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OVERLOOK'D

A Memoir

A FREE CHAPTER

Lost

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Chapter 1

LOST

Before my parents gave me away in court, my father lost me.

Not emotionally. Not in the vague way people say a parent "was never really there." He lost me in the plainest, ugliest sense of the word.

It was 1975 or '76. I was six or seven years old when my father took me with him on one of his drinking binges, dropped me off at a stranger's house, and disappeared so completely into alcohol, drugs, and gambling that he forgot where he had left me. For a while, he forgot he had taken me at all.

That happened before the courtroom. Before foster care. Before the system found more formal ways to move me from place to place. It happened while I was still living at home, if you could call it that.

My father was a violent alcoholic and a drug addict. He gambled too, mostly poker, and he was terrible at it. He could not win if his life depended on it, but that never stopped him from trying. The money we did not have had a way of disappearing into bottles, pills, cards, and whatever else called to him louder than his family did. What was left of our lives was built around the wreckage of his appetites.

When my father went on a binge, it was never just one night. He might be gone two days. He might be gone a week. He always came back eventually, usually broke, usually mean, often needing to beg for

his job back, and almost always carrying with him the threat of what the rest of us were about to pay for. He did not come home ashamed. He came home dangerous.

My mother knew this. We all knew it.

So when he came home one Friday wanting to go out drinking again, my mother had an idea. Looking back, I can see it for what it was: desperation disguised as strategy. She thought that if I went with him, he would have to come home. He could not disappear for days with a child in tow. He would have no choice, she must have thought, but to come back.

That idea only made sense if you believed my father's addictions still had some edge they would not cross.

She did not yet understand, or maybe could not bear to understand, that drinking and drugs and gambling had already made him the kind of man who could cross any line there was.

He took me with him.

I do not remember whether I chose to get in the car or whether I climbed in because children do what they are told and because defiance was not a safe instinct in our house. I remember the feeling more than the details—the uneasy awareness that I was being pulled into an adult world that was not for me, and the equally familiar feeling that none of my opinions on the matter counted.

He drove me to the part of Kingsport white people around us called by a vile, racist name back then. I will not use the full word here except to say that hearing adults say it was part of the air I grew up breathing. The ugliness of that name told you plenty about both the place I was being raised in and the people doing the naming. My father used it casually, like it was nothing.

He pulled up to a small house and took me inside.

An older Black couple lived there. They sold moonshine out of the house. I remember the kitchen sink because it did not have a trap underneath it. At that age I did not know much about plumbing, but I knew enough to notice when something looked wrong. Later, I learned why: If the police came, the couple could pour the moonshine

down the sink and there would be nothing sitting in the trap to give them away. Even as a child, I understood that this was a house where adults were always half ready for trouble.

My father left me there and went off to do what he had come to do.

Drink. Get high. Gamble. Lose money we did not have.

I waited for him to come back.

At first, I do not think I was afraid in a deep way. Children get used to strange circumstances faster than they should. When chaos is normal, you learn to accept almost anything as temporary. I probably thought he would be back later that night, or the next morning, or whenever men like him came back from the places that mattered more to them than home.

Night came, and he did not come back.

Then another day went by.

Then another.

The older couple fed me. That matters. In memory, it matters almost as much as the fact that my father left me there in the first place.

They fed me, and after a while they washed my clothes, too, because I had only what I was wearing when he dropped me off. I do not remember them making a speech about it. I do not remember them treating me like a problem. I remember care in its simplest form: food, clean clothes, a place to wait.

They did not owe me any of that.

My own father, the man who had brought me there, had vanished into his appetites so completely that he was no longer functioning as a father at all. But these two people, who had no obligation to me, did what the situation in front of them required. They took care of the child who had been left in their house.

There is a strange kind of humiliation in being a child and realizing that strangers are handling your existence with more seriousness than your own parent is.

I do not know what story they told themselves about me. Maybe they knew all about men like my father. Maybe they had seen this kind of thing before. Maybe they knew children get left in the middle

of adult wreckage more often than respectable people care to admit. Whatever they thought, they did not send me away hungry. They did not leave me in dirty clothes. They did not make me pay for the sins of the man who had left me there.

I waited six days.

That is a long time to a child. It is long enough for time to stop feeling like time. Long enough to quit measuring in days and start measuring in smaller units: meals, bedtimes, mornings, the angle of light in a room, the sound of cars pulling up that are never the car you are waiting for.

I do not remember what I thought had happened. Children are practical in strange ways. Maybe I thought he would remember soon. Maybe I thought my mother would come. Maybe I thought no one knew where I was. Maybe all those thoughts took turns. What I know is this: I waited because waiting was the only job I had.

The worst part did not happen while I was waiting in that house.

The worst part was what I later learned: My father had gone home after three days without me.

He walked back into our house without his son.

And he did not even realize it.

He forgot not only where he had left me; he forgot that he had left me at all.

That is the kind of fact that sits in a life like a nail. It is too blunt to be poetic and too sharp to ignore. There are people who abandon children in anger. There are people who abandon children out of cowardice. My father did something with its own special kind of horror in it: He abandoned me because his addictions made me forgettable.

He did not leave me behind because I mattered enough to reject.

He left me behind because for a while I stopped existing in his mind.

Three days after he got home without me, he finally found the house where I was again.

I do not know whether he showed up ashamed, irritated, sober, drunk, or simply inconvenienced. The emotional weather around my

father changed fast and without warning. But whatever expression he wore, the truth beneath it was the same. He had done exactly what my mother had hoped my presence would prevent. He had vanished into himself and left me in the custody of chance.

That was one of the lessons of my childhood: Adults will sometimes make plans around a dangerous man as if danger can be reasoned with. Put the boy in the car, maybe he will come home. Say the right thing, maybe he will calm down. Try not to set him off, maybe tonight will pass.

But addiction and violence do not honor bargains. My mother's idea was not foolish because she was foolish. It was foolish because she was trying to create logic inside a life that had stopped obeying logic a long time before.

What stays with me most is not even my father's failure, though that failure was total. It is the contrast.

The man who was supposed to protect me forgot I existed.

The two strangers he left me with fed me and washed my clothes.

There is something revealing in that, something that took me years to understand. Respectability and goodness are not the same thing. Broken-looking people are not always the dangerous ones. The world I grew up in had firm ideas about who mattered, who was trash, who was decent, who was suspect. But when I was a child abandoned in somebody else's house, the people who showed me basic humanity were the very people men like my father looked down on.

I have never forgotten that.

I also have never forgotten how ordinary the whole thing felt by the standards of my childhood. That may be the saddest part. The day my father lost me should have stood out as impossible. Instead, it fit too easily into the larger disorder of our lives. Violence, terror, hunger, waiting, money gone, grown-ups gone, apologies that fixed nothing, return without repair—this was the climate I lived in. Being lost by my father was not an exception to the rule. It was a pure expression of it.

People sometimes ask what abandonment feels like, and they imagine the courtroom because it is clean in its brutality. Two sentences.

Two exits. A child left behind. But abandonment often starts earlier and in messier ways. It starts in smaller rehearsals. It starts in the times a child is not chosen, not protected, not remembered, not considered. It starts in the long training of being made to understand that your welfare is negotiable.

That week taught me something I would not have words for until much later.

I could disappear, and the world might keep moving.

That is a dangerous lesson for a child to learn.

It settles into the bones. It teaches you not to expect being searched for. It teaches you not to assume being missed. It teaches you that rescue is uncertain and that your own existence may not weigh heavily enough in the minds of others to alter their plans.

I was still just a boy. I did not know that this was only one chapter in a much longer story of being overlooked. I did not know there would be a courtroom ahead, and foster homes, and cruelties I had not yet met, and a porch I would sleep under, and a lie I would have to tell just to qualify for help. I did not know that years later I would meet a family whose front door was never locked and finally begin to understand what it feels like to be taken in.

All I knew then was simpler.

My father had taken me with him.

He had left me with strangers.

He had gone home without me.

And for days, nobody came.

That was not the day my parents gave me away.

But it was one of the first times life taught me how easily I could be lost.