
Chapter Two
FALLING THROUGH A HOLE IN THE CLOUDS

On May 5th 1956, one week before my eighth birthday, I was placed in a foster home in Villa Park, Illinois an affluent suburb west of Chicago. Randy and I were placed together and never separated more than a few months even as adults. We were the only two siblings raised together from beginning to sorrowful end. Though we had different fathers he really was my kid brother. We saw the rest of the family once a month at the headquarters of the children's home in Bensonville, Illinois.

One year later the principal of Lincoln School summoned me from Ms. Mueller's fourth grade class. In the hall, outside the room, he told me my mother had disappeared once again. Because I was never adopted there was no legal father and I was declared a "ward" of the State of Illinois. Making clumsy apologies for being the one who had to tell me, he sent me, crying, back into the classroom. That was a bad afternoon. My teacher, unaware of what happened in the hall, had little patience with a little boy who wouldn't stop crying. Finally placing a small roll of toilet paper on my desk she announced, "If you can't control this, you'll have to leave the room." But I didn't hear her. I'd heard nothing since the principal vomited the word, "ward" into both my ears.

A ward? What was that? I was nine years old. The state didn't know me. The state didn't love me. The state couldn't put its arms around me and make me feel safe. What I felt was unwanted. Nine and twice discarded, the refuse of the universe awash on the shores of a cold world. Amazingly, despite the undeniable realities, I carried a malevolent fantasy of my mother as an unfortunate victim until she assassinated that fantasy as an adult. I say malevolent because believing her innocent of all crimes for the sake of an evasive and longed-for love, harmed me. Sustaining that illusion for half a century meant keeping my heart open for what only proved to be more of the same. This outburst has nothing to do with bitterness or forgiveness. It just needs said. I forgive her. Every day. How can I not? She was victimized in a manner so thoroughly monstrous my feeble brain cannot comprehend its enduring power for terror. But forgiveness doesn't mean I must continue to drink from the well of sorrow, to continue exposure to an ongoing source of pain. That's suicidal. Sometimes, forgiven and distant is the only, healthy solution. When history screams "run" in our ear nothing beneficial is gained by feigning deafness. A consequence of her daily choices, I neither saw nor heard from her for the next 17 years.

I lived fewer than five years with my mother but I will spend the remainder of my life dealing with the deep anguish that occasionally bullies its way into my conscious thoughts. Like a piece of emotional grit, lodged in a dark and unmapable fold of my soul, it flares up at will. One of the few, enduring memories I have of her follows an occasion when I was "knuckled up" by a group of older kids. When she got home she put a piece of raw meat on my swollen face. It was an old, Kentucky remedy designed to reduce swelling and bruising. She took me to see the movie, "Mighty Joe Young" but not before she made me go back out to confront the bullies. "Gonna make a man out of you," she said. That was interesting since she saw men as bridges to nowhere, wallets attached to a penis. That's not bitterness. It's history. That movie is the only thing I can remember doing with her. She insists there were other, maternal events but I remember none.

Jackie Kennedy said, "If we bungle raising our children, nothing else in life matters." Despite our staggering flaws and crippling limitations we remain the only creatures in the known universe capable of charting the

course of our days. If we "bungle" raising our children, therefore, it's likely not by accident. While there are few children on the planet unharmed by faulty parenting, there are, similarly, few parents unharmed by faulty children. But that doesn't satisfy the meaning of "bungle." Having children is something specifically more profound than just a notion and a parent, whether by accident or design, ought to at least plan on being present. Exceptions? Certainly. Extenuating circumstances can so limit a person's options that the luxury of choice is lost. But when the word "fun" is the only thing in the other side of the scale from your child, your choice will define you, forever.

Some words possess the power to create green places in memory, oases of comfort. They are words that elicit hope. Words like home, heaven, family, *mother*. Did you ever try to find an appropriate poem for Father's Day? I don't mean the tepid quatrains of a Hallmark card; I mean a full-blown poem that can make a *glass* eye weep. Good luck. Instead, we invent words like Kaiser, Caesar and Khan that all point to the same root: *father*. The *office* of Father doesn't move us to poetic excess. While it moves many to steel themselves it should move us to feel safe: protected. But the word, "mother," conjures feelings of a different sort, holding a unique place in our cultural consciousness. Respond to a black prisoner's insults with "Yo mamma," and he'll "splain" it to you another way.

Our mothers don't even have to be good, just good enough. We'll love them regardless because we're in love with the word and the rich promise it holds. The office of Mother is beyond reproach even when the mother is not. Discarded, inconvenient children needn't long travel "this, mortal coil" to unearth the universally, sacred bond that exists between mother and child. It is inviolable. A mother rat will attack if you stir her nest. Therefore, if my mother rejects me, *twice*, there must be something wrong *with me*. That's what a kid thinks. If we're lucky we learn better, later. The world's sorrow is that it's populated with people who didn't. Being a parent isn't always what it's cracked up to be but there really isn't a higher calling anywhere on the planet. The Pope is still one merit badge shy.

Love is not an instinct. It must be built one smile at a time. Love's sought after agenda is to anesthetize, encouraging us to excess in a growing state of fondness. The overflow of the heart's cup is, "Where you are is where I want to be." Presence, therefore, is both requirement and reward. Love's potential victims must be within bowshot of one another. In the strongest of arms its arrows shoot only so far. If you are not present, I cannot *learn* to love you. The seed will never take root. It has nothing to do with forgiveness or a vengeful heart. Distance becomes the natural by-product of a series of choices. Parents like my mother, though tragic victims themselves, shouldn't be surprised when their estranged babies respond like strangers. They are. I think of the choices my mother has made and then hear the Cowardly Lion asking another little girl suddenly awakened from her nightmare, "What did you learn Dorothy?"

John and "Betty Lou" Engelke were thoroughly wonderful people who, as much as possible, treated us as if we were their own. Unable to have children and frustrated with years of failed attempts at adoption, foster parenting became their next option. They *wanted* children. Ecstatic to have two brothers, theoretically potty-trained right out of the gate, they were possessed with a clear idea of a positive future. But we were traumatized. At a moment when we weren't looking, someone stole our family. It's so strange to me now, but we couldn't bring ourselves to call the Engelkes Mom and Dad. As bizarre as our lives were up to that point we still felt a fierce loyalty to what we understood as family. Calling them Mom and Dad was a betrayal. I'm certain therapists have an explanation for that but we referred to them as Uncle John and Aunt Betty. Initially, we were pretty ragged. When company came over Randy quietly crawled under the dinner table to look up women's dresses. I wasn't encumbered with the need to keep my hands to myself and, to us, the word "company" was French for "victims unaware." We both ended up in the office of a child psychologist within a year. Delightful savages at eight and seven, it was time to shave our fur, cut our horns and tag us.

This was far more than a temporary relocation. We'd fallen through a hole in the clouds into a renaissance. She was head nurse in the intensive care ward at one of Chicago's large hospitals. He owned a television repair shop in Cicero, hometown of Al Capone. The front part

of Uncle John's shop was a retail hobby shop selling model kits for planes, trains and automobiles. Bringing model kits home, he taught us how to build them paying attention to detail. Aunt Betty taught me how to read music and play piano and accordion. Randy learned trombone. She later secured lessons for trumpet and baritone so I could participate in the Junior High marching band and Orchestra. By the time I was 12, I played four instruments, performed publicly and wrote my first songs.

I've loved music as long as I can remember. "When words fail, music speaks,"ⁱⁱ was a sentiment I felt and understood. Listening to WLS and W-I-N-D radio was the only distraction or entertainment available to a "home alone" kid in the "Windy City." James Brown's "Night Train" and "Canadian Sunset" were the first two songs I remember committing to memory, learning to play "by ear." But Aunt Betty taught me to appreciate all types of music. Her collection of albums included the Inkspots, Mitch Miller, Porgy and Bess, Kingston Trio and all the great jazz instrumentalists of the time. The diversity of music in my own home finds its roots in her heart. Years later she died of cancer but very few people have had a more lasting, positive influence on my life than she.

The Engelke's property backed up against acres of open fields. Sloping upward toward the Chicago and Northwestern railroad tracks about 300 yards away, it made for some great sounds in the night. Torturing that field into softball diamonds, skating rinks and secret, underground forts, we also used it to raise pheasants and rabbits in a large, chicken-wire compound. We learned to grow vegetables, graft flowers and build something from nothing more than an idea. Spending two weeks each summer camping our way across America and Canada, we learned to fish, hunt, ride horses and all things pleasurable to boys. Backpacking on horses into the Grand Tetons, fly-fishing in cold, Canadian rivers and recording mountain lions scolding the night are things street kids just don't get to do. In our world nothing had existed unframed by concrete. Building everything from crystal radio sets to photo labs for developing pictures taken of the night sky we grew as human beings.

We regularly attended the local Congregational Church where, as a Boy Scout, I spent an entire year working toward the God and Country award. Of the many tasks essential to secure the award I taught an

adult Sunday school class, providing my first teaching assignment. Along with a learned respect for sacred things, a desire to be a good man was awakening in my little boy heart. My best friend, Jeff Nelson, and I started a group called "God's Little Helpers" and asked our 6th grade teacher if we could present it to the class. The idea was to rally our classmates to help elderly folks in our community with chores and errands. She succumbed to the flagrant cuteness of it all and it turned into an after school club. I think about that and wonder at its innocence. I also wonder what my life might have been had I allowed the Engelkes to adopt me. But I didn't. Unable to abandon the groundless hope that my mother would show up to claim me, it became my first, bitter lesson in false hope.

While mom was on her "Man sans Kids" road tour, we saw Gilbert several times each year. In 1961 he married Florence Ford, a full-blooded Chippewa Indian and wanted to bring all his children back together. My brothers and sisters were his by birth. I was not. In fact my legal name remained Kedrick Joseph Gregory. I wasn't eager to leave the Engelkes but Gilbert began telling me things like, "They don't love you. They get paid to care for you. Your family are the only ones who love you." Family. What a word to use on a kid who was just starting to learn what it meant. With continual coaxing from my younger siblings and the lure of big city adventure gnawing at me, I agreed to move back. It was the single, worst decision of my life. I was now 13.

ⁱ Hans Christian Anderson