



my journey . . .  
*from skepticism to faith*

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# 1



I woke up earlier than usual that day. It was still dark outside. I dressed quickly to do my chores, distracted by the suspense that had been building for days. Leaving the house, I walked to the barn as I had done a thousand times before.

*Perhaps today will be the day*, I thought, feeding a bucket of oats to my horse, Dolly. She looked at me with her big brown eyes that always set me at ease. I could almost hear her thinking, *Can I come with you?*

I laughed and stroked her muzzle. “We’ll see, Dolly. We’ll see.” She neighed softly, comfortingly. I hurried to do my other chores, but even though I was still unfinished at seven o’clock, I ran into the house looking for Mom. *The chores can wait*, I thought to myself.

In the kitchen, Wayne Bailey, our hired hand, was washing dishes. He was a tall, thin man with a long, pointed nose. Sometimes I thought he looked scary; other times I thought he looked comical as he walked about the house with his apron on, stooping to sweep up the dust in the corners or from under our worn furniture.

“Where’s Mom?”

Wayne looked up from his dishes, his eyes narrowing. “Why do you wanna know?” he asked.

I played dumb, pretending to yawn. “Just wonderin’.”

“She’s out with your dad.”

My eyes widened. “They movin’ the house already?” I was so excited that I could scarcely get the words out.

“What do you need to know for?”

I studied Wayne’s face for a clue. “They’re movin’ the house, ain’t they!” I exclaimed.

Wayne pretended to scrub extra hard on a frying pan. His silence said it all. I ran to my room to change into clean bib overalls and a red checkered shirt I’d set aside for the occasion. Reappearing moments later, I tucked my shirt into my pants and headed for the door.

Wayne glared at me. “Your mom said you can’t go nowhere ’til you finish your chores!”

“The chores is finished!” I retorted, bolting out the door.

In the distance, I could see people walking back and forth along the ridge of a nearby hill. There were cars and trucks parked along the sides of the hill as well. I ran as fast as my eleven-year-old legs could carry me. This was one event I was not going to miss. No, sir. This was like having the circus come to town—only better. The circus was coming into my own backyard!

My older brother, Wilmot Jr., or “Junior” as we called him, was going to move the itinerant farmworkers’ house, situated on the top of the hill, to about a mile

or so down the road. For some reason, this made my parents terribly upset. Every time the subject came up for discussion, Mom would cry. I wasn't sure why this upset her and my dad; they wouldn't tell me, though there was talk about how Junior's wife was dominating him, or some such thing, and putting foolish ideas in his head.

There was also talk of a "law suit" and how Junior was taking Mom and Dad to the "cleaners." I asked Mom what a "law suit" looked like and why it cost so much to get it cleaned. The questions only made her more upset.

"You're too young to understand," she'd say, going on to give me an explanation anyway. It seemed that Junior claimed my dad had promised him the house. My dad claimed he had done no such thing, but who knows? Dad was a heavy drinker, and he'd say things he later regretted or didn't remember having said. His daily drinking regimen was between two and three bottles of cheap wine. Sometimes he'd get violent (usually as he was getting drunk), then he'd be incoherent and passive.

For me, however, all this talk about "lies" and "law suits" was best left to the grown-ups to sort out. My mind was caught up in other things. *How are they going to move a house?* I wondered. That was the question I wanted answered. Were helicopters going to fly in, lift the house up, and carry it across the mile or so of farmland to its new location? Or maybe airplanes were going to swoop down and haul it away on thick,

strong ropes. I had no idea, but I sure wasn't going to miss the show.

I was out of breath by the time I reached the top of the hill. Already, big tractors were positioned around the house, and a crew of workmen was securing the sides of the house with lines. I saw my mom and dad glaring at Junior, who was standing next to the house. A crowd of neighbors and folks from town were laughing and carrying on while they dug up the shrubbery and small

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trees my mom had planted around the house. I'd been expecting a party, but this had an odd feel to it. Something wasn't right.

I watched as my father walked over and grabbed Junior by the wrist to stop him from digging up the

plants. Junior jerked his arm away, and Dad stumbled backward. Mom made her way toward the crowd as well, waving her handkerchief as if calling for a truce. The crowd ignored her, gathering around Dad and scolding him like an ignorant child. I heard words that turned my ears red. Then the crowd turned on Mom and began insulting her, using the filthiest, most vile language you can imagine. For a moment I looked into the faces of these "good folks" I had known all my life. How could they be calling my mom and dad such names? Weren't they our friends?

My dad, who had already been drinking that

morning, slipped on the muddy ground and fell on his backside, drawing further jeers from the crowd. I ran to my mother, afraid she might fall, too, as she tried to help him up. I'll never forget the look on her face. She looked at me with the eyes of someone drowning, someone who had struggled to stay afloat amid swirling currents and was now too weak to continue. I could see her giving up and letting go, resigning herself to a watery grave. I looked down at my freshly pressed bib overalls and red checkered shirt. There were flecks of mud on my pants. It had started to rain.

I looked around once more. This wasn't going to be a party, I realized. There weren't going to be airplanes moving a house down the road either. My disappointment was overshadowed by the harsh lessons burned into my heart like a branding iron. I had never known love in my home, but now I saw with my own eyes that it seemed like our neighbors had no love for us either. There was no love anywhere in the world. And I remember thinking, *There is no hope. There is no love and there is no hope.* And then my mind went blank.



The next thing I knew I was running down the other side of the hill toward the barn, crying and screaming in front of everyone. At one end of the barn were stalls containing wheat, oats, and shelled corn for mixing cattle feed. I ran up the steps to the grain bins, passed through a large door, and lowered the door's heavy

iron latch behind me. There were two windows with louvered blinds in the room. I knocked out the sticks holding up the blinds and, there in the darkness, crawled into the shelled-corn bin and buried myself up to my neck in the corn.

I wanted to die. Not because the “party” on the hill had gone sour; not because my parents were humiliated by false friends or my brother hated his own family; but because all of these things—and more—had combined to make me bitter. I felt such shame.

I cursed God between the sobs erupting from inside me. God—if he even existed—had abandoned me. And if he did exist, if he had stood in front of me right at that moment, I would have attacked him with every ounce of strength in my body. I hated him more than anything else in the world. Well, more than almost anything.

My father was right up there too. I cursed and damned him over and over, as if taking an oath. The town drunk. The coward who’d beat my mother every time he had too much to drink. Even now, he was probably out looking for one of his wine bottles, which he kept hidden around the farm. He was no father. He was a miserable drunk who had children so he could have workers on the farm. He’d get what he had coming to him. I’d see to that.

An hour passed, then two, then three. I began to get hungry. It became clear no one was going to come and look for me. I was alone, abandoned. It seemed no one cared whether I lived or died.



Eventually I struggled out of the corn bin and made my way to the door with the heavy latch. I pushed open the door, blinded by the glare of the bright sunlight. I squinted, wondering if, perhaps, I'd see someone there. Someone who had come to look for me. My mother, perhaps.

She'd be calling my name, wanting to comfort me. But no one was there. Just the sound of blowing wind.

I shut the door to the grain stalls and walked down the steps to the main floor of the barn. *We live*

*like the animals*, I remember thinking. *And one day, I'll die like an animal. We all will. There is no love in the world. No purpose. No God.* My eyes began to adjust to the bright light just as my heart began to adjust to the new realities of my existence. The innocence of childhood evaporated like morning mist.

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No God.***