

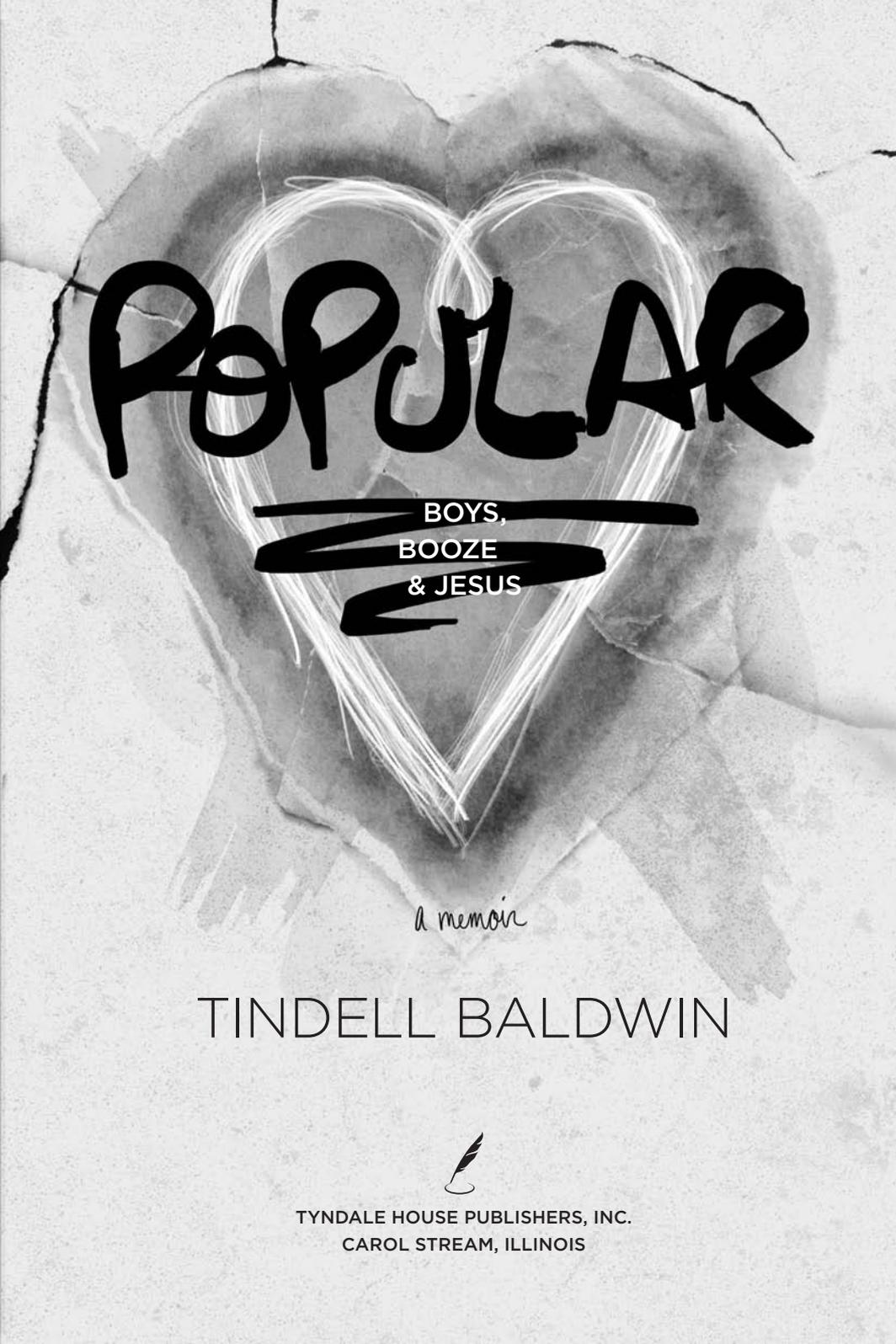
POPULAR

BOYS,
BOOZE
& JESUS

a memoir

TINDELL BALDWIN

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TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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Popular: Boys, Booze, and Jesus

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Published in association with Yates & Yates (www.yates2.com).

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baldwin, Tindell.

Popular : boys, booze, and Jesus / Tindell Baldwin.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-4143-7524-3 (sc)

1. Baldwin, Tindell. 2. Christian biography—United States. I. Title.

BR1725.B3335A3 2013

277.3'083092—dc23

[B]

2012040419

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14 13

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction *ix*

PART ONE Dark *1*

- CHAPTER 1 Where It All Began *3*
CHAPTER 2 Good-Bye, God *15*
CHAPTER 3 Giving It All Away *31*
CHAPTER 4 A Different Kind of AA:
Addicted to Attention *57*
CHAPTER 5 Disaster without the Beautiful *71*
CHAPTER 6 Desperate to Belong *85*
CHAPTER 7 Dancing with Death *95*

PART TWO Light *99*

- CHAPTER 8 It Feels like Home *101*
CHAPTER 9 A New Song *111*
CHAPTER 10 Baby Steps to Four O'Clock *127*
CHAPTER 11 What Does Different Look Like? *141*
CHAPTER 12 Grace-Filled Sex *155*
CHAPTER 13 Starting Over Again *161*
CHAPTER 14 Through My Mirror *181*
CHAPTER 15 Something to Believe In *203*
CHAPTER 16 Brick by Brick *217*
CHAPTER 17 From Here to There *227*

Introduction

*Welcome to me.
I'm going to give all my secrets away.*

HELLO, I HOPE you're listening. . . .

I'm sitting at the Austin airport stuffing my face with overpriced candy, all in the name of PMS, and wondering how I'll ever be able to write a book for teenage girls. The topics seem too vast and too graphic to really dive into, and yet I have an intense desire for teens to swallow some truth along with all the other messages being sent on a daily basis.

This dream began when I was twenty and spent the summer interning at a Christian youth camp. I'd only recently come out of my dark world of booze and boys, and I realized that my story was like so many others. When I shared my story with the teens at the camp, they opened up, they took it in, they understood. That's when it hit me—my story was relevant because it's the story of life after a battle. It's the story of what happens when God reaches down and saves us from the thick of it. I'd danced

with true turmoil and lived to tell the tale. So that became my goal: just to tell a story—a story that resonates with teens where they are.

For so many, high school is a blur of bad decisions, followed by college, which is an even bigger blur of bad decisions (but these don't require your parents' permission), and then you're thrown out into the world. Eventually, we all wake up and realize we need a Savior. My thought behind this message is that you won't have to wait so long before you realize your deep need. My hope and my prayer is that truth will speak louder than the lies the world is feeding you.

The younger you are, the greater the distractions are. That's why it takes us so long to realize how much we need God. There are so many things that keep our minds away from Him: technology, social networking, TV, movies, books (but not this one, of course!). With so many enticing distractions, it can take years to learn that these things will not make you happy, and neither will the next thing, or the next.

What I never realized when I was younger, and what I hope to reveal now, is that the decisions you make when you're seventeen will shape the way you live the rest of your life. Who you sleep with will be in your heart forever. The addictions you form at fifteen won't go away on your twenty-fifth birthday, and cleaning up your life doesn't magically happen. I wish someone had told me this. My

hope is that these pages are filled with things you've been wishing someone would tell you.

It was hard for me to see that I needed God. When I was sixteen and all my friends were drinking, it was easy to think, *Why shouldn't I?* Then I was seventeen and all my friends were having sex and seemed to really be in love, and it was easy to think, *Why shouldn't I?* There were plenty of reasons why I thought I didn't need God in high school and college: my life was filled with distractions that pushed Him to the side, and He was asking me to give up things that seemed very appealing. He was asking me to refuse the things that felt good, looked good, and tasted good.

God is still asking a lot from teenagers. He is asking them to be different, and asking most fifteen-year-old girls to be different is like asking them to grow beards.

The truth is, a lot of things are just distractions, designed to keep us happy for a little while, until the next "latest and greatest" thing comes out. I'm a huge iPhone advocate. I love my current iPhone, but I know as soon as Apple comes out with the next generation of the iPhone, I'll most likely "need" it. Life's distractions are things that keep us happy for a while so we don't realize how unhappy we really are. I'm not against technology, I'm not against progress, and I'm not against Apple. I'm against these things distracting us from our need for a relationship with our Creator, a need to be in creation, a need for human contact, and a need to be fulfilled by something greater than this earth can offer.

I love having an app for everything, and I'm not blaming society's problems on Facebook. I'm just saying distractions make things harder for us. It's harder to get away, harder to concentrate, and harder to get our attention. Why? Because *everything* wants our attention.

There's so much to do, so many things to play with, e-mails to check, videos to watch, music to listen to. When was the last time you sat in silence for more than a few minutes? It feels weird. We're constantly surrounded by video, music, people. No wonder attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is more prevalent than ever; no one has to concentrate for more than thirty minutes to learn everything they need to know. You almost need to have ADHD to keep up with society. When I drive, I'm always doing at least two things (sorry, Mom): eating on the go, checking my phone, talking to a friend, all the while looking at my GPS. The distractions are everywhere—how can God break through all the streaming media?

I've been trying to answer this question for a long time. After I became a Christian, I started to see the wreckage that came from my four years of partying, and I wanted to give girls something to help them navigate life. I wanted to convey that hope lies on the other end of the road. Walking through high school is like walking in the woods with a flashlight—you can only see so far ahead. I have been there, and I might be able to cast a little extra light on your trail. I might be able to stop you before you

chain yourself to choices you will live with for the rest of your life.

I get the feeling people often give up reaching out to the younger generation and hope to catch them on the upswing. For me this felt very true. It didn't feel like a whole lot of people (besides family) wanted to love me where I was; they wanted me to change before they would consider reaching out to me. Well, part of the reason I'm writing this book—the main reason—is that I want to catch you on your downswing. I want to send you a message of hope in some of the darkest days of your life, because changing the direction of your life right now might be just what this world needs.

Usually, high school marks every big moment in your move from childhood to adulthood: first kiss, first car, first car wreck, first love, and the first time you have to decide who you are. In high school you step as far out from under your parents' roof as you can while still living there, and you attempt life on your own. It's a trial-and-error process that type A personalities pass with flying colors, but people like me . . . well, we crash and burn and thank God that His grace abounds.

I want to write this book with the kind of utter honesty that makes people uncomfortable. That might sound weird, but until we're brutally honest about important issues, we won't know how to tackle them. This means I'm going to put a lot of deeply personal stuff in these

pages in hopes you can learn from some of my mistakes. If you're anything like me, the temptation will be to prove me wrong, to prove you can do what I did without ending up in a downward spiral. I hope you won't try. While you might be fortunate and come out with only a few deep gashes, you might not be. I've been to plenty of funerals for people who didn't have the luxury of second chances. I've watched friends go to rehab fighting to break the chains of addiction, and I've watched others not able to give it up at all. So I hope you won't try to prove me wrong. I hope through my story you'll see what I had to learn the hard way: we all need a Savior.

DARK

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

I'M 794 MILES from my hometown, but somehow it all feels so familiar: the lockers, the overwhelming smell of vanilla and Abercrombie, the confusing layout, the kids rushing to class, the couple in the corner making out. I walk the halls and breathe a sigh of remembrance. The bell brings me back to the here and now, and I have no idea where room 2070 is.

Finally I stumble into the classroom, and twenty sets of eyes look at me. A few of them look confused; I'm obviously not their teacher. I tell them that today I'm their substitute. A few more confused looks, and then one brave girl in the back asks, "How old are you?"

“Twenty-three,” I say, looking down at my instructions. They have a test today.

“You look like you’re eighteen,” one of the pretty girls in the front says.

I glance up and see the familiar scene. It might be six years since I was in high school, but not much has changed. There’s still the loner in the back wearing all black, trying to blend in with darkness; the oversize scary boy who wants me to know I don’t have authority; the peppy cheerleader who smiles even when nothing is happening; the angry girl who probably dates the scary boy in row three; the athletes who swish their hair to the side trying desperately not to care; and the rest: the average-for-now kids who get lost between categories. I know they won’t take their test until I go through the normal ritual of questions, so I let them ask.

No, I didn’t go to school here, and yes, I’m old enough to teach. Yes, I’m super tall, and no, you may not stand next to me to see if you’re taller. No, I didn’t play basketball, and yes, I’m married. By this point I can normally get them on task, but the brave girl in the back says something I don’t expect.

“Tell us your life story.”

I look up. Twenty sets of eyes look back. Only forty-five minutes left in class. I wish I could tell them my life story.

I would tell the popular girls to be nice, because later in life they’ll realize life isn’t about them. I would tell the

pretty girls that looks aren't all they have. I would tell the kids in black that this is just a phase and the real world isn't quite so harsh. I would tell the tough girls that getting hurt is part of life. I would tell the pretty boy with the hair swoosh that there will be a million of him wherever he goes next and the only thing that will make him stand out is his character. I would tell the girls trying desperately to fit in that one day it won't be so hard. I would tell the in-betweens that one day they'll have their place in this world. Mostly I would tell them there is a Jesus who loves them, a Jesus who knows what they are going through and has a relationship waiting for them that is more than they could ever imagine. There are so many things I would like to tell this class, but for now they have to take a test.



So which one was I? Great question. After I watched *Mean Girls* with my parents when I was sixteen, my dad turned to me and asked, "So, which one are you?" I was Lindsay Lohan's character: a little clueless, but drunk with the idea of being on top of the popularity food chain. I had started off as a no one, but because of a late burst of puberty and my ability to take shots of vodka, I was fumbling my way to the top, making all the classic mistakes along the way.

I was like many teenagers. I hated my parents. I drank alcohol. I smoked weed and the occasional cigarette, had

sex, got a broken heart, struggled with depression, and in the end wanted out. I have a classic high school story but with one big twist at the climax. Here's where it began:

Before the alcohol, the hookups, the rebellion, and the aches and pains of teenagedom, I was just a little girl with two parents I adored and three brothers I wanted to be like. There was a time before puberty when I enjoyed being with my family. A time when I still laughed at my brothers' singing. A time when we would catch turtles at Hilton Head. A time before my dad became embarrassing and we still played games together on Friday nights. We were all best friends in the time before life took hold of me and I became *too cool*.

My dad would come to call the time when I became *too cool* the "blue eye shadow phase" because I wore a thick layer of blue eye shadow up to my eyebrows, and I thought it looked good. (If you're in this phase, do us all a favor and throw away the blue eye shadow. It doesn't look good.) It seemed the more eye shadow I wore, the witchier I got, and my parents bore the brunt of my hatred. I started drinking because I thought I deserved the freedom to drink. It was my parents' fault my life was so hard, and if they'd just let me do what every teenager does, then we wouldn't have any problems. If they'd just let me stay out all night and drink, even though I was underage, we would be okay.

When I was sixteen, I went through a phase where I refused to tell them I loved them. I thought I could prove

how much I didn't need them if I only withheld my love. I would storm off to bed, angry about something I didn't have that I desperately needed, but they'd just smile and say, "I love you." The little girl inside me longed to say it back, knowing I needed them more than ever at this time in my life, but I refused her.

All this denial, anger, hatred, and need were compounded by the fact that my mom was sick. Her first "episode," as we came to call them, happened when I was four. She had a fever and chills and could barely get out of bed. We took her to the hospital, and I remember my dad buying us Happy Meals and letting us play in a park nearby. The doctors told her she was dehydrated and gave her some fluids. But it wasn't dehydration. The episodes came back again and again, and they continued for the rest of my childhood. The doctors would think they were close to an answer, and then it would slip away.

The only time my mom and I got along was when she was sick. That's when I became her caretaker. I brought her ice packs when her headaches were unbearable, ginger ale when she wanted something to soothe her stomach. I folded laundry when she was too weak to manage. This was the only time I made life easier for her. Sometimes, when she was really sick, we'd sit on her bed and watch TV, just enjoying moments of peace. In a way, her sickness brought healing moments to our relationship, but it was also hard. At ten, I knew the grocery store like the back of

my hand. I could cook dinner and often did. When my mom was sick, no plans were definite, and I got used to shopping trips being canceled, activities being moved, and life being put on pause. It wasn't anyone's fault, but when you're a kid, you don't understand that, and I adjusted to her chronic illness like all kids adjust to change, kicking and screaming.

Being my mom's caretaker and getting used to having my needs put on hold is probably why I became fiercely independent. And it's at least partly why I cheated on all my boyfriends one way or another until I was eighteen. I had to prove I didn't need them, that I was stronger than they were. I had to prove to myself that I was beautiful and worth being wanted, and I had to prove to others that nothing fazed me. I didn't care who I left in the ashes as long as I came out okay. Of course, this was a shell—a way to hide how deeply insecure I was and how much I really wanted to be loved.

When I was fifteen, I got a necklace from my cousin that said "Rebel" on it—*very* class. I wore it with pride, hoping it would confirm the rough exterior I put on. I wanted everyone to know that I needed no one. But that was the furthest thing from the truth. I needed love, I needed attention, I needed a place to belong, and most of all I needed to know who I was. So I created who I was—I made myself the person I'd always hoped I could be. I followed rules I created for myself, strict social guidelines that would ensure

I always came off as cool. As a sign of my true strength, I acted like nothing bothered me. In fact, I stuffed away all the pain that came with being a teenager. I stuffed away the pain of disappointing my parents and losing friends, the pain of rejection, and the pain of guilt. From the outside I appeared happy, healthy, and loving life, but on the inside I was praying no one would find out I was a fake.

The thing that drove every decision I made at this point of my life was my desire to be part of the popular crowd. I was scared and insecure in who I was, so I sought to belong to a group that seemed to know exactly who they were. There were no limits to what I would try. I would be whoever anyone asked me to be as long as I was a part of the crowd. I drank because that's what you did when you were popular. I smoked weed because to be cool you had to at least try it. I fooled around with boys because that's what the other girls did. I didn't know who *I* was; I just knew who I wanted to be like.

The first time I got in trouble for drinking, I was fifteen and went to party with some of my older brother's friends and my best girlfriend at the time. My parents were out of town, and I told my grandparents I was going to a friend's house. When I walked in, everyone stared in disbelief and delight, and they immediately started offering me drinks. Some of my brother's friends were fighting over who could give me shots. No one could believe that I, a member of the Stanfill family, wanted to get drunk,

so they watched in anticipation as I drank shot after shot. Before I knew it, I was wasted and had made out with my best girlfriend at the older boys' urging. I don't remember it, but a picture truly says a thousand words. By the end of the night I'd also made out with one of my older brother's friends, even though I had a boyfriend—another picture memory—and was hanging my head over a toilet seat in the arms of a stranger. My boyfriend at the time found out and was livid. He tried to call me, but I wasn't answering my phone. Everyone was in a panic trying to figure out whether I needed to go to the hospital or not, but I wouldn't let them take me, because I knew I'd be in trouble. The night ended when I stumbled home and fell into bed with the stale taste of vomit on my breath.

On Monday the whole school was talking about what an idiot I'd made of myself. I was mortified. My boyfriend broke up with me, and when my parents came home they got four phone calls from "concerned parents" letting them know what had happened. My parents confronted me, and I'll never forget my dad asking me why I made out with my girlfriend. How could I explain to him that I would do anything for the popular kids, even if it meant making a fool of myself?

I was grounded for three months. Much of my freshman year continued in this manner: groundings, followed by freedom, followed by drunken nights, followed by loss of trust and another period of being grounded. It was an

endless cycle I couldn't escape. My parents tried every bargaining tool in the book, but I wouldn't give up alcohol for anything. One spring break my mom even let me get my belly button pierced because I told her I'd quit drinking if she did. I lied. I didn't think I could be cool without alcohol, and I couldn't survive if I wasn't cool. My reasons for drinking were all lame, but somehow I kept convincing myself they were valid. Self-exploration was my favorite excuse, although I don't know how much you can find out about yourself with your head hanging over the toilet.

I'm an all-or-nothing person, which explains why I felt the need to try everything before my sixteenth birthday. I was in my best friend's basement when I first smoked marijuana. (First moral of the story: parents, don't get a house with a basement.) We were bored on a Friday night, and my friend had an older brother who supplied us, so we smoked and ate a whole bag of potato chips. It wasn't very exciting. I would smoke weed on and off until I was eighteen, when I had my heart broken and found it was the only thing that would numb the pain while I was at school. Smoking was just another way that I could be who I wanted to be.

One particularly boring Friday night, my friends and I decided to smoke weed in a closet in my parents' garage apartment. We all giggled, passing around a bong a friend of mine had bought. We tumbled out of the closet laughing, only to find my parents coming up the stairs. We sprayed

body spray until it smelled like burned hair and hoped they wouldn't catch on. My mom walked up the stairs, and the first thing she said was, "I think something's burning up here!" My friends almost fell out of their chairs. I quickly blamed it on a faulty heater, and they went back to the house. Once they left, we erupted in a fit of giggles. The smell never did come out of our garage apartment. Times like this make it all seem harmless, but it wasn't. These isolated incidents seemed funny at the time, but it was never just about smoking or drinking; it was about running away from who I should be. When I was high or drunk, I hurt my family, ruined friendships, and lost people I cared about.

Most of the four years described in this book were spent running from the responsibility of being the person I knew I was supposed to be. I knew I should be a law-abiding citizen, a good daughter, a faithful friend. However, all I cared about was me and how and whether I fit in with the popular crowd. So I ran from that straight to who it felt good to be, and then I kept running. I was always running.

The cigarettes came along with everything else, just something to do to intensify the drinking. The first time I had one I threw up for hours. That should have been my first clue to stop, but of course I pushed through, until the nicotine was enough to calm my nerves after a long day of school. My three best friends and I all picked up smoking together until finally, when one girl's mom was diagnosed with lung cancer for the third time, we all vowed to quit.

A few years later that same friend's mom died from the habit we so carelessly picked up.

So these are the things that defined me—what I did and who I was with. It was all so harmless at first; I just wanted to fit in—and I did, but at what cost? What I gained was nothing compared to what I traded. I traded diamonds for dog food.