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P R E F A C E

# WHAT'S REALLY GOING on HERE?

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*Six-term Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) resigned amid reports that he had sent sexually explicit Internet messages to at least one underage male former page. Foley, who was considered likely to win reelection this fall, said in a three-sentence letter of resignation: "I am deeply sorry and I apologize for letting down my family and the people of Florida I have had the privilege to represent."*

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*A football-loving 14-year-old boy with quiet parents pleads guilty to raping four primary school girls in a park in Salford, England. The forensic psychiatrist who examined the teenager said in court that the violent sexual images he had seen inspired him to carry out the offenses.*

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*The Department of Homeland Security's deputy press secretary faces charges of using the Internet to seduce a detective he thought was a 14-year-old girl. The man sent the detective "hard-core pornographic movie clips" and used the chat room service "to have explicit sexual conversations," some of which the sheriff's office said "are too extraordinary and graphic for public release."*

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*Police wondered where two girls, ages 11 and 12, who had posted photos of themselves nude on the Internet, got the idea. They said they were influenced by pornography on the Internet. Photos of the girls were downloaded and distributed at their school.*

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*A Long Island man has been sexually abusing his 4-year-old daughter for almost her entire life—and recently offered to swap her for another child via an Internet chat room called “Baby Sex,” police charged yesterday. The accused man, who lives in Dix Hills, was held in lieu of \$1 million cash.<sup>1</sup>*

We see the headlines and read the stories and shake our heads in disbelief, wondering, “What’s going on here? Who would ever do something like that?” And then we read another. And yet another, the latter even more twisted than the first.

Some of us think to ourselves, “Wow, there are some really messed-up people out there. Sexual deviants that need to be locked up for good.” Others reason that it’s the porn industry and our hypersexual media who are to blame. They figure we’re all becoming victims of a sex-saturated culture. Then there are those who insist poor parenting and centuries of sexual repression are the culprits behind our sexual pathology. Regardless of our own particular bias, we all tend to breathe a sigh of relief in knowing that we’re not like them, and that they’re not us. That it’s just another news story about strange stuff that happened to someone else, matters far removed from our own personal lives.

But then you get the phone call from your sister-in-law with the surprising news that her husband, your brother, just announced he’s leaving her and the kids for someone he met online. Or maybe she’s the one who’s leaving him for another man. Perhaps the stunning news was that of a longtime friend who’s just been arrested and charged for soliciting sex with a minor.

Or maybe the newsflash hit closer to home and you're still reeling over the discovery of hundreds of pornographic images sitting on your family computer's hard drive. Graphic images and hard-core videos whose lurid titles and degrading file names betray their owner's best attempts to keep them hidden.

Again you find yourself asking, "What's going on here? Who could have done this?" But this time, there's a strong sense of urgency and importance you've never felt before. Because now, it's personal. No longer is it just a question of idle curiosity. The craziness you once thought only resided in other people's lives has just invaded yours. So you start looking for answers, searching for the truth. You have to know the truth because the stakes are higher now that you're involved.

But you're not the only one looking for answers. Because you're not the only one involved. There are others—spouses, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, parents, coworkers, and friends. A web of people just like you who are trying to make sense of the offense or the abuse. And then there's the offender, or the abuser. You hope they're asking questions too, or at least asking for help.

"What were they thinking? How could they be so blind? What's *really* going on here?"

Speaking as one who's been both the offender and the offended, the abuser and the abused, questions like these have haunted me for most of my life. In my own case, as soon as I discovered that sex could make me feel better about myself, I gladly became a user. Whether it was trying to fix myself, to erase my pain and be "normal," or trying to cope with the stress and boredom of my everyday life, I used both porn and people, and kept secrets to hide my guilt and shame.

But then, I was caught. Exposed. The secret got out, at least part of it. But not enough of the truth came out, not enough to really break me. Before hitting bottom, the burning questions that kept me awake nights

dealt more with how to keep hidden: “What if they keep digging, what if they keep searching? What will happen to me if the truth comes out? What will I do? How will I cope? What will I do to survive?”

It was only after losing everything that mattered to me—my fifteen-year marriage, my family of two boys, my home, my job, most of my friends, and my reputation in my church and in the community—that I finally hit bottom and began asking the only kinds of questions that really mattered: “How in the world did *I* get here? What was *I* thinking? How could *I* have been so blind?”

In other words, “What’s *really* going on here?”

That was ten years ago.

That’s when I started to write this book. Of course, I didn’t know it at the time. All I knew was I needed to start somewhere. I had to discover the truth. The truth about me. So one day I sat down during my lunch break from work, pulled out a notepad, and wrote the title “The Truth about Me” across the top of page one. And I started writing. Then I stopped. Then I started writing again. And stopped again. Each time I’d start writing again, I’d look over what I had written before and I wanted to gag. Old lies, sugar-coating, people-pleasing prose.

It’s now ten years since I began both my recovery and writing this book, and I’m just now beginning to realize how difficult it is for me to tell the truth about myself. The truth is, today, I’m a recovering sex addict. I’ve lived most of my life as a compulsive, pathological liar. That means I spent a lot of time covering up the truth. Granted, I haven’t had to hide heinous crimes like robbing banks or stealing cars—my lies are far subtler, but no less destructive. Twisting the truth. Obscuring reality.

My battle in writing this book is that I’m trying to be honest, both with myself and with you, the reader. For some people who have been mostly honest all of their lives, this struggle may not make much sense. But for me, and I imagine for millions of others, perhaps even you,

living out a life based on truth and honesty is a constant battle. So when we stop to look at the many sexual dysfunctions that are evident in our culture, we inherently know there really *is* something going wrong here. A lot of us have lived it in our own lives. It may not make the headlines, but we know it's there, recorded forever in the activity logs of our minds. We may have spent most of our lives running from it, or hiding from it, but we all realize that the truth about us is there also, battling the lies and crying out to be heard.

The battle of darkness and light that rages inside all of us is nothing less than a battle for freedom—your freedom, my freedom! My story is about the epic battle that has been raging underneath the veneer of my life. There are elements of this struggle that are universal to us all, and there are some that are uniquely mine. But at the end of the day, we have all fought our own skirmishes between the truth and the lie.

My hope for you as a reader and fellow sojourner is that you will recognize the signposts of your own life's journey in my story, and having seen a glimpse of what lies ahead, that you might seek out a straighter path to the freedom that awaits you.



# FACING the TRUTH

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It was almost too hard to believe. My suspicions had led to this—a suburban Atlanta address just a few miles from where I worked. I just couldn't get over how close it was. For almost a year now, Teresa said she'd been living back at home with her parents in Birmingham, and I had believed her. But this guy's name had kept popping up in our conversations, this guy in Alpharetta.

"A business associate," she'd say one day. Then months later, he'd be a family friend. And all those times she'd talked about the rush-hour traffic on Georgia 400 with frustration in her voice—why should she care? She lived three hours west of the Georgia 400. "I just know it's bad whenever I'm up there." Yeah, right.

But now that I'd matched his name to the local phone number she'd mentioned a few times, it was all coming together. And there it was on MapQuest, plain as day, only 6.2 miles away from where I worked.

"Oh no! No way! There's no way this is happening!" I jumped up

from my office chair in a panic and grabbed the keys from my credenza, darting past the other offices without saying a word to anyone. The elevator seemed to crawl as I rode down to the building's entrance. I kept my head down as I blew by Debbie, the receptionist. I wasn't about to stop and chat with her, not now. As I hurriedly slipped through the front doors of our nondescript office building, a thought suddenly crossed my mind. *What if she's been lying to me all this time? What if she's living with another guy? This can't be happening!* I must have rehearsed those lines at least a hundred times in the few short minutes it took to drive to the neighborhood where my map address said he, and maybe she, lived. As I pulled up to the end of the cul-de-sac, I started checking the numbers on the black mailboxes. They all looked alike, very uniform, very suburbia.

*Nice neighborhood*, I thought to myself. And then I spotted it—house number 1516. That was it, the house I was looking for. I eased the car a little farther up the curb and parked alongside it in front of the neighbor's house. About then, I noticed my pulse was racing, quickened by waves of adrenaline.

I got out of the car and started up the driveway. It was quiet. No surprise. After all, it was close to noon and the kids from the neighborhood were all at school. I started to notice that I was breathing faster, feeling anxious. *I pray to God I'm wrong*, I thought to myself.

I quietly stepped up onto the red brick porch and began sheepishly peering through the front door's sidelight. It was midday and I had a hunch that she would be there. But no one was in sight. There were no cars in the driveway either. Maybe I was wrong. How could I have doubted her love like that? I started to feel like a fool, like an insecure and jealous boyfriend. I knocked on the door anyway. Silence. Just as I began to turn my head and start back down the steps, a woman suddenly appeared through the window sauntering from the kitchen to the den,

cordless phone in hand. It was Teresa, standing there in a full-length white bathrobe, only ten feet in front of me. I stood there in shock for a second, staring at her through the narrow glass window. My stomach recoiled as if I'd just been hit by a sucker punch.

"No, no, no!" I started slamming my fist against the door as she peered back at me, acting surprisingly unconcerned about my unexpected visit.

"Teresa! Open the door! Open this door NOW!" As I waited for her to open the door, I watched her pace quicken. Still, she looked more concerned about ending her phone conversation than about what was to be the inevitable ending of our tumultuous two-and-a-half-year relationship. Then, without warning, a random thought interrupted my growing rage. Actually, it was a quote from the Bible, of all places.

*You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

The placement of that thought was odd, considering what was going on. I was losing it, totally freaked to discover the woman I thought I loved walking around in her bathrobe in another man's house. I was enraged and I couldn't wait for her to open the door. I started thinking to myself, *Could I have been that stupid, that naive? Was I really that desperate for love, that blind to all of the obvious clues she'd left for me along the way?*

This woman, whom I had poured out my heart to, for whom I had sacrificed my marriage and my family, was not who she claimed to be. She was a lie. I banged on the door once again as she ended her phone call and started walking toward me, phone still in hand. With an irritated look on her face, she opened the door.

"Michael, what are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? What are YOU doing here?"

She started backing away from me as I burst into the foyer and continued raging. "How could you do this to me? You are such a liar! I can't believe you've been lying to me all this time, pretending to be with me

while you've been living with someone else! Who is he? What's his name?"

In a measured tone, she tried to calm me down.

"Honey, this isn't what you think. He's just a friend."

"A friend! Yeah, right! You've been lying to me for nearly a year about living with a friend. I can't believe this! I can't believe I gave up everything for you!"

I don't remember much about our exchange after that. She started yelling back at me, and I continued raging at her. I was out of my mind with anger, yelling at her and yelling at myself and not believing my own ignorance, my own stupidity. At some point, I remember her telling me to leave and threatening to call the police if I didn't. That was just before I threw her down on the couch. The phone went flying out of her hand as I found myself summoning every bit of self-control I could to keep from hitting her. I'd never hit a woman before, but I could feel myself starting to lose it.

Before I knew it, the police showed up. She had dialed 911 just before I shoved her onto the couch. Apparently, the people at the response center could hear our argument and had wasted no time in dispatching a patrol car to check it out. Two officers decked out in their blues knocked on the door, and Teresa went to let them in. After splitting us up to ask us our own version of what was going on, one of the officers approached me once again.

"Here's the deal. She's not going to press charges." I remember my whole body freezing at the thought of how close I was to being arrested. "But you've gotta leave now. She wants you gone, and so do we. If you don't leave now, then we'll take you in."

"Don't worry, I'm out of here." I walked toward the door and headed for my car. I had no idea where Teresa was at the time. I never turned back to look, and I didn't want to. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was leave

that place, and her, and never look back. I was in shock; I felt betrayed, used. I guess I had gotten what I deserved. This was exactly what so many people tried to tell me was going to happen.

I had sunk to a new low. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. As I was driving away from that house and from the relationship that had started as an affair two and a half years earlier, I began thinking about what it had cost me: a fifteen-year marriage, my two wonderful boys, a promising family business partnership, and countless friendships. How could I have fallen in love with this woman? What had I been thinking? How had I let this happen? And how had I gotten to this point?

I found myself thinking about those words from Scripture once again, the words that had come to me as I had been standing at her front door: *You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

In my arrogance, my first thought was, *Of course, now I know the truth about HER! I gambled on the wrong woman. She's the reason my life is a mess. She used me, lied to me, and deceived me. I'll bet everything she told me was a lie. I'll show her. I'm gonna blow her cover, make some calls, talk to some of her so-called friends she never would let me meet. I'm gonna find out the truth about her and throw it right back at her.*

The anticipation of vindication had never before felt so sweet, so just.

For the next several days, my life became “CSI: Atlanta.” I was obsessed with trying to uncover every lie, reveal every affair, unravel every scheme I suspected she might have cooked up over the past several years. What I was really looking for was vindication, nothing more and nothing less. After all, my pride was at stake. It only took a few days and a dozen or so phone calls before the web of lies and deception started to unravel.

There was the lawyer in Montgomery, the couture shop owner from

Buckhead, the NASCAR driver from Charlotte, the stockbroker from Atlanta, the furniture salesman from Nashville, the office supplies business owner from Doraville, and the medical software sales rep from Atlanta whose house I had caught her living in. Then, of course, there was me. Most of us were married and had families when we had met Teresa. All of us were guilty of letting our lust hijack our sanity. But something deep down was telling me there was more to it than that. I wasn't sure what it was at the time, but I just knew there had to be something more. After uncovering unlucky guy number seven, I finally decided I'd had enough of the truth and gave up the search for more victims. It was becoming a pointless exercise in futility. The more lies I would uncover, the more I felt like an idiot and a blind fool. And then those all too familiar words came back to me again. But this time they took on a whole new meaning.

*You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

Now I had grown up in a religious home and had spent enough time in churches over the years to recognize that this familiar phrase came from somewhere in the Bible. But beyond that, the words held little meaning for me. Even as I had been standing on that porch just days earlier, those words resounding in my head for the first time, the significance of their meaning had been lost on me in my moment of rage. But now, something about it was different. This time when the words came to me, I noticed that the emphasis had shifted in a way that gave this phrase a whole new meaning. I started to wonder if my earlier interpretation might have been wrong.

*YOU will know the truth (about YOU), and the truth (about YOU) will make you free.*

*Huh? The truth about ME—not her?*

This seemingly insignificant thought, confusing and brief as it was at the time, ended up marking a real turning point in my life. It was an

epiphany of sorts, an intellectual and spiritual flash that would forever mark a change in the way I began to view myself and others. At a time when I found myself with no one else to lean on and no one else to blame, my focus began to shift as I started to hunger for the truth about me. This represented quite a change for someone who had been a pathological liar for most of his life. And this persistent little phrase—the truth about me—summed it all up for me at the time. My new mission in life was to discover what the truth about me really was.

As I started to examine myself and my life more closely, I came to realize that my circumstances weren't looking very good. Aside from the fact that I was able to find a well-paying job back in the computer industry after having been fired from my brother's business, I was pretty much facing life on my own. No one else really wanted to have much to do with me. That was hard enough. So the last thing I wanted to do was to set out on some inward-looking journey to discover the real truth about *me*. I didn't really like me too much at the time. In fact, I was growing sick and tired of myself as I wrestled with the guilt and shame of having abandoned my wife and kids for another woman. I had begun to spend more and more time using pornography and obsessing about sexual fantasies and less time investing in real relationships with real people.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

The truth about YOU.

For the first time that I could remember, I truly felt hopeless and alone. The kind of alone that keeps you up at night wondering if you'll make it through another day. Wondering if anyone really cares about you, cares whether or not you're even alive. Everyone had left. Somewhere in the midst of my self-consumed arrogance and selfishness, they had all walked away. They'd had enough of me, and who could blame them? *I* didn't even like being around me anymore.

As I started to consider what it might mean to know “the truth about

me,” fear began to creep into my psyche, fear of what I’d find when I really looked deep within myself, fear of discovering who I really was inside and of learning what it was about myself that caused me to act out in a sexually compulsive way. I had spent most of my life avoiding these deep recesses of my heart. But now this fear kept creeping back into my conscious mind like an early morning fog, pulling me deeper and deeper into the darkness of depression as daylight faded into night. Suicidal thoughts started to reason with me as a more painless, albeit unattractive, alternative to the agony I was feeling. Oh, those dark and despairing nights! I was scared to death of spending the rest of my life all alone, unloved and unforgiven, and wallowing in the misery of my guilt and shame.

I was afraid to face the many questions I suddenly had about who I was and what I had become. But one question haunted me above all others. It was the first question I asked myself, and it refused to fade away. It was urgent and rather obvious, and it kept playing itself over and over in my mind, like a bad jingle that you can’t seem to shake, no matter how hard you try.

*How did I get here?*

Somehow, I just knew that this was the starting point. This was the door leading to the way out. And if I wanted to rid myself of the misery that I alone had created, I had to summon what little courage remained in me in order to pursue the answer to that question. To discover the truth about myself, I had to face the truth about my past. I had to start at the beginning of my pain to find the birthplace of my lies.

CHAPTER

1



# LEAVING PARADISE

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**B**lue skies. Incredibly close, nearly touchable, warm blue skies. That's the first and last thing I think of when I think about growing up in southern California in the late '60s, when you could still see the sky in L.A. Living on the peninsula in a home perched high above the city, with panoramic views of an even bluer Pacific Ocean, was like living in a dream. It still romanticizes me to this day whenever I travel to L.A. Even when the valley is thick with smog, somehow when I look up toward the sky, my eyes only see blue.

Life was incredibly good back then—or at least as I recall. I was ten years old, the youngest of five, living in picture-perfect Palos Verdes, a new suburban enclave that was being carved out of the rolling hillside along the coastline just south of L.A. Sunsets were like elaborate production numbers filled with a rainbow of colors. Visits to the rugged sea cliffs were like Indiana Jones adventures, the rocks brimming with sea life. If you were bold enough to risk getting soaked by the white water

of the crashing waves, there were always little surprises waiting to be discovered in the tide pools nearby.

Then there were the regular visits to the beach—soaking up the sun, body surfing, building sand castles. I even loved my school, where I was athletic and pretty popular and it felt like everyone was my friend. That was my life as a kid. “Leave It to Beaver” in Technicolor. I had it made! Life was good.

At home, everything was smooth sailing too. As the baby of the family, I was always well taken care of, looked after, coddled. I felt secure and safe. Our life back then was middle class with a forward lean into upper middle, thanks to my mom and dad’s unapologetic affinity for a new concept called the credit card. We lived in a new home with a pool and a view of the Pacific Ocean. The real people of privilege lived a couple of miles away, on large ranches with acreage and in gated communities with romantic names like Rolling Hills Estates and Rancho Palos Verdes. But Sunmist Drive was enough for me. That and those amazing sunsets—exclamation points appropriately placed at the end of yet another perfect day in Paradise.

But that all changed one day. After gathering all six of us in the living room for an important announcement, I watched while my father, an overpowering figure in our home, strutted over to the stereo console to put a record on. The volume was turned up to the point that hearing him scratch the needle across the vinyl would make your heart stop. Next thing I knew, I felt like I was standing in the middle of a huge football stadium during half time with a hundred-piece marching band blaring out their school’s fight song. My dad stood there with an expectant grin on his face, like the game show host for “Name That Tune,” eagerly waiting for the next contestant to pounce on their buzzer and blurt out the right answer.

Then it struck me. This wasn’t some lame home version of a faddish

game show. This was our family tradition. “Name that college town and you’ve just learned where we’re moving to next. Surprise!” I’d grown up hearing about this, like a family urban legend. I remember hearing my brothers and sisters talking about it. One day after school they came home to hear “The Eyes of Texas Are upon Thee” blasting through the windows of our suburban Chicago home, courtesy of the Texas Longhorn marching band. The next thing they knew, we were moving to Dallas. I was only one year old at the time, but they said it was all pretty exciting stuff. After all, Texas was bound to be much warmer than Chicago. Five years later, it was a stirring rendition of the USC Trojan marching band playing “Fight On” that broke the silence of our tree-lined Dallas neighborhood. Before we knew what hit us, we were headed for L.A. Again, another standard of living and climate upgrade. I was six at the time, still too young to remember. But I’m sure we were all smiles once again.

Most major college fight songs were recognizable to us by now. That just went with being in a family of jocks where everything we did seemed to revolve around sports, especially football. But this latest rendition seemed to stump everyone. That meant we probably weren’t going to recognize the city we were moving to, either. Maybe that’s why everyone seemed a bit on edge. That and the fact that living in southern California wasn’t just a dream to me, but it was Paradise to ALL of us. No one had ever considered that we might one day actually leave Paradise. After it was obvious that no one could guess the song, my dad broke the silence and spoke up in a confident voice.

“It’s ‘Bow Down to Washington!’ We’re moving to Washington!”

I think that was the cue for us to look and act excited. But this one I remember. I was ten, and I don’t recall much excitement or happiness filling the room when the announcement came. It was more like a bad dream. It showed on our faces too. We were brokenhearted. No one

wanted to move. No one wanted to leave Paradise. I could see my mom's eyes tearing up in the background. It felt like somebody had just died.

I remember breaking the silence at one point to ask my dad a burning question I had.

"Dad, where's Washington?"

I was pretty sure it was a long ways away on the opposite coast, somewhere near New York City.

"Washington's just up north of here a ways, son."

That was my dad, the eternal optimist and consummate salesman. He made it sound like it was just a few miles up the Pacific Coast Highway. You know, like we could just pop up there for the day and make it back to the beaches before sundown. That didn't seem so bad. But then the confusion started to set in.

"We're moving to Spokane, Washington."

*What? What's a Spokane?* It didn't sound right, and after he pulled out a map to show us where it was, it didn't even look like it was spelled right. I had enough of a challenge having to spell and pronounce my last name for everyone who asked: L-E-A-H-Y, like Lay-He. Don't tell me I'm gonna have to do the same thing every time someone asks me where I live—not Spo-KANE, but Spo-CAN. And I could see it definitely wasn't going to be a day trip getting there and back. A sinking feeling came over me. I didn't want to move to Spokane. I didn't want to leave Paradise. For the first time in my life, I remember feeling sad. Not just sad for a moment, but really sad—and confused.

Over the coming days and weeks, I was filled with a thousand anxious thoughts. *What about my friends? Does this mean I'll never see them again? And what about my school? And the beach? And my sea adventures exploring the tide pools at Abalone Cove?* The map showed that Spokane was a long way from the ocean.

My dad continued to give us his best sales pitch for a deal that was

already done. With his eternal “can-do” attitude and fun-loving Irish personality, he was a master of the positive spin. Part dad, part motivational speaker. He grew up in Chicago, the youngest of seven boys in an Irish Catholic family full of outstanding athletes. He attended Western Michigan University where he was captain of the football team and eventually met and married my mom. A loud, warmhearted, blue-eyed Irish character, he still had a football lineman’s physique left over from his years as a college athlete and Golden Glove boxer.

Dad was a gentle giant of sorts with an inherent goodness and a charisma about him that always put him at the center of attention in just about any setting. Like many of his generation, he started smoking and drinking while in the service. My mom would later confide in me that she thought drinking gave my dad the courage and self-confidence his tough-guy image otherwise lacked. It also gave him overconfidence and arrogance when he overindulged, which was a lot of the time as I recall. As a kid, I both feared and respected him. He was larger than life to me. He could kick my butt across the room when he felt like he needed to. And many times, he did just that.

I still had a lot of questions about this move. We all did. But that didn’t matter. Before I knew it, the moving van was loaded up and we were on our way to Spokane. My mom started crying when she saw the Spokane Airport for the first time as we circled to land. A Quonset hut planted next to a long runway on the outskirts of town, this was a far cry from the newly opened Los Angeles International Airport we had just left behind. Pretty soon, my sisters were crying too. I was excited about flying, but really had no clue what I was in for. As soon as the freezing winter chill smacked my face, I started longing for my home, my friends, and those amazing sunsets. Having so many good memories made me sad. In fact, now that I think of it, *leaving* L.A. was the only bad memory I ever had of that place.

When we left southern California, it was Thanksgiving weekend and the weather at the beach was sunny and seventy-something degrees. When the moving trucks finally pulled up to our new home in Spokane, it was thirty-two below zero and there was two and a half feet of snow on the ground. I was quickly learning that Spokane was everything L.A. wasn't. But I was still yet to face the biggest changes of all. That would come only days later when I started going to my new school.

My parents enrolled me in a private school. It was the middle of the school year, and I was in the fifth grade. On my first day of school, I got lost walking home and nearly froze to death wandering the ice-packed streets of my neighborhood in subzero temperatures for hours looking for a house I hardly recognized. Not exactly a great way to start.

Things inside the classroom weren't much better. No one was impressed with my dark tan and beach blond hair, and I'm sure it didn't take them long to get tired of hearing me talk about how good life was back in sunny southern California. Spokane was surrounded by farms and forests, so my past was irrelevant to most of them. The school I went to seemed like it was filled with thugs and criminals, or so I thought. And the nuns and priests who ran the place acted more like wardens and prison guards than like the spiritually enlightened. I got pretty good at anticipating when a book or a chalkboard eraser would go flying through the air. Our teachers gave new meaning to the term "duck and cover."

It was here where I came face to face with my first "bully." Actually, there were several of them, and I seemed to attract them like a magnet. Being the new kid in school, my popularity was at an all-time low. I was threatened with being beat up and chased every day for months. In the process, I was also given a variety of unflattering nicknames that I still cannot bear to hear.

Then there was this guy who made a big deal of stepping on and smashing my bag lunch every day during recess in front of all my class-

mates. That went on for what felt like an eternity. Everyone laughed and thought it was hilarious. I was too embarrassed to tell my mom or dad or anyone else about it until one day a teacher walked in on the act. Nothing ever really happened to the bully, but it did put an end to the daily lunch “art” sessions. Of course, that would only give rise to other creative forms of harassment. I felt very alone and very different from everyone else while this was going on, and I didn’t really understand what I had done to deserve it. I felt bad about myself a lot of the time, which was a new feeling for me.

At home, things weren’t faring much better. Everyone’s unhappiness with the move cast a negative pall in our home for some time. There were lots of tears and lots of complaining. I’m sure the move put a lot of pressure on my parents, especially on my dad since this whole thing seemed to be his idea. But in our family, it was always important to look good, to put on a happy face, even in the midst of sorrow or unhappiness. I did notice that my dad was drinking a lot more—or maybe he was drinking the same amount as before but now I was old enough to finally see it. Either way, it started really bothering me. Drinking never did appear to do my dad any good. For a brief period of time, it seemed to put him in the zone as the “life of the party.” But eventually, the charm would wear off, and in its place was left a stupid, sloppy drunk. And when he was sober, he would often act the classic dry drunk—irritable, selfish, quick tempered. I wondered if I was the only one who could see this, the only one who cared. But at that time in my life, most of my brothers and sisters didn’t seem to be around as much as I was to witness it firsthand. They were all older and spent most of their time away from the house with their friends or involved in other activities. And even when they were there, nobody ever dared talk about dad’s “problem.”

But over time, dad’s problem increasingly became my problem. I learned that firsthand whenever I got in trouble, and those times

seemed to come with more frequency the older I got. The worst times for me were the evenings, when I was up past my bedtime playing in my room. He'd notice my bedroom light was on, come charging into my room in a rage, get right in my face, and start yelling at me. The more booze I could smell on his breath, the worse I knew it would be. If I said the wrong thing or smarted off at him in response—or even said nothing at all—he'd start kicking me around the room like a football. Dad was built low to the ground, a former pulling guard in football with tree trunks for legs, so some of those kicks would literally pick me up off the ground.

My dad never hit me with his fists, but the kicking and the rage I would see in his eyes and hear in his voice were enough to crush my spirit every time. It was degrading, and it made me feel worthless and guilty, like I must be a bad person or flawed in some way to have deserved this. At the end of our episodes, he would typically add the caveat that "I'm sorry, but I only do this because I love you." I wanted to fight back, but I didn't know how. I was too young and too scared to fight back physically, so the thought never crossed my mind. In the end, I just wanted him to go away and leave me alone. But I loved him—he was my dad, my hero, the guy who protected me and kept me safe from whatever was out there in life that could hurt me.

I was thoroughly confused, so I learned to stuff the feelings I wasn't allowed to show that raged inside of me. I learned to keep silent, to bury the frustration and the confused feelings that I had. But now that things at home were getting as messed up as things at school, I started looking for a way out of my pain, a great escape. I wanted to feel safe and to be accepted once again—the way it was when we were living in Paradise. I longed to find some friends that I could hang out with, friends who would accept me the way I was. And I yearned to feel the joy and the happiness that I once had—anything to replace the pain that I was feeling by just being me.