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## Intersexion

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INTERSEXION

by

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## ABSTRACT

### INTERSEXION

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Old Dominion University, 2017  
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A combination of memoir, reportage, and opinion writing, *Intersexion* explores the realities of growing up intersex while also examining the also the conservative mindset that caused the narrator—a happily married suburban mother—to lose a tenure-track position at a Christian university for being unwilling to label Danny’s intersex condition as “repugnant” and “offensive to God.”

#### A Note to Readers:

The task of writing a nonfiction narrative requires a string of decisions about what to reveal and what to conceal. “Danny,” for instance, is a pseudonym. In a cultural climate where transgender, and, by extension, intersex individuals are too often targets for hate crimes, and out of respect for the new life Danny is building, changing his name was an easy choice. But this reasoning also meant that everyone else’s name needed to change, too.

I was equally opaque about the exact Tidewater, Virginia community in which Danny grew up and we both now live; thus, names of schools and churches have been changed. Similarly simple was the decision to withhold the name of the university at which I worked. The events that played out could have occurred at dozens, perhaps hundreds, of conservative schools, and to spotlight my former employer would be to take focus from the larger story of what one source dubbed “ally discrimination:” applying the same unjust treatment to supporters of “out” groups as the members themselves. I used email, text messages, and journal entries to bolster memories of events, and made every effort to stay faithful to the actual timeline of how the story played out.

More challenging were decisions about how to portray scenes that happened as many as thirty years ago; scenes I wasn’t present to witness. I drew on over a decade of experience writing human-

interest stories to guide my interviews with Danny. Knowing that encounters with real people are mind-expanding tools, I worked to gather details that I hoped would bring Danny to life. The scenes from Danny's childhood—informed by numerous conversations, photos, and general knowledge of the time period—represent the “movie” my mind constructed of the events, places, and people that that comprised memorable moments in his life. I preserved the essence of conversations Danny related to me as faithfully as possible.

Also crucial to the story was the decision to refer to Danny with a masculine pronoun throughout the entire narrative. Since these chapters are written in close third person, we decided to give the reader Danny's lens by always portraying him as male. The female pronoun is only used when quoting other characters. Readers should note that scenes occurring before his transition, when he was still presenting publically as female, are indicated by the feminine spelling of his name: Dani.

Finally, I always use the acronym LGBTQI when referencing sexual minorities to include the too-often ignored “intersex”—a word that's barely entered the public dialogue, but has been Danny's reality for over 40 years.

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Dedicated to the one in every hundred whose  
gender cannot be contained within a checkbox.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This manuscript was only possible because of my friend, Danny's, willingness to spend countless hours in honest, transparent, and, at times, painful reflection of some of the darkest moments of his life. The time he spent reliving his past was a selfless act offered in hope of a more accepting future. May his story be read as a gift, accepted in love, and considered a call to action.

I am also indebted to my thesis director, Mike Pearson, and my committee, Joe Jackson and John McManus, whose varying perspectives all contributed to my vision for and development of this project.

I am grateful to my family, who allowed me to turn them into literary characters. I am appreciative of the best line editor I know—my daughter, Allison, who donated her exceptional skills to this effort. I want to thank my son, Brandon, for supporting me and this work even when he had no idea how it could impact him personally. I also want to thank my husband, Brad, who, next to Danny, is the person most responsible for what follows—from the initial idea to the final details of formatting, his influence on each and every page.

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## CHAPTER 1

October 30, 2014

My decision to wear black was affirmed by the time I slid into the high-backed vinyl chair across from Mitchell's desk. I expected to be nervous, but I felt like the stickiness seeping from my body wasn't just perspiration, but fortitude as well. I was in the final phases of interviewing for a tenure-track position at a tiny Christian university at which I'd been adjuncting for a couple of semesters, and I was about to throw it all away.

"Before we go up to the boardroom," Mitchell said, steepling his hands as he leaned back in his chair, "are there any other questions you have about the position?" As the Academic Dean, Mitchell, a forty-something with square glasses and thinning blond hair, was prepared to field a query about curriculum or course loads, or perhaps the day's agenda for my full-campus interview. But I'd already asked those questions; I already knew that the schedule and the courses I'd be teaching and developing were a perfect fit. I already loved my students and couldn't wait to have my own office where I'd host afternoon Happy Hours with coffee and chocolate and tutoring, and where I'd establish a revolving, open door ethos of conversation and encouragement.

I took a deep breath. "Thanks for sending along the faculty handbook last week. I was particularly interested in the section on intellectual freedom and publishing." I paused in an effort to avoid regrettable phrasing or fainting—neither of which were out of the question. I took solace in the fact that the handbook indicated that faculty could expect to enjoy "full freedom to write and to speak as a citizen and a person" so long as their views did not "compromise the integrity of the University."

It's sad to think that a condition of birth could threaten the moral fiber of an academic institution. Worse, that my employment was in the balance over a condition that wasn't even my own. But I speak fluent church, and the party line on issues of sexuality spoke to the possibility that a lot more was at stake than the reputation of a mere university.

The intellectual freedom clause of the handbook indicated that the range of acceptable thought allowed for "differences in the interpretation and application of Scripture on matters that do not

undermine the foundations of the Christian faith.” So my question was if, in the view of the university, my academic and personal interest in my friend Danny’s transition from female to male represented foundational cracks that could cause the whole system to crumble.

“The section interested me in light of a manuscript I am working on about intersex and transgender people.” I paused, considering the possibility that enough had already been said, before adding, “in the church.” I paused again.

Mitchell went blank, as though disabled by an invisible switch. Seconds ticked uncomfortably by before he rallied. “Why,” he asked, slowly, “would you ever be interested in writing about *that*?”

*Because transgender teens are disproportionately homeless? Because 25-43% of transgender adults attempt suicide at some point in their lives? Because hate crimes against trans persons are becoming a staple in the news headlines? Because the church is the one institution to whom these statistics should matter most?* Although any one of those reasons should have been sufficient, I went for something less theoretical.

“I have a friend who appeared female at birth, but inside, always knew he was male. In puberty, he even developed male sex organs. But he lived his entire life until now as a woman, because he was afraid the church wouldn’t accept him for who he was. “

“So you’re just telling this person’s story?” Mitchell asked, a hint of hopefulness in his voice. I imagined Mitchell’s brain already working to reframe the situation into something palatable. Although the handbook clearly stated that permanent, tenure track faculty must be “members in good standing” at a church of a particular denomination—which I had been for almost 20 years, but now wasn’t since becoming a part of The Harbor, a vibrant, non-denominational congregation—he’d found a loophole. Although I’d yet to earn my terminal degree, he’d carefully reviewed state standards to prove I was qualified to teach and lead in the areas the university most needed. Although I lived an hour from campus, he’d drafted a schedule that had me on campus for three days each week, and teaching online from home the other two. In case that wasn’t enough, he’d reminded me that my son, Brandon, then a junior at the

school, could, along with the rest of my family, expect to enjoy free tuition, a fact that stood to essentially increase the salary offered by at least a third, more if my daughter, Allison, decided to attend.

As an adjunct without a PH.D., I was keenly aware of the unlikely nature of the opportunity. I knew it was a function of being at the right place at the right time. Weeks earlier, a routine accreditation review at the university had ended in a mandate for the hiring of a full time English professor. As the most, perhaps only, qualified person currently connected to the campus, I became top pick by default. Mitchell was eager to get this appointment behind him; I was excited by the prospect of a position where I could make a difference.

“I’m not yet sure of the full extent of my project,” I answered honestly.

“But would there be any, er, evaluation?” Mitchell asked.

“Evaluation?”

“Would you be rendering opinion or commentary on the matter?”

“Well, again, I don’t yet know the scope of the project, but I would like to be in a position to freely explore the issue without stipulation.”

Mitchell nodded, and glanced at his watch. “I think it’s best that we just continue this discussion upstairs,” he said. “We’ll have to see what Peters thinks.”

I’d never actually met President Peters, although from scant forays into his social media postings, and stories from my son, I couldn’t picture him enthusiastically endorsing a book of such progressive content. However, I wasn’t about to pre-judge. I had already confessed that I considered myself “socially liberal” and supported pro-gay legislation, and I was still in the game. In the course of a professional life that has included stints as a youth director, art teacher, journalist, and now, an instructor at two different universities, I have learned that people are more complex than I ever imagined; that no one can be summed up by a title, or role, or even an ideology. Our understanding of life adapts to allow for integration of new experiences and information.

Early in our married life, my husband, Brad, and I meshed neatly within the structure of conservative, GOP Christianity. There was right and there was wrong, and it was easy to tell which was

which. We married young, and, accordingly, found our niche as volunteers in the youth group scene. My blond haired, blue-eyed husband exuded a quiet confidence to which teens gravitated. I was louder, bolder, and more apt to involve us in adventure, calamity, or some combination of the two. We were a well-balanced team. We shared responsibilities equally and invested wholly, and, after about six years of doing overnight lock-ins, concerts, and summer camping trips as volunteers, found ourselves directing the entire youth program at a very conservative church.

Things became complicated as we began to build strong, trusting relationships with the teens at our new post. As we got to know the students better, we discovered that about a fourth of our core youth group members were gay—a situation we had yet to encounter and for which had nothing to offer in terms of advice, resources, or hope. It was humbling, scary, and life changing.

Bereft of answers, we fell back on the one skill we'd have done well to employ from the start: we simply listened. We began to just take in the students' stories and compare them against things we knew or thought we knew. The picture that emerged was disturbing. We saw vibrant, enthusiastic students, excited about their faith, grow distant from the church as they became increasingly unable to incorporate their true selves—their immutable identities—into the tightly woven fabric of the conservative Christian church, a situation we found unacceptable. We began to reach out to teens like this long after we moved on from that church. When Allison's first boyfriend—a polite, articulate 14-year-old—broke up with her because he finally understood he was gay, his role in our family morphed to that of a de facto brother. The newly dubbed “middle sibling” between my daughter and her younger brother, Brandon, Josh became a fixture in our home, joining us for meals, holidays, and family outings. We also helped him navigate the daunting prospect of helping his conservative, Baptist parents understand and support him. Through our experiences with teens like Josh, my husband and I embraced a self-assigned role of a bridge: imperfect, rickety, constantly under construction, but a connection, we hoped, between marginalized people and the support and love that we knew could still be found in a faith big enough to include all who wanted to find it. Our interest in finding common ground between sexual minorities and the church was the reason I received a text exactly three weeks prior to my ascent to the boardroom.

It was from Janice, a friend who had recently finished a certification program in life coaching and was, at the time, practicing some techniques on a pro bono basis with Dani, a woman from church we were both getting to know. In our own ways, we'd both reached out to Dani in recent weeks after it became clear she was going through a hard time: there had been some physical issues, and, it appeared, depression. Dani—a heavysset woman with close-cropped hair who did nothing to accentuate any feminine features—lived with Joanna, a blond with bright blue eyes, a big smile and a stocky build, in what appeared to be an enmeshed relationship. In addition to a house, the pair shared a car, vacations, and even a goddaughter that would stay with them in the summer and attend the youth group they co-led. Our community fathomed Dani and Joanna with the same understanding that we, as a society, have long held concerning Sesame Street's Ernie and Bert. I always assumed that they were lesbians, and my budding friendship with Joanna had, over the past year, included conversations with enough cues and clues that it was no surprise when she finally revealed that she was Dani's partner. In recent weeks, however, Dani had been sporting shorter hair, larger shirts, and baggy cargo pants—adopting such a masculine stance that Janice posed the theory that Dani might actually be male.

Brad and I were sitting in one of our favorite pizza places when my phone buzzed.

“Can you swing by Panera real quick? Please?”

“I'm actually nowhere near Panera—already ordered Italian,” I typed back, secretly happy that I had an excuse. Janice's new found credentials had taken their toll; she had just about coached her way out of everyone's life.

“O.K. Well. Dani is here with me and wants to share something.”

“Is she OK?”

“Actually, that's what he wanted to talk to you about. He's great.” Janice had my full attention now.

Dani was now Danny. This was important; for Brad and me, a drop-everything- and-run sort of affair, not unlike the obstetrician's midnight call to the delivery room or a first responder summoned to

the epicenter of catastrophe. Someone at that moment needed exactly what we had to offer. We boxed up our pizza and headed to Panera.

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I followed Mitchell up a staircase and through a maze of hallways, taking in features of the architecture despite my nerves. I love old; I also love quirky, off-beat institutions located at the far end of the normal bell curve. I deliberately drive to a seedy part of town to use a gym with cracked floors and about half a dozen mostly obese members. I attend The Harbor, a small, warehouse church that a diverse assortment of NASA scientists, doctors, drug users, and homeless folks call home. These things work for me; they remind me that life plays out in all kinds of places and give me access to stories and people that challenge my mind and encourage my soul. Although I was also teaching—quite happily—at my alma mater, Christopher Newport University, a gorgeous, up-and-coming campus of about 5,000, it was not a stretch to picture myself making a professional home at this small little school.

The Bible college campus was situated along a tract of land bordered on one side by the Pasquotank River and the other by a row of old, rambling houses—the charming kind with winding staircases and skeletons of strong hard wood—and a large brick building. Faculty and various administrative offices were nestled inside the houses. The brick building was the center of campus academia; a maze of classrooms, study areas, and offices connected by staircases and hallways that emitted an olfactory experience—a mix of dust, wood, and character—that is typically the domain of antique shops and the better estate sales. The décor consisted of 70s era portraits of beneficiaries, pull-down maps, and the occasional sepia-toned, standard-issue depiction of Christ—the one that looks suspiciously like the free 8 x 10 from an Olan Mills sitting.

With a student body hovering around 200 and a penchant for unconventional norms such as renting out dorm rooms to non-students to pad a perpetually precarious budget, and a recruitment program that drafted least one of my remedial students off a local beach, the school wasn't your typical 4-year university. I was excited by the possibilities.

Mitchell kept walking ever deeper into the upper floor of the building until he stopped at a room that boasted the largest table I have ever seen. It seemed as long as my dead-end street, and about as wide. It wasn't a stretch for me to picture the entire freshman class sitting comfortably around its polished surface. "This isn't at all intimidating," I quipped.

Mitchell laughed. "The others will be joining us in a moment," he said. "I'm expecting Peters, Jim, Catherine, and Kent.

Peters I knew only by reputation, but I had never even heard of Jim. Catherine was a stout elderly woman who was at the helm of payroll and IT. My only personal interaction with her had been about a year earlier when I went to her office with a question about a faulty piece of campus software and she yelled at me because she thought I was a student, and, as such, had no business with the software or in her office.

Kent was a psychology professor who had been to my home for dinner about a year prior, when my son and his daughter briefly dated. He'd also helped me sneak backstage when a popular band visited campus months earlier and a power-hungry coach-turned-bouncer kept shooing me away. I hoped he'd be as helpful in the current context.

Peters was a robust septuagenarian with wire-rimmed glasses and a bow tie. He entered the room with a clipboard and a crisp, business-like air. Jim introduced himself as the Vice President for Institutional Advancement. He looked to be in his late 60s, with warm brown eyes and a quick smile that almost made me forget that I was moments away from a discussion about my friend's genitalia.

The purpose of the interview was for these key personnel to get to know me better as a person before joining the staff-at-large for an academic interview in another hour. The questions were easy enough in the beginning. Kent wanted to know if I thought an increased role on campus would create any challenges with my son. "Maybe you have some tips," he said, referencing the fact that his daughter, now one of my composition students, had begun her first semester as a student on campus.

"Nah—as you know, Kent, I started working here in the first place because my son suggested you all hire me. We're really close and know how to communicate."

“You’ve been with us a couple of semesters now,” Peters observed. “What do you like best about things here?”

“The diversity of the students, and a chance to really make a difference. The students I have in my Basic English class aren’t your typical college students: my class might be their only chance to go forward and get a degree.” The diversity of the school is a sense of pride; the university had recently been recognized as a leader in providing scholarships to disadvantaged students. About a third of the students were minorities, around a fourth were adult learners, and at least a dozen hailed from far-flung parts of the earth. Most of these international students were missionaries, or the offspring thereof, many focused on gaining education to take back to their countries of origin. The students in my remedial class—like Kevin, who’d gone from being a local beach bum on Saturday evening to a degree-seeking undergraduate by Wednesday—had academic records that would preclude their acceptance at other universities. The flip side, though, to the school’s “everyone gets a chance” philosophy was that the average incoming freshman lasts just one semester. When their next question was about my perception of institutional weaknesses, I discussed this point, and some ideas I had to help. With each question, I could feel my confidence escalate.

Catherine peered over my resume. “You’ve done a whole lot of things,” she said. “I’m just wondering if you’d be happy settling down here.”

Realizing the possibility for my resume to cast me as a beatnik dabbler—I teach art! I’m a youth leader! I write things! But-never-in-the-summer-so-I-can-go-abroad!—I rallied to shift the question into a springboard. I launched into a story I’d been saving about my life-long dream of being a beloved professor at a small school—an alter ego conceived from the DNA of forgotten films and assorted literature—and having a parade of students in and out of my house.

Peters jumped in, “Since you live a distance away, have you put any thought into how you might recreate that sort of situation within these perimeters?”

“Yeah, actually, I have,” I said, telling him about my Happy Hour concept.



He nodded. “And you know we have the apartment over in the residence hall. Some of our commuting instructors like to use that every now and then, when we have campus events. Would that be something you’d like to do?”

I told him I’d stayed in the apartment for an event the night before, and was hoping it would be an option that could continue to be available. Rudy, a Port-au-Prince native who a handful of us had befriended the previous summer on a mission trip to a remote Haitian village, was spending a week on campus as a prospective student. The previous night he’d led a Bible study and a Q and A outside the apartment door. The evening had erased any doubts I may have had about my ability to carve a niche for myself at the school.

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“You coming, Mom? Rudy’s about to start.” My phone had lit up with Brandon’s text as I finished a simple crackers-and-cheese dinner inside the small apartment right off the student lounge.

“On my way,” I texted back, instinctively changing into my green Team Haiti shirt and heading out to the lounge. Rudy, an early twenty something with a huge smile and boisterous laugh, snuck up behind me and gave me a hug. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a cluster of green shirts—Brandon and the rest of the team. No one had talked about changing—we just all had. One of the students slid to the edge of his chair and I joined him on the wide seat. I felt like I was home. I felt like I belonged.

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Mitchell cleared his throat. “Cynthia and I were talking earlier about our intellectual freedom policy,” he said. “She wanted to clarify it in light of a manuscript she’s working on,” he said. “Why don’t you tell the group what you shared with me down in my office?”

I swallowed hard. “Well, I am working on a project about intersex and transgender people. In the church.”

The room was still. Faces froze. The polished table was the only thing in the room still beaming.

“Why this topic?” Peters boomed, laughing.

I paused for a moment, and decided to channel Danny that night three weeks ago at Panera. I pictured the nervous smile he gave Brad and me as we slid into the booth across from him and Janice, before he turned his attention to a napkin he was twisting between his fingers.

“So, Danny’s ready to start sharing some news with people,” Janice had said. “I told him that before we started this,” she waved a hand vaguely between her and Danny, indicating their private sessions, “you and I had a strong hunch about what was going on. Danny’s really nervous about how to explain things to people, so we’ve been working on a script, and I promised him you guys were safe people to practice on.”

Brad and I both smiled at Danny, encouraging him to go on.

Danny smiled nervously and cleared his throat. “Janice said I should start sharing this gradually in small groups, with the safest people first so I can build some confidence,” his voice quivered. He paused, looking again at the twisted napkin, as though he’d find the script printed somewhere in the folds. “So, you’ve probably heard the term hermaphrodite before,” he said. “It’s actually called intersex, and it refers to people who have both male and female sex organs. That would describe me.” Danny pressed his lips together in a tight smile and nodded, looking me straight in the eye. He took another deep breath. “All my life I’ve identified with my male side, but I’ve had to present myself in the way that people wanted to see: as female. But I’ve recently decided that I can’t do that anymore, and I’m going to live the rest of my life as me; as a man.”

Even though I wasn’t at all sure that Peters was a friendly audience on whom to practice my version of the speech, I took a deep breath. “Maybe you’ve heard the term hermaphrodite,” I said. “It’s actually outdated and misleading, but when people use it, they typically mean intersex: someone who has both male and female organs. That describes my friend Danny. He was born looking completely female, but always knew he was really a boy. He later developed male sex organs but was afraid to tell anyone because he didn’t want to be rejected by the church, so he went on presenting himself the way people wanted: as female. But it’s become too much for him physically and psychologically to continue living as

someone he's not, so he's made the choice to live the rest of his life outwardly being who he has always been inside."

"Whoohoo," Peters chortled, bringing a fist down to the table and his head right after. "Well!" he sputtered through his laughter. "I always say to my staff—when something happens, just tell me. I can handle anything, but you have to tell me. I sure didn't see this one coming, though."

I wasn't sure if this outburst was good or bad. It was hard to tell if he was, indeed, prepared to handle this revelation, or if he'd just stumbled on the one thing he really couldn't handle and was thoroughly flummoxed. Chances were, he didn't know at this point, either.

"Well, how often does something like this actually happen?" Peters asked, gathering his composure.

"About one in 2,000 people are like my friend Danny. But studies show that approximately 1 in 100 people are born with bodies that differ in some way from standard male and female binaries," I said, drawing on information I'd gathered from the website of the Intersex Society of North America. "It can be helpful to view it as a continuum," I said. "The truth is, you all know someone who is like this, but they are afraid to tell you."

"Is this true, Kent?" Peters asked.

Kent smiled at me as he nodded. "Yes, everything I'm hearing is right on," he said.

Jim had been hanging on my every word. "I want to read this book!" he said, his eyes flashing in excitement.

I glanced at Catherine, who had yet to say a word. She appeared to be stifling a smile. I pictured her mentally weaving together a good yarn to share over dinner. I had the distinct impression that nothing this interesting had happened in this room in quite a while.

"Is he getting any surgery done?" Jim asked.

"I think he wants his outside to match his insides," I said. "I believe he's planning a mastectomy." Later, Danny would explain that the preferred term was "top surgery," a procedure done with a focus not just on removing the breasts, but creating normal-looking male chest contouring and nipple placement.

Peters waved a palm idly at the ceiling. “It sounds like that L...G...B...T...Q nonsense.” He recited the letters slowly, as though as though picking them out of a particularly thick alphabet soup. “Do you support homosexuality?” he demanded.

“Intersex actually doesn’t have anything to do with being gay,” I said. “And transgender refers to a person’s psychological identity, whereas intersex refers to biological characteristics. Where those lines may converge isn’t really known,” I added.

“Well,” Peters said, “it may not be gay, but they’re certainly kissing cousins!” he blurted, then burst into gales of red-faced laughter when he realized what he said. The room broke down. Even Catherine began to laugh.

I wasn’t sure what, exactly, was so funny. Personally, I found Peters’ reaction to be absurd enough to warrant laughter, but it wasn’t clear what amused him. Was it nervous tension?

Peters sobered. “But you understand what I am asking here,” he said, looking directly at me. “Is homosexuality wrong?”

Here it was. The bullet I thought I’d dodged. The week prior, I’d been summoned to the office of a senior faculty member for what was referenced as the “full” doctrinal interview (to distinguish it from the lighter version I’d had when I was brought on as an adjunct). The office walls were seemingly held up by books—including a tome that must have had a full foot on the spine of *War and Peace*. The tenant of the office, a Bible scholar with large plastic glasses and a tweed overcoat that made him look like he’d been lifted off the dust jacket of a 1970s Bible commentary, asked me to join his colleague, a robust archeologist known for his off-topic lectures and affinity for making mud bricks. Between the pair, they could cite the linguistic etymology of all scripture as well as the exact stratum of soil where the documented events took place. The rest of the faculty deferred to these men on all spiritual matters.

The linguist had sat at his paper-laden desk and gestured for me to take a seat on the sofa next to the archeologist. I feared I was about to be grilled about homosexuality, a topic that had been conspicuously absent at my interview the year prior. The topic had loomed, unaddressed, in the recesses of my mind since the beginning of my employment. I knew enough about the ideologies of the school to

understand that homosexuality wasn't a concept they championed; however, I took the silence on the matter as hope that a "don't ask, don't tell" culture could exist; a culture that just might make room for someone that didn't claim to have the answers; an environment that might allow me to quietly construct my now-familiar role as a bridge for the LGBTQI students that I knew—from statistics and personal knowledge—existed on campus. These were my hopes, but the truth was that since the moment I was first asked to pursue the tenure-track job, I had expected my prospects to be over after this interview. However, when it ended after an odd line of questioning about the finer points of baptism and a few stray questions about the structure of my church, I allowed myself for the first time to believe that I might actually have a shot at becoming a tenure-track professor.

And yet, there I was, at an interview that had been billed as an elaborate meet-and-greet, forced to answer the question evangelical Christianity has somehow shaped into the ultimate litmus test.

I deflected to buy time. "It's wrong for me," I said.

"Don't play that game with me," Peters boomed. "Don't make me ask you the right question, in exactly the right words. That's the thing my sons always did that made me the maddest." His face was red and I felt flushed.

"You know," Mitchell intervened, "Cynthia probably hasn't had the opportunity yet to see the new Marriage and Family statement."

Peters took a breath and smiled. "Ah, ok. Will you shoot that on over to her, Mitchell?" He tapped a pen on his clipboard, then looked me straight in the eye.

"Why should I hire you?" he asked.

It was the easiest question they'd asked all day. "Because I don't know how long you're going to have to look before you find someone who cares more about the students than I do."

Peters' eyes betrayed his surprise in my bold statement, but then he smiled and nodded approvingly. "My first impression is that you'd be dynamite here. I may have some follow up questions for you later. And Mitchell—get that document over to her right away."

The group of us filed out of the boardroom to reconvene in another building. Kent pulled me aside in the hallway. “If your friend would ever be willing to come to talk with my human sexuality class, I’d love to have him,” he said.

The prospect of the impending receipt of the statement loomed over the otherwise encouraging second round of meetings. Despite how phenomenally well things outwardly appeared to be going, I feared the whole thing would implode as soon as I opened my email.

I stood on the sidewalk with Mitchell before I headed to my car to go home that evening. He expressed enthusiasm about the day’s events. “I’m heading back to my office now,” he said “and I’m going to send that Marriage and Family Statement over to you. You’re not going to have any problems with it,” he said. “It’ll be in your email when you get home.”

Driving through rural North Carolina with the windows down just before sunset was a trip that had become familiar over the past couple years. On a crisp fall evening with the golden sunshine sinking into the farmland, it wasn’t difficult to imagine myself doing it three days a week, ten months a year.

I parked in front of my house, grabbed my laptop and ran to the living room, fingers flying across the keyboard as I entered various passcodes to access my campus email. I took a deep breath and opened the one from Mitchell with “Marriage and Family Statement” in the subject header.

The statement consisted of a thorough catalog of variant human conditions, to include not only all homosexuality, but also “attempt(s) to change one’s biological sex, or otherwise acting upon any disagreement with one’s biological sex,” followed by a hard-and-fast ruling that that the entire list of ills was “sinful and offensive to God,” and “repugnant to the principles of the University.”

It took about a second of scanning the document for the truth to sink in. I was never going to be a tenure track professor: at least not now, not at this school. I stared, blankly at the screen, willing the letters to rearrange themselves into words that were more gentle, loving, inclusive.

“What does it say?” my husband asked.

“That this is over,” I answered.

Until now, the question had been whether or not I was willing to slide in under the radar, aware that the school probably didn't agree with my stance, but on not really knowing the extent of their position and, thus, never having to actually lie. I'd been wrestling with the both the morality and practically of the situation: was it wrong to withhold my opinions on a divisive issue? Wouldn't it be better to just be there for the students? Did I want Peters—a reported Facebook enthusiast—creeping on my social media posts? And—far more uncomfortable—how much of my decision was motivated by the financial reward the job would bring?

Confronted by the reality on the screen in front of me, the issue became, literally, black and white. There's right. There's wrong. There are men. There are women. There's no grey. There's no confusion.

Until this moment, I'd been sitting at a commitment equinox: a supporter of Danny in a role that required no personal cost beyond my time. With my verbal encouragement, Danny was revealing himself on a daily basis: weighing what each conversation would mean for his future. Each revelation represented a journey from which there would be no return. Balanced at the midpoint between spectator and participant, until now I'd had the luxury of watching—albeit with concern—how things turned out for the principal players.

But now it was *my* future on the line. As humans in polite society, we know when it's socially acceptable to avoid certain topics: politics, finances, a secret penchant for blaring Nickelback alone in the car—we all pick and choose what to reveal in various settings. If I decided to confront the school's stance on sexuality, I'd no longer be able to keep my views off the record if it suited me. I could retreat into vague statements of pseudo-consent and have a shot at becoming a well-loved professor like I's always dreamed. Or, I could be brave, like Josh, the youth group teens, and Danny before me, and take a step out into territory from which there would be no return.

## CHAPTER 2

1973

“How about this one?” Sherry suggested, holding up a short green dress. Her daughter, Danielle—the little red-haired baby girl she’d prayed for every day during what would be her final pregnancy—stubbornly shook a tangled mop of hair back and forth.

The three-year-old pulled a T-shirt and shorts from a drawer and held them aloft. “I want to wear this!”

“But the green is so pretty!” Sherry sighed. The last time Danielle wore the frilly spring green dress was for the family picture a few weeks earlier, and it certainly hadn’t been willingly. It never was.

“I don’t like dresses,” Dani said. “I’m a boy.”

“No, you’re a girl,” Sherry corrected.

“Well, I’ll be a boy when I grow up!” Dani insisted.

It hadn’t been the first time Sherry had heard her daughter express those sentiments. It was baffling, really; something Sherry had never encountered with her other girls.

With a warm rush of pride, she remembered the dresses her older daughters, Barb and Mary, had worn in the family snapshot: Barb’s stylish, above-the-knee A-line in a crisp white fabric that complemented her dark brown bob, and Mary’s long, floral print dress with the ruffled tier that began at her calves and stopped just above her white sandals. The height of 1973 fashion, the dresses could have been good finds from any department store, but they actually represented a milestone in Sherry’s life.

Just a few weeks earlier, Sherry and her daughter, Barb, had both graduated from high school. The dresses had been a final exam, of sorts, the last project in a home economics class that was one of a handful Sherry had taken at the local high school to earn the diploma she’d forgone 20 years earlier. At 16, she left her mother’s unstable home at to marry Ben, a young GI with whom she’d fallen in love. Sherry spent the intervening years building a home for Ben, their six children, and scores of young airmen Ben invited in for a dose of the kind of comfort that can only be found around a family table laden with homemade fare. The Sunday after graduation, one of the airmen who happened to be at the Cooper table



offered to take a family photo after a lunchtime observation that both Barb and Mary wore the new dresses to church.

“We’re all dressed up. Why not?” Sherry said.

The family gathered outside their standard-issue house on the California Air Force Base where they were currently stationed. The three boys—Michael, 19, Bill, 16, and Jim, 9, looked sharp in their button-up collared shirts and slacks—Michael even wore a tie. And Sherry couldn’t deny that the older girls looked fabulous in their dresses. The family looked crisp, pulled together, collected—all but Dani, who stood in the too-short ruffled green dress in front of Sherry and next to Jim with a thumb in his mouth and a pout on his face.

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It was a phase, Sherry thought. It will pass.

But it didn’t pass at the family’s next station in Guam, where Dani grew into a rambunctious child with an impish smile, occasional black eye, and an unruly mop of curly strawberry hair, knotted from days of hard play—hair he hated having touched or brushed.

And it didn’t pass in Virginia, where the family moved on humanitarian orders when Sherry’s sister was dying of cancer and, exhausted by life events and Dani’s incessant pestering, she relented and allowed him to cut his hair—short—very short. Dani’s new hair signaled the ushering in of what would become the golden age of his childhood.

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Despite the stressful circumstances that brought them to Virginia, Dani settled happily into life in the close-knit military community that came complete with a self-contained elementary school. The neighborhood kids hailed from a kaleidoscope of backgrounds: black, white, Asian—no one cared who you were or where you came from, as long as you were up for a lively game of tag or pick up ball.

Dani fell in naturally with the boys in the neighborhood. He never felt detached from the male camaraderie, and, when it came to games of “house,” the girls always assigned him the role of the dad. In fact, it was one such game of house that led to Dani’s first kiss. He was hanging out with a friend one day

when his friend's sister came home with another girl and the group decided to play house. Dani was paired with his friend's sister, Maggie. When play called for him to go to work, he planted a kiss on Maggie's lips—innocent, playful behavior that felt completely natural to Dani.

What didn't feel natural were the types of things he had to do at home to please his parents, who were constantly steering him toward feminine activities and clothing. Skirts were a must at church—Sunday morning and evening. Dani hated every minute he spent in a skirt, but complied to please his parents. What he lived for were the rare moments when he felt comfortable and his parents were happy, too. Like the time he was six and, wearing a newly acquired Happy Days T-shirt, he bounded into the living room where his parents were holding a Bible Study group. “Heyyyyy...” he called in a deep, gravelly voice, two thumbs pointed skyward in his best Arthur Fonzarelli. The room burst into laughter. In that moment, he was The Fonz, and his parents loved it. Dani craved the feeling of getting a positive response for being himself, hamming it up, emulating a masculine role model. The routine became a shtick, a feel-good go-to.

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In terms of emotional boosts, visits from Dani's maternal grandmother were the anti-Fonz. She didn't enjoy kids in general—shooing everyone outside to play was standard procedure during her stays—but Dani's appearance and habits particularly vexed her sensibilities.

Nanee, as she was called, was an Elizabeth Taylor-esque figure, in matters of both deportment and matrimony. Tall, thin, and impeccably dressed in pant suits and jewelry, Nanee had been divorced four times before the 1960s. By the time Dani came along, she'd settled into permanent union with Orville, a professional dancer and musician who had earned a place in the Jazz Hall of Fame in Alabama. Orville, who went by his first name, was the sole embodiment of anything good that happened to Dani during their visits, whether at Orville and Nanee's house in Florida or his family's home in Virginia.

“Don't touch!” Nanee would say at intervals whenever the kids were in her home. “Kids need to be kids outside,” was another of Nanee's mottos. “If you are going to sit inside, you're going to behave. In here, it's adult time.”

Adult time was of no interest to Dani, who opted to ride Orville's bike outside all day. But adult time occasionally moved outdoors when it came to waterskiing or golf, two of Nanee's great pastimes. During one Florida visit, Nanee dropped Dani and his siblings off at Epcot Center for the day so the adults could enjoy a few uninterrupted hours on the golf course.

When Dani wasn't pedaling around the neighborhood on Orville's bike or being shuttled off to an amusement park, he typically rode out visits in the company of Orville and his father, watching TV and gleaning tidbits about the guitar from Orville while the women shopped and lunched. Hiding out with Orville was a place of refuge, a sanctuary of sorts that came to a sudden and certain end when Nanee and Orville visited Virginia right before Dani's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Sherry would go into overdrive during these visits, and put extra effort into "fixing" Dani in an attempt to gain her mother's approval.

"She is too dirty for a girl!" Nanee would say to Sherry, frowning in disapproval. "Look at her hair! It's a mess. She's never dressed."

Sherry would direct her response toward Dani. "You have to act like a lady," she would say, reinforcing the maxim with a continual string of corrections: "That's not how young ladies sit," or speak, or act. Dani was expected to take part in the shopping and lunching excursions now, no longer allowed to hang out around the TV with Orville and Ben.

One day Sherry told Dani to get ready to go to the mall. "Nanee is doing something special for your birthday today," she said.

Dani couldn't imagine that this would be a good thing, a sentiment that Sherry's next words confirmed. "We're going to take you to get your ears pierced!"

"What?" Dani immediately panicked. How could he get out of this? "No, please," Dani said. "I don't want that."

"Listen," Sherry said, "This is something Nanee wants to do for your birthday. You are going to do it. It means you are growing up," her voice lightened. "You're becoming a woman!"

“That’s so unfair!” Mary said when she heard the itinerary for the shopping trip. “The rest of us had to wait until we were 16! It was the rule!”

Dani trudged through the mall as though condemned to the gallows. “How long do I have to keep them in?” he asked Mary.

“It’s 6-8 weeks,” she said.

Dani’s stomach felt heavy. Ben and Jim’s softball teams were about to begin exhibition games: a springtime ritual that Dani eagerly awaited. Not only did he love to be on the softball field, he relished the chance to interact with the kids of the opposing teams’ players—peers who didn’t know to call him “her,” didn’t know he wore skirts on Sundays and had to be reminded to act “like a young lady.” Like a rancher’s brand on a cow’s hide, the earrings would be a mark of identity. But a pair of shiny studs would pinpoint him as a member of a group to which he didn’t belong: female.

Dani sat in a chair in a booth that seemed to be in full view of the mall shoppers. A sales woman showed him a display of earrings and asked him which ones he wanted. In what amounted to a last stand, Dani pointed at one of the men’s earrings.

“Oh no,” the woman laughed. “Those are for men. They don’t come in pairs. You need to choose from these,” she said, sweeping a hand across several rows of shiny studs.

Dani chose the tiniest cubic zirconia setting available—specks he hoped would be easily overlooked. Resignation washed over him once the studs were through his ear. He felt a small amount of hope resurge as the woman explained the importance of cleaning his ears each day and underscored the risk of infection. Dani silently pledged to never clean his ears and hope that germs would accumulate into a raging infection. Much to his eventual disappointment, Dani’s ears were impervious to infection despite his meticulous neglect. The earrings became just another thing he endured for the sake of keeping his home life as normal as possible, a challenge that was destined to get increasingly difficult now that he’d reached his double-digit years.

Indeed, Dani’s carefree days of playing and learning within the familiar confines of the Air Force base were drawing to a close. Ben’s retirement was approaching and the family would need to adjust to

life outside the supportive structure of the Department of Defense. Even though the family would be settling into to a home just a few miles off base, for Dani, the move was a permanent transition from childhood into the pressure of a larger public school and a puberty for which no curriculum could have possibly prepared him.

## CHAPTER 3

1982

In the spring of 1982, Star Trek fans anticipated the Wrath of Kahn on the big screen, the Falklands War erupted in Argentina, and a small paperback book appeared beneath Dani's door. Dani wasn't an avid reader, but he was no stranger to literature, reading mostly for book club perks such as the posters of The California Raisins, Pac Man, and Star Wars that were plastered across his walls. But a passing glance at this title—*Almost 12*—supported suspicions that the covert, under-the-door delivery system had already raised: this would be an uncomfortable read. Dani cracked the spine anyway. Maybe, just maybe, this book contained a clue, some tidbit of information that would explain the hell that had been sixth grade.

“Did you get the book?” Sherry whispered, later.

“Mmmhmm,” Dani answered.

“Well, let me know if you have any questions,” she said.

Dani knew his mom had probably breathed a prayer as the book scooted beneath the door and across the floor that there would be no questions, of any kind, ever, about the text. It wasn't a complicated request; Dani really had no questions—at least about the material covered in the thin volume. Health class had covered those basics. Dani's questions were beyond the scope of the material that Kenneth N. Taylor, of *Almost 12* fame, or the Virginia Department of Education seemed equipped to address.

Besides, Dani had already attempted a question, six months earlier, when the school year was fresh and its problems were new, a query he hoped would give him the kind of answers he needed to just get through a day in his unfamiliar new school. That inquiry, posed to his brother, Jim, had yielded less than comforting results—nothing concrete for Dani to cling to as the maelstrom of 6<sup>th</sup> grade events raged on.

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The first day of school began on a high. Dani walked into the classroom, joining three girls who'd already claimed spots near the back of the room. Dani slid into an open seat next to the prettiest girl,

Valerie—a poster-girl cheer-leader-to-be: blond hair and blue eyes; looks she'd later learn to use as currency. Kara, a petite girl with a sharp tongue and long black hair, sat on Valerie's opposite side. Jen claimed a spot one row over, a position that subtly communicated her position in the group. She was a tag-along, a pre-teen with unruly brown hair who was yet to discover where she really belonged.

But on this first day of the new school year, Dani was confident in his place as an outsider among cliques that had been long-cemented on playground swing sets and over cartons of cool chocolate milk. Sixth grade might have been Dani's first year at George Washington Elementary, but the majority of his classmates had been walking these halls since kindergarten.

"Nice flannel," Kara said, smiling.

It was a sincere complement that the other girls echoed. Sure, flannel wasn't the obvious choice for a late summer day in Virginia, but the shirt was brand new and Dani couldn't wait to wear it. Any additional warmth the shirt added now registered only as a glow in which to bask.

The conversation volleyed back and forth—the girls addressing each other, and then including Dani. Talk turned to pain tolerance for reasons long forgotten—perhaps an account of a summer bike spill or dental procedure—prompting Valerie to ask for Dani's arm.

"What? Why?" Dani laughed.

"Like this," Valerie said, taking Dani's arm and turning it palm up. "Have you seen this one?"

"Umm..I don't think so?" Dani said, as Valerie slapped the surface of his arm. "I'm planting a garden," she said. The girls giggled nervously as Valerie began digging her nails across the tender skin on the inside of his arm, executing their version of the painful "garden" game, a staple activity on the playground circuit. "First we need to dig the rows. Tell me when it's too much," she laughed, digging deeper into Dani's skin.

"No, I'm good," Dani said.

Valerie increased the pressure. Her nails tugged across Dani's skin but the pain remained tolerable. "Now we have to plant the seeds," she said, grabbing and pinching puffy skin along the "rows" she dug into Dani's arm.

Valerie pulled back her hand, and inspected the puffy red tracks and blotches across Dani's skin.

"Look what I did to your arm!" she said, clapping her hand over her mouth.

"It's ok, I'm good," Dani said.

"That's so cool," Valerie gushed.

*Heck yeah, I'm good*, he thought. *The prettiest girl in the school just touched my arm*. Maybe this new school wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Then came lunch. The teacher, Mrs. Conway, lined everyone up in the hall at the entrance to the bathrooms.

"We're all going to wash our hands before we eat," she announced.

Dani's heart pounded beneath the flannel that had become suddenly stifling. As a rule, he avoided public bathrooms at all costs. They were dangerous; far more dangerous than any stray germs that may or may not be on his now-sweaty palms.

Dani had only met Mrs. Conway one other time; however, he had not been assigned to her class by random selection. Sherry had selected Mrs. Conway—an old friend who'd been in her wedding—as Dani's teacher to "keep an eye" on the daughter about whom she was increasingly worried.

From his place in line, it seemed clear that the day—the entire year, in fact—was taking a sharp southerly turn, but Dani decided on a last stand.

"My hands aren't dirty," he said, shaking his head.

"Everyone needs to go, Dani"

"But—" Dani protested.

"Go on," Mrs. Conway said.

Dani's legs were heavy. The few yards to the door seemed like miles. His face was flushed and he felt woozy, faint as he approached the door of the room he was expected to enter.

"That boy is going into the girls' room! Stop him!" It was Jerry Binker, a bully who would, from this moment forward, make it his personal mission to make sixth grade Dani's own personal *Inferno*.

"No," Mrs. Conway jumped in. "That's Danielle. She's a girl."



There it was. The flannel shirt, the scratched arm, puffy with red badges of masculinity, the giggling admiration of the popular girls: none of it mattered now. He was done. Labeled. A freak. The looks of jaw-dropping shock followed by the anger that flashed across Valerie, Kara, and Jen's faces said more than words ever could.

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Dani lay on his bed, trying to quiet his thoughts enough to get to sleep. Dani's guinea pig, Patches—a creature with far fewer worries—had settled down into the wood shavings that lined his cage and gave the room a light cedar aroma.

*Why do things have to be this way? How is God going to work this out for me? Is he ever going to change me into a boy? Really, truly, fully, in a way that everyone can see?*

Dani tossed and turned awhile more, his eyes eventually settling on a shelf that contained his collection of rabbit figurines. Sherry would find these figures—bunnies wearing sunglasses, or swinging a baseball bat, fun, but nothing too girly—and give them to Dani as gifts. He liked them a lot; they were a way that he and Sherry had found to connect.

Dani could hear Jim in the bathroom across the hall. Six years Dani's senior, Jim was really popular with girls, and Dani wanted everything he had, especially his wardrobe. Dani often raided his dresser, liberally borrowing his jeans and T-shirts.

Dani heard the doorknob turn as Jim left the bathroom. "Jim? Can you come here for a minute?"

Jim came in the room and stood at the foot of the bed, next to Patches's cage.

Dani sat up. "If you are, say, a guinea pig and there's um," his eyes darted across the room, settling on the shelf of figurines, "rabbits that you are hanging out with and you are trying to help them, will God change you into a rabbit?"

Spiritual metaphor seemed the best path into the topic. And if Jim seemed confident that God could change one species into another to support His purpose, then clarifying a gender would be no problem.

“No, Dani,” Jim said. “It doesn’t work that way. God would either find a way to use the guinea pig, or he’d find another rabbit.”

This was not the response Dani was hoping to hear. He wanted his brother to say that of course, God would make that guinea pig into a rabbit. God could do anything, right?

Dani continued to pray. And then, miraculous, joyous changes began to take place. Actual, visual changes. Something between his legs began to get larger, and longer, and a single sphere descended from wherever it had been hiding deep inside his body. Jim, apparently, was wrong. God was turning Dani into a rabbit.

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“Mary, I’m bleeding.” Dani called out to his sister.

He’d just returned from a softball game and, as usual, ran straight for the bathroom. If necessary, Dani could spend an entire day on the ball field and never use the restroom. Avoiding the public bathroom trumped even dodging a tag out at home plate on Dani’s personal list of priorities.

When he pulled down his white baseball pants he was alarmed to see a bright red stain in the crotch—fresh blood, he realized.

His mind raced with possibilities. Groin injury? Could something be torn or ripped? He didn’t remember anything significant on the field today; he hadn’t been hit with a pitch, no daring slide-ins to bases. Could it be a kidney? Cancer? Oh, no, could it be cancer? Dani’s thoughts flashed back to his family’s hasty departure from Guam and moving in with his grandparents so Sherry could care for her sister, his aunt, who had cancer and *died*.

Dani’s face flushed and he felt queasy. He wasn’t sure what was worse: the prospect of death, or having an issue that would require a trip to the doctor. Because next to praying for a body that would match his insides, he prayed for good health—no high fevers, no rashes, and certainly no internal bleeding—nothing that would prompt a visit to a doctor’s office. The last thing he needed was someone examining his body, asking questions.

Mary came to the bathroom door, and Dani showed her the stain on his pants. “Don’t worry about it. It’s your period,” she said.

“My what?!” Dani screamed.

“Just go look under the sink,” Mary said.

“No, it can’t be that,” Dani insisted. “There’s just no way.”

“Dani, it’s normal. Get something from under the sink,” Mary sighed.

Dani was numb, but stumbled into the bathroom and found a package of *things*, girl products, stuff he didn’t know anything about and had no desire to learn. He knew, from health class and Kenneth N. Taylor, that periods existed and were for girls, and that was all he ever hoped to have to know. After all, God was making him into a rabbit, wasn’t he?

Dani’s hands were shaking as he fumbled with the box. He remembered nothing from health class. Forced to attend the girl class, he’d mentally checked out during the talk about periods, the ghastly birthing videos—anything involving blood.

*“No, no, it can’t be that,” Dani thought. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. How can I have both? Everything was moving in a really good way, and now I have both? I don’t want both! I’m a guinea pig with rabbit ears!”* Dani’s thoughts raced.

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Being a sixth grader with both a penis and a period was confusing, to say the least. The *Almost 12* episode confirmed that sex organs were not a topic of household conversation, but that didn’t mean Dani was completely without support.

Sherry knew that Dani was having a tough year, and offered encouragement in the form of daily notes in his lunch bag. Some days the notes featured a Bible verse, other times, an “I love you,” or good wishes that Dani would find a new friend. He kept these notes in an old brown lunch bag in the back of his desk to cheer him up on bad days. Days like the ones when Jerry would wait until most of the class was within earshot then point at Dani’s shoes and scream “butter cookies,” sixth-grade slang for off-brand shoes. White canvas Nikes with a baby blue swoosh were a status symbol; wearing butter cookies implied

that you were too poor for the good shoes. Dani spent most of the year kicking around in lookalikes Sherry bought at the base, before she realized the problem and bought Dani some Nikes.

One day, Dani walked into the classroom and saw Jerry at his desk, pulling a white paper from a crumpled brown bag,

“OK, guys, here’s one: ‘For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.’ God has big plans for you, Dani. Love Mom.”

The class howled. Kara perched on a desk near Jerry. “Come on, hurry, read the next one,” she coaxed.

Dani slid into his seat and blinked back tears.

“What’s going on here,” Mrs. Conway demanded as she entered the room.

Jerry snickered. “Just like always, Dani, your best friend Mrs. Conway saved the day.”

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Sixth grade finally ended, and it was summer. Dani was beginning to adjust to his new body. Although he wasn’t a fan of his current situation, he knew he’d figure something out. He continued to pray that God would make him fully male. After all, if new parts could appear, old ones could go away. Anything was possible.

Including one more surprise his body had in store. Sometime that summer, his nipples began to hurt and seemed to swell. Then the area around his nipples got larger too. As if a penis, testicles, and a bleeding vagina weren’t enough for a pubescent pre-teen to handle, it became impossible for anyone to ignore the fact that Dani now had breasts, too.

## CHAPTER 4

Early November 2014

Noon, the day after the Marriage and Family bomb hit, I was hunched over my laptop in a chair outside the classroom where I'd just finished teaching. It was time. I knew the email I was about to send would be the end of my tenure track aspirations, but there was no point in putting it off any longer.

*“Mitchell, I am so sorry to say that I will not be able to support the Marriage and Family Statement as it is written. So much of the time in these cases the only honest answer I have is ‘I don’t know,’ and I have learned to be at peace with that answer. I am OK with not being in the position of judge, and, focusing instead on what I know to be my job, and that is to love. My stance is to leave judgment to God and focus instead on the mandate I know to be clear: to love. I know this means that I will miss the opportunity to work with all of you, and that is heartbreaking. “*

My palms dampened and my pulse quickened as I typed, but when I hit send, I clapped the lid on my computer like it was the back cover of a rough read and headed down the hall toward the parking lot.

I don't know why I said “as it's written.” Almost as if it was an editing problem: we were so close—just a semantic gaffe that I can't quite see around—can we revise? Perhaps a gentler verb here, a question mark there? I probably soft-pedaled my response because I hated the thought of not leaving some sort of opening for resolution, some hope that this clearly impossible situation could yet be salvaged, and somehow, I could just go back to looking forward to an office and nice salary and no tuition bills. I wrestled with varying versions of “good enough” answers, or ways to give them an evasive turn of phrase that would allow me to secretly harbor my beliefs without technically lying. Part of me wanted to do that, pretty badly, actually.

But the truth is, I really don't believe these types of statements have a place in Christian institutions. I know the majority of my more fundamental counterparts disagree with me on this, and I am aware of their concerns: society is morally corrupt, someone needs to take a stand, sin must be confronted. I know. I get it. But we'd be remiss to ignore that the Church as a whole has had a relatively

embarrassing history when it comes to these kinds of things. Kind of like it got roped into some sort of Sin of the Decade Club someone forgot to cancel.

When both Danny and I were in elementary school, congregations were still sorting out the finer points on their interracial marriage positions (yes, this went on well into the 80s). Although we grew up in different states and denominations, our pre-adolescent years were fraught with angst over whether or not we should feel guilty about enjoying music with a beat. Particularly in question was a variant labeled “Christian” rock (almost always written with quotes around “Christian”). We were warned—often in seminars presented by people introduced as “experts”—of the dangers of hypnosis and the possibility of demonic possession via the phenomenon known as backward masking: the deliberate embedding of messages heard only when audio is literally played in reverse. Some believed, for example, that, when played backwards, Queen’s *Another One Bites the Dust* delivered the message “It’s fun to smoke marijuana.”<sup>1</sup> It was a pretty big deal. If we’d had the Internet then, there would have been memes, sharing of strongly-worded articles, and heated debate. What we did have were Statements. Churches were quick to publicize their positions on the types of music their sect sanctioned, often banning drums altogether for fear that demons might accidentally be summoned, confusing the beat for a voodoo ritual or tribal chant.

In our collective fervor to stand up and confront the sin in our corrupt society, we’ve made a few mistakes along the way; we’ve lost some opportunities, definitely some good people. We’ve showed up in the historical annals with egg on our face enough times that it’s a shame we don’t just take a step back next issue and just listen for a while—hear people out; consider some new approaches. I’m not advocating a loosey-goosey, anything-goes philosophy, rather, a more thoughtful, productive approach than running to the keyboard and issuing blanket statements about debatable issues.

I think Mitchell must have picked up the its-just-a-semantic-difficulty vibe of my email, because his next one wasn’t the “sorry to see you go” I was expecting. “Church on Sunday” was the subject header, and the body contained a request for the address of The Harbor, which he would be visiting on

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian community isn’t alone in succumbing to backwards masking furor: In 1969, many Beatles fans claimed to hear “turn me on, dead man” when playing the song *Revolution 9* in reverse, fueling rumors that Paul McCartney had died in a car accident. More recently, artist Missy Eliot purposely used

Sunday “as part of the hiring process.” Just as I concluded that Mitchell must have sent his email before reading mine, I read his closing line: “we’ll talk more about your feelings on the Marriage and Family statement in person.”

Even as Mitchell’s response fanned the glowing ember of hope I’d subconsciously nurtured with my less-than-definitive wording, my expectations about the outcome of the visit and any resulting discussion were virtually non-existent. There was no way around the issue, and the fact that Mitchell still thought there could be made me feel like there was either a major miscommunication, perhaps brought on by my “as it’s written” misstep, or worse, a feeling on their part that I was malleable or ill-informed; that I could be talked out of my conviction. I no longer saw the job as a viable prospect. I saw the church visit and any resulting discussion not as “part of the hiring process,” but rather, as closure.

Sunday morning, I watched for Mitchell to come through the double doors into the large, dimly lit room of café tables that serves as our version of a sanctuary. Brandon, who, at 19, had already been The Harbor’s music minister for two years, was on stage warming up with members of the worship band. Brandon was in the center, strumming his acoustic Taylor guitar, flanked on one side by a brooding male bassist, and the other by Chet, a 30-something bi-polar vocalist known to leave the stage, sometimes mid-song, in the throes of rage or sudden allergy. Danny kept time in his usual spot behind the drum cage.

People were filing in from the adjoining café area, balancing Styrofoam coffee cups and plates of donuts while greeting friends on the way to various tables. Joanna waved and approached my table.

“Is he here?” she whispered.

“Not yet.”

“Are you nervous?” she asked.

“Why should I be?” I laughed, reminding her of some of the highlights from the boardroom scene I had described to her at a friend’s party earlier that weekend. “Sounds like that L...G...B...T...Q nonsense,” I said, waving a hand dismissively through the air while Joanna laughed.

“I have come with snacks,” a voice boomed. It was Ed, a regular at the coffee house where Allison worked as a pastry chef. At her invitation, the husky, bearded history teacher had begun attending

The Harbor a few weeks prior. “I don’t know everything that’s going on here. I just know someone is coming, we are nervous, and these are probably called for,” Ed said in clipped, theatrical tones that served as his baseline timbre.

“Hey, it’s The Customer!” Pastor Tom, our 65-year-old, perpetually sandal-clad pastor, shook Ed’s hand. Tom dubbed Ed “The Customer,” after Allison reminded him several times that Ed was not her boyfriend. Tom turned to me. “I hear we’re under investigation this morning.” His tone and inflection carried an energized, folksy amusement that many Harbor members lovingly imitate.

“Yes, it seems we are,” I shook my head, glad someone from my family had brought him up to speed since I last briefed him on the situation mid-week.

“Well, I will try to be on my best behavior. I don’t want to be the cause of anything bad that happens,” he said, scrunching an eye and tilting his hand back and forth like an out-of-control seesaw.

“Oh, I am doing a good enough job ruining things on my own,” I quipped. “Nothing you could do will make it any worse.”

Pastor Tom, whose jokes get him in trouble with his wife at least once a Sunday, may have worried that my employment prospects would be over by virtue of his sermon alone, but Brandon was more optimistic. The classes he’d taken with Mitchell had already involved discussions of different styles of “doing church,” and Brandon said Mitchell had always seemed interested in learning more about our laid-back, church-is-for-everyone approach.

I saw Mitchell walk through the doors and waved him over to our table while I opened Ed’s bag from the coffee shop. “Yes!” I exclaimed as I saw Allison’s signature oatmeal crème cookies—my absolute favorite. “Ed, you are amazing!”

We greeted Mitchell and forced a cookie on him as Brandon called the service to order. I was pretty sure that sitting at a café table eating fresh cookies while listening to a preacher in Teva sandals delivering a sermon from a stool wasn’t a typical Sunday morning for him, but he seemed unperturbed.

The service was uneventful by Harbor standards. Chet made it through the service happy and healthy, Pastor Tom avoided verbal gaffes, and Mitchell seemed pleased. He made some offhand remarks



about the service to Brad and waved a hand at Brandon, who was playing a reprise of an earlier song as people filed out of the room. He turned to me. “We need to wrap this thing up pretty quickly,” he said. “Peters is pretty worried.”

“He should be!” I exclaimed. I rejected his statement. Metaphorically balled it up and threw it back at him—I mean, I did, didn’t I? Did he think I just don’t understand what I’m saying?

“Well, here’s what I’d like to do,” Mitchell said. “I’d like to hold a conference call tomorrow afternoon with Dr. Raoul. He’s our most conservative faculty member, and Peters tends to look to him on points of doctrine. If we can get Dr. Raoul on board, I think we can still make this happen.” Dr. Raoul was the archeologist I’d met with a couple weeks prior. He’d always been friendly to me, and my son enjoyed him as a professor, but I had noticed in both doctrinal interviews I’d had with him his tendency to fixate on minor points, hanging onto them with a tenacity that would have been impressive as a feat of endurance, but became downright exhausting in an interview setting. I didn’t see the situation Mitchell described as going well.

I was confused, and said so. “I have to say, Mitchell, that I don’t see a way around this. I have significant issues with the statement. I don’t see a way forward here, but if you do, I guess I’ll play this out. I’ll follow your lead tomorrow,” I said.

“Great! I still have a good feeling about this,” he said, grabbing his coat off the back of his chair and heading to his car.

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Allison came through the front door just prior to 3:00 the next afternoon, “Mom, everyone at work is abuzz over this whole university episode. They are dying to know what happens. They can’t believe this all comes down to a *moral matter*,” she said dramatically, dropping her backpack on the table and fending off Audrey, our two- year-old husky who was jumping on her in greeting.

My phone began to vibrate, so I took a deep breath and went to my master suite, shutting the door behind me. Mitchell greeted me crisply, confirmed the presence of Dr. Raoul, and jumped right into the topic of Danny.

“It’s a fine line, but an important line, to draw between hermaphrodite syndrome and someone who simply desires a sex change,” Mitchell said. “I don’t believe that one would apply the marriage and family statement to a hermaphrodite.”

I wondered why Mitchell was still using the archaic “hermaphrodite,” but recognized that he correctly distinguished intersex conditions (a visibly verifiable, medical issue) from transgender (a psychological dissonance between inward feeling and outward appearance), even though I saw potential for those lines to blur in ways that Mitchell would not. Danny, for instance, was technically both intersex and transgender, since he had decided to transition from presenting as female to male.

“I think I’d go a bit further than calling it a fine line—the distinction is one even experts don’t always agree on. Some people have dualities on the chromosomal level that don’t manifest physically. It’s entirely possible that some people who just don’t feel right in their bodies—people you might think of as ‘just wanting a sex change’ could still have a biological basis for the disagreement they feel with their assigned gender. There are so many stories of people who find out in adulthood that they aren’t the gender they think.<sup>2</sup> The only thing I’m confident in saying is that I don’t have all the answers.”

I was sitting on the cold slate platform of my tub, surveying the soap scum on the shower curtain and the husky fur tumbling across the floor. My housekeeping indiscretions kept me grounded in a tangible reality. Mitchell and Dr. Raoul were formidable, but in a vague, distant sort of way; the dirt was a force with which I could reckon. I slid down to the floor and swept my hand across the blue tile to gather the stray fur.

“But scripture tells us God made male and female,” Mitchell said, as though reminding me of a variable I’d forgotten to consider in my calculation.

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<sup>2</sup> A New Delhi woman learned of her surprise Y chromosome when she sought fertility help. She subsequently gave birth to twins. Spanish Olympian Maria Jose Martinez-Patino discovered her XY status when she “failed” routine Olympic gender testing in 1986. In 2006, runner Santhi Soundarajan was stunned to learn on an evening news broadcast that she wasn’t female and was, accordingly, being stripped of her medal. These women have Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome—they are physically and psychologically women, but genetically men.

“Yes, of course. But we can’t ignore the scientific fact that not everyone fits with those binaries. Most of my information comes from The Intersex Society of North America, an organization devoted to public education on issues of intersexuality. One of the most interesting facts I’ve found is the statistic that 1 in 100 people have bodies differ from standard male or female. If you view male and female as two ends of a continuum, these people fall at all points in between.” I’d rehearsed these lines as if I was preparing to deliver them in a play. I had more well-rehearsed answers in my arsenal—I just needed Mitchell to feed me the right questions.

“God did not make a continuum,” Mitchell said. “Scripture is clear that God made male and female. Not a continuum,” There was a long pause. I imagined Dr. Raoul frowning, shaking his head, slipping Mitchell a note about points he wanted clarified. Mitchell cleared his throat and then asked, “Would you ever feel there was a time to intervene in a situation with a friend who was struggling in this area?”

“I am not really sure what you mean. Could you clarify the question?” I had no prefabricated material to address this cryptic query. I was pacing through my cavernous bathroom now as I talked, a nervous habit that serves as a tell to any observer how much I dislike phone conversations. I hate not seeing facial expressions or hand gestures—the nonverbal cues that are so important to effective communication.

“You have expressed that you don’t feel called to judge, but I think scripture tells us that we are to judge. So, in your friend’s case, where do you see the sin in his situation?” Mitchell said.

“What?” I exclaimed, forgetting to censor my horror. “Sin? You think that I think he sinned?”

“Well,” Mitchell said, patiently, “in your friend’s situation, there, are um, certain things that must be given up.”

“Wait, wait, are you suggesting celibacy?” I asked, incredulously.

“Yes, yes, I am.”

“I don’t think that at all,” I said. What happened to the idea of the Marriage and Family Statement not applying to a “hermaphrodite”?

At this point I could almost hear Dr. Raoul scratching furiously on an imaginary piece of scrap paper, but any actual scraping I may have heard was Audrey pawing at the door as Allison eavesdropped. “Tell us your thoughts on homosexuality,” Mitchell asked, in apparent acknowledgement of the impasse we’d reached.

“Well, I don’t believe it’s a choice. It’s a condition of birth. Politically I support all legislation that gives gay people equal rights.” I ticked off these ideas confidently—in my mind, these were no brainers.

“But is it wrong, in your opinion?” Mitchell was trying to elicit specific wording from me. It seemed that he really didn’t care if I believed that people were born gay—he didn’t even mind if I deviated politically a bit left of university norms that represented the university’s norms. He seemed to be looking for something more: explicit moral condemnation.

“The way you are born is absolutely not an issue of right and wrong,” I said, linking my answer to the ideas I’d just stated with confidence.

“OK, so can we compare it to, say, alcoholism? Just because you are born with a proclivity toward something harmful does not mean it’s ok to give into it.” Mitchell seemed to be reaching deep into his own arsenal of rehearsed material, but his analogy seemed faulty to me—a logical gaffe that wouldn’t hold up to scrutiny. I paused, and said, simply: “Let me put it this way: if a gay Christian were to successfully live a celibate life because that was their conviction—that person is a true hero of faith. I’d like to think I could be that strong. But the truth is, I don’t know that I could be. I don’t know how many people are.”

“But the Bible is clear that acting on such urges is an abomination.”

“I am not so sure it is clear on that,” I said.

“Well what would you say about verses such as—” here Mitchell’s voice trailed off and became muffled in apparent consultation with Dr. Raoul—“Leviticus,” he said. “What would you say about Leviticus?”

I internally scoffed. Leviticus as a guide for modern living was a concept easily debunked. Written as ancient Jewish law—a law Christians believe was fulfilled by Christ’s death and resurrection—the text prohibits things like wearing garments made of blended fabric and the requirement that homes with mildew be vacated until deemed clean by a priest. “Umm...well, I would leave Leviticus completely out of the conversation,” I said. “I mean, unless we’re also going to talk about whether or not a priest should come and bless the fridge after the moldy leftovers have been removed. Leviticus just doesn’t work in this context.”

“Well one of the New Testament scriptures we can look to is I Corinthians,” Mitchell said, as though eager to drop the Leviticus inquiry.

I knew the verses he was referencing—chapter 6, verses 9 and 10, which commonly include homosexuality among a list of sins that would keep one from “the kingdom of God.” I also knew the case was less than clear that word translated to mean modern day homosexuality carried the same connotation in the time they were written. In fact, Brandon and I had recently had a conversation about the passage. In the widely used New International Version (NIV), the scripture reads: “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men...will inherit the kingdom of God.” The New American Standard Bible (NASB) says “neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals” will inherit the kingdom. In place of “homosexuals,” other translations use “abusers of themselves with mankind,” or “practicing homosexuals.” As an assignment in his Corinthians survey class, Brandon had examined three different commentaries for perspective on the text. Of the three, one confidently characterized the verse as anti-homosexual, a second admitted a degree of doubt concerning the translation, and the third conceded to straight up not knowing what, exactly, the Apostle Paul was referencing in the passage.

Indeed, it wouldn’t be long before I would delve into some linguistic studies of my own. In the months following the phone call with Mitchell and Dr. Raoul, articles began circulating through my social media feed about the discovery of papyri in an ancient burial mask that could prove to be the oldest

known copy of the Gospel of Mark. And it seemed that burial mask was not an isolated find. Recent years have seen an increase in linguistic knowledge as other papyri containing letters, contracts, notes—items tantamount to first century junk mail—have surfaced, allowing linguists to see language used in its original context. According to Greek scholar Dr. A Nyland, author of the controversial *The Source* translation of the New Testament, prior to these finds, as much as 17% of the words in the New Testament represent the best guesses of translators (7).

In *The Source*, which seeks to update and clarify the scriptures in light of recent linguistic finds, Nyland notes that no equivalent English word exists for either malakos (the word rendered as “effeminate” in the NASB and other translations) nor arsenokoities (“homosexual”) (314). Translating malakos to mean “effeminate” is problematic. It may be the best we can do in terms of a 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent, but Paul’s audience in the Roman colony of Corinth knew that the Roman equivalent to malakos, cinaedi, referenced a specific group of socially reviled outcasts known for cross-dressing, promiscuity, and prostitution. Using a word with clear historical meaning as a basis for modern judgment seems irresponsible (314).

According to Nyland, arsenokoities, the word translated as “homosexual,” has a semantic range that “includes one who anally penetrates another, rapist, murderer [and] extortionist” (314). Although it’s textual proximity to malakos suggests the sexual meaning over murder or extortion, Nyland notes that the word is not used “exclusively to males as the receptors, as it was also used for women receptors”—introducing the idea that Paul could have just as easily been referencing a heterosexual breach of conduct (314).

The game-changing idea that the denouncement in 1 Corinthians 6:9 might not even apply to male-on-male sex, but, rather, a heterosexual encounter is further illuminated by findings of Craig A. Williams, Yale-educated professor of classics at the University of Illinois. Williams’s research, which includes studies on ancient Roman graffiti, literature, and theatre, confirms that a percentage of homosexual practices came with cultural stigmas that also extended to heterosexual relations. For

instance, Williams cites the expulsion of a man named Manilius from the Senate around 184 BC for “kiss[ing] his wife in broad daylight in the presence of their daughter” (17-18).

However, Nyland’s footnotes on I Corinthians 6:9 offer evidence to make a case that Paul may not have been writing about homosexual relations at all, but a sinister heterosexual practice: rape. According to Nyland’s notes, third century Egyptian monk, Pseudo-Macarius, used *arsenokoities* to describe the intent of the Sodomites to rape their angelic visitors (315). Aristides, a highly regarded Greek general and statesman, said that the Greek gods “commit murders, poisonings, adulteries, thefts, and *arsenokoities*” (315). Nyland contends the context of both Pseudo-Macarius’s and Aristides’s remarks were suggestive of rape (315). Additionally, 6th century astrologer Rhetorius Aegyptius used *arsenokoities* when speaking of woman as receptors (315). In other words: scholarly findings do not support the idea that the I Corinthians passage on which Mitchell and Dr. Raoul’s argument rested was speaking about homosexual sex at all.

Indeed, taking historical context into account, it seems not only possible, but, arguably, probable, that Paul’s words had nothing to do with homosexuality. Tradition and history portrays Paul as highly educated. His home region, Tarsus, was one of the great intellectual centers of the time, and Paul, a Roman citizen, enjoyed full access to religious and civic training. It is, therefore, relevant to note that bisexual orientation was a given for Roman men, who, at any time, performed a wide range of homosexual or heterosexual acts, each carrying a set of social norms and mores that our society will never completely understand. The range of variant sexual possibilities discussed during the period of Paul’s writings necessitated the use of different words to distinguish these acts. Understanding the existence and importance of semantic nuances is crucial to understanding scriptural intent because much of the ancient sexual vocabulary does not have English correlations and refers to social or moral stigma outside our experience—an experience that is narrower and more limited than we may realize.

Williams notes that “scholarly inquiry into human sexual behavior worldwide, from the earliest times to the present, has made one thing clear: apart from the modern social formation conventionally

called “Western culture,” very few cultures have issued a blanket condemnation of sexual practices between males as being in and of themselves objectionable” (17).

All of which brings me to this: if Paul WAS, as a Roman man writing to Greek citizens in Corinth, making a bold, sweeping move against entrenched cultural norms by condemning all forms of homosexuality, he would have needed to use far more specific language. I am not a linguist, but I am a writer. In my professional capacity as such, I am confident in saying that for Paul to use just one word in blanket condemnation of all forms of homosexual practice and expect his audience to understand would be sloppy, unclear prose that would make him an ill-informed and out-of-touch correspondent—a description diametrically opposed to his reputation as a highly educated Roman citizen and Jewish scholar.

I wish I’d been armed with Drs. Nyland and Williams that deep fall afternoon, pacing around my bathroom with Mitchell and Dr. Raoul on the line. I doubt, though, that it would have made a measurable difference from the outcome that actually resulted. Mitchell rephrased his “but don’t you think homosexuality is wrong” question one more time, in an apparent last-ditch effort to align me in some way with the sentiments expressed in the sexuality statement. I couldn’t do it. Mitchell said he was going to discuss our conversation with Dr. Raoul and Peters and that he’d be in touch.

From an interview perspective, my performance was abysmal. I threw the job away and I knew it. Of course, I knew it going in, a fact that would seem to make illogical the anxiety that was settling in. But it was no longer concern over whether or not I’d be hired—I’d all but accepted that I wouldn’t—but rather worry about everything my decision implied. Publically rejecting the Marriage and Family Statement implied that I wasn’t on board with mainstream, conservative Christianity. It implied that I was, probably at that moment, being judged—labeled—deemed unfit to teach in a Christian setting. It implied that I was off map. And any time one goes off map, it implies they could get lost. The prospect was terrifying.

It slowly began to occur to me that my refusal to participate in evangelical Christianity’s stand against its latest pet sin was about more than a job. It was no longer about figuring out the minimum



acceptable answers I could give and still be hired, or the promise of a more-than-doubled salary, free tuition for everyone in my family, or the ability to pay off my house in the next couple of years. It wasn't even about having the office and the revolving door, or even about being there for those students at that school.

The fact was, I walked away from the job that quite possibility could have been the fulfillment of one of my oldest dreams over an issue that wasn't even directly *mine*. It seemed absurd that I—a happily married suburban mother— could be banned from employment over an issue of sexuality. I was baffled to be someone living a lifestyle lauded and applauded by evangelical Christianity, but still deemed unfit because I didn't feel qualified to judge people who are different from me. Some days, I think it would have been the easiest thing in the world to have just told them what they wanted to hear, but my conscience wouldn't allow it. It wasn't just guilt over the dishonesty—as bad as that would have been—but rather, the guilt over being on the wrong side of a conflict with life and death consequences; a war waged daily in the form of countless private battles. Invisible skirmishes that crush spirits and wound souls, struggles so deeply personal most of us never know they exist—and yet here I was, an outsider, being invited into the front lines of one person's last stand. How could I live with myself if I just walked away?

## CHAPTER 5

1983

In 1983, Sally Ride rode all the way to space, the Midwest was parched, Michael Jackson ruled the airwaves, and Dani began sneaking T-shirts from Jim's drawer on a daily basis. It began as late summer experiments in front of his bedroom mirror; trial runs that evolved into a multi-step, self-designed chest binding system. The first day of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Dani pulled one of the stolen T-shirts over his head and cinched it tightly under a belt. He reached behind his back and pulled down on the shirttail, hiking the collar up to his neck in front. He then pulled the shirt taut beneath his belt buckle, wrapping the excess fabric around the leather strap. Foundation secure, Dani slid into a long-sleeved, button-up flannel shirt that he tucked into a pair of jeans and anchored with a second belt. He surveyed the results in the mirror with a critical eye. It was more difficult now, with breasts, but he hoped the rudimentary binding effort had bought him a little more time to pass as male.

Dani was optimistic about the new school year. Although the hallways were peopled with familiar faces: Binker, Valerie, Kara, and Jen—this was junior high: a new, big building filled with students that came from several different schools, and, in Dani's mind, that represented hope. It was an optimism that wasn't completely misplaced, as Dani learned during a 2<sup>nd</sup> period Health class at the outset of the year.

Health alternated with PE and was often held in the gym, with students choosing their own seats on the bleachers. The kids clumped in predictable formations, with outliers like Dani sitting alone on the periphery. Dani didn't expect any different, and sitting alone was certainly preferable to being taunted.

"Hi, I'm Abby," a voice jolted Dani from his thoughts.

Dani looked up and saw a waif thin girl with long brown hair. Dressed in a mishmash of stripes and plaids and clutching a sketchbook and a copy of *The Exorcist*, Abby may just as well have been walking around in a sandwich board proclaiming herself a nonconformist.

Abby slid across the bleachers and took a seat next to Dani. "What school did you come from?"

"George Washington," Dani said.

“I came from Hamilton,” Abby said.

“I know a couple people from there,” Dani answered, mentally scanning the roster of regulars at his church youth group. He supplied a couple of names that didn’t ring any bells for Abby. “So what did you do at Hamilton?” he asked.

“I read,” Abby laughed, raising *The Exorcist* with one hand, “and drew,” she added, lifting her sketchbook with the other hand. “You?”

“Softball,” Dani said, lobbing an invisible pitch toward the gym floor.

Abby and Dani compared notes on their schedules and discovered that they had all the same classes. The pair instantly became two friends in an eventual threesome that would include Abby’s boyfriend, Paul. Stick thin with straight, flat hair, Paul was ahead of his time: emo before the term was coined.

They began to share a table at lunch, where conversation often turned to speculating why they collectively became misfits.

“They call me a freak,” was all Dani would say about his circumstances.

Paul was more specific. “I’m attracted to guys,” he whispered across the lunch table one day.

Dani shot a look in Abby’s direction.

“She knows,” Paul said. “It’s something I’m working on.”

Dani asked Abby about it one day when they were alone. “You really OK with Paul liking guys?” he asked.

“He just needs love,” Abby said.

“It just kind of seems like maybe he’s not into this as much as you are,” Dani said, furrowing his brow.

“No, he loves me,” Abby said. “He’ll come around. In the meantime, it gives him something to tell the bullies,” she added.

Paul numbered among Binker’s victims, teased mercilessly for his effeminate mannerisms and speech patterns. Abby and Dani shared no classes with Binker, but Paul wasn’t as fortunate. The two

classes he didn't have with Abby and Dani were with Binker. By virtue of proximity, Binker's primary interest shifted from Dani to Paul.

Securing a place among misfits gave Dani a bit of courage in more challenging 2<sup>nd</sup> period circumstances. Traditionally, PE had always been Dani's favorite class; but it had been so much easier in elementary school when it was just fun and games, before the curveball that was the junior high locker room and its forced communal showers.

The locker room smelled of sweat, soap and Secret deodorant, the flowery kind that the girls slathered liberally over their breasts and backs. Talk was predominantly of bodies; notes were compared, experiences shared.

"It happened on vacation, wearing a brand-new pair of shorts," one girl whined. "We were at a restaurant and my sister whispered at me to go with her to the bathroom. I had a huge red stain. It was so *embarrassing* and my shorts were ruined."

"I was so scared," confessed another student. "And my stomach hurt. I didn't think it would be like that."

Dani remembered how scared he was when his period came. He wondered if his experience was like anyone else's. As the girls would talk about their periods, growing breasts, and bras, Dani scanned the conversation for key words, clues, any hint that someone else had a body that was changing in ways similar to his.

Abby never participated in these conversations. Her locker was tucked in an inconspicuous alcove in the back of the room, and she typically did her business and went on her way, unnoticed. Dani, however, in hopes of stumbling on some key piece of information that would explain his existence, regarded the locker room chatter as a chance for life to suddenly make sense.

One day the subject was pubic hair: who had it, what it looked like, how it felt, where it was growing. Fresh from the shower, several girls hitched up their towels to show each other the coarse, alien patches of growth sprouting across their private areas.

To Dani, the situation seemed communal, intimate. Valerie and Kara were even there, talking freely about their bodies in front of him. Things were better now, normal. Everyone was going through a lot of crazy changes—not just him. And maybe it was OK to talk about it. *Now's the time to bring this up*, he thought. *Test the waters*.

“So, um, is it normal for someone to have, um, other things going on down there?” Dani ventured.

“Other things? Like what?” someone asked.

“Um, like, you know, other things than what we've discussed,” Dani shrugged.

Eyes darted around the room; brows furrowed.

“Like sweating?” someone offered.

“No, no, nothing like that.” Dani's face burned.

“Do you mean, like, pain?” someone else tried.

Dani shook his head.

“Itching?” someone suggested.

“No, no,” Dani said, squeezing his eyes closed and taking a deep breath. “Like you've got, you know, both guy and girl parts.”

The room went silent for a moment. Zippers stopped short. Brushes halted mid-stroke. When the response came, it was collective, vehement, and final. “Eww!”

“That's freaky. Valerie said, pulling her brush through her long, wet hair. “That's not normal.”

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“What's going on?” Paul asked that afternoon as they were waiting in the hallway for their parents to pick them up after school. Dani had kept to himself all afternoon, his insides a twisted mess of anger, confusion, and embarrassment.

“I don't really want to talk about it. Something bad happened earlier today in the locker room,” Dani answered.

“Why do you care so much what they think?” Abby said. “They are so mean to you.”

“Ok, well, I don’t feel comfortable changing in the locker room anymore. Will you guys help me?”

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The next PE day, Dani added his gym shirt to his ensemble, layering it between his flannel and the two tees he was now using to bind. With his athletic shorts stuffed in a book bag, Dani no longer needed a trip to the locker room to change for PE. A covert trip to an empty restroom at the tail end of first period allowed him to ditch his outer layer of clothing, pull on his shorts, and slide into the gym without incident. The downside multiplying layers of shirts combined with puberty and physical activity caused Dani to sweat profusely.

“I know I stink. I can’t go in there. I can’t be made fun of,” Dani said to Abby.

“It’s ok,” Abby said, a large bright pink flower bobbing up and down as she nodded. “They pick on me too. Screw them.”

Dani became adept at averting his gaze, refusing to make eye contact with anyone; anything to keep the girls from making a scene about him being in the room with them. He tried sharing a locker with Abby, in hopes that he could adopt her inconspicuous locker room routine, but it was too late for Dani to become invisible: he was labeled.

“Is the freak going to take a shower?” Valerie stage-whispered as Dani walked through the locker room door.

Nervous laughter rippled through the room.

“I’m serious,” Valerie said. “I’m really uncomfortable.” She turned to address Dani. “Please don’t watch me,” she pleaded.

Dani began to linger in the gym after class instead of filing into the locker room. He’d duck under the bleachers or in a corner, waiting for Paul to give him a sign that most of the girls had filed out of the locker room. Abby would then go back and do a physical check to make certain the room was completely empty. Only then would Dani slip into the room, change as quickly as possible, and attempt to get to class before racking up another in a growing pile of tardy slips.

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Sherry came into Dani's room after he got in bed one evening. She sat down on the edge of his bed. "I know what you're doing," she said, softly. "Why are you trying to hide who you are?" Her voice shook with emotion. "What you're doing to your body, tying it down like that, isn't healthy," she said.

Dani didn't know how to respond. He was terrified of disappointing his parents, and it made him sick to think he caused his mom so much pain and worry. The only thing he wanted was to make his parents proud. But how could he do that and still be himself? The question seemed to have no answer, though he stared into the darkness for what seemed like hours attempting to find one.

As much as it scared Dani to admit it, part of the problem was that he didn't know what he was, really. Male on the inside, sure, but the outside—the part that really seemed to matter—was less straightforward. The locker room experience was enough to convince him that his body wasn't following any sort of normal plan. He saw enough during those chat sessions to be confident that he wasn't physically female. But as much as it hurt to admit, he wasn't male, either. What was he, then? What was left? Could Valerie have been right? Was he a freak? Some sort of one-of-a-kind mish-mash of body parts?

In the end, it was Valerie who supplied the first word Dani had for himself. It happened one day in the hall outside the gym. She looked up and stared straight at him. "There's the hermaphrodite." She spat the word from her lips like it was an accidental swig of sour milk; foul, offensive, objectionable. Dani didn't need to look the word up to know that it was a synonym for "outcast," but as soon as he was home from school he headed straight for the large bookshelf in the living room and homed in on the encyclopedias, pulling book number nine, "H" from the shelf. The information wasn't overly useful, but it supplied Dani with a name, a label that would stick in his mind for the next 30 years.

## CHAPTER 6

1983

“Some of you here tonight are just faking it,” the sensei said.

Dani knew all about faking it. It wasn't a topic he'd been expecting to consider that evening, but suddenly he was all ears.

Dani's dad, who served as the youth minister at their church, Calvary Baptist, had taken the group to an event called Karate for Christ. Dani was familiar with this type of program: the evening would be largely comprised of some sort of show or presentation—in this case breaking boards, high kicks, and targeted punches—followed by a talk about what it means to be a Christian. Dani already knew all about that, at least in his head. He knew you were supposed to believe that Christ died for our sins and he rose from the dead. He was good with that. He was good with going to church: learning the songs, memorizing the verses, knowing the answers—he'd been doing that for a long time.

But a recent conversation with Megan had been haunting his thoughts. Megan and her sister, Tess, were the senior pastor's daughters, and they were about the best friends Dani had. In Dani's mind, Tess was one of the guys: they played outside when the weather was good and watched sports on TV when it wasn't. Megan, on the other hand, was a girly girl: pretty and popular like Valerie and her friends, except that she had always treated Dani with a gentleness and kindness that he'd never felt before. She was so gentle and kind that when she called Dani a fake a couple weeks earlier it had made an impression that Dani couldn't shake.

Dani knew the truth in Megan's accusation. His circle of 7<sup>th</sup> grade school friends had expanded as the year wore on. He'd become friendly with a group of kids Megan probably wouldn't have chosen, but Dani hadn't spent much time thinking about Megan's reaction. He separated his school life from his church and home lives, and saw little opportunity for them to intersect. At school, he had a shot at being something close to his real self, but at church he never had a chance.

For as far back as he could remember, something always seemed a little off at church. Feminine behavior wasn't just preferred, it was enforced. Even now, Dani was expected to wear a skirt to church



both Sunday morning and Sunday evening. At church, his mother's friends viewed him as Sherry's red-headed baby girl. But what they prized even more than physical appearance, Dani discovered, was knowledge. Parents—even his own—would forgive a few appearance-related missteps if he knew the most verses, said the most prayers, and won the most Bible quiz games. At church, being the most spiritual was the fastest ticket to popularity. It was his coping mechanism, and, so far, it had served him well.

At school, however, Dani capitalized on an androgynous image to form different friendships, such as the one he forged during art class with Jo, the ringleader of his new group of friends. Olive-skinned, muscular, and a head taller than most the other students, Jo wore her dark hair cropped close against her scalp. She seemed drawn to the ambiguous tomboy persona that Dani had begun to cultivate, gravitating to oversized, heavily patterned shirts that would draw eyes away from his chest. Dani took comfort in the gender confusion of the image he presented. If people were confused, it meant passing as male was still an option. Jo liked Dani's tough front and began to introduce him to her world and friends.

Jo's best friend was Amanda Mason, who wore her blond wavy hair long and her jeans skin tight. She tended toward tied halter-tops, a sharp tongue, and risky recreation. She peddled marijuana and speed, but left the harder stuff to her older brother, Ron. Amanda was Ron's protégé, and Jo was Amanda's bodyguard. The Masons were infamous for their parent-sponsored parties, complete with a full buffet of illegal substances.

Dani would have never been allowed to go to any of these parties, and he never asked. He wasn't interested in the drug scene, but it was kind of nice to have a couple of popular friends—even if it was the wrong kind of popular. Abby and Paul didn't approve of these friendships, and, when she found out, Megan didn't either.

Dani hadn't really expected to have to give account for the disparity between his school and church personas. Sure, he'd invited Abby and Paul to come with him to church events a few times, but if they noticed that church Dani was different than the Dani they knew from school, they didn't say anything. Then Jan Pritchard, a friend of Kara's from school, started coming to youth group. She hit it off

with Megan and they began talking. Dani hadn't even known Jan at school, but Jan certainly knew who Dani was.

"Dani's completely different here than she is at school," Jan had told Megan. "The way she dresses, the kind of friends she hangs out with—it's like she's not even the same person. Something's fake."

It wasn't long before Megan asked Dani what was going on. "It's like you are living a double life," she said.

*Double life.* The words echoed in Dani's brain as the sensei spoke. He talked about getting real, about how God didn't care who you were or what you'd done—he loved you.

*I hate who I am,* Dani thought. *I don't even know what I am.*

"God loves you," the sensei said. "He really, really loves you."

The idea that God could actually love him—despite everything—hit Dani for the first time. God was probably the only one who knew the real Dani and He loved him. Dani's faith became real that night. It became about more than a bunch of verses and facts, more than just another venue to navigate. It became something real, and Dani knew that meant making an effort to reconcile who he was with what he'd been faking.

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Dani wanted to be a good Christian, and he knew part of that involved figuring out how to make his parents happy without being completely miserable. It was impossible for him not to notice how happy Sherry was whenever he did something feminine. Dani knew that the quickest way to make his mother proud and to show he was serious he was about his faith was to explore his female side. It was something foreign, something for which he had no instinct. But he suspected that trying a different answer to a question a boy named Mike had asked a few times could be a start.

Mike was a blond-haired, sporty guy—in a recreational league kind of way. Dani had class with him the last two periods each day. They struck up a friendship that revolved around discussions about video games and, occasionally, whether or not Dani would go out with him. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, "going out" was

more of a title than an event, but it was a title that could go a long way toward helping Dani fit in with the girls—which would make his parents happy, and, by extension, make him a better believer.

So the next time Mike asked Dani out, he said yes. They still talked about sports and video games, but now they held hands as they walked together to science, their final class of the day. Dani hated it. It was disgusting and he felt miserable inside, but he kept it up for two full weeks: the title, the handholding, the feeling—it was all for a greater cause. One day as they were leaving science class and toward the bank of lockers outside the door, Dani was having a particularly hard time hiding his unhappiness.

“What’s up with you today?” Mike asked.

“Nothing.” Dani shrugged.

“What?” Mike prodded, “Is it your time of the month?”

In an instant, Mike was against the lockers, Dani’s right hook exploding across his nose. Blood splattered through the air; cheers erupted from the crowd of onlookers clustering around the action. Dani walked out the door and toward home, a teen boy masquerading as a tough, newly single girl.

## CHAPTER 7

November 4, 2014

Hours after the call with Mitchell and Dr. Raoul ended, my brain was still hosting a mental highlight reel of the interview. My decisive squelch of the Leviticus thread was a clear win, but knew I choked when Mitchel said that a gender continuum couldn't exist because "God created male and female." Of course, I also knew that none of this really mattered because I wasn't getting hired, but I "knew" I'd lose the job after my confession in Mitchell's office, and my I-can't-sign-the-statement email, and the doctrinal interview before that, and, even earlier, I "knew" my concerns about the schedule and the commute would end the process. There was a part of me, even after the hour of stammering and awkward pauses on the phone that thought the job was—somewhat mystically—destined to be mine; that maybe, just maybe, there was nothing I could do to mess it up.

The fantasy was further bolstered when the next morning arrived with no word from Mitchell. Silence implied deliberation. Deliberation implied that there was more to discuss. I hit the "compose" button on my email and surprised myself by beginning to type. I thanked Mitchell for the conversation and acknowledged that it didn't go well. I told him I wanted to respond to his question about the continuum because it was important. I sent him a link to a page on Intersex Society of America site confirming the facts I cited in the interview. I then typed: "Understanding and dealing with the reality of intersex is particularly relevant within the context of an institution training the current generation to be effective ministers in their world. The church as a whole is beating a path of retreat from these issues, but I don't think it's a sustainable model." I thanked him for reading my belated response and then stationed myself on my email's refresh icon for much of the next several hours.

As golden afternoon sun sliced across the surface of the old donut shop booth on my front screen porch, the email popped up on my MacBook:

*Dr. Raoul and I have talked. I have briefed Peters. At this point in time we all agree that perhaps our marriage and sexuality statement is stronger than you are able to commit to, thus we shouldn't proceed with trying to hire you.*

*I appreciate the conversations. At times, I feared that we might be talking past each other. What I can't get past is the idea that science and the biblical position may be at odds. I believe that the Bible is God's Word and it is timeless. I think God in his infinite knowledge knows truth and he gave instruction that is true for any time and place. I recognize that God's world does not operate the way he intended, and people are caught in situations that are completely out of their decision-making process. But I'm also not prepared to say that being born a certain way (with certain feelings) is an excuse for behavior that God says is wrong.*

The email solidified for me the idea that we *weren't* simply “talking past each other;” that Mitchell’s narrative of science and Biblical conflict was heavily redacted, discounting times the church—not the Bible—got it wrong: the flap with Galileo over the shape of the earth, the banning of Copernicus’s seminal work come to mind. Brandon would later learn that the university drafted a similar statement decades before condemning interracial relationships. In twenty years would they be equally embarrassed about their current denouncement? It seemed likely, and I wanted to be glad not be a part of it.

I mentally returned, as I would frequently that fall, to a conversation I had with my father a few days before the all-campus interview. I’d been anguishing about the job more than I thought was normal, and struggling to figure out why. Was it an aversion to long term, full-time employment—a cultural intuition that I had, historically, regarded in the same vain as incarceration? Was it sadness over the prospect of leaving my alma mater, the actual campus where I hoped my dreams would eventually play out? Or was it something just beyond conscious reach, like a passing flicker caught in the corner of the eye; that thing you hope was just a play of light or shadow; that thing I may or may not have seen a few weeks earlier when I was being interviewed in the linguist’s office.

I'd been sitting beside Dr. Raoul on a nondescript brown couch positioned on the right-hand side of the linguist's desk—Dr. Raoul and the wall of tomes on my left, and the door, nearly covered in suit coats and academic robes hanging from so many pegs, on the right. The linguist sat behind his desk, hands locked behind his head, chair swiveled toward the couch. The robes and coats jostled as one of the professors—my mind conjures a faceless form when I try to remember which one—cracked open the door and popped his head through the crack.

Seeing me on the couch, the intruder excused himself, but the linguist asked him to continue.

“I have that media statement on family ready for you,” he said.

The linguist raised an eyebrow. “Has there been a need?”

“No,” the form replied.

“Good,” the linguist nodded. “We'll keep it on file. But it needs to come through me,” he added.

“I'll send it over.”

The interaction was crisp, professional, and a bit south of neutral in a way I wouldn't have been able to pinpoint from a lineup of sinister things. Did my unconscious do the work that my sentient mind refused to process? Did I sense on any level that the school was bracing for backlash over the legalization of gay marriage just three weeks earlier in neighboring Virginia? Could I know, on any level that this “media statement” was part and parcel of the policy that would become my undoing? It seemed at that point to be easily dismissible university business that exceeded my pay grade. The interaction couldn't have taken more than ten seconds, but it somehow left me with the familiar feeling of dread that often lingers in the wake of those uncertain, fleeting shadows.

I'd decided at that point that I needed some perspective outside my home and my immediate circle of friends. I wanted to hear from my dad, whose own spiritual journey had volleyed from the far right, to moderate, and was now decidedly left-leaning. I had sprawled out on my King-sized bed and its usual tumbleweed of pillows, blankets, husky, and cats, and hit my father's number.

“Did these people come right out and ask what you were writing about or for your opinions on any of this?” he asked, after I'd brought him up to speed on my writing project, my upcoming interview,

and my concerns about what would happen when they learned about my work, either up front or down the road.

“Not yet,” I admitted. “But I know it’s coming.”

“You aren’t obligated to volunteer anything, you know,” he said, a familiar timbre of righteous, screw-the-man indignation in his voice.

Part of me was eager to explore this line of thought. I wanted someone I respected to convince me that the school was being unreasonable, that keeping some information close to the vest was not only human, but also expected. I wanted to hear that it didn’t really matter if I told them or not, that I could keep my work and private lives separate and still be a good person. My ears were itching to hear it, all of it. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t picture a satisfying outcome.

“I don’t know, Dad,” I said. “I don’t want to have this thing hanging over my head all the time. They either need to accept me, my views, and my project, or not, I think.”

After a pause, my dad said, “If you do this, you can’t become my friend Paul.”

“What do you mean?” I laughed.

“Paul fell in love last year with a woman named Kim. He decided to propose even though there were a hundred reasons why it wasn’t going to work with Kim. She didn’t want his golf clubs in the garage. She didn’t like his friends, his clothes—the list went on. We’d sit at breakfast every week and he’d complain bitterly. Then Kim gave an ultimatum.” My father paused, for effect. A newscaster by trade, he knows how to pace a story for optimal effect. He also has a Christ-like tendency to speak in parables, and I wondered where this one was going.

“What happened?” I asked, falling under the spell.

“Kim said no golf clubs. No old friends. Pare down his stuff. If he was going to be in her life, it was going to be by her rules.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No, no it wasn’t. Paul knew this, and he let her go.”

“Good for Paul!”

“You’d think good for Paul,” my dad retorted. “Until you have to listen to him. Every week, it’s: how could I have let her go? She was the love of my life! I’m broken. But you and I both know that life with Kim would have been a disaster.” My father paused again. “This school is your Kim,” he said, his speech building momentum like a preacher closing in on the altar call. “It’s not something that’s going to work. If you decide to tell them, don’t look back. It’s not the one that got away.”

This idea—that I wasn’t throwing away my future—was a concept about which I’d need frequent reminding in the weeks after my vocational dreams officially derailed from the tenure track. One of the immediate consequences of my decision was that I had to finish out the semester as an adjunct, coming to campus, engaging in an extension of my life that was about to be severed—something I had to do the very next day after officially losing the job. I don’t remember much about being in the classroom that afternoon, but the ride back home was sobering.

Since my teaching duties and my own work as an MFA candidate at Old Dominion University meant that my life played out at three universities, through two bridge tunnels, and across one state line, I had learned to embrace my commutes. Through the portal of satellite radio, my jalapeño green Spark became a veritable town hall of ideas and entertainment. I bounced between jazz and alternative, baseball and NPR, with likely detours into pop and house music. My first teaching night after being fired (because, honestly, that’s what it was; I hadn’t seen it yet, but an email had been sent to adjuncts that afternoon requiring everyone to “affirm the statement” in writing) quickly became an NPR night.

The topic was LGBTQ—and I’ll just stop here to add in the “I” that so irks Danny when omitted—youth suicide rates. Caller after caller phoned in with stories that successively amped my outrage: parents who felt like they had to choose between their children and their faith; churches that shunned families for standing by gay daughters and sons, kids who ran away to avoid the shame. I’ll never know if the actual transcript of the show would support my impression, but the message to my ears was a resounding: “if someone had been there, this tragedy could have been averted.” Instead, stories that should have been about faith communities rallying around hurting people were now fodder for call-in shows, blow-by-blows about how the church abandoned them.



It rained the next day and I began rage-writing in an effort to purge my feelings of loss—not just mine, but of our broader, fractured faith community that seemed to be more interested in creating rules than room. I camped out on my couch with a bottomless mug of coffee, my keyboard, and Audrey, pounding out what became an open letter to my students that I resolved to post right after I submitted my final grades. Until then, I determined to keep the issue as far away from my classroom as possible.

My last day on campus, three of my students asked me why I wasn't returning for the spring semester. I told them the truth. The responses summarized the problem better than I ever could:

Yolanda, a 19-year old single mother: "What? But there are lesbians in the dorms!"

The younger of a pair of perpetually skirt-clad, far-right, rural, conservative sisters: "I don't understand what that has to do with you teaching English."

A thirty-something black woman who went by the single letter "T," my class her first-ever foray into academia: "I hope they don't find out about me."

## CHAPTER 8

1983

Not long after Dani pummeled Mike against the lockers, he found himself in a new relationship. He hadn't planned on it, and, in fact, didn't even realize the potential was on the horizon until he found out through casual, youth group conversation that Tommy, a guy he played video games with after church softball games, wanted Dani to be his girlfriend. Dani wasn't broadsided, then, when he received a hand-scrawled note from Tommy, crafted in the classic will-you-go-out-with-me-check-yes-or-no style. Since being Tommy's girlfriend seemed to require nothing beyond continuing to play video games at each other's houses after church softball games, Dani checked the box next to the word "yes." It seemed a safe cover—a painless backdrop that allowed him to pursue his true interest: Megan.

Megan was not only Dani's best friend, she was the one who consumed his thoughts and elevated his heart rate. Whenever Dani heard Steve Miller crooning "Abracadabra" on the radio, it was Megan's big brown eyes and voluminous dark blond hair that popped into his head. He cared so much for Megan and their potential relationship that he even attempted to explain himself to her, in an effort to help her understand their bond.

Because the feelings weren't one sided. The prior summer, Megan and Dani had been hanging out with Tess at the girls' house. Megan and Dani began playing a game, pretending they were married—a pre-teen version of the childhood game of house that scored Dani his first kiss with Margaret on the Air Force base years earlier. Tess quipped that if they were married, they were going to have to kiss. So they did—a few simple, sweet brushes of their lips that lived in Dani's memory every morning when he got up and every night when he went to bed.

Megan worried about the pull she felt toward Dani. She liked boys—in that she was confident. But she also liked Dani, and that scared her. Dani knew he had to try to explain what was happening.

"God is changing me," he said, during one of their long talks one evening after a Wednesday night church service while their parents were at choir practice. They were walking around the large yard in front of the church building. Dani was nervous, sweating, grasping for words.

“What do you mean, changing you?” Megan asked.

“He’s changing me into a boy. It’s already happening, I promise you.”

“How could that be?” Megan demanded.

“I don’t know,” Dani admitted. “I’m a boy, but no one understands yet. So I’m praying that God will change me in ways that everyone will see, and it’s already starting to work.”

“How do you know?” she asked.

“I’m changing,” he said. “My body is changing. Soon everyone will see.”

“But how can that be? I don’t notice anything different. I don’t understand.”

“I know it’s hard,” Dani said. “But God does miracles, right? We talk about that all the time here at church: God parting the Red Sea for the Israelites, people getting healed and raised from the dead: all kinds of things. God doesn’t change—he can still do miracles.”

“But I haven’t heard of him changing anyone from a girl to a boy. Why would he do that?”

“He already is,” Dani said. “And it’s going to keep happening, I know it. Hey, remember the story we talked about in youth group a couple weeks ago with Gideon? God said that Gideon was going to free Israel from the Mideonites but he wanted to be really sure it was God speaking?”

“Yeah,” Megan said, “so he put a piece of fleece from a sheep outside his tent and asked God to make the fleece wet and the ground dry in the morning as a sign.”

“And it happened!” Dani said.

“But he was still not sure so he asked God to make it go the opposite way the next morning, with the ground wet and the fleece dry.”

“And it happened again! And remember how we talked about praying like this today? Well, what if did, here, now, about this?”<sup>3</sup>

“OK, what do we pray for?” Megan asked, excited by the possibility of bearing witness to a miracle.

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<sup>3</sup> “Putting out a fleece” was an idea that gained traction among Christian kids in the 80s. The thought that we could divine God’s plan by the laying out of simple, visible terms was exciting, and was often mistakenly extended into all arenas of life.

“Well, you know how I am really regular with, uh, that time of the month?” Dani blushed. “How about we pray that if God is really changing me, he will make it go away for, say, two months,” Dani, said, striking on a figure that seemed remotely plausible, but not at all probable, considering that he’d never missed a single cycle since that fateful afternoon on the softball field. “Not late or anything,” Dani clarified, “just two months in a row, missed completely.”

“OK,” Megan said, “I will pray that with you. We’ll see what happens.”

The truth was, Dani was getting frustrated by the time it was taking for God to answer his prayers. He fully expected to wake up one day and suddenly everyone would see him as himself, for who he was, who he’d always been. It seemed God was interested in his case—a miracle had already occurred with his body—but how long was it going to take to become fully effective? When would others be able to see changes? The fleece prayer was important, not just to prove to Megan that he really was changing, but as a boost to him, too.

If things weren’t changing fast enough in his personal life, they certainly were shifting at school. Jo and Amanda were becoming ever more daring with their drug use, as Dani learned first-hand during a free day in PE.

Free days were largely unsupervised free-for-alls, during which students enjoyed full access to equipment, balls, and the gym floor while the coach hid in his office, emerging at infrequent intervals to make sure a quorum of students were still accounted for. Dani had spent prior free days sitting on the bleachers with Abby and Paul, but this time, his new friendship with Jo and Amanda lured him over to a corner where the pair and several of their friends were rifling through a lunch box.

“Brownies!” Dani enthused, reaching for a dark brown square as he approached the group.

“Ummm...I wouldn’t eat those,” someone cautioned.

“Why not? It’s *chocolate*,” Dani said, taking a big bite, “my favorite!”

Soon Dani was feeling amped, overly energetic. It was a good sensation at first, but soon he was running around the gym, shooting hoops and sweating profusely.

Jo and Amanda were laughing as they watched him ping from one thing to the next. Their laughter made him angry. He wanted to stop running, stop sweating, but he was no longer in control, and he hated the feeling. After PE, Dani went on autopilot, sailing through a day he later couldn't remember. The brownies were laced with speed, a staple among the Mason siblings' crowd.

Although that particular brownie distribution went unnoticed, Amanda and Jo's luck was about to run out. One day, Dani stayed home sick from school, and when he came back, neither Amanda nor Jo were there. Dani learned that in his absence, Amanda and Jo had been taking drugs in the bathroom when a teacher came in. Amanda, who was standing by a sink, tossed a small package to Jo, who was closer to a bathroom stall. Jo tossed the package into the toilet and flushed. Both girls were suspended. Amanda eventually returned to school, but Jo, who was caught red-handed flushing the drug, never returned.

Although Dani's parents would never know about the brownie incident, by the time spring came, they were hearing enough other school news to cause them to question Dani's future in the public-school system. One afternoon, Dani came home from school and found Sherry in front of the TV.

"Did you know this was happening?" Sherry asked, pointing toward the screen where a local news anchor was reporting live from Dani's school that a knife had been brandished in a student altercation over an alleged rape of a white student by her black ex-boyfriend.

Dani paused for a moment to listen. "Yeah, I knew about this," he said, his voice trailing off in confusion. The report was portraying the situation as a race issue: a black on white crime, but everyone at school knew the girl was lying. She'd admitted that much.

Dani opened his mouth to try to explain, but Sherry was caught up in the furor the report ignited. "Did you see it happen?" she demanded.

"No, mom, I didn't see it. I wasn't there."

"You never felt in danger?"

"No!" Dani said, "I heard about it after it was over. It's ok. I'm ok."

Another day, Dani asked his parents a question about a homework assignment for an in-class debate when he unknowingly confirmed his parents' suspicions that his school situation needed to change.

"I am trying to decide who to put on this lifeboat," he said, tapping a pencil on the kitchen table. "I've got nine spots, but 15 people drowning. "

"What," Ben asked, "is this assignment for?"

"It's a debate, Dad. We're imagining a ship has gone down and we have to decide who to save."

"I know the exercise," Ben said, "But this is not something that's an appropriate conversation for junior high," he boomed. "Deciding who to get rid of? We shouldn't even be talking about such a thing."

"All life is sacred, Dani. Only God can judge," Sherry chided.

Sherry and Ben's concerns about the lifeboat debate were strong enough to warrant a meeting with the principal. Despite the principal's sympathy with their argument, which led to the cancellation of the in-class debate, Ben and Sherry began to research private school options for Dani.

After tagging along with his parents on visits to a couple of small Christian schools and a large Catholic high school, Dani was prepared for change. So when his parents sat him down in the living room one late summer day, he was expecting to hear that he wouldn't be returning to school with Abby, Paul, Amanda, Valerie, Kara, Binker and all the other personalities that had, in many ways, shaped his self-image over the previous months and years. He wasn't prepared, however, for his parents' decision about *how* things were going to change in his life.

"Dani," Sherry said, "your father and I have decided that homeschooling is the best option for our family."

"Homeschooling?" Dani was incredulous. "What about Calvary Christian or St. Mary's?"

"Dani," Ben said, "This is what's best right now. Those private schools are expensive."

"This is a great opportunity for you to do well," Sherry added. "Why not give it a try. Just for the year. In ninth grade, you can go to public high school with your friends. We just need to get you out of this situation right now."

Dani nodded slowly. He wanted what was best for the family, and it was just for a year. “Sure,” he said. “OK, I’ll give it a try.”

“It’s just for a year,” Sherry reiterated. “Just until high school.”

It wasn’t long until he began to see some benefits. First, he didn’t have to get up and actually go anywhere. He’d already phased out binding at the end of seventh grade, and now the entire dressing-for-school dilemma was erased. Also, he was able to stick with a single subject for long periods of time. The go-at-your-own-pace curriculum that was shipped to his house from a satellite school afforded him the ability to hyper-focus on a single subject until he mastered it. Perhaps for the first time, he felt successful at school.

His days fell into a predictable pattern. For the first month, the phone would ring first thing every morning. “Would you get that, Dani?” Sherry would call. “It’s what’s-her-face from the office,” she chuckled.

For the first half of the year, their morning began with a phone call from the secretary from the school office. “You are supposed to be in class,” she said.

“Um, no, I’m not,” Dani would say.

“No, you are.”

“I’m homeschooled now.”

“Let me talk to your mother.”

The call became a shtick, a routine that Dani and Sherry laughed about each morning. It also became a school bell—a signal that it was time for Dani to tackle his studies so he could be done for the day by the time his friends were home in the afternoon. At first, he tried to keep up with Abby and Paul, but the friendship began to fade. His parents encouraged him to invite church friends over more often, and that included Megan.

Megan became increasingly important to Dani. They had an understanding: for now, they were best friends. If God chose to make Dani fully male, they could become even more. The hope of that happening, of Dani changing visibly and indisputably into a guy, had been fueled by the results of the

pair's prayer fleece. From the day they had agreed to pray, Dani missed exactly two cycles and then resumed his prior schedule of clock-work periods. The prayed-for two-month hiatus reassured Dani that God hadn't forgotten him—God was still working, Dani's body was still changing, and one day, one joyous day, everyone would see. The missed periods had also heightened Megan's belief that maybe—just maybe—Dani's hopes weren't unfounded, that transformation might yet be possible.

“If it happens, I want to be your girlfriend,” Megan said time and again. “Until then, we are best friends.” The arrangement came with an added perk for Dani in that it saved him from uncomfortable social situations, particularly the kind that were common at the Christian Skate Night events his youth group would attend.

The evenings were a big deal for Christian teens—churches from all over the community would attend. To Dani, new people always represented a chance to be perceived as male—an outcome that frequently came to fruition. As exciting as it was when girls would flirt with him, the attention presented a dilemma when they would approach him during couple's skates. If he accepted their advances, he'd risk raised eyebrows from the youth group, and, worse, his father. If he refused to skate, he risked hurt feelings, or worse, blowing his masculine persona. His bond with Megan afforded him another option. Now, the second the rink lights dimmed he'd scan the room. If he saw any female movement in his direction, he'd lock eyes with Megan. “Help.” He'd mouth the single word and she'd smoothly skate toward him and grab his hand, an action his admirers would see as a sign that he was taken, and his friends and father would see as two close girlfriends enjoying some fun. Dani occasionally regretted that he couldn't skate with another girl to conjure in Megan some feelings of jealousy, but, on the other hand—he got to skate with Megan.

As the year wore on, Dani developed a vision for his high school experience. His parents announced that the lease on their house was ending and the family began looking for a new home. One of the top contenders offered Dani the ideal circumstance—a chance to live a block away from Megan. Megan! The person who understood him; the one who knew he would someday be a boy, and would be waiting for him when it happened.



“The house has a horseshoe driveway,” Dani said, describing the house to Megan over the phone one afternoon. “And Mom really seemed to like it—she used words like “cute” and “charming,” so things are looking good.”

“We’d see each other all the time!” Megan said.

“School, church, home—it would be great!”

A week or so later, Dani began to worry. His parents didn’t seem quick to close on the cute house with the horseshoe driveway, and had turned their attention to a far less favorable property.

“It’s crazy!” he said into the phone receiver. “The walls are all sickly puke yellow-green and the whole place smells of incense. They’ve got beads hanging in the doorways and idols everywhere. It’s creepy!”

“What happened to the other house?” Megan asked. “The one *we* like?”

“Mom keeps saying it’s too big,” Dani said. “The puke house is smaller and newer and there’s less to paint. The worst of it is that its 20 minutes away. A whole new school zone.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I can’t do the new kid thing again. I just can’t.”

Weeks later, the Coopers moved into the sickly beaded house in the opposite direction from everything Dani wanted: Megan, the school they would have attended together, most of their friends. A 20-minute car ride for anyone not yet allowed behind the wheel seemed almost insurmountable.

One summer evening after Wednesday church, Dani and Megan walked across the yard and sat on a small concrete staircase by the rear entrance of the church.

“I hate the new house,” Dani said.

“I know,” Megan said, gently. “I had some bad news myself this week.” Her voice became softer, quieter.

“Oh, no!” Dani said, “What happened?”

“My dad got this offer,” her voice drifted. “To go to a new church.”

Dani's heart sank. The Smith family at the helm of his church was one of the staples of Dani's life, an anchor he could count on.

"It's a good opportunity," Megan was saying, "a really big congregation."

Dani's mind was racing through the list of the bigger churches in the area, trying to figure out which one would have been most likely to want Pastor Smith.

"It's even on TV," Megan continued.

"TV?" Dani's thoughts snapped to a standstill. He couldn't think of a single local church that televised their services.

"It's in Miami, Dani," Megan said, tears running down her face.

"Oh," Dani said, slumping, his own eyes welling up. It hadn't mattered, then, where his family had moved, after all: the high school dream he'd imagined was never meant to be.

A couple of weeks later, he stood with Megan on the church stage, holding hands under her father's pulpit on the family's last day. They'd decided to sing the Michael W. Smith song, "Friends," a firmly cemented anthem in the youth group culture—a go-to ballad reserved for going away parties, graduations, and heart wrenching farewells of all varieties. Tears drenched their faces as they sobbed their way through the chorus:

"Friends are friends forever,  
 If the Lord's the Lord of them.  
 A friend will not say 'never,'  
 For the welcome will not end.  
 Although it's hard to let you go,  
 Through the Father's hand we know,  
 That a lifetime's not too long  
 To live as friends."

A few days later, Megan was gone. But not before she'd repeated her mantra one last time: "I'm still praying," she said. "If anything happens, I want to be your girlfriend."

## CHAPTER 9

1985

It was the year Billboard chart toppers collectively reminded us that “We Are the World,” the year that British scientists announced the discovery of a gaping hole in the ozone layer, but, for Dani, 1985 came with a soundtrack further south on the charts and a void much more immediate.

The Coopers moved into the house across town, tearing beaded doorway dividers, eliminating the lingering aroma of incense, and painting over the sickly shades of citrus. Dani personalized his room, adorning the walls with posters of his obsession, Christian music sweetheart Amy Grant. His bedspread was a leopard print, intended to mirror the pattern of the thigh-length jacket the singer wore on the cover of her newest album, *Unguarded*.

But no amount of redecorating masked the emptiness Dani felt inside. He’d simultaneously lost his best friend and first love, neighborhood, pastor, and, eventually, church. In the wake of the Smith family’s move to Miami, the church, under new leadership, began an ideological shift that caused the Coopers to join a newly forming congregation that boasted neither a building nor teenagers. Cut off from the social interaction on which he thrived, Dani began to withdraw into his room. When he emerged, he was sullen, uncommunicative.

“This isn’t like you, Dani,” Sherry would say. “Tell me how you are feeling.”

Dani would typically shrug, but finally Sherry’s inquiries released his angst like a popped tab on a shaken soda. “You want to know my feelings?” he screamed, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes. “I’ll tell you how I feel. You ruined my life! I have no friends. And you don’t care!”

Sherry remained calm. “Dani, you know what we’re going to do? We’re going to pray about this. We’re going to talk with Dad. We’ll find something for you.”

True to her word, Sherry would find leads on various youth meetings at other churches to which Ben would drive him in hopes of hitting on something Dani would enjoy. “How did you like it?” Sherry asked when Dani returned from a meeting one evening.

“I hated it,” Dani said. “The kids were snobbish, the leaders didn’t plan anything, and none of these groups you’ve taken me to are remotely close to what I had at Calvary. I had something great, and you guys took it from me.”

Although Sherry and Ben didn’t give up on finding a new youth group for Dani, they also made an effort to keep him connected to his old Calvary friends by inviting some of their families over for dinner. One night, it was Cadi’s family. Cadi was two years older than Dani and sported long, straight brown hair, tight jeans, heavy metal T-shirts and a racy reputation. She had been a part of his broad social circle at Calvary. Friends also with Tess and Megan, she had been included in Dani’s traditional birthday sleepovers—big events for which Ben would draw on his youth leader sensibilities and plan games and activities for the group—but Dani had never had a close one-on-one friendship with her. The reason for the casual nature of their relationship became evident when the adults went to talk in the living room and they were left to hang out on their own.

“Want to listen to some music?” Dani asked.

“What do you have?” Cadi shrugged.

“I’ve got some Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith...” Dani started. He paused, taking in Cadi’s Iron Maiden T-shirt she’d slit into a makeshift V-neck that plunged low enough that the tip of her cross necklace hit at the point. “Or some DeGarmo and Key,” he said, trying for something a little higher on the Christian music intensity scale.

“No Motley Crew, huh?” Cadi asked.

“Um, no. How about playing Pac Man?”

“I don’t like video games,” Cadi said.

Dani mentally scrambled to come up with something else to suggest before settling on board games, particularly a *Happy Days* themed game and another from *Mad Magazine* which he regarded as go-to crowd pleasers. These standbys didn’t fail him now, either. Soon he and Cadi were racking up “cool points” with the Fonz on Arnold’s juke box and sending tokens around the *Mad* board, with the goal of

losing all of their paper “*Mad Money*”—emblazoned with the iconic image of boyish mascot Alfred E. Neuman—in a sort of reverse Monopoly.

The games gave them a script, eliminating the need to invent conversation. As Dani’s stack of *Mad Money* dwindled, the space between his and Cadi’s chairs shrank as well. When she would ask a question to clarify a rule, she’d touch his arm or brush a finger across his hand. If Dani didn’t know better, he’d have thought she was flirting with him. He’d seen her do it with the guys at youth group for years: a flip of the hair, a coy smile, the excessive touchiness. She was technically dating Ryan, one of the youth group guys, but that didn’t stop her from ducking into a closet or beneath a stairwell with a wide assortment of other youth group guys.

Dani began to sense that the evening was winding down for the adults, so he didn’t suggest a new game. He started boxing up the *Mad Money*, when Cadi suddenly said, “Hey, can I spend the night?”

Dani was slightly taken aback. Sure, they’d gotten through the evening, but he wasn’t sure that they’d made enough headway to sustain an overnight. Still, he didn’t feel he was in a position to turn away friends. “Yeah,” he said. “Why not? Let’s ask.”

Once they were in Dani’s room, Cadi kicked off her padded pink and gray Reeboks, and began to settle in. She was still acting funny—really touchy-feely. Dani was confused. He opened a drawer and pulled out a T-shirt that he tossed in Cadi’s direction. She disappeared down the hall to change. When she returned, Dani flipped the light switch and started toward his bed, but Cadi reached out for him and kissed him full and hard on the lips. Dani was stunned, but not shy about returning Cadi’s advances. His head was reeling—she really was flirting! Dani found the attention not only intrinsically pleasant, but also exciting for what he assumed it meant: Cadi was able to see him for who he was. Could it be that his prayers were finally being realized? Was his transformation becoming fully effective? Would other people soon see?

From that night on, make out sessions with Cadi became frequent events. She became a regular visitor at the Cooper house. Sometimes she came with her family for dinner or dessert and the two would head toward the TV and to watch *Miami Vice*, *Max Headroom*, or maybe the “A” Team, depending on

the day. During commercial breaks, Dani would ask about mutual friends at church and get caught up on the news about what he was missing. They still didn't have much in common, save for a mutual interest in the sleepover that Cadi would always suggest at the end of the evening.

Cadi got more daring as time went on, going so far as to lock lips with Dani in the backseat of the family car with Ben at the wheel, taking Cadi home after an afternoon movie at the Cooper house. Dani kept an eye on the rearview mirror, bracing himself for the moment when his father's eye would catch his, or he'd slam on the breaks and pull the car to the curb, but it never happened—Ben either legitimately or intentionally never saw the passion playing out in the seat behind him.

Dani enjoyed having what he thought of as a normal teenage experience with Cadi. It wasn't exactly a romance—not in the talk-for-hours-heart-to-heart-you-really-get-me sense, like it was with Megan. It was simply physical. Anytime they could get someplace private, Cadi would be all over him, sitting on him, kissing him—for Dani, it was a very heady experience. He didn't overthink it or let it go too far. He didn't question Cadi's interest in him—he assumed she somehow saw him for who he was. And even though he may have been tempted to let his hand wander down from Cadi's face, he never gave into the urge. Dani was petrified of getting into a situation where his body would be exposed. Besides, he didn't feel anything for Cadi—he didn't care when he'd hear, a day or so after a few stolen moments with her in his room, that she was in the church broom closet with another guy, or holding hands with someone else during youth group.

Dani was still emotionally invested exclusively in Megan. They may have been limited to letters and the occasional phone call, but Dani made the most of these tools. He was allowed to make one long distance phone call per month, and used the entire hour his parents allotted, but it was in print that Dani really shined. Ink issued from his pen like blood from a gaping wound. As far as love letters go, Dani's were suitable for Disney. Still, his words reflected sentiments that didn't exactly jive with the notion of correspondence between best girlfriends, an idea that Dani never expected to have to justify until a phone session several months after the move.

“Um, so something happened this week,” Megan’s voice came across the line just above a whisper.

“What’s going on?”

“Mom found your letters in my room. She read them.”

Dani felt flushed, nervous. “What did she say?”

“She said something’s wrong with you—that you aren’t quite right. She’s really concerned.”

Dani felt sick inside.

“Hey,” Megan said. “It’s ok. Just tone your letters down—don’t be obvious.”

Dani’s letters shifted into chatty, neutral territory. He was terrified of the possibility of Megan’s parents forbidding further contact. He had to change, to appear normal. He fortified an already near-impenetrable guard. He’d been wrong in his hope that other people were beginning to see him as himself; they saw him as a freak. His secret wasn’t safe. It was something he couldn’t tell anyone, ever.

Dani’s connection with Cadi eventually fizzled and his horror over Megan’s mom’s suspicions morphed into a glimmer of hope for redemption. A parent-approved plan was in the works for Dani to fly to Florida as a surprise. From Pastor and Mrs. Smith’s perspective, the visit was more for Tess than Megan. Like Dani, Tess was having difficulty adjusting to the changes in her life, and a friendly face from home seemed like it would bring a needed boost. Dani saved his allowance and began volunteering for extra chores—washing the car, pulling weeds—typical teenage money-making schemes. Several weeks later, the plan became reality: the ticket was purchased, and plans made for Mrs. Smith to pick Dani up at the Miami airport.

When it came to his traveling wardrobe, Dani drew inspiration from one of his favorite shows, *Miami Vice*. He wasn’t specifically emulating either Crockett or Tubbs, but, rather, the palette and panache of the 80s Miami fashion the show modeled each week. Dani sauntered off the plane clad in a crisp white sport coat, linen khaki pants, and boat shoes.

Mrs. Smith gave Dani a rundown on the plan as they claimed his baggage and headed to the car. “The girls are at the church now, at our weekly potluck. We should arrive just in time for you to go through the tail end of the line and then take a seat at their table,” she said. “Tess will be so thrilled!”

Dani was more excited than nervous as the view from the car window became progressively more affluent. Sure, he’d be happy to see Tess, but, more importantly, he was going to experience a week of life with Megan in her new environment: he’d go to school with her and hang out with her new friends, matching faces with the names he’d heard in her stories. It was like a dream come true.

Dani slid through the potluck line without much thought about what ended up on his plate. He could see the girls’ table out of the corner of his eye, and identified the empty seat he’d claim. His stomach was doing flip-flops as he placed his plate down on the table. Dani held his breath and waited for his presence to register, for the reaction. As his plate hit the table, Megan’s head turned upward. When her eyes met his, she blinked and said, “Oh. Wow, what are you doing here?”

Dani’s heart hit the floor with a thud. Before the jolt could register, Tess bounded from her seat and gave him the greeting he’d wanted from Megan. “This is so awesome! I am so excited!” she screamed. Tess immediately introduced Dani to some of her friends, but Megan was more judicious. In response to the raised eyebrows in her immediate circle, she simply said, “This is Dani, a friend from my old church.” It didn’t take long for Dani to size up his competition: the church was populated with a veritable army of attractive guys vying for Megan’s attention. And Megan, Dani noted, was doing her best to sustain their interest. Every strand of her freshly highlighted hair was in position and her make up impeccable. Megan talked with her circle of friends for the duration of the evening, while Tess stayed by Dani, a pattern that continued when he went with the girls to their private school the next morning.

Dani tagged along with Megan to her classes, but he learned to keep to himself. Dani discovered through conversation that Megan had plans that evening with a group of her friends. He wondered if he’d be invited along, but that hope was dashed after school when Megan said, “I’m sorry, Dani, but I have plans I made awhile back. You’ll be ok with Tess tonight, won’t you?”

Dani nodded.



“I’ll be out late, so I might not see you when I get home. Tomorrow morning we’re carpooling to school with my friend, Lark DiMucci, so we need to be up and ready a little earlier, ok?”

“DiMucci?” Dani asked, immediately thinking of the singer Dion DiMucci, who was one of Mary’s favorite artists. She was forever playing “Trust in the Lord,” a catchy song with a funky Caribbean beat. “Like Dion?” he asked Megan.

“Yeah, Dion is Lark’s dad. He’s driving us to school tomorrow.”

The news was delivered casually, like it was a normal thing in Megan’s new life to be driven to school by one of last year’s Grammy award nominees. Dani imagined the two of them would have relished the detail just a few short months ago.

The next morning, Dion pulled up in front of the house wearing the signature taxi-driver cap he’d sported in every picture Dani had ever seen of him. It was as though he’d walked off the cover of one of his albums. “I love your music!” Dani said, after introductions. “I have your tape right here!” Dani held up the cassette case he’d grabbed from the stash he’d brought along with his Walkman for the trip. “Would you sign it for me?”

Getting Dion’s autograph was a bright spot in what was, otherwise a disappointing week. To Dani, it seemed that Megan’s new life revolved around fashion and image. Her clothes were all new—Jordache jeans and other designer brands. Tess was her old self at first, but things between her and Dani became strained as the visit wore on and Dani’s indifference and constant questions about Megan began to sting. “She’s different now,” Tess shrugged. “She’s one of the popular people.” By the end of the week, Dani was relieved to be flying back home.

Things changed after the Florida visit. Dani’s letters slowed to a trickle and Megan’s responses stopped altogether. It would be another year before he’d see Tess and Megan again— a year during which Dani held on to a thread of hope that when they next met, things would be different.

## CHAPTER 10

December 2015

I scoured the email from my department head for some phrase or nuance—anything I might have missed in my four prior readings. My eyes were still darting across the screen when Brad came through the front door. He found the answer to his “how are you” in a single glance. “What happened?”

“I have one class next semester. One.” Panic and anger blended into discordant notes of despair. “Yeah. This time they took two classes away.”

Fear of losing my classes—sections that had immediately filled at registration—to tenured faculty that had failed to fill theirs, had become an all-too-common part of my existence over the past several semesters. Twice I’d been given replacement classes last minute, but at least two other times I simply lost the class and its income. I never imagined that having two classes yanked was even in the realm of possibility. The loss of these classes combined with the fall course I’d lost left me with three classes for that school year: half the job I started with. It seemed clear things at Christopher Newport had run their course.

I hurled myself into the job market, adding the chore of completing lengthy applications to my end-of-semester grading. The educational pickings were slim, mostly postings from the for-profit sector: business and technical schools with names recognizable from daytime television commercials. It wasn’t long before I had an interview for a permanent job teaching English at a proprietary college operating out of the upper floors of a large shopping center. I soon found myself planning a teaching demo for a panel of people simply called “management.” The day of the interview, I slid into a parking space around the corner from a favorite sandwich chain and a few clothing stores. I tried to stave off a craving for a veggie sub and divert my gaze from the cute party dresses in the window displays. I was *on campus* now: never mind the lack of columns or fountains or flyers promoting lectures and author talks. I walked through a glass doorway on the side of a Barnes and Noble, up a staircase and down a hallway flanked by bulletin boards showcasing cardboard cut-outs of snowmen and posters advocating positive outlooks and fresh starts.

I sat in a vinyl chair next to a reception desk and was soon greeted by a plain woman with a neutral palette and a soft voice. She introduced herself as Yvonne, the woman who invited me to interview. She led me down a hallway adorned with near-billboard sized signs featuring photos and testimonial blurbs from former down-and-outers turned office managers, medical assistants, and jail wardens as a result of their studies. We entered a classroom where Yvonne introduced me to two members of the management team who wanted me to delve right into my material. My teaching demo was a mini lesson about crafting thesis statements for evaluation papers and involved sampling and rating sandwich cookies. A serious, suit-sporting businessman named David surprised me by being the only one who played along. After my lesson was over, he asked a few questions about my resume, said I was a “fast tracker” and would have to further break down concepts for “slower” students, and then left me with Yvonne and Roberta, a slight, middle aged redhead.

While I was still considering how a thesis statement could become more approachable than the pros and cons of a standard sandwich cookie, Roberta turned to me and said, “Please describe the caliber of student you think you will find here.”

My mind went immediately to my remedial English class at the Bible college. “I think I will find a lot of people who may not fit well in a traditional college setting,” I said.

Roberta peered at me over her glasses. “Yes. But do you know what that means?” she demanded, launching into a catalogue of ills: poverty, scammers trying to collect grant money without doing work, single mothers who miss classes for lack of child care, high school dropouts on their second and third chances—problems that seemed to leave Roberta weary, if not jaded.

Roberta soon left, leaving me with Yvonne, who walked me around the concrete campus, concentric squares of hallways and classrooms, nested like a set of quadrate babushka dolls.

“We fill a niche,” Yvonne was explaining. “We help students that no one else will take.”

She led me into her office, a pale space with a laden desk surrounded by boxes. “You can get creative,” she said. “Take field trips downstairs to Barnes and Noble!”

I wasn't sure if I was horrified or intrigued by the possibility of working in a place so different from the mainstream academia that I loved, but was so thoroughly screwing me over. As the conversation began to wind down, I asked the question I'd been dreading: "Is the position year-round?"

"Yes," Yvonne said. "We have three full semesters. I think there's a week or two off between one of them. And Christmas break," she added, a lilt of encouragement in her voice.

"And what's the course load?" I asked.

"Full time is six classes per semester. You'll get first pick of all the classes," she assured me, "So you'll get some days in there, not just late nights and weekends. And we really try not to have you here six days a week," she said, her voice a rush of reassurance.

Six classes was a massive workload. Full time faculty at CNU taught four. I'd done five one semester between both CNU and the Bible school and been reduced to a life of squalor: dirty and clean laundry intermingling in Jenga-like stacks, papers strewn inches-thick across tables and sofas, a trail of coffee mugs left in my wake. Yvonne delivered the information as though she was ticking off a list of benefits, so it took me a full two hours to absorb what my life might look like: stacks of papers in July, workdays that might end at 10 pm and begin again at 8 the next morning, teaching on Saturdays, and all for a salary that might compare to what I'd make as a public high school teacher.

By the end of the week, I'd told Yvonne I couldn't make that kind of commitment and hope to finish my MFA program. Since I was desperate, I asked her for some adjunct work. I accepted the class she offered without asking the compensation, which I'd later discover was just over half of what I made per class at my alma mater.

The pay was an insult for sure, but issues of pride and prestige factored into my angst as well. I'd read essays blaming the for-profits for spearheading an education-wide trend toward grade inflation. I was familiar with water-cooler style chatter equating proprietary schools as degree mills in the business of churning out sub-par graduates. A patina of stigma coated every conversation I had with friends and family in the weeks before class began. Still, I knew the names on my roster were flesh-and-blood

humans with goals and dreams and reasons they registered for class. I wanted to know them and their stories.

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I rolled out of bed one Saturday in early January to attend what had been described as a two-hour orientation with breakfast. I walked up the staircase and down the halls—now flanked with snowflakes and new-year-new-you style messages—and filed into a seat at one of two long tables facing a blackboard. A half empty box of donuts sat next to a carton of juice on the other side of the room. David, who I remember as the cookie-eating management team member outlined an agenda that would clearly take most of the day: computer training, breakout sessions, photos, pep talks, and a tour during which everyone gathered in what appeared to be a break room with desks. A wiry man in an argyle sweater directed our attention to a set of shelves containing an endless row of navy blue binders.

“These are your course binders. There is one for every class,” he said. “Every single thing you do must be recorded in these binders,” he said. “The mother ship can audit these at any time.”

A hand shot upward. “What’s the mother ship?”

The man in argyle laughed. “That’s the name for our main campus up east. Everything we do in this building is delivered from the mother ship.”

I was relieved to see a break was up next on the schedule. I was having a hard time keeping track of all the rules and processes—edicts apparently handed down by the mother ship: never cancel class; deliver attendance forms to management before you leave each day; keep records of every student meeting.

I wandered over to the coffee machine where another trainee—a stooped woman with silver hair—stood clutching a handcrafted walking stick, beaming as she took in the scene. “This,” she declared, “is worth the drive!”

“Oh?” I said, blinking away my surprise. I hadn’t decided if I could say the same, and I could be on my couch in under eight minutes. “Where are you coming from?”

She named a Southside city accessible only through one of the bridge tunnels, a commute few consider “worth the drive” for anything that doesn’t involve a steep benefits package or proximity to the ocean. During the morning’s introductions, this woman claimed to be teaching 10 classes that semester at six institutions. Scanning the rows of shared desks that represented the sum total of faculty office space, the sterile walls, and the conspicuous lack of anything resembling office supplies (not provided), I wondered what we had here that the other five institutions lacked.

I rewound seven years to a better-stocked institutional workroom where I was, as a graduate assistant at CNU, making copies. A spry, balding man of long tenure, a professor we’ll call Dr. James, entered the room and introduced himself before asking about me. I told him who I was working for and that I was in the teacher preparation program. “Oh, so you want to teach high school?” he said.

“No, not really,” I answered. “I’d like to teach college.”

Dr. James shook his head. “Sounds like you are in the wrong program,” he said.

I was irritated at the remark. I knew the program I enrolled in wasn’t ideal, but it had, quite literally, chosen me. As a mere taxpaying resident, I’d been walking across campus on a cold January afternoon when a woman struck up a conversation, decided I needed to be in education, and walked me straight to the Office of Teacher Preparation where Marsha, the director, hired me on the spot.

I had both a paycheck and a free ride for a program that, if not perfect, would still get me the credentials to teach at the university level. I knew exactly what my program could and couldn’t do for me. I told Dr. James that I was confident I’d have the credentials I needed to get a foot in the door somewhere.

Dr. James frowned. “No one,” he said, “aspires to be an adjunct.”

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And yet I did what Dr. James deemed impossible—almost. I’d been an adjunct for just three years before being actively pursued for a tenure track position—only to find myself now, a year later, cobbling together a set of jobs that would bring me close to the financial situation I’d had before it all began. In addition to the literature class I still had at CNU and the Comp class from the mother ship, I accepted a job grading papers for a professor at Old Dominion. The pay was comparable to my per-class teaching

rate, so it made sense financially, if not practically. Grading is my bane. Family members have been known to find boxes of papers stashed in my trunk. It is wrenching, soul-sucking work.

I was initially grateful to make up the money, but that didn't last long. I was ashamed by the position: at least as an adjunct, I still could pass as a professional in the outside world. To the general public I was a *professor*, an intellectual, someone with a position of respect. But a grader? Someone who did another professor's grunt work? I couldn't bring myself to admit to anyone that I had plummeted to this low. I pictured people shaking their heads, stroking their chins. "She grades papers? I thought she was getting tenure?" someone would say. "Nope, she couldn't just keep her mouth shut and sign the paperwork." Everyone would tsk in response.

My bitterness grew as I discovered that actually getting paid would become tantamount to another job. Payday came and went and the professor for whom I was grading simply passed me off to Christine, a bored brunette who frowned when I showed up in her office wondering why I hadn't been receiving paychecks.

"You didn't fill out your time sheet," she snorted.

"Oh. No one told me that was the process."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you think hourly means?"

I didn't know how to respond. When she hired me, the professor had simply quoted a sum that I'd receive for a semester of work: no one mentioned counting hours. I tried to convey this, but Christine interrupted me.

"You work 20 hours a week." She seemed to regard the payment process as an opaque code I was expected to crack. I was clearly failing.

"But I don't think I actually do."

"You work 20 hours a week. If you have questions, talk to your professor. The time sheet is online." She then began printing out forms that I needed to parade around campus for a set of signatures to receive back pay. Hours vaporized as I completed my tour through the bowels of the university payment system.

I used this time to curse everything that led to my downfall: my trumped-up idealism, an over-sensitive moral code, an almost inexplicable loyalty to sexual minorities. What had they ever done for me? The Old Dominion LGBTQI group had regarded me with suspicion when I asked for their assistance in gathering data for a class. One of Danny's trans friends was wary about my writing. "We like to tell our own stories," he informed me. Besides, I "supported" lots of people without falling on my own metaphoric sword. I'd had a student with no arms, friends who couldn't eat bread, a child terrified of crickets—and I've supported them all in practical ways: holding doors, baking with oats, reading *A Cricket in Times Square* aloud in a failed desensitization attempt. What had my rejection-of-the-statement stunt accomplished, exactly? Who was benefitting?

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Christine's frown plunged even deeper the next time I appeared at her door. I explained that I'd submitted a time sheet but only got paid half of what I anticipated. She shook her head. "You have to submit 40 hours at a time." Christine thrust more forms at me and retraced my steps around campus, in what would become a well-worn path of shame.

The paperwork I resubmitted still fell short of expectations, leading to another trip to Christine's office. "This has to stop," she announced. "We'll be audited."

The next time, it wasn't even my fault: someone further up the chain forgot to approve my timesheet, yet I was left with the legwork if I wanted to see my funds. I now budgeted time for collections among my compounding duties. On top of teaching and grading, I resumed what was typically a summertime, coffee-and-spending-money gig: writing business profiles for a local publication. In the summer, the challenge of making the inner workings of dentists' offices, accounting firms, and lawyers' practices read like grown-up, Mr. Rogers-style "who-are-the-people-in-your-neighborhood" pieces was an amusing diversion. Now, interviews with realtors and shopkeepers were just line items in an ever-growing list of headaches.

Highs were hard to come by that long winter, but I adopted a few. I took pride whenever my Fit-Bit tracker indicated that I exceeded 20,000 steps. I fell hard for the coffee station at the Shopping Mall



Academy—a machine I regarded as a wonder of the modern world. It was taller than me, with large chambers that held four different types of whole bean coffee that it would grind on the spot, to the specifications selected on the front screen. Interior chambers housed chocolates and syrups that blended into the fresh brew to make mochas and lattes on demand. I was determined to supplement my income with liberal use of this solitary perk.

But the extra coffee undoubtedly offset any benefit from the extra mileage my Fit-Bit logged, resulting in a stagnant break-even that was becoming increasingly hard to achieve in the rest of my life. Deadlines began snowballing: photos and copy for Attorney X and Accountant Y due to my editor Monday; interviews to conduct for the newspaper's next issue; reams of papers from three different sources, accumulating by the day; lessons to teach. People were leaving Mall Academy in droves. A professor—rumored to have a doctorate from an Ivy League school—was found crying in the break room for having her pay, such as it was, docked for an emergency surgery that caused her to miss class. At least six other people I trained with were gone by mid-term. Yvonne asked me if I wanted more classes.

It should have been an easy “no,” but I hesitated for a moment as their faces flashed across my mind. There was Laura, the older woman with stringy hair and big glasses who relied on public transportation; Gina, the 23-year old veteran who wrote an argumentative paper against woman serving in combat roles, and lugged a 120-lb. rucksack into class one evening to demonstrate why; Karen B., the stout, middle-aged woman who couldn't operate the computer. Then there was the other Karen, Karen W: a lean woman in her mid-fifties who introduced herself as a business owner, but turned out to just be selling off several rooms worth of junk she accumulated during a hoarding phase. Kristie, the recent high school graduate, who joined us a month into the semester after dropping out of community college, and Amy, the bright, mid-twenties woman who aspired to be lawyer and almost certainly needed to transfer.

Most of all, I thought of Charlene, a slender woman of 54 who failed the English class the previous semester. She told me the first night that she was giving herself six years to get a degree and then she was done. I asked her why she would give up on herself at 60, and she said if she didn't make it by then, she never would. I could almost hear the clock chipping away her dreams. Every night she

thanked me for helping her, encouraging her, telling her she could do it. And it was her encouragement that told me that maybe I could make it, too.

I honestly loved my students. I wanted to help them, but I could barely help myself. Of course, I couldn't take on more classes mid-semester: I wasn't even keeping up with what I had. Well-meaning friends were quick to remind me what a good job my husband has, but it wasn't help to me when I was responsible for tuitions—mine and my son's, my car payment, and my self-actualization: none of which were being satisfied. The only place where I really felt effective, vital, and alive was in my classroom at CNU, presiding over my one remaining class: a struggling adjunct, the thing no one aspires to be.

I came into the door from class one night and fell into Brad's arms. "I am so unhappy," I sobbed.

## CHAPTER 11

1986

January of 1986 found the world in mourning after the space shuttle Challenger left, as Ronald Regan would famously quote, “the surly bonds of earth.” Meanwhile, Dani was desperately trying to find his place on that same planet.

“I don’t know how this is going to be, Dani, but it’s worth a try,” Ben said, navigating the family car through the chilly winter evening toward a neighborhood community center. Ben and Sherry hadn’t abandoned their efforts to find a social outlet for Dani, and, when Ben heard about the local Campus Life meetings, he set aside the general skepticism he held for organizations that were unfamiliar to him and encouraged Dani to go.

Campus Life was an instant win for Dani. The group focused on high school students from several area schools: it was designed to be a safe environment for teens to form relationships with peers and mentors who would encourage them in their faith. They’d play crazy, goofy games—things involving relays and sticky substances—that helped Dani feel more carefree, more like himself. The few familiar faces were friendly ones, acquaintances from his old neighborhood.

The outlet became more just a weekly gathering—it grew into a way of life. Dani quickly identified the group as a place where outcasts found a home. For the first couple of months, Dani just attended the meetings, but as spring approached, he began to get more involved. Often, the core group members and leaders would hang out after the meetings at places like Burger King or Pizza Hut. Mike Stewart, the 28-year-old, city-wide Campus Life leader, was always a fixture at these after parties. He circulated the tables, checking in with his people, listening, making plans to meet up for lunch at the school cafeteria or to catch a concert or sporting event in which a student was involved. Dark-haired, lanky and perpetually dressed in a button-down shirt and crisp pants, Mike was soft spoken, calming. Dani absorbed the cadence of his voice like music—whenever he spoke, Dani just wanted to listen. Dani admired Mike’s ability to tell students that they were messing up, while simultaneously building their

self-esteem. He made people feel like they could change, like they could be better. He had a way of pinpointing students' strengths with laser-like precision.

One night Mike suggested that Dani might want to help out with the music during weekly meetings. To Dani's eye and ear, the guy in charge of music was a carbon copy of John Denver. He had a penchant toward campfire ditties like "If I Had a Hammer," "Kumbaya," and "In the Jungle." Although the guy was only 20, Dani pegged him as a decade behind his time and decided he could probably use a hand.

At first, Dani filled out the sound as an extra guitar. Then, John Denver started asking him to sing background on a few songs. Eventually, Dani began to suggest new songs to try. John Denver told Mike he could use more of Dani's help, and so Dani began going to a second night of Campus Life each week, on the other side of town. Between the two meetings, Dani was playing in front of 200 students each week. He began to cultivate a new look to correspond with his developing social life. Drawing on the popular punk scene, he grew his hair long in the back and cropped and spiky at the top. He cut his shirts into asymmetrical slants and bought a few pairs of Chucks that he mixed and matched at will: blue on one foot, yellow on the other one day, maybe red and blue the next. He tied a brightly colored bandana around one of his denim-clad thighs and finished off the look with several chains that trailed from his belt to his pocket.

Dani began making friends, forming connections, feeling useful in his role as John Denver's assistant. He got his driver's license and began transporting not only himself, but also another student to group meetings. Life, for Dani, in the late spring of 1986, was beginning to make sense.

#### Summer 1986

"I want to come and pick you guys up in my new car," Dani said into the phone. He hoped his voice sounded upbeat and casual, that the undertone of shakiness he was struggling to mask did not convey across the phone lines. Megan, Tess, and their parents had returned from Florida for a month-long visit with family. The news came to him from his parents; neither of the girls had been in touch. Perhaps one or two awkward communications had passed between the friends since Dani left Miami, and not a word was said about the visit itself.

It had taken days to manufacture the nerve to make this call. He'd needed the right pretense, the right "in" to the conversation. It finally arrived in the form of a coupon. JC Penny was offering free 8X10 portraits for a nominal sitting fee, an offer that gave Dani an anchor activity for what he hoped would turn into a full day at the mall with Megan and Tess.

"You have a car?" Megan was saying.

Dani was jubilant—Megan had asked a question, which, to his ears, was an invitation to keep talking. "Yeah, mom and dad got a new car after I had a little fender bender with the K car. It was the other guy's fault. I inherited the Vega."

"That station wagon?" Megan said.

"Yeah! That bright yellow station wagon is now mine! And here's the best part," Dani said, drawing out the story with some dramatic tension, "it's not just a yellow Vega. It's the Amy Grant Mobile," he grinned, nodding in affirmation as he revealed his car's moniker like it was the grand prize on a game show.

"Huh?" Megan said.

"Yeah, so I took two big *Unguarded* buttons and super glued them back to back as a mirror ornament," he said. "And—this is the best part—the only music allowed in the car is—of course— Amy Grant, OR people associated with Amy Grant, like, say, Michael W. Smith." He smiled broadly into the phone, bobbing his head up and down. "Like it?"

Megan laughed, but it sounded hollow to Dani. "So about these pictures," she said, "Let's coordinate. I am thinking we all wear pink and white."

Dani swallowed hard. Pink and white was not the image he wanted to project. But for the moment, giving Megan what she wanted was more important than how he looked. He was losing his best friend, the one person in the world who seemed to "get" him. This might be his last chance to win her back. He had to show her that things could be normal again, and, if, to Megan, "normal" meant all three of them in pink and white, then that was the way things had to be for now.

"OK," Dani said. "I'll pick you guys up in the morning and we'll do this."

Dani headed to the bathroom first thing the following morning, determined to put together a look that would put Megan at ease, make her feel like things would be OK, that they could get back to the way things were. From his observations in the PE locker room, he knew how to use a brush and blow dryer to give his mullet the poufy, “feathered” look that was in style. In the recesses of his closet, he found a pink shirt—a gift from a relative? One of Mary’s cast offs?—and a pair of white pants. He then rooted through a bathroom drawer, pulling out various compacts and tubes of stray makeup, and, once again, drew from locker room observations to apply the contents. He took a long look in the mirror.

The image staring back wasn’t his, but he hoped it might match what Megan wanted to see. Get the friendship recognizable first, and he’d worry about himself later, he thought. The 8 x10 may not prove to be a displayable keepsake, but it was the time that Dani was really after. But his plans for a day of bonding at the mall weren’t meant to be. Megan called just as he was heading out to pick her up. She and Tess arranged their own ride to the mall, they’d pose for the picture, and they’d be on their way. They’d made other plans; they were sorry.

Dani saw the girls just one more time that summer, at a church picnic both families attended. Tess and Dani talked a little bit, but Megan kept her distance. It was clear that the JC Penny Portrait Studio had immortalized the defining friendship of Dani’s childhood at the exact moment of its death; Dani awash in Pepto pink and the sisters, pausing to pay fleeting homage to the past before hurrying toward other plans, another future. Indeed, the three friends would never again be smiling, together, in one place. It was as though a sinkhole opened in the floor of the studio simply sucked the friendship from his life. Despite the disastrous visit to Miami, it took seeing Megan again on their home turf for Dani to fully comprehend that their friendship was really gone.

Dani was discouraged and hurt, but two happenings kept him from complete despair. The first was a job. Not a typical burger flipping gig, but, rather, summer mission work. A woman from church told him about an organization called Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF) that needed people to run Backyard Bible Clubs for children during summer break. “Host families” would provide snacks and a backyard and invite the neighborhood kids to come for a week of “club” sessions that involved games and

stories that Dani would lead. On Sundays, he'd meet his host families and canvas the neighborhoods, passing out invitations to the event. Monday through Friday, Dani led three club meetings in three different neighborhoods each weekday for six weeks.

The second development that preserved Dani's psyche that summer was inclusion into the Campus Life inner circle. Although officially the club's meetings corresponded with the school year, a core group of leaders and invested students had established a year-round "base" at Mike's apartment. The space itself wasn't anything special: a two-bedroom pad with white walls, a sofa, and enough mismatched chairs to seat at least a dozen within view of what Dani assessed to be a pretty nice TV and VCR setup.

The Amy Grant mobile played a key role in the circumstances that brought Dani into the hub of the Campus Life off-season. Dani had struck up a friendship with the student he had been transporting to meetings during the school year—a student who, as it turned out, was part of the group who frequented Mike's living room. Jemma, a sporty, gap-toothed blond with a fun-loving personality, gave Dani an "in" to the group: he continued providing rides.

The summer scene at Mike's house was welcoming and communal. After a few visits, Dani realized that virtually anyone could walk through the door. Some predictable regulars anchored the scene: Karen and Deborah—Mike's longtime friends, both in their late 20s—someone named Tom, who was about 20 and popular with all the girls, and Dale, a big, boisterous guy with dark bushy hair and a mustache who typically bumbled through the door with a bag of groceries and a diverse crowd of stragglers he picked up, seemingly from the streets.

"Is that shrimp Creole I smell cooking in there?" someone yelled from the living room.

"You bet!" Dale said, pausing what appeared to be a deep conversation with a guy who was perched on a stool watching Dale chop onions and celery. "Give it another half hour and we'll be in business."

"I've got my card right here if you want to see it," the guy was saying as he reached for his wallet. He held up a laminated rectangular ID card. "It's a residence card," he explained. "Until this afternoon, I was a resident at the psychiatric hospital."

And now, here he was, about ready to eat shrimp Creole with a rag tag bunch of people crowded into Mike's two-bedroom apartment. It was as simple as that: wander in this door from anywhere and you find a home. Dani began to think of Mike's place as a refuge: not a place safe enough to share his secret—no place was that safe—but a place where he didn't need to act feminine or polished to feel at home.

As the summer wore on, Dani clung to his dual lifelines. He became a regular at Mike's apartment. No matter how many people were there, or what was going on, Mike always found time for one-on-one moments with everyone. He'd ask Dani about his music. He wanted to know if Dani was writing songs (he was), what they were about (spiritual themes with a twist of angst) and if he could hear them (maybe). Dani eventually shared a single song with Mike. He'd written it while sitting on the sea wall at the beach one late summer afternoon when thoughts of Megan skirted the periphery of his mind. As he prayed and played his guitar, he began to sing:

There's something about that piece of mind  
 when the Lord's right by your side  
 he will take away your sorrow and wipe your eyes dry.  
 Take a moment now to think about God's awesome power  
 and think about what he's done for you.

The song was soothing and peaceful and never failed to bring with it a peace that washed over him when he played it. Mike encouraged Dani to keep writing. He saw leadership potential in Dani, and took every opportunity he could to highlight it. He'd ask Dani about his job with CEF, too.

The fact was, the curriculum for Dani's Backyard Bible Club sessions had supplied him with a role model and ideas about his future. Three times each day, he told the story of Mary Slessor, a strong, single, Scottish missionary and adventurer with whom he began to identify.

Short, red headed, with a squarish face more accurately described as handsome than pretty, Slessor physically resembled Dani in ways that, consciously or not, reinforced her image as a worthy model in his mind. In backyard after back yard, Dani described her adventures to groups of wide-eyed



children: Mary sailing to Africa, Mary making a home in a Nigerian town where no other European had set foot, Mary rescuing twins left to die in the bush because they were thought to be demon spawn.

Mary lived among tribal people, mastered their language, ate their food, and earned enough trust that she was able to reverse many human rights violations that the tribe held as common mores, such as trial by poison to determine a suspect's guilt. She was brave and bold and did work that mattered—all alone. In Mary, Dani began to see a model for celibacy, the potential to skirt the issue of romance in favor of ministry and adventure. Later that summer, he encountered a piece on Benin, Africa while flipping through a magazine. West of Nigeria where Mary's work played out, Benin seemed a suitable corollary. Dani had found answers: he'd begin preparing for a life in Africa.

Fall 1986

When Campus Life started up again in the fall, Dani threw himself into the ministry full force. The John Denver doppelganger didn't return, so Mike asked Dani if he'd be interested in doing the music for both groups' weekly meetings.

"Technically, it's against the rules for you to serve in leadership since you haven't graduated yet," Mike said. "But since you aren't in public school, no one really knows. I'd like for you to do it."

Dani embraced the opportunity as his new purpose; perhaps even training for his future life in Africa. He would be singularly devoted to ministry now. Before, he had been preoccupied with worry over whether or not it was okay for him to like women, let alone pursue them. Over time, Dani had learned subtle ways to push connections with girls, and it wasn't just Megan and Cadi who had responded. He'd often felt what he assumed to be normal male/female chemistry with girls to whom he was attracted: girls he knew liked men. His thinking was that if a girl got to know him, she would, instinctively—magically perhaps—know him for who he was. If they like guys, he reasoned, then they would like him. So he'd learned to play with proximity, gauge interest, see if he could tease out a flirtatious response. Girls would often seem surprised, but it wasn't unusual for them respond, hold his hand, flirt back, treat him like he'd seen them treat other guys.

Dani's view was often myopic. He so thoroughly identified as male that it was hard for him to view himself outside his skin: to see himself as others did, in the feminine. Even the Campus Life environment wasn't completely judgment-free. Sometimes Dani would hear comments like, "You're gay," or "You're a dyke," which he knew couldn't possibly be true. He'd been told repeatedly that being gay was sin, shameful, wrong. He wasn't that kind of person. No way. Dani didn't know for sure how many of those rumors came back to Mike, but he knew Mike understood that something different was going on with him. He also knew that Mike supported him anyway. Every now and then, he'd say to Dani, "You're just being yourself, and that's great."

And Dani was learning to be okay with being himself. Dating had proven too confusing. Cutting it out of his life seemed necessary if he was going to devote himself to ministry. His involvement with Campus Life extended beyond the two meeting nights each week. Dani began to go with Mike to schools during lunchtime to eat with the students, building rapport and friendship. He was consumed by Campus Life: the students, the meetings, the music; these things comprised his world.

In the spring, Dani was selected to go to Washington, DC for a weekend leadership conference with some Campus Life people. Mike was supposed to go, but got sick at the last minute and had to bow out. Everyone else piled into a 15-passenger van for a weekend of bonding and learning. Dani was excited—this was the kind of thing he lived for.

The group had only been at the conference for a few hours when Tom—the good-looking guy who'd been a fixture at Mike's house in the summer and his protégé when regular meetings resumed that school year—showed up at the convention center. One look at his face told Dani that something was seriously wrong.

"It's Mike," he said, once the group gathered. "He's in the hospital. I don't have much information, but he's really sick. We need to pray."

Dani struggled to process the words. It seemed impossible that Mike could be sick enough to be hospitalized, let alone critical. He'd just seen him the night before. He seemed pretty normal, aside from what Dani assumed was a cold. Dani went through the rest of the conference mechanically: outwardly

moving, appearing in the right places at the right time, processing nothing except the prayers he breathed on behalf of his friend and mentor.

The ride from DC was tense—devoid of the joking and laughter that characterized the trip to the capital just two days prior. When they pulled into the church parking lot that served as their pre-arranged meeting place, Dani was horrified to see Mike’s friends Karen and Deborah waiting, their faces tauged and streaked with tears.

Dani processed the next few moments thorough the few disjointed phrases that penetrated the pounding in his ears. “He’s gone.” “Sick for a long time.” “Heart condition.” “Transplant list.” “Excited to be with Jesus now.” Shock jolted through Dani’s body as his mind argued: *I just saw him, he had a cold, he never, ever mentioned being sick.*

Dani somehow ended up at home, in his bed, cognizant of nothing before the moment when he stood strumming his guitar at the front of a church as he sang:

There’s something about that piece of mind  
when the Lord’s right by your side  
he will take away your sorrow and wipe your eyes dry.  
Take a moment now to think about God’s awesome power  
and think about what he’s done for you.

## CHAPTER 12

### Epilogue

Campus Life saw Danny through high school. Along with a group of students that eventually included Joanna, he helped keep the group intact in the difficult year following Mike's death. Although in time gave up on the idea of retreating to Africa, the idea of mission work led him to Moody Bible Institute.

Even through his college years, Danny would lie awake in his dorm bed, believing the miracle that began in his body could still be fully realized, that one day he'd wake up and everyone would see the obvious: that he was a man. Joanna, who was a year behind Danny in school, eventually followed him to Moody, where they were perceived as inseparable best friends. But after graduation and a move back to Virginia, where they moved into Joanna's childhood home, they quietly accepted that most people assumed they were lesbians. Danny stopped correcting people, stopped caring.

The pair eventually committed to the relationship in a secret wedding that masqueraded as Joanna's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Even in the best of situations, there are no guarantees in marriage, but a secret union where one partner is the sole secret-keeper of the other's identity comes with pressures most unions never face. With a lack of male companionship and Joanna's jealousy over his forging of female friendships, Danny became a prisoner in the relationship.

The marriage was over for Danny long before it was for Joanna. In the months before that evening at Panera, Danny, on his darkest days, had teetered on the brink of suicide. Our church family at The Harbor was initially supportive of Danny's transition. But as people began to realize the nature of his relationship with Joanna, many who had initially supported him became judgmental. In Danny's mind, he and Joanna had stayed under the same roof as roommates, as a matter of convenience. He'd long since moved out of their room, shifting his view of her from spouse to sibling.

But Joanna portrayed herself as a woman scorned, rallying support and forging alliances that left our community fractured. Danny moved out of their house and into a spare bedroom in my home. Most people never saw the lengths Danny went to in an attempt to create a fresh start with Joanna: if not

romantically, in a new, healthy incarnation. Most never knew the financial hardship he endured paying their bills and continuing to take care of Joanna's mother.

Joanna left The Harbor along with many who knew only her perspective. Many of those people were my friends. I often want to leave too, now, out of loneliness, but I stay for Pastor Tom and Ellie, who have paid no small price for their support of Danny. The people who left—arguably the financial backbone of The Harbor—included members of their own family.

Another blow for The Harbor was actually a win for the overall cause. Brandon is no longer our music minister, but for the happiest possible reason: despite the dread that followed him for the entirety of his senior year—the very real fear that his employment opportunities would end with a demand to sign a statement similar to the one his university adopted—he found full time work at an open, loving church. Ironically, he probably got the job because of my dismissal from the university rather than in spite of it. Brandon's new church is led by a renegade alumnus from the Bible college: a man that didn't drink the institutional Kool-Aid and wouldn't have signed the statement, if such a thing had existed in his time. He welcomes gay couples, isn't new to having trans people in his congregation, and gears his messages toward an audience who may be opening a Bible for the very first time. Despite these facts, he's managed to maintain friendly relations with his alma mater, and, when he was in search of a music minister, the university sent him my son. But Brad and I aren't completely alone at The Harbor. We have Danny, and we have his new wife: Krista.

Krista began dating Dani several months after he moved into my house. They'd already enjoyed a long and eventful friendship that began with Krista viewing Danny as an older female mentor, and Danny seeing her as a young person Joanna had befriended and set up in their guesthouse for the summer before she left for college. She eventually became the first person to know him as Danny, and, after moving home as a college graduate, began to view him from a new perspective. Despite a significant age difference, they fell deeply in love.

They got married on the hottest day of the summer in an outdoor wedding at the zoo. Danny's brother, Jim, officiated. Every one of his siblings was in attendance. Ben prayed blessings over the new

couple, and Danny danced with Sherry. Brad was the best man, and Brandon, along with Krista's brother and two trans men, dear friends of Danny's, were groomsmen. Allison and I were bridesmaids. I am not sure if all the other bridesmaids knew about Danny's past, or that some of the groomsmen had not always been men, or how many of the wedding guests were aware, either.

What I know is that it doesn't matter. When Brad stood up to give his toast, he made us all laugh as he worked in gentle jabs about Danny's love for napping and penchant for spilling liquids—things about him to which even his newest friends could relate. Brad told us how he'd learned more from Danny than just about anyone he's ever known. I think I can say the same.

Danny taught me that deciding to be yourself is the bravest thing anyone can ever do. He taught me the importance of living in harmony with yourself, of making sure your insides and outsides match. For people like Danny, the costs of coming out, of stepping into your own identity, are astronomical; the risks are literally life and death. But Danny also taught me that you don't have to be intersex to have a "coming out" experience. The one thing all of us—gay, straight, male, female, conservative, liberal, and on the continuum between the absolutes — have in common is the fear that we won't be accepted. The fear of what we'll lose if we are "known."

Danny taught me to let go of that fear. The day when I channeled his coming out speech in the university boardroom was my own "coming out." It was the moment I chose to be me despite the consequences. The moment I realized that an opportunity lost to the truth was never mine in the first place. It was the moment I chose to be "known" instead of liked.

Danny and Krista and I sat around my dining room table last week. We were surrounded by printouts and flashcards and computers, studying for a Creole class we're taking together to prepare to go to Haiti. Krista told me about the nausea she's had lately and the pregnancy test she took that morning.

"It was negative," she says. "But I think it's too early. It may have been false."

"Wait!" Danny answers. "I just realized that if it was positive, you'd be due when we were leaving for Haiti!"

Krista laughed. “I want to go to Haiti!”

“I do, too,” Danny said.

“I want to have a baby!”

“Me too! I don’t know what to hope for!” Danny paused. “Life is just good,” he said.

A few days later, I walked into Mary’s office. She’s the new English Department head at CNU. She was also my first grad school professor, and the first to give me hope after Dr. James told me I was in the wrong program if I ever wanted to teach college. “I hire everyone who teaches freshman writing around here,” she’d told me. “If you still want to do that when you graduate you just let me know.”

This time, I want a lot more than adjunct work. I told her I’m about to get my MFA, I told her about the Bible college, and that teaching here, at my alma mater, is what I have always wanted, the whole time. A smile broke across her face. “Message received,” she said, smiling. “Message received.”

There are no promises, not yet. Not for me, not for any of us. We don’t know if come July there will be a new baby to love, or if I have a chance of moving into my dream office at my alma mater in August. What we do have is a confidence that the things we left behind belonged to old versions of ourselves—relationships and opportunities that were sloughed off so we could learn to be comfortable in our skin. What happens next is what is supposed to happen to us: to the people we really are.

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Cynthia Davis will be receiving a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Non-Fiction from Old Dominion University in 2017. She also holds a Master of Arts in Teaching English from Christopher Newport University (2009) and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Saint Leo University (1996). She is currently an Adjunct Professor in the English Department at Christopher Newport University, where she has served since 2011. Her academic responsibilities include teaching first- and second-year writing seminars, course development, workshop design, and accreditation support. She has also taught at other private and for-profit universities and schools in the area teaching both English and art, and served as the Writer's Conference Coordinator for Christopher Newport University from 2004 through 2005. Cynthia is also a freelance journalist and photographer and has published nearly 100 religious and human interest articles in the Daily Press of Newport News, VA since 2001 and has written many corporate profiles for the Oyster Pointer in Newport News, VA since 2011.