

CHAPTER I

Deathbeds Are Waiting

I figured out early on that my dad cared about two things: God and sports.

When it came to sports, I never had a chance. My sister, Carol, had it even worse, being a girl in the pre–Title IX era, meaning she didn’t even register on Dad’s radar screen and never got any attention at all. She married at nineteen, when I was two, mainly to get out of a house where she was always the moon to her brothers’ suns. She grew into an adult who craved attention, provoking it with outrageous behavior when necessary, determined to get herself noticed some way, any way. Once free of our parents’ home, she stopped going to church and dyed her hair blonde and wore halter tops and short shorts, all behaviors that scandalized Mom and Dad. I had to give her one thing: she found a way to get their attention.

My brothers had it easier. The one family commitment I can remember Dad always keeping was attending any sporting event in which my brothers competed. Alan, the oldest, was the handsome, responsible kid who ran relay on a high school track team

with two guys who later won Olympic gold medals. Alan was always my favorite. While my relationships with Mike and Paul were characterized by long spans of inattention interrupted by bursts of terror and mockery, Alan always paid me attention. He gave me the only nickname I ever liked—“Champ”—and he actually tried to *teach* me to swim rather than throwing me in the deep end of the pool to see if I would literally sink or swim, as Mike and Paul did. He was my hero.

Mike, the middle boy (I was too young to really count), suffered from the same problems as many middle kids; he was always overlooked a bit, always overshadowed a bit. He ran track too, but he was never quite as good as Alan. He played football too, but he was never as good as Paul, which must have especially galled him as he was the older of the two. Skinny and nervous, he would bite his fingernails to the quick, so I remember them as only nubs. He was often angry, and he scared me.

Paul, the youngest of my brothers, was the golden child. Handsome, athletic, he was good at the most sacred of sports—football—and talk of him “going pro” floated around the house for as long as I can remember. Everything seemed to come effortlessly to Paul—sports, friends, girls, biceps, washboard abs—all of which I spent my own early years noticing I lacked. Absorbed in himself and his own world, Paul barely noticed my existence. But Paul’s golden status curdled as he became a bullshit artist as an adolescent and an adult, one who never took responsibility for his actions, always telling tales that were beyond belief to avoid the consequences of his behavior. He totaled Mike’s car while driving it illegally at fourteen, claiming that he lost control because he was trying to get a grasshopper off the windshield. Thanks to his good looks and charm, he pulled off these tall tales time and time again, and never learned the lessons of hard work and responsibility that Mom sought so desperately to impart.

Like a white-trash version of the Kennedys, our family recreation revolved around intensely competitive games of touch foot-

ball, church softball games, and basketball at the Y. I was always expected to get on the field and play alongside my dad and brothers. This was a bit of a challenge, as my brothers and their friends outweighed me by as much as fifty to a hundred pounds. Most of the time, I just ran around, waving my arms frantically, calling “Me! Me! Throw it to me!”—as if someone was actually going to throw me the ball (hope springs eternal). On the occasions when I did get the ball—events as frequent as appearances of Halley’s comet—my six-, seven-, eight-year-old hands would invariably fail to grasp the adult-size basketball or football, and after exclaiming their disgust—“Come on, Kevin! Catch the damned ball!”—they’d go back to ignoring me and I’d go back to running around like a chicken with its head cut off. When playing on the opposing team, if I got the football, my brothers saw golden opportunities to create fumbles and would nail me as hard as possible to jar the ball loose. I would fly five, ten, fifteen feet before landing and coughing up the ball, watching helplessly as someone picked it up and ran it back for a touchdown. The basketball court was even worse: if I had the ball, my brothers and their friends would either quickly steal it or, if I managed to hoist a shot, they would slam the ball back in my face with a force that would do Shaquille O’Neal proud. I got my revenge some two decades later, at a family reunion in the late eighties, when I, a healthy twenty-something, ran circles around my overweight, middle-aged brothers on the basketball court, stealing the ball at will, until my sister-in-law Claudette (always my biggest champion within the family) yelled out from the stands, “Payback’s a bitch, now, ain’t it!” She remembered.

Strangely enough, I did not develop an aversion to sports. My dad and brothers set the standard for masculinity, part of which was participating in sports, and I yearned to live up to it. At age six, Dad tried to sneak me into Pop Warner football two years before I was old enough to play. I was big for my age and Dad—ever the con artist—thought he could convince the coach to make an ex-

ception for me. One warm Florida evening, just after he had gotten off work, Dad brought me along to the playing field where he was picking up Paul from practice. The sun was just starting to go down and I stood by the car while Dad took the coach by the arm and walked him out onto the playing field. I had never been so nervous in my life: somehow, I thought, if I got onto the football team, I could make Dad proud and he would love me just as much as he loved Paul and Mike and Alan. I pictured myself in my shoulder pads, helmet, and jersey, Dad on the sideline cheering me on, giving me the same kind of attention my brothers got. I was sure Dad would succeed: he was my dad, and a minister, how could the coach say no? But when he got back to the car, he had a look of disappointment on his face. Once we were all in the car he told us that the coach said I was just too young to play and would have to wait. Since Dad couldn't have been the one who had failed, I was filled with shame: there had to be something wrong with me, I must not have measured up in some way and that was why the coach rejected me. I just wasn't enough of a man.

Having failed at sports, I tried the other way to get Dad's attention: church. Dad's journey to his ministry as a fundamentalist preacher was a bit unusual. Born in 1924, Dad hailed from Taunton, Massachusetts, one of the mill towns that dot that state and fueled the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. His parents had a classic mill-town marriage. His father, Marlitt Fisk Jennings, was a flinty old "swamp Yankee" (in other words, someone whose family had somehow failed to make any money despite English ancestors who had come over in the 1600s) who emoted a little less than the Plymouth Rock he took me to see when I was six. His mother, Merilda Ora (Carmel) Jennings, was a French Canadian whose family was among those who had immigrated to work in the mills in the late 1800s, speaking not a word of English, replacing the Irish as the lowest of the low in New England's white ethnic pecking order.

A restless, rebellious kid, Dad jumped at the chance to join the

merchant marine during World War II, having been rejected from the “fighting” armed forces because of his medical exam, and he ended up in Miami. There he met my mom, whose family had migrated from the Appalachian hill country of Tennessee, their ancestral home, to take advantage of the jobs the war had created. Mom was already engaged to another man, who was fighting in the Pacific, but the five-foot-eight, athletic, dark-haired, olive-skinned, handsome Yankee swept the little dark-haired lady off her feet with his jitterbugging (she always loved to dance) and his “foreign” ways. (His resemblance to his Quebecois ancestors was passed down to me, complete with the big nose.) She wrote the fighting man a Dear John letter, and Chet and Alice were married in 1945.

Theirs was indeed a mixed marriage. When Mom brought Dad home to meet her parents, his thick Yankee accent and their molasses Appalachian ones were so dissimilar that Mom finally had to translate for them, as each was baffled by what the other was saying. Descended from Confederate veterans, the Johnson family looked askance at the Northerner. When my mother’s older brother Fred returned from fighting in Europe, he met my dad, was polite, waited until Dad left the room, and then snarled, “I can’t believe you married a fucking Yankee,” before stalking out.

As countless bumper stickers promise, “Jesus Saves,” and he would save my dad and his marriage. When Mom and Dad were visiting her family in Knoxville in the early fifties, Mom’s brother Fred—the one who had cursed her for marrying a Yankee—introduced Dad to Jesus, and Dad accepted him as his personal Savior and decided to start his life over with a clean slate, as Jesus had cleansed his soul. Dad told Mom of his plans, of how he wanted to move south and become a preacher and save men’s souls so they could find Jesus the way he had. As a preacher’s wife, Mom would have to accept Jesus too, of course, and (despite having no religion growing up) Mom eagerly did so, happy to be saved—and saved from the North, a land that she hated, where the water in the toi-

let of her lakeside cottage froze in the winter. She must have been skeptical about the leopard changing his spots, but she went back to Massachusetts, packed up her three kids and their belongings (easy to do as they didn't own much of anything), and headed south.

Dad went to a seminary in New Orleans, with Mom working as a telephone operator to put him through school, connecting calls all night and then tending babies all day while Dad was in class. Dad got his first church in Pleasant Home, Alabama, in the mid-fifties. With the church and the parsonage a mile from the nearest electricity, it wasn't the best post. Mom cooked on a woodstove and literally swept rattlesnakes out of the house. She bore a fourth child, Paul, in nearby Andalusia, Alabama, in 1956. These were all hardships, but they were making a new start, and things would assuredly get better from here. Southern Baptist ministers are somewhat akin to free agents in professional sports; they are hired and fired by congregations at will, with the more entrepreneurial ones starting their own congregations. A minister's personal charisma was the foundation of his success, and his ability to deliver a knockout sermon was the only guarantee of any kind of job security. Dad believed he had the gift, "the Calling," and Dad and Mom thought Pleasant Home was but the start of his journey to bigger and better things.

But Dad was soon booted from Pleasant Home, the first of a series of congregations that would fire him before and after my birth. As a kid, from my view in the front pew, I thought Dad was great and couldn't figure out why he could never seem to get or hold on to a congregation. I didn't understand yet that his Yankee accent was alienating to his Southern audiences or know that he had an unfortunate habit of sleeping with the deacon's wives, making it hard to hold on to a pulpit once he got it. Listening to Mom (who doctored the truth for her own purposes and wouldn't come clean about Dad until I was in my midthirties), I learned that Dad was too strong in the Gospel for the Pharisees and hypocrites who

occupied the pews behind ours. Like Jesus, he was a prophet being scorned in his own land for telling the truth too clearly and too often.

By the time I was born they were back in Florida, where Mom and Dad had first met in 1945. Florida was Dad's Promised Land. He too hated the cold, snow, and ice of New England, and had vowed as a child that he would live in a warm climate one day. The late fifties were a good time to land in southern Florida, as the region was just beginning to take off economically and was made habitable by air-conditioning (Florida would aptly choose John Gorrie, considered the father of refrigeration and air-conditioning, as its representative in the National Statuary Collection in the U.S. Capitol building). Celebrated Northerners like Jackie Gleason were moving down to the Sunshine State. Jobs were plentiful, and Dad could always find something to do between congregations.

The Southern Baptist Church was the central institution of our lives. First there were the services: Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night prayer meeting. Then there were the choir rehearsals one or two nights a week; Dad loved to sing, and Mom had a mean alto that made her a frequent soloist at Sunday services. And then there were the softball leagues, which Dad and my brothers always played in. Throw in the "pageants" we rehearsed for Christmas and Easter, the potlucks (where my dad would never eat, as he had a paranoia about flies; he would heap his plate with food, flattering the church ladies on their congealed salads and potato salads and macaroni salads and then quietly dump it all behind the nearest bush while no one was looking), and your week was pretty much filled up. Religion, arts, athletics: the church provided it all. If we had just moved, we'd simply find the nearest Southern Baptist church and plug into a ready-made community.

On the nights when we weren't playing church softball or at Wednesday night prayer meeting or rehearsing with the choir, my family would attend revivals or "crusades." These gatherings, held

in open fields or tents or churches or indoor arenas, depending on the reputation of the preacher, would go on for hours, often extending over multiple nights. Crusades were thrilling events: the big ones, like Billy Graham's, would attract thousands of people, feature choirs with hundreds of voices, and had all the excitement of a rock concert. The smaller, local ones, in churches or tents or fields, provided a chance to see friends and to check out new talent, unknown preachers who were making a name for themselves on the traveling revival circuit. The crowd would always provide entertainment as well: when especially moved by a preacher, some participants would fall to their knees and call out "Hallelujah, thank you Jesus!" or run down the aisles sobbing to find a counselor to whom they would witness that they had accepted Christ. As entertainment, it beat the hell out of church softball.

The main attraction of each crusade (there was always one preacher who was the headliner, like Billy Graham) needed warm-up acts in the form of local preachers. Dad saw this as his chance to grab the golden ring. If he could get up at a crusade and wow the crowd, he'd surely win a congregation and we could finally settle down. Crusades became for Dad what auditions are for aspiring actors, and we often found ourselves on hot summer nights swatting mosquitoes in some tent while Dad tried to summon the Spirit to give the sermon that would bring security to our lives.

One such crusade took place in a small town called Goulds, south of Miami. It was a hot, humid Florida night, when I couldn't have been more than six. Humidity and heat notwithstanding, we always dressed up when headed to the house of the Lord. I had on my requisite short-sleeved white dress shirt and clip-on tie (Dad wore the same, but he wore long sleeves and a real tie), and Mom had on her pink suit, my favorite of her outfits. The church hosting the crusade was a modest one, newly constructed, white stucco like everything else being thrown up in south Florida during the boom of the sixties, but lacking air-conditioning, so that the windows were wide open and bugs swarmed in. Over the din of whir-

ring fans and flapping church programs parishioners used to try to cool themselves, Dad made his pitch for their immortal souls. He painted his picture of the terrors of hell, lakes of fire where you would burn for eternity, which surely awaited you if you did not accept Jesus as your personal Savior. He warned that death could come at any time, even on the drive home tonight, and that you had to be prepared to meet your Maker, you had to be right with God, or else the jaws of hell yawned wide for you. I was terrified and thrilled by his oratory: Dad was going to save people tonight, save them from eternal damnation. I was so proud to be his son.

At the end of his sermon, Dad made the Call. The Call was a fervent plea by the preacher for you to accept Jesus as your personal Savior and thereby be washed clean of your sins and be saved from burning in a lake of fire for eternity. After making the Call, Dad always asked the choir to sing "Softly and Tenderly" as he waited for sinners to come down the aisle to repent and accept Jesus. I can hear it to this day . . .

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
calling for you and for me;
see, on the portals he's waiting and watching,
watching for you and for me.*

Refrain:

*Come home, come home;
ye who are weary come home;
earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
calling, O sinner, come home!
Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing,
passing from you and from me;
shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming,
coming for you and for me.*

I would wait anxiously, breathlessly, to see if any of the sinners would come home, would accept Jesus, or if they would leave him

at the portal, waiting and watching. Would they continue to risk eternal damnation should they lose control of the steering wheel, skid off the road, and perish on the drive home?

After the sinners had accepted Jesus and the crusade wound down, I walked hand in hand with my dad that night across the darkened church grounds toward the parking lot. I had never loved him the way I loved him that night—as he stood at the pulpit, making the Call, holding the hands of the sinners who stumbled sobbing down the aisle into his grasp to find Jesus, to find salvation. I desperately wanted to be special to him, to bring to his face the joy I saw when the sinners responded to the Call, so I decided it was time to be saved myself.

I looked up hopefully into his face and said, “Dad, I want to accept Jesus as my personal Savior.”

Instead of joy on his face, I found a frown. “Kevin, you’re too young to be saved.”

This wasn’t the response I was hoping for. “Why?” I asked.

“Accepting Jesus as your Savior means giving your life over to him. It’s a big decision that you need to be able to make knowing what that means, and you’re too young to know what it means yet.”

I strenuously objected. “That’s not true, Dad! I do know what it means!”

“No, Kevin, you don’t. You can’t yet. We’re not like Catholics, who baptize babies at birth before they know anything. That doesn’t count. You have to *choose* to be baptized, and you’re just not old enough to make that choice yet. You’ll just have to wait.”

I would have to wait. I was crestfallen. Once again, I didn’t measure up. Would I ever?

But there was a deeper, darker, scarier implication than disappointing my dad to the problem of not being saved. The next day I waited until Dad had left for work and approached Mom in the kitchen to ask her some questions.

“Mom, is it true what Dad preaches, that people who don’t accept Jesus will go to hell?”

“Of course it’s true,” she answered. “You have to accept Jesus as your personal Savior to be saved. The Bible says, ‘For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. . . . But he that believeth not is condemned.’”

This was troubling news. “But what about people who’ve never heard the Gospel, Mom, who live in Africa or someplace where there are no preachers? Will they go to hell?”

“Well, yes, that’s sad, but they will still go to hell.”

“But that’s not fair! They’ve never heard the Gospel! It’s not their fault!”

“The Bible says, ‘No man may cometh unto the Father except by me,’ Kevin, and those folks don’t get an exception just because they didn’t know any better.”

I took a deep breath and then I asked the question that was really on my mind.

“What about little kids, babies even, who weren’t old enough to accept Jesus before they died—will they go to hell?”

Here Mom paused, caught between her maternal instinct to tell her obviously distraught son that it would all be okay and the rigid truth of the Gospel as we practiced it. She was torn, but she couldn’t deny the Gospel, so she replied, “Well, I guess they go to hell, too.”

I was stunned: I was going to go to hell, and Dad was going to let it happen! The sermons, the crusades, the hymns always emphasized that death was lurking, that

*Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing,
passing from you and from me;
shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming,
coming for you and for me.*

Deathbeds were coming for me. I just knew it. And I was going to hell.

So, by age six, I had figured out that the world was unfair, that death and damnation loomed at every turn, and that God was more intent on punishment than mercy. I had a profound sense that disaster was always about to strike, and that we were powerless to stop it from destroying our lives. The world was a bad place, where bad things happened, like they did to the sinners in darkest Africa, like they did to babies who never got to accept Jesus. It was only a matter of time until our turn came.

And then I turned eight.