

CHAPTER 1

AWAKING EARLY, AFTER A fitful night in which I slept little, I make my way to the kitchen where I get the ancient percolator going. After pouring myself a mug of the steaming brew, I make my way to the porch overlooking the small backyard. It is not yet daylight, but to the east I can see the first hint of morning breaching the darkness. There is a chill in the air, but I know it won't last once the sun pushes its way into the sky. Here on the high plains of north-eastern Colorado the nights are cool, but during July and August the heat returns with a vengeance each day. Taking a sip of coffee, I position myself on the porch rail and contemplate my uncertain future.

Although my mother and I were not close, her death has left me more than a little disoriented. I telephoned her infrequently and almost never came to see her; still, knowing she was here seemed to give me roots. Having lost my father at an early age, I now feel totally alone. Of course there's my sister Helen, but we have almost nothing in common. She's married to a local minister and to my way of thinking is something of a religious fanatic, while I haven't darkened a church door since I left home nearly ten years ago.

I am twenty-nine years old, and, although I would never admit outloud, my life is pretty much a mess. I dropped out of college after two years, and since then I have drifted from one dead-end job to

another. Currently I'm a lineman for the power company, a good enough job as jobs go, but not something I want to do for the rest of my life. My divorce was final a few weeks ago, and I'm still reeling from the fallout. Thankfully there were no children, or things could have been worse.

My wife, or I should say ex-wife, said she loved me, but she could no longer bear to watch me destroy myself. Protesting, I said, "I don't drink or do drugs, at least nothing to excess. I go to work most days and come home when I am supposed to, so what are you talking about?"

"Bryan," she said, her eyes brimming with tears, "I love you, but you are so full of anger and bitterness you can't receive my love, and it's killing me."

I argued with her, professing not to know what she was talking about, but I knew all right. But knowing something and being able to do anything about it, or even wanting to do anything about it, are distinctly different things. Frustrated by my obstinacy she finally moved out and filed for divorce.

Thinking about it now, I realize I am tense with anger. Taking two or three deep breaths, I try to calm myself. Slowly my pulse rate returns to normal, and I find myself listening to the rumble of the big rigs out on the interstate at least a mile away. For a moment I envy the drivers' solitude and their freedom, but I know it is only an illusion. Like the rest of us they have deadlines to meet, and, though they may be hundreds of miles from home, they pack their troubles with them, of that I am sure.

Taking a sip of coffee, I realize it has grown cold, so I dump it into the flower bed at the base of the porch and retrace my steps into the kitchen. Rinsing out my cup, I place it in the rack to drain, noticing, maybe for the first time, that Mom never owned a dishwasher. Reluctantly I admit that her life wasn't easy; still, I cannot bring myself

to feel much sympathy for her. Difficult though her life was, it was of her own making, at least in large part. She could have remarried. She didn't have to try to raise my sister and me by herself.

Wandering through the modest house in which I grew up, I realize that I can recall only a few good memories. Mostly, I remember my mother's sadness. She tried to be brave for Helen and me, but her grief tainted everything. Birthdays and holidays were strained affairs in which our forced gaiety inevitably succumbed to the omnipresent shadow of my absent father. Although I was too young to fully understand what had happened, I knew it was something terrible, a tragedy of such magnitude that our family might never recover.

The first few months were the worst. Many a night I would awaken and hear Mom sobbing, a sound so sad I thought my heart would break. Sometimes, I would slip from my bed and make my way on tiptoe, down the dark hallway, to sit on the floor before the closed door that shut her bedroom off from the rest of the house. One night, when her sobs seemed ceaseless, I dared to open her bedroom door, something that was strictly forbidden. When I did, so great was her grief that it seemed to suck me across the room and into her arms. For a moment she let her defenses down, and we clung to each other, mother and child, taking what comfort we could from one another.

Things might have been different if we could have built on that moment, but too soon she reverted to her rigidity and sent me back to my room—an act so grievous to me that I have never been able to forgive her. In my more magnanimous moments I am almost able to believe she thought she was protecting me, but she was wrong. By trying to shield me from her grief she left me to grieve alone, a burden no child should have to bear.

Looking back, I think that was when my grief turned into anger. For years it was just a wordless knot in the pit of my stomach, a smol-

dering resentment I could neither deny nor explain. I knew it was related to the tragedy that had befallen our family, but I couldn't explain how. My mother eventually worked through her grief, at least to some extent, but I have never been able to rid myself of this toxic rage. More than any other factor it defines who I am and charts my destiny, whatever that may be.

The ringing of the telephone jerks me from my troubling thoughts, and I hurry across the living room to answer it. Holding the phone on my shoulder, I manage a hello while fumbling through my pockets for my watch. It's my sister, and her condescending tone immediately grates on my already frayed nerves.

"Bryan, I just wanted to check in with you and see if there is anything we can do." When I don't respond, she continues. "Would you like for us to come by and pick you up on our way to the church? It's no trouble."

Forcing myself not to react, I reply, "Thank you, but I prefer to drive."

"Are you sure? It's no trouble."

"I'm sure."

"And Bryan, please don't be late."

Although I have a lifelong history of tardiness, I resent being mothered by her. Refusing to dignify her request with a response, I allow a sullen silence to hang between us. "One other thing," she ventures at last. "If you don't have anything to wear to the funeral, Rob would be more than happy to loan you a suit, or if you prefer, a sport coat."

"Helen," I reply, making no attempt to disguise my anger, "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, so stop mothering me!"

Slamming down the phone, I pace the cramped living room as my anger subsides. At first glance her concern seems genuine, but I know better. What concerns her is not my well-being, but the family image. Rob is the senior pastor of a prestigious church, and she is afraid I will embarrass them in front of their congregation.

EPILOGUE

SEPTEMBER 1971

I AM LIVING ALONE in an old farmhouse just outside of Fort Collins, Colorado, nestled up against the foothills of the Rockies. As I write this, I am sitting at a makeshift desk that I have constructed out of two sawhorses and a sheet of plywood. It sits before the west window in the front room, facing the mountains. To my left is a framed black-and-white family photo taken in 1946. We are standing in front of the mission house and behind it the towering trees of the Amazon rain forest block out the sky. Helen is clutching a homemade doll while looking shyly into the camera. I'm glaring up at my father who has a firm grip on my shoulder. Of course, both Mother and Father look severe. It's the only picture I have of my family, and I treasure it.

To my right there are two framed photos in vivid color. In the first, Diana and Eurico are sitting side by side in the swing beneath the *samaúma* tree. She has her arm around his narrow shoulders, and he is smiling up at her, his red shirt bright against the green background. In the second, Diana is sitting on the porch step in front of her small house on the mission compound. Her hair, the color of new honey, is streaked by the sun. She is smiling bravely, but there is sadness in her blue eyes, and I cannot look at her without getting a lump in my throat.

My father's Bible and his journals are sitting between two book-ends at the front edge of my desk, in the very center. Next to them there is a coffee cup full of cheap ballpoint pens, a pair of scissors, and a letter opener. I'm writing in a lined journal with a kerosene lamp at my elbow and a cup of coffee that has now grown cold. This is where I come when I need solitude but cannot bear to be alone.

When I first returned from the Amazon, I considered going back to college to study photojournalism. But after thinking about it, I realized that while I have a good eye, there's no art in my photography, nothing to set it apart. Truthfully, I'll never be more than an amateur shutterbug. I love it, but I have no talent for photography.

Much to my surprise, I have discovered that I have a gift with words. Like my father, I am mostly tongue-tied, but with a pen in my hand all the inarticulate yearnings of my soul seem to find their voice. For me, writing is like coming home. It's like I have finally found what I've been searching for my whole life. I want to be published. I want to write novels that tens of thousands of people will read, but what fulfills me is the writing itself. When I write, I feel alive, and it seems that God smiles on me.

I've enrolled at Colorado State University with a major in creative writing. Classes start in about ten days, and as hard as it may be to believe, I'm actually looking forward to it. I was always a poor student, but I think that was more a reflection of my lack of interest than any lack of intellect. For the first time ever, I'm excited about going to school.

Never a day goes by that I don't think of Diana, Eurico too. They continue to live together in Diana's small house on the mission station. The adoption is finally official, much to the consternation of the foreign mission board. Who knows what kind of disciplinary action they might have taken if Gordon Arnold hadn't interceded on Diana's

behalf? To their way of reasoning, it only takes one exception to set a bad precedent. Be that as it may, Diana and Eurico are a family, and I couldn't be happier. Yes I could—if I was also a part of the family—but that can never be.

Leaving Diana and returning to the States was the hardest thing I have ever done. It ripped the heart out of me, but even worse was the knowledge that I was breaking Diana's heart once again. I wasn't being selfish; not this time. In fact, it may prove to be the most selfless thing I will ever do. I can only liken it to a mother giving up her beloved baby for adoption. She denies herself, risks her child's misunderstanding, maybe even her child's lifelong animosity, to do what's best for the child. I did it for Diana, and it nearly killed me.

During those final days in the Amazon, we discussed every possible scenario, left no option unexplored. Late into the night we planned and schemed and argued, but when all was said and done, there was no way we could make a life together. Diana could not marry me and continue to serve as a missionary, even had I been willing to live in the Amazon. Her denomination has a prohibition against ministers or missionaries marrying someone who has been divorced. If she were to marry me, the Department of Foreign Missions would rescind her appointment, and her denomination would defrock her. No matter how much we love each other, I could never permit her to suffer such a loss or the inevitable public humiliation that would accompany it. Nor could I let Diana give up her call and return with me to the States. God has first claim on her life, and whether she realizes it or not, turning her back on her call would kill something vital inside of her. In time she would come to resent me, to blame me for the loss of her life's purpose, and then her love for me would die. It was better, I reasoned, to suffer a clean break, painful though it was, than to slowly destroy each other, as inevitably we must.

So I sit here late into the night, a kerosene lamp my only light, and remember. I remember the way she looked the first time I saw her and how beautiful she was sitting in the swing beneath the towering *samaúma* tree. Her eyes were the color of the Colorado sky, and her face was full of laughter, the afternoon sun highlighting her blonde hair. I remember her gentle touch when she cared for me while I had malaria, and the terror I felt when she plunged down the mountain. I remember the soft pinging of a gentle rain against the corrugated tin roof, creating what will always be in my mind a kind of music, a love song. I fixed those images in my mind, carefully noting each detail. Even then I knew it would be important later when all I would have are the memories, and so it is. When I look back on my days in the Amazon, this is what I remember—the soft glow of a kerosene lamp, the murmur of rain on the roof, and Diana’s fingers in my hair. And no matter where my life’s journey may take me, the drumming of rain on a tin roof will always sound like love to me—Diana’s love.