All But Normal

life on victory road

a memoir

SHAWN THORNTON

with JOEL KILPATRICK

Foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada

Afterword by Nick Vujicic

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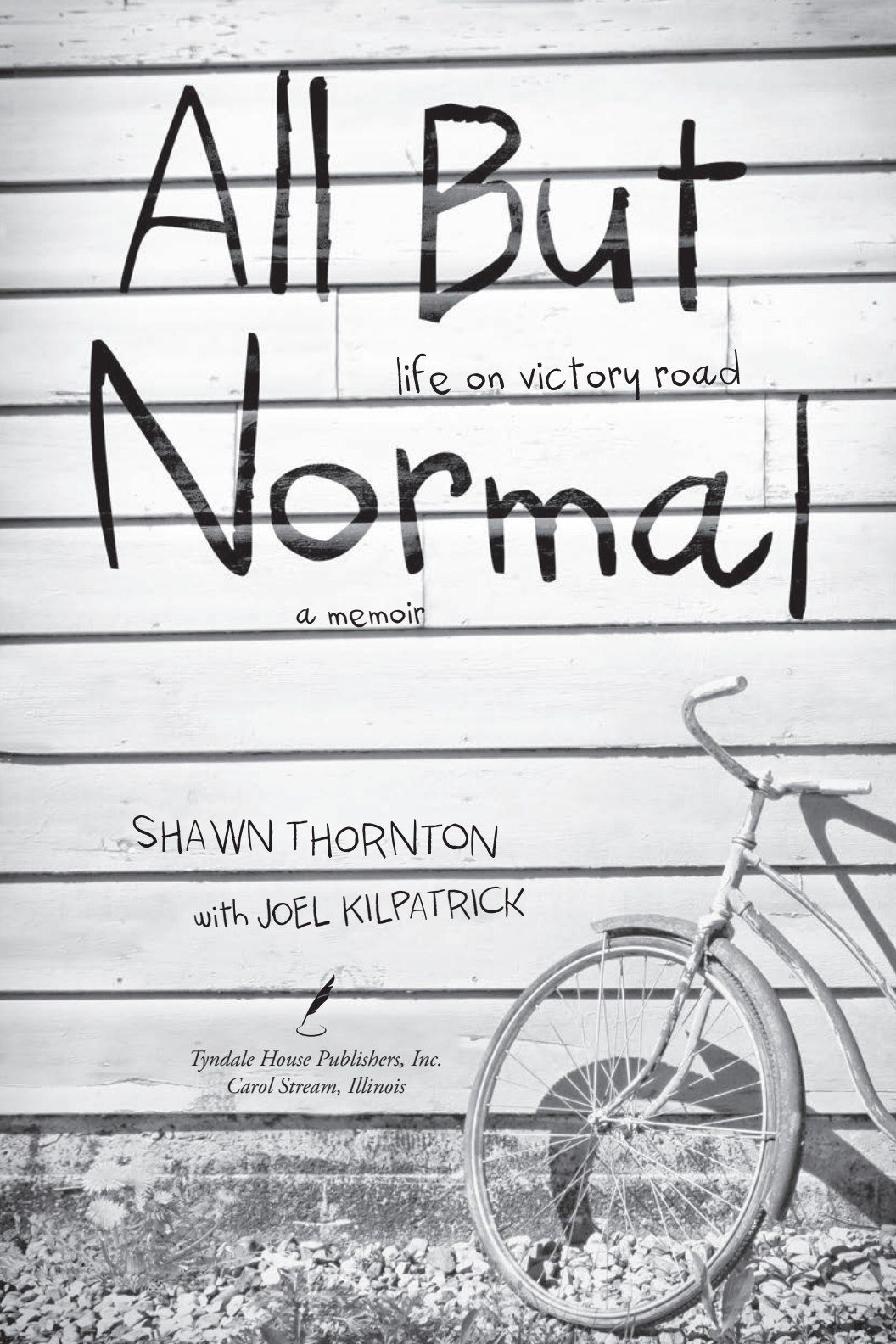

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All But Normal: Life on Victory Road

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Publisher's Note

Dear Reader:

The story you are about to read is true. The events depicted include vulgar language of a kind that typically doesn't appear in books we publish. But after careful consideration, we decided to include some dialogue that, though potentially offensive, is accurate, helps to capture in an authentic way the intensity of the events, and gives a truthful illustration of the human condition.

Author's Note

This memoir is based on events that happened across nearly five decades, including events that occurred before I was born. I have done my best to tell these stories accurately. In some places, I have used composite events, dialogue, and chronology for the sake of clarity, and I have changed some names and details to protect the privacy of individuals. I understand and respect that others may have different perspectives on the events and stories I have included in this book. As with any memoir, this version of my story is uniquely mine.

Foreword

Sometimes before I speak, when I'm in the wings peering at the crowd, I'll wonder, *How did I get here?* I don't mean "here" in the sense of directions; I mean, how does the least likely candidate to speak at a Billy Graham crusade, or to write books that people actually read; how does a person who takes the gospel to disabled people around the world; how did the strange and twisted circumstances of my life bring me to this point?

I bet on Sunday mornings Shawn Thornton wonders the same. When he's standing in the wings at Calvary Community Church, ready to give the sermon, perhaps he glances at the crowd and thinks, *How did I get here?*

Shawn is an effective, godly leader who does not appear to bear the emotional wounds of a shattered and chaotic childhood. Where did he get such a glad disposition and easy manner? Knowing his background, if I were him, I'd be a basket case. Yet he is easily one of the kindest and most influential Christian leaders I've ever met.

I have only recently heard Shawn's whole story—it was a few years ago, when I asked him to speak at one of our

conferences for Joni and Friends. I asked because his church has one of the largest, most successful disability ministry programs in the country. However, I had no idea he was actually *raised* in a special-needs family (a very polite way of putting it). Disability in any family is never easy, but in Shawn's case, it nearly ripped his childhood to shreds.

Growing up under a parent with a serious mental illness? Being raised by someone who'd scream every name in the book at you? How does a kid survive that? In the sixties and seventies, a psychiatric disorder was just not talked about, let alone treated effectively. It was a tragedy you would try to forget when you packed yourself a bag lunch and headed to school in the morning. But family tragedies have a way of catching up with you. And so it did for Shawn.

But please do not think that *All But Normal* is a scathing tell-all against a crazy mother. Shawn loved her then, and it's obvious in every chapter that he loves her now. Like any good family member, he has taken the high road when it comes to dealing with disability. Rather than scorning his mother, he clung to those moments when he felt her love. As broken and bewildering as their relationship was, Shawn's bruised heart was filled with compassion for her.

And as I read Shawn's story, I learned to love her too. There is a secret why, but I won't share it here—after you read a few chapters, you'll understand my special affection for Mrs. Thornton.

One more thing about *All But Normal*. Shawn's story will force you to forget everything you've ever been taught about personal power leading to effective leadership—confidence,

charisma, and chutzpah count for little over the long haul. As a psychologist friend once told me, the leaders God chooses are often more broken than strong, more damaged than whole, more troubled than secure. God's most effective leaders don't rise to power in spite of their weakness; they lead with power *because* of their weakness. By the last page of this book, you'll be convinced that God's greatest leaders seem to rise up from beds of nails, not roses.

This is the fascinating story you hold in your hands. It is laced with horror yet softened by humor. It has lots of jagged edges yet is honed and polished by the tender traces of God's love. There are dark, hellish storms, but you learn to see silver linings gracing most of the clouds on Shawn's horizon.

No one can describe it better, though, than the man himself. One of his most touching reflections in *All But Normal* reads, "I realized our family possessed something in our little house on Victory Road that many people simply didn't have: the love and the purpose of God in the midst of seeming chaos."

There you have it. This remarkable autobiography is filled with hope and redemption, revealing how God used unimaginable turmoil in one little boy's life to ultimately rescue him, hone him for leadership, and fill his heart with compassion for the poor and needy, for the broken and damaged.

It's why I don't think Shawn would trade his abnormal childhood for any amount of normal.

Joni Eareckson Tada
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PROLOGUE

IT HAD BEEN a night of hell like no other.

Red and blue police lights flashed against our house. From my bedroom window, I could see the front yard where the officer's car was parked. It looked so unusual sitting there, like something out of a TV crime show that my family, on more peaceful nights, might watch together. But the tears on my face, the pit in my stomach, and the sound of hateful words and shattering glass ringing in my ears reminded me that this was not a scene I could switch off by pushing a button. Tonight, it was real, and it was happening to the Thornton family.

I wasn't even sure how it had started, but I realize now that everyone in our family had seen it coming for months. Although few outside our home knew it, Mom's deteriorating capacity to manage life, to even walk safely, and her utter frustration with her limitations had brought her and Dad to a point of total exasperation. Dad or one of us boys must have said something to set her off—something small, not worth noticing under normal conditions, when grace flows

more freely. But tonight it pierced and wounded, and Mom escalated into one of her outbursts, the terrifying rages that had begun to grip her with ever-greater frequency. Her sudden flare-ups seemed to have otherworldly power and put her under the influence of something we didn't understand. Whatever it was, it transformed her from a kind, loving mother to a volatile tempest of emotions. Our home could become a battlefield in seconds.

"I'm tired of this s—!" Mom yelled. "I'm not living like this anymore. I'm going to divorce your a—!"

"Go ahead. What do I care?" Dad responded.

Dad seemed worn out from a long day at the factory—more fatigued and irritable than usual. Sometimes he could bear her flare-ups. Not tonight.

"I will!" she promised. "Tomorrow I'm leaving you. It's over!"

Most of these battles died out after a little while, but thirty minutes later, this one was still going strong. My brother, Troy, and I glanced at each other. This was getting bigger, scarier, and more violent, like a river rising beyond its banks, unpredictable and wild. Mom grabbed something and threw it from across the room at Dad, hitting the cabinets near his head. In anger, Dad whirled around and threw something back at her, not full force but enough to warn her not to do it again.

"I hate you!" she screamed. "It's all your fault! If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be this way!"

"Shut up, Bev!" Dad yelled back. In response, Mom held out her stiff arms and bent fingers for inspection.

"Look how I am! Look at you! You don't have to live like this!" she cried.

He turned away.

Crash!

She had hurled another item at him, something randomly snatched from a counter nearby.

"Boys, go to your rooms," Dad said.

Troy and I didn't hesitate. We wanted out of there as much as our parents wanted us gone. Usually their arguments held to a pattern. One of them would eventually calm down, and the violence and recriminations would stop. Now they were squaring off for extended battle. This was something we had rarely seen.

In my bedroom, I huddled on the bed and listened to the sound of objects crashing in the kitchen. Something shattered—a glass? A vase? A picture frame? Something else hit the wall so hard I knew it had made a hole. Something shattered and knocked down other items around it. Would anything be left in the morning?

Their voices sounded different—more raw, more capable of hatred and wounding power. Dad's yells were a throaty roar, sharper than usual, full of anger. Mom's voice was simply terrifying—shrieking, spiteful, unrestrained. More hurtful than Dad's. Tears flowed down my cheeks in wide channels, and I wondered how long I had been crying.

Is this the end? Is this where our family rips apart forever?

With hardly a pause, the raging went on for hours, walls pummeled by unseen objects, glass shattering, accusations of the most penetrating kind wielded like daggers. Lady,

the mutt who had joined herself to our family, lay patiently against my chest and endured as I squeezed her tightly, as if I could transfer my mounting sadness and grief into her little body. I had never known such a friend. She was with me when even God seemed absent. Like now.

Lady looked up sympathetically at me. *Why, God?* I asked. *Why did you let this happen to us? Can't you just take me away from here? I don't even want to live if this is the way life is going to be.*

Just when I thought the house might come down with all the shouting and violence, I heard a car pull into our front yard. A strong knock sounded at the front door, and Dad answered it. The officer came in, his radio crackling and chattering in the car outside. The police had never been to our house before. The fight must have alarmed the neighbors.

Mom and Dad's voices de-escalated as they told the officer what was happening. Mom still spoke through tears and with heightened emotion. Her words ran together in seething incoherence.

"To hell with him!" she said. "I can't stay here anymore!"

There were spans of silence when I imagined that the officer was inspecting the ruined house. How could he know that even in normal circumstances our house looked like a total wreck? How could he tell the busted plates and glasses from the rest of the junk that normally littered our floors?

Sinking further into my bed, I held Lady close. If nothing else, I was thankful the yelling and throwing had stopped. Mom was still obviously simmering, agitated, out of control.

Dad and the officer were speaking. His voice had returned more or less to normal. My ears rang in the relative silence.

Then out my window I saw something that wrenched my heart apart, something I never thought I would see: my mother, her body so stiff she could barely walk, her voice issuing long moans through gritted teeth, walking with the police officer, slowly making her way through the yard. The rotating red and blue lights from the police car painted her in a surreal portrait of sadness and futility. I watched as the officer gently helped my mother into the back of his squad car.

It was the night my mother was taken to the mental ward.

CHAPTER 1

"Mom, can I go with John to the department store?" Beverly asked, holding up a blouse on a hanger. "I want to exchange this blouse before our trip tomorrow."

She stood in the doorway of the girls' bedroom in their 900-square-foot house in Mishawaka, Indiana. The seven-member Gilvin family was getting ready to head "down home to Kentucky," as they put it, to visit relatives on Aunt Beulah's farm.

"Oh, Bevie, don't do that now," Bev's mom, Betty, said. "We're getting everything ready. You don't need a new blouse anyway."

"But I don't want to wear this white one down at the farm," Bev said with a level of concern only a ninth-grade girl

could attach to her wardrobe. Little sisters Connie and Gail, twelve and ten years old, respectively, listened from the doorway. "She just wants to go driving with that boy," Connie whispered. Gail nodded.

"Well, you've got plenty of clothes," their mother said.

"Can't I trade this for something new?" Bev pressed. "It's our vacation. I want to wear the right thing."

The day had been full of rushing around. Betty had packed for all five daughters, of whom Bev was second oldest. Darkness had fallen over the leafy northern Indiana city, and suitcases lined the walls of the tiny home, ready to be shoehorned into the wood-paneled family station wagon for the next day's journey. From the living room, sounds of voices on television drifted in as their father, Russell, finally got off his feet for a bit.

"Are you all packed up?" Betty asked.

"I think so. Yes." Bev could sense a weakening in her mother's resistance.

"Then go ask Daddy."

Bev's eyes gleamed. She paused before walking toward the living room, gathering her thoughts, her eyes reflecting the words she was about to say.

Everyone knew Bev was clever and highly intelligent and not a schemer. Her sisters considered her the kindest and most playful sister. Her giggle was infectious and smart, not silly. It emanated from a warm heart that loved to laugh. She spent a lot of time with her younger sisters—playing make-believe school in the basement and volleyball in the park, and roller-skating and bike riding on the sidewalks around their house.

Measured in birthday invitations, Bev was the most popular outside the home as well. On Valentine's Day a month earlier, she had received flowers from a number of boys at school. Few were brave enough to come calling to the house, but Bev's sisters knew she was the focus of special attention from boys.

Bev was at the head of her class academically as well, her report card a tribute to the first letter of the alphabet. When not socializing or playing, she sat in the house and read dense books with no pictures in them and sometimes Latin primers. She had recently won the highest honor given in eighth grade, the Daughters of the American Revolution award, for being the student with the best academic performance, best citizenship, and most well-rounded personality. The family had gathered at the school to watch the presentation, her sisters giddy with excitement, Russell and Betty taking lots of pictures. Nobody in the family had received such an award before, but it seemed obvious that it would go to Bev.

Bev also served as crossing guard at the school, a conspicuous honor given to only the most responsible students. Every day, she left class early, put on her patrol belt, and helped children safely cross the street after school. It made her proud that she had been entrusted with the lives of her younger schoolmates.

Tonight, Bev's well-known tenacity was on display. Her sisters were right. She was indeed hoping to spend a few moments with John Thornton before heading to Kentucky for spring break. She barely knew him—he was seventeen and a senior in high school, and she was fourteen. John had

asked her to a dance, prodded by his best friend, Chuck, who was dating Bev's older sister, Sue. Bev's parents agreed she could go to the dance, and John began dropping by the house to get to know her. In truth, Chuck had pressured him into it.

"You can't ask a girl to a dance and then ignore her for two months," Chuck scolded John. That made sense to John. If he didn't get to know Bev, what would they talk about at the dance?

Normally, the Gilvin and Thornton families would never have associated. They shared no friends, no church, no clubs, and little cultural background. The Gilvins were transplanted Southerners. Russell had moved the family from Kentucky to Indiana after World War II in search of a better job and now drove a truck for one of the factories that had sprung up in the Midwest after the war. The Gilvins' modest home, with a simple porch out back and a tiny awning over the front door, could barely contain their growing family. Four girls shared one bedroom. Three-year-old April slept in her parents' room. If someone sneezed at night, everyone said, "Bless you."

The Thorntons resided on the opposite side of town—and on the opposite side of the social spectrum. Their two-story home faced the St. Joseph River on a new, well-to-do street in Mishawaka. John's dad was a proud Notre Dame graduate, a politician and businessman who partnered with the Chicago mafia and ran an illegal casino behind a false wall in Mishawaka's most upscale restaurant, the Lincoln Highway Inn. When his political party was in office, he wielded great power locally, running the license bureau. Political cartoons of him appeared in

the local newspaper's opinion pages, and reporters knew better than to dig too deeply into his affairs. The Thorntons were big fish in a small pond and often made the ninety-minute trip to socialize with Chicago's elite. Mrs. Thornton kept weekly appointments at the bridge club and beauty parlor. Their calendar was full and so was their bank account.

When John turned sixteen, his father took him to the auto dealership on Highway 31 in nearby Niles, Michigan.

"Pick out a car," he said, waving his hand toward the lot.

John, newly licensed, chose a sporty, cream-colored '62 Corvair, and his father purchased it outright.

Russell and Betty naturally had not allowed Bev and John to go out alone, protective as they were of their daughters. Russell was gentle and gregarious, a natural salesman and an easy friend, but he was not so friendly to teenage boys interested in taking his daughters around town without supervision. John and Bev had already failed to get his permission to go for ice cream without Chuck and Sue. In John's first visit to the Gilvin house, Russell had seemed standoffish, powerful, and mysterious. It didn't hurt that he had the muscles of a dock worker from driving heavy trucks before the advent of power steering. John got the distinct impression that if he caught him crossways, Russell might chase him around the side of the house with a baseball bat or maybe one of those Kentucky long-barrel shotguns.

Still, John had been courageous enough to call on Bev again, and even with limited interactions, puppy love was blooming between them like the dogwood trees along the boulevard. Now, on the night before the family's spring break

trip, Bev approached her father in the living room, heart more hopeful than when she began. Blue television light radiated against the drapes and against his hands, resting on the arms of his chair.

"Daddy?" Bev said. She never faked sincerity. Even when asking with a purpose, she could only come across as sweet and believable. They were kindred spirits, she and her father—witty and sociable but gentle and kind.

"Mm-hm," Russell replied.

"I wanted to go exchange this blouse at Goldblatt's. I'd like to get a better one for our vacation."

"You're running out of time. Goldblatt's closes at nine."

"If I go soon, I can make it."

"Did you ask your mother?"

"She said to ask you." Bev paused. "If it's easier, John can take me."

Russell didn't respond immediately.

"He's got his license," Bev added helpfully.

Her father's thoughts seemed set on the next day and the long drive, not on the television show that continued before him. Connie and Gail stood behind Bev and awaited the verdict.

"I hope they let her go," Gail said softly, thinking of her brand-new roller skates. Bev was the hero among the girls that Christmas because she had prevailed on their parents to buy them all new roller skates—not the clip-on kind but roller skates with real boots.

"I hope they say no," Connie whispered back. "That boy's too old for her."

Russell seemed ready for bed and tired of making decisions. He heaved the air from his lungs.

"Whatever your mother says."

"Okay. Thank you." Bev went quickly to see her mother, her goal coming to unlikely fruition. "Daddy says it's okay with him if it's okay with you."

Betty looked up from packing a bag for April and shook her head a few times slowly, unconvinced but worn down. Bev wasn't usually *this* insistent, and the other girls needed help getting to bed. Tomorrow would be long, and she didn't want cranky kids stuck in the car together.

"Fine," Betty said. "Go ahead and go. Just don't be late. And come right back."

"Yes, Mom," Bev said and disappeared to call John before her parents' decision could change. Gail beamed at Connie. Connie bunched up her lips.

"He's still too old for her," she said. Gail shrugged and hopped off to make sure she had gathered all the toys she wanted to take.

Lately, Bev's sisters admired not just her grace and gentleness but her deepening faith. The Gilvins were regular church attenders but not overly religious. Russell often worked second jobs on Sundays or went to car shows. Betty took the girls to Twin Branch Bible Church, a congregation that met in a three-hundred-seat A-frame building twelve doors down from their home. Bev had always embraced faith more passionately than the others in her family. She worked with Child Evangelism Fellowship to conduct backyard Bible clubs and summer 5-Day Clubs for children. She also

began attending Youth for Christ meetings led by a committed young couple, George and Pat Phillips. Their zeal for the Bible and prayer inspired Bev, and in recent weeks, her prayers took on an urgency that caught the attention of the Phillipses and her friends.

"Pray for this boy I like, that he'll come to Jesus," Bev asked repeatedly at Youth for Christ meetings. "And for my dad to come to Jesus too."

That prayer became the focus of her life, and friends heard her pray with startling passion, "God, use me in any way that you want to see John and my dad come to know Christ."

John had attended church with Bev's family a couple of times, though he would have rather spent time alone with Bev, enjoying conversation outside the presence of spying sisters and Bev's parents. That kind of opportunity had not come until now, the evening of March 30, 1962.

At around eight o'clock, John pulled up outside the Gilvin home in his Corvair. The quad headlights lit up the street, and the Chevy bow-tie badge seemed to glow with inner warmth. Without making a scene, Bev traipsed out the back door and hopped into the passenger seat. John's lanky frame and goofy smile were visible in the darkness.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," Bev responded, grinning across the divided bench seat. He thought she was vivacious and beautiful, goodhearted and mischievous, all in right measure.

"Well, here we go."

John took the long way to Goldblatt's, making a circle

around town. Otherwise it was too quick, and there was no time to be together.

"Isn't the dance going to be fun?" Bev said.

John shrugged. "I don't dance much. I guess we'll watch Chuck and Sue."

"I think we could try," Bev offered.

He nodded. There was a silence. "Kentucky, huh?"

"My Aunt Beulah's farm. It's always so much fun. They have farm animals, and my cousins will be there."

"Pretty far away."

"A day's worth, I guess. But it's a pretty drive."

John drove on in silence.

"Guess I'll see you when I get back," Bev said.

"That'd be nice."

John was often at a loss for words with Bev. She struck him as so smart and genuine and promising. John, by contrast, was disappointing his family's academic expectations. Classrooms didn't fit him well. As a boy, he stared out the windows at passing airplanes, wondering where the passengers were going and wishing he could join them. When teachers called on him, especially in math class, he usually had no answer. Equations made no sense to him. This surprised his parents because Wilson Thornton, John's grandfather, was known for a geometric algorithm he created in 1951, which was lauded among mathematicians across the country. Wilson's name even appeared in popular geometry textbooks.

John was a different bird. In grade school when the teacher taught two plus two is four, John's immediate response was, "Why? Who says it's got to be four? Let's make it five. How

about twenty?" It seemed to him that teachers were assigning arbitrary numbers to arrive at easy solutions. John questioned everything in the same independently minded way. It didn't help his grades.

His parents put him in college prep classes in high school, clinging to their dream of another generation of Fighting Irish. Many family members—cousins, uncles, grandparents—were college-bound or had their degrees framed and hanging on the wall. The plan was for John to attend college and become a teacher. But reality was going another direction.

Finally, the high school principal sat the Thorntons down.

"John won't be following in your footsteps to Notre Dame, Mr. Thornton," he said bluntly. "He hasn't performed well enough. He's had to take extra classes to make up for the ones he failed. Right now, he's struggling in all his college preparatory classes. My question is, do you want him to graduate from high school at all? If so, I recommend he switch to classes he can pass and enroll in summer school so he can at least earn a diploma."

It was bitter news for the Thorntons, but not much more could be done. They had given him the best they could with their money, influence, and encouragement. Now, with an uncertain future ahead of him, John would have to make his own path.

"Say, how do you drive a car like this?" Bev asked as they glided through the night. A light spring snow still graced the sidewalks, though the streets were clear of it.

"You mean shifting gears?"

"Yes. Daddy's trucks always have a gear shifter coming up from the floor."

"This one's very much the same. You just—well, here. Put your hand here."

He pointed to the gear shift protruding from the floor.

"I'll speed up. You move that thing when I say so."

John stepped on the gas as they traveled down the four-lane road.

"Okay—now," he said. Bev switched the gearshift lever. The car smoothly settled into a higher gear and a lower rev. "Good job, Bev!"

Bev smiled. "I drove a car! I can't wait to get my license someday. Then I could drive us places."

John smiled back in spite of himself. He was drawn to the liveliness and affection of the Gilvin family. Home life at the Thorntons' was good but staid. They showed love through duty and commitment, not gauche displays of emotion or bantering conversation. Something about this Southern family and this girl sitting an arm's length from him struck him as fresh and exciting.

"Coming up to Goldblatt's," he announced with a trace of new-driver's pride.

Goldblatt's was in the town's new shopping plaza on Miracle Lane. Bethel College, a small Christian school, sat opposite the mall. They had named the street, deeming it a miracle they had been able to buy the campus. Bev, her hands folded on the white blouse in her lap, sighed contentedly and pondered what she would exchange it for. She was thinking of a pair of blue jeans.

John signaled and arced left into the intersection.

The impact was so sudden and jarring that neither John nor Bev knew what had happened. Coming the opposite way across Miracle Lane, a pickup truck banged the Corvair's passenger side bumper, sending John's car spinning backward and sideways. Another car collided with the back of it. John's head smacked the window and driver's side door. Bev's head came down squarely on the dashboard. For both of them, everything went black.

The three damaged cars sat silently, waiting for help. Bystanders rushed over, alerting other drivers and peering into car windows.

"What happened?"

"That sports car turned into the intersection. He must not have seen the oncoming traffic."

"Who hit him?"

"That truck. It can't have been going more than thirty, forty miles an hour."

"Nobody looks too badly hurt."

The pickup driver got out of his banged-up vehicle and walked over.

"You okay?" someone asked.

"I think I'm fine," he said. "He turned right in front of me. I couldn't stop."

He sat on the curb and waited. Within minutes, emergency personnel arrived and helped John from the car.

"Can you stand up?" a medic asked.

"Yeah," he said, feeling woozy and not completely aware of what had just happened.

"Can you walk over here and sit down?"

John did.

"Does it hurt anywhere?"

John held up his hand. There was a small cut on the back of it. The medic looked him over before ushering him to the ambulance.

"You're a lucky boy," he said. "They'll stitch that hand up for you at the hospital."

"This one's not awake yet," said another medic, examining Bev in the passenger seat.

"How's she doing? She alive?" one medic asked.

"She's alive. Doesn't look too banged up, but she's unconscious."

"What about her head?"

"Nothing there, really. Just a cut under her chin. And on her knee. That's all I see."

"But she's not conscious?"

"I don't think so. Miss? I'm a medic. Are you all right?"

Bev did not respond.

"Miss? Are you all right? Can you hear me?" He shook his head. "No, she's out."

They carefully pulled her from the car and put her on a gurney. Her body convulsed several times.

"Whoa, whoa, watch out!" one medic said to another.

"Did she wake up?"

"I don't think so."

"Probably just knocked out for a while. I've seen worse."

At the hospital a little while later, John's brain seemed to

refocus. He found himself in a small room. Looking down, he saw a bandage on his hand. An ER nurse came in.

"You're okay to leave. Your parents are here to take you home."

John followed his parents to the car, to their home, and to his bed.

At the Gilvin house, the phone rang just before nine o'clock. The girls were almost in bed, their thoughts full of the cows, horses, and cousins they would play with at Aunt Beulah's farm.

"Mrs. Gilvin?" the voice said. "There's been an accident. Beverly's at the hospital. It looks to the doctors like she has a blood clot in her brain. She's sleeping right now."

"Oh, God, please," Betty said, and she and Russell rushed to the station wagon.

The packed suitcases and their owners would not be going to Kentucky.

Bev lay in a bed in the intensive care unit looking like her normal self except for an abrasion on her forehead and a cut under her chin. An IV protruded from her arm, and the doctors had given her a tracheotomy. Otherwise she simply appeared to be asleep—not bruised, not broken, not seriously harmed.

"It looks like she's just knocked out," the doctor said, somewhat unhelpfully. "We should know more in three days."

A specialist was brought in, but in the hours and days that followed, everyone seemed mystified by her condition. Several times the dire phone call came.

"Mr. Gilvin, you should probably bring the family in. Bev may have a short time to live."

Each time, the family stood around the bed as Bev slept as if nothing could wake her.

A somber feeling pervaded the house as days blurred into weeks and weeks blurred into months. The girls saw little of their mother, who stayed at the hospital all day. The family summoned their financial resources to pay for a registered nurse to stay all night with Bev. Betty and Russell's conversations bled through the bedroom walls, full of sadness, self-recrimination, and occasional blame.

"Why did he have to turn in front of that pickup?" came Russell's voice, exasperated.

"I don't know, Russell. It breaks my heart."

"Ah! We should never have let her go. I can't believe that boy did this to her."

The sisters were never part of these conversations, but one night, Connie began crying in her bed.

"Why are you crying, Connie?" Gail asked in the darkness.

"'Cause Bevie's going to die."

"No, she's not. Don't say that."

"Then why isn't she awake yet?"

"I don't know. She needs rest. Sleep is good. She was in an accident." Gail paused, then added, "Everybody at church prayed for her this Sunday. And three people called the house today to ask how she was."

"But she's unconscious."

"I know that. She's sleeping," Gail countered.

"Shush! It'll be all right," Sue said. "Whatever happens, it'll be all right."

• • •

On the night of the accident, John started vomiting and experiencing an intense headache while lying in bed at home. He returned to the hospital. The doctors diagnosed him with a concussion and kept him for three days. After that he returned home and suffered no further obvious effects.

His senior year, with all its excitement and anticipation, was winding up, but John's mind was on Bev, lying unconscious in a hospital because of the accident he had caused. He tried to visit her, but the Gilvins had denied him access. Their pain was still too fresh. On the other side of town, Mr. and Mrs. Thornton were deeply unsettled that their son was now mixed up with a family so unlike them. At the same time, they, like John, wanted to help the Gilvins if possible.

The problem for John was that no one seemed interested in his feelings about the situation or offered to help him sort out his responsibility—not his parents, not the Gilvins, not anyone. As Bev slept on, John sought counsel from Chuck one night while they drove John's newly repaired Corvair to a bank overlooking the St. Joseph River.

"I hear what you're saying," Chuck said. "So, what do you think you're going to do?"

They both leaned against the hood of the car, watching the river flow by like liquid time.

"How do I know?" John almost shouted with frustration. "Nobody's telling me anything! The adults are handling everything. I'm not involved. It's like they don't even care that I was there!"

He paused to hurl a rock into the void. It landed too far away to register a splash.

"My life has always been confusion," John went on. "I don't even know which end is up. I'm just bouncing around. One day this happens; another day that happens. It's all just random. So now this accident. What do I do? Stick around? Slowly move out of the picture?"

He shook his head, unsatisfied with every option.

Chuck thought for a moment. "You ought to go visit her," he said, leveraging himself up and looking back toward the city center.

"I tried."

"You should try again."

John knew in his gut it was the right thing to do.

A few days later, he ventured back to the hospital, feeling horribly awkward and conspicuous. *Does everyone know I'm the one who was at the wheel of the car that injured this innocent girl?* This time the nursing staff let him through—with or without the family's permission, he didn't know. He walked quietly into Bev's darkened room. She lay there alone, several medical machines standing cold sentry around her. The vivacity that had drawn him to her seemed to have drained away. She was sleeping, empty, gone. He opened his mouth to say something, but speaking didn't make sense—she was unconscious. She still looked so young.

A nurse slipped in. John turned.

"I brought her something," he said and handed the nurse his gift: a stuffed white dog.

"That's very sweet," she said and laid it beside Bev. It

seemed to enliven the scene just a little, as if some part of Bev's personality had returned in the silly expression of the animal.

"I'll see you later, Beverly," John said haltingly. Then he walked out. A deep weight of responsibility went with him to his car and back home.

• • •

The Gilvin girls visited their sister on occasion, gathering soberly around the foot of her bed. Nobody had scripted their interactions with an unconscious sister, so Betty coached them. "She can hear you. Talk to her."

"Hi, Bev," Sue said bravely.

"You look really good, Bevie," Connie added.

"Hi, Bev," Gail said, not feeling very creative.

"You're safe here," Sue continued. "Someone's always here with you. You're gonna be all right."

Connie turned to their mother. "I'm scared." It was the sight of Bev's eyes, slightly open at the time, and of the rolled-up towel placed in her tightly clenched fist to keep her fingernails from embedding in her palm. The scene frightened her.

"It's okay," Betty said. "This was a nice visit. They'll see you later, Bevie. Say good-bye, girls."

"Good-bye, Bevie. See you soon," Sue said.

"Bye, Bevie," the others said and filed out as silently and respectfully as they could.

Back home, the girls heard their parents praying in their bedroom.

"Dear Lord, please bring Beverly back to us," came their father's muffled voice through the wall. "Please don't let her die. We want to see her. Let her be part of this family again."

Their mother's weeping flowed under his words like a stream of grief.

In the small home of George and Pat Phillips, the Youth for Christ group also prayed earnestly for their friend Bev and felt gripped to pray with urgency for John Thornton and Russell Gilvin, just as Bev had been asking them to do. Together in the modest living room, they cried out, lifting up the request Bev had asked them to pray in the months before the accident: "Lord, use Bev in any way you see fit so that John and Mr. Gilvin will come to you."

One Sunday not long after the accident, John, who had started to attend church occasionally, listened intently to the sermon at Twin Branch Bible Church. When the pastor invited the congregation to come forward for prayer, John stood up and walked to the front. The situation surrounding the accident had opened his eyes. Awareness of his own failure and inadequacy had led him to recognize his need for a Savior—or for something to guide him out of his brokenness. On a different Sunday, Russell did the same thing. On his previous visits to church, he had jangled the change in his pocket with nervous energy, to the point of distracting people nearby. Now he was baptized, and he attended Sunday school so faithfully that in the years to come he would win medals for attendance.

John's quiet journey of faith helped him formulate a way to respond to Bev's new reality—and the future staring so blankly at him.

• • •

"Good morning, Bevie. It sure is a nice day."

The nurses always talked to Bev as they did their rounds. As usual, the only response was the hiss of air flowing into her neck through the tracheotomy tube. A small black-and-white television droned on from the desk across from the bed. Russell had picked it up somewhere on his truck-driving journeys. The nurses left it on permanently, on the doctor's theory that it would stimulate Bev's brain.

"July Fourth was nice," the nurse continued. "Kind of hot. The fireworks were spectacular. You could see their reflection in the river. It was gorgeous."

Suddenly something hit the nurse's back and fell to the floor. She looked down—a white stuffed dog rested at her feet. She turned. Bev's eyes were open, and her glare indicated she was seriously annoyed. The nurse had been standing between Bev and the television, and Bev had thrown the dog to get her to move. The nurse gasped, dropped her tray, and rushed from the room.

The call to the Gilvin house was triumphant, joyful, and unexpected.

"I'm happy to tell you that Bev woke up today," the doctor said. "She's going to live."

Russell hugged Betty tightly, both of them feeling waves of victory and relief. Betty cried. A miracle, it seemed, had been granted as a result of the prayers of friends and family. After three months, few people were expecting Bev to live.

The Gilvin sisters were beside themselves.

"Bev's back!" Gail yelled, running around the house before being herded to the car to visit her. April clapped her hands in celebration. If everyone else was happy, she was happy too.

Bev's eyes were open, and she was looking around, but as was to be expected for someone who had lain motionless in bed for three months, she had lost some of her body's functions. She could not speak, sit up, walk, or use her arms or hands in any consistent way. She had partial amnesia and had forgotten the three days preceding the accident and the accident itself.

"Sit up now, Bev," the nurses said as they led her through her first rounds of physical therapy. Carefully, they placed hands behind her back and brought her forward. Bev's eyes registered that it was happening, but her response was wordless.

"We're going to put your legs over the bed for a few minutes before laying you back down again, okay?"

Bev gave approval with a look.

Within a few days, they were standing her up between two strong nurses who held her arms like fence posts so she wouldn't pitch forward. They trained her hands so she could feed herself and handle her own hygiene. She did these tasks roughly. Her fine motor skills appeared to be gone. She could not pick up an object without long moments of mental determination and a slow, clumsy physical response. Her joints seemed locked in place and no longer moved with the fluidity of normal human motion.

"These things will come back," the doctors told her family encouragingly. "Just keep working with her on them."

John heard that Bev was conscious and waited a few days before coming to the hospital to visit. As he stepped into the second floor hallway, he saw Bev standing there between two nurses, struggling to take a step. Her body was bent unnaturally, and she was still wearing a hospital gown. To John she appeared elderly, broken, even forlorn. She looked up at him slowly, still unable to speak, and their eyes met. John wasn't sure if she even recognized him. Her mind appeared entirely focused on regaining control of her legs. Shocked, unable to imagine a conversation, and not wanting to interrupt her therapy, he turned and walked briskly out.

The tracheotomy had left Bev's throat scratchy and injured. One day she spoke her first word since the accident: "Daddy." It came as a low croak, so frightening to Connie and Gail that they secretly hoped she would not speak again until her voice returned to normal.

After a couple of weeks, doctors were satisfied that she was making enough progress to go home and continue her recovery there. She still could not walk on her own and spoke only in an unnerving baritone rasp.

"Her motor skills will return over time," doctors said. "Just keep working with her."

A hospital bed, quietly donated by the Thorntons, was waiting for Bev at the Gilvin residence. It was placed in the girls' bedroom, then later in the tiny, centrally located dining room, which would become Bev's room for two years.

A day or two after Bev's return, Connie and Gail lowered the rails and helped their sister down from the bed.

"The doctors said you should crawl because it will help you get your coordination and flexibility back," Connie said. Bev looked at her wide-eyed, partially comprehending.

"Come on," Connie coaxed. "Let's get down on the floor."

Carefully and slowly they helped her to her knees, then laid her flat on her stomach. They got on either side of her, took her same face-down position, and began the exercise.

"Now pull your knees under you and push up with your hands," Connie said. Bev slowly followed their example with moderate success. She seemed taxed to her limit. She awkwardly pushed her chest a couple of inches off the ground.

"That's good, Bevie!" Gail said as Bev sank back to the floor, unable to hold the pose or to complete the desired movement. "Let's do it again. This is fun!"

Gail enjoyed playing teacher in the mock schoolroom in their basement, and now she was able to teach a real, live pupil. Hopes of a full recovery filled everyone's minds.

Bev rested a moment, then tried to push herself up again. This time she got farther.

"Good, Bevie!" Connie said. "Now let's crawl forward, just one step."

"I . . . can do . . . this," Bev said. To their relief, the scratchy, deep voice had gradually gone away. But her speaking cadence still sounded off, as if she were drugged. Gail reached over to move Bev's free arm forward.

"Don't . . . help . . . me! I . . . can do . . . this," Bev said gruffly.

She seemed upset, humiliated. Older than both Connie and Gail, she was now groveling painfully on the floor. Her

sisters could get up and walk around at whim, but Bev was stuck.

"Here—come this far," Gail said, sitting a few feet in front of her. Bev grunted and willed her limbs to move.

"Like this," Connie said.

"I . . . can . . . *do* . . . it!" Bev snapped back. "Don't . . . help . . . me!"

"But Mom said to help you," Connie said. "She wants us to help you."

Bev collapsed on the floor.

"I . . . can do . . . it," she said, voice muffled by the carpet, where her face was now half-buried. "Stop . . . helping . . . me."

The next morning, Connie, Gail, and April came into the bedroom holding a plate of runny eggs, a glass of juice, utensils, and a dish towel. Bev stared at them, leery and confused.

"What . . . happened?" she said.

"It's breakfast time!" April announced. Bev shook her head and repeated, "What . . . happened?" They knew what she meant.

"You were in an accident," Gail said plainly. "You don't have to think about it."

"I don't . . . remember." Bev's face held unspoken questions. *Why am I in this room? Why am I in this bed? Why can't I move or speak normally? What happened to me?*

"Everything'll be fine, Bevie," Gail said. "Look, we brought you some eggs!"

April approached and set the eggs on Bev's lap. Connie gently put a fork in Bev's left hand and helped her poke some eggs, dribbling with yolk just like their mother always made

them. She guided the fork to her mouth, and Bev took them in and began chewing. She was right-handed, but the effects of the accident had caused the whole right side of her body to remain stiff.

"After a while, you'll be doing this on your own," Connie assured her.

"I've got juice when you want some," Gail volunteered.

Connie turned for a moment to April, who was standing by the fan they called "big blue" because of its size and color. It was the only thing that kept them from madness during sweltering summers. "April, would you get the salt and pepper from the table?" she asked.

Just then, April's eyes went wide and she ducked. A plate full of eggs zoomed by her and into the fan. Yolk flecks spattered around the room in an explosion of yellow stickiness. The girls looked toward the bed. Bev's left hand was wavering in midair, her face a picture of rage. Connie and Gail looked at her as if to question why. April sobbed and ran from the room to find Betty, then threw herself into her mother's arms.

"I can't help with Bevie anymore," she said. Connie and Gail came behind her.

"Bev threw a plate of eggs at her," Connie said in a confused whisper.

Betty's expression clouded, but just for a moment.

"April, we can do this. We can all do this. We need to help your sister. Now Gail and Connie, why don't you clean up the egg before it dries all over the place?"

Betty held April until she stopped crying.

A few days later, Connie came in to bathe her sister the

way the nurses had taught them, using a basin filled with warm water. Afterward, she began brushing Bev's hair.

"You're getting much better at walking," Connie said with a mother's assurance. "It won't be long before we're all back at school. Everything'll be fun. Ooh, your hair looks nice, too. I'm glad we washed it—"

Without warning, Bev swung her elbow around angrily, smacking Connie's arm and sending the hairbrush flying across the room. Connie jumped back, unable to mask her emotions. The hairbrush clattered to a rest. Bev's eyes flashed with ire, and she settled into an angry, unexplained silence. Connie quietly picked up the basin and walked out of the room.

Questions poured out when the girls were riding in the car with their mother.

"Why is Bevie different now?" April asked.

"Because of the accident," Betty said.

"But why?"

"April, that's enough."

"Is she going to be normal again?"

Betty paused. "She's going to be just fine."

Connie and Gail looked at each other, wondering how much hope to set on her words.

• • •

After two months, Bev was walking and talking well enough to enroll for her sophomore year in the fall. The high school had passed her through ninth grade, due to her academic strength. Now it was time to return to normal life.

While Bev was unconscious, John had graduated and taken a job with Everett-Ballard Funeral Home. His goal: to become a mortician. They put him to work cleaning the place, doing routine maintenance, and driving an ambulance—mostly to pick up drunks and vagrants. At the time, the mortuary business operated ambulances that offered no service except a fast ride to the hospital. After a year of apprenticeship, John could attend mortician school, then get his license and perhaps one day own a funeral home or become an embalmer on staff.

He had chosen not to fade away from the Gilvin family and instead was quietly allowed to see Bev again. Betty and Russell even gave him permission to drive Bev to school occasionally.

But school was proving difficult for Bev. Her natural intelligence seemed bottled up inside her, tangled at times. Connie was tagged to help her with her homework. One day she brought in the geometry book for a quick lesson before the next day's exam.

"Triangles are very predictable," Connie instructed, reading from the book lying open on Bev's lap while she sat in a chair in the living room. "They have three angles, and the angles always add up to one hundred and eighty."

Bev listened and processed.

"So if this angle is forty-five degrees and this one is fifty-five, what is this third one?" Connie asked. The question hung there as Bev pressed her brain into the problem.

"Forty-five plus fifty-five would be . . ." Connie said.

Bev's face flushed. She clearly didn't like being prompted

or patronized. Her right fist, clenched tighter than normal, pressed hard against her body. An expression of pure fury tugged at her lips and lit a flame behind her eyes.

"I know!" she said. "I get it! I just—"

She was sputtering frustration.

"I'm a little thirsty," Connie said. "I'll go get us some iced tea and we can move on to another problem. Be right back."

She stepped away. The sisters were learning how to manage Bev's condition.

One day in the middle of September, John pulled up to the high school. Bev could no longer ride the bus—she was too stiff and slow; boarding and riding presented too many hazards. She walked over to his car. He pushed open her door from the inside in anticipation. With an awkward motion, she flung her pack in and sat down roughly. Pain emanated from her eyes so much that John didn't know how to greet her. He pulled away from the curb and began to drive her home.

"I can't do anything," she said after a time of silence. "The stairs—I can't get up them fast enough. I'm late for class. The teachers are marking me late. When I get there, I can't open my book to the right page or write anything down fast enough. It's like—like I'm in slow motion, or everyone is in fast motion. I don't know how to keep up anymore."

John listened.

"People—people make fun of me for the way I do things," she said. "Everyone's too busy. Everyone's . . . *normal*. Like I used to be."

John's heart was burning now, his gut screaming with indignation. His words burst out almost unwillingly.

"Who are these kids?" he nearly shouted. "Who are these teachers? Who is this principal that lets someone get treated like this?"

He looked over at Bev in the passenger seat. Once a shining, spunky, school leader, she was now an afterthought to most people, an unsolvable equation. She was trapped, body and soul.

"You're not going back there," he announced simply, as if he had the authority to make it so. Minutes later at the Gilvin house, John parked the Corvair in front and walked in with greater resolve than he had ever shown in anything. Betty and Russell were both in the kitchen. They looked up at him, sensing he had something to say. Bev stood behind him, clutching her book bag, not knowing what would happen.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gilvin, I don't know if Bev has told you what's happening at school," John said.

They looked at him and waited.

"Things aren't working. She can't get around. People are making fun of her. The teachers aren't helping her. Nobody's helping her!"

He reined in his frustration and continued evenly.

"I don't think she should go back. Not in her condition, not the way she is right now. It's not helping her. It's not helping anybody."

He was surprised at his own boldness. Their response surprised him even more.

"We've been thinking about that too," Russell said. Betty sighed. John and Bev didn't know her parents had met with

the principal, who concluded that because Bev could no longer navigate the hallways and stairways fast enough to make classes on time, it was impossible for her to function as a student anymore.

"We think this is probably the end," Russell said. "We'll have to do something else."

The four of them took the decision in somberly, minds full of unspoken questions about the future. So Bev's academic career ended. The straight-A student became, by force of circumstance and lack of viable options, a high school dropout.

• • •

Life went on around her. Bev sat at home and read for hours, a pleasure still available to her. Her sisters played volleyball and roller-skated in the skates Bev had won them. Betty cooked and managed the house; Russell drove the truck; April got bigger; Chuck and Sue got serious and married that fall. Perplexed by Bev's condition, everyone quietly hoped she would get better over time. Doctors told them—more hope than prognosis—that she would improve. After all, there were no obvious injuries, no broken bones, not even a notable scratch or bruise left. But Bev was a different person, and everybody knew it.

Meanwhile, John's stint at the mortuary wasn't going well. Maybe it was the monotony, maybe the dead people. He just knew he wanted to go in a different direction. Serving in the US Army for four years seemed to offer productive work and extra time to plan his life. He told Bev of his decision, and though they were still only shallowly

acquainted, they spoke tentatively of a shared future. One day in December before heading off to Korea, John went to Will's Jewelry in downtown Mishawaka, with its big, landmark clock out front, and bought three matching rings, one for him and two for Bev. He surprised her with them on Christmas 1963. They weren't exactly engagement rings. After all, she was just sixteen. But they were a statement of commitment, his way of saying, "I'm not walking away from this." What that meant, he wasn't sure. He still saw her as the pretty, mischievous, vibrant girl on whom he had developed a teenage crush. But now their situation bore the weight of adult decisions.

In Korea's demilitarized zone, his head was full of its own battles. *I've got to be a man. I'm the one who turned in front of that truck on Miracle Lane. I liked her before the accident, didn't I? Does that mean I love her now? Should I marry her because of the accident? What's my responsibility? Am I doing this out of guilt? If the accident hadn't happened, would I still be interested in her?*

Letters went back and forth over the ocean. John sent gifts of beautiful Korean fans to the Gilvin sisters, and they wrote back with thanks. The sisters spied on Bev as she wrote letters to John at the kitchen table. Writing was so laborious for her that it took hours to commit enough words to paper to merit the stamp. Soon their frequent letters circled around the idea of actually getting married and setting a date. Following his gut and settling the storm inside his conscience, John confirmed he would like to marry Bev. She received her parents' approval. They thought Bev was young, but John was trying

to do the right thing, and what other future would a daughter in her condition have?

The wedding was planned while John was in Korea. He came home on leave, stepped into a nice suit, and put a ring on Bev's finger in a ceremony at Twin Branch Bible Church. She wore a borrowed dress and gripped her father's arm like a vise to keep from falling as she walked down the aisle. Her sisters wore pillbox hats and "rainbow dresses"—April in yellow, Connie in blue, Gail in pink, Sue in mint green, and John's sister, Donna, in purple. Each dress had ruffles around the bottom. April carried a little white basket. John's best man was a guy he had never met, because Chuck was Roman Catholic, and in 1966 Catholics and Protestants in that area didn't generally participate in each other's weddings. The reception was held in the basement with cake, punch, and pastel mints. Bev shone like the sun with joy.

As excited as the Gilvin sisters were to be in a wedding, their opinions of John were mixed. Bev insisted to Connie that she loved John, but Connie still felt Bev was too young to get married. And Sue openly disliked him at first. Gail and April were younger and more sanguine about the future.

The Thorntons hosted everyone for a rehearsal dinner at the Lincoln Highway Inn. The girls had concluded by now that John's family was rich.

"I bet the girls who eat here have their own bedrooms," Gail whispered as they admired the elaborate interior of the inn.

"I bet they have their own dressers," Connie said.

"I bet they have their own closets," Gail said.

"And lots of shoes," Connie added before their mother hushed them.

As Betty put it, the Thorntons were "not the kind of people we would normally have picnics with," but they were nice enough. The Thorntons paid for John and Bev's honeymoon—three nights in a classy Chicago hotel overlooking Lake Michigan—but the honeymooners didn't get that far. Twenty miles out of town after the wedding reception, John spotted a motel and took an early exit.

"That looks like a nice place," he said.

Bev eyed him with good-natured suspicion. John shrugged.

"Chicago's a long drive. We wouldn't be there for another hour and a half."

Five nights later, they reported to Fort Sill in Oklahoma, where John entered a new round of training. Then the army deployed him to an emerging global hot spot—Vietnam. There he worked the radio with a couple of officers, scrambling and unscrambling coded messages that came in. One day he got a message from his dad, delivered by the Red Cross: a son, Shawn, was born December 20, 1966.

John was now a father, and I was his son.

Mom sent reel-to-reel tapes of me crying, and the guys in Dad's unit lay on their beds and listened to those tapes for hours. They hadn't seen or heard their own children for so long that even my squalling sounded sweet.

Mom and I lived with Grandma and Grandpa Thornton in their large home until Dad got home in June 1967. He had avoided, by just a few weeks, the bloodiest months of

that war. He got a job at Dodge Manufacturing—an iron foundry that made parts for large machinery makers such as Caterpillar. Soon after that, he and Mom found a home on the outskirts of Mishawaka on a dead-end cinder road with three homes. Ours was the smallest—handmade and less than a thousand square feet. But it was the house I grew up in.

It sat on Victory Road.