. Dewboy came by at 5:00 and picked me up. His Chevy Caprice was spotless, and I felt bad he had to drive his clean car up my muddy driveway, but he didn't mind. Dad commented that I looked nice and said he could see Mom in my face. Not surprisingly, Jean didn't say a word about how I looked. She was just happy I'd be gone for the evening. "Trust me Jean, the feeling's mutual."

After Dewboy picked me up, we headed to Angie's house. She lived close to Sequoia Boat Dock, which was quite a haul from my house. When we got there, I walked up and knocked, and her mom opened the door and invited me in. She seemed like a nice lady and pinned the boutonniere on my tux for me. Angie was still getting ready, and I sat down and talked to her mom. I was nervous because Angie's dad (he never said a word) was sitting on the couch, cleaning his gun. Was he sending me a message? I don't know, but I was getting one, nonetheless. Angie finally emerged and looked beautiful in her white dress. Her mom pinned my corsage on her dress, and we were ready to go. Her mom asked when we'd be home, and I didn't know what to say. I hadn't considered that.

"I don't know. Midnight, I guess?"

She smiled, and said, "eleven will be fine." I nodded and off we went.

The next stop was Donna's. The drive to her house was another haul (she was fifteen miles from Angie's house). All told, Dewboy probably logged forty miles by the time we finally got to school. The prom was in the auditorium and the theme was Moonlight and Roses. We found a table and the girls reserved our spot with their purses and we went to get some punch and mingle with friends. Our prom actually had a live band, The White Brothers and Sister Dee. The lead singer was the school band director, Rick Hong.

Folks started dancing and I panicked. I didn't have a clue how to dance. "What the heck would I do?" Angie and I sat down and talked and watched a few brave souls dancing. Dewboy was the "Man", and grabbed Donna by the hand and said, "Let's go cut the rug!" I noticed all the guys (Dewboy included) looked like dorks on the dance floor.

I thought to myself, dang, I can look like a dork just as good as the next guy, so I said to Angie, "Want to give it a shot?" She said, "Sure", and I nervously escorted her to the dance floor, and we started dancing (using that term loosely).

The girls seemed to be better dancers than the guys. Finally, the band played a slow number. The Paul Davis song, *I Go Crazy* began and we danced. I didn't have any real romantic interest in Angie, but that dance was really nice. It felt natural, swaying to the music with her head resting on my shoulder. Shortly afterwards, we went for pictures.

After pictures were taken, we went to Thomas Michael's restaurant in Fountain City. Dewboy, Donna and I ordered steaks. Angie ordered a hamburger, which I thought was odd, but much cheaper, so it was all good. Around 10:15, we started for home. First stop was Angie's house. We arrived about 10:50 (just before her curfew).

Since I'd watched her Dad cleaning his gun earlier, I didn't plan on even attempting a kiss. When we stepped on her porch, the lights came on, and I saw her mom through the window. For a second, I thought of giving her a hug, but the sight of her mom put the kibosh on that idea. I started to shake her hand and she pulled me close and gave me a nice hug. She said, "I had a really nice time, David. Thanks for asking me." Ecstatic with the hug, I returned to the car and hopped in the back seat. Off we went towards Donna's house.

I noticed the mood in the car was a tad frosty and there was no conversation going on. Dewboy had an 8-track stereo, and the *Hotel California* tape was playing. One of my favorite songs came on, "Wasted Time" (a song about remorse from a failed relationship). It's a favorite of mine and could be autobiographical at several junctures in my life. As I listened to the lines,

And I know what's been on your mind, you're afraid it's all been wasted time

I thought, "This song isn't relevant tonight. Hell, I've had a great time." There was still some disconnect between Dewboy and Donna as we approached her house. They got out and Dewboy walked her to the door and came back in a flash.

When he got back, I could tell he was pissed. I was like, "Okay, what the heck happened?"

“When you walked Angie to the door, I tried kissing Donna, and she pushed me away. Dammit man, I spent a lot of money on this tux, her corsage, and a fancy dinner. I ought to get some sugar.” This guy had been my best friend for 13 of our 17 years, and I knew how he rolled. This was vintage Dewboy, and I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing.

“Maybe you *'ought'* to get some lovin' but she thought differently.” He got quiet for a second, then saw the humor in it, and started laughing. We still had time before Dewboy's curfew (I didn't have one) and he asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Sure, I could eat something.”

“Let's go to Richy Krème [a drive-in, kind of like Sonic] and get some food.”

Late-Night Chicken Fingers

We made the short trek to Clinton, still jamming to songs from Hotel California. For the next hour, we ate greasy chicken fingers, drank Dr. Pepper, and talked about the night. Besides the prom, we talked about life as juniors in high school, where we wanted to go to college (me, not a clue, Dewboy, Vanderbilt) and what we wanted to be when we grew up. Dewboy wanted to be an engineer, and I wanted to be a Game and Fish Officer (and, of course, a Major League baseball player).

There was a lull in the conversation, and *Wasted Time* came on again. We quietly listened to it, and my mind wandered to Mom. She'd been gone four years. Had those years been wasted time? Not really, but the lyrics hit me hard that night in Dewboy's car. The years had been so tough and hundreds of times I'd wished Mom was still here. Not a day had passed that I hadn't thought of her. I started sobbing a little when I heard the last lines,

Maybe someday, we will find

That it wasn't really wasted time

There was an avalanche of emotion, and I couldn't stem the tide any longer. I openly wept for just a moment before regaining composure. Dewboy said, "Brother, I don't know how you've handled this crap-storm as well as you have. I still can't believe she's gone. I loved your mom, too." When the song ended, we just sat there, quietly eating our food. I was really feeling the loss of my mother at that moment, not for the first time, and certainly not for the last.

Sensing the need for a mood change, he ejected Hotel California and put in Steve Martin (*Wild and Crazy Guy*). We finished our chicken, downed our drinks, and headed home. Listening to Steve Martin, we laughed the whole way back. He pulled into the bottom of my driveway, and I told him to drop me off there. I said, "No sense getting your car any dirtier on my driveway." We both laughed, and I said, "See ya man." He backed out and headed home. I walked up the driveway to the cacophony of seven dogs, barking their asses off. The '78 prom was in the books. Moonlight and Roses indeed: a memorable night.

Baseball (and Basketball)

Baseball season of 1978 brought a change to our team. We had a new coach, Andy McKamey. Coach Hollander had moved to another school. Assisting McKamey was the new math teacher, Ken Bonee. My junior season was not my best. My defense was solid, but I struggled at the plate. I swung for the fence too often and ended up striking out several times. I hit my first home run at Wartburg that year. Wartburg is a little “spot in the road” in Morgan County, the same county where Mom grew up. Their games were broadcast on a tiny little AM station. The “booth” where the announcer called the action was next to our dugout, and he had a loud booming voice that carried, so you could hear everything he said.

In the first inning, we had one out and two guys on base, and I was up. I was always a first pitch hitter, because, in high school, 90% of the time, the first pitch is a fastball. Sure enough, the pitcher threw his heater down the middle, and I crushed it. I knew immediately it was a homerun. Before I even got out of the batter’s box, I heard the announcer say, “Peters just hit a monster homerun to center field.” Hearing my name called out was cool (not gonna lie), and as I rounded third and headed home, my teammates greeted me at the plate. As I headed to the dugout, the announcer muted his mic and said, “Hell of a shot, son.”

In total, I hit four homeruns that season. Our team just wasn’t that good though. Only a couple of seniors contributed, and the only juniors were me, Doug Fielden, Wayne Hughes, and Jack Bumgardner. We had some talented sophomores, but they weren’t quite ready. I finished the season batting .297 and for the first time, failed to make All-District.

Later that spring, the basketball team held a meeting during lunch one day. On a lark, I decided to go check it out. For my first three years, I hadn’t played basketball because I didn’t want to put the time in. I’m not sure why I went to the meeting, but I’m glad I did. At the meeting, Coach Walker announced that, unlike previous years, the roster would be entirely chosen during spring practice. If that was the case, I figured I’d give it a shot. For seniors, it was varsity or bust. Seniors couldn’t play junior varsity (JV) ball. I was pretty good, but

would Coach Walker give one of twelve slots to a guy that hadn't played before? Only one way to find out.

Tryouts started the following Monday, and I played well that first day. It seemed like coach noticed me a lot. The varsity roster would be finalized by Friday. The next day, I continued my solid play. I didn't know if I would make the team, but tryouts were going well. On Wednesday I got dressed for practice and headed up to the gym to warm up. As I walked by Coach Walker's chair, he tossed me a practice jersey and said, "David, you can start dressing in the varsity room." Wow, did this mean what I thought it meant? Was I in the CLUB? At that moment, Rodney Stooksbury, the team captain, walked up and said, "Welcome to the varsity." I was the first new player picked.

One perk for varsity players was having their own locker room. It was as cool as it got in high school. You had your own key, and it was off-limits to anyone except varsity players. It was carpeted and painted in school colors, maroon, and Columbia blue. Each player had his own locker, and the best part was a stereo in there, complete with 8-track player. So, while dressing for practice, or a game, we jammed to the latest hits. The song, *Kiss You All Over* by Exile still reminds me of that room.

For the rest of the week, several players vied for the final roster spots. Two in particular, Mike Armstrong and Dewboy, were upcoming seniors like me, and both close friends of mine. If they didn't make the varsity, their careers would be over. It wouldn't have been a big deal for me if I hadn't made the team, because I'd never played before. For these two, the clock was about to strike midnight. Friday's practice would be the final countdown. At the time, I didn't realize how important it was to them.

Mike ended up getting that final roster spot. I think that might've been the happiest day of his life. I didn't notice Dewboy's reaction and had no idea of the hurt he felt from not making it. It was forty years later when he confided to me how disappointed he was. He told me he walked out to his car that day and broke down crying. I felt sorry for him, and never knew how disappointed he was at the time. Some might've thought I wasn't serious about basketball (if I was, I would've played before, right?), but I make no apologies for playing my senior year. I earned my spot fair and square.

I didn't have a job when summer started, but Pop helped me find one. My stepbrothers, David and Mark Neumann, worked at Pathway Bellows, a manufacturing company in Oak Ridge. The company made large expansion joints. Some were so big you could drive a car through them. Dad called Mark to see if Pathways had any summer jobs. He checked and called back and told Dad to bring me in for an interview. Dad drove me to Pathways, and on the way, prepped me about answering questions in an interview. It was nice, having some alone time with him. These rare times reminded me of what he could be like, and not the fake Dad that existed around Jean.

I filled out the application, and personnel sent me into the hiring manager's office. He asked if I had a driver's license, and said the position was a courier job. It involved driving all over Oak Ridge and Knoxville, delivering, and picking up stuff. I was thinking, this is awesome. Just drive around, listen to the radio, maybe occasionally swing by the pool, and see my buddies. The job paid \$3.00/hour - good money compared to the minimum wage of \$2.65.

Afterwards, Dad and I got some McDonald's for lunch. We ate in the car beside Melton Hill Lake and talked. We talked about me leaving for college next year, how fast time flies, my baseball, Tennessee Vol's football, Tim living in Boston and how much Dad missed him. There was a lull in the conversation, and we sat and watched the duck's swimming. Dad broke the silence: "Do you think about Mom very much? Is it still really painful?" He caught me off guard. Dad had rarely mentioned Mom in the last few years.

A long pause. I wept a little. Dad continued, "It's all right, hon. Don't ever be ashamed of your emotions. I'm proud of you and I know Mom is proudly looking down at you." I looked at him and

asked, "Will it ever get any easier? I have so many unanswered questions. Why'd she do it? I'll never understand. It still doesn't make a bit of sense."

Another pause, and I continued. "Pop, I'm sorry, but I really wish you hadn't married Jean. She treats us like crap, and you know this. And you allow it. That really hurts. Mom would never have allowed anyone to treat us like that, and you shouldn't either. How do you think that makes me feel? It makes me sad, like I don't matter to you. Tim feels the same way. I'm just venting, and don't expect an answer. Just realize that we're aware that Jean runs the show. That's your cross to bear, Pop. That's on you."

"It's complicated David, but I am sorry." I just shrugged my shoulders.

We got home around three and life returned to normal. Dad disappeared again - Jean's husband returned. Shortly after getting home, I got a call from Pathways. I got the job and would start Monday. My stepbrother, Mark, would be taking me to work each morning.

On Monday morning, Mark picked me up and we headed to my new job. Mark was always nice to me, as were his siblings, Linda, and David. It was just their mom that was mean. We got there around seven thirty and I met my new boss, Bob. A man walked into Bob's office and said, "There's been a change of plans. The courier position was filled by an employee's son." I'm thinking, "Great, I haven't even started, and the job is gone. Just my luck." Then he said, "You still have a job, but you'll be working out on the deck. Bob will show you the ropes." I would soon learn that this job was a far cry from the courier position.

The deck was an outdoor area, away from the main part of the plant. It's where they coated large expansion joints with nickel plating. When the joints were submerged into the plating, air pockets occasionally formed, which caused bumps to appear on the surface of the joint. When that happened, the plating had to be completely removed. This required using an air-powered grinder and grinding all the nickel off. To say it was labor intensive was an understatement. It took a half hour of hard work to grind an area about the size of a

movie poster. Afterwards, the surface had to be tested by brushing it with copper sulfate.

If the nickel was all gone, you had a nice pretty copper-tinged area. If any remained, it appeared as black spots, and you had to regrind that place again. Grinding the nickel made sparks fly everywhere, and white-hot iron filings occasionally burned your skin. For the next two and a half months, I worked like a dog, sweating all day, and getting my arms full of iron filings. When I got home each day, it'd take thirty-minute showers to scrub the filings out of my arms. During my whole time there, I completed only two expansion joints. That's how big they were.

After showering, I still went out at night, usually to play basketball or softball in Clinton. The outdoor courts in Clinton had steel nets, and there were some intense games on those hot summer nights. A couple of nights a week, I played third base for McRae's Construction softball team.

Including work, I probably got ten hours of intense exercise each day. I actually got legitimate biceps that summer. Since I was a working man, I had plenty of money for movies and eating out. I bought clothes I needed for my senior year, and still saved a tidy sum of money.

Played Like a Fiddle

One day, my buddy, Bill Henry (he also worked at Pathways that summer) came over to the deck and asked if I wanted to grab lunch. I said, "sure" and got in his VW. Bill's dad occasionally sold cars on the side, and this was one of them. It was a blue 1970 VW Bug with a 3-speed automatic transmission. It looked decent, had all the hubcaps, and an 8-track player. Bill said, "This is a sweet little car, man. You should buy it."

"How much?"

"Six hundred."

Dang, I thought, I've almost got that much saved. We returned from lunch, and I spent the rest of the afternoon grinding nickel plating and thinking of that car. With a car, my social status would take a quantum leap forward. I'd have transportation to school, be able to repay buddies who'd hauled my ass around forever and even have dates. This would be awesome.

The next morning, I walked into Mr. Henry's office and told him I'd give him \$600 on Friday. I got paid Friday morning, cashed my check at lunch, and bought my first car. Hot damn, I'm on my way. I was a varsity basketball player, baseball player, and now a car owner. I was living the dream, or so it seemed at the moment. After work, I got home and called Eric Jackson, and asked if he wanted to go to the movies in Knoxville.

He said, "Do you mean, do I want to take you to the movies?"

"No pal. I have wheels. I bought a car today and I'm driving."

"Hell yeah, get your ass over here."

I jumped in the shower, got dressed and went into Norris. I pulled into Eric's driveway, and he checked out my VW. His assessment; "Not bad man, not bad at all." He hopped in and off we went. I had wheels. Finally. As we motored down I-75, we jammed to WNOX and talked. The windows were down, we were cruising, and life was good. "What could possibly go wrong?"

As we're getting close to Knoxville, I told Eric a story about my boss, who was an asshole, and said, "Man, I wanted to kick his ass!" To emphasize my point, I barely punched the windshield. It cracked, all the way, from top to bottom. We looked at each other as if to say, "Ruh Roh." Was this an omen?

We pulled into the parking lot of Kingston Four Cinema in West Knoxville. We were there to see Animal House, but the first show was sold out. We bought tickets for the ten o'clock show and headed to the car. We were gonna go grab a bite to eat and come back at 9:30. We hopped in the car, I put the key in the ignition and turned it. Nothing. It wasn't like the battery was dead. No sound was made at all, not even a click. Eric and I didn't know jack squat about cars. I opened the rear hatch and saw the engine. Yep, that's a motor, now where's the damn battery? It ain't here. We poked around and didn't see squat. What the heck, let's check under the hood. Nope, not there, either. I found the owner's manual in the glovebox and learned the location of the battery. While we're on this treasure hunt, the clock is ticking. It's getting dark (we don't have a flashlight), but we finally found the battery. It was located under the rear seat. What the hell? Under the rear seat? How stupid.

Okay, we've found the battery. Now what? Find someone who can jump us off? It never dawned on us that the problem wasn't a dead battery. I had no jumper cables but figured a good Samaritan might have some. People were filtering out of the theater, and Eric and I asked anyone and everyone if they had cables. We finally found a guy who had some. He pulled his car up, and connected the cables (Hell, we didn't even know how to do that), got back in his car and revved his motor up. He gave me the signal to start my car. Fingers crossed; I turned the key. Nothing. He gunned the engine even more, and I tried again. Nothing at all. It wasn't a dead battery, so we were screwed, blued, and tattooed.

The Highway Patrol was about a mile down Kingston Pike. Eric offered to call and see if they could help us. We found a payphone and called. The dispatcher answered, Eric explained the situation, and she transferred him to a state trooper. Eric told him the problem and that we were just one exit away. The trooper said he was busy and couldn't help. Eric lived for this crap. He goes off on this rambling diatribe about taxpayers, etc. and the guy finally says, "Damn kid, calm down. I'll send someone down in a minute." Eric thanked him, hung up the phone, looked at me and said, "Hell yeah." I laughed, and we went back to the car. We sat in silence without music (no battery) and waited for help.

A trooper finally arrived, and like us, didn't have a clue what was wrong. We tried jumping it again. Nothing. We were stuck in the

Kingston Four parking lot. Eric kept pleading with the cop to help, and he said, "Look kid, I don't know anything about cars. The only thing I can do is radio for a tow truck." I had no idea how much it would cost to tow us all the way back to Norris. I told him to go ahead. What other option did I have?

A half hour later, a tow truck pulls up and the driver says it'll cost forty bucks to haul the us (and the car) home. We made it back to Norris and the tow truck driver dropped Eric off at his house. A few minutes later, he dropped me off at the bottom of my driveway and unhitched my VW. I went to bed around one, resigned to the fact I might've just bought a piece of crap. And I was broke!

The next morning, I told Dad about my misfortune. He said, "Why didn't you call me? I probably could've got your car running, or at least, hauled you home for free." It took Dad all of fifteen minutes to fix the problem (loose wire). For the rest of the weekend, I burned up the roads, going to Norris, the Dam, the Civic Center, and Oak Ridge. I had wheels and life was great. That next week, I drove to work every day and, at night, went to the Civic Center or the Softball Park in Clinton. The car ran like a champ.

On Saturday afternoon, I called Jennie Brooks, a sophomore girl I had a little crush on, and asked if she wanted to play tennis. Jennie seemed excited but said she wasn't a very good tennis player. I assured her I'd give her some pointers. I was going on a real date in my own car. This was uncharted territory. I started towards Jennie's house, but, on the way, the car started running sluggishly.

By the time I pulled into her driveway, the car was smoking badly and I'm thinking, for the love of Mike, no. Please don't break down. But, of course, it did. Jennie had a long driveway that ended at the top of a hill, and I made it halfway up before I shut it down. The engine was still smoking as I walked up the hill to her house and gave her the news.

She said, "Oh no, I was so looking forward to our tennis date. Do you want Dad to look at it?" I said, "Sure" and her Dad walked down, opened the hatch, and looked at the still-smoking engine. He said, "David, I don't know much about engines, but that looks like burned-up rings. If you let it cool down, it might get you home." So, we walked up to the house, and watched TV.

After a half hour, I told Jennie, "Well, I guess I'll try to make it home. I don't want to get stuck out on the road after dark." The car

started okay, and I started for home. For the first mile or so, the car was fine, but after a few minutes, it started sputtering again. I barely made it home. The car was smoking badly, and I left it at the bottom of the driveway. The next day, Dad poked around the engine, checked a few things, and said, "I don't think this is good. I'm afraid it's going to need an engine rebuild of some sort. Larry Cashman owes me a favor. He works on VWs. We'll tow it to his place and see if he can fix it."

Dad called Larry and he said to bring it over and he'd try and repair it. Later that afternoon, we towed my VW over to Larry's and dropped it off. Dad talked to him, and I hoped the car would quickly be repaired. For the next few weeks, I asked Dad daily if he'd heard anything. Once or twice, he called Larry and asked if he'd done anything. Every time, he'd assure Pop he'd get on it soon. I wasn't a fool. Larry was never going to fix that damn thing. I'd worked my ass off all summer and bought a lemon. Bill's dad had played me like a fiddler at a backwoods hoedown. The next week was my last at Pathways, and I was riding to work with Mark again. All I had for a summer's worth of hard work was some new clothes.

After my job at Pathways ended, there were two weeks until my senior year started. One day, I walked to the tennis courts and practiced my serve. While retrieving balls, I decided to jump the net backwards. Unfortunately, my foot caught in the net. I knew I was going to fall, so I used my right hand to brace myself. I landed hard and felt a sharp pain in my wrist. I got up and resumed serving. On the first serve, my wrist really hurt, so I shut it down.

With nothing to do, I walked over to the high school (teachers had already returned from summer break) to see Doc Bratcher. I walked into his office and sat down. We talked for a minute, and he said, "You look like you're hurting, DW. What's wrong?" I told him about my wrist, and he could see it was swollen. He had Mrs. Skeens (the secretary) get some ice. A little while later, he said, "You really should walk over to Doc McNeeley's and get the wrist checked."

I walked across the street to the doctor's office, checked in, had a seat, and sat there, while my wrist throbbed in pain. The nurse, Barbara Shelton, finally called me back, and I walked into the examination room. Mrs. Shelton had been a close friend of Mom's,

and we chatted for a few minutes. She said, "I heard you made the varsity basketball team. That's awesome. I keep up with your baseball through Mrs. Johnson. I remember watching your Little League games with your Mom. I sure do miss her - I know you do too. She was one of my best friends in the world."

Doc McNeeley came in to check my wrist. He'd brought me into the world seventeen years earlier and been my doctor ever since. "How are you, David? It's good to see you, although not under these circumstances. Let's see your wrist." He looked at it, squeezed it lightly and said, "I don't think it's broken, but it's badly sprained. Let's take a couple of pictures." He turned to Mrs. Shelton and said, "Barbara, take an X-ray of this." She took me back to their ancient X-ray machine, and I grimaced as she placed my wrist flat on the plate. She took a few pictures and then led me back to the exam room. After an eternity, Doc came in and said, "I just can't tell, David. Our machine isn't the best, and I still don't think it's broken, but I don't want to take chances. Why don't we call your Dad and have him take you to Oak Ridge and get a better X-ray. That way, we can know for sure."

Reflections in the Emergency Room

Dad arrived, talked to Doc for a minute, and we headed towards Oak Ridge. My wrist was killing me. I was close to tears but fought them back. We finally made it to the ER, and got checked in. While I waited in pain, Dad and I talked about my upcoming last year at home. Although my grades sucked, I was smart, and knew I was going to college. There was no way I was staying home one minute longer than necessary. I was sick of Jean's bullshit, and sick of my whole home life. My early years had been fraught with the awfulness of Mom's illness and suicide. That had been devastating, but the last four years with Jean had been really bad too. I was ready for my childhood to end.

Sitting in that waiting room, Pop started waxing philosophically. "I'm sorry you and Benjy and Tim had so many obstacles early in life, hon. You boys didn't deserve it, but you learned lessons from those events. One is this - life is hard for everyone, and no one gets through this world unscathed. We all have crosses to bear, but you guys have had some big ones. I love you, David. I have failed you at times, and you deserved better, but I truly did the best I could. Because of these challenges, you'll be better prepared to handle the inevitable storms of life when they come. Still, I'm not sure it was worth it. They were tough lessons."

As he talked, I tried to forget the pain, but my wrist was hurting terribly. I tried to put it aside and listen to Dad. He HAD let me down at key times, but, as he talked, I felt some empathy for him. This man, who had defended our nation in WWII, graduated from college, taken care of a sick woman for two decades, and basically raised three boys by himself, was telling me he was a failure.

Maybe for the first time, I was seeing my father through the eyes of a young man, not a child. I realized he was human - he was broken, like each of us. I grasped what he was saying - but I was still only seventeen, and greatly resented some things he'd done or allowed to happen to Tim and me. Those feelings were still fresh, still raw, and I was years away from understanding the magnitude of what he'd endured. Part of me wanted to give him a pass and tell him he'd been a good father, but I held that back. At least for now.

He continued to talk and shared with me a fantasy he'd harbored for years, from when I was young. He told me he used to lie awake at night and fantasize about running away. I asked him what he meant, and he continued. "I thought about grabbing you, Tim and Benjy and getting in the car and just driving. I thought I would go so far away that nobody would find us, maybe to the Reno, Nevada area. That's where I went to radio mechanic's school during WWII. The Truckee River is there, and I used to fly fish for trout on that peaceful meandering stream.

That would've been a nice quiet place to live anonymously and raise three boys. I'd find a job and we'd have to get new names and would never be able to return to our old lives." I was thinking, WOW! It was hard for me to grasp he'd actually considered this. He continually feared Mom might physically harm us. Lying in bed at night, he'd even entertained the unthinkable - that she would kill us. I thought, damn, the dark thoughts that creep into a person's mind.

Even today, it's still hard to grasp. We look at our parents as superheroes, but they have the same frailties we all have. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't that long ago that Dad was just a kid from Clinton, Tennessee, a kid who was probably picked on, the middle child among four sisters. He'd done the right things, at least by society's expectations, but had still been crapped on for most of his life. He might've been fifty five, but inside he was just an older version of that scared, skinny kid from Cullum Street. Just a guy trying to do the best he could and reflecting, at that moment, that he hadn't done so great.

A silence hung in the air. I broke it by saying, "Why didn't you do it Dad? Why didn't you take us and run away?"

"A couple of reasons. First and foremost, it wasn't the right thing to do. My mother was a widow, and I couldn't abandon her. More importantly, I would never do that to your mom. Lastly, it was illegal." He finished by half-chuckling and saying, "Heck, it wouldn't have worked anyway." This guy, who had been through so much crap, had just bared his soul to his youngest child. I was at a loss for words. It blew my mind that he'd considered this and I felt compelled to say something profound but couldn't think of anything. All I could muster was, "Gee Pop, I had no idea you'd had these thoughts." I've never forgotten that talk.

All along, I thought Dad had all the answers, but he didn't. He was as lost as I was - as all of us are. Our relationship was still a work-in-process, but I started seeing him in a different light. There would still be occasions where I was disappointed, but my chilly attitude towards him began to thaw. He'd had to juggle a lot of balls, and he'd dropped some, but maybe he HAD done his best. He'd made mistakes, of course, and I still held a grudge, but I was beginning to get a new perspective.

Having an affair with Jean while married to Mom was still a sore spot, and several of his actions had been disappointing. The hospital records from Mom's multiple trips to Eastern State were tough to read. The main takeaway from those were twofold: First, Mom was very ill, and second, Dad suffered immeasurably. Maybe my father was the real tragic figure in our family. I understand now that he did the best he could, and under unimaginable circumstances. His world came crashing down and didn't stop. It just got worse and worse.

I thought back to the beginning. Almost twenty-five years earlier (before I was born), when Mom had the episode in Arkansas in late 1953. She was seven months pregnant with Benjy and the episode was alarming, but nobody could've envisioned it would be the start of all this. It's difficult to grasp the magnitude of everything that happened. I'll never understand some choices he made, but I couldn't have handled things nearly as well as he did.

Finally, I was called back to the ER, and had my wrist X-rayed. The orthopedist found a crack in the growth line of my wrist. They put me in a splint and sent me home. The doctor assured me I'd be fine for basketball season.

The following week was the last week of summer break, but for the basketball team, vacation was over. From Monday through Friday, we met at school every morning to run. By now, school employees were back at work, so the cafeteria workers made lunch for staff each day. Every morning, we'd meet in the gym and spend 5-10 minutes stretching, before heading out to run three miles, which was ten laps around campus. Every lap, we passed by the cafeteria. After the three miles, we ran six mankillers in the gym.

One morning, my teammates and I stretched for a few minutes and off we went on our run. After a couple laps, the cafeteria smell

was getting to me. By the last lap, my stomach was really queasy. I gutted it out and staggered to the gym, nauseous and exhausted. Of course, we weren't through yet. We still had six mankillers left to run, with only a brief interval between each one. After the second mankiller, I was sick to my stomach. Coach Walker could tell something was wrong and asked, "David, are you all right?" I shook my head.

"You better go outside and take care of business." I hurried out of the gym and puked all over the sidewalk. Getting in shape is a bitch.

Senior Year and First Love

At long last, I was a senior in high school. When classes started, I had just gotten my splint off. The wrist was fine, and I returned to normal activities. At lunch, I played quarterback out front, like I had the previous three falls. The weather was warm, and the girls sat out in the sun, catching rays, and watching the guys play. My academic load was light, and my grades were average, which was a step up from abysmal. The only class I excelled at was English with Mrs. West. She was a hottie, and definitely flirted with the boys. We loved it.

In late September, basketball practice officially started. We had been running for over a month, and physically, we were in good shape. I hadn't played organized basketball since junior high, so playing on a team was an adjustment. I grew up playing pickup ball, where we only played man-to-man defense. At Norris, we primarily ran zone defense, which was also an adjustment.

My best buddy on the basketball team was Mike Armstrong. He lived in Claxton (about 15 miles away). As I mentioned earlier, Mike got the last roster spot on the varsity. His dad had recently bought him a new black Firebird. They actually flew to Detroit and picked it off of the assembly line. The thought that he had a new cool ride, and I couldn't even drive Dad's piece-of-crap car chapped my ass. Mike gave me a ride to school every morning my senior year. He also gave me a ride home after practice each night. We were tight that year and did a lot of stuff together.

I got bitten by the love bug that fall and had my first serious crush. I guess I was late to the party, considering I was almost eighteen, but I had it bad. To this day, I'm not sure if I picked Janet Craig, or she picked me. She was a cute junior. I thought she was interested in me, but I didn't have much self-confidence when it came to girls. She was buddies with a group of other junior girls (they called themselves The Crew).

One Sunday afternoon, I was at the bottom of my driveway, waiting for Scott Turner to pick me up for choir practice at church. Scott was late (he was always late) and I was sitting on our gate, thinking about Janet, and watching cars go by on the freeway. A car went by, and it was Linda Carlton (with Janet riding shotgun). They

must've been talking about me, because when they drove by, Janet saw me and started jumping up and down in her seat. She was pointing at me excitedly and apparently, telling Linda, "There he is. David's right there!" When that happened, I was pretty certain she had a crush on me. It was a great feeling, and when Scott finally picked me up, I told him all about it.

There isn't a more potent drug than love, and in my naive seventeen-year-old mind, I was already in love. The following night, I wanted to call Janet. I thought she liked me but was still too chicken to phone her. I agonized beside the phone for a while, and finally dialed her number. She said hello a couple of times and I sat there like an idiot, not saying a word. She finally hung up. I'd wussed out. I was frustrated all night that I'd chickened out and the next day at school, I bumped into her.

She worked in the principal's office each morning from nine to ten, and I needed a tardy slip. Janet was talking to Natalie Roberts about something, and I went to get my slip. She told Natalie, "Somebody gave me a prank call last night" and she looked right at me. I didn't flinch, and she blurted out, "Was it you?" I thought, geez, am I that transparent? Of course, I played it off and said, "Make a prank call to you? I don't think so." She looked at me suspiciously and handed me my tardy slip. When I got home from practice that night, I waited till 7:30 and called again. Just like the previous night, Janet answered, "Hello? Hello?" Once again, I was chicken and didn't say a word. Finally, she said, "David, is that you?"

It was put up or shut up time. I timidly said, "Hey Janet, it's me," and she laughed. Within a few minutes, we were talking like we'd known each other forever. We talked for an hour or so and made plans to talk again the next night. Before we hung up, she said, "I'm glad you called, David. I hope you'll say hi to me at school tomorrow. Goodnight." I practically floated to my room. In my mind, Janet was the one. I'd marry her, and we'd live happily ever after. Writing that sounds ridiculous, but in my seventeen-year-old mind, this was gonna be forever.

The next morning, I walked by her locker and said, "Hi Janet, how are you doing?" She winked at me and said, "Better now." That made my day, and I couldn't wait to call her when I got home from practice. That night, we talked for two hours and unofficially became a couple.

This was moving fast, but it was all good. I was basking in the glow of new love.

At lunch the next day, I played football out front with my buddies. Janet was sitting on the grass with friends and watching me. After playing for half an hour, I walked over to where she was sitting, and we talked for a few minutes. I daydreamed through afternoon classes and basketball practice.

That night, I couldn't wait to phone her. I called, and we quickly settled into our routine. Asking about each other's day, gossip at school, songs, movies, etc. The kind of juvenile stuff that seems vitally important when you're a teenager. I needed to ratchet up the sense of commitment, so I got bold and stepped out on a ledge.

I asked her, "Janet, have you told anyone about our relationship?" She could've easily said, "What relationship? We're just talking on the phone." Janet said, "Before I answer, tell me something. Have YOU told anybody we're in a relationship?" I thought to myself, well, no guts, no glory.

"Yes, on the way home from practice, I told Armstrong we were going steady."

"I'm so glad you said that. I was hoping you felt the same way I did." It might've been the happiest moment of my life, up to that point. I'm now convinced life cannot possibly get any better. We talked for another hour or so, and then said goodnight. I was ecstatic.

From that moment on, we talked for hours every night. It sucked that I didn't have a car, or access to one. I sure wished that VW I'd bought hadn't been a lemon. Janet didn't have her driver's license yet, so she couldn't drive either. The bulk of our alone time was sitting on the steps in the hallway during lunch hour and holding hands. For the time being, I was content with that. I had to be.

Puking

The big musical phenomenon in the world in 1978 was the group, Boston. They were on a world tour, promoting their second album *Don't Look Back*, and one of their stops was Knoxville. Tickets were eight bucks and the concert quickly sold out, and my buddies and I scored four tickets. The concert was on a school night in early October, and I went with Mike Armstrong, Gene Smiley, and Terry Cawood.

Mike, Gene and I all played basketball, and after practice that night, we met Terry behind the high school. We piled into Mike's Firebird and headed towards Knoxville. On the way, we bought a case of Stroh's beer (cheap and crappy) and started chugging them. I drank a couple but was scared about getting drunk and doing something stupid. Naturally, our driver, Mike, was slamming most of the brews, and by the time we got to the coliseum, he was hammered.

This was my first concert, and I was stoked. I loved Boston's music. Their debut album had sold several million copies and *Don't Look Back* was selling great too. We ran into several friends from school at the concert. Finally, the lights went down. Mike and I had gotten separated from Gene and Terry, so before every seat was taken, we grabbed a couple close to the balcony.

The opening act was Sammy Hagar (who would later become famous as the second lead singer for Van Halen in the eighties). I don't remember much about his set, except he was really loud, and Mike was swaying back and forth. There were four girls sitting right in front of us. They looked like they'd spent hours primping their hair for the big night. Sammy was winding his set down and announced his next song would be his last. I glanced over at Mike, and he was sloppy ass drunk. Right before Sammy's song ended, Mike erupted.

He puked all over the girls in front. The girls felt the vile nastiness immediately and were saying, "Ooh, shit, what the hell?" I looked at Mike in disbelief, and he said, "Hey man, who puked?"

I burst out laughing. "Are you serious?"

He nodded, and repeated, "Who threw up?" While he asked, he was literally wiping the vomit off his mouth!

I screamed over the loud music, "What are you wiping off your mouth?" He paused for a second, realized what had happened.

"Oh damn, my bad!" Mike felt better after vomiting and was enjoying the music in our seats that now had plenty of leg room (thanks to the girls running to the bathroom).

Around 9:30, Boston took the stage. The crowd came to their feet and the applause was deafening. I'd love to say Boston sounded as good as their records, but they just didn't. Their sound was so unique that it was impossible to replicate live. But for a first concert, it was awesome. We found Gene and Terry after the concert was over and walked to Mike's car. Mike was still drunk, but of course, he drove us home. We were seventeen. We were not bright.

The following Saturday night, Janet and I orchestrated our first and only "date." We managed to finagle Scott, Eddie Schultz, and Donna Seals into a night on the town. Eddie picked us all up at our individual houses and we went to Knoxville to see *Death On The Nile*. After the movie, we went to Swenson's for ice cream sundaes. Then, we cruised around West Knoxville for a while. Janet and I were holding hands in the back seat, sitting next to Scott. I put my arm around her. All I thought about was getting my first kiss, a momentous occasion. In my mind, this was a no brainer. I simply wanted to kiss my girlfriend.

We were cruising around, and it was suitably dark in the back seat. The time was right, I was ready for that magic moment, and I went for it. I leaned into Janet's face and went for the kiss. She pulled away. I was shocked. "What happened?" I had built this up as something monumental. I believe she loved me, but that rejection damaged my self-confidence for years.

I tried to whisper, "What's wrong?", but she just shook her head. That was as close as we ever got to kissing. Years later, I asked her what the problem was. She said, "I'm sorry, David. I really wanted to kiss you but had never kissed a boy and was scared." We laughed about it.

Halloween

On the way home from basketball practice one night, Mike and I were listening to our favorite rock station, WOKI, on the radio. It was the week before Halloween, and a commercial came on, advertising a new movie that was opening Friday, *Halloween*. The commercial had the creepiest music we'd ever heard and the tag line, "Halloween: The Night He Came Home". The music alone had us hooked and we decided to see it opening night.

Friday, after practice, we headed to Kingston Four Cinema. There was a long line out front. Luckily, we got tickets right before the sold-out sign popped up. We bought some popcorn and quickly grabbed two seats. It was the best horror movie (I love scary movies) I'd ever seen. Watching it for the first time in a sold-out theater was quite a rush. When the movie ended, we were still petrified but couldn't stop talking about it. We needed to decompress, so we drove to our favorite pizza joint, Stefanos Pizza for some slices of deep-dish Italian sausage pizza. We stayed a couple hours, eating and talking about the movie before starting for home.

On the way home, we were listening to WOKI again, and another commercial for *Halloween* came on. That creepy piano music brought our fears right back to the surface. As we continued towards my house, it got quiet. About ten miles from home, Mike broke the silence and said, "Hey man, can I crash at your house?" Bear in mind, NO ONE had ever stepped foot in my house except Scott Turner.

I was ashamed and embarrassed to have anyone see the inside of my filthy house.

"Dude, are you serious? Why would you want to spend the night at my house? It's nasty, and there's dog shit everywhere. What's the deal?"

"Man, I'm scared I'll drop you off and see that Michael Myers dude standing in the middle of the road on the way home." I'll admit the movie scared me, but I wasn't that big a chicken. If this guy was willing to spend the night in my house, he must be really scared.

"Okay, it's your funeral. I hate the place and I friggin' live there."

"I don't care. I just don't want to see Michael Myers on a dark road."

"Okay, when we get home, the dogs will be barking up a storm, which will wake up Jean, my stepmom. Also, watch out for the dog

crap. It'll be everywhere on the living room floor. You can crash in Tim's room. You'll need to scoot in the morning before she wakes up."

"No problem. As soon as it's light, I'll split."

Mike and I went up the driveway, he parked his car, and we walked into the house. The dogs started barking like crazy. Once inside, I told them to shut the hell up. Of course, Dad and Jean were now wide awake, and Jean wasn't happy. Dad came down and asked if we'd had a good time. I told him Mike needed to crash and he said, "no problem" and went back to bed. We went upstairs and I got Mike settled in Tim's room. I told him I had to take a leak and then I was hitting the rack. He said "later" and shut the door. I went and pissed and headed back to my room. I couldn't get the image of Michael Myers out of my head. I walked in my room and someone from behind the door grabbed me with both arms (I just knew it was Michael Myers). I screamed bloody murder. My Michael Myers was actually Mike Armstrong, having a little fun.

Jean was not amused. She stormed in and said, "What the hell is going on?"

"Sorry, Mike played a little joke on me."

"Do you know what time it is? It's after midnight, dammit." Then she looked at Mike and said, "Who are you?"

"This is my friend, Mike Armstrong, and he's sleeping over. Dad said it was okay." Before she walked out, she looked at Mike and said, "Make sure you leave early."

Mike nodded and said (dripping with sarcasm), "Nice to meet you."

Once she was back in her bedroom, we quietly cracked up, laughing in silence. Then I whispered to Mike, "Listen asshole. I'm paying you back for scaring me. Sometime tonight, I'm going to scare the crap out of you. It might be twenty minutes, it might be 4 hours, but make no mistake. I'm getting you back!" I wasn't really going to do anything and fell asleep in an instant. The next morning, I went into Tim's room and Mike was conked out. I woke him and he looked exhausted. The first thing he said was, "Dude, I laid awake most of the night, thinking you were going to scare me. I'm going home, man. I'm beat."

November was the start of basketball season. Our first game was the intersquad game and I was starting for the maroon squad. The gym was packed, and I was stoked. As I put my warmups on, I thought, "I have finally arrived." We walked up the steps towards the entrance to the gym and fans were on their feet, cheering us on. Maroon was the home team, so we warmed up closest to the home crowd. I saw Janet in the stands, proudly cheering me on. I played most of the game and scored twenty-two points. I think I led all scorers, and thought I'd played well.

After the game, we headed to the locker room for coach's post-game speech. Coach Walker gave his assessment of how each player performed. He turned to me and said, "David, nice game offensively, but son, your defense sucked. You do know there are two parts to the game, don't you? There's offense (which you obviously know) but there's also defense (which you apparently ignore). If you want much playing time, you're going to have to start hustling on D." I thought, dang, that sucked.

From mid-November through mid-March my senior year, my life was dominated by basketball. Coach Walker still thought I dogged it on defense, but I settled into a role as sixth man. Although I didn't start, I usually got in the game in the first quarter. Janet came to all the home games and was proud to see her guy playing for the varsity. She cheered me on loudly.

At one game around Thanksgiving, I was lost in love, sitting on the bench, and staring up at her in the bleachers. She was staring right back. Mike Armstrong saw that I was "in a daze" and zoned out. He whispered to George Huff that Coach wanted me in the game and word filtered down to me. I woke from my trance, stripped off my warmups and headed up to where Coach Walker was seated. When I got there, I crouched down so he could still see the court. He was totally focused on the game.

I couldn't enter the game until there was a stoppage in play, so I waited patiently. Finally, there was a foul called and play stopped. Coach finally noticed I was hunkered down beside him and said, "Yeah David, you need something?"

"Yeah, I'm ready to go in."

"Not right now, but I'll let you know." Realizing I'd been punked, I walked back to my seat in shame. I noticed Armstrong laughing his

ass off, and as I walked past him, I mouthed the words, “asshole” and finished my “walk of shame.” He got me good.

Pork Chop Love

Mike Armstrong’s mom, Evie, became another surrogate parent to me. He lived with Evie and his younger sister, Yvonne, who was a sweet girl, four years younger than us. Ever since Mom died, all my friend’s parents liked me and took me under their wings. Evie Armstrong was one of those people. She was born and raised in Germany and met Mike’s dad when he was in the service there. They fell in love, got married and he brought her back to Tennessee. After several years, they eventually divorced. She was the German teacher at Oak Ridge High School. The first time I went to his house, I didn’t quite know what to make of her. She was loud, animated, and had a thick German accent. I was a little apprehensive about her.

On that first visit, Mike and I were watching a football game and Evie came into the den and said to Mike, “Is Peters staying for supper?” I’m a picky eater and reluctant to try someone’s cooking. So, Mike asked, “You wanna stay?”

“What’s she making?”

“Hey Mom, what’s for supper?” She said, “pork chops.”

I whispered to Mike, “I’m not wild about pork chops,” and that got her attention. She walked over and got in my grill.

“What do you mean, you don’t like pork chops?” She was staring intently at my face.

“You’ll like my pork chops, Peters. You’ll see.”

“Okay, I’ll try them.”

All the time this was going on, she continued to stare at my face, and finally said, “Where’d you get that scar?”

“I had a birthmark removed when I was little.”

“Very nice, very handsome. You know, men with scars in Germany are considered sexy,” which was a little weird. After that exchange, she went into the kitchen and started cooking. Whatever she was making smelled good.

Supper was served, and we sat down to eat. She fixed me a plate with a huge, breaded pork chop, au gratin potatoes, green beans, and rolls. I took a bite of the pork chop and grinned. It was fabulous. I said, "This is great." She nodded confidently and said, "I knew you'd like my pork chops, Peters." I ate two of them and over the next few years, every time I ate there (which was quite often), she'd make pork chops.

Evie and I became very close over the next few years. Mike and I drifted apart in college, but I stayed in touch with her. After leaving for Tennessee Tech, I rarely returned to East Tennessee, but when I did, I'd often crash at her house. On two occasions, she even loaned me money to keep me afloat in college. After I graduated college and moved to Nashville, I lost touch with her. Through the power of social media, I've reconnected with Mike and his mom. I wrote her a letter, telling her how much she'd meant to me during those years and thanking her for everything. We even talked on the phone this past winter (2023). Like so many surrogate parents before and after, she loved me very well.

Christmas 1978

Christmas break finally arrived, but I wasn't thrilled. The highlight of my days was spending lunch with Janet at school. We would sit on the hallway steps, holding hands and talking. Those moments at lunch were everything to me. With school out, there'd be none of that.

Tim flew home a few days before Christmas. He was doing well academically but hated his physics classes. He was considering changing his major to literature. By now, he was firmly entrenched in college, fraternity life, and Boston. I don't think he even wanted to come home but did so for Dad.

In recent years, Dad and Jean had started having parties on Christmas Eve. They bought cheap booze and Jean made crappy hors d'oeuvres. Besides Tim and me, Jean's kids and their families came. I just bided my time every year until my buddy, Scott, came and rescued me from the "fun." Scott was the only kid I allowed in my house. I never wanted anyone to see the squalor and filth in the place I called home. The thought of Janet seeing this place was unimaginable. I lived a completely different existence from my friends. Their jaw would hit the floor if they walked in that house.

That Christmas Eve, Scott arrived and came in to say hi to Dad. Pop always greeted him by saying, "Hey Tommy, how's it going?" He would laugh and say, "Actually Mr. Peters, I'm Scott." "Dang it, that's right, I never can remember." It was a running joke. After a few minutes, we got the hell out of Dodge. We headed to Knoxville and drove around looking at Christmas lights. As he drove, we reminisced about past Christmases. My happier Christmases were when Mom was still living.

After cruising around, we stopped by Krispy Kreme for some donuts. Around one o'clock we headed home. As Scott dropped me off out front, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Merry Christmas To All, and To All A Goodnight." His greeting woke Jean up from her inebriated slumber. I laughed out loud.

Christmas Day was crappy at home. The only thing I asked for was the *Lord of the Rings* boxed set. It cost twelve bucks, but I guess that was too steep. After Tim and I opened the little bit of crap we got, Dad made pancakes.

At some point that morning, Jean felt she needed to interject her own version of holiday cheer. Because Tim received Social Security benefits for college, Jean chose the Lord's birthday to have a conniption fit about it. God only knows why, but it was a burr under her saddle. Shortly after breakfast, she started in on him because he'd bought some new clothes with his monthly check. She chastised him for blowing money on clothes. I felt bad for him but was relieved she wasn't riding herd on my ass, which was often the case.

Initially, Tim put up a valiant effort, defending his purchases, but eventually folded like a cheap suit. He started getting flustered, but she didn't let up. The whole time this was happening, all I could think of was, "For land's sake, bitch, GET OFF his ass. It ain't your money, so who gives a shit?" I could tell Tim was upset and hurt and he retreated to his room to get away from her. Dad sat quietly by while the whole thing unfolded. He was just a wimp around Jean. He should've taken up for Tim, but he didn't. Very disappointing.

That afternoon, Mom Johnson came and picked me up and brought me to her house for Christmas dinner and to open presents. Like so many other times, she answered the bell once again. She replenished my wardrobe with Levi's, shirts, and a pair of Puma tennis shoes.

When I got home, Jean was having another heated "discussion" with Tim about him spending his own friggin' money on clothes, and, by now, Tim was pissed. Jean just wouldn't let it go. He'd finally had enough and turned to Dad and said, "Pop, I'm going back to Boston (it was still three weeks before winter semester started). I called the airline and made a reservation. This is bullshit, and I did NOT deserve this. Shame on you for letting her do this." Dad sat there like a man who was whipped. Then, Tim turned to me and said, "Big Dave, I'm sorry you have to stay here, but you'll be going to college soon." Two days later, he boarded a plane for Boston. That was the last Christmas he ever came home.

Shortly after Tim returned to college, Jean wanted to "assert" her dominance one night. It was January and the middle of winter. One night Dad took a bath and came downstairs to watch TV. Jean began browbeating him for taking a bath. Bear in mind that we had a well.

Water was free. How much would the electricity have cost to heat the water for a bath? A penny? Anyway, she just kept ridiculing him until he was just cowering. Apparently Jean didn't think a bath was a daily necessity in the winter. I thought that was insane. Dad even went so far as to bring his dead mother into the discussion.

He said, "Well, my mother said I should take a bath every day." I'm thinking, c'mon Pop. Get a backbone. Tell her it's none of her damn business. But he didn't. He just let her completely emasculate him. At times, she loved to tear others down to make her feel better. I despised that, and was embarrassed that my father put up with it. I guess he had his own internal battles to deal with at the time.

My Bucket Has a Hole In It

By mid-January, Janet and I began having problems. At the time, I thought she was my forever girl, but my insecurities started showing. This would become a common theme in relationships for most of my life. My insecurities are analogous to a leaking bucket. If Janet told me she loved me, then my bucket would be full, but it wasn't long before it started leaking. Before I knew it, the bucket was empty, and I needed a refill. I constantly needed reaffirmation.

Sometimes I would push the issue with her, and things would get awkward. I hated doing it but seemed to have no control in preventing it. Once the insecurity genie was out of the bottle, there was no stopping it. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it had to have been exhausting for her.

Things came to a head during a network broadcast of the movie, *Gone With The Wind*. This was years before the VCR, so if you missed something when it aired, it might be years before you saw it again. I knew this was her favorite movie, but I didn't care about that. It aired on Sunday, February 11, but for me, that was just another night. I called her a few minutes before eight. I told her about my day, and she started talking about hers. Suddenly, she said, "David, *Gone With The Wind* comes on in a minute. Once it starts, I have to go." That made no sense to me, and I said, "What's the big deal? You can catch up after we finish talking."

A short pause and, "David, you know I love this movie, and I haven't seen it in years. I'm gonna watch it."

"Well if you love me, you'll stay on the phone with me."

"This is ridiculous. You know how I feel about you." A million thoughts went through my mind, but one trumped all others - this girl doesn't love me. If she did, she'd skip watching a forty-year-old movie to continue talking to me."

My inner demon was saying, "Man, she doesn't love you. You were a fool to ever think otherwise." I felt backed into a corner, and I made matters worse.

"If you watch that movie instead of talking to me, we're done."

"Please don't do this, David. I love you, but I never get to watch this movie, and I'm watching it. Just calm down." I was at the point of no return.

“Fine, I know where I rank in the pecking order. Have a nice life.”

And just like that, my first real romance was over, all because of my stupid insecurities. I had just lost my first girlfriend. I was in shock and couldn't believe what had happened. “Why the hell had I forced the issue?” As reality seeped in, I got really depressed. “Could I possibly undo this?” In my heart, I suspected it was over, but I had to make sure. I wrote a heartfelt letter to her, apologizing, and telling her how much I loved her. I wrote it with the fervor only young love can muster. In my naïve eighteen-year-old mind, I thought we were going to live happily ever after. Now, because of my childish actions, I'd probably pissed it all away. That night, I didn't sleep at all. I laid awake and wrestled with the likelihood that Janet was history.

The next morning, I was sick to my stomach, and all I could think of was getting my letter to her. When I got to school, I placed the letter in Janet's locker and waited for her. She finally showed up, walking down the hall with her buddies. She got to her locker and hung out there for a few minutes. Finally, right before the opening bell, she opened her locker, grabbed my letter, and put it in her purse.

Reluctantly, I trudged on to class, all the time wondering when she'd read my letter. All morning, I obsessed about it. Finally, lunch hour arrived, and I went to her locker to meet her. When I got there, she wasn't around, so I stood there, waiting impatiently. I waited 30 minutes, and finally saw her and Patti Cole walking my way. I was so worked up that I just pounced on her. I said, “Where have you been? I've been waiting for a half hour. Did you read my letter?”

“I had a pep club meeting. Yes, I read it. Why don't you call tonight, after practice?”

“Why can't we talk now? Is everything okay?” I knew I sounded panicky, but I couldn't help it. I WAS panicky.

I wanted badly for her to say, “Everything's okay, David. We're still a couple.” But she didn't say that. She said, “David, I'm not talking about it now, but we'll talk tonight. Call me after practice.” “Okay Janet, love you,” hoping she would say the same. Instead, all I got was the assurance that we'd talk tonight. I had no choice but to accept that. I figured we were history. The rest of the afternoon, I was depressed. I held out a sliver of hope that a miracle might happen but wasn't optimistic. My insecurities had driven her away. I had pushed and pushed, and she'd had enough.

I have learned through therapy that I have an absolute paralyzing fear of abandonment, like Mom abandoned me when she committed suicide. There were times in my life that I needed her, but she just couldn't be there, usually because she was hospitalized at Eastern State. And her death was the ultimate abandonment. There was something inherently broken in me that caused me to keep pushing people away, constantly testing their devotion. Regardless of how wonderful, happy, and fun it had started out, my relationship with Janet was most likely finished. All because of my insecurities and repeated attempts to elicit responses that would never be sufficient.

School finally ended and I went to the locker room to get dressed for practice. Surprisingly, practice went well. I had obsessed and stressed the whole day about Janet, so practice was a good release. By the time we finally ran mankillers at the end, I felt a little better, and my mood had improved. I even entertained the notion that our relationship might not be over.

Mike brought me home (he knew all about the situation) and said, "Good luck man," as he dropped me off. By now, I was anxious, and wanted to find out, yes or no. I called her up and she answered the phone, just like any other night. "Hey Janet, how's it going?" "Fine, how was practice?" With those opening remarks, we began talking, just like any normal night, but this wasn't any normal night. After a few minutes of chitchat, I said, "Just tell me Janet, are we finished?"

"David, I care about you ('never a good sign'), and I'll never forget this time, but I think we got too serious, too quickly. I think we should see other people. I still want to be friends." There was a long pause and I thought I'd lose it right then, but pulled it together with the classic line, "I don't want to be your friend. Hell, I've got plenty of friends. I never really cared that much for you anyway." It was the biggest lie I'd ever told. There was nothing left to say.

When I hung up, I cried like a baby. That moment seemed like the saddest moment of my life. My heart was crushed, and I didn't think I'd ever feel this way again for another girl. Unfortunately, this pattern would repeat itself again and again.

Music is the soundtrack of our life, and a song can take us right back to another time and place. The song that reminds me of Janet is *Time Passages* by Al Stewart. It was a hit when we were going steady. To this day, when I hear the first notes of that song, it takes me right back to my senior year, and it makes me a little sad. Alas, life goes on.

Overall, basketball was a good experience for me, but Coach Walker penalized me for waiting until my senior year to play. I should've been a starter. Even my friend's parents would tell me, "David, I don't know why you don't play more. Anytime you get in the game, you make something happen." My best game was against Mom's alma mater, Coalfield. I entered that game in the first quarter and quickly grabbed a couple of boards and put a shot back in. I played so well in the first half that I started the second half. I finished the game with 18 points and 16 rebounds. When we got to the locker room at halftime, Coach said, "That's the way to play, son. Great job." In spite of my good play, I was back on the bench at the start of the next game.

The district we played in was rural East Tennessee, and some places were in the middle of nowhere. The schools (and towns) were full of rednecks. At one town, Wynn, locals threw bricks at our bus, and we needed police escorts to get to and from the gym. At Wartburg, I remember standing at the free throw line, waiting for the ref to hand me the ball. I gazed up in the stands and little old ladies would spit snuff juice at you.

For road games, the bus rides home were interesting. After a few minutes, the bus driver would turn out the lights and it would be pitch black. There was lots of making out on the rides home, none of which I participated in. Occasionally, I rode home with Dad. He came to some of my road games. He never came to the home games because I think he felt ostracized by folks in Norris. We finished second in our district and advanced to the regional tournament.

Our first regional game was at Alcoa, a school with several black players. We hadn't faced many black players all season. East Tennessee was (and still is) lily white. I didn't think we had a chance to beat Alcoa, and, early on, our starters were clearly intimidated.

They were afraid of getting their shots blocked, so they didn't get set properly. I told my buddies on the bench I would not be intimidated when I got in the game. Right on cue, coach called timeout and told me to come up. We were huddled around, and coach said, "David, get in there and make something happen."

I looked at my fellow benchwarmers as if to say, "Watch and learn, boys. Watch and learn." Nothing much happened the first minute or two I was in there. After Alcoa scored a basket, we drove the ball down court, and I got a pass on the wing. I set up for my jump shot and let it fly. As soon as it left my fingers, some dude comes out of nowhere and spikes my shot like a volleyball. He scoops it up, drives the length of the court and does a tomahawk dunk. I thought to myself, damn, that didn't go well.

Afterwards, we inbounded the ball and brought it down the floor again. I glanced over at my bench buddies, and they had their hands over their faces (I'd just gotten "faced," a popular expression then) and were laughing their asses off as if to say, "You just got owned, pal!" I think we lost by 40 points or so. That game was the end of our season and the end of my high school basketball career.

It was now March, and the start of my last season of baseball. I had high hopes my senior season. I was team captain and during the first week of practice, I noticed that last year's sophomores looked a lot better.

Our team started strong, winning three of the first five games. I started the season with a hot bat. Through the first seven games, I was hitting .545, with three home runs. After beating Coalfield, our record was 5-2. I walked down to Archer's Food Center one day at lunch to buy the *Clinton Courier*. My teammates and I checked it weekly to see if there were any writeups about us. Imagine my surprise when I saw an article and my picture. The title was, *Norris (5-2) likes Peters' Hefty Bat*. Pretty cool.

One day, in the middle of the season, I was in Doc Bratcher's office, and he talked about how good I was playing. He suggested I try getting a baseball scholarship to Tennessee Tech. I didn't have a clue how that was done, but Doc said he'd help. He went to our library and clipped articles about me out of the *Courier*. He included these with a cover letter and mailed them to David Mays, the coach

at Tech. I thanked Doc for his efforts but didn't get my hopes up. A few days later, Doc saw me in the hall, and said, "Don't go to the Civic Center tonight." I asked why, and he said, "The coach at Tech is going to call you." I couldn't believe it.

I got home from practice and went upstairs. About a half hour later, I heard the phone ring. Dad said, "Telephone, hon." I picked up the extension and said, "Hello."

"Hi David, this is David Mays at Tennessee Tech. I've been looking at the articles and letter your guidance counselor wrote and wanted to talk about you playing at TTU." I was stoked. This guy actually wanted me to play college baseball. This was an actual recruiting call. "How cool was this?"

We talked for the next half hour. He asked me about my high school career and what I hoped to achieve in college. There weren't full scholarships for baseball at Tech, but he could offer a partial scholarship. I asked what that meant.

He said, "An athletic meal ticket and a discount on textbooks." Considering it was my only offer, I said, "I'll take it." He said he'd send me a National Letter of Intent with a self-addressed stamped envelope.

He told me when I got the letter, I should sign it and mail it back. Once he got it back, he'd put an announcement on the wire services and area newspapers would pick it up. The last thing he said, was, "Welcome to Golden Eagle Country, David." Just like that, I was going to play college baseball. At this point, my dream of being a major league player was still alive. I went to bed, excited about the future and feeling great.

In late April, we had a gap in our baseball schedule to accommodate spring break. Our senior trip was to Daytona Beach. Besides roundtrip bus service, the trip included four nights lodging, dinner at a seafood restaurant, and trips to Disney World and Marineland. The total cost was only ninety-seven dollars. It would've cost more, but our class had done a lot of fundraising (donut sales, car washes, etc.) since our freshman year. Even at that discounted rate, I was still ninety-seven dollars short of having enough for the trip. I knew Dad could never swing that kind of dough, and even if

he could, Jean would never have allowed it. I went to Mom Johnson and, without batting an eye, she gave me the money.

You would think I was set, but the trip cost didn't cover spending money. I still needed about eighty bucks for meals and stuff. Just like last year, I was working at Mr. Ellertsen's house on weekends. I had only saved fifteen dollars and was considerably short of the amount I needed. I was at Mr. Ellertsen's one Saturday and had been pulling weeds for hours. He came out with some lemonade and had me take a break.

While I caught my breath, he asked how baseball season was going. I talked about my upcoming trip. He was always interested in what was happening in my life. I mentioned I was about sixty dollars short of what I needed, and he asked what I was going to do. I told him I hoped to get in a full day's work today and possibly another full day next Saturday. That still wouldn't be enough but would have to do. When the break was over, I hopped on the mower and started cutting grass. When I finished, Mr. and Mrs. Ellertsen came out to pay me. He gave me twenty-five dollars for eight hours' work, and then Mrs. Ellertsen handed me a check for sixty dollars! I couldn't believe it.

I was touched by their generosity. They helped me, like so many others had on my journey. Mrs. Ellertsen said, "David, Birger told me about the trip, and we want to help. Keep in mind, just like last year, we expect you to work it off." If it wasn't for their generosity, I would have subsisted on baloney sandwiches in Florida. They were good people and took a real interest in a kid that needed help.

There were only a couple of months left in high school and things were going well. We were kicking ass in baseball. We were in first place in district two and looked like we'd be the first Norris baseball team to ever win a district championship. On nights when I didn't have a baseball game, I'd go to the Civic Center and play hoops. I was excited and ready for the beach and a break from school.

First Kiss

The next Sunday night, Mike picked me up around 8:30 and we headed to the high school. Spring Break was officially here. Our Greyhound Bus driver had a funny southern accent and would get on the PA system and inadvertently crack us up.

He drove all night, and we pulled into a restaurant in Valdosta, Georgia on Monday morning. We were awakened by a funny voice over the loudspeaker, (a nasally Southern accent) "All right, time for breakfast, if ya can stand it."

For the rest of the week, Jeff Hesoun would occasionally bellow out, "All right, time for breakfast, if ya can stand it." Each time, it cracked us up.

Around lunchtime, we were far enough into Florida to finally see the ocean. The view of the ocean has always been a sign of God to me, beautiful and infinite. For some classmates, it was their first time seeing it.

We made it to Daytona Beach around three o'clock Monday afternoon and checked into our motel. There were four people per room, and I roomed with Dewboy, Mike Armstrong and Paul Abercrombie. As soon as we unpacked, we hit the beach. The water was chilly, but we had a blast playing in the surf. After a couple hours, we returned to our rooms to shower before heading out to eat.

Every night I'd walk along the beach, sometimes with Dewboy and Mike, sometimes by myself. Walking along Daytona Beach, I'd look at the vastness of the ocean and think about Mom. She always loved the water and when I was a toddler, she and I would walk along Panama City Beach every summer during our week down there. The last time our family went to the beach was the summer of 1968. One day, Mom and I were walking along the beach, and she said, "David, look out there at the Gulf of Mexico. See how vast the water is? That's how vast God's love is for you." That stuck with me, and I thought about that while walking along Daytona Beach that week. Surely the God that made the ocean and loves us that much was taking care of Mom in heaven. I hoped that was true. I had faith it was.

One afternoon I went into a liquor store (I was eighteen, which was the legal age then) and purchased some Mad Dog 20/20. It was

cheap wine that was good at getting you buzzed. I really have no idea why I bought it, as I wasn't much of a drinker. I wrapped the bottle of wine in my towel one afternoon and walked down to the beach. I found a place and put my "parcel" on the sand. A little while later, I saw a girl, and went up to her and started talking. We walked along the edge of the surf. She was a cutie from Calhoun, Georgia named Sharon. She was seventeen and a cheerleader at her school. We walked a couple of miles, talking the whole time, and ended up back where I'd left my towel. It was almost sunset, and a beautiful late April evening.

I asked if she wanted some wine, so I pulled out the Mad Dog (last of the big-time spenders) and we started swigging straight out of the bottle. It didn't take long for the alcohol to start taking effect.

We were definitely flirting with each other as the sun went down. That night on the beach, we started getting close. She had a portable radio with her, and we listened to some tunes. *Reunited* by Peaches and Herb came on and she leaned in close and kissed me, full on the lips. It was a milestone. I'd finally kissed a girl. Pretty pathetic that it took eighteen years, but I'd finally done it. We kissed some more, and she laid her head on my chest as we listened to the surf under the moonlight.

I'm not sure if it was the alcohol or what, but we started baring our souls. It was a fairly serious talk for an otherwise happy occasion. She told me her stepfather had abused her a couple of years earlier and told me about some other stuff happening in her life. I told her about my Mom's suicide and my cruel stepmom that hated me. We both shed a few tears about what we'd endured in our young life, and there was a definite connection between us. After dark, we continued making out for a while, but then just held each other. Finally, we hugged and promised to see each other the following night.

Unfortunately, the next night, our class had a group outing at a seafood restaurant. It was nice but we didn't get back till 9:30, and by that time, Sharon was nowhere to be seen. I wasn't in love or anything but was bummed we hadn't gotten together again. On my last day at the beach, someone came up behind me and put their arms around my waist. She said, "Guess who?" I turned around and there she was - the Georgia peach. She was getting ready to head home and asked for my address. I explained why I hadn't shown up the

previous night, but she was totally cool about it. She promised to write when she got home and wrote her address on a scrap of paper and handed it to me. We hugged and she kissed me on the cheek, and said, "Thanks for being here, David. You made this week a lot more fun. I hope you hit a bunch more home runs for the Senators."

When I got home, I did write to her, and she wrote me back a couple of times. We continued corresponding occasionally, even into college. I was in Sigma Alpha Epsilon at Tennessee Tech, and she was in Phi Mu at Mercer University, so we had the Greek thing in common. In 1981, she invited me to a dance at her sorority for homecoming, but I had no car, and had a girlfriend at the time.

It was just a one-night fling on Spring Break, but I still think about her sometimes. To this day, when I hear the song *Reunited*, I think of that first kiss on Daytona Beach in 1979, and the girl who gave it to me. I never heard from her again, but I hope her life has turned out good.

On our last day in Florida, we went to Disney World. I'd been there five years earlier, shortly after Mom died. Since that first trip, they'd added Space Mountain, which was basically a roller coaster inside a dark building. It was a blast and I rode it several times. Everyone had fun that day, and it was the icing on the cake for a great Spring Break. The next morning, we headed home, and I geared up for the final stretch of baseball season.

Breaking Bad

In the second week of May 1979, the District Two tournament started in Oliver Springs. We entered the tournament in first place with a record of 12-4. Now that we finally had a good team, there started to be some buzz amongst our classmates. At Norris, basketball was the top draw and baseball always a distant second. For our first three seasons, we were pretty mediocre. It was irritating that folks were just now jumping on the bandwagon. My thinking was, where were you the last three years?

We played the host team, Oliver Springs, the first night. My favorite bat throughout high school had been the Jackie Robinson fat-handled bat. Someone had recently broken our last one, and I needed a bat. I had never used an aluminum bat before, but thought I'd give it a try. It felt pretty good, and I walked up to the plate. The first pitch was high and outside.

The next pitch was in my sweet spot, high and inside. I swung and instantly knew it was a home run. I wished I'd watched the trajectory, because, at the time, it was the longest home run ever hit in that park. Their left field fence was 310 feet away and the ball cleared the fence as well as the light pole at the fence. There were two men on base, so we were already up 3-0 and never looked back. We won 11-4 and faced Jellico the next night in the championship game.

The next day was Thursday, May 10, 1979. When we got to the ballpark that night, I got my teammates together and gave them a pep talk. I told them we were going to win this championship for each other, not the bandwagon fans that were just now coming around. Once the game began, it was apparent that we were the better team. Jellico's starting pitcher had decent control but not much of a fastball. On my first at bat, I swung at a fastball and hit a line drive homerun over the left-field fence. It was my second home run in as many days. I was "in the zone."

I came up to bat again in the bottom of the fourth and hit a line drive that bounced off the center-field fence. I stopped at second with a double. The field at Oliver Springs had bases that were not safe. They were the hard plastic type with a vertical steel rod inserted into the ground. The good thing about them is they're durable, but the bad thing is they don't move. With a traditional base, if you slide into

it, the base gives way, and you slide on past. These type of bases are literally locked into place.

I was never blessed with great speed (understatement) but was a smart runner. Ninety percent of high school catchers can't throw out runners trying to steal base. So even with my subpar speed, I could steal bases pretty easily. As soon as the pitcher let go of the pitch, I took off for third base. I got a good jump and hoped I wouldn't even have to slide. As I got near third base, I realized this was going to be close and, unfortunately, I would have to slide.

I slid too late, and all hell broke loose - literally. I could feel my ankle breaking and let me be perfectly clear - it broke bad. It hurt like hell, and I knew it was awful. I was screaming and rolled over on my back. Coach McKamey ran out and I told him, "I just broke the shit out of my ankle."

"No you didn't. Your cleat just came off." Then he saw that my foot was still inside the cleat, and I saw his eyes roll. It looked disgusting. The bottom of my right foot was pointed straight up in the sky. Our pitcher, Terry Cawood, saw it and puked.

Someone ran to the phone and called an ambulance. About twenty minutes later, it arrived and drove right onto the field. The paramedics cut my pants leg to access my ankle and extricate my foot from the cleat. Then they loaded me into the ambulance. While they were doing this, a tournament official handed me an All-District certificate and said, "Son, you had two great games this week. Heal up soon."

It was now ten o'clock, and the pain was intolerable. If they'd given me anything for pain, it hadn't helped. The orthopedic surgeon came in and told me about the injury. I had fractured my ankle in seven places and suffered a subtalar dislocation (a rare dislocation). It was a bad injury, but the doctor thought I'd eventually make a full recovery. The anesthesiologist came in and explained how they would put me to sleep. He told me to start counting - one thousand one, one thousand two, etc., and before I got to thirty, I'd be asleep.

The last thing I said was, "Whatever you do, DON'T TOUCH my ankle until I'm knocked out." They assured me they wouldn't, and, in a minute, I started counting. One thousand one, one thousand two...one thousand twenty-eight, one thousand twenty-nine, one thousand thirty... I got up to about one thousand forty and said, "Ok, timeout, this isn't working, and my ankle is still killing me. I don't

want anyone touching me until I'm conked out." The only person in the room was a nurse and she said, "Sir, it's 1:45 in the morning. You've been out of surgery for three hours." Wow.

I woke up the next morning to the sight of a massive cast on my right leg. It ran from my toes to right below my knee. The doctor dropped by and told me the surgery went well, and I should be out of a cast in eight weeks. I asked him if I'd be 100% by the start of college and fall baseball. He thought it was possible, but there was a lot of trauma to the joint and it would take some time.

At lunch, I got a call from Doc Bratcher.

"DW, how are you feeling and what are your injuries? There are crazy rumors going around school. Everything from your foot was amputated to you'd never walk again." So, I broke it down and told him about the fractures and dislocation.

Dad came to the hospital that afternoon and said my accident was the worst sports-related injury he'd ever seen. When the orderlies brought supper, several of my teammates dropped by my room. They brought me the game ball from the night before. Each player had signed it and put the date and final score (11-5) on it (I still have it). For the first time, we were District Two Champions.

The next day, I was given a quick tutorial on crutches and discharged. When I got home, I was hurting and just wanted to go upstairs and lie down. The next few days sucked. My ankle hurt constantly and laying in that hot house was miserable.

Later that week, Susan Fisher, a sportswriter for the *Clinton Courier*, came to the house and interviewed me about my injury, my high school career, and my thoughts about college baseball. The interview was for the following week's paper. I had talked to Susan several times in the past about baseball and basketball for various articles, but in the past, we'd always talked at school. I was totally embarrassed that she saw the inside of my house. While she interviewed me, she also asked Dad and Jean about my college baseball scholarship. Dad, of course, was nice, and shockingly, Jean said, "Yes, we're very proud of David." It might've been the most ridiculous lie she'd ever told. She didn't give one shit about me. It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud. Afterwards, I hobbled out to Susan's car and begged her not to put the quote from Jean in the paper - and she didn't.

In the current issue of the *Clinton Courier*, there was an article about the success of our season, and there were pictures of the four guys who made All-District (Sammy Sawyer, Bobby Beaty, Terry Cawood and me). Coach McKamey was quoted in the article, saying that he thought Norris would've won their regional game if they'd had David Peters. The article said, "Peters, the Senators' exceptional third baseman finished the season batting .488 but broke his ankle in the title game against Jellico." The article also said, "Peters' big bat was a huge factor in the team's success." The last line said, "Peters is definitely a college prospect."

The footnote for my high school baseball career was an awards cookout held at our second baseman's house. I was really happy to get the MVP trophy.

After the season ended, I returned to the orthopedic surgeon for a checkup and new cast. It was late May, and my first cast was pretty foul smelling and getting loose as swelling had decreased. When the technician cut the cast off, I was shocked how bad my leg and ankle looked. From my toes to my knee, it was solid black. Although it was still only May, it was hard to believe I'd be ready for fall baseball.

It was finally here: my last week of high school. No school work got done, and everyone was ready to graduate. Thursday was awards day. The varsity basketball players received their letterman jackets. I wasn't expecting anything else, and just sat back, watching others get recognized. When they announced the award for Most Outstanding Male Athlete, I figured it would be someone on the basketball team, since that was the big sport. I was shocked when my name was called. I hobbled up on crutches to collect the medallion.

Friday afternoon was graduation rehearsal, and the person they paired me to walk with was Peggy Humphrey. During rehearsals, she was patient and walked slow enough to allow for my crutches.

Graduation night 1979 was held in the gym, and it was pretty warm. There was no air conditioning in our school. Our valedictorian was Melea Nash, and after she gave her commencement address, Doc Bratcher got up to announce scholarship recipients. I was elated to hear him announce, "David Peters will be attending Tennessee Tech to play baseball and major in accounting. He will receive \$1,500 for his studies."

High school was over. In three months, I would be leaving for college. I was so ready. After graduation, I was still on crutches and bored out of my mind. I needed something to do and money for college. I asked Doc Bratcher if he had any ideas and he said he'd look into it. The next day, he called and asked if I'd considered a career in law enforcement. I laughed and said, "I don't think so." He chuckled and said, "Regardless, you're going to be spending your summer as a dispatcher for the Norris Police Department." I knew what a dispatcher was from watching *Adam-12*. Norris is like Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*, and there was absolutely no need for a dispatcher. I asked Doc, "Are you serious? Norris doesn't need a dispatcher. Don't get me wrong. I'm thrilled to have a job, and I appreciate your help, but it sure seems like a token position." "Just take the job, DW, and take a bite out of crime." I laughed and said, "10-4."

To this day, I don't know why the powers that be decided to give me that job, but I enjoyed my summer at the police station. As far as dispatching duties there really weren't any, so I basically just hung around and entertained friends who dropped by. Since it was summertime, I wore shorts and golf shirts and sat in front of the station, soaking up the sun. It was an easy gig.

Around the fourth of July, I got my last cast off. My foot and ankle were still swollen, but I could get a tennis shoe on (barely). What I couldn't do was bend my ankle. In eight weeks, I'd lost all flexibility in the joint. I did finally ditch the crutches, but still had a bad limp. It was July, and I was really questioning whether I'd be ready for fall baseball.

One Friday in mid-August, Mike Armstrong and I drove to Cookeville to pre-register for our first quarter at Tennessee Tech. I spent the night before at Mike's house so we could leave early the next morning. That morning, Evie, Mike's mom, made us authentic German pancakes and we hit the road for college. We were stoked about finally seeing the campus and the city of Cookeville. We arrived around nine thirty and spent most of the morning in orientation. After breaking for lunch, we had a couple hours to explore campus. At two o'clock, we reported to Johnson Hall (the college of business) to register for fall classes.

Later that afternoon, I walked to Hooper Eblen Center, the basketball coliseum and also the home of the administrative offices for athletics. I walked into the baseball office and met Coach Mays in person. I started to introduce myself when he said, "You must be David Peters, third baseman from Norris. I recognize you from the pictures in the articles your guidance counselor sent." He knew about my injury and asked how long I'd been off crutches. I told him it'd been hard regaining flexibility in my ankle. He told me that when school started, I should go to the training room at the football stadium every night and get whirlpool treatments for my ankle. After talking a couple more minutes, I shook his hand and said, "I'll see you next month, Coach."

After that, I walked down the hall to the women's volleyball office. The new volleyball coach was my cousin, Sharon Perkins (Perk), who'd been the recreation director in Norris when I was eleven and twelve. I remembered her fondly. I walked in and Perk looked about the same. It had been five years since I'd seen her. At first, she didn't know who I was, and finally, I said, "Hey Perk, it's that chubby kid that followed you around like a puppy for two summers." She laughed and said, "David, is that you?" I nodded and we talked for a few minutes.

I told her I'd just met with Coach Mays and would be playing baseball there. I brought her up to speed on the last few years and we talked about Mom's death. When we talked about Mom, she got emotional. Mom's funeral in '74 was the last time we'd seen each other. Before leaving, she said that if I needed any help at Tech, just ask and she'd do what she could. As I got up to leave, she said,

“Wow, you are really handsome. Cousin, you’re going to break some hearts around here.”

I left her office and limped across campus to the graduate school. Another second cousin, Martin Peters, was the Dean. I’m not sure I’d even met him before, but Dad spoke highly of him, and he’d written me a nice letter when he saw the story in the local paper about my signing to play baseball at Tech. In the next four years, he and his wife, Lorraine, would become two more surrogate parents to me. He had two grown daughters, so I became the son they never had. Lorraine was a Home Economics professor at Tech. It was almost dark when Mike and I finally got home. It’d been a long day, but I was almost ready for college.

Leaving the Past Behind

I knew what I was taking to college, and it wasn't much. Besides clothes and baseball gear, I took my two Bibles (the blue jean Bible from Mom and *The Way* from Mom Johnson), and a portable TV. I brought an electric blanket but hadn't considered sheets and other stuff. Once again, like so many other times, Mom Johnson came to my rescue. She got me a footlocker to haul all my gear - sheets, pillowcases, towels, etc. Everything I needed, she provided. She was truly my angel.

On a Sunday morning in mid-September, I packed for college. Mike Armstrong was supposed to arrive around one and pick me up. By 12:30, I was outside, in front of the log house, ready to split. I'd been waiting for this day for years, and it was finally here. There were times when I wondered if I'd ever get out of here.

The years with Mom had been a roller coaster, living through the emotional ups and downs, her suicide attempts, and finally her death. There were some good times, and I always felt her love, but there were many traumatic lows as well. Dad's affair, Mom's suicide attempts and subsequent death - they'd left indelible marks that would never go away. But the years with Jean had been really bad too, worse in some ways. She'd treated me like crap for five years and it had taken a toll.

Dad came out to talk to me and I could tell he wasn't prepared for the moment. He was sad but knew it was time to let me go and asked if I was ready. I wanted to say, "Hell Pop, I've been ready for years" but thought that sounded insensitive, so I just said, "Yeah, I think so." He knew my grades weren't great and told me I'd have to really crack the books in Cookeville. For the next few minutes, my 56-year-old father opened up about his view of life when he was eighteen.

College hadn't been an option for him, and, instead, he'd enlisted in the Army Air Force and served his country. He regretted he hadn't made more friends growing up, but said he was too shy, which seemed odd. I'd never considered him shy. He remarked, "David, you have a lot more friends than I had at your age, and I think it's great how people gravitate towards you. I'm so thankful Mrs. Johnson helped fill the void in your life after your Mom died."

“I wish Jean had been nicer to you and Tim, but what’s done is done. In a few minutes, I’ll be an empty nester. How does time go by so fast?” He asked how my ankle was doing. I told him it still felt weak, and my mobility wasn’t close to where it needed to be. He said, “Don’t rush it. If you have to sit out your freshman year, so be it.” He told me how proud he was of my athletic skills, that he’d loved playing sports, but just wasn’t in my league. I learned from his memoirs that, in fact, he was a darn good baseball player. Dad was trying to give me a good sendoff, but it wasn’t necessary. I’d waited forever for this day. A minute later, Mike pulled up and we loaded my gear and hit the road.

We pulled out of the driveway from that filthy old log house and started the trip to Cookeville. It’s a hundred-mile drive and it was a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Just like Tim had told me years earlier, I believe it WAS the happiest day of my life. It was a little surreal, knowing I’d finally gotten away from the cancer in my life that Jean had been. There were times, especially in this past year, where I thought she would break me. Her incessant belittling and nagging had crushed my spirit. I’d put on a happy face to the outside world, but inside, she’d hurt me repeatedly with her mental cruelties. Outside of Mom Johnson, Tim, Doc Bratcher and a few others, no one knew the real torment I’d faced from her.

The next four years would be, for the most part, a great time in my life. College was a happy time, a fun time, and most importantly, a healing time. I found a really good therapist on campus at Tech, and he helped me figure things out and made me realize that none of the crap Jean did to me was my fault. I joined a fraternity and found dozens of brothers who also helped me immensely.

As Mike and I got on I-40, he popped our theme song, *On The Run*, into his cassette deck. That song always made us smile and he cranked it up. I glanced at the back seat of his Jeep. The meager belongings back there represented all of my worldly possessions.

Besides those few items, I did have one thing that was with me from the moment I was born. I had my mother's love, a love I still feel to this day. I could no longer see her face or touch her, but I still feel her love in my heart. The English poet Thomas Campbell said, "To live in the hearts of those left behind is not to die." The love of Julia Peters lives on in my heart. That part of her will never die.

Andy Dufresne in *Shawshank Redemption*:

Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.

That's exactly how I felt. I had HOPE for better days. I was finally
ON MY WAY!

Epilogue

Little Boy Lost is a memoir of the thirteen years I had with my Mom, and the five years after her suicide. I started college in September 1979 and those four years were some of the best of my life. To be sure, there were challenges then, but, overall, it was an awesome time. Probably the best part of college was knowing I'd gotten away from my stepmother, Jean. That was huge.

I turned 23 on January 9, 1984, and started my career in Nashville two weeks later. That seemed like a good demarcation point for ending the book. I look back at my first 23 years in three parts, two of which are detailed in this memoir. The first, and most significant, was my formative thirteen years with Mom, and ultimately, her suicide. The next part was the five years of emotional abuse I endured from Jean. For me, those years were just as damaging (in some ways, perhaps more so) than the ones with Mom. The last part was my four years in college.

There are three points to cover in this epilogue. First, I want to talk about Dad and what happened with our relationship after I left for college. Second, I'll briefly talk about Jean and what happened with that relationship. Lastly, I'll bring the reader up to speed on events from 1984 to the present.

Dad

People that read my short stories identified my father as the tragic figure in our family. There are certainly signs that point in that direction, but just like life, it's complex. In this book, I was pretty critical of him, especially in my teen years.

For most of my childhood, I thought both my parents walked on water. From my earliest memories, I knew Mom was sick and would often be gone for extended periods of time. During those times, Dad filled both parental roles, mother and father. He had a high-pressure job but was still home every night to cook, clean, and take care of us. His days were insanely long, but he never complained. Not only did he maintain his job and take care of the house, but he also attended our extracurricular activities (sports, music, scouts, etc.).

He was Superman, but he did make mistakes. I now realize he did the best he could, and under unbelievably burdensome circumstances. If he was depressed, I never noticed it. My mother was truly the love of his life, and it must've been a crippling blow when she got sick. He had a herculean load and did the best he could. He soldiered on and never gave up.

The first real bump in the road, for me, was when Jean came into the picture and became our *de facto* caregiver. Initially, things seemed fine, but, at some point, I strongly suspected she and Dad were getting a little too friendly. In my gut, I knew something was awry, and my suspicions were confirmed when I caught them that Sunday morning. That broke my heart and was one of the worst moments of my life.

For years, I was angry at him, but part of growing up is the realization that parents are as flawed and broken as we are. It still hurts that he committed adultery, but, over time, I learned to forgive him.

Where I really struggled with Dad was when he married Jean, and became subservient to her, even at the expense of his children. We were devalued by him and for what purpose? To pacify a cruel, hateful person? We were his flesh and blood. It wasn't right then. It's not right now, but I eventually just had to let go and let God help me learn to accept it.

When I left for college, my relationship with Pop slowly started improving. It was very much a journey and took years to come full circle. During college, he wrote me two to three letters a week, and I learned a lot from those letters (most of which I still have). He wrote about his love for Mom, his childhood, his hopes, and ambitions. Over time, I learned who Benjamin Harrison Peters Jr. was - just a shy guy, trying to make his way in a world that wasn't always fair to him. I began to see him in a different light.

After I moved to Nashville in 1984, Dad started coming and spending weekends with me. By now, his marriage to Jean was in shambles, so coming to Nashville got him out of the house for a couple of days. We really got to know each other on those weekends. We went for walks, listened to music, watched movies, and Andy Griffith reruns, and ate at some great restaurants.

For most of my childhood, Dad always worked, so I never really got much time with him. At this stage of his life, he had all the time

in the world. It was analogous to the Harry Chapin song, *Cats In The Cradle*. I learned that my father was a lot like me, and we grew really close. Part of the mending of our relationship was maturity on my part, combined with empathy for a man who'd been through so much. I began to earnestly pray that he'd find a way out of his loveless marriage. The problem was that he had nowhere to go and no assets. He was financially destitute.

He reconnected with his faith and joined a church close to his house. He attended worship services by himself and seemed to enjoy them. One night, his youngest sister, Joyce, dragged him kicking and screaming to a senior's dance in Knoxville, where he met a widow named Nellie. They had an instant connection, and it wasn't long before he filed for divorce and moved out. He and Nellie were married, appropriately enough, at a dance, and they enjoyed twenty happy years together. About ten years into their marriage, Nellie was diagnosed with dementia, but Dad took care of her till the end of his life. He was selfless.

In late 2009, he was walking out of a restaurant close to home and fell in the parking lot. He broke his femur, and, at age 86, it was the beginning of the end. Dad died a couple of weeks later. Tim and I jointly gave his eulogy in early December. I was blessed to have him for thirty-five more years after Mom died. I miss him every day.

Jean

A lot of people have asked me if I was able to forgive Jean for her cruelty all those years. There are various theories about forgiveness and that it somehow brings closure and healing to victims. Jesus personally preached about forgiveness, and I understand the basis for that. Not forgiving is to somehow sentence yourself to being a victim forever.

Ironically, Jean appeared to be a good mother and grandmother to her biological family. For whatever reason, she just didn't like Tim or me at all. Benjy was 21 when Dad married her, so he didn't have to endure what Tim and I did. It's inexplicable that she was so nice to us, only to change so completely. Maybe it was the classic stepparent issue. It's weird though how she changed so much, but there's no doubt that she despised us.

The last time I spoke to Jean was the summer of 1982. Dad wanted me to come home from college to visit the World's Fair. I spent two nights at the log house, and never stepped foot in that place again. Everything was tolerable until the second night. I was sound asleep when World War III broke out between Dad and Jean. She was pissed because he'd paid for my admission to the World's Fair (maybe fifteen bucks). The shouting finally stopped, and I went back to sleep.

The next morning Dad was gone, and I went downstairs to get some orange juice. I was minding my own business when Jean said, "I guess you heard that argument last night. You should pay me for the World's Fair ticket your father bought.

"Nah, I don't think so."

"You're a loser, just like your brothers are." I'd had enough. That last statement just set me off.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

There was a marked change in my tone, and she knew it. She timidly said, "You heard me." I walked up to her and said, "Don't ever speak to me that way again. If you do, I promise you'll regret it. I've had it with your crap, Jean." I walked away before things got out of hand. That was the last thing I ever said to her. She died in 2011 at the age of 82. Her death had no bearing on my life.

My feelings about Jean have been a long journey. I'm not gonna lie - I was very angry at her for years, but through therapy, prayer and hopefully, a little maturity on my part, I have forgiven her. I will NEVER forget what she did, but I just came to a point where I was giving the anger too much power in my life. And I didn't like it.

I finally forgave her for my own healing, not because she deserved it. Because honestly, I still don't think she deserved forgiveness. The whole thing was sad and unfortunate. She should've treated Tim and I better, and she should have treated Dad better. Ultimately, that was her cross to bear. I harbor no malice towards her though.

1984-The Present

When I graduated from Tennessee Tech in December 1983, I figured I was done with school. At the time, I was lucky to even graduate. At my first job (Comdata) there was no incentive to get further education. In 1986, I started at Northern Telecom and found myself surrounded by people who were Certified Public Accountants (CPAs). I started studying for the CPA exam and finished in early 1991. After I finally passed (on my fourth attempt), Dad joked, "Just think hon, last week, you couldn't even spell CPA and now, you are one." Peer pressure beckoned again, and in 1993, I enrolled in the MBA program at Belmont University, here in Nashville. I graduated in 1995. Not bad for a guy who barely finished high school.

After my first two years at Comdata, I spent sixteen years at Northern Telecom (Nortel Networks), then two years at Oman-Gibson Associates, a property development company, eight years at Dell Computers, and finally five years as an economist for the state Attorney General. Like most people, my career had some ups and downs. I did all right, I guess.

In 1987, I was going to my then-girlfriend's house for Thanksgiving dinner and had a head-on collision that almost killed me. One person in the other car was killed. The accident was just that - an accident. It was no one's fault. When it happened, Dad was just sitting down to eat lunch with my brother at his apartment in Manhattan. He got in his car and immediately drove to Nashville. Dad and my Aunt Toni basically moved into my condo for the next two months. They never left my side. I was hospitalized for 35 days, underwent multiple surgeries, and still feel the effects of the accident today.

I got married in 1991 to Cassandra Howle. In 1994, my son, Andrew was born. Today, he lives in Florida. In 1998, Will was born. He lives in California. Raising children was cathartic for me and gave me some perspective about what my own parents went through, raising my brothers and me. It gave me a chance for redemption from aspects of my own childhood that had traumatized me. I'm proud of both Andrew and Will and love them so very much. If I've done anything right, it's raising my boys. They're good guys.

My brother Benjy (Ben) is 69, retired, and lives close to Norris, in Knoxville. Benjy just got lost in the shuffle of our family's structure. He was the first born and, unfortunately, bore the brunt of the early years of Mom's illness. At various times, he's struggled with substance abuse, but for the most part, has been clean and sober for the last 30+ years. He is a coin collector and dealer. I'm proud of him and I love him.

Our middle brother, Tim, is a retired editor and writer and lives in Los Angeles. He's the brains of the family. I'm equally proud of him and I love him.

Final Thoughts

Living in a family with a parent who has a serious mental illness is quite an undertaking for a child. I loved and still love my mom very much. I was never angry at her for leaving me at age thirteen: hurt, not angry. Even as a child, I was able to understand that she was sick and unlike other mothers. I knew her illness wasn't her fault.

I loved her for what she was, not for what I expected her to be.

After all this time, I still miss her and thank God for the years I did have with her. I never doubted that she loved me very much. I weep for the 49 years I've been without her and for the grandchildren she never got to love and enjoy. It's too bad she was sick back then when the medications were so ineffectual.

Today's drugs are light years ahead of what was available then. Had she lived twenty years later, she possibly could've enjoyed a relatively happy life. Still, I feel incredibly lucky that she was my mom.

I'm proud to be a part of my Mom's family, the Burgesses. Although I pretty much lost touch with that side of my heritage after she died, they are good, smart, hardworking people. Mom's siblings just grew up under difficult circumstances and in crippling poverty. They've endured lots of hardships, death, and sadness, but are survivors and have persevered. I'm equally proud of my Peters lineage. They are smart people and known for their kindness.

For a long time, I was truly lost, but I developed coping skills to keep me functioning. One of the worst methods was pushing people away before they had a chance to leave. I'm sure this stemmed from abandonment issues of Mom leaving me at age 13, and in the way that it happened.

Occasionally, the abandonment thing still surfaces, but I can usually extinguish it pretty quickly. I've never had suicidal ideations, but I have been in some dark places.

Along this journey, I've learned to like who I am and forgive myself for mistakes of the past. I found special people who were committed to me and were in it for the long haul – and most of them still are. I acknowledge my life, warts and all in a positive light. I'm thankful for my family, friends and faith, which both inspire and sustain me daily. Those elements are more than enough.

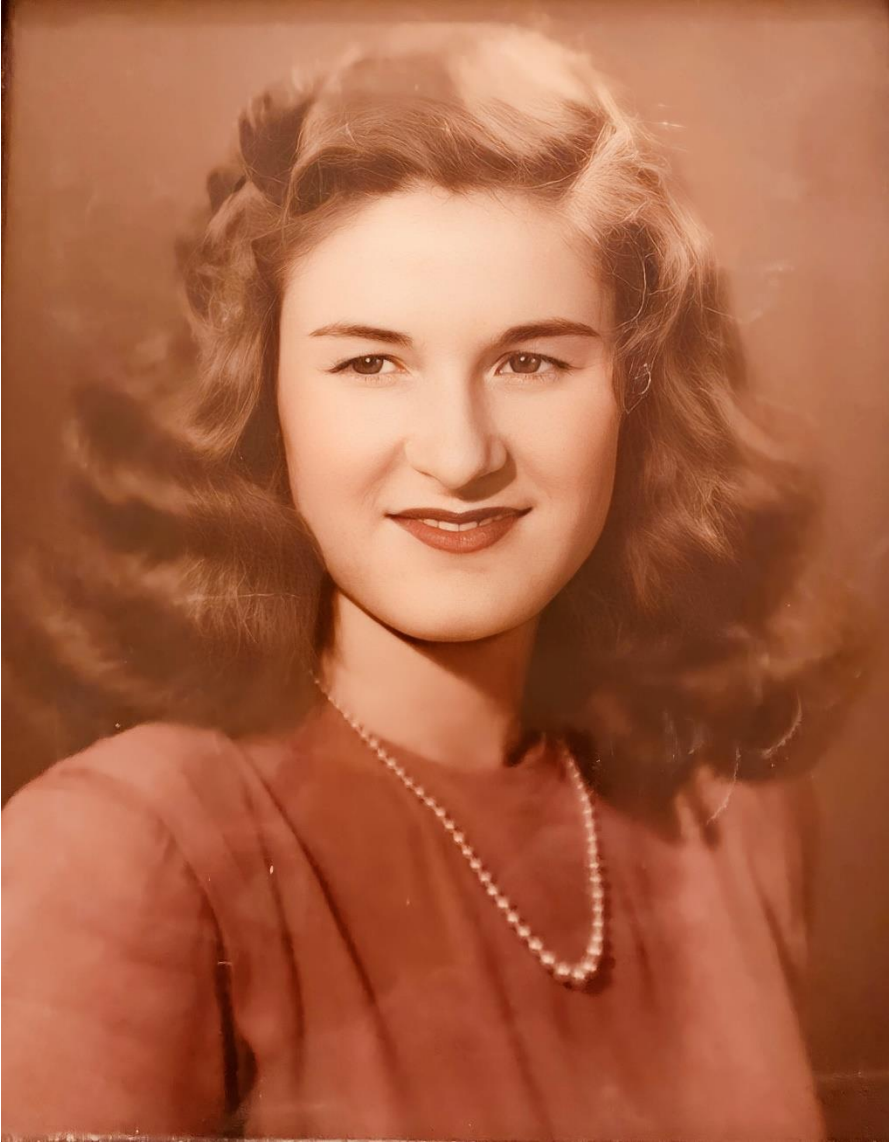
Sure, I still struggle with life occasionally, but I no longer have the emotional torment that haunted me for the longest time. Most of the pains of my past that betrayed me for so long are gone.

To paraphrase the start of the Rascal Flatts song *I'm Movin' On*,

*I've dealt with my ghosts,
and I've faced all my demons
I'm finally content with my past.*

It's taken almost a half century, but I've arrived at my definition of peace. I'm movin' on and no longer a little boy lost.

David Peters
Nashville
September 2023



Julia Ann Peters
December 8, 1926 -
March 17, 1974

Facts About Suicide

- Someone commits suicide every 11 minutes in the United States. Over 49,000 people died by suicide in 2022.
- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States.
- Suicide is preventable and everyone has a role to play to save lives and create healthy and strong individuals.
- Suicide and suicide attempts affect the health and well-being of friends, loved ones, co-workers, and the community.

If you are experiencing mental health-related distress or are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support, I encourage you to contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by:

- Calling or texting 988
- Chat at 988lifeline.org

You will be connected with a trained crisis counselor. 988 is confidential, free, and available 24/7/365.

Another excellent resource is the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention at <https://afsp.org>.

Its mission is to save lives and bring hope to those affected by suicide.

Acknowledgments

The real catalyst for Little Boy Lost began with a story I posted on September 9, 2021 in a baby boomer Facebook group. I posted a 200-word story about my father. At the time, I was petrified I would get laughed at, but shockingly, the post generated over 4,000 likes. In the next month, I posted several more times, and those posts generated over 30,000 likes (that number is almost 100,000 now). The overwhelming takeaway was that people were interested in this story and encouraged me to write a book. After that initial response, I began writing.

The first draft came in at 209,928 words (approximately 800 pages), so the book had to go on a crash diet. The final manuscript came in under 75,000 words.

Writing this memoir has been cathartic and brought closure to me in many ways. It has truly been the gift that keeps on giving. I'm proud of it and think my parents would be too.

None of this would be possible without the contributions of the following people. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to each of them.

To the late Chris (Mom) Johnson, the most important person in my life throughout high school and college. She encouraged me for 30 years to write this story. I miss her terribly.

To my high school guidance counselor, the late Don Bratcher, who was the greatest mentor Norris High School had in the 70's. He changed the lives of hundreds of kids from Norris and helped me so much.

To all the surrogate parents who "adopted" me after Mom's suicide: the Dew family, ~~the~~ the late Bobbye Pointer, ~~the~~ the Morgan family, the late Birger and Betz Ellertsen, Evie Armstrong, the late Kathryn Keeling, and the late Martin and Lorraine Peters.

To my wife Cassie, for tolerating me reading this out loud a hundred times.

To my sons, Andrew and Will, for encouraging me from Florida and California.

To my brother Tim, who edited and offered invaluable insight into the writing process. I never could have done this without him.

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To the people of Norris, Tennessee, who helped pick up the slack after my mom died. Unless you've lived there, you can't understand it. It is a special town and a great place to grow up.

Lastly, to the one companion who was with me for every word I wrote - my dog Bubba, who patiently laid beside me every time I powered up the laptop.

Meet the Author



David Peters was born in the small town of Norris, Tennessee in 1961. He grew up playing every sport available and trying to avoid flunking out of school. After graduating from Tennessee Tech, he moved to Nashville and worked for the next 30 years as a CPA.

An avid sports fan, David loves the Tennessee Vols, Tennessee Titans, Atlanta Braves, and motocross.

David and his wife Cassie, live in Nashville with their dog, Bubba. They have two grown sons, Andrew in Florida and Will in California. Little Boy Lost is his first book.

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Before You Go

Thank you so much for reading Little Boy Lost. I'd greatly appreciate it if you would leave an honest review at GoodReads or wherever you bought or downloaded the book.

And sharing it with friends, family, and book groups would be a great way to help others who might be going through their own struggles or supporting a loved one who is dealing with mental illness. In fact, I'd be honored to speak to book clubs, so please contact me to set that up.

Want to stay in touch to find out about my next book or read more? Here's how:

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You can reach me at www.davidpetersauthor.com or dave@davidpetersauthor.com