

Life *and* *how to* *live it*

**Volume One:
Begin the Begin**

by:
Chaz Holesworth



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*Maybe he's caught in the legend
 Maybe he's caught in the mood
Maybe these maps and legends
Have been misunderstood
He's not to be reached, he's to be reached.*

-Michael Stipe from the song "Maps and Legends".

Chapter 1

Begin the Begin

It was the worst of times; it was the even worst of times.

One day in the winter of the late 1970s, I was born. After that, it was all down a steep hill. I am a good example of why not everyone should have a kid. I cannot fully detail my progression through depression, anxiety, drugs, Jesus, love, hate, humorous dancing, and my love for R.E.M. However, I want to try to describe my life and how I lived it. This is the first volume in a story that has ups, downs (mostly downs) and some sideways too. So, away we go...

To understand the big picture of my life, and it is a big picture indeed, we should start with how I entered such rotten conditions.

My father and mother were both the products of divorce and broken homes. Charles Holesworth, and my mother, Cathy, met in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. Kensington was a rough, lower class and blue-collar sort of area. My father will call Kensington his home for most of his life.

My mother was born in 1951 in a suburb of Flint, MI. At age 12, she moved to Philly with her mother and her brother Russell after they left her father. They moved to Philly because that is where her mom was originally from. My mom only saw her dad once after that when she was 21. He was in the Navy and met my grandmother while stationed in Philly. After a few years of marriage and making a life in Michigan, he had an affair which led to their divorce. I never met him, but I am told that I have a whole set of cousins and aunts that I am missing out on, not to mention all those free vacation stays, if I ever want to go to Flint.

Anyway, my grandma remarried an older gentleman from Philadelphia, and after a few years, my mom's mom had another son called Eugene. They lived in a row home in the working-class area of the Port Richmond section of Philly.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, my father was the product of two people who could not work it out. After his parents Charles Sr. and Margaret Holesworth got divorced, his mother remarried and had six other children with her second husband (her soul mate) over the course of the next 15 years or so.

His father was not around much after the divorce. I am named after my father, just as he was. Charles the First was an alcoholic, drug addict and, in my opinion, a worthless piece of shit that did not deserve to be a father. He was more like a sperm

donor whose infrequent visits included bullying and mocking his daughter-in-law and grandson.

Not only was he a lousy father to my dad, but my grandpa was also a criminal, and wife beater.

Sometime in the 1950s and '60s my grandpa ran around with an Irish crime gang in the Kensington area called "The K&A gang." The K&A part came from the two major avenues that ran through Kensington, Kensington, and Allegheny avenues.

The gang were notorious in the area and throughout the city of Philly, as they had dealings with the Italian mafia of Philly as well and were on good terms with them. They did have a rival gang in the majority Polish neighborhood of Port Richmond called "The Kielbasa Posse" which I thought was a joke the first time I heard it mentioned, but it was their real name.

The K&A gang started off with home invasions and robbing the more well-off people in the suburbs of Philly. Then they took their crime spree on the road and hit all sorts of homes in other states. They were smart about their crime jobs, they never carried a weapon in case a cop caught them, it wouldn't be armed robbery and a heavier sentence, they targeted homes they knew would be unoccupied for hours and days by watching neighborhoods for as long as it took, and they wore nice suits or business clothes when they were on a job, so they didn't look like they were about to rob a place. They made a killing on robbing homes until the rise of home security took off, then they had to move their interest into something more lucrative, and that was the wonderful world of drugs.

My grandpa was a roofer at the time and was friendly with the roofer union boss who had friends with the K&A gang. One thing led to another, and my grandpa was on jobs with them, first robbing houses and then helping with the drug business, which was mostly distributing it through the city, and he usually dealt with the drug, meth. Which was the drug my grandpa would be on most of the time.

Charles Sr. was in and out of correction facilities through this time. He would do his time and get out and then get caught again doing something illegal. One of the places he ended up in was a low security prison where my dad will be in a good 30 years later. It was a real life "Cat's in the Cradle" sort of thing.

"You know I'm going to be like you dad."

Around this time my grandma (my dad's mom) had enough of her husband's shit and filed for divorce. She was a strong headed woman that was not going to put up with a drug addict criminal forever. She would say that my grandpa was a good boyfriend but a lousy husband.

Because of my dad, my grandma kept in communication with my grandpa and even would visit him with my dad when he was in prison. This all changed one night at a bar in Kensington they both frequented.

Life and How to Live it

My grandma was out with friends at this bar, having an enjoyable time, when my grandpa, fresh out of prison, came up to her and tried to sweet talk her like he always did. The old Charles Holesworth charm that comes in handy. My grandma was getting annoyed by him and wanted him to go away so she could spend time together with her friends and possibly meet another classy Kensington gentleman.

To get rid of him she said to him half-jokingly, "I can't meet a guy tonight if you keep hanging around me." Which caused charming Charles to lose his temper and fly into such a rage that he started to punch my poor grandma in the face so hard that he knocked some of her teeth and broke her jaw. Now, how did a man get away with punching a woman in the face so much to cause considerable damage? This was Kensington in the '50s and Kensington was not going to be made into a Norman Rockwell painting. After that night, my grandma cut my grandpa off for good and he would be absent in my dad's life for a good part of it. This would not stop my dad from idolizing his dad for some disturbed need for the approval of the guy who treats you like shit.

My father was pretty much raised by his mother's father, Henry, who took my dad into his house where the two lived together after Henry's wife died. Henry was a character and a half. He was always good for a funny story or two. He would always talk about how he couldn't wait to go to hell because his friends are there, and they were going to party. He was an atheist and a member of a certain southern club that was extremely strict on who could be one of its members. He would hang up his robe and hood in the basement every time an African American electric worker came to read our meter, so he would know not to steal.

My great grandfather's house was in Kensington. This area was somewhere between the poor working class and just plain poor. This section of Kensington was closer to North Philly rather than Port Richmond and what we used to consider "Kensington up the street," Fishtown (which, after 2003, became a hipster/yuppie haven). Kensington was always a drug haven, and drugs like heroin caused a lot of heartbreak in the neighborhood. In other words, the stacks were already piled too high for my pop.

Henry had been in one of the branches of the armed forces and fought in World War 2. He worked a blue-collar job for many years. He was also a taxi driver for a bit. He took my dad in because he cared about him. I can only guess, since neither of them is around any longer, that Henry didn't realize what my dad was going through when my father became addicted to heroin. Either way, in 1968, my father became addicted to a drug that was so ruthless that it took him over 30-plus years.

Even with the addiction, he was an overachiever in school. One time, he told me that he got a 92 on a test, and he was depressed it wasn't an A. In the early stages of his addiction, he still achieved his high school diploma and even managed to go to Penn State University's local campus, of which he was deeply proud. I am not totally

clear on the details that led to his departure from PSU, but I am sure it had something to do with his addiction. But no matter what he was, he was always proud of Penn State and his short time there.

Meanwhile, my mother dropped out in the 10th grade of high school. Her mother decided that my mom didn't have to go to school and get her diploma since she was just going to get married and be a housewife. So, instead, she was told to work for shit money and help support the house while her brother went to school and graduated. My mom was a meek person who never stuck up for herself. School kids and brothers tormented her. She had an innocent heart that was always on her sleeve. People took advantage of that. Her mother was guilty of this. She never went into detail, but I know there were times when her mother said she hated her.

She was also sexually assaulted, which left a huge emotional scar, and one boyfriend overdosed on heroin and died a few years before she met my father on a Kensington corner. These are just some of the tragic events that left my mom with no self-worth.

Let me explain Kensington a little to illustrate the mindset of its residents. Once, it was just a blue-collar area that was tough but safe enough if you were already living there for a while. Over the later decades of the 20th century, it became more like the scenes in the Bruce Springsteen song. *Rocky*, and parts of *Rocky 2*, *5*, and *6* are in Kensington. But only the first one really captured what Kensington was like in the '70s and '80s.

Imagine feeling like you've been broken so many times that it gives you an excuse to have a couple of Peels or Schmidt's (two beer brands popular in Kensington, especially with my grandpa) before noon; when you have taken enough lumps over the head that the new American dream is paying your bills on time.

There is a joke that sums up how others see "Kenzos." Kenzo is the nickname given to us who lived there. Some people wore the name like a badge of honor. How do you know that the toothbrush was invented by a Kenzo? Because if it was invented by anyone else, it would have been called a "teeth brush." The joke is that Kenzos have poor oral hygiene due to being poor. I find this highly offensive as I have known many good people (including my parents) who were missing some, or all, their teeth. If you are spoiled, you were born with a silver spoon; in Kensington, you were born with only the chance to fight for a used plastic spork. I guess what I'm saying is that it wasn't the best place to grow up in the '60s and '70s, and it only got worse. A lot worse.

I don't know what caused my dad to try heroin. I know he was 17 years old and a senior at North Catholic High in the Frankford section of Philadelphia. He was a devout Catholic and a good student getting mostly 'A's. Even though he had a good head on his shoulders and a mature outlook on life, he was still a kid, and he made a bad choice as kids do.

Life and How to Live it

I was told, at first, he was what they call a functioning addict. He maintained his grade point average and held down jobs. All I know about this time was told to me by my mother since my dad and I never had the old “heroin ruined my life” conversation. My father was full of pride, which is another great and foolish quality of a Kenzo. I know he was involved with a girl he was serious about, and the relationship ended because of his addiction. And then there was his time at his beloved Penn State was affected as well by his drug abuse.

He once told another adult family member about his addiction. When he sat them down and found the courage to say he had a problem, their response was, “Is that all? I thought you were going to tell me you were gay.” Drug addiction was common in the poor neighborhood of Kensington. The mindset there was to muscle through it and get over it on your own. Nobody can make you quit drugs. Only when you hit rock bottom will you want to change for yourself. But it still hurts to feel like ones alone even when they’re not.

He was known as Chalie Chuck. In Kensington, you get all kinds of nicknames that have no purpose in the English language. He even had a poem created for him: “Chalie Chuck married a duck. The duck died; Chalie cried.

Hooray for Chalie Chuck!”

My dad was a handsome man. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a thin build, and he was quite the gentleman. He was a soccer player before his demise and was said to be quite the party animal, at least when he was not nodding off. The father of one of my childhood friends knew my dad from their glory days; he said, “Man, your dad was a nut.” My father, the Kenzo legend.

Soon after my mom’s parents divorced, they moved to Philadelphia. Not knowing anyone was a little rough for my mom, and her mother wasn’t too kind. My mom had low self-esteem, which she passed on to me. She never felt good enough. Things did not get better when she dropped out of high school. I do not know what her plans were, but Port Richmond was almost as demotivating as Kensington. I think she was living on a prayer. But she was only a quarter of the way there.

Mom never really talked about her life before my dad. The date rape she experienced was too much to talk properly about even 30 years later. She was hurt when her boyfriend overdosed, and she didn’t seem to have much of a future. It was Chalie Chuck’s charisma that hooked my mom in 1971. And my dad once admitted it was her hourglass figure and her resemblance to Janet from *Three’s Company* that did it for him. Let there be love. My parents, young and in love with a used spork full of know-how.

Chapter 2

It's a Nice Day for a White Trash Wedding

You may be wondering how my mom could fall for another heroin addict. I guess they were a dime a dozen in Philly in the '70s. Plus, she sang the anthem of the used and abused women's union: "I thought I could change him." I heard that at least 4,599 times throughout my life, followed by, "If I could go back, I would do it all differently." Then the classic, "The only good thing that came out of it was you and your sister." Hey Hallmark, I think I can see a market you are missing out on.

They had only been together for about 10 months when they decided to marry. They eloped on May 26th, 1972, to Camden, NJ, of all places. Only because at the time, my mother was 20, and if you were under 21, you couldn't be married in Pennsylvania. After the courthouse wedding, they went back to my Grandpa Henry's house, which was now my parents' house in Kensington.

My sister Cathy was born in 1974, and shortly after, my family moved into an apartment in Fishtown. By this time, my father managed his addiction well enough to go to community college, and he received his associate degree in chemical engineering. He found a full-time job in the neighborhood. But things started to go south when my dad began showing signs of a full addiction. He would be out doing God knows what with God knows who for days on end. His paychecks mostly went to his dealer instead of his family. Then there were the rumors that my dad was cheating on my mom. She even said she had found other women's underwear in their apartment. Not so smooth pops, not so smooth.

One time, my dad wasn't home for a few days, and my mom thought it was just the norm for my dad until she got a call from the Camden County Police District saying that they had one Charles Holesworth in custody for drug possession with a woman he said was his wife. It turned out my dad was caught with drugs he was smuggling from a corrupt doctor from New Jersey to Philly. This would be the first time my dad was in trouble with the law. And like his father, it wouldn't be the only time.

It either takes true love to bail out your husband after a story like that or complete stupidity and a lack of a backbone. Your guess is as good as mine.

Life and How to Live it

When they couldn't pay rent on the apartment, it was back to Grandpa Hank's in Kensington. You may think that the last thing they would want would be another child. Living in poverty with a drug addict for years should be enough to not want to bring a child into the world, but not for my parents. I was born at the Northeastern Hospital in Philly in 1978. I was supposed to be born on December 22nd, 1977, but I was taking my dear old time. I was turned over in the wrong way, and I was too stubborn to move, and the doctors were going to induce her for our safety. But at the last second, I turned and was born on January 2nd, 1978.

We were not doing so well as a family before my birth, and one more mouth to feed didn't help. My father was up to the same shenanigans, and my mother was overwhelmed. We needed a sudden change, and we got it when my dad's dad, Charles Sr., invited us to live with him and my dad's stepmom, Dolores, in North Hollywood, CA. It was a great chance for my dad to kick his addiction and for us to live in a neighborhood that wasn't so dog-eat-dog.

Let me tell you something about being a Holesworth. My grandpa Holesworth was the youngest of four kids. His parents, who were of German descent, Americanized the last name Holzworth into Hoelsworth (Or at least that's what I was told most of my life). How did Hoelsworth become Holesworth? When my grandpa was born, the hospital made a spelling mistake on his birth certificate. You'd think such a mistake would be quickly reconciled, but it never was. So, out of four children, my grandpa was the odd man out. That would be the beginning of the Holesworths being the black sheep, and perhaps, of a sense of isolation that I would inherit.

Chapter 3

California Dreaming

In late 1981, we moved to sunny California, and things were looking up for the Holesworth clan. My grandparents' house was very pleasant and worthy of calling home. I was only three when we moved there, and my fourth birthday was celebrated at Disneyland. I remember following the seven dwarves around, being scared to death of the Peter Pan ride, and my dad having to hold me through it.

I have a few other memories of that time. I remember jumping on a bed and my grandma telling me to stop. I remember walking off with the nine-year-olds on the block without telling my mom. She was so worried that she called the cops, and I was found about five blocks away. I was a hyperactive youth. If we had gone to the doctors, or at least the kind that knew about modern medicine, I would have been diagnosed with ADHD. I used to be able to entertain myself for hours, in my own world.

One day I was watching cartoons, and a commercial came on. The PlayDoh man, made out of clay, was dancing around and doing flips. I decided to do the same and gashed my head open on the television. My dad and grandpa rushed me to the children's hospital, and I ended up with a two-inch scar between the top of my forehead and my hairline. Growing up, my hair always looked like I had a slice in it when it was short.

Anyhow, I know now that while we were in North Hollywood, there was an ongoing struggle between my mother and my headstrong grandpa.

My grandpa's hatred for my mom was so intense it was the monkey wrench in my dad's recovery attempt. My mom is a good-natured woman, but her naïve, passive attributes ground my grandpa's short temper and zero tolerance for anything he saw as stupidity. My mom told me stories years later about the confrontations between the two of them, like when my grandpa sat across from her, listing all the things she did wrong and telling her how much he hated her.

My only guess is that he thought that my mom wasn't good enough for his son: and this was a son that he was barely there for growing up. A drug addict son, wasting his life, perhaps because his father wasn't around to talk some sense into him.

Or maybe he thought that my mom was an enabler and that she should stick up for herself more and maybe force my dad to get clean. Who knows? All I have is my mom's side of the story, and what she says is she was so unhappy that she would cry

all the time we were there. She said that my gramps would pick on her for everything from the way she cleaned to the way she was with me. She couldn't take anymore and told my dad that she had to leave. So, we moved to Kensington, the wasteland capital of heroin. Thanks, gramps, you did one hell of a job.

One thing I can say about my gramps is that he did have a knack for trying to toughen you up. He would always tease and make fun of me in an attempt to make me a man. "The world's a tough place, and you have to be strong," he'd say. Like I wasn't going to realize that for myself.

He failed if he was just trying to get my mom fired up and ready for a battle for my dad's sobriety. If he really did hate her and just wanted her to leave and for the rest of us to stay in California (as he suggested) then I wish he'd just left us the fuck alone. Hey gramps, you were the beginning of dad's failures, and maybe you could have shown some responsibility and kept your mouth shut when it came to your son's choice of wife.

Granted, my father had still been up to his same tricks in California. He would still stay out for nights without calling, and he was still using, but his chance of kicking the habit seemed higher in sunny Cali.

Chapter 4

Running to Stand Still

My father thought whatever his dad said was gospel, so now he blamed my mom for all of our miseries and always would. They thought she was an idiot and that she was beneath them. I know if my dad hadn't been a junkie he wouldn't have been with my mom. He would have succeeded in college, married a girl he met there and had a chance at a normal American life. But given his addiction, he found a lady that would stay by him, no matter what. Maybe she did things that got on his nerves. But she wasn't trying to hurt him on purpose and didn't cause him anywhere near the misery he caused her. I am not saying my mom is perfect (her flaws were at least harmless). But it was unfair to blame her for everything that happened.

I do believe that if my father had a better life, he wouldn't have tried any hard drugs. I also think if he had gotten help in the early stages, everything would have been different. Of course, I don't condone his cheating on my mom, nor do I condone his absence for weeks and months at a time, but drug addiction is a powerful thing that consumes lives no matter where it occurs. In the '80s in Philadelphia, the supposed "war on drugs" had been forgotten.

So, we were back on Wishart Street with good old Grandpa Hank. He took us in at the three-bedroom row house that I would call home for the next 13 years. Me and my sister, Cathy, shared a room with bunk beds for eight of those years. Nothing had changed much, and my dad fell back into his comfortable routine. In fact, he seemed worse. I think the rift between my mom and his dad was too much for him to forget, and I guess part of him was lost when the California dream was just another Holesworth failure.

My overly sensitive mother was having a hard time herself. She was stuck raising two children with a spouse who was out and about getting high and when he wasn't high, he was trying to get back to that high as soon as possible. One good thing is that my dad had pride, and he truly loved my sister and me. He did at least manage to go back to being a functional junkie. He took only enough to get through the day.

He got a job which was something to do with gold plaiting and chemicals. Some money was coming in, and things were slightly better. Of course, after work and on weekends, he was a mess. He would pass out with lit cigarettes in his mouth and hands,

burning the furniture. The infamous heroin nod off is like trying to sleep in an uncomfortable position; you nod all the way down and instinctively bounce back up and start the whole process again. You never appear to be awake or aware of the situation.

He'd give my mom half the paycheck, then come back a few days later for more to help pay for his habits. Another thing functioning addicts do is try to stay "clean" through other substances like alcohol. So, my dad was nodding off either from the effects of heroin, alcohol, or both. He was spending almost all our money on his addictions while we had to eat ramen noodles and welfare cheese.

It was becoming too much for my mom to handle, and enough was enough.

She went to see the priest at our local Catholic church, St. Hugh's, and asked him for advice. The priest told her to divorce my dad and take us away, as other people had. She was once again either too much in love or too stupid to listen. So, she tried to get a job to help while my sister was at school, and I was being watched by my neighbors. That only led to my dad having more money for drugs and her having less time with me. And I needed parental influences, so she quit the job. Dad was furious, but he was the pot calling the kettle black. He did try to show us attention the best he could. It is important that my dad did try to show me things and take me out to places growing up. Even though we were dirt poor, and I knew exactly what was going on with him at age four, I loved him with all my heart.

One summer day in 1982, I was playing with the neighborhood kids. Whether it was tag or stick ball, we often played until it started getting dark, which was my curfew. This time I was playing with Esther, a neighbor from down the street, who was 12 or 13. I played with her a lot throughout the months since we returned to Kensington. This one night she told me that she wanted to play "house." She would be the wife, and I'd be the husband. I am not sure if I had an instinct about what she wanted to do, but I said I didn't want to. Then she said she wouldn't be my friend anymore if I didn't. So, I did what she wanted.

We sat next to our steps with a blanket on top of us as she touched my private areas, and she told me to touch hers. It went on for quite some time. I didn't realize it just yet, but this event would change me forever. When I got up, I remember my next-door neighbor Jack saying he had seen what I had done and was proud of me.

I was stricken with confusion, not knowing if he meant that he was proud of me for being molested and for me touching a teenage girl's private areas or if he was proud that I had walked away.

Either way, he told my parents what happened. I clearly remember my dad taking me up to his room and telling me that I hadn't done anything wrong and that I shouldn't feel bad. However, I already felt bad, which would be a feeling that I would have towards sex for a long time.

Esther and I were not allowed to hang out any longer. I was glad because her house had a bad smell in it. And her dogs would poop all over the house on newspapers.

Meanwhile, my parents were still up to the same old, same old. And my mom was about to lose her last nerve. The house that we stayed at was owned by Hank, so there was no mortgage, but my parents were supposed to help with utilities and the like. There was less money for things like that, and Hank wasn't happy about it. Guess who he blamed. Not his grandson. Nope, the easy target: my good old momma.

It's not like she wasn't good at taking the blame. She did it with a sense of purpose. It seemed it was in her nature to let people walk all over her and have the ones who were to blame pass it on to her like a martyr.

I remember how much my pop and I loved baseball and going to get pizza. He would always joke around saying, "Do you want to go smell the pizza?"

I would think, "Alright, time to get some pizza."

Then we would walk in, and he would say, "Okay we smelled it; let's go." We would walk out, only to walk right back in and get a slice of pizza pie. But my fondest memory of my dad and I in 1982 was our mutual love for the *Star Wars* films. I think it was our first bonding experience watching the movies together. I idolized Luke Skywalker because he reminded me of my dad. I had the toys before I knew what they were, and my dad would sit around and play with me. I think he enjoyed it as much as I did.

In spite of his addiction, my dad was a God-fearing man. I think 12 years of Catholic school will do that to you. He also wanted us raised Catholic, which was fine since my mom was Catholic too. My sister went to St. Hugh's elementary school. And we would go to church there at least once a month.

If you don't know what a row home is, it's a house connected with a row of other houses. The house was your normal size and style for a Kensington house, which means it was too small and needed a lot of work. The living room was the most appealing part of the home. It was fashioned with a fake fireplace and furniture only a Kenzo in the '80s would want. And the walls were yellow from all the cigarettes my dad and Hank chain-smoked.

The rest of the house needed a dumb reality show-style makeover. Our kitchen needed numerous improvements. My dad would start projects with the intention to complete them but then get preoccupied with his addiction. So, our kitchen was a mess. The floor was vinyl and full of cracks. My dad and his dad had torn up the floor, meaning to replace it. This uncovered the black, dirt-like substances. It made your feet extremely filthy, especially when there were wet spots. It was like this in the '80s and didn't change when we left in 1995. The roof leaked. The ceiling looked like the scene of a 19th-century haunted house. Broken wood showed through and there was a water stain as big as an elephant.

Life and How to Live it

One thing they did accomplish was to install a dropped ceiling. This shifted the ceiling about a foot from the original ceiling and was held up with wires and metal channels. It mostly consisted of large soft tiles. Since they never had the roof fixed, the dropped ceiling was ruined, with half of it collapsing. The bedrooms were all doorless. We used a hanging bed sheet for a door for the bathroom, which didn't have a working shower. My family wouldn't have a working shower until 1998. And it was a low-flow one at that.

Hank's room was in the worst condition even though he owned the house. He let my parents have the bigger bedroom and took the smaller one. It became my room after Hank passed away when I was 12. The roof leaked heavily in this room, so the walls were so worn down that you could flake off parts with your nails. It also smelled musty with a hint of mothballs in the air.

Then there were the rodent and bug residents. To say we had an insect problem would be a huge understatement. We had so many German cockroaches that our walls were 80 percent covered by thousands of these disease-filled, disgusting pests. We had flying ones, we had small and big ones, and we had clear-as-crystal albino roaches.

We had them the entire time we lived there. They even came with us when we moved a lot later in our lives. I remember when they would crawl across the ceiling and drop on my food and drinks. I would unknowingly take a sip of my drink and find something unpleasant wriggling in my mouth until I spat it out. We couldn't keep food out unsupervised for longer than a minute or two. Of course, they were most lively at night, but they'd also be out looking for food during the day. We barely had enough food to spare, and even when they may have touched our food, we had to eat. Even food that was "sealed properly" would be contaminated by a few of the vile things. Partly as a result, I was a skinny kid.

Then there was the toothbrush and paste situation. It was hard to brush your teeth when you went into the bathroom and saw cockroaches all over your brush and the paste. I would have lots of cavities throughout my life, mainly for this reason.

Even our pets had to suffer. When we had cats, there would be a swarm of roaches around their food and litter. And our dog didn't have it any easier, with his food and water being a buffet for the bugs. I wouldn't want anyone I know to experience this with their pets.

The roaches were not alone. The mice also tried to eat everything in sight. We tried to find ways to kill them off: mousetraps, poison, and of course, those cats.

Unfortunately, they were more show and less rodent killers. One cat, Tiffany, wouldn't come out of the dropped ceiling except to eat and poop everywhere but the litter box. Midnight, who was a better cat when it came to killing the rodents, had a wild side; she got out of our home, and we never saw her again. Then there was the legend who was Cinnamon. We got her as a kitten. She was adorable. She grew up to

Chaz Holesworth

be extremely violent and had no tolerance for any of us. If we tried to pet her, it would last maybe 10 seconds before she tried to scratch us.

She would wait in some of the areas where she could hide in the kitchen and attack my dad, leaving him with bleeding feet and the bad temper that I saw too regularly. The only thing she didn't do was kill mice! She was also always in heat and would urinate on a lot of our clothes, especially mine. This became a problem for me during my teenager years (I was a bit of a smelly kid). My parents shouldn't have been allowed to own pets (not to mention kids).

Chapter 5

Personal Jesus

My mother was not a happy person in 1982. My father was running around on her, and she was struggling to make ends meet. The perfect storm eventually happened. One day she was out and about in Kensington when she saw a puppet show run by the Ontario Street Baptist Church. The church was on the Kensington and North Philly border, about a mile from where we lived. I am not sure of the show's message, but it intrigued my mom, and she subsequently pursued being a "born-again Christian" and succeeded.

The demands of being born again are overwhelming and self-sacrificing. You pretty much have to give up the things that make you happy that are "worldly" and just focus on the church and Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior. To be a born again Christian, you have to believe with all your heart that Jesus died for your sins and believing in him and letting him into your life and heart is the only way to salvation. This religion is different from other types of Christianity. It's heavily based on faith and taking the Bible literally, word for word, from Genesis to Revelations. They believe that to be born-again, you have to accept Jesus into your heart and live a Christ-like life. In this way, and only in this way, will you go to Heaven and escape the damnation of Hell.

Other branches of Christianity dwell more on good works and confession for salvation. The born-again folk think that everyone who is not a born-again is going to hell unless they repent and come onto their side of the cross.

Now, it seems easy to get to heaven this way; just ask him in your heart, and bam, you're in. However, there are a few rules you have to follow. It is driven by fundamentalism, and extreme measures are often enforced. Here are a few examples: Women are not supposed to wear pants because it shows off their figure, which is lustful. My mom hasn't worn pants since 1982. You have to keep away from images of evil and wickedness. So, no movies or worldly plays, and in some cases, you avoid any establishment that serves alcohol. The Bible says that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and you must keep it clean, so no drugs, alcohol, and so on. However, they never say anything about eating fast food, non-organic foods, or soft drinks.

No music or movies unless they are about Jesus (this would be the dealbreaker for me). No dancing and no songs with a rhythmic beat. Like other forms of Christianity, you are not allowed to have premarital sex, of any kind, but the born-againers go even

further by not allowing two people of the opposite sex to be alone at any time unless they are married. When you want to date someone, you have to be chaperoned, even if you're an adult. Pretty much everything they think is a sin is on the don't touch list, and to be born-again, you better stay away.

Now, there are more rules, and I will explain these things as I go on, but the one that really created a rift in our family was that if you're born-again, you can only socialize with other born-a gainers, unless you are converting a non-believer. They believe that other Christians are worldly and going straight to hell. For some reason, the Catholics were the biggest target in this holier than-thou finger-pointing.

My father, the Catholic, was never going to like my mom's big news of her newfound faith. I don't even know when my father became aware my mom had been reborn in the power of the blood of the Lamb (Jesus is the sacrificial lamb, dying for our sins and all that mumbo jumbo). So, I don't know how my father reacted, but I do know that my mom went gung-ho over the feelings of comfort and belonging it gave her. She finally had a place where she felt like somebody would listen to her load of worries. Why deal with life's problems when you can push them off with lines like, "God's in control" and "Jesus has a plan for your life." The born-again faith is filled with broken people with low esteem.

She was so relieved by the cross she bore that she decided that my sister and I should also feel the same relief. So, she brought us into her slice of happiness, never thinking about what the consequences would be. In her defense, she wanted to protect us from the ways of the big, bad world, and she wholeheartedly believed that our salvation depended on it.

I understand that she thought she was doing her best for us. It wasn't the best, and I wish I had had the chance to choose my religion, but times were tough and Catholic rituals left my mom feeling cold. Not my dad though, he may have been a heroin addict, but he was also fixed in his beliefs.

Chapter 6

New Sensation

Ontario Street Baptist church became our second home. My mom absorbed the teaching of Pastor May like it was from John the Baptist himself. We went to church for three sermons on Sunday and one on Wednesday. I think, as my mom had the blinders on, she never thought twice about my father's faith. She was so overwhelmed with ignorant bliss that she believed she could take us into fundamentalism without my pops lifting a finger to object. Well, she would prove to be right, but not immediately.

At first, my dad thought she was going through some phase and that it would run its course. Man, do I wish that had been the case. When my mom was getting even more headstrong about her beliefs, my dad finally voiced his thoughts. He thought my mom was an idiot for believing in such a crackpot faith. He thought it was a cult that had grasped my mom using false hope and fear. My father should have realized that it was partly his fault, but his pride would always take control of his tongue. So, my dad decided that my sister and I would have both religions to choose. We would go to my mom's church on Wednesdays and Sunday nights, and on Sunday morning, it was St. Hugh's Catholic Church with my dad.

I think my dad was hoping that not only would this give Cathy and me a more normal perspective on Jesus, but also that my mom would come around if my sister and I chose Catholicism. It might have been a good plan, but too often, my dad would be high or not home, so my mom would take us to Ontario Baptist instead. And it was absorbing into me as though it was *Sesame Street*. On the other hand, my sister had been in Catholic school for a few years by this time and had a better grasp of what she believed. So, she was somewhat on his side.

I was the young mind that was ready and willing to be influenced and programmed. I still loved Luke Skywalker and thought that he was not the second coming of Christ but more like the only coming. I learned that God had made the world in seven days, that we were all sinners, and that I would go to this horrible place called Hell, where I would burn forever unless I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I had no choice but to say, "Dear Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and that I am going to die for my sins. I know that I will burn in a lake of fire forever. Jesus, I know you died on the cross for my sins, and I ask you to come into my heart and save me. I love you, and I

want to be saved from damnation. Please, Jesus, save me and let me into your father's home in Heaven."

Remember, I was four years old and still thought there was a Santa Claus (but not for long; because Santa is a no-no to the born-again folk since he steals Christmas from Jesus). Obviously, this subject was too heavy for a four-year-old to be exposed to, but the Christians (more like the Xians since they really suck the Christ out of it) were never ones to think about the outcome of their actions. So, now mom and I were born-again, and since I didn't remember much from life at this point, I could have dropped the "again" part.

My mom had all new friends. I even met my first best friend there. Uriah and his family were already going to Ontario Baptist when we joined. His mom and my mom hit it off right away. The more my mom became zealous about Jesus, the closer she got to Uriah's mom, Josie. It was great that my mom had a good friend. Uriah was six months older than me and was the middle child between an older brother, John, and younger sister, Mary.

During the summer of '82, we were all attached at the hip. We would go out "door knocking," which is going door to door preaching the gospel to the unsaved folks. Then we would get slices of pizza, which was my favorite part.

Ontario Street Baptist had about 100 or so people that would fellowship there. Some were lower middle class, but the majority were lower class. They had a school, and I was enrolled in their kindergarten at the tender age of four. I didn't start the class until the middle of October, and I was younger than everyone in the class by a good year or so. I remember getting hand-me-down clothes that were too big for me, a recurring theme in my life. The school was in the same building as the church. My class was on the ground floor. I remember being hysterical and crying up a storm at first. I remember my mom and Josie forcing me into the room and Uriah trying to cheer me up at recess. Meanwhile, my sister was in the third grade at St. Hugh's Catholic School. If he could afford it, my dad wasn't giving up on her. My sister and I started on the rocky side as siblings. When I was born, she tried smothering me with a blanket (my mom happened to check on me and saw the blanket over my head). She also poked me in the eye and pinched me to see me cry. That was all set aside growing up, and I valued her opinion like she was a guru.

Once, around the same time in 1982, my sister had a yo-yo, and I asked where she got it. She responded that she had stolen it from a certain store. The next time I went to the store, I pocketed a nice green yo-yo without getting caught. It was almost the perfect crime! When my mom saw me playing with it, she asked where I got it. Like it was no big deal, I said, "I stole it." My mom was mad and asked why I had done that. I said Cathy had done it too, but of course, she denied it, and I had to go back to the store and tell them what I had done. So, whenever she fought with my mom or said bad things about her, it cut me like a knife. I was such a momma's boy at the time.

Life and How to Live it

Don't get me wrong; I loved my dad, but my mom had me as the Christians had her: hook, line, and sinker.

I know now that my sister was probably angry and that she had more memories of life before the born-again hostile takeover than I would ever have. Cathy was old enough to see the differences between the two churches, and perhaps she wanted a semi-normal life. My dad wanted me to go to St. Hugh's as well, but it was not in the budget with all the pest poisons, heroin, and so on. I think he figured that it be okay for a couple of years till I got into a higher grade, and then I could go to a Catholic school and learned about a real religion. Not the best choice by pops. The Christians had their hold on mom and me, and it would take years for me to break it. My mom on the other hand, would never see a fault with it.

Chapter 7

Don't Stop Believing

Sometimes my dad would take me out on Sundays to avoid having me cooped up in church. My mom didn't like it much, but my dad still cared enough about my childhood to create some bonding moments. We would go to the downtown, historic area of Philadelphia, which included the Liberty Bell and Penn's Landing near the Delaware River that had docked old warships throughout the history of America.

He would take me to his friends' houses, and we would hang around with his friends; they were all well in their 30s, but they would act like they were in their teens. I now realize I was living my dad's normal drug addict routine. The degenerates we visited were the stereotypical white trash druggies you'd imagine. We'd go from house to house and corner to corner doing God knows what. I clearly remember when we went to some woman's house that had boxes and boxes of electronics stacked up in her living room. She even said something to me about getting a Nintendo if I wanted. I never got that Nintendo from her. It took me years to realize she was storing stolen products, and if she got me a Nintendo, it would have been hot. I wouldn't have cared because a hot Nintendo beats no Nintendo.

I remember hanging on the corner while my dad and his friends would drink beer in the morning. Not the best son and dad time, I admit, but it was an experience that stuck with me in several ways. One Sunday we spent the day roaming the streets of Kensington with my pop's friends, including this lady my father knew. She was having bad cramps and opened her pants so it would relieve her cramps for a bit. I didn't know about women's reproduction organs, and I thought it was odd to tell an eight-year-old boy this, but "When in Rome," she said, and just went with the flow. Later that day, another man who was supposed to be her boyfriend yelled at my father and her about her now being my dad's girlfriend. He threw a glass bottle at all of us, nearly hitting me. My dad explained, saying that the woman was his friend and that she was a girl, so in a way, she was his girlfriend. Don't worry, pops. I felt guilty and dirty enough for both of us.

Our father and son bonding was supposed to happen every other Sunday, but it occurred more monthly since my dad would often not come home on a Saturday night or let my mom take me to church so he could do whatever he wanted away from my eyes. I was still going to church a lot and hearing all these messages about how I was

a piece-of-shit sinner, and I'd better make sure I was cleansed and saved cause God was also watching and judging like an obsessive parent figure. They would go on and on about how anyone who wasn't part of their "going to heaven" list was damned. That is exactly what they would say over and over again about my father. It was the start of the demonizing of my dad.

Not long after I started at the church, I would never have a healthy relationship with my dad. It would be that my dad was a sinner, heading straight to hell, and needed saving. Now my dad did need to be saved from his addiction and lifestyle, but a bunch of low-class bible thumpers that feared their own shadows if the preacher told them to, were not the saviors he needed. My father needed counseling and something to wean him off heroin.

Methadone was the drug used to give heroin addicts a better chance of getting clean. It gave addicts relief from the physical symptoms. It would not give the satisfaction of the high, though. So, the addict usually needs to want to quit when placed on methadone, or he will relapse, which was what my father had done several times. This leads to the big question that I will never have answered. If we were living so poorly, why didn't my mother leave my father so he could hit rock bottom and finally get off the drug that had ruined him. Why? Because the Christians were against divorce, and they told my mom to stay with him and pray for his salvation. Wrong answer, Xians.

Chapter 8

It's (Not) a Family Affair

My immediate family and our extended one were not as close as other families might be. Our family, being in a rougher neck of the woods, along with my father's dirty habits and my mom's newly found stock in the self-righteous born-again crusade, may have prevented some beautiful family moments. I remember my dad's mom coming by every month to see her father, Henry. She would sometimes bring my dad's sister, Aunt Margie, who was also my godmother. And I also faintly remember going over to their house for visits every so often, but this would diminish over time. As my mom became even more wrapped up in being a light in the world and refraining from evil, she had less in common with people of other faiths. She still gave time to her mom, Eileen, and her brothers Russell and Gene. Going to Eileen's house for a visit was pretty boring, and my mom's stepdad Sam was such an angry sod that I was terrified to even be in the same room as him. Sam married Eileen in the '70s after his first marriage fell apart. He was about 20 years older than her with kids of his own, and of course, Eileen had a few too.

There was the time I was at a function at the house in the basement with another male relative who was a teenager. We were alone, and I think we were playing some sort of game that kids play, when he asked if I had ever played a game called "kiss the birdie" before. He told me to pull out my penis, and he would give it a kiss, then he would expose his penis, and I would give it a kiss as well. I did not see how you could collect points and win this game at all! My memory is a little fuzzy of the event, but I did what he asked, and of all things I was scared he was going to urinate in my mouth. This fragile memory became blocked by my subconscious for about 14 years until I remembered it out of the blue while tripping on acid. In the meantime, I didn't say anything to anyone about what had happened, and it went under the usual baggage that I was already carrying, which you could file under "awkward puberty to follow." The sad part is that I carried this guilt about sex throughout my childhood and teenage years. Basically, my family was in its own orbit.

Chapter 9

The Kids Aren't Alright

About 120 kids went to my school, all from the area, although some came from different born-again churches. See Ontario or OSBS, wasn't alone in their mission to save the lower classes of Philadelphia. They had sister churches throughout the area. Cedar Grove, Faith Independent, Heritage Baptist, Christ Independent Baptist, and its favorite partner-in-crime, Bethel Baptist Church. Most of the pastors were ex-hippies or drug addicts that had replaced their addiction with Jesus.

I understand that this faith gave them the courage to overcome their struggles and that it had been so life-changing that they felt they had to spread it throughout the land. But they should have kept their thoughts to themselves. The school was broken down into a few rooms. It was not too big, so everyone knew everyone else. In my class, I would meet some kids I would know for the next 10 years. Dominic, Wayne, Mark, Marsha, Laylonie, a girl from Hawaii who was my first girlfriend at the age of three), Joshua, Matthew, Uriah, and others. The classes in kindergarten were pretty much like other ones in normal schools, full of math and ABCs, except for the constant bible talk. Also, when we pledged allegiance to the American flag, we followed it up with a pledge to the Christian flag, then one more to the Bible. We would sing lots of Christian songs full of colorful characters like Noah, Zacchaeus, and, of course, the big man, JC. The songs were full of catchy rhymes and disturbing messages. I look back on them and think, "What the hell was I singing?" For example:

*The B-L-O-O-D
That Jesus shed for me
Cleansed me from sin,
I belong to him, the B-L-O-O-D.*

Now maybe out of context, these songs seem a little creepy for kids to sing. With the constant singing in the morning in church, they are still stuck in my head, mixed with 100 other catchy songs. It was like brainwashing kids with cartoons while poisoning them with ice cream.

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As creepy and overwhelmingly cult-like as the children's songs were, they were nothing compared to what we had to sing when we sat in for the church services on Wednesdays and Sundays.

Here are a few more examples:

*Would you be free from the burden of sin?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood;
Would you over evil a victory win? There's wonderful power in the blood.
There is power, power, wonder-working power
In the blood of the Lamb; In the precious blood of the Lamb.*

See, that's pretty haunting, what with all the blood talk. People would sing this song like it was a good time party song. Here are a few more that would cause a double-take.

*If ever in heaven your soul has a place, ye must be born again.
Good works will not answer; no penance will do,
Morality, too, is vain,
For naught will be avail but a creature made new; Ye must be born again.*

This was usually sung at the end of the sermon. After the lyrics were finished, the piano player would keep playing, and everyone would close their eyes and bow (but people would peek). At this point, the preacher would say whoever wanted to repent, or even better, get saved should come to the altar and pray for forgiveness.

I found this part boring; the only reason I didn't fall asleep was the fact that I was standing up. This was a time when you could see if someone was living in sin and backsliding. Backsliding was when a Christian was not living for Christ in one way or another. The same goes for drinking, smoking, having sexual thoughts, or even listening to rock music. We were taught not to be like the rest of the world, but to be a light or an example of how to be saved.

Okay, one more scary Christian song:

*"Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you washed in the blood,
In the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb?"*

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Like I said, we would sing these songs every Wednesday, every school morning, and on Sundays we would go to church for three sermons. The first sermon was at 10am, but for the kids it was Sunday school. We would have to sit through the second one at 11am, and at 6pm we'd come back for one more lecture about our damnation and how Jesus was the only way to keep your soul out of the flames of Hell!

At that tender age, I was unable to resist the programming, and I was saved for all my five-year-old sins. Thank you, Jesus.

Chapter 10

Hooray for Hollywood

My dad was losing the fight badly with his absences on the weekends. He would still take me to places of interest, and he would also take me to the movies. Throughout the years, he took me to see some of my favorite movies ever: *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, *The Karate Kid*, *Rocky 3*, and *Cloak and Dagger*. My mom didn't like it much as it was making me a backslider in the church's view, but my dad still wore the pants in the household. Going to the movies was a treat since we didn't have much money. Eventually, things got even worse financially, and my dad gave up on keeping me away from the church. I wouldn't go to the movies again for seven years or so.

We only had regular TV without cable until 1993, and we only owned a VCP (which played videos but couldn't record them) for about a year in 1986 until my dad sold it for drug money. We wouldn't have a VCR until I bought one in 2002. So, I missed out on a lot of movies that I should have seen.

My missing out didn't matter to my mom since she could do without the sinful movies Hollywood produced. Luckily my dad was a sci-fi and action movie buff, so we would share that for a bit. My father also thought it was normal enough for me to go out on Halloween. The Christians strongly disagreed. It was the devil's holiday, and if you celebrated it, you were said to be praising Satan.

My pops fought over this subject for several years and won for a while.

I got to go out dressed as some of my favorite heroes: Bugs Bunny, Zorro (twice), and Luke Skywalker (also twice). To be Zorro and Skywalker was pretty much the same costume. I'd dress in all black for both, but when I was Zorro, I wore a mask. To make up for me not having a lightsaber, my dad made a sword out of newspaper and colored it green. I don't know how I got any candy for that.

The last year I went out for Halloween (at least as a kid), I went out with my mom, and she made me feel so bad about it that the next year I told my dad that I was getting too old for Halloween. I was eight years old.

So, the line in the house was drawn clearly. My dad wanted me to have a semi-normal life, and my mom wanted to protect me from my dad's version of a semi-normal life. My dad didn't like the Christians, and felt they brainwashed my mom and I.

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He always felt that anyone who followed the life of Christ was a Christian, no matter what particular sect you belonged to. But the born-again movement was all about isolation from anything slightly different from their extreme views of God and faith.

They didn't even consider their religion a religion. They called it faith instead because religion fails.

Chapter 11

Rapture, Be Pure

All through 1983 and 1984, my mom was cutting off more and more people from her past that weren't born-again, and basing her life and my entire life on the church.

By the end of my first year of school, I was doing well with all A's. My next year was pretty much like the first. The only difference was we moved out of the basement and into a makeshift room, which was part of the cafeteria the year before. This year, there were more blood-filled Jesus songs and more praying for the lost or unsaved. There was also more detailed talk about the scarier parts of the Bible-the end times. Born-againers believe that when the world is at its worst, and when you can't take any more sinful acts, Jesus will come back to Earth and save all those who are true believers (meaning themselves). They call this the Rapture. Jesus will blow his trumpet, and all those who are saved will ascend to Heaven, no matter what they are doing. No one knows when this will happen, so you have to be cleansed all the time.

Everyone thinks that this rapture will take place in their lifetime. They all want to be that generation that won't see a physical death but be raptured to heaven instead. Some people will not even plan their lives past a year or two because they think they'll hear Jesus' musical number any day.

One consequence of this fear mongering was that when I communicated with unsaved people, like my Grandpa Hank, I tended to preach to them. I would tell him that he was going to hell if didn't get saved before the rapture, and so on. His response was a funny one to me now, but then it made me sad. He'd say, "I want to go to hell. That's where all my friends are and we are going to have a party."

Chapter 12

Like a Prayer

My dad won a big battle in the fall of 1984 when he decided to have me start second grade, joining my sister at St. Hughes. My preaching skills got put to work during my nine months in a Catholic school. I was already a fish out of water, being a year younger or more than everyone in the class at St. Hughes, but I was also an onward Christian soldier who wasn't having any of this Catholic propaganda. First, the born-again gang does not believe in the crucifixion. They believe that Jesus left the cross, so the image of Christ on the cross is belittling and contradicts his resurrection. I brought that up a few times.

The born-again club also didn't believe in worshipping idols and statues of Mary, the mother of Jesus. I had a thing or two to say about that. But what I talked most about when it came to religion was how I needed to save people and be a light for Jesus. I would bring in these bible tracts and give them out to my teacher and other kids. I would not say the prayers other kids knew by heart and did so in one creepy united chant. I was even down on Santa by this stage. I was that weird kid who was too strange for words. I might as well have been Amish or Muslim in their minds.

It was a good thing my dad talked with my teacher about what was happening and how I was being brainwashed. My teacher, God bless her heart, tried to make me feel like I belonged as much as she could. My love for sci-fi and alien shows leaked over into conversations with kids. I was utterly obsessed with this '80s show called *V*, about lizard-like aliens that invaded earth. I remember writing the letter V on everything that came through my grasp. The teacher also knew that I loved Luke Skywalker, thanks to my dad.

So, one day she decorated the entire classroom with spacemen and aliens. It made me really happy and relaxed, until it was time for the parent and teacher meetings. My mom caught wind of my love for aliens and saw how my teacher was trying to make me feel like a real second grader, and she wasn't having any of it.

She made me feel like I was sinning and that aliens were worldly. I wasn't being the light that I should have been, so the next day I had to tell the teacher that I didn't like aliens, and I wanted her to take the decorations down. She kept them up for another week or so but that was the end of little Charlie fitting in at St. Hughes.

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My sister was not going to help me feel any better either. She would avoid me at all costs when we passed each other through the building. I get it though. I was this little boy who never brushed his hair and looked dirty a lot. But it was still mean of her.

I once got into a fight with this Spanish boy while waiting for my sister to come out to meet me to walk home, which was a daily activity. This boy had an older brother in the fourth grade, and I was terrified of him. So, I let this boy who was even smaller than my six-year-old frame hit me a few times. The kid bragged about beating me up the next day. This was another recurring theme in my life—letting people hurt me because I wanted to avoid conflict.

The other important event to come out of this period was the Christmas pageant of 1984. In Ontario Baptist pageants, I was a big fish in a little pond. In 1982, I was one of two sheep covered in cotton and walked down the path to be at Jesus' side while he was entering the world. I was told I was adorable, but I just heard people laughing at me, and I cried (another recurring theme). Next year, I played a singing cow that let Joseph and Mary stay with him to give birth to Jesus.

I was just a lousy member of the choir. But, as I was in the choir, I was right next to the loudspeakers, in view of everyone during the entire play. My mom did not attend the pageant, and neither did my sister. My dad was the only one in attendance when I started to get scared of the loud rock music playing before the Nativity scenes. Girls were dancing to "Maniac" from the movie *Flashdance*, while I thought I was making God so mad that I was surrounded by sinners while rock music was being played loudly. I thought, "What if Jesus came back and the rapture took place right now! What would he think of my actions?"

I could feel the guilt laid on me by the Baptist filling me with fear till I was dripping with sweat. I had to tell my teacher that I wasn't feeling well, and she escorted me to my dad, who was very loving about it. He just let me sit on his lap and watch the rest of the pageant until I fell asleep on him. I was terrified of the sounds and vibrations coming from the stage.

My dad told me that night that he loved me and had been proud of me up there during the pageant, no matter what. I think that my dad was foolish enough to believe that this time in a Catholic establishment would convince me to walk away from the life of the Christians, and more importantly, my mother's side. But it was too late, no matter how much he tried. The poison that the fundamentalists had spawned in my young, fragile mind was enough to keep me diligent about the ways of the Catholic Church.

As the new year came, I was still preaching the ways of my mother and the glorified cult that we belonged to. And my mother gained some ground in her struggle when it became clear that we could not afford to go back to St. Hugh's. My sister and

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I had to change course and start our education in the place that was a shining display of educational irony: Ontario Baptist school.

God help us all.

Chapter 13

Back on the Chain Gang

I was super excited when I heard the news of my return to Baptist school because I missed Uriah and the gang. Plus, I never got used to all the crucifixes and chants. My sister was not so thrilled. She was leaving friends and such.

And I think she was under the impression that being a born-again was weird.

She was a moody child, and I guess the change was hard for her. She made friends, but her dislike of the change was apparent from her actions. Miserable would be her motto for quite some time. In contrast, I loved being back in the church and living for Jesus.

Third grade was like I had never missed second grade. Same friends, same Christian fears. Blah blah blah. My father, meanwhile, was going further than ever into his dark side. He would be gone for days and weeks on end. Money was so tight we would stand in line in churches for an hour to get welfare cheese and butter. There is nothing like an unappetizing block of government cheese on a slice of bread.

I think my dad felt alone, and his addiction amplified with the splitting of our family. Like me, my sister and mom got even more overwhelmed by the church. My father was finding refuge in his heroin and fellow junkies, who were in the same boat as him. Don't get me wrong: he still showed some caring, with me at least. Some of my fondest memories were when I came home from whatever I was doing, and I would find a new *Star Wars* toy out of its package waiting for me, thanks to my dad. This would happen every so often, and I was none the wiser until the day he gave me a toy that was only fun with the accessories from inside the box. So, I asked my dad where the box was, and he told me that he had opened it up and thrown it out on the street so it would be ready for me to play with. I put the pieces together and realized that all the toys he gave me never came in packages (apart from Christmas presents). Then I remembered when we had gone to a woman's house with tons of expensive things in boxes in her living room. And I remembered she offered me a Nintendo. At this point I somehow knew that my father was giving me stolen toys. But it's the thought that counts anyhow.

Chapter 14

Nobody Knows in America

In 1986 our neighborhood began to change. It went from being a bunch of Irish and German knuckleheads to an overwhelming flow of Hispanics from the island of Puerto Rico. At first it was just a few families that came to America looking for the dream and all that, but then something else came spurting up. Drugs came into our streets like a windstorm. One second it was perfectly fine to be out and about on my block, and then bam! We had a drug corner. This was terrible for property values but even worse for a heroin junkie whose family just turned their backs on him. Not everyone who moved into our neighborhood was a drug dealer; many Spanish families on my block were good people who suffered from the drug dealing as well.

Horror stories came in like waves. Like when my father was out on the corner with our next-door neighbor, Jack. Drug dealers are one of the things you can count on to be open all night long. It was midnight when he saw Jack start running. My father didn't have time to react to his white trash friend's movement because the man Jack had run from stabbed my dad four times with a knife. When the ambulance came and took him to the hospital, the doctors told my dad he was lucky he was wearing a tight leather jacket because if he hadn't, the blade would have done some real damage. Instead, he would only need stitches and some antibiotics. For me, that would have been a lesson learned and led me to higher pastures. Too bad my dad was a stubborn jackass. He reverted to his old ways as soon as the stab wounds healed.

One fine afternoon my dad came home on a Saturday drunk and on a roll. He was so wired up, and it wasn't heroin (because that would just make him nod off).

This was something else that made him hyper and full of foolish courage.

He was screaming up and down about how he and his father were going to take back the neighborhood from the Spanish.

I was terrified at this point, but as my mom tried to say prayers under her breath, my dad said even scarier things. He started to say that he was the devil possessed and that there was no saving him. That didn't sit well with my zealous mother. She started to "plead the blood in Jesus' name" (ask Jesus for protection). My father's actions that

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day just added more fuel to the fire. After that, he left to do whatever he did and wasn't seen until dawn.

Chapter 15

*You're so poor you're PO 'cause you
can't afford the OR.*

Around this time, my dad gave up on the fight for religious equality. He would silently let my mother have her way as long as he could have money to do what he wanted. As a result, a lot of years that could have been life-shaping bonding became lost to fear mongering and hypocritical bullshit.

We were struggling to make ends meet. No-frills food was our brand of choice. We would walk two miles or use the family bus pass to go to the cheapest food market to save a few bucks. Hand-me-downs and thrift stores were our source for clothing.

We would often visit a place called Christ's Home for Free Clothes. The people working for the church (including my mom; by this time, she was teaching kindergarten, and she would clean the church weekly with my help) were allowed to select as many articles of clothing as needed. The styles were obviously not the top brand names that popular kids wore but rags that smelled of mothballs. But they were free, so it was a shopping spree.

Most of the clothes did not fit me. They were way too big for my skinny frame. Since I didn't have a belt, I was always tugging my pants up. Uriah's mom would later say that I started the rage of hip-hop kids wearing baggy pants that fall off their asses and that I should get paid for it. If only I had taken pictures.

Our household was separated by religion, lack of communication, and different coping strategies. But at least my dad was physically there. And when he was awake (or sober), he would be a caring man who showed that he loved us. Unfortunately, these times were few and far between. My dad had a disease that needed to be dealt with. And if it had been, my mother would not have had to rely on Jesus to save her. How wonderful it would have been to have normal friends with a normal social life and school. But it would have been a lot more generic and wouldn't be as interesting a story, I guess.

Chapter 16

Got to Keep Them Separated

All our friends were from the church. We only were entertained by things approved by the church (except when my dad wanted to watch TV shows and movies that my mom didn't approve of; the church did preach that a wife should listen to her man). Monday through Friday was school and the preaching and singing that came with that. On Tuesdays, they had the ladies' bible study, which I had to go to because my dad would be nowhere to be found. On Wednesdays, it was the prayer meeting, which was also known as gossip hour. See, they had sheets to go around the church so that everyone could see the congregation's prayer requests.

This is where you would know what was happening in everyone's lives and silently judge them.

Most were like, "Please, Jesus, save my sister from hell" or "Please, Jesus, help with my financial troubles." My mom was a superstar when it came to the prayer request. I think it was because she believed in Christianity so much that she thought God could do anything. So, she would let the cat out of the bag about our life. Mom would pray that my dad would stop doing drugs and stop leaving for days without saying where he was going. She would ask for God's help in dealing with my sister when her temper and teenage angst settled in for the long haul.

But her "go-to" request would be on the list for 20 years or more. She would ask for my dad's heart to soften and have him ask the lord into his heart for salvation. This would be fine and dandy if it stayed in the walls of Ontario Street Baptist, but my mother would keep the sheet in her Bible and bring it home. Once my dad caught wind of the tell-all, he forbade her from sharing our business. After that, she obeyed except for the big one, revealing that my dad was a sinner going to hell.

Whatever comfort my mother got from being a Christian probably peaked in 1986. The fact that both her children were in the church's school was like hitting the spiritual lottery. My sister experienced her first year under the watchful eye of the lord and savior. She became moody and had some angst in her expression. My dad was a strong influence on my sister now, and she thought my mom was an idiot for believing in a hocus pocus cult as much as my dad did. Due to the age gap, we didn't spend much time together. But there were only about 120 other kids with us. I knew that she made some friends there. This made me happy since I was my mom's son, and I wanted my

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sister to be happy and to love my mom. I wanted her to be nice to us, which she was not most of the time, especially toward my mom.

Her friends were often the sisters and brothers of my friends since most Christians didn't believe in birth control. Most had about four to six kids, and some families had as many as ten.

Uriah and I were like Forrest and Jenny or peas and carrots. We had a friendship that never missed a beat. I was back in the swing of things with all my Christian friends, and I even had a puppy love girlfriend, Brandy. Life at the age of seven was looking good.

My father started making less effort with me. One time I was playing in my parents' room and found drug needles and baggies. I went in front of the entire church and told them what I found. I was asking for prayers to save my dad from his sinful ways. Things on Wishart Street were still causing emotional damage to us all. I love that Christians lump all things they think are sins and label them "worldly." I don't believe that drug addiction is a sin. Now, I KNOW that drug addiction is not a sin; it's a disease.

Chapter 17

Like Father, Like Son

In 1987, my grandparents decided to move back from California to Philadelphia; they found a house in the Oxford Circle area of the city. Since they now lived closer, I would see my grandpa a lot more. He was also trying to be there for his son, I guess. My dad still held him up on a pedestal and was cheerful now that his neglectful father was in his life again. It was not enough to change his lifestyle, but it made for some fun stories.

While our family never owned a car, my dad actually had his driver's license up until the '90s. One weekend, my grandpa lent my father his brand new 1988 Lincoln town car for the weekend. On the first day, I remember driving around with my dad, and everything was great. That was Friday night. On Saturday night, my dad went with his daily routine of staying out all night, doing what good Lord knows. Somewhere over the late-night hours, there was a loud crash on our corner at A and Wishart streets. It was enough to wake me up for a few seconds, which is saying something because I have always been a deep sleeper. I went back to sleep and found out later that my father had totaled his father's brand-new Lincoln, driving into an electric pole.

My dad claimed that someone had thrown a rock at the car, and it startled him enough to lose control and plow into a 30-foot wooden pole. I was only nine, and I knew better than that. No matter how angry my grandpa was when he heard the news, you have to take some blame for trusting a heroin addict and a mild alcoholic with your car, jackass.

Another time that year, our family came home after a spiritual awakening at church, and my father had a present for me. It was a *Rocky IV* t-shirt he must have found somewhere on his travels. It was in the style of '80s rock bands like Iron Maiden and Mötley Crüe. When the church preached about the evils of rock music, for some reason, they focused on Iron Maiden and showed pictures of the band's shirts with "demonic" images bestowed on them. So, when I first saw the shirt, I panicked, thinking my dad had bought me a rock shirt and I would have to disobey God to wear it. Boy, did I have a rush of relief when I saw that it was a Rocky shirt.

One Tuesday evening in the fall of 1987 became the worst day of my life so far. I was watching a cartoon called *Duck Tales*, waiting for dinner to be made, when I heard a loud crash from the bathroom where my father was taking a bath.

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My mother ran upstairs first, and I heard her saying my dad's name over and over again. She was trying to revive him from the drug-related seizure that he was having. I ran upstairs as fast as I could. When I reached the top, I saw my dad twitching and changing colors with blood dripping from his mouth; he had bitten his tongue during the seizure.

As this went on, my heart was pounding. I was praying and crying hysterically for my dad to live. I remember looking into the bathroom mirror and realizing that no matter how sad my life had been, this moment was ten times worse.

I prayed, saying, "Please, Jesus, let my dad live. I love him so much." Meanwhile, my Grandpa Henry was chiming in that I should stop crying, my dad would be fine, and that he was a fucking asshole.

Someone called 911, and the paramedics came about 10 to 20 minutes later. By this time, my dad had come out of the seizure and was coherent enough to put on pants and talk to the EMTs. They asked him questions to make sure he was in the proper mindset. They asked who the president was. He said Kennedy, not Reagan. They asked him what year it was. He said sometime in the '60s. I guess he was daydreaming of a better America. I never left my dad's side during the chaotic events, and they asked my dad who I was. He said proudly, "That's my son, Charlie." It was the one question he got right.

That was the first sign of relief I had. He was sent to the hospital for a routine check. He fought with a nurse because he didn't want to be touched by anyone. He was thrown out of the hospital, and my parents took the bus back to our happy home.

My mother would tell me later in life that my dad had several more seizures that year- at work or home when I was in school. Dad still kept up his junkie-lifestyle though.

Chapter 18

Father Christmas, Give us the Money

The week before Christmas, my dad was missing for longer than usual. Where it was usually a day or two, maybe three, this was a week. My mother was constantly looking for him through the window or opening the front door to see what was happening. On the 23rd of December, she finally saw him walking down our street. She darted out after him, yelling, “Chollie, where have you been?” He was covered in bruises and had a black eye. He claimed to have been robbed by a man with a gun. He also explained how the money for the Christmas presents had been stolen, and that’s why he hadn’t come home for a week, out of fear and guilt.

We were happy to have him back, but part of me was upset that our artificial Christmas tree would have a lot of room underneath it. I was only nine, and Christmas was usually the time when my dad made up for the poor existence that we shared through the rest of the year. He would usually go out of his way to make sure we had a nice Christmas with plenty of gifts. We would eat no-frills food and welfare cheese for the rest of the time, but Christmas was his chance to say he was sorry and that he did love us, at least until this year.

A call was made to my grandparents in Oxford Circle. Grandpa came and took us to his house for the holidays. He even lent my parents some money and gave them a ride to buy us presents. He wasn’t as much of a jackass as I usually thought, even given what had happened in California.

Christmas morning came, and I was overwhelmed by the fact that we had presents. There weren’t that many presents, but it made me smile all the same. Even though I believed that my father and his parents were going to hell to burn for their sins for the rest of eternity, I was happy that my dad was safe, and we were temporarily out of the neighborhood. Even if it was just for a day or two.

Chapter 19

The Real-Life Karate Kid

In 1987, I also took karate lessons from a man who was a born-again Christian and would do these lessons for a low price. The lessons were at a church that Pastor Harmata oversaw.

So, me, Uriah, his brother Jonny, and the rest of us young Jesus freaks would spend every Saturday from 8-12 pm learning how to block punches and defend ourselves against people that might grab us at any moment. We did this routine for a year or so. By the end, I would be an orange belt, which was only two belts from the white belt (the beginner belt).

I loved *The Karate Kid*, but I would have rather stayed home and watched my favorite thing in the world at the time - Saturday morning cartoons! But Uriah's mom had persuaded my mom I should do it. Maybe it will come in handy if someone decides to attack me in the predetermined situations I trained for, like the very common "thumb grab." And I did get to wear a karate suit.

My father claimed to have learned martial arts. Sometimes, he would wear his "ninja" suit to walk around the neighborhood, claiming he was armed with Chinese throwing stars and other weapons he had bought from our city's Chinatown. I don't know why he did this, but I thought he was so awesome when he was in the ninja suit, so maybe it was all about impressing me. Who knows?

Chapter 20

Heaven is Place on Earth, Sike

Pastor May was getting too old to preach at a church in an area that was becoming a dangerous wasteland. He stepped down so a younger man, Pastor Griffin could keep up his mission. He brought his family of six, and Uriah and I made a new friend in Steve Griffin. People called us the three stooges. With Steven came his sister Mary Griffin, who I guess was my first real crush.

I got all my ideas of love and women from Daniel from *The Karate Kid* and Han Solo, so I believed in love at first sight, and I had it with Mary. I told her I loved her a few times; she said, “Why do you keep saying that?” I wanted to tell her it was because that’s what Han said to Leia in *Return of the Jedi*, and that’s all I knew. Long story short, she broke my heart.

Chapter 21

I Hate my Sister, She's Such a Bitch

More and more Spanish folk were moving in during 1988, which I didn't mind. I had some Spanish friends; we had a ball playing outdoor games. I was just happy to be playing with my Transformers and G.I. Joes with someone else for a change. Playing with my toys was the only escape I had from my troubled home life and the "thou shalt do nothing that makes you smile" religion.

No matter our race, we all had to run into whoever's house we were nearest to if a drug bust happened. And when other drug corners wanted to fight for more turf, we'd all go to each other's houses for safety. I would thus see different cultures first-hand. There I saw plastic furniture and smelled food I hadn't consumed before.

I wasn't too concerned when I was around two or no more Hispanics speaking Spanish. I remember some of them laughing at me trying to speak Spanish, and I would say something insecure to my sister like, "Cathy, whenever I see people laughing, I tend to think they are laughing at me." She responded the best way she knew how: "They probably are laughing at you."

She would always say things to me that would hurt my feelings. I don't know if she was doing this to hurt me or if she didn't think people were as sensitive as her. But I was very sensitive, so I took all this to heart. I always wanted to be good-looking and popular. And whenever someone would say something to the contrary, it would cut me down to size. Cathy was the queen of mean way before I heard of Lisa Lampanelli.

She was a moody, miserable sibling who didn't have an outlet to channel her frustrations. Besides treating me like shit, she would also take her angst out on our mother. My parents were the heavyweight fighters in our house, but my sister was the lightweight champ. She had nothing good to say to or about my mom. She would start arguments over the littlest things. The things she would say broke my heart and my mom's. She said how much she hated our mom and how she ruined our lives.

I was so bothered by the arguments between them that I would try my best to make distractions. I blamed myself for my sister's hatred and would do whatever I could to stop her from being mean to my mom.

Once, I was upstairs playing with my toys in the hallway near the bathroom when I heard my sister yelling about something trivial. I decided to throw all my toys,

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including big metal transformers, down the stairs. It worked! The noise startled them and made them cease their fighting for the time being.

Another time I was in the same room as them and couldn't take anymore, so I turned around to them and said, "Why don't you shut the FUCK up?" That also worked. My mom was so flabbergasted by what I said. I don't know how I got away with this one, but I quickly told her I said, "Shut the fudge up," and she bought it, probably because she wanted to.

The most reckless of my anger management sessions happened when I was upstairs doing whatever and heard the squeaking of the queen of mean.

Full of rage, I threw myself down our stairs, about 14 steps.

I had my blanket wrapped around me, but our wooden stairs were not carpeted. It hurt a lot, but I did cause the battle to cease that night. But the war was far from over. I still don't think it will ever end. At least I stopped throwing my toys to distract them.

Chapter 22

Deep in the Heart of Texas

In the summer of 1988, I found I was about to lose my best friend, Uriah. He and his family moved to a Christian community in Corpus Christi, Texas. He was my best friend, and I was going to be without one for the first time I could remember. I wasn't sure why they left, and I didn't know when he would be back (which turned out to be two years later).

I really missed him, but Christian life goes on. I became even more Christian than before. I became friends with people in our church who were more Christian than the likes of Uriah. I was getting closer to the bible thumpers who were influencing me to thump my bible more often. Good thing it didn't take.

Chapter 23

A Little Piece of Normal

In the winter of that year, my mom's brother, my Uncle Russell, came through in a big way. He gave me the best birthday present of my childhood: a new scooter.

Later that year, he took Cathy and I to the Poconos, a resort mountain area in PA. One day we went to a lake to relax and swim. I was in deep water when suddenly people on the beach started to yell for me to stand still. I looked around and saw a water snake swimming across the water towards me. I don't know why they told me to stand still because all I could think about was running as fast as I could, which I did. I was unharmed, but I still avoided the lake the rest of the week.

Chapter 24

Eyes Without a Face or a Proper Education

I started to realize my eyesight was starting to weaken. I told my mom I thought I needed glasses. At the time, my father still had health insurance for us, but we couldn't afford any add-ons. So, my dad responded that I didn't need glasses and just wanted them because my friends had them. I wouldn't have glasses for another four years.

The beginning years at the Baptist schools were simple because any yahoo can teach K-4th grades. My mother, for example, never finished the 10th grade but was the kindergarten teacher there for decades. Some things differed from more normal schools.

I explained the ongoing chapel and Jesus' blood songs we sang daily. Then there was the fact that instead of learning about the universe and evolution, we learned about Creation and how there is nothing else in the universe except mankind, and God was the center of everything. Also, there was no talking about worldly, ungodly things. We could talk about cartoons and whatnot, but no mention of worldly music and movies.

In 1988, things took a drastic turn. We left the normal "teacher in front of the kids" system that has worked for thousands of years for a "learn at your own pace" format through a curriculum called ACE (Accelerated Christian Education).

We would all be facing a wall with dividers between us. There, we read through books that were 20-40 pages long. We would read a page or two and fill out questions that followed. To know if you were correct in your answer or not, you would have to put a flag in the flag hole that was on top of our cubicles. When our supervisor (not a teacher) saw the flag, we had to ask them to check our answers at a designated area with the score keys. Score keys were similar to the books we had to fill out but with the answers in them. We also had a flag to go to the bathroom or if we needed help. Sometimes you had to wait a while until they saw your bathroom flag.

If you needed help with a question or problem, the supervisor would go through the same illustrations and text you already read. So, they were not much help at all. If you didn't understand something, there was no one to ask for help; you just had to read the same bullshit you didn't understand the first time.

It was like being home-schooled with other kids in a large room. There were five subjects: English (which should be taught out loud, so you don't say things the wrong way), math (which does not translate well through illustrations and a few examples), science (God created the earth in seven days), history (which explained how history is God's story, hence why it's called HIStory. This would make sense if there were another "s" in there. Instead, it's HIS tory, and what the hell is a tory?), and of course, Bible (like we couldn't get enough of that).

Each subject had 10 -12 booklets to fill out throughout the year. If you fell short of that, you had to make it up the following year. And everyone knew where you were in the booklet completion race by the chart placed on everyone's cubicle, where you would have stars marking your pace and achievement through the year. If you had fewer stars than you were supposed to, everyone knew it, and you were considered stupid, and your self-esteem took a hit.

I assume this was due to how much cheaper it was to have this system of education rather than teachers, especially ones without a degree. It would mean our Christian leaders that didn't have the "know-how" wouldn't have to teach our young Christian minds.

It also gave them a get-out clause. If some child didn't get a subject, it was the child's fault, and it was up to that child to use their merit to get all the stars they could. I know that my sister and the others in "high school" had trouble with the program. But, in 5th and 6th grade, we were having a ball, if not learning very much.

Chapter 25

Nightmare on Wishart Street

My grandparents would take me to their house to get away from Kensington now and then. They had me over one night and let me watch whatever I wanted. It was something I could not take for granted. I searched the TV and found a channel showing the first three Freddy Krueger movies. I knew him through random commercials, and my sister watched them at her friend's house. She said that they were not scary at all. I still idolized my sister, so I decided to watch these nightmares of movies, and my grandad somehow thought it was okay. Did he not know who I lived with?

I survived the viewing of the movie marathon. But, as soon as I went to bed alone in the spare room, I screamed bloody hell. I was so scared that Freddy was going to come and kill me through the bed as he had done to Johnny Depp that I couldn't sleep. One of the nicest things my grandpa did was come into the room and stay with me until I fell asleep. Then, sometime in the night, I woke up from a nightmare screaming bloody hell, and he did the same thing again. I guess he wasn't all bad.

I think this event spawned my overwhelming fear of the unknown. Since I believed there was a devil in a place called hell plotting to steal my soul so I would burn in a lake of fire forever, I opened the door to the fear that something evil and likely supernatural was out there to get me.

I was told repeatedly that demons were everywhere and that I had to make sure I was pure, cleansed, and, of course, saved so I did not get possessed by them. Demons scared me so much more than the devil. I thought that the devil was too busy plotting the end of Christianity, while the demons were the pawns who were there to do the devil's dirty work. I feared that Freddy, vampires, ghosts, and whatever else I feared was coming after me. I would sleep with the blankets up to my neck, thinking that this would protect me from vampires (I wouldn't be able to sleep without a blanket up to my neck until my twenties because I got so used to it). I also slept with a Bible and a cross next to me. I often woke up scared that demons were plotting to get me because I was a Christian. I would repeatedly say, "I plead the blood in Jesus' name," and I would pray for safety because these are the things I was taught to do.

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Later in life, I would eat garlic powder and keep a wooden stake in my bed just in case some vampire showed up for a bite to eat. I fixated on the ads for *The Lost Boys* and other vampire movies that terrified me.

Rather than making this into an argument against kids watching violent movies, I would say I was open to scary things at such a young age because I didn't know what was real or not. And I was taught and influenced by my role models and peers to fear all things ungodly. So, I was extra sensitive towards things that went bump in the night.

Chapter 26

Cry Little Sister, Thou Shall Not Fall

Since I mentioned The Lost Boys, there was an interesting chick tract (a propaganda comic used to brainwash kids with clever names to get you to read them) called The Lost Boys right around the same time. It was about a good Christian boy who got lost from his faith and went down the hell-bound path towards homosexuality! He goes to clubs and dates a motorcycle man who looks like he belongs in The Village People. Eventually, he finds the Lord and ends his sinning ways! There were tons of these chick tracts to confuse kids into fearing everything that contradicted the Gospel of Christ.

Some Christians would give these little comics out for Halloween instead of candy. They hoped the comic would change the kid's perspective of the holiday. Okay, maybe the tracts were better than corn syrup and sugar, but I'd take a rotten tooth over a rotten childhood! Trust me. I could never watch *The Lost Boys* without thinking about the tract (both had a lot of sucking involved).

The chick tracts were only one of the ways to scare kids into submission. There was also the constant reminder that God is watching and will punish you for your sins. And there were the Christian urban legends. These got passed around the faithful, such as the man so close to death that he saw heaven, and it was glorious, so he came back to life to tell the world how great heaven truly was. Then there was the atheist at death's door who witnessed Hell. Of course, he returned to warn the world of how horrible Hell is and how we must be saved from it.

These stories were very believable if you were a child, especially when told by older kids and adults that you trusted. The worst type of scare tactics used to create hysteria were the propaganda movies about the Rapture and the End Times! These movies were filmed somewhere in the psychedelic days of the 1970s, and boy, were they scary. Even Freddy Krueger would be asking Jesus to save him after watching them. These films were made 20 years or so before the hit *Left Behind* series. I could tell you all about a particular one called *Thief in the Night*; that really stayed with me, and not in a good way.

See, everyone born again has the same dream of being in the rapture. The rapture was one of the most comforting ideas in our religion. To never see death and to have Jesus take you to heaven! Who wouldn't want that?! We were told that this rapture

could happen at any time. The phrase “Jesus is coming” was used as much as “God bless you” or “Amen.”

The worst part of the rapture folk was their lack of desire to really live their lives. It was only about winning souls for the Lord before the end times came. Of course, we were all pretty poor, so what else could we do besides go to strangers’ doors preaching the word of God? But it would have been nice to say, “Hey, maybe we can plan for a life past 20, and how about having a life that consists of getting out of a shitty neighborhood?”

The big secret is that Christians don’t want to improve the world. They want everyone saved, but their core beliefs are that most people will not believe and that Jesus will not come back until things are at their worst. So, they secretly feel excited when they hear about erratic weather and how many more murders happened this year than last. It’s almost like, “Okay, this has to be it! Jesus knows that the world is this bad. He must be around the corner.” Every generation of Christians thinks that this is the worst time ever and that any day we will hear the trumpet of the Lord to rescue us from death.

It is almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of evolving and making the world a better place, they want it to burn and fall into such a depth of despair that their God will destroy it and create a new one in its place, for them and ONLY them to enjoy.

That doesn’t sound too Christ-like to me! It seems an obvious contradiction that this belief pattern underpins neglect of human responsibilities and social disorders that would fill a Lexapro salesman’s schedule till kingdom come.

Chapter 27

OCD, Yeah, You Know Me!

I was a firm believer in the gospel and tried my best to ensure salvation at every waking hour. I would frequently panic that I was going to hell or I was going to be left behind. I would constantly pray and ask Jesus to cleanse me for whatever I was doing wrong, which was a lot, according to the church. I would plead to be cleansed for all wrongdoings so I could feel pure enough in the event I died or the Rapture took place. I truly wanted to be on a path to Jesus, and I didn't want anything else bad to happen to me. I felt like I was getting punished for whatever I was doing wrong and felt a desperate need to pray constantly. This probably stemmed from the other side of the spectrum in my life. Things considered normal in most households were sinful, according to the church.

Man, if I didn't know better, which I didn't, I'd say I was becoming obsessive-compulsive.

Too bad I wouldn't know what that was for too many years to count. My love for TV and my desire to know about movies were guilty pleasures, and I mean guilty with a capital "G."

I only had two outlets from the obsessive religion: my drug-addict father and a poorer-than-dirt life with enough roaches and mice to fill a landfill. That was where my imagination and my obsession with celebrities spawned. I would feel guilt for enjoying my television viewing, but it was the only thing I had to do. It did cause conflict within me, but it was worth the escape. Of course, it always led to more praying and more blood cleansing.

As we didn't have cable or a VCR, I only had a few options to choose from to entertain myself. It was becoming harder to run around and play with my friends on the block as the neighborhood was getting more dangerous, with more gunshots ringing out. I would watch sitcoms, cartoons, and movies edited for television as much as possible if my sister or dad weren't watching one of the two TV sets we owned. We had a typical 19" color TV that had been around before I was born and a 12" black and white that stayed in my parents' room.

I developed such a deep love for celebrity and entertainment that I wished I was on TV. I had a love/ hate relationship with child actors like Fred Savage. I would relate

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to him for being near my age group, but I would be so jealous that he was on TV, doing what I thought I should be doing.

I started to act out my own TV shows whenever no one was around or if I thought they couldn't hear me. I began acting out adventure movies and shows that I thought would be great for the small screen. I even thought of my life as an ongoing drama about which I would address my made-up audience through the camera (the mirrors in my house). It may sound absurd, but I was a kid, and my imagination was a comfort in the times when I needed an outlet. Maybe if I had gotten that Nintendo, things would have been different.

I thought being famous and an actor would be the greatest thing to happen to me. I even went behind my mom's back and asked my dad if he could take me to acting auditions. He would say that it would cost too much money and that it wasn't worth it if you didn't know someone in the business. Good old dad.

The fantasy world I enjoyed lasted only an hour a day or so. The real world was always showing its ugly head around. The Christians were still judging and waiting for the rapture. The drug dealers were on the rise, and Uriah, my best friend, was still in Texas, leaving me to my own devices.

Chapter 28

Rather Be Dead Than Cool

At church, I had other friends to carry on with, but I also met my first bully. This Spanish boy named Rich was three years older than me and would treat me like shit for years to come at church and school. He was very worldly compared to others I knew at church. He listened to rap music and dressed the part as well. He liked bad movies with cursing and talked about sex with other kids his age.

One Sunday after church, we were all coming out and getting ready for the fellowship part to end so we could go home. I was standing with a friend or two when Rich walked up and said something to me in a mocking tone. Then he pushed me into a pile of horse shit on the street in front of the church. I have no idea where the shit had come from in the heart of inner-city Philadelphia. All I know is that it smelled terrible, and I was hysterical. I remember throwing whatever was in my pockets at him (I think a hairbrush and a pocket mirror) and screaming that I hated him. He just laughed as I cried.

The sad part was that I was wearing this Don Johnson-type suit jacket my grandma Peggy bought for me, now covered in horseshit. Since we couldn't get it washed immediately, it had to go in the trash. Man, it was nice to feel cool for a bit, even though it was 1980's cool, which wasn't cool at all.

Chapter 29

Onward Christian Soldiers

Pastor Griffin, who saw his flock moving further away from the Kensington/North Philly area due to the Spanish influx, decided the time had come to move to another neighborhood. He moved the church and everyone who came to Christ Independent Baptist Church in the Frankford section of Philadelphia. Christ Independent Baptist was an already established church with its pastor and members. It had its own “school” too called Christ Independent Baptist Academy (CIBA for short). We merged with the born-againers who were already there. It was about a three-mile difference and a better area by an inch than where we left.

Pastor Rivera, who was bi-lingual and able to preach in English and Spanish, took over at Ontario Street. The big merger was exciting and new. We were in a new building, and some new Christian friends were already at Christ Independent, who stayed after their pastor stepped down.

This church was a lot bigger too. The auditorium on the third floor was twice the size of Ontario Street, and there was a “gym” (which consisted of a basketball net and was big enough to play dodgeball). There was also a huge room on the first floor, used first for Awana and later turned into a room for church services.

What is Awana? It was the Christians’ answer to the boy/girl scouts with bible verses! We would wear wannabe boy scout uniforms, play games, then, of course, be preached to every Wednesday. The only reason we kids did this was that if you were between the ages of 6-13, you’d either go to Awana or sit upstairs with the adults for the sermon and prayer meeting (boring).

This room would then become the “classrooms” for the school that year. They only had a chance to build a few rooms in the short time over the summer, so grades 6th through 12th were in the same room. I was in the sixth grade, and my sister was in ninth, so this made us classmates! It sounded good to me but not so much to her.

Chapter 30

The Times They are a-Changing

This was a good time to be a born-a gainer in Philly, and my mom was in high heaven.

My dad was still in my prayers. I had a list that I would pray for silently every night before I fell asleep. I would pray for my mom to be happy, for a Nintendo, for Mary Griffin to like me, and to be on the game show *Double Dare*. I only watched the show once, at Uriah's house, because we didn't have cable, but I thought I'd do great. The last thing I would ask was for my dad to be saved and stop doing drugs. I was scared that my dad would burn in hell because he could die from his drug habit, but I also wanted the separation in our home to end.

I wanted what other families had: everyone on the same page with church and family functions. Our family would eat together now and then, but for the most part, we were like ships passing in the night. The line was drawn, and we Christians were on one side, and on the other was dad and grandpop Hank.

Things began to change when my Grandpa Henry fell out of bed and broke his hip. Well into his 80s by now, a fall like this was life-changing. My father wasn't home when it happened, so my mom went to find him through the Kensington hot spots. Our next-door neighbor, Jack, was at one of the houses my dad sometimes frequented, and my mom asked if my dad was there. Jack said he wasn't, but if he saw my dad, he would tell him what happened. Five minutes later, my dad was home, as though he had radar. Even my naïve mom could tell that Jack was a lying bastard who had known where my dad was but hadn't wanted my mom to know what my pops was doing.

Henry was many things and couldn't get pushed into one convenient category. He may have been a racist (his worst flaw); he may have been a little angry after a few beers (and by a few, I mean a case); and he may have been an atheist who wouldn't hear a word about salvation. However, some of the good things he did cannot be ignored. He pretty much raised my father while my dad's father was absent. He loved my father enough to love my family and me in his own way. And he took us in and made sure we had a roof over our heads.

My dad was extremely upset. Henry got rushed to the hospital, and before you knew it, his daughter, my dad's mom, decided it would be best to take him in at her house to ensure he had proper care.

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While things were bad at the time in the house, things didn't seem any brighter without Hank. His presence kept my dad in check as much as a junkie can be. He had made sure the bills got paid and would even buy my sister and me a soda or chips during the week when he knew we were upset.

So, without his presence and his wallet, things started slowly changing. However, one bright spot was that I finally had my own room. I moved into grandpa's room as soon as possible. The room smelled like an older gentleman had occupied it for years. But it was my private area where I could act out whatever show or movie I wanted to until I was blue in the face. My sister was also thrilled to have her own room.

I even found a new name. I was tired of being called Charlie and Cholly. Charlie made me feel like I was five, and Cholly made me feel like I was whiter than white trash. I needed a change. I wanted something to configure my position in life at the time. So, I examined my limited options. There was Chuck, which is another name for vomit. I thought about what I could do to get a name that would give me satisfaction, but nothing came to me until the day the Fox network started broadcasting in our area in 1987. I could sneak a glimpse at shows like *The Tracey Ullman Show* (mainly for the Simpson family clips) and *Beans Baxter* when mom and, eh hem, God weren't looking.

The name change came from a show starring a pre-*Friends* Matthew Perry called *Second Chance*. Without getting too deep about this great, ahead of its time show, I will cut to the chase. Perry played a character named Charles, whose best friend called him Chaz. It rang loud and clear with my desire for a cool, original, and less white trash name.

Now I knew what name would be on my gravestone. But first, I would have to get my peers and friends to accept it, which didn't work right away. I needed a clean slate, a chance to set the clock at zero. I would have this chance over two weeks in the summer of '89, which is a lifetime when you are 11, but it wouldn't be for a few years that the name would stick. I would have to leave the Christian world and find some secular friends to call me by my chosen name.

Chapter 31

Are You Ready for the Summer?

I had never been to a summer camp before, and when the idea of going to not one but two summer Christian camps arose, I was as thrilled as a newborn, born-againer! The first of the two was Camp Nicodemus. The church paid for a bunch of us to go.

I never spent a week away from my parents before, so I thought this would be an experience I would fully enjoy. Man, oh man, was I wrong.

The camp was in a peaceful environment. There were plenty of trees and fresh air to go around.

But there were also the degenerate teenage camp counselors who made Bill Murray in *Meatballs* look like Mother Theresa. For a cheap camp, it was what it was. We had food and a place to sleep for the week for only 25 bucks. But we also had leaders straight out of juvie. I was in a fistfight almost every night. Rich, the bully, and others from our church were egged on by the camp counselors to fight in our own private fight club.

I even fought a kid who was too nice for words and that I generally liked. All because my camp counselor told me that he made fun of me and that I should kick him in the balls. Then there was the boot camp. If anyone talked after 10 pm, the entire bunk, which consisted of about 60 kids, would have to run for an hour around the entire campsite without shoes. My feet never hurt so much as they did after a good run over rocks and even bigger rocks.

As much fun as fighting may have been at 11, there were other fun things that Camp Nicodemus had to offer. There was the 1/10th Olympic size pool. And when I say 1/10th, I mean small as shit. The best was when we would go night swimming, and the bats would sweep down and skim the water while we were in it. I encountered rodents before, but there is nothing like a bat (a rat with wings) being two inches from your head. Then there were the pony rides, which were more like a stroll for five minutes in a ten-foot circle while someone else held the reins. When it was all over, I couldn't wait to get back to the gunfire and rodent-infested streets of A and Wishart.

Luckily, I was fortunate to go to another summer camp for an entire week. This camp was called Camp High Point. I was wary after my Nicodemus experience, but, once again, it was a break from the ghetto, and a few people in the church came

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together and decided to chip in and send me and my friend Charlie Glassey. Neither of our families would have been able to afford the \$100 fee.

It already felt like things were different once we got there and saw a real Olympic-size pool and a lake the size of a few city blocks with plenty of paddle boats and canoes to go around. The kids there were so pleasant and fun to be around. And the horseback rides were miles long!

The food was delicious, and we had archery, capture the flag, baseball, miniature golf, basketball, the whole nine yards. And then there were the counselors. They never made me run barefoot on rocks or tell me to fight other campers. They were kind and so cool.

I idolized my counselor, Harry, after the first day. However, the one that took my breath away was Desiree Winters. I had a big crush on this one. She looked like Alyssa Milano (who I had an even bigger crush on at the time). She knew I liked her, and she handled it well. I knew she knew because, before every assembly at the chapel, the lovely pastor would read love notes that we campers had written to each other. Pastor Weiss was his name. There would be letters going on about campers: "Ricky, I think you are so cute, love Tracy," and whatnot.

Then one day it was, "Dear Desiree, I think you are so pretty, and I want to marry you, Love, Chaz." Of course, it wasn't me who had written this, but my friend Jason. He was a nice kid who struck a chord with me. And I wasn't mad or embarrassed by the sting he had pulled. I did like Desiree, and it was nothing but childhood fun. Plus, I was just thrilled someone called me Chaz in public.

This whole time there, I was not worried about the problems I had in my life, and I was happy to let go. The one bad thing was that Cathy, my sister's friend, was also there. All through the week, I would hear her with her girlfriends, saying things to each other like, "You're Mrs. Holesworth, hahaha." I was not sure what this meant, but on the way home to Philly, I asked Cathy.

She told me that none of the girls liked me, and it was a joke or insult to be called Mrs. Holesworth. I laughed it off and pretended that it didn't bother me. But my little fragile 11-year-old heart died a little in that station wagon that drove us home.

Chapter 32

Holy Shit Life, Batman

I had self-esteem issues as it was. But this took me to another level. If I had been allowed to listen to rock music, this would have been a perfect time to introduce me to The Cure. I went home and just cried and sulked for days and days. I looked in the mirror and hated everything I saw. My hair sucked, my nose was too wide, my teeth were crooked, and my chin was too long. Then, after the sulking ran its course, I was just plain depressed.

I had these feelings before, but I would push them off to play with my toys or imagine a superhero movie. It was the new *Batman* movie that pulled me out of my depression. The movie with Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson came out that summer, and Batman fever was everywhere. I didn't have any money, nor did mom, so I treated whatever Batman merchandise I could get my hands on like a holy relic.

I remember taking a box I found and making it a Batcave. I learned how to draw the bat symbol and taped Batman trading cards all around the box. It was enough to make me smile and not think of my ugly situation. Every chance I had at this point to purchase something, it would be a Batman-related item or the movie-related magazine. My grandmother took pity on my sister and me and offered to buy us some clothes. I chose a Batman shirt.

A few years later, Cathy would tell me that she had been joking and that it hadn't been an insult to bear my name. It was a bit too late, and I am sure she only said this because I had cried to my big sister about what happened, and it got back to her.

Chapter 33

911 is Indeed a Joke

It was getting harder and harder to determine the good Spanish folk from the ones who meant harm. The streets would rattle every time a car drove by, blasting music with the bass turned up to the max, which was 80% of the time. Not to mention all the car alarms set off by the vibrations of the latest hit songs from K7 or Lil' Suzy.

It became harder to step out into the neighborhood. The drug dealers were only feet from us, and some neighbors I grew up with started following suit. Like Billy and Bobby, two kids I had played with and looked up to who were now drug dealers, trying to achieve the American dream in any way possible. Our house was two row homes away from the corner, which had a corner store where the drug dealing took place. It also would take place right next door to us. There's nothing like asking strangers ruining your block to move from your steps so you can get in your house every day.

Several times the cops tried to crack down and arrest these people via undercover operations. This led to people running and guns drawn in broad daylight. People would be out and about making noise until all hours of the night. The only things open 24 hours in Kensington were the 25th district police station and the local drug dealers. This situation didn't make it any easier for my pop to quit and go cold turkey. Common sense would say it was time to relocate. Too bad common sense took a back seat to stubbornness and fear of rocking the boat.

Chapter 34

We Don't Need No Education

The powers that be were making changes again to our education. They decided to switch from the ACE program to a similar one called the Alpha and the Omega's Lifepacs. It was probably just cheaper. It was the same basic idea as ACE. We would have to read the 30–50-pages of Lifepac by ourselves and try to learn at our own pace. However, these Lifepacs were a lot harder to adapt to and absorb. We all struggled with them. And we were still basically teaching ourselves home-school material with limited help.

Then the cheating scandal of 1990-91 happened. Somehow these bible thumpers got wind of how to get around the harder subjects. Like ACE, Lifepacs had the answer keys in the same room, so you could put your little flag up on your cubicle desk to see if you had the answers right. I'm not sure why the adults didn't realize they were letting us see the answers for that page and the pages ahead. It didn't take long for kids to take home an answer key book for the night, copy it, then pass the answers around. Now, the tricky part was this; after every Lifepac you completed, you had to take the final test on it, and if you failed the test more than once, you would have to do that Lifepac all over again! The answer key to the test was only located in the teacher's desk.

This would have to be a group effort. Waiting for the teacher to leave the room was the hardest part. Once they left, someone had to keep watch for any adult, and the kid who needed the final Lifepac test answers would get it out of the teacher's desk and write down the answers.

Now this did get tedious. The next step in making the Pastor's honor roll (the highest achievement we had at CIBA) was to find someone who could get the answers for us.

Luckily for us, we had three ways to do this. First, enter the homeschoolkid! Some kids we knew from the years of being born-again learned at home with the Lifepacs. We'd be able to get the kids to sneak into their parents' room and get the answer keys for the test. However, that only worked if you were on the same Lifepac as the homeschooled kid.

The second and most efficient way was for the teacher's children to sneak around the house and find the answers to the test. Since the teacher always took the answers home with them, this worked well. And the third was the hand-me-down scheme. We

Chaz Holesworth

kept the test we took, and when it was time for the next kid to take it, we'd hand it over to them the night before. They would either memorize the answers (multiple choice made this easy) or write them on their hand or a piece of paper hidden on their desk.

Uriah and I didn't want to join in with the sneaky kids. We weren't innocent but we never went that far. I did get the answers a few times here and there, but my guilt took over any desire to get good grades, no matter the cost. Still, being the good Christian boys we were, we thought it was wrong to cheat and that God would bless us for trying to do the program right. At least that's what I thought.

What happened was something else entirely. Those who cheated climbed the ranks, and Uriah and I got left in the dust.

Chapter 35

A New Decade

The start of 1990 brought in a new decade of the same nonsense, only with people dressing more in bright neon colors and baggie jeans. Grandpa Henry had taken a turn for the worse and passed into the afterlife. However, because he didn't believe in the afterlife, he just stopped existing. As sad as it was to see him dead in a casket at his funeral, I was more sad thinking that he was going to a lake of fire since he had never accepted Jesus into his heart.

Afterwards, we went to my grandma Peggy's house for lunch. While the adults mingled and told each other how much they loved each other, we kids were upstairs in my Cousin Billy's room. (Billy had lived with my grandma since he was young.)

My father never talked about his pain over this turn of events, but I saw him cry at the funeral-the first time I had seen him do that. It was the man who had raised him and was like a father to him. And now he was gone. Even with how bad this was, things were going to get worse for my dad. A short time later, my dad got laid off from the job he had held down for a few years.

A lot of the good paying factory jobs in Kensington started to close in the '80s to move to areas where there was cheaper labor (like the south and then overseas). While the rest of the world might have been goo goo for Reaganomics and thinking the economy was the best ever, us in Kensington saw a whole other side to it. Capitalism wasn't the end all and great system for profit companies claimed it to be.

For some reason my dad's company closed, leaving him to his own devices. It would be the last time my father had a job besides his time in a work-release program. He received unemployment, but it wasn't nearly as much money as he made at his company. There was less money for food and about the same amount for my dad's habits. Jesus and the gang had more to complain and pray about now that he was a jobless addict. To make things worse, my dad had more time to kill, which is not the best thing for an addict.

Chapter 36

Home Is Where the Heart Is (And the Burglars)

One day, someone decided to rob our home in broad daylight. The neighborhood was getting worse by the minute, but robbing someone in the day took balls. My mom, my sis, and I came home from some holy roller thing to the place more in shambles than usual: a couch turned over, cabinets opened, and dresser drawers pulled open.

We didn't have much, so there wasn't much to take, but some things were missing that seemed peculiar. My dad had antique baseball figures from childhood: Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, and so on. They were worth something, according to him, and hidden in a living room cabinet. Only someone who knew they were worth something would have taken them, which was suspicious.

Then there was my Grandpa Hank's safe, which was way too heavy to pick up and carry out the door. I know the safe had the deed to the house and some watches in it, but the best thing in there was all the money he had from the 19th and early 20th centuries, which was worth a bit. And the thief had the knowledge and manpower to take it from the upstairs closet. I didn't even think about it then, but it was probably my father. I just believed that a couple of guys had come into the house with a keen knowledge of antique baseball figurines and a device to pick up a 300-pound safe.

I didn't own anything of value back then, but my sister had some things that would raise a buck or two, and they were gone from her room. And the frozen meats in our freezer were stolen too (I'm not sure of the street value of that). I was terrified the robbers would return, so I didn't sleep well for a while. For once, it wasn't because of the car alarms and stereos. But we kept on. I trusted God and my mom and was always hopeful that I was protected.

Chapter 37

Are You Ready for the Summer Again?

My home during the summer holiday was usually so mundane and depressing. With no money and nothing to entertain me, I got to hang out with my mom and see her upset with my dad all the time. It was too much to take. I needed a break. Once again, it was camp time! First, it was Camp Nicodemus (which struck fear in my heart and pain in my toes!).

Somehow, this year there was a 360-degree difference. I don't know how they did it, but it was an actual fun experience. The camp counselors were fun and glad to be around you. My counselor, Jason, took a shine to me when he saw my Batman shirt. He kind of took me under his wing for the week. It was full of normal camp fun. And I felt relaxed.

But I still couldn't wait for my week at Camp High Point. Thank goodness once again that someone took pity on my situation and paid 100 bucks for my week vacation from Kensington. This year, I was the only one going from the church, which meant no one knew me, and I could be whoever I wanted. For the first time, I felt liberated. On the bus ride there, I met a kid who was so excited to see his girlfriend from the year before, Amy Weiss. He kept going on about how great she was and how he only got to see her at camp because they lived far from each other. But when we got there, Amy had a new boyfriend at the camp, and didn't want anything to do with my buddy. It was hard to avoid her since Amy's father oversaw the camp.

My boy was upset but he took refuge in Amy's little sister, who also liked him.

He was happy like nothing ever happened. Then out of the blue, Amy broke up with her boyfriend and decided to like someone else.

That someone else was me! Why would such a pretty girl like an ugly loser like me? You got me! But for whatever reason, she liked me, and even her dad read the love note in front of everyone at the assembly, saying, "She thought Chaz was cute, and she was done with what's-his-name." Of course, I thought, "Take that, Cathy Meshel, and your last summer cronies."

At the same time, I didn't believe it. I thought I was being set up for something, like at the prom in the movie *Carrie*. But she seemed to really like me. She wanted to hang out with me during the last two days of camp (which equals a lifetime in a 12-year-old's view). But then it happened.

I saw my friend who had “gone out” with Amy the year before on the day of the big campfire, which was the cream of the crop of the week. It’s where you hold the hand of the girl you like and feel some sort of normal feeling that you get when God isn’t judging you for being attracted to the opposite sex. My friend claimed that Amy didn’t really like me and that she was just messing with me. That’s all it took. All my self-doubts settled in, and my hatred of myself took its normal path. My guard was built, and I was ready for the fall.

A few hours later, the friend told me he was wrong, that Amy did like me, and that she wanted to meet me at the campfire. I went and met her but with a sense of restraint. However, she held my hand and seemed happy to be with me. I was delighted and thought for the first time in my miserable life that I was finally happy.

Take that in, Chaz, take that in. It’s as good as it gets.

After a week of being full of life and teenage love, it all ended, and my ride came to bring me back from my paradise. It was in the form of my childhood hero, John Heider. John was my sister’s age. He was cool, good-looking, and, most importantly, a genuinely good guy. I was thrilled that he picked me up. I got to tell him about my week and Amy. He was happy to hear about my adventures but had something to tell me. He told me my mother and sister decided to leave my dad and move in with another Christian family, the Flites.

After the high of holding Amy Weiss’ hand and being on top of my game, I didn’t immediately understand what he was getting at. I said goodbye to my summer camp friends and foolishly thought I’d see them again. Especially my Amy.

When I got back to Philly, I joined my mom and sister in the Flites’ three bedroom house. I was happy since their part of Kensington was far better than our drug-infused neighborhood. It was nice to walk around without the fear of being jumped. If I wanted to go to the corner store, I could do so without apprehension. And I got to hang out with my favorite five-year-old, Jimmy Flite, a kid so eager for rebellion it gave hope to all of us rebels at heart.

It was like an extra vacation from my hell on earth. And that’s all it really was-a vacation. We only stayed away from my dad for about a week. Then it was as if it had never happened. My dad told my mom he would change, and things would be different. Blah blah blah. So, we returned to the hell of a life I had briefly thought was behind me. The honeymoon didn’t last long, and my mother had an itch to leave again. For the next few days, she kept telling us to be ready to pack our things and leave at any time.

I packed my pathetic hand-me-down clothes and whatever else I thought was worth keeping in trash bags because that’s all I had. But nothing happened. My bags just sat there for months. I remember being scared that the mice in our house would start taking refuge in my things trapped in the bags. I’m still not sure if they did or not.

It continued for a few months until the second time my mother decided to leave my dad. My mom told Cathy and me we would leave dad in the next few days. I was ready to go. I was tired of living in the hell I was handed. Plus, I still thought my dad was a sinner on his way to hell and was the root of all our misery.

When Pastor Higgins and some random follower he brought with him showed up at our home one night in November of 1990, I was more than excited to have a chance at a new life. Higgins came in and made my mom wake my dad up from his sleep to tell him that we were leaving him. My dad, who only weighed 140 pounds at the time, came downstairs to fight for his family. He swung at Higgins and was manhandled by the goon Higgins brought with him. I clearly remember the image of my dad being put in an arm lock by this asshole in a suit. Being the foolish born-again boy I was, I was happy to go and thought my dad should have been knocked out by Higgins and his crony. Once my dad had been overpowered and ashamed, we left in the church van with Higgins to a house owned and attached to the CIBC, where we stayed.

We settled in the three-bedroom row home. I didn't sleep well at all. I kept waking up and wondering if my dad was coming to bang on the door and drag us back to Kensington. To my relief, he didn't come. The sun rose and to school we went. It was nice to be right next door to the school and church. I didn't have to leave for either until the last minute.

But this only lasted a week or two.

According to Pastor Higgins, my dad kept calling and threatening him, and he told my mom we had to move back. By contrast, my dad claimed Higgins called him and said that the church couldn't keep us there and that he had to take us back. Whatever and whoever was right, back we went to our home sweet home in Kensington.

My mom tried yet again in January 1991. This time we asked my dad's mom for help. We went to my grandmas on a Friday, and again I thought we would stay away forever. But by Tuesday, we were back at Wishart Street, and this would be the last time my mom would get the courage and self-esteem to leave.

Chapter 38

Teenage Waste Land

I was now 13. The hormones from puberty were taking a toll, but also the constant hopes of leaving the hell of my life behind and the crashing disappointment when we kept returning left me feeling let down. Also, throughout the years, I had escaped the horror of my life through toys and make-believe. And I had outgrown these ways of comforting myself, so I was left to my own devices.

The crashing force of memory left me crying for hours. I prayed and prayed for change, but nothing ever changed. So, the doubts in my faith started to materialize. I would cry myself to sleep, praying for change. When change didn't surface, I'd get angry and curse my Lord to see what happened. I would scream, "I hate you, GOD! Just kill me now!" I wanted God's wrath to strike me down. Nothing would happen. I kept praying and begging for something to happen to save me from this life. I thought he was waiting until I was in my darkest hour, and then he would swoop in to save me. But things got worse.

No thanks to God!

Around this time, our water heater broke and was still broken when we moved in 1995. We had no hot water for five years. We had to boil water on the stove and take it upstairs to our bathroom. We'd boil as many pots as possible so we could bathe. The best part was that the last three steps to our upstairs collapsed and never got fixed. We would have to carry a boiling pot of hot water and stretch our legs over three missing steps. I did not bathe much because of this.

We wouldn't have a working shower until 1998. Also, the old 19" color TV that Grandpa Henry left us died that year, and the only TV we had was a 13" black and white that my dad would take up at night so he could fall asleep with it on. I was really fucking bored at night.

The neighborhood was so dangerous at this point that I was scared to walk out of the house. When I did leave, it usually led to me getting chased or robbed by gangs of Spanish kids. Once for my birthday, I got some money and bought myself an Oakland A's hat. When I was waiting for the bus afterward, staring at the ground, trying to mind my business, three kids walked up to me, and one punched me and stole my hat. I started to run after them but decided it wasn't smart since there were three of them.

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My sister, who was with me, made fun of me for not going after them. But I was outnumbered.

Later that year, my friend Joshua and I were walking home from the stores under the El at Kensington and Allegheny Avenues when a group of Spanish kids ran down from out of nowhere and robbed us. They punched me in the stomach. I had just bought a comic book, and my instincts told me to put it down my pants, so at least I didn't lose that. We ran into a Rite-Aid near our houses and called our parents to walk us home.

I had a membership for a video store called USA Video, even though we didn't have a VCR or a VCP. But I had a Nintendo my grandparents had given me without any games. Whenever I had a couple bucks, I'd rent a video game. I asked my dad to take a game back for me once. When I went back to the store, they told me it never got returned. Even at that age, I knew my dad had sold it for drugs.

Chapter 39

A New Hope?

After the school year ended, I got a chance to escape my own private horror show at a friend's house. Mike Peterman, who was a year younger than me, was beyond excited to have me stay at his house for two weeks. They lived in a different part of Kensington that wasn't as bad as my neck of the woods. I liked Mike and his brother Dave, who ended up marrying my sister a few years later.

Dave was sort of a legend at our school. He was very rebellious in his youth. One time, when asked to name the tissues in the body (this was before the Lifepac regime), he answered with brands of bathroom tissues!

I got to watch movies at the Peterman's house. I didn't usually get to watch real movies that weren't cut up and edited for TV. I was all about it. The Petermans were not the coolest people, according to the bullies of our low-budget school, because of how poor they were and how backward their father was.

He was very (uncool) 1960s and strict to boot. He made us pick up lint and crumbs off the rug of his house. Have you heard of a vacuum cleaner? But they were okay in my book. So when they asked me to go on vacation with them, I was thrilled. They came from the western part of Pennsylvania, close to the border of Ohio. Their family had a timeshare in Dubois, PA, where they took turns vacationing. I got the chance to be there in the summer of 1991. Somehow in this small town, hundreds of miles away from my hometown, my life would change with one song on a jukebox.

After the nine-hour drive, we reached our destination, which was well worth it. The condo was so stylish and clean. It was the nicest place I'd ever been. Wall-to-wall carpet and air conditioning too! It was a mansion compared to Kensington.

Chapter 40

Losing My Religion

There were tennis courts, an Olympic-size swimming pool, and an arcade/rec room to top it off. We were near a lake where we went fishing, and even the church we went to during the week was a breath of fresh air. The kids and leaders were so down-to-earth and laid back, and they talked about movies and TV shows after church. It was starting to look like a good vacation, but it was about to be life-changing in a way I'd never have guessed.

At night, Mike, Mary (Mike's older sister), and I would spend our time in the arcade/rec room. There were a bunch of old video games, a foosball machine, an air hockey table, and a stellar jukebox. Everything cost a quarter, including the jukebox. With one 25-cent piece, you could choose two songs from a hundred or so. I only knew music through my sister, so I picked songs by Paula Abdul and Amy Grant. Since I could count the worldly music artists I knew of on my left hand, my options were few and far between.

Then this kid with braces and pimples all over his face, wearing a *Saturday Night Live* shirt, came in. He was about three years older than me. He told me I should play this song next time. He played the song that would define my miserable existence and set me on the path to the change I needed in my life. It was a song that I can say with all honesty changed my life: "Losing my Religion" by R.E.M.

I was scared at first. The title was enough to rock this born-again Christian to his God-praising knees. But the sounds and the melodies and the singer's voice-such a passionate voice- had me listening with my full attention. I couldn't stop looking at the jukebox and staring at the small bit of paper showing the artist and song title. I was half thinking that the demons would possess me and half thinking I wanted to hear it again (which I repeatedly did).

It was years before the internet. I didn't have a radio, nor was I allowed to listen to one. I was taught that rock music is the devil's music and would open me up to demonic possession. The scaremongering over rock music even through the '80s and '90s was hysterical.

I got home from vacation on Saturday and was anxious to watch my favorite program, *Saturday Night Live*. It was a rerun since it was the middle of the summer, but it was one I had never seen since I was always asleep before 11 p.m. during the

school year, even on Saturdays. My dad was still up so I got to stay up, but I had to massage his legs to watch what I wanted. It was so worth it! The musical guest was the one and only R.E.M. I barely even remembered their name from my time in Dubois. When I figured out it was the band that played “Losing my Religion,” I memorized the three most important letters I’d ever discover, - over and over, because I was afraid to write them down in case my mom caught wind of it.

My dad was asleep on the couch by the time I watched R.E.M. perform their second song that night: “Shiny Happy People.” During both songs that night, I watched this energetic, skinny man sing his heart out with his arms flailing and his voice pitch-perfect. His suit seemed to be made out of newspapers and stripes. I thought at first his legs were tied together since they never moved and were so close together.

We woke up the next morning and went to church for hours on end. I’d like to say that hearing R.E.M. changed my world overnight, but the truth was that they only planted a seed at this point.

Now that I had had my first taste of loving a rock song, I started to hear it pop up everywhere I went; in department stores, on TV shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and in the car of my cousins who brought me to Wildwood, NJ in August of 1991.

Chapter 41

Summertime and the Living is Easy?

My grandparents from California now lived in Wildwood. They invited me to stay with them for the rest of the summer in the house my grandpa built. It was awesome being in a shore town full of peace and quiet. West Wildwood was low-key and laidback in comparison to the tourist traps of the town. My Uncle Jimmy (my grandpop's brother) lived two blocks away, which made me feel even more like a local during the summers I stayed there. My cousin Mike usually spent his summers at Uncle Jimmy's place.

This gave me a chance to socialize and become friends with some local kids and feel a little normal, as they were the first non-Christians I had known.

My cousin Mike and I were close during our summers in Wildwood.

I was dirt-poor and dressed the part, but I would still try to meet girls on the boardwalks or around the town. Mike and I met some girls from Northeast Philly that we hung out with for a few days while they were staying in West Wildwood. I thought I was being cool and let one of these girls talk me into getting my ear pierced. I knew I would have to sleep on my left side so my grandparents wouldn't see it.

My sister came down for the week when I had the piercing. She took a picture of it and used it to blackmail me for months. But she also helped me sneak out to go hang out with the girls from Northeast Philly. I thought one of them liked me but when I tried to talk to her, she gave me the cold shoulder. I would call her from time to time after the vacation, but she would give me a bullshit excuse not to talk. The last time I called her, she told me that her friends made fun of how I dressed and looked. Why she gave me her number if she didn't like me is a mystery to me.

Wildwood was a great release from not just the ghetto but also the pressures of being a born-againer. I could go to the movies and talk about everyday things without feeling like I would get in trouble. The best part was that I got to watch cable TV since everyone down there had it. I even got to watch MTV.

Even though "Losing My Religion" was a huge hit, I never got to catch the music video that summer. But I did see the first-ever video and the second song I heard by R.E.M., "Shiny Happy People." Of course I loved it. It was now my second favorite song in the world. My third was "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You" by Bryan Adams. I still like that one.

Chapter 42

The Day the Music Tried

I wouldn't see my beloved video until the end of the year. The suspense and mystery of not seeing it made it even more intriguing. I would see clips of it and try to analyze the scenes I saw as fast as possible. I was half scared, half wanting there to be sacrilegious overtones in the video. I was at the perfect age and mindset for a break from my Christian upbringing but I was still brainwashed enough to fear the worst. As a teen, this only made it even more attractive and appealing to me.

I didn't get to watch the 1991 MTV video music awards, but I found out R.E.M. had won a bunch for "Losing My Religion." I was so proud of them. That's when I realized R.E.M. wasn't as popular in the hood as they should have been. Everyone at school made fun of me for liking them. Those who were rebellious and listened to music at all judged me. They liked all the pop and rap songs that were trendy at the time. My sister said she didn't like R.E.M. because "Losing my Religion" was sacrilegious, and "Shiny Happy People" sounded like they were high. That was the beginning of me outgrowing what my big sister told me was cool and what I should like.

Now is a good time to explain how I saw the music industry then. I did not know artists released albums. I thought they put out songs for the radio and MTV to entertain people, and maybe the government paid them or the radio stations. I thought R.E.M. only had two songs. This is what happens when you are cut off from society. I knew only the most popular artists like Michael Jackson, Madonna, and New Kids on the Block. Most of my knowledge of pop songs came from either my sister, who was in the midst of her rebellious phase or from TV shows. I liked songs here and there when I heard them, but R.E.M.'s "religious" hit was the first song I was so intrigued by that I would miss it when I couldn't hear it. When I heard it once at a department store in Kensington, I pretended to be looking at socks so I could stand under the speaker to enjoy my favorite song.

Later that year, I finally got a cheap radio cassette player for Christmas from my grandma (my mom's mom). It wasn't the best-sounding thing to play music with, but it would do. I had to listen to it low when my mom was home. Usually, I listened with a pair of earphones, one in and one out so I could hear my mom coming up or down the stairs, depending on where I was listening to my devil's music. I would now be

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able to listen to radio stations in search of my favorite songs. Soon enough, I struck pay dirt. I got “Losing My Religion” on tape from Philly’s top 40 station at the time, Eagle 106. Now it was all mine, and I could listen to it at my leisure.

Chapter 43

Life, It's Bigger Than Me

In September 1991, I returned from my month in Wildwood and had a nice tan going on. A new Christian family was going to our school and, in true born-again fashion, they had eight kids, including Nicole, who was my age. I liked her, and she liked me, so we started to be “boyfriend and girlfriend.” This relationship consisted of writing each other notes and sitting with each other at assembly or chapel. Things were looking up for me a little. I was somewhat happy until about a month later when Nicole dumped me out of nowhere. It was around the time I called that girl from northeast Philly who said some mean things about my looks. I started to slip into a deep depression.

Previously, I experienced sadness and frustration but managed to push it away by wishfully thinking that God was in control and everything would work out, so I should just watch TV and not worry. But now, I was at an age when I was more aware and conscious of my environment and status in life. No more would cartoons, sitcoms, toys, and video games suffice.

My sister was catching wind of the fact that our education was seriously lacking, and she was scared about the future. She was saying it was too late for her but thought mom should pull me out as soon as possible and get me a proper education (which she should have and never did). I started to realize what Cathy was talking about, but I was still in denial and thought that school was my only shot. However, I was having a hard time with the Lifepac system and was falling behind. It was another blow to my fragile emotions.

Chapter 44

I Think I Smell a Rat

The back door of our house led to a concrete backyard. Our stove and sink were broken at the bottom. There was a good 4–5-inch hole in the wall that we never fixed, although we put a piece of wood there to try to block it. One day, a huge grey sewer rat appeared in the kitchen. I guess that piece of wood failed. My mom opened the cabinet over the stove, and the rat jumped out at her. She screamed bloody murder. Most people would have spent whatever it took to get rid of it, but we had this pest in our house for months. I watched it crawl through the exposed ceiling and walls. The rat was almost always on time. Every day around 5 pm, I'd see it creeping across a pipe or a piece of wood in our shitty ceiling. I started sleeping with a hammer on my mattress on the floor in case this rat tried to eat me.

Despite all of this, I was starting to develop a sense of humor. Uriah and I decided to name the rat Ralph. We bought rat traps, which are like mouse traps but larger, but the rat never fell for it. Finally, one day we didn't see Ralph at his usual time, and we smelled something weird in the house. RIP Ralph.

Chapter 45

Trouble Me

By this time, we were one of three or four families in the area that wasn't Spanish. Not that I had a problem with being a very small minority in my neighborhood, but it seemed the majority had a problem with me. I was chased by groups of people so often that I would be terrified if I saw more than one person walking in my path. I was so scared of getting robbed or beaten up on the bus coming home from school I would hide my face under my coat until I knew my stop was up. Then I would have to make my way through a packed bus to get off. It went on for years. I didn't look like I had money or anything worth stealing, I was just alone and different. School wasn't much better for me.

Our school didn't have many options if you didn't get along with the "cool" kids or if you were different in any way. I was short, terrible at all sports, and the poorest of all the poor kids there. You'd think Christians would be the ones to not care about material things, but teenage Christians were just as awful as non-Christian ones. For some reason Uriah's brother, Johnny, decided to make fun of me daily. Rich and Johnny were the cool guys because they were taller, liked sports, and were worldly compared to other kids. They were the big fish in a little pond.

I had bad wavy hair that I did not know how to style. I would try to do it like the guys on *Beverly Hills, 90210* but failed miserably. I had more of an afro that always stood up. Since I couldn't afford a good haircut more than every few months, I was stuck with my "Sideshow Bob" hairstyle. I wore hats most of the time, but I couldn't wear them at school and church. One day, someone at school described me as looking like Screech from *Saved by the Bell*. One of my heroes was Zack Morris from the show. I wanted to be cool and have girls think I was cute. But they thought I looked like the geeky sidekick. It was the biggest insult at the time. Screech was ugly and dorky, and no one in their right mind wanted to be compared to him. I couldn't even think or look at the show after that without being panicky or depressed.

The bullies at my school took this Screech thing and ran with it, especially Johnny. I like to think of the best in people, and maybe Johnny was trying to toughen me up, but I was living in hell, and he knew what I had to deal with at home. I think he was always looking for jokes and to entertain people at any cost. He was also a big prankster. Someone used to order Depends protection underwear for random teenage

girls at our school (including my sister) to embarrass them, and the money was on Johnny and Rich being the guilty parties.

The funny thing is while Johnny was a huge dick to me, I still wanted to hang out with him and have his approval. He was good at making you feel like he was your friend. No one knew how much I was picked on by him and his pals and how much I was starting to hate him. I would still go to his house to play with Uriah, and Johnny would be okay with me because he didn't have an audience. But back at school it was torture from him all over again. He would tell me he was hanging out on Saturday at the mall or a bowling alley and that he'd pick me up. I would wait for hours, and the jackass would never show up. It was a cruel joke to play on a kid with nothing going for him.

I was entering puberty, and the effects were taking a beating on me. My voice was changing of course, which is truly embarrassing when you're already the laughingstock of the class. I was also developing a nasty speech problem. I was so nervous talking because I wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. This would cause my words to run into each other, as my brain moved quickly to process and get them out fast so I could go back to being quiet. I would be panicky about saying words wrong or saying something stupid and would end up sounding like I was mumbling quickly with a high-pitched voice. Even now I still have a little anxiety talking in front of people and saying certain words right. I had to practice the words before I said them or choose a different phrase because I couldn't say them the way I wanted. It would be something I had to deal with my entire life.

Chapter 46

Like Mother, Like Son

I believe my lack of confidence and need for approval was mainly due to my mother's influence on me. She would take whatever people gave her and never spoke up for herself. I thought I was the ugliest thing in the world and hated everything about myself. Making things even more terrible, I started to develop gynecomastia- aka man boobs. I was skinny as a pole since I ate like a bird and didn't have an ounce of fat on me. But I had these puffed-up nipples and a little bump on my chest that easily could have been mistaken for a 13-year-old girl's chest. I would find out later it wasn't uncommon for teenage boys going through puberty. But this was years before the internet so there was no research and nothing I could do to fix it.

I gained weight as I got older, and my man boobs became more noticeable and bigger. I chalked it up as another punishment or curse from God. I tried many things to hide or get rid of them for years, but for the time being, I had to stop wearing tight shirts like turtlenecks, and didn't like taking my shirt off in front of people. When we had to change our school uniforms for gym class (we changed in our church/school's kitchen), I would go into a corner to change my shirt as fast as I could.

At the time, I thought God was punishing me for thinking sexual thoughts since I was going through puberty. Well, since I was molested as a kid, I had already been having sexual thoughts, but now they intensified. I would always try to pray these thoughts away during my prayers. I was trying to cleanse myself and ask for forgiveness. I thought the devil was trying to put these thoughts in my head because I was taught that since age four. The devil is the one who puts these sinful thoughts in your head, and you must push them out and beg Jesus for forgiveness.

It felt like God wouldn't listen to me if my mind and heart were sinful or thinking sinful thoughts. I would try to think of pure and godly things while praying, so God wouldn't tune me out. It was a race to do this before the "bad" thoughts came. Of course, those thoughts of sin, death, or depression would enter while praying and I would have to start over again until I felt holy and pure.

Jesus, does that sound fucked up. I did this for years upon years. I wouldn't feel satisfaction or relief until I could pray without thinking sinful thoughts. I would always end the same way with, "I plead the blood in Jesus' name."

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I had nothing going for me at all. I was alone. The perfect storm that was my miserable life was waiting for an outlet to embrace. That outlet, my only escape at the time, was music.

Chapter 47

Music Will Be the Light that I Can Not Resist

The radio my grandmother gave me that Christmas was a lifesaver. It was a connection to a world outside of cultish social interactions. R.E.M. was something that I liked on my own without any peer pressure or desire to impress anyone. I loved everything about “Losing My Religion,” from the opening note to the lyrics, to the passion in the singer’s voice, to the end note. I would have goosebumps and a feeling of significance every time I listened to it. I still love everything about it. I honestly think it is the greatest song of my time. The energy and melodic intervals of the song grab me every time. My god, there is so much passion and depth in his voice.

At this time, I didn’t know the members of the band that would become my favorite thing in the world. All I knew was that it was the first thing I ever felt was speaking to me, and I wanted to be a part of it. It was a mystery to me that I was forbidden to love a song with such depth and importance. My love of the song, and eventually the band, came from nothing but a pure and genuine desire to absorb it and understand it.

I knew right away the song wasn’t about religion per se. Us born-againers never called our belief patterns “religion” anyway; we called it our “faith.” The Catholics had religion, and it was a false way to God and heaven. The term “losing my religion” didn’t offend me or make me feel like I was going against the church as much as it might have. But it had just the right number of sacrilegious undertones to make it a bit rebellious and exciting without being the devil’s music.

I saw the lyrics as being about a person giving everything to help or be a light to someone. I felt he would go to this extreme to help, love, encourage, or just be there for another person. Like most great songs, especially great R.E.M. songs, meanings can be interpreted in different ways. It’s what makes R.E.M.’s songs so interesting and emotionally charged. It can be seen as a love song or an obsession song.

Michael Stipe said, “This song is about you,” as he pointed to the audience during the band’s first *MTV Unplugged* performance in 1991. I heard a man trying to lift the audience, trying to keep up with them as they changed or as the band changed through

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life. He was saying it's a constant struggle to do this as an artist or even as a compassionate human. I also see it as describing how life can be a bit too much and it takes a toll on us.

The song starts by saying life is so big that its overwhelming for all of us (including the listener), and the singer will go to the extreme to make it better or close the distance. He is saying he is strong enough and willing to do what the listener can't. Stipe then admits to saying too much, which is so naked and genuine; he is scared it's his own doing. Later in the song, he realizes how dire it is and how there is still more to be said. That's him in the corner, being punished or maybe just hiding from view. That's him in the spotlight, on stage, or in the public eye, doing what he always does: giving it all, even when no one is looking. He's "losing his religion" (up to his wits' end) trying to keep up with the listener, and he admits he doesn't know if he can do it with such honesty in his voice.

In the next part, he thinks the listener is better or right there with him and his art when he hears them laugh, sing, and try. But it was just a dream, so it's back to losing his religion over it. Like it's on a loop. Like it's what he will always have to do.

My absolute favorite lines are in the second verse. "Every whisper of every waking hour, I am choosing my confessions." I took this line to heart since this was how I felt every day. Almost every hour, I thought about what I did wrong. I would think about how much I had to "confess" to feel better or to lose my guilt. The insecurities that were constantly on my teenage mind.

Through listening to this beautiful piece of music throughout my life, I have come up with many concepts to explain it. This is what makes a great song - when you can find different meanings at different times. The instrumentation was also amazing. I didn't even know what a mandolin was until I heard this track.

Chapter 48

I Thought That I Heard You Sing

I finally managed to see the video for “Losing My Religion” (LMR) on the 1991 Best Videos of the year countdown on MTV. My family was over at grandma Peggy’s house for our holiday visit, and my cousin Billy and I were in his room watching the countdown. It was well worth the wait. The imagery was captivating, and the front man looked so genuine in his passion for the song and its message. And then there was his dancing. I had never seen anything like it before. His arms were flailing around in synch with the beat, and there were more religious overtones than the song itself. I was looking for meaning and messages throughout the video, which brought a new level of excitement and mystery to the song. It scared me a bit, but it was too late. I was already on the R.E.M. train. I didn’t know what a music scene was or the importance of alternative rock vs. pop, but I knew I wanted to be a part of what R.E.M. had to offer. They were poetic, and the sound was unique, even if I only knew the songs on the radio. The best part was the way the video spoke to me like nothing before or ever again. Thank the gods I found out there was so much more to R.E.M. than my favorite song.

I wanted the full R.E.M. album with my favorite tunes more than anything. The problem was I was poor as shit and didn’t know when or where I could get it. But on my 14th birthday, I had some money given to me by a family member. I decided to go to a mall to purchase my first ever album, R.E.M.’s *Out of Time*, on cassette tape. I remember smelling the plastic and being a little scared this scent was how the devil would steal my soul or whatever crazy thoughts the Xians made me think. I was a little disappointed the lyrics to the songs were not printed with the album. But I took in the artwork and the pictures of flowers and bodies of water while listening to the beauty of the songs.

I loved every one of them.

I fell in love with great harmony-driven songs like “Near Wild Heaven” and “Belong.” My other favorites were “Me in Honey” and one of the greatest R.E.M. songs ever, “Country Feedback.” Out of the new songs, I listened to those two the most. “Country Feedback” especially hit a chord with me. It was on the dark, sad side of the R.E.M. spectrum. It set a mood full of remorse and longing. The lyrics were both straightforward and stream of consciousness. His voice was raw and honest. Even

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at 14 years old, I had an idea what the song was about when Stipe sang with pure passion about how much he yearned and needed something that he was losing. I read later that R.E.M. said this album was nothing but love songs. I believe that, in a way, they all are but for me, this one was the staple love (or lack of love) song of the album.

Boy did I choose the right first album to buy.

I also got to see the band members' names printed for the first time on the cassette sleeve. I memorized their names as fast as I could: Bill Berry-the drummer, Peter Buck-the guitarist, Mike Mills-the bassist, and Michael Stipe- the lead singer, who would become my hero and role model for the years to come. I made sure I memorized his name first.

Chapter 49

I Want My VH-1

One good thing going on in my shit show life was that our shitty black and white TV started to pick up some cable channels from our neighbor's house. The TV had a dial, so you had to get up and change channels manually. We only had the basics for broadcast TV, so it was the four major networks and a few on the UHF dial. I would explore the UHF dial since they had more channels to watch, and I discovered we could now watch the music video station, VH-1.

The reception was a little fuzzy but I took what I could get. It would expose me to much more music-especially R.E.M.'s catalog. I still had to wait until my mom was out of the room to watch it, but I caught my favorite video almost daily. I also discovered R.E.M. had other albums. Around this time, I saw the video for 1987's "The One I Love." I remember looking for the title on my *Out of Time* tape, thinking I missed a song. I would find out later about R.E.M.'s great back catalog. It would be a few more months until I discovered their I.R.S. (their independent record company was called I.R.S and would be the band's home for most of the 1980s) years and learned how the band had come from the underground to the mainstream, all on their terms.

To be fair, I didn't even know what the mainstream was. Everything was underground to me since I wasn't allowed to listen to secular music. I figured that there was what was popular on radio and MTV, and that was it. I thought all genres got lumped into the same music scene. I got that there were rap, pop, country, and rock styles, but it was all new and forbidden for me to hear. So, when the radio played all of these styles I figured this was what everyone liked. I knew that people who liked rap probably didn't like rock, but in my mind, it was still the same music that would get you in trouble at church. It was all worldly, and I liked almost everything I heard on the radio and my fuzzy VH-1 reception.

I later discovered how wrong I was and how many great bands were not on the radio yet, especially when a little band called Nirvana broke through with a couple of hits that would change mainstream music just as I was getting into it.

Chapter 50

Just Another Brick in the Wall

In the meantime, things were godawful at school and church. My depression and sadness were taking over increasingly every day, which didn't help but there was no structure to this system of education and no real teachers to help me. I was being judged and preached to every moment, and I was fast realizing my future was bleak with that education. It was only training us to be in the "Lord's service" like being a preacher for the guys and a preacher's wife for the gals! I never had any motivation or inspiration in that school. If I knew the books of the Bible, it was okay; it was all God's will like all the other bullshit I heard over the years.

I was being set up for failure. If I stayed, maybe I could get a church job or work with someone I knew from the church, most likely a hard labor job. However, if you wanted to do something else or further your education in a non-Christian college, good luck. They thought they were doing God's will by protecting us from the evil word. They thought they weren't doing anything wrong or holding minds back from actual learning (but they did a lot of wrongs and ruined a lot of lives).

So, with all this going on, let's bring in the humiliating sports experiences at CIBA that year. As well as Awanas, their lame version of the boy scouts, where we learned bible verses and played lame games like steal the bacon or keep the balloon up in the air with just one hand, there were the Friday teen outings. We would go to events like a scavenger hunt at a local mall, bowling outings, or to the Christian movie theater that showed the good old Rapture movies. Nothing, and I mean nothing, is more embarrassing than being seen in public, especially on a Friday night, as a born-again Christian, playing games while normal people wonder if you're Amish or Mormon.

These nights always ended up at the church where lo and behold, they preached to us. Then they attempted to give the senior students a senior prom with a banquet-style meal at the church. We were not allowed to be alone with the opposite sex, nor were we allowed to touch them, so eating a foot apart was the best we could ask for. The worst part was instead of hiring a photographer to take prom pictures of this joyous time of our youth, we had to go to a store like Sears that had a photo package for a reasonable price so we could have a picture for our wallets or coffee tables.

Later in life, when I cut my ties to the church and entered the secular world for good, I would go to any dance or prom I could. I would go to 20 proms, soph hops,

ring dances, and winter flings from 1996-1999. Each was a different date, and I had a blast at all of them. I did it partly for fun, and to make up for the lost time. I even bought a used tuxedo because I went to so many dances.

Besides all that hogwash, the most humiliating experiences were the sporting events the school held.

We had gym class every day, which was usually us playing basketball, volleyball, steal the bacon (if you don't know what this is, then google it, or don't cause it's really not worth it), and dodgeball, all in our upstairs "gym." During the warm months, we'd all walk down to the local Frankford baseball field and play softball. I was not good at most of these things. And no one showed me or took an interest in showing me how to be good.

Most of the time, I just wanted it to be over so I could get on with my miserable commute home. I think I was around five feet tall and about 100 pounds. Obviously, I got picked last for every sporting event. Since we were such a small school, there were no places to hide during gym, so everyone had to play. It would have been tolerable if we weren't involved in playing sports with other schools. Then some asshole decided to enter us into a Christian school basketball tournament in the winter of 91/92. We would travel to a suburban school in Bucks County, PA, and play against other born-againers who had the money for uniforms and players they could pick and choose from for the teams.

Meanwhile, at CIBA, every boy in school was on the team, even the short kid with man boobs who barely knew how to dribble, let alone shoot a basketball. Our uniforms were the worst. We couldn't afford your basic pressing of a unified outfit, so one of the mothers decided to make them. She took some t-shirts and painted our names and number on them with blue paint. Even at 14, I realized how stupid this was and was glad I would probably not play.

The most pathetic part was when the mom who made my "uniform" didn't space out my name conservatively and ran out of room for my ten-lettered last name. My t-shirt read "Holeswor" with the "th" underneath it. Only mine was like this, even though other kids had just as long of a name. I thought it was intentional or just my rotten luck again. We practiced for a month or two, with me mostly just looking on.

All the taller kids who thought they had a shot at the pros were on cloud nine, especially Johnny and Uriah. Then came the day of the big tournament. I have no idea how we did. I am sure we didn't do well because I would have remembered that. I do remember being embarrassed by our uniforms and playing for about a minute at the end of the game when we had no shot at winning. I know I got a rebound, panicked and threw it to the most familiar face on the court, Uriah! But Uriah was out of bounds, so it was all for nothing.

The school that hosted the tournament was Faith Baptist Church, the church of my Camp High Point fling, Amy Weiss. I got to see Amy, but she gave me the cold

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shoulder, which fit with everything else in my terrible existence. I didn't blame her, not with my "make-believe" uniform and awful hair (I was just glad she didn't call me Screech). That was the end of my competitive sports career. It was CIBA's last attempt at playing organized sports altogether as well. Mainly because next year there will be another split in our little born-again community.

Chapter 51

I Thought that I Heard You Laughing

I listened to music a lot to get by, especially the only album I owned, my beloved *Out of Time*.

Another escape was the long-running comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). It was my favorite show, and I loved almost all the skits they showed in the early '90s. In my opinion, it might have been the best cast they had Mike Myers, Dana Carvey, Phil Hartman, Julia Sweeney, Chris Farley, Adam Sandler, Chris Rock, Kevin Nealon, David Spade, Victoria Jackson, Ellen Cleghorne, and Jan Hooks were all incredible. The writing from the likes of Al Franken and Robert Smigel was top-notch. SNL was my last hurrah before a Sunday full of church and judgment.

Of all the skits I loved, my favorite, like most kids at the time, was "Wayne's World." And in the winter of 1992, they made a *Wayne's World* movie! Uriah and a bunch of us eventually snuck into the theatre to see it, and it was everything I hoped it would be.

We would quote this movie for years to come. But it was the inclusion of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" that really had an impact on me. The song was first released before I was born but re-released for the movie due to Mike Myers' love of it. I listened to the top 40 radio station a lot, and this tune was always playing. It was fast becoming my second favorite song after "Losing My Religion" (LMR). I kept my love for popular music hidden from the adults at church and school. The Queen song was the first time I got in trouble for liking rock music. One day, a kid in gym class started singing "Bohemian Rhapsody." I realized it was Johnny. The adult in charge must have known the song from his youth and asked how he knew it. Johnny said, "Charlie Holesworth told me about it." It led to my mom finding out. I told her I only knew it from *Wayne's World*, and I had to deny listening to secular music as if we lived in the '50s. It was a close call, and now I had to be extra careful because I did not want to give up the one thing, I had going for me: music. Including a new band that I just heard of called Nirvana.

Chapter 52

Entertain Us

When I first heard Nirvana, it was the anthem “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” I thought it was about a girl’s deodorant, as my sister once had a deodorant called Teen Spirit. I had no idea what Kurt Cobain was saying in that song, but I liked it and did not want to stop hearing it. “Come As You Are” was the second song I heard by them since it was the next single and I liked that one a lot, especially since I could understand what Cobain was saying. I started making mix tapes of songs I recorded off the radio. The funniest part was that the only cassettes I had were my mom’s from preacher’s sermons about how evil TV and rock music was. One day my mom will look for one of those tapes and find it in my room and when she plays it, instead of hearing some southern gentleman making you feel bad for watching a sitcom, she will hear a pop song from the likes of Madonna or Jesus Jones.

Chapter 53

The Radio Gods Shine on Me

I had to step up my sneaky music listening in the spring of '92 when I won my first radio contest on my favorite station, Eagle 106. I would go on to win a lot of radio contests, but this one was exciting since it was my first. I got to be on the radio, got the answer right, and won \$106 worth of cassette tapes! It was a daily contest where they had their top 8 countdown at 8 pm, and after the most requested song played you called, and if you knew the list, you won. I was so happy not just to win something but to win so many tapes that I was sure would be exactly what I was looking for. Most of the tapes were ones they just wanted to get rid of because they weren't big hits or had too many copies.

I had a memorable adventure getting to the radio station in Media, PA to pick up the tapes. I woke up one day in May that year and decided I would get my prize. The only problem was that I had no idea how to get to Media, PA. I called my local public transport company, SEPTA, and they gave me long and complicated travel details to get to Media from Kensington. It involved the bus I took with my sister every day to Kensington and Allegheny avenues, then the El train westbound to the last stop at 69th and Market. The trip took 30-40 minutes. Then I had to get another bus that only came every so often, which took me to the area where most of the radio and local TV stations broadcasted at.

It took me hours to get to the station and my mom worked at the school, so she would know I didn't show up. I didn't care. I was on a mission. I can only imagine what the station workers and DJs thought about this 14-year-old kid in a "hand-me-down" school uniform with messy, wavy hair.

I had a ball though. Everyone there was so nice to me. I met DJs I heard every day, including my favorite, Elliot. They gave me my prize, radio station T-shirts, and pens! They asked me if my parents were waiting for me, and I told them they weren't. My response prompted strange, concerned looks on their faces. They didn't have bags to put my tapes in, so they gave me an office envelope.

Cathy knew what I was doing, and she was cool about it. She told my mom I wasn't ready for school yet and would come on my own later. My excuse was going to be that I got on the wrong side of the El, and by the time I got to our neighborhood,

it was so late I figured I would go home and do my Lifepacs. It actually worked! My mom was mad at me, but it was the first time I did something like that and playing dumb was the best way out.

The tapes were mostly pop/rock albums. I got some duds, like a band called Linear that I never heard of. They looked like they were “hair metal” and sounded like New Kids on the Block. There was one from a group called Colourhaus, whom I was scared of because they had a bunch of crucifixes in the cassette’s artwork. I threw that one out in fear that it would possess me. Years later, I found the CD at a dollar store and liked it a lot. There was nothing sacrilegious about the band. It was just pop music with a female singer with a great voice. I wonder what else I missed out on due to my irrational fears of the unknown.

I also got tapes from Mr. Big, The Cure, Right Said Fred, Color me Badd, Prince, Amy Grant, Bryan Adams, Roxette, and Sophie B. Hawkins’ debut album featuring “Damn, I Wish I Was Your Lover” (Damn, did I love that song). Some scared me, and some I loved, but I always had a place for pop music in my heart even when my taste in music became confined to one genre later in life.

Just like that, I had a mediocre tape collection going for me. I had to cut a bigger slit in my box spring to hide all my tapes. No matter how much I have loved music since then, there will never be a time like my first discovery in 1991-93. It was all so fresh, forbidden, and real to me. I loved it all, from pop songs to rock songs and even the rap that was on the radio. When I listen to popular music of that time, I still recall memories of innocence and genuine eagerness to hear and feel it all. Everything from P.M. Dawn to Extreme to Suzanne Vega to KLF. The early ‘90s were a melting pot of popular music, and it was a great time to throw yourself into it.

Chapter 54

Trouble at the Old Holesworth House

Meanwhile, there was trouble brewing in the Holesworth house. My granddad, Charles Holesworth Sr., wasn't doing too well. He had been diagnosed with cirrhosis due to his many years of heavy drinking and drug abuse.

It was so bad for him that he would forget where he was from time to time. He once urinated in the living room, thinking he was in the bathroom. My grandma Dolores should have never married Charles Holesworth Sr., nor should have my father's mom, Peggy. My grandpa womanized, cheated, and stole money from these wonderful women all the time. I would even say Charles Holesworth Sr. should never have reproduced at all. My dad and mom shouldn't have had kids too, but it started with good old gramps.

None of that mattered now that he was dying. He eventually passed in the early summer of 1992, at age 62. I wasn't overly upset at the funeral. He was the man who had been mean to my mom and me, and I held more anger towards him than love. I was, however, upset for my dad. He lost both his father figures within a couple of years.

I was also upset that my grandpop was likely in hell since he was never saved. The only good thing about it was that I tried my best, later in life, to not drink too much. It's not always easy, but at least I tried.

Chapter 55

We Don't Need No Thought Control

That year almost marked my sister's "graduation" from CIBA. She and about four people were up there on the stage of our church's auditorium, pretending that we had a legit school. After graduating my sister didn't do much. She didn't get a job until she gave in to the faith and went to a bible institute three years later. At the graduation, my extended family who were in attendance (those who were not born again) were upset that the preacher gave a gospel, soul-winning, "You're going to burn in hell unless you're saved!" sermon.

My dad called it right away, saying that the church saw a bunch of new faces they could preach to and try to convert to their cult. I understood his point of view, but this was what the born-againers did all the time. They are in the constant mindset of getting as many people saved as possible. So, almost every time there is an event, they preach the gospel. It happens at weddings, graduations, funerals, and even big tent revival meetings.

I really think most of these people are good-hearted and doing this out of pure love for mankind. They genuinely believe what they preach is fact and stand behind their life goal of salvation. My father thought a little differently, especially about Pastor Higgins. He felt he was just an opportunist looking for more church members so he could move his church to a better neighborhood. He once told me he knew people like Pastor Higgins and they weren't good people.

He had a point. When Higgins and his family showed up at Christ Independent Baptist Church, he refused to live in the church-owned house next to them. Other pastors lived there while being the leader of CIBC. The neighborhood was godawful, so I get why he didn't want to live there, but it did go along with the job. He made the church buy a house in a better neighborhood about 10-15 minutes away by car. Then after being the pastor there for three years, he decided to leave CIBC and start a smaller church closer to where his church-bought house was. He took all the members who were making okay money and could pay their tithes to the church to keep it going and started Maranatha Baptist Church.

Higgins would eventually move on again to greener pastures in a larger, fancier neighborhood in New Jersey. Perhaps, my dad was on to something. When Higgins

decided to split up the church, he also started his own bullshit school with Lifepacs and all. Higgins' decision to leave the church and school we had known for over a decade caused a rift amongst the churches we were involved with. The fellowship and bond these churches had had together by sending their kids to one building for schooling was over.

All the churches of the same faith also decided to start their own "schools" and pretty much kept to their own. Whatever sense of normalcy we had with kids our age over the years at Ontario Street Baptist and CIBC was gone. We went from an embarrassing 120 kids in our school to each church having at most 30 kids in the school. They still tried to pretend it was normal. Instead of 40 kids in a room from all different grades, it was now 10 kids facing a wall, reading our magazine textbooks in each room, more miserable than ever.

If I remember right, this poorer man's version of a school was on a major street in Philly and was an old computer repair shop. We didn't have dividers between us kids because the church couldn't afford them, but we still had to face the wall. They placed long tables against the walls, and this was where we did our fabricated learning.

Everything the founders of these churches wanted when it came to unity in Philly as born-again Christians was failing. The only good thing about going with Higgins to Maranatha was that it was where Uriah and Mary went, along with my friend Josh and that bully Rich (who was not seeing my sister anymore). I was more aware than ever of my plight in life and how I wasn't going anywhere, especially since I was gradually growing away from the faith I was raised on and wanting some sort of normal life.

Chapter 56

Sell the Kids for Food

We still had a million roaches crawling everywhere and barely had any food. Lettuce sandwiches would be my go-to because they were cheap, and we always seemed to have lettuce. They consisted of lettuce and mustard on toasted bread. Ramen noodles were the staple for lunch and sometimes dinner. We were so broke that my mom would sometimes knock on neighbors' doors asking for some food so that we would eat something with substance.

My wardrobe was as embarrassing as it could be. I think I owned three pairs of shorts, and one of them was a bathing suit that was too small. It was a good thing I wasn't trying to be cool and was a bit in denial of how bad my wardrobe was. I did get some sympathy from those who knew more of my status in life than I did. It was either sympathy or pity.

To make things worse, my dad was being investigated for check fraud. After he was convicted, he got sent to a correctional facility in Northeast Philly for four to five months that year. He told me he had been in a bar, and a guy asked him to pass down some blank checks, and that person used them for fraudulent purposes. I have no idea how much my dad was involved or if he got anything out of it, but he got arrested for being the middleman.

I only got to visit him at the correction facility once or twice, but my mom went a lot more and told me later how embarrassing it was getting searched by security. It was traumatic to see my dad in this situation. Even if our relationship wasn't in tip-top shape, I felt sorry and ashamed for him. He would later get out on work release and stay at a halfway home until he was free to go.

He worked at a shitty McDonald's for his work release. My father, the college grad, flipping burgers. I have to give it to him, though. He did his time, worked his shit job, and was home that fall. In the meantime, my mom had to find a job, so she went to work at a Hallmark store in Port Richmond, making an outstanding \$3.25 an hour.

I was told America was in a recession, but that didn't matter in our lives since it always seemed like the Holesworths were in a recession (if not a full-blown depression). She worked about 30 hours a week, enough to get us kicked off government assistance. My mom got a letter 20 years later saying she still owed money

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to welfare because of the first week she worked at the card store and still received food stamps. God bless America.

Chapter 57

Always Look on the Dark Side of Life

While my dad was locked up, he wanted us to have call-waiting set up for our home line so he could get through if he called. Our phone was still a rotary phone, and I think they had to send us one with buttons to set up call waiting. Also, my dad got so used to cable TV in jail that he needed it when he got out. Especially since his plan now was to never work again and get Social Security Disability benefits. This is because my dad was now sick on a few levels.

He had been diagnosed with Hepatitis C (from using a dirty needle while shooting heroin) and several mental health issues, including paranoid schizophrenia, anxiety, and some type of depression. I believe most of his mental problems stemmed from his chaotic, addicted lifestyle. He put in for SS benefits which he was entitled to, but it would take years to establish this; it was a battle for the rest of his life. Again, God bless America.

Cable on the 13" black and white TV would not suffice. So, it was a good thing that summer when the Uriah family came through like never before. They felt so bad for my family that they gave us their spare 19" inch color TV. When my pops got out of jail, we would have basic cable and be able to watch in color!

The greatest change that year was in July when I told my mom I wanted to get a job like my buddy Josh did, selling local newspaper subscriptions door to door. *The Inquirer* and the *Daily News* paid a commission for selling subscriptions to people at a rate of \$2.50 per order if I remember right. However, once you hit 15 subscriptions a week, all orders before and after would shoot up to \$4.50 each. It was the best chance for a kid to make money in our urban neighborhoods without job experience.

At first, my mom said no because she was a huge worry wort, but I think Josh's mom, Barbara (another born-againer), influenced my mom and told her it wasn't dangerous. So that summer, Chaz Holesworth officially entered the workforce.

Chapter 58

Working for the Man

This job involved an adult male driving around in a huge van picking up kids from their homes around Kensington and neighboring areas like the Juniata section, which was considered upscale because they had front lawns. There were also kids from Fishtown. He would pick us up, and we would go to strange, sometimes dangerous neighborhoods to attempt to guilt people into buying a newspaper.

On the first day, the brown van with a beige strip in the middle pulled up, driven by my first boss, Mike Jericho. I was embarrassed like I always was when people pulled up in front of my crappy house in my seedy neighborhood full of drug dealers. I saw a bunch of kids, maybe 10 total, all around the same age as me.

I was wearing a shirt I owned for years, with a ton of wear and tear, and my too short bathing suit with a little wave on it that said, “15 ft waves.” One of the kids instantly made fun of me for this ridiculous look, but it never came up again. I was relieved, but I also didn’t care because I knew I needed some income, even at 14 years old, to buy the things my parents couldn’t afford. You know, luxuries like getting a haircut regularly and clothes that fit. Not to mention the things I wanted to buy that most people took for granted, like music, going to the movies, and sporting events.

The job was simple. The boss would drive us to a neighborhood that hadn’t recently been solicited for newspapers, and we’d get out with a clipboard with subscription orders, a pen, and a stack of newspapers. There was a whole spiel we had to say to everyone, trying to sell something most people didn’t want. When someone came to the door, we would hand them a copy of the newspaper and say, “Hi, here’s a copy of today’s paper.” Then we would go into the sales pitch.

“Hi, my name is Chaz, and I am in a contest to win college bonds, and you can help by trying the *Inquirer* (or the *Daily News*) for a short 13-week trial period. If you’re not fully satisfied after the trial period, you get a full moneyback guarantee. So do you say, will you help me win a bond for college?”

They were selling newspapers through a bunch of poor kids from lower-class neighborhoods with dreams of higher education in their eyes. Putting people on the spot with young and disfranchised kids must be a better method than a telemarketer calling and asking to subscribe to a paper. Most times no one would answer the door,

or they would say they already got the paper, which was usually a lie. But sometimes they'd take pity on us, and we'd get a sale!

We were mainly doing this for the commission, but there was a college bond you could win. It was worth \$100, or you could cash it out right away for \$50, which is what I eventually did. You won it by selling more subscriptions than anyone else in the company. We even had a weekly and monthly newsletter showing who was in the top ten for sales. At the end of the month, whoever was number one got the bond. I would get it next year, but first I had to learn the job.

I was trained by another kid who lived about five blocks away from me, who became one of my best friends in life, Eddie Maurer. Eddie took me out for a few blocks and showed me how to talk the talk. He was a skinny white kid with short brown hair, greenish eyes, and a long nose that fit his face well with his full lips and high cheekbones.

I instantly liked this kid. He was extremely nice and approachable. I felt comfortable around him from day one, as if I already knew him. I would see a lot of him throughout my life. He wouldn't only be one of my dearest and oldest friends but also an anchor or a constant bond, over the hellish upbringing we both experienced.

On my first day I got two or three subscriptions, which wasn't bad for the first time. I kept at it for the next week or two and never got that many orders, except one day when I got four. I wasn't the best at it and was starting to get discouraged. I thought I would either get fired, if possible, or quit and try to find a steady job.

It didn't matter because it was time for another break from Kensington by going to Wildwood for six weeks and staying with my grandma Dolores. I was still sporting my *Batman Returns* shorts and my only pair of swim trunks, so I wasn't the coolest kid to roam the boardwalk and beach.

Chapter 59

Summer, Summer, Summertime

Like the year before, I got to listen to my music all I wanted and watch MTV a ton. Watching VH-1 at home on the old 13" was fine for my fix of videos from Richard Marx and Genesis, but MTV (when they still played a lot of videos) showed me all kinds of bands I had never heard of, who I would go on to love for years. These included the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Guns N' Roses, Pearl Jam (who I would end up seeing live 20-plus times), and I got more into Nirvana. I also caught wind of other songs by R.E.M. that I didn't know existed, like "Stand" and "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine).."I still didn't know what albums R.E.M. put out before *Out of Time*, nor did I have the money to buy them, but I wanted to find out all about them.

The artist that really got to me that summer was Tori Amos, who would be crucial to my journey through this bullshit life.

I watched the video for "Crucify," and it automatically struck a chord with me, given my faith-based upbringing. I saw the video a few times during the summer, usually at night or during MTV's *120 minutes*, which featured obscure and alternative music. It didn't grab me the way LMR had the previous year, but it wasn't that far from the same feelings of clarity.

Every line made sense to me. From the opening, "Every finger in the room is pointing at me, I want to spit in their faces, but I'm afraid of what they will bring" to "Just what God needs, one more victim" to "I got enough guilt to start my own religion." The latter was my favorite. And the chorus "I crucify myself every day, my heart is sick of being in chains" was me in a nutshell. Her voice was amazing. I would close my eyes and listen to Tori's voice, feeling every note she sang. Not only was the music good, but her presence was captivating. I thought she was so beautiful and unique. I wanted to learn more about her, but I would have to wait a few months, then a few years, to see her live and fall deeply in love with everything about her.

One cool thing about that summer was that I found this shop on the boardwalk in Wildwood that sold all kinds of rock and roll memorabilia, everything from t-shirts to bootleg concerts to pins and stickers. It was called Cookie's Fun Shop. I bought many of my favorite bands' shirts from there in the years to come. But this summer, I was on a strict budget of the pocket money my grandma gave me to do things like cut her

lawn. So, I settled on a couple of R.E.M. pins they sold there. I wore them all summer long.

Along Wildwood's beaches, there is a boardwalk with hundreds of shops selling everything from fudge to shirts with crude and trendy slogans to pizza to rock and roll memorabilia. They also have a bunch of places to eat (including fast food joints) and carnival-style games and rides. Thousands of people come to this extravaganza every summer, and there was a sense of excitement and peacefulness I needed while I was away from my hellhole in Philly.

I walked around meeting people on the boardwalk with my friends who lived in West Wildwood all year long or ones who came down for summer, like my cousin Mike and me. Everywhere I went, I wore my R.E.M. pins with pride.

I met some older kids from Philly, and we started talking about our schools. By now, I realized it was better to tell a white lie than to explain my Christian education to people. So, I would tell people I probably wouldn't ever see again that I went to an ordinary public school like Kensington High or North Catholic High School. I could pretend I was just like other kids, going to high school where I got a real education, dressed regularly, and listened to whatever music I wanted.

The older kids knew about North Catholic High. When I told them I was going there in the fall, they said, "You better not wear those R.E.M. pins when you go there until you find your group of friends, or you might get beat up and labeled gay." It was the first and not nearly the last time I would hear R.E.M. associated with being homosexual. I was a little confused and suddenly self-conscious about my pins. I was worried that these kids might think I was gay. I never considered them to be what people would call a "gay" band. I saw them as a sensitive, deeper type of music but never thought it was anything to get beat up or made fun of for enjoying.

Chapter 60

God is Gay

I was having major doubts about my religious upbringing. I wanted to explore the secular world but was indoctrinated by these teachings, and they wouldn't leave my head overnight. One of the hardest things to accept was how wrong we were with our attitude toward homosexuality. We were taught repeatedly that homosexuality was one of the ultimate sins and that God created AIDS and HIV to punish the wicked gay sinners.

Later in life I thought, if God created diseases to kill off gay people, why couldn't he have just not created homosexuality? Why go to the trouble of creating a disease that will kill millions of straight and gay people when you can make everyone straight? Oh, that's right, because it's all bullshit.

When I was young, I naively thought the same way as everyone around me. I believed being gay was one of the worst things in the world and that gay people were disgusting and were going to hell. I thought the worst insult you could hear was being called a fag or a homo. And it happened to me due to my non-athleticism and overly sensitive demeanor. I was never very masculine and was a bit of a momma's boy growing up since she was the one who raised me. So, I would hear the random "fag" and "homo" directed toward me by my peers. I hated it and didn't want anyone to think I was that way. I didn't even know what it truly meant. I knew gay men were usually effeminate and kissed other men. I didn't know anything about the sexual parts of it. I didn't even know the parts when it came to heterosexual sex. I wouldn't know the name of a vagina until I was way into my teens.

This hatred of a particular group was caused by the people influencing me. It would take a little bit longer to see the error of my ways. And of course, it would be Michael Stipe who would wake me up to my faults.

I wondered why anyone would think R.E.M. was a gay band. I thought maybe it was because of "Shiny Happy People." It isn't the most macho song, but I just thought it was a happy tune about everyone in the world getting along. Then I thought maybe it was because they weren't like other rock bands who were loud and aggressive, like Guns N' Roses and Nirvana. I'd later find out how much Kurt Cobain hated macho

assholes who picked on homosexuals. One of my favorite Cobain stories is how he'd spray paint "God is gay" all over his hometown.

Meanwhile, Michael Stipe talked sensitively about his insecurities and innermost feelings, and obviously only the gays would do something girly like that. I would later hear how Michael really was gay and that LMR was about him coming out of the closet and feeling guilty about it. I would hear the rumors that Stipe had AIDS and that was why he was so skinny and wouldn't tour anymore. R.E.M. decided not to tour for their two most popular albums, *Out of Time* and *Automatic for the People*, so the rumor mill spawned some doozies about Stipe having AIDS or HIV.

The rumors were false, thank the gods, and R.E.M. would tour a lot more in the years to come. Thank the gods once more. My built-in hatred and disgust for gay people made me not believe that Michael was gay. When people would say it to me, I would ignore it or say it wasn't true.

Eventually, I would have to choose between my prejudices and my love for this hero/role model of mine. It wasn't just the faith that was so angry and afraid of homosexuals. There was homophobia everywhere. In Kensington, in the '90s, if you weren't considered tough or masculine, you were weak and an easy target. My prejudice wasn't just formed by the Christians (though they were the ones who preached about it the most), but also by the peers in my neighborhood and eventually those who I worked with and became friends with.

Chapter 61

Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow

I also got interested in politics that summer. I was only 14 years old, but for some reason, I found myself interested in the 1992 presidential election. That summer, since I had access to cable TV and the leisure time to watch a lot of it, I kept up with the news and the opinions of the candidates, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. The Xians always pushed the pro-life candidate, so it was always the Republican nominee, even if it meant voting against their interests. It was always one issue for them when it came to voting for candidates - who was the closest to God and Jesus. Bush was their pick in 1988 and the same for 1992.

I guess the beginning of my separation from the church was when I began seriously looking at the Democrats and their nominee, Clinton. I was still under the impression that abortion was murder and was against it, but I looked past that one issue because I realized even then that the policies of the GOP were not in the best interests of an extremely poor kid from Kensington. I also realized that Bush (and seemingly the rest of the GOP) was out of touch with everyday poor and working-class people.

By contrast, Bill Clinton was energetic, charismatic, and seemed to care about people. He was younger than the dinosaurs in office for the past 12 years and knew how to light up a room. He talked about change and creating jobs, helping the environment, and promises of revolutionizing the healthcare system (if only we were so lucky). I would take this new appreciation for politics and the next POTUS with me when I came home to Philly.

The night that Clinton won the election, I was thrilled but my dad said to me, "Wait and see how he ruins this country." Like most white males, he was a Republican for the status points. He would later come around to see how the GOP didn't care about the poor, especially those on social security disability. He would realize that these men we put in charge of our daily lives were influenced by big donors rather than those who don't have any money. And he saw that cutting social security benefits was the goal of some of these elected officials. Most of these politicians would be from the Grand Old Party.

Chapter 62

Back to Life, Back to Reality

After the summer ended, I went home and continued selling subscriptions to the local papers. I got a call from Mike Jericho asking if I wanted to try the job again, and I thought, “Why not?” I didn’t think I was that good at the job, so I was a little surprised. It led to an even bigger surprise: I actually was good at the work. I don’t know how it happened because I didn’t do anything different from the first time, but I was a natural.

On my first day back, I got four orders. The next day I got seven or eight, and by the end of the week, I passed the 15 orders I needed to make each one worth \$4.50. The job ran six days a week. We had off on Sunday, and I wasn’t allowed to work on Wednesdays due to church services. We’d get picked up in the van around 5 pm and be back around 8-8:30 pm. On Saturdays, we worked almost a full day. Saturday is when you made the most money. People were home, and you had a better chance of orders. I eventually got the high for orders on one Saturday-about 20. It was nice to have that going for me for a bit.

As I racked up the orders and made money, I was almost the top dog in Mike’s group. Since I had the high just about every night, Mike would let me sit in the front passenger seat. If you beat the all-time high for orders, he’d buy you McDonald’s or Burger King food. What I liked most about sitting up front was I could control the radio.

When I first started, we’d listen to the top 40 rap and dance music station we had in Philly, Q102. It played your typical trending mindless sounds, mostly about dancing or sex. Now that I was riding shotgun that all changed. I would play my favorite station, Eagle 106, or if a commercial aired, I would switch to one of our other rock stations, like WMMR or WYSP. Soon I discovered 103.9 WDRE, which played nothing but modern rock. I even converted some strict rap fans to R.E.M.

When I started back at the job there were pretty much all new kids in the van. Success was solely based on one’s ability to sell the paper, and if you couldn’t make it work in a week or so, you would most likely move on to another source of income like mowing lawns or flipping burgers. So, there was a huge turnover, but some kids from the summer before were there.

Who wasn't there was more important: Eddie Maurer. When the van pulled up to pick him up, he'd always have an excuse for why he couldn't come with us. I always got a little excited when we pulled up to his house on Lee Street but most times, I was disappointed. Eddie did come out to work sometimes but it was rare. I had a sense he was different than the other kids we worked with or that I knew. It was like I knew he would be a significant part of my life for the long haul.

When he came back, after a long time of being out of the loop, I was the top sales kid. He joked about how he trained me, and I owed everything to him. Then we went to a neighborhood in the Mayfair section of Philly. When I finished my block, I found him sitting on the end of a block next to mine. He said he wasn't going down that block because a bunch of kids were hanging out, and he wasn't going to deal with that shit. It was the first time I slacked off on the job. We sat there talking about God knows what, but I knew that Eddie was the kind of kid I wanted to be near. He was genuine, nice, and so easy to be around. It was the first time I had had a friend like him. I felt like I could be myself around him, and he was a cool kid. Way cooler than the born-againers and the other kids in Mike Jericho's van.

We would be forever kindred spirits. But throughout that period and our friendship, Eddie and I would come together in waves. We wouldn't see each other for months, and then we would see each other and talk on the phone all the time. Then we wouldn't hear from each other for another few months. We never missed a beat though. We would be in synch throughout our lives, mainly due to our similarities.

We were both scrawny, little white kids in an all-Spanish neighborhood where it was genuinely dangerous to leave the house. We were dirt poor with few prospects of a higher education or a path to the American dream. Most importantly, we were more of the sensitive, thinking type than most people around us. We seemed to be a bit brighter than the average Kenzo as well. We liked different kinds of music and movies than the other kids we knew and worked with, and we would talk about deeper things than sports and sex.

We liked sports and girls like the next kids, but we also liked the idea of having a relationship with a girl and finding love. We would also ponder life and its deeper meanings and all that bullshit. All this at 14 and 15 years old.

Back in Jericho's creepy van, I made other friends. Eddie Flankenstien (which is probably spelled wrong) was the funniest kid I met back then. He was witty as hell and did a good impression of the people we worked with. He lived around E and Allegheny, about a five-block walk from my house.

Around the corner from him was my good buddy during those couple of years, Renee Melendez. He was a pleasant kid about a year younger than me and was the first Puerto Rican I ever met who was obsessed with Bon Jovi. Like me, the first Bon Jovi music Renee caught wind of was 1992's *"Keep the Faith."* That album of the same name was a departure from their 1980s hair metal days. I guess they saw the writing

on the wall and decided to make an album more socially conscious, like other bands at the time, including R.E.M., Pearl Jam, and U2. They tried to break away from the overly sexist bands of the hard rock scene. It didn't go over that well, but this was the Bon Jovi album I would listen to a lot in 1992-93. Renee was such a fan that he would carry the tape of the album in his pocket everywhere he went. I did the same with R.E.M. tapes.

Then there was Matt Ward, a kid who used to live across the street from me on Wishart Street. His family moved out after the neighborhood started to get worse. Working at the paper job would be the first time I had seen him in seven years. He was a good enough kid but tended to act tougher than he was.

On one occasion, Eddie, Matt, and I were hanging out in downtown Philly during the day before work. We wandered all around and ended up at the mall at 8th and Market called The Gallery. We were getting ready to leave when three teenagers (who were bigger than us) started to fuck with us. They had us in a less populated area of the mall and seemed to be getting ready to corner us to mug us. The usual thing that happened was these bullies would ask for money in a not-so-kind way, and then we would try to get around other people so they would leave us alone. Everything was going according to plan until Matt had to open his mouth and say, "Chaz, hold my jacket," as if he was going to fight these guys who outweighed me and Eddie by at least 50 pounds. They followed us as we made our way to the El train. We got separated and each of us had one on our tail. I was terrified and had that same feeling of being the constant victim. The feeling of "here we go again" since it was just another time, I was being ambushed by those who saw me as an easy target. For some bullshit reason, I had the tallest and biggest of the three following me as I tried to lose him in different stores in the mall until I got to the connecting El station underneath the Gallery. When I got off at my usual El stop at Kensington and Allegheny, I saw Eddie there waiting, then 10 minutes later, Matt came down the steps, so we were all safe and sound, despite what he had done. That will be the last time we let Matt get us into that sort of situation.

Then there were the Hanes brothers. Harold was about a year older than me, and his brother, David, about a year younger. I liked both a lot but struck a particular friendship with David. They both went to North Catholic. Harold was the first metal fan I ever met and was somewhat on the dorky side of life. He would try to get me to play the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was up there with rock and roll as a way to get possessed by demons, according to the born-againers. Eventually, I would go to a *D&D* game party with Harold and, of all people, Eddie Maurer. I would see that it wasn't really devil worshiping. It was just boring and dorky. Eddie would play it for years, and some of the guys who played it with him would become good friends of mine.

There was also Wayne, Fred Bloos, and Gary Reese (the second funniest kid I met then). Kids would come and go, but those were the ones I remember most from the

early days of the job, which was one of my favorite times in life. I had money coming in to do things that I wanted to do. I got my first taste of friends who weren't from the church or born-again. And I was doing normal things like going to the movies, roller-skating rinks, sporting events, malls, and so on.

These kids liked me, and we were having fun at work and during our off time. My boss, Mike, was more like an older brother than a boss. He was in his 20s and had a girlfriend and an apartment, so I thought he was a cool guy. He liked music that I liked, from the '80s and early '90s, like R.E.M., U2, Peter Gabriel, and Genesis. He wouldn't stay around for my whole time at this job, but it was good while it lasted with him as our boss.

Those were some of the good parts of the job. Now let's talk about the scary and borderline abusive stuff that came with going to strange neighborhoods at night.

One time I was going door-to-door in a neighborhood with high steps, somewhere in Delaware County, PA (a suburb of Philly). It was around 6 o'clock when I got to a house where a grumpy asshole had some words for me. He was probably in his 70s and decided to lash out at a 14-year-old trying to make some spending money.

After I gave my speech, he ranted about it being illegal to solicit at his door. Whenever this happened, we would usually say, "Thanks for your time," and keep moving, and the person would go back inside their house.

Not this time. This lousy curmudgeon started to follow me. When I knocked on the next door, and a nice woman answered, he started to yell for the woman's husband, who was sleeping on the couch. The husband came out and told me to beat it. My temper made me turn to the old bastard and yell profanity at him. The husband thought I was cursing at him.

This grown man, probably in his 40s, said, "What did you say to me?!" and chased me down the steps while the grump was cheering him on, saying things like, "Get him!"

The husband threw me to the ground and told me to never come back to this block. I said something along the lines of, "I'm only 14, and I'm going to call the cops."

This prompted him to say in a clear, serious tone, "Oh yeah? Then I'll fucking kill you."

I was shaken to the bone. When Mike picked me up to go to the next neighborhood, I told him what happened. He said, "Don't worry, I'll take you a few blocks over, and he won't bother you there." Thanks, Mike, I just got assaulted, but I'll knock on more doors.

Another chance encounter was in my neighborhood of Kensington. For some reason we did better in the poor, run-down areas than in the suburbs and middle-class ones.

We were around Kensington and Allegheny Ave (K&A), working the row homes and duplexes under the El station. I knocked on a door that happened to be a duplex

with three apartments. I got a good catch at the first house in the building. An extremely skinny man in his 30s answered and was really interested in what I had to say. He invited me into his apartment, where he was coughing all over the place. His wife was sitting on the couch. They were drinking out of old coffee cans, which was something we Kenzos did. The man was easy to talk to and seemed compassionate. He said he would order the paper and was eager to do so. As I sat in a chair across from his wife, this man decided to give me some advice. He told me I had to be careful in life and mentioned that he and his wife had AIDS. It shocked me to my core.

In 1992 AIDS was a terrifying word, even to a 14-year-old born-again virgin. I knew it was a deadly disease, and, as the old faith told it, God was using AIDS to kill off sinners like the gays and drug addicts. I remember television shows having episodes dealing with the disease, but they weren't too informative. I didn't know if there were other ways to get AIDS, like getting spat at or breathed on. I was so panicky that I held my breath so none of this man's saliva would find its way into my mouth or pores. He told me that I had nothing to worry about because I could only get AIDS if I shared a dirty needle with him or if we were to have sex. I didn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. I wanted to get the fuck out of there.

After the guy filled out the order form, he took me down to his neighbor's apartment and got that guy signed up for me. The whole time I was in a panic. When I finally got out of the apartment, I told Mike what happened and how freaked out I was. He took me to a bar to wash my hands as if some old bar of soap at a pub on Kensington Ave. would kill the AIDS virus.

I would find out later that I had nothing to worry about, but at that moment, I was scared shitless and prayed the whole night through. After that experience, the last thing I wanted to do was knock on doors and sell subscriptions. We would work like a mailman in rain, sleet, snow, cold, etc. One time, we knocked on doors on a Saturday during a blizzard. I hated cold weather, and, unlike a mailman, I wasn't dressed properly. So, I'd freeze my ass off.

I was almost attacked by a German Shepherd when a woman, thinking I was her son coming home, opened the door and, the dog lunged at me. I had to hold the dog's mouth shut until she could pull it back in. Another time a bulldog (which is one of my favorite dogs) came out while I was talking to its owner and bit my leg. No blood was drawn or anything, but it still hurt.

Yet another time, I was walking around an apartment complex ringing bells, when I heard a sound like a chain rattling. My first thought was it was a loose dog, and I ran. It was not a dog. It was the cops answering a call about a robbery, and they thought I was the robber since I ran away. Mike pulled up when they had me pinned over a car with my hands behind my back. He started yelling, "He's working for the Daily News. He's just a kid!"

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The cops asked why I ran, and I said, “I heard your keys and thought you were a loose dog.” They had a good laugh, and I got to knock on more doors after another traumatic experience.

The first year of the job was so much fun though. The friends I made were a breath of fresh air after only knowing born-againers my whole life. We were doing typical things like getting a homeless person to buy us beer. All we had to do was give them enough cash to buy some for themselves. We’d listen to music and watch movies (these people had cable and a VCR!). It wouldn’t last, of course. All the kids I had fun with would go their separate ways (besides Eddie Maurer), and Mike Jericho would eventually move on to a better job which left a big hole in the manager position that never got filled properly.

I had a steady income and friends who liked me. Things were looking up except when my family would “borrow” money from me and never pay it back. It got so bad that I would lie about how much I had and hide the money. My dad was the worst offender, of course. He took money for his habits, promising to pay me back (another broken promise from good old dad). But even after that, I still had enough cash to experience a little enjoyment in my life of hell.

Chapter 63

I Want My MTV (and VH-1)

Maranatha Baptist “Academy” wasn’t ready for the school year that first year, so we didn’t start until the end of September. It was cool with me since we got basic cable that month. My dad, who got used to watching cable TV in jail, could watch it when he was released the next month. We didn’t have hot water and only had heat during the months that it was illegal for the gas company to turn it off, even if you were delinquent. We had to walk to discounted grocery stores miles away, get welfare handouts, and knock on neighbors’ doors, begging for food. But the Holesworths finally had basic cable. Hallelujah! All from my mom’s minimum wage job. My dad getting locked up was the best thing to happen to us. We also got call waiting!

We were catching up with Uriah and his family. Now that I could watch channels I normally only saw at friends or relatives, I was glued to the TV. MTV was my go-to channel, along with my trusty old friend, VH-1. Then a mix of Comedy Central and the Sci-Fi Channel grabbed my attention when it premiered next year.

I was thrilled to watch the 1992 MTV Video Music Awards and see performances from all the great bands I got into over the summer. Bands like Pearl Jam, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Nirvana, G N’ R, my boy Bryan Adams, and a band who I was just getting into, U2. The funny thing about U2 was that I was still a little worried about listening to the “devil’s music” and was a little scared when I heard their hit “Mysterious Ways.” The song had a heavier guitar riff to it and with the imagery from the music video of what seemed to be people from other religions than being a Xian in it, I was a bit freaked out over it. It would take me another year or so to appreciate them as one of the greatest bands of the decade. It showed how fucking brainwashed I really was.

I thought U2, goddamn U2, was out to turn me into a devil worshiper.

U2 performed with one of my SNL favorites, Dana Carvey, who hosted the show as his *Wayne’s World* character, Garth. He played the drums, and it was enough for me to realize U2 was on the up and up. I was also slightly scared of Pearl Jam when I saw the video for their breakthrough hit “Jeremy” that summer, but I got over it quickly. I thought they were heavy metal because they had long hair and got played on MTV’s *Headbangers Ball*. In my naïve and new to it all mind, I was worried Pearl Jam might

be out to steal my soul for the prince of darkness. Thank the gods that wasn't true, and I realized how different they were, compared to other bands on the show.

Pearl Jam's performance at the 1992 VMAs was incredible. They performed "Jeremy," a song about a troubled youth whose parents raised him poorly and was treated like shit by his schoolmates. I was blown away by Eddie Vedder's passion and emotion. When he sang, "I don't need no mom and dad," I was sold. The devil may not have my soul, but Eddie Vedder, it's all yours.

During Nirvana's performance, I saw the bass player throw his instrument up in the air and have it crash down on his head. Even though this was the first VMAs I watched live, I knew it wasn't planned. I felt bad for the guy. Kurt Cobain ended the performance by saying, "Hi, Axl," referring to G N' R lead vocalist, Axl Rose. I thought this was sincere and Kurt and Axl were friends, and he was saying hi to him because that's what friends in rock bands do. In the born-again world, one thing they had going for them was everyone was nice to each other and wanted to be one family or community. I figured this was the same for rock bands in the secular world. I was terribly wrong. I would find out later that Kurt was egging Axl on by saying hi to him because Axl had a run-in with Kurt and his mostly misunderstood wife, Courtney Love.

The story is that Axl was a bully, pointing his finger at Kurt's face, saying he should keep his wife in line and stop her from talking about Axl to the media (white people problems). Courtney's interview in a magazine where she said negative things about the G N' R singer really got under his skin.

It was the line in the sand. On one side, you had Guns N' Roses, the essence of the '80s hard rock scene, full of testosterone and barely dressed groupies in their videos and artwork. They were a superficial, one-dimensional rock band, whose meaning and depth could be summed up by a 7th grader. On the other side, you had Nirvana, the future of rock music, who were simple musically, but complex lyrically. They had songs about anger, isolation, and women's rights (the opposite of what glam/hair metal embodied).

They represented the backlash to the '80s in general. The constant spending and excess of that decade led to the '90s, when we were in a recession, the rich got richer, the poor became poorer, and most people were terrified of sexually transmitted diseases.

The consciousness of the masses was looking for something besides rich rock stars partying all the time and not caring about anything other than drugs and a hole to fuck. Nirvana had depth, energy, and most importantly, they were real.

My turn my head moment during the VMAs broadcast came during the return from a commercial break. R.E.M. was not involved with the 1992 VMAs, and I wasn't 100% thrilled with the show because of it. But suddenly, they showed a list of videos that would be premiering in the next few weeks, and one was, be still my beating heart, a brand-new song by R.E.M. called "Drive." There was hope on the horizon.

Chapter 64

Hey Kids, Rock N' Roll, Nobody Tells You Where to Go

I only had Out of time, and other R.E.M. songs were a mystery to me because I didn't know how to hear or find them.

I knew the song "Stand" from its use as the theme song to the early '90s cult sitcom *Get a life*. I watched it in syndication when I could just to hear the song. If I remember right, the album that "Stand" was on, *Green*, would be the first album I knew was out there besides *Out of Time*. I knew "The One I Love" from watching VH-1 when we had that 13" black and white TV. But this was the first new music from the band, and I knew it would be released soon.

The video for "Drive" premiered in September of '92. I saw it the day it premiered due to Maranatha Baptist starting late for the school year. I was beyond excited. It played every hour on top of the hour throughout the day. I had to wait for my mom to be out of the room to time my viewing right and it worked.

I caught it a few times during the day, and it was more than I could have hoped for. The video was dream-like. It was my hero, Michael Stipe, crowd surfing over a sea of fans. It was shot in black and white (if I was watching the old 13", I wouldn't have missed a thing). The song was somber but beautiful.

It was the total opposite of songs on *Out of Time* but still gorgeous.

The song was exactly what I needed to hear. In my opinion, it was about a younger person taking control of their life. Stipe sang about not letting anyone tell you what to do or where to go. I thought these Christians who controlled my life shouldn't have this much control and power over me.

I also saw the first inkling of R.E.M. and Michael Stipe's political stance. I had a feeling they were going to be Clinton supporters and democrats, but the only thing I had to go on was one album that didn't have any political songs (a rare thing for the group) and a couple of videos. When the band won VMAs in 1991 for "Losing My Religion," Stipe wore a bunch of shirts for causes he believed in. Shirts that pushed for gun control, saving the environment, safe sex, anti-racism, and others. I had an idea they shared a stance for things that candidate Clinton had in his Presidential platform, but it was "Drive" and an explanation about the song that it was also about getting out the vote and not being Bushwacked.

Chaz Holesworth

I didn't know the difference between a conservative and a liberal, but with my thoughts on the environment and the lower-class needing help with poverty instead of being thrown of social programs they need; I was slowly becoming a liberal democrat without knowing it. I just had to get over my homophobia and belief that abortion is murder. All in due time.

Chapter 65

Automatic for the People

I found out R.E.M.'s new album, *Automatic for the People*, was going to be released on 10/6/1992. I had the money to buy it. All I needed was the know-how to get it. Enter my brother from another mother, Mike Jericho.

I asked Mike to buy it for me since I wasn't allowed and didn't know how to get to a record store on a weekday without lying to my mom. He said yes and bought the album that would become my favorite for the rest of my life.

I got it the following Thursday since I wasn't allowed to work on Wednesday because of church. Mike waited until I was done knocking on doors for the night before he would give it to me, just like a boss would. The excitement I felt when he gave me the Sam Goody bag that contained my future favorite album would never be felt by me again. It was like Christmas morning, except this was real and non-gimmicky.

I remember looking at the cassette tape repeatedly. The cover art was a black iron or steel star, something used either as a weapon or to navigate. The color scheme was gray and black, which felt gloomy, but the tape inside was light yellow, like the color of the sun. I was intrigued by all of this.

I turned the tape around to read the song titles and noticed the familiar "Drive" was the first track. As I skimmed the others, I couldn't wait to hear what they were about and sounded like. But one title above all stuck out to me: "Everybody Hurts."

The title made me want to listen to it right away. I was depressed as hell. Despite having a part-time job and some new friends, I would still go home to a condemned house and to a bullshit school teaching me to follow one path. I still thought I was ugly as sin and had no expectations of things getting better. Seeing a title like "Everybody Hurts" was comforting in those dark days of my youth.

I listened to the album in my bed that night on my piece of shit radio with my shitty ass earphones so my mom wouldn't hear. I instantly loved it. "Drive" was now mine to listen to as much as I wanted, which was all the time.

It was followed by another somber tune called "Try Not to Breathe," an extraordinary number about passing on from this life. Never was Stipe's voice so earnest than with the songs on this album, especially this song. He would say it was about the passing of his beloved grandmother, but like every great song, the singer shares a glimpse of his loss with the listener, and we can adapt it to our own losses.

This one will be played at my funeral. Well, most of these songs will play at my funeral, except for “The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonight” (it’s too upbeat).

“Sidewinder” is a fun one that makes you want to dance and sing (even though it’s hard to tell what the song is about or what Stipe is saying). It’s just as great as every other song on the album in its weird way.

In the clean-up spot was what became my favorite ballad ever, “Everybody Hurts.” They say you can’t judge a book by its cover, but boy was I right about this song just by its title. The music was haunting and beautiful, and the words were direct and to the point but comforting. It was exactly what I needed. Stipe was hitting notes and carrying the tune like he felt and believed in what he was saying. And simple lines about the listener not being alone and not to give up, from his sincere voice carried so much weight because I knew he meant what he was saying. His wisdom came shining through every note. He told the listener that everybody, including himself, hurts, and they’re not alone. I thought of it almost the same way as LMR where Stipe pleads with the fan or listener to not give up and keep moving forward, even when everything is wrong. It was a universal song.

My mom’s mom (who was in her 60s) told me when she first heard the song, she stopped what she was doing to listen to the singer’s comforting voice. I’ve met people who never listen to alternative bands and prefer top 40 pop and rap but ask me to make them a copy of “Everybody Hurts” because it hits home with them. Whether someone was going through a breakup, getting picked on by assholes, or in such despair that they couldn’t fix their life, this song was a five-minute break from that hell. I listened to this song hundreds of times from ‘92-‘94.

The rest of this classic album was equally incredible. Every song was just as good as the last and was a breath of fresh air for me. It was a beautiful, perfect album from start to finish.

The instrumental “New Orleans Instrumental No. 1” was a nice segue between the brilliant sadness of “Everybody Hurts” and “Sweetness Follows,” another beauty about losing loved ones. Death and immortality were themes throughout the album—not in a depressing and longing to die sense, but more of a goal of finding hope and peace during the mourning period.

The more up-tempo but solemn tune “Monty Got a Raw Deal” seemed to be a tribute to the troubled actor Montgomery Clift. Like other great R.E.M. songs, Stipe uses a person (here it’s Clift, and later on the album, it’s Andy Kaufman) not just to pay tribute but to go on a journey to convey other points.

Then there was the only real rock song on the album, the heavily political “Ignoreland.” It was hard to understand what Stipe was saying under the loud guitars and muffled effects his voice had. I had a hard time deciphering what he was saying, but when I did, I got it loud and clear. Stipe was calling out the republicans who were in power for the past 12 years, Reagan and Bush Sr.

Stipe called bullshit on their trickle-down economic policies that ignored the working and lower classes. We became a defense-spending, ultra-power-obsessed land where only the rich will benefit the most. This song might have taken place in the Reagan/Bush era, but it will be relevant throughout our journey to a better union. Whether it's in the 2000s and we're getting told a bunch of lies to go to a pointless war, or it's 2016, and a conman game show host gets the keys to the White House and makes executive orders and deregulations that only help corporations and the ultra-rich. "Ignoreland" will always be a song to vent about the powers who are only out to get richer.

The fastest song on the album was followed by the most mellow one, "Star Me Kitten." It's the closest thing to a love song on the record. It was a dreamy song that somehow fitted right in with the flow of the record.

Then came, in my opinion, the best three songs to finish an album or follow each other that I ever heard.

The first one was the anthem that would become a R.E.M. classic and staple song, "Man on the Moon." The song was a tribute to the late great comedian, Andy Kaufman, who I only knew from reruns of the sitcom *Taxi*. R.E.M. took Andy on a journey through life and the afterlife while paying tribute to his genius antics and questioning everything persona. Stipe would write lines about things we all know about and brush them off with a "yeah yeah yeah," as in "I've heard that one before, and tell me something new." It's what Andy Kaufman was all about - changing the audience's experience by making them break out of their comfort zone. He forced them not settle for the "take my wife" routine. The music was upbeat and uplifting, and the lyrics took you through childhood games and bible stories (and how heaven may be the biggest prank of all), while Andy dazzles us with questioning the moon landing and his "you can question anything" stunt.

"Man on the Moon" would become the second single from the album and would be on the radio and MTV constantly. It became the soundtrack to my life in 1992/93 and one of my favorite songs of all time. It was a fun, happy song mixed with a message and vocals that were rich and in-depth. Plus, once again, R.E.M. introduced me to something I didn't know about: the greatness of Andy Kaufman.

This song ends with the chorus and the excitement of a great pop song blaring to the last note, and what comes next is the complete opposite, another melancholy song called "Nightswimming." Many fans say this one is their masterpiece. They often say this is the most beautiful song they have ever written. I am not one of them (even though I love this song) because I think the one that follows it may be R.E.M.'s most beautifully written tune. But "Nightswimming" is the band at their most naked and pure. It's a gorgeous piano-driven song about innocence and still having childlike wonder in the world. The dream-like picture that Stipe paints is one of people, maybe in their youth, maybe not, swimming, perhaps naked, at night under the stars and the

moon. It has a universal feel of nostalgia, and sometimes it's okay to just live in the moment. Stipe's voice was vulnerable and passionate, with raw emotion in every note. You felt every line meant something to him in his vocal that tethered between perfection and humility.

It is a brilliant song. And so is the final one on this masterpiece, "Find the River."

I may be biased, but I think R.E.M. does one hell of a job picking songs to start and finish an album. It is especially so with *Automatic for the People*. They start the album with the brilliantly dark and gloomy "Drive" and end with a beautiful ballad about hope and finding one's way through life. Stipe paints a picture of someone on an adventure or journey of self-discovery (me in a nutshell). He describes the ups and downs with a voice that is rich, full, and magnificent. He talked about finding that river of hope and good things are on their way.

That's the song that would give me the most goosebumps and hope for better days ahead, though I am still looking for my river.

The only problems I had with the record were the lack of printed lyrics and that I had to listen to it in secret most of the time. Most of the time, I had to guess what Stipe was saying until much later when I saw sheet music at a music store for some of their albums and then, of course, the birth of the internet. Now you can get lyrics to any song you'd ever want.

But in 1992, I had to play a line, rewind, and write down what I thought Stipe said most of the time. "Losing my Religion" was still the song that changed me and the one I loved the most, but *Automatic* slowly but surely took over as my favorite album, replacing *Out of time*. My love for this band would only multiply once I discovered how many albums and great songs they had ten years before I heard them.

Chapter 66

Discoverer

(A Long Chapter About my Love for R.E.M.)

On a miraculous Saturday night, a variety show that came on late after SNL called *Night Flight* that was a syndicated show, advertised two documentaries on two different bands they were going to show that night. One was a band I sort of knew called The Cars, and the other was my beloved R.E.M.

I stayed up later than usual since it was a church night, but I needed to discover more about this mysterious band that I loved. Staying up until 2 or 3 am that night was well worth it. I would learn everything about them up until the period that I was already familiar with.

They started from the very beginning. The group formed in the late '70s/early '80s when I was around one year old. They started their band in a town called Athens, GA., which I never heard of, but would visit numerous times in my adulthood.

In 1981, when I was three years old and getting ready to move to California, R.E.M. released their first song, "Radio Free Europe" on an independent label called Hib-Tone records. About 40 years later, I bought that rare record (a must-have for any R.E.M. collector/fanatic) for a hundred bucks off eBay.

In 1982, when I was leaving California to live back in Kensington (when my mom found Jesus and I was getting molested by a neighbor and a relative), R.E.M. signed a record deal with an independent label called I.R.S. I didn't understand the difference between a major label and an independent one. I still thought bands just put out albums, and these bands and singers I heard on the radio or MTV were the only bands around. I had no idea how record labels worked. Little did I know how influential R.E.M. was on the independent scene.

That year, they released a gem of an EP called *Chronic Town*. It was a college radio hit (I had no idea what the fuck "college radio" was) and gave them a lot of buzz as a band that wasn't like everyone else at the time. They weren't like every other post-punk, new wave band in the early '80s; they had a unique sound from the start. You could hear influences from the '60s and '70s, but they were getting so much recognition because they didn't try to sound like their influences. They were the best

of the '60s and '70s in one band, channeling the energy of punk and the melodic songwriting of '60s bands.

In 1983, when I stopped believing in Santa and put all my faith in Jesus, the same year my dad kept nodding off from heroin, R.E.M. released their critically acclaimed debut album *Murmur*. It started a love affair between R.E.M. and music critics almost everywhere. It even won the best album on *Rolling Stone* magazine's 1983 end-of-the-year music poll, beating The Police. R.E.M. stood out with their energetic presence, nonstop touring, Stipe's muffled and mumbling vocals, and their integrity to not compromise their sound.

They developed a cult following that only grew with every album and tour.

In 1984, I was six and had to start 2nd grade at a Catholic school without my friends from Baptist school. I felt like I was sinning every day I spent there. Meanwhile, America decided to re-elect a has-been actor showing early signs of dementia and pushing "voodoo" economics that hardly trickled down anywhere. My dad, of course, was still enjoying passing out from massive amounts of heroin. But it wasn't all bad. R.E.M. released their sophomore beauty called *Reckoning*.

The band avoided the "sophomore slump" by making a better album than their first. They still had cult status, but the fan base was growing, and this album had some classic fan favorites like "So. Central Rain" and "(Don't Go Back To) Rockville." Stipe's voice was a bit clearer, and you understood what he was saying more than in the previous album, which will be a common theme throughout their catalog. Stipe would develop his voice, album after album, until it was at its best. It was like he was getting over insecurity and shyness right in front of our eyes (or ears).

In 1985, seven-year-old me was back in the Baptist school because my parents couldn't afford the price of a catholic school. My sister came along for 6th grade and was pissed, and my dad was enjoying his favorite pastime of nodding out on H. R.E.M. released their darkest album yet, *Fables of the Reconstruction*, which focused on songs about the south through Stipe's environment. It was a hard time for R.E.M., especially Stipe, who was going through a deep depression. The album was recorded in England and was so stressful for them that it almost led to their breakup. Thank the invisible lord that didn't happen!

It was a bleak album compared to the previous two, but it was their most popular to date, with songs like "Driver 8," "Feeling Gravity's Pull," "Wendell Gee," and "Life and How to Live It," which contains a line about if Stipe was to write a book it would be called, *Life and How to Live It* (Wink, Wink).

In 1986, I was eight, wandering the streets of Kensington every other Sunday with my dad instead of going to church. My mom refused to go to her brother's wedding because they would be serving alcohol and playing rock and or roll music, and my dad was sleeping hard from all the hard drugs. My sister was mean as shit to me, and the Space Shuttle *Challenger* blew up, which was one of my first national memories. *The*

Transformers: The Movie was released (I wouldn't see it for another couple of years), and my cartoon hero, Optimus Prime, died. Dad was missing a lot around Christmas time, but R.E.M. released what will become my 2nd favorite album from them, *Life's Rich Pageant*.

It was R.E.M.'s first certified gold record (selling five hundred thousand copies in the U.S.) and the first one I bought after *Automatic for the People*. The album was R.E.M. at their most vivid and confident. "Fall on Me" is a beautiful environmental call-to-action song that was almost a crossover to the mainstream hit. The songs were upbeat and demanded your attention. Stipe must have overcome his depression that almost sealed R.E.M.'s fate. He was hopeful about change and used his voice to bring attention to causes he held dear to his heart through songs like "Begin the Begin," "These Days," and "I Believe." It was like R.E.M. was getting too good for cult status. Stipe even said that radio isn't ready for R.E.M., but the very next year, it would be.

In 1987, I was nine and more aware of my surroundings. I would watch movie previews and want to see all of them, even though I wasn't allowed. I made out with a girl who was the daughter of my dad's Kenzo friend. She had the flu, and she gave it to me. I thought God was punishing me for sinning. Uriah and I were going to a fake karate class every Saturday. My dad was passing out from all the dope. My mom was more Christian than ever. The neighborhood turned to total shit and had a drug dealers' corner where my dad got stabbed. He was missing a lot around Christmas time. I was terrified of Freddy Krueger after watching three *A Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. But R.E.M. released their first platinum album (a million copies sold in the U.S.), the phenomenal *Document*. It was their first top ten charting album in America.

It featured their first top ten song and one that I sort of knew, "The One I Love." There was another I was familiar with from the radio station commercial, "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)."

Once again, R.E.M. outdid themselves. The songs were louder and harder than the previous ones. There were a lot of political lyrics, some taking aim at the Reagan administration and their corrupt, anti-worker ways. Stipe was becoming a voice for a generation, at least a voice of reason in the days of excess and a "don't need nothing but a good time" mindset. There was a huge tour to support the album, and they were headlining bigger venues, getting up-and-coming bands with similar messages to tour with them, like the 10,000 Maniacs.

R.E.M. had finally made it on their terms and broke through to the mainstream. Like it or not, they weren't the cult indie band of their early years. They had become masters of their craft, and the world (and me) needed to hear and be exposed to them more. They would leave their independent label and sign to their only major label, Warner Bros. Records.

In 1988, I was 10, poor as shit, and going to summer camps where I had to fight other campers, like Rich the bully, who pushed me into a pile of horse shit. We left

Ontario Street Baptist to merge with Christ Independent Baptist, and we went to phase two of our bullshit Christian education with the ACE “work at your own pace system,” which led to a bunch of our demises. My dad was having sweet dreams all the time after injecting heroin anywhere he could. Uriah moved to Texas, and America decided to give the rich what they wanted with the election of George Bush Sr. The roaches and mice were running rampant like always in my house as R.E.M. released their major label debut, *Green*. This album focused on the environment. They had now become the band most likely to promote environmental causes.

The album featured their second top ten hit, the catchy and danceable single, “Stand,” which I knew from *Get a life*. “Orange Crush” was a take on military life and bringing home what happens over “there,” whether it be a chemical sickness or PTSD. It gave R.E.M. their first MTV video music award for best modern rock video. They were on a roll. The album went double platinum and spawned a shit load of new fans. But I would find out later, after I bought the album that year, that the two best songs were not singles or well known outside of the R.E.M. fanbase, “You Are the Everything” and “World Leader Pretend.”

I grew to love these songs as much as I loved “Losing My Religion.”

In 1989, I was 11, my dad was constantly missing and doing what he could to get his fix. I was becoming obsessed with Batman because I was slowly realizing how unattractive I was. Jesus wasn’t answering my prayers, and R.E.M. went on a nearly yearlong world tour that would be so enduring that they wouldn’t tour again until 1995. They would also not release another album until 1991. It was a break in R.E.M.’s pattern of releasing a new album every year. They were now in their 30s and were taking a much-deserved break. And it would pay off.

In 1991 I had anger and depression problems, man-boobs, and a father who was in and out of the house with no job or money. Rats and mice and thousands of roaches were everywhere, and Spanish kids picked on me for being an easy target. I switched to a worse schooling system with asshole kids who tormented me daily and girls who thought I looked like Screech from *Saved by the Bell*. My sister was blackmailing me, we had no hot water, and I was losing faith.

Meanwhile, R.E.M. released their breakthrough to a worldwide audience, *Out of time*. This is where our paths cross. R.E.M. released their biggest hit, “Losing my Religion” and I happened to be at a club house in a condo in the middle of fucking nowhere Pennsylvania and got exposed to the brilliance that is R.E.M. Some were upset that they left I.R.S. for a major label, but if they didn’t, I don’t think they would have had the same exposure. Perhaps LMR wouldn’t have been as popular and wouldn’t have made it to that jukebox in Dubois, PA, in 1991 for me to hear it

So, now I know their history, and I have the names of their albums. I wrote them down while I watched the documentary. I would start in the fall of 1992 by collecting R.E.M.’s albums on tape and finish around Christmas of 1993. I was making some

money, but it wasn't enough to buy their entire catalog, and finding the albums was half the challenge. Not all their tapes were in stores, so I would buy them as they were available.

This was my favorite time of my youth, and I will never have the same joy and interest in anything as I did discovering R.E.M.'s back catalog. I was excited to get all their albums and hear everything they wrote. I would soon see R.E.M. was a collective of different sounds and emotions. Everything from fun and lighthearted songs like "Stand," "Shiny Happy People," "We Walk," and "Get Up," to political songs like "Ignoreland," "Disturbance in the Heron House," and "Begin the Begin." They also balanced thought-provoking tracks like "Driver 8," "Losing My Religion," "Feeling Gravity's Pull," "Fall on Me," "World Leader Pretend," and "You Are the Everything" with beautiful tunes like everything on *Automatic* and most of *Out of Time*. I knew almost instantly R.E.M. was different and, without a doubt, my favorite band.

Chapter 67

The Beauty of the Light of Music

(Another Chapter About my Love for R.E.M.)

The first two I bought after *Automatic for the People* were *Green* and *Life's Rich Pageant*. I got them from a Sam Goody store at a local mall. They had other R.E.M. tapes there, but I went with these two because I already knew "Stand" from *Green* and "Fall on Me" from the *Pageant* album.

Right away, *Life's Rich Pageant* grabbed me with songs like "Begin the Begin," "These Days," and my favorite, "I Believe." But it was *Green* that had what will be two of my favorite R.E.M. songs ever recorded, "You Are the Everything" and "World Leader Pretend" (which was the first song to have its lyrics printed in a R.E.M. album because they were that good). All those songs had lyrics that brought hope and made me feel better about myself and my situation. They did what good pieces of music do - they kept me going.

After those two, I discovered the band's debut EP, *Chronic Town*, and debut LP, *Murmur*. *Chronic Town* only had five songs (its only flaw). I wish it were longer. *Murmur* was the right length and had "Pilgrimage" on it, which became a song I will cherish throughout my life.

After that, I picked up my favorite from their indie-label days, *Document*. It was full of such energetic songs and melodies that it was clear how the band had crafted their sound to near perfection over the years. "Disturbance in the Heron House," "Welcome to the Occupation," "Fireplace," and "Exhuming McCarthy" all struck a chord with me and taught me about things I didn't know much about, like the Iran-Contra scandal and the importance of activism for what one believes in. Then there are the hits: "The One I Love" and the apocalyptic anthem, "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)." To figure out the lyrics to the latter, I had to rewind the tape for every line and write down what I thought Stipe said until I had it memorized. Because of this effort, I won a contest for front-row tickets to see the band many years later.

Fables of the Reconstruction came next, which I bought at a Kmart store in Port Richmond. It was the hardest for me to get into, but when I finally did, it became so special that I will quote lines from it in this book. "Maps and Legends," "Life and How

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to Live It,” “Driver 8,” and “Feeling Gravity’s Pull” all stand the test of time in my heart and soul. It was when Stipe started to write lyrics for the listener to ponder. I felt this one was their *On the Road* (Jack Kerouac) type album. It had a sense of travel and everything the band saw in America (especially in the South).

I rounded up the rest by the end of the year. I got the I.R.S. era greatest hits album and the B-side/covers album. Then I snagged their second album, *Reckoning*, for Christmas in 1993. *Reckoning* also had some great stuff, of course. “Harborcoat,” “Letter Never Sent,” “Camera,” and the alt-country song, “Don’t Go Back to Rockville.” I now had all their albums and could honestly declare myself a huge R.E.M. fan. Most days, all I wanted to do was listen to them, so that’s what I did. The only thing that could have made it better when falling in love with the band was if they would tour soon. But I was a couple of years away from that happening.

Chapter 68

The Wise Built His House Upon the Rock

My foundation in music (and life) was set. I would slowly but surely fall in love with every R.E.M. record. All other artists and bands would be second fiddle to them.

I now was a bona fide R.E.M. fanatic, with a love for the band that will never be matched. I listened to other bands and artists, but most of the time, I had my ears glued to one of the many R.E.M. albums I now called my own.

When I say I loved and love R.E.M., I mean it. There is a song for every emotional experience, so I had that to give me comfort or support. I loved the song structures, their energy, integrity, and the jingle rock guitar chords Peter Buck used, and I love how each member wrote songs for the band. Bill Berry wasn't just a good drummer but a songwriter who wrote the music to some of my favorite R.E.M. songs like "Man on the Moon."

I love that Mike Mills uses the bass as another instrument meant to be heard rather than fill out a song, and his vocals were perfect for harmonizing with Stipe. And oh, how I loved, love, and will always love the distinctive voice and mysterious, poetic lyrics of Michael Stipe.

Throughout the years, R.E.M. will be my rock or constant when I need them the most. In my early teenage years, R.E.M. was the most important thing I had going for me. It might sound pathetic or trivial, but it's the truth. They weren't just my favorite band; they were my favorite anything. My love for them was the only thing that seemed right and good in my life. I never felt guilty for listening to R.E.M. when it came to the born-againers and their teachings about rock music. I accepted every song and album, absorbed them, and made them my own without prejudice or cynicism.

All I wanted was to listen and know more about R.E.M., which I did. I bought books that I read from cover to cover about the band, I bought t-shirts that I would wear under my school uniform and church clothes, I bought magazines featuring the band, and I even bought a poster with the guys on a waterfront somewhere in a place I never heard of called Copenhagen. I hung it up in my room and told my mom that it

was a movie coming out starring Luke Perry and pointed to Stipe. She either bought it or just pretended to.

Around this time, I also watched special documentaries about R.E.M. and learned as much as I could about them. I witnessed their 1st MTV Unplugged appearance (the second one will be about ten years later). Boy, that was the best performance I ever saw. The band sounded incredible in an acoustic setting. Stipe was on his game and sang passionately through songs from their entire catalog. The highlights were “Fall on Me” where Michael rolls his eyes back to show only white at one point, with pure emotion and sincerity. “Half World Away” was beautiful, and their acoustic rendition of “It’s the End of the World” was impressive and fun to watch.

But like always in my life, “Losing My Religion” stood out for me in the set. Stipe says before the song, “This is about you,” and points to the crowd, then showcases a performance of raw emotion and genuine concern for the subject matter. His line before the song confirmed what I thought the song was about - Stipe trying to keep up with the listener or the person he knew needed encouragement to try. I listened to all R.E.M. on a cycle, but it was always *Out of Time* and *Automatic for the People* that I would always come back to the most during those years.

I saw the growth in the band and Stipe’s writing and singing. They went from a college rock band with a singer who mumbles to a band that could capture any mood they wanted with any instrument and a singer who was clear as day and had a voice that was full and comforting. It was no secret that I idolized Stipe. He wasn’t just my favorite singer or pop star, he was my hero, my role model, and in some sad, pathetic way, an escape.

He wasn’t just a positive influence on me but also a teacher. I learned phrases and words I had never heard before. I found out who people like Andy Kaufman, Lenny Bruce, Miles Standish, Joseph McCarthy, Maria Callas, and Leonard Bernstein were. I discovered more about politics and what was at stake through the years if a specific party (republicans) had power. I cared more about the environment and man’s role in its destruction. I questioned things around me more and felt less alone. I even tried to be a vegetarian. I didn’t know for sure if Stipe was vegetarian until later in 1993. I just assumed it was the right thing to do, and that’s what Stipe taught me the most. I wanted to do the right thing (or the Stipe thing), but my parents wouldn’t let me. I eventually became vegetarian in 1994 and never looked back.

I wanted to stand up to hatred and be an activist for things like racism, which led me to change my perspective drilled into me by the toxic masculinity environment around me. The Christian faith told me that homosexuality is wrong and worth being damned in this life and the next. Hatred and prejudice were instilled in me toward gay people (mostly gay men because toxic masculinity is full of hypocrites) since day one. Men having female behaviors like sitting with their legs crossed, talking with their

wrist bent (not sure how those became women's only gestures), and being emotional and sensitive got looked at as weaknesses.

I realized later it wasn't just a toxic hatred towards men who acted like what they presumed women should act like, but also a looking down on women in general. These people thought it was weak for a man to act like a woman, so they believed women were weak. I admit I was right there with these haters thinking gay men were gross and should be made fun of and persecuted in our god-loving society.

My views changed when I opened my mind and heart to Michael Stipe and R.E.M.'s message and examples. I already said I heard Stipe might be gay or bisexual earlier, and I wouldn't know for sure until next year, but I started to think if he is gay or bi, what is wrong with that? He is my hero, and if he is presumed to be gay because he is an emotional man or sits with his legs crossed from time to time, so be it! This way of thinking would eventually lead me to the realization that if Stipe is gay or bi, so what? He is my favorite person, and if he is gay, I guess gay people are cool in my book. I also would conclude that it was Stipe's business to who he is attracted, and I love him for who he is altogether.

Later, after I finally get the picture of it all, I will champion gay rights causes as much as possible. I will understand this is a civil rights issue and the stigma that homosexuals still deal with is Un-American and unjust. I also never saw Stipe as a straight or gay man; he was Michael Stipe, super smart and charismatic with wit, and seemed to have a beautiful soul. I admired him so much that I would mimic him without even knowing. I started to sit with my legs crossed all the time, not caring if it looked effeminate.

I would talk in phrases that I learned from R.E.M. songs. I would sit with my arms crossed and dangling from my sides as Michael did in the LMR video. I also would try to dress and look like my hero. At this time, he had short hair that he either pushed back like James Dean, let it sit there looking messy, or just put a hat on. I loved that because I hated my hair and never knew what to do with it, so wearing a hat and having it short and messy will be a lifelong look for me.

Stipe was in a preppy Gap boy fashion period around this time, so it was an easy transition for me to mimic his wardrobe with Gap hats and button-down shirts that looked like I was an adult all the time (but my clothing was from thrift stores and not the Gap). I even tried to do his facial expressions without knowing I was doing it.

It was total admiration for this man from a teenage boy with nothing in his life to look forward to besides music. When Stipe shaved his head in 1994 and started dressing in T-shirts with a star in the center and Jeff or newsie hats, I followed suit. When he wore eyeliner and nail polish, so did I.

I would dance and act out his video and live concert performances in the mirror. I was delightfully good at the "Losing my Religion" dance Stipe did in the video. I would do it for people at parties in those days.

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I even had the greatest compliment said to me numerous times by numerous people. They'd say, "You sort of look like Michael Stipe." It put me on cloud 9 for a few moments until my self-esteem returned to its usual lowest position.

Michael Stipe had a huge influence on me and still does (though I haven't shaved my head in quite some time). His influence and my desire to be as good and genuine as him got me through many dark moments. For the most part, I would make the right decisions (most of the time?) and think logically due to Stipe.

I wish it were always that way, but there were times when my rage and pain would take over, and it would be harder to think clearly and do the right things. But most of the time, Stipe and R.E.M. righted me along.

Chapter 69

Everybody Hurts Sometimes

(More Like All the Time)

It may be a good time to talk about my anger problems. I was an overly emotional kid with serious issues to be mad and depressed over. I was depressed and angry almost every day, and if something happened that I didn't like or want to happen, it would tip me overboard, and I would be overwhelmed with anger or sadness.

I had explosive, angry meltdowns where I would break whatever was around me, slam doors until they broke, or punch walls until the rage flew out of me. Later in life, I would contain the anger, but it would flare up sometimes, usually while intoxicated. Often it was in the form of hurting myself, by banging my head against brick walls, or Eddie's kneecap because it was the hardest thing I could find, or using whatever hard object was in my hand like a coffee mug or a beer bottle and bang it over my head until I saw stars. This impulsive urge to hurt myself will follow me well into my adulthood, embarrassing enough, my self-abuse lingered on.

Chapter 70

Snitches Get Stiches

I had plenty to be angry about, like on Columbus Day 1992 when I was waiting for the bus at Frankford and Allegheny Ave., at the Port Richmond and Kensington border, with a bunch of comic books I purchased from a comic store. I was very excited to go home and read these comics that I was sure would be worth a pretty penny one day (they won't be). Since having my paper job, I collected my favorite comics regularly, including my favorite superhero, Batman.

It was a bit cold out, so I had on the only jacket I owned. It was a black nylon jacket my mom bought for ten bucks and sowed a Los Angeles Kings patch on the back of it. I didn't really care about hockey at that time, but I think I chose the Kings logo because it looked best with the black nylon.

I was not proud of this jacket. My friends all had the popular, more expensive Starter jackets that were officially licensed by whatever sports team it was promoting. Mine was the poor man's version. The Kings patch was too small, and the jacket lacked the trademark patches to prove it was official. But I was too poor to get the real one (even with my paper job), so I wore this like a white trash dope.

I was minding my business when two Hispanic teenagers walked over to where I was waiting for the bus. They seemed to go out of their way to walk to my location. The one was a little taller than me but slim, and the other was a little stocky but shorter than my 5'5 height. It wasn't my first rodeo, so I was on guard, especially when the two gents started speaking Spanish to each other. This was usually the sign that they were talking about you or saying something they didn't want you to hear.

Next thing you know, they get in my face telling me to give them my jacket. I looked at them and said laughingly, "You don't want this jacket. I don't even want this jacket." The taller kid pulled out a knife and pointed it at me, telling me to take off the jacket. I, for some goddamn reason, decided that my pride was more important than my safety, and even though I hated this jacket, I wasn't going to let anyone take it from me. I was also scared that these assholes would take my bag of comics too.

I decided to fight back. I tried to grab the wrist of the kid with the knife but accidentally grasped the weapon by the blade. I used my other arm to grip the kid up and used my strength to push him away. The other one came up, and I punched him in the stomach. The jerk with the knife came back at me and stabbed me in the shoulder

blade, right under my neck. He only hit bone, so it wasn't that deep. I somehow karate kicked the kid in the face, making his hat fall off. He ran and got it, and they both took off.

I fought off a couple of assholes from taking my comics and piece of shit jacket with just a superficial cut on my hand from holding the blade and a small circle-sized wound on my shoulder blade that wasn't bad but got infected right after the encounter.

The funniest part was when a man in his 40s came out of the doctor's office at the same intersection and said, "Man, I saw the whole thing from the doctor's office. That was crazy how you fought back!" I thought, "Thanks for helping me then," but he did tell me he called the cops. So, there was that.

When the cops showed up about 15 minutes later, I told them what happened, and they asked if I was okay and all. I said I was and didn't take the offer to go find the kids to identify them since my bus was coming and I had to work soon (because selling papers is more important than keeping knives out of criminals' hands and seeing a doctor for the wounds that were just inflicted on me).

I told my parents what happened, and my father told me he was proud of me for sticking up for myself, but my mom was upset because I could have gotten seriously hurt.

I went to work a little later and told my friends about everything. The cut on my shoulder blade hurt while I was working, but I didn't do anything about it. I don't even think I put a band-aid on it until the next day. I was worried about getting sick from the germs on the knife and getting HIV from it because I didn't know where it had been before it was in me. But the only thing that came out of it was an infection that eventually cleared up and a cool story of me using the karate I learned a few years before.

Chapter 71

Learning to Fly

Around this time, I began realizing how fucked up my religious education really was. As I met and had friendships with other “worldly” kids, I saw how different and embarrassing my life was. The school shrunk to about 30 people for the entire K-12th grade. It was so low-budget and lacked a conventional learning structure. I was more miserable than ever and didn’t mind showing it. I would walk out of class if things made me angry, and things usually did. I was getting bolder with the class bullies I grew up with too.

Johnny and Rich couldn’t get under my skin now that I had actual friends who were non-Christians and cool. Rich was even warming up to me and asked me to buy him a porno from an Asian pawn and junk shop that didn’t care how old you were. I went there to buy used video games, and since he knew this, he gave me ten bucks or so to get the XXX tape. I brought it into school the next day for him. Little did the Xians know I had sexual healing in tape form, with my Bible in my bookbag that day.

I was so fed up with how small and almost home-school like our school was that I wanted out.

I wanted to have a normal life with big classes and be able to listen to music and go to the movies without sneaking around and feeling guilty. And I wanted to meet and date regular girls and do fun things with them.

No matter how pathetic and a loser I felt in my school situation, it was never more apparent than on Wednesdays when we got out at 1 p.m. so we could get ready for church that night. On these days, when we had to catch the first of three buses to get home, the neighboring all-girls Catholic school, St. Hubert’s, would also get out at that time. The first bus, the 56, picked us up outside our tiny, sad excuse for a school. They would see us coming out of this building that was obviously a store before it was a school, and the judgment had already begun.

It was painfully apparent how unlike we were with the way we dressed. The Hubert’s girls had brown and yellow uniforms with their school symbol or initial sown in, and the girls’ uniforms at our school were a basic navy-blue cloth material with no emblem. Our attire screamed, “I am poor!” and showed we were different from the Catholic kids these Hubert’s girls had known. So, naturally, they made fun of us every week.

There were about 15 of them vs. the likes of Joshua, Rich, Uriah, his sister Mary, and me. They made fun of our clothes, small school, and looks. They were such assholes that I would get anxious to catch the bus on Wednesdays. It gave me almost as much anxiety as the last bus I took home, the 60, which was the road through hell. That's when I was terrified of every kid in a pair or a group.

The Hubert's girls made me hate their brown and yellow uniforms so much that it took me years not to feel dislike when I saw the colors together. They did push me a little further to wanting to be normal, though. At first, I thought those types of people, since they had it better than me, were better than me and were right about their opinions of me. I thought being Catholic and being able to talk freely about "worldly" things, I wanted to be accepted by these "worldly" girls, and it caused some strife knowing that I didn't. Later in life, I will see I would not want to be their type of normal. They were assholes, and I would soon realize that I wouldn't fit in with the likes of them or the Xians.

Chapter 72

Pop, Pop, Pop Music

Because of all this anger and reasons to feel sad, I would drown my sorrows in music. I was more melancholy than angry, so my music taste tended to be more on the lighter, sensitive side. I was totally engrossed in pop music. Not just my beloved R.E.M., but I would get lost in albums by people I would love for years to come. I was buying and listening to everything from Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* to Nirvana's *Nevermind*.

I had albums from Philly's own Boyz II Men, Guns N' Roses, and Pearl Jam's masterpiece *Ten*. I liked the song by Boy George from *The Crying Game* soundtrack, so I bought that, along with stuff by Cypress Hill, Whitney Houston, Depeche Mode, and Duran Duran's 1993 self-titled album. It was a melting pot of good, solid music that I was engrossed in. What a time to discover music.

Chapter 73

My Heart is Sick of Being in Chains

I liked a lot of pop singers at the time. It wasn't like I fell for music on the deeper spectrum overnight. This shift started with the most influential artist and album for me (besides R.E.M.) by Tori Amos.

I knew the song "Crucify" from my days in Wildwood the previous summer, but it was not until I had some pocket money and the know-how to find her debut album, *Little Earthquakes*, in the fall of 1992 that I would hear more of her wonderful music. Over the next few months, I had Tori Amos on regular rotation.

The album was perfect from start ("Crucify") to finish ("Little Earthquakes"). I got lost in her melodies and beautiful vocals with her effort making breathing and her "calm before the storm" whisper-like singing, which was almost sensual but passionately displayed. She is an amazing pianist and talented like no other songwriter.

Her lyrics were not for the faint of heart or those who just wanted to listen to the Amy Grants of the world. She was talking about deep, intense subjects. She was raised, as I was, in the fundamental Christian faith and, like me, decided to leave it behind and search for other realms of possibilities. I listened to a lot of her songs in this mindset. Many on this album I felt were about the church, but as her career and my love for her grew, it would become obvious her thoughts on this faith that favored men most of the time. She wrote about questioning not only her faith but her independence and her place as a strong woman in a world that wasn't ready for women to be equal.

I took her lyrics as proverbs or bible verses in some way. I would find my own meaning from the stream-of-consciousness style she had going for her. I did the same with Stipe's lyrics, but with Tori, it was closer to home when it came to the born-againers and the struggles I had with my faith since age four.

"Crucify" sealed it for me, but the album was full of haunting and beautiful songs about trauma, being controlled, religion, and recovery. Songs like "Girl," "Silent All These Years," "Precious Things," and "Winter" were enough to get me through the rough times and make me feel like I wasn't sitting in a partially condemned house with nothing worth living for. She made me feel like I wasn't alone in my doubts about my faith and that I might be a part of something that didn't have anything to do with my life on Wishart Street.

Then there was “Me and a Gun.” It is an extremely powerful acapella song about the most traumatic experience a woman could have, rape. It will become a staple of her music, art, and activism for many years. I wouldn’t know for some time what the song was about, but when I did, I felt terrible that any woman would have to go through such a horrible crime as this. I was already a momma’s boy and getting raised with my sister had a huge influence on my development, so I was already headed towards the feminist way of thinking.

Discovering Tori was the time I embraced it as much as I could.

Tori’s lyrics are intense and thought-provoking. She takes you through this dark and traumatic night, showing you exactly what she was thinking and feeling.

Little Earthquakes finishes with its haunting, epic title track, an eerie tune filled with chanting and deep male backing vocals. I admit this one scared my little born-again mind a bit. But its church-like chanting and repeating lines made it more appealing. I was half scared, half intrigued by it.

Here she would talk about how familiar those traumatic and disappointing events come around and shake us to our core. She sang the lines with a bottomless pit in the soul, kind of yearning for redemption. It was like a ritual finishing the album with this song. Which was the perfect way to end an album about being ripped to pieces by whatever caused it.

Tori Amos was edgy without trying to be. She was deep but not in a pretentious way. She was beautiful inside and out, and it showed in every song. Listening to her was like cleansing my soul. It was a purification and a sort of exorcism of my demons. I got hooked, and there would be plenty more killing of bad feelings via Tori Amos for years to come.

Chapter 74

I Will Always Love You

(Well, at Least for a Month or So)

In the winter of 1993, I would have my first taste of a real and secular relationship. One of the kids I worked with had a girl in his class that liked him. He didn't feel the same way, so he gave me her number since I was single and never had a girlfriend (besides church girls I couldn't even hold hands with).

Christine and I went on my first and only blind date on 2/12/1993. It was my first chance to have a normal date like I had seen on TV and in the movies.

I met her at the Septa bus terminal in Frankford. We weren't old enough to drive, and since neither of our families had cars, a bus was our means of transportation. We took a 45-minute bus to the Franklin Mills Mall and sat pretty much in silence.

I think we ate somewhere, maybe at a Chinese restaurant, and then we went to see the Christian Slater movie *Untamed Heart*. On our way back to the bus stop, I bought her a rose from some store in the mall. Then we stopped, and I had my first real kiss.

We then started to be a couple, which lasted about 2-3 weeks until she dumped me for reasons unknown. I think it was because I was a bad kisser, and she found someone better looking than me or whatever. But in the weeks of the courtship, I enjoyed myself. She also lived in Kensington, but in a better part closer to Juniata and Frankford, rather than my part near North Philly and all the degenerates.

I would hang out with her and her friends Rose, Nicole, and Sandy and pretend to be normal for a while. When she dumped me, it hurt, of course, but mainly because I set myself up and let my guard down, thinking this was the beginning of a normal relationship, like the ones I saw on *Beverly Hills, 90210*, or *The Karate Kid*.

It made me keep my guard up for a bit, and I listened to "Everybody Hurts" a lot. I bring this up because it will not be the last I see and hear from Christine and her crew. She will become one of my dear friends in Kensington.

Chapter 75

C.R.E.A.M.

Meanwhile, I finally got tired of the homemade L.A. Kings jacket and bought a new one. It was on clearance for dirt cheap, and I had to buy it. I was tired of being cold with my thin as shit Kings jacket. The new one was thicker, warmer, and was an official licensed NHL jacket. The only problem was it was a San Jose Sharks jacket, and I didn't know shit about the Sharks. But I wanted to look less poor, so I got it, and it was my jacket for the rest of the winter. I bring this up because Eddie Maurer still makes fun of me for wearing it to this day. When I finally stopped trying to fit in with the sports folk, I gave the jacket to my dad, who wore it for 10 years or so. Not bad for twenty bucks.

I was collecting anything I could that had something to do with R.E.M. I bought a VHS tape of their videos from *Out of time* without owning a VCR. I would go to the library and take out issues of *Rolling Stone* magazine that mentioned or had R.E.M. on the cover. I would write out the lyrics to their songs as best I could from hearing Michael mumble through them. This went on for a bit, and then one day I got careless, and left my school bag open at school with R.E.M. magazines poking out. The "teacher" who was my buddy Josh's mom, pulled them out, along with my notebook of R.E.M. lyrics handwritten by me. I tried to say it was poems I wrote, but they didn't fall for it.

There was a big discussion at the morning sermon about the evils of rock music. And when he had our smaller devotions class, which consisted of the 8-10 boys in the school with Pastor Higgins in his office, he went off about how evil rock music is. Rich asked about rap music and how it's not demonic, and Higgins said it doesn't glorify the lord with the beat, lyrics, and worldly subject matter. I was 15 and knew this conversation was pointless. The jig was up for me and my love for the devil's music, but I did not care anymore. I knew these people couldn't do anything to me since I was already at rock bottom.

They gave me a ridiculous and useless education that left me with zero options. They had taken any chance of a typical adolescent experience and replaced it with fear-mongering and anxiety about the outside world. All I wanted was to listen to the one thing I enjoyed, R.E.M.'s music, and fuck them for trying to take it away. Do your

Chaz Holesworth

worst, Higgins. It wasn't him I should have been afraid of, but other Christians that did the most harm to me.

Chapter 76

Coming Out of the Rock n' Roll Closet

My mother and I were at odds with my new, outside-of-the-church friends. I would go out all the time and never tell her what I was doing. Since they were worldly kids, she was worried.

It all boiled over when I came home late from work after Mike Jericho took us out for food to reward us for a good night of subscription sales. It was probably around 10 pm since the 10 o'clock news was on, and my mom gave me the cop treatment. She was fuming. She kept telling me how sinful I was and that I can't stay out at all hours of the night.

I was ignoring her mostly and thinking about how the only thing I did was work and blow off steam with my new friend. Then the news showed their pop culture segment about Whitney Houston getting hitched to Bobby Brown. It led to my mom saying, in the middle of yelling at me for being out late and worldly, "I know you're listening to that rock music!"

Usually, I would have denied it like the times before, but I had enough with her as much as I did with the church. I turned to her and said, "Yeah, I do, and I love it. I love it so much I want to sing and be in a band when I grow up!" It was true, but this was the first time I admitted it out loud. She looked at me, shocked as if she had no son. It is ludicrous to think me coming out as a rock music fan is as shocking as someone saying they're an addict or a criminal, but this was the life given to me.

I think my mom knew I was serious about my love for music. She realized it was my outlet in life, and she wasn't going to pray it away. It was a breakthrough for me. She didn't tell me to throw my tapes out or that I couldn't listen to rock music.

I could now listen to my tapes without earphones, or the sound turned down low when my mom was home. I displayed my ever-growing collection of cassette tapes in my room. I had a shrine to R.E.M. set up on an old wooden chair in my room.

My mom would eventually buy me tapes for my birthday and Christmas in the years to come. She came a long way from not going to her brother's wedding due to secular music getting played and alcohol being served. My sister always complained about this, saying how unfair it was that she couldn't do half the things I did, like listening to music in the open, but I wasn't going to stop listening to it, and mom knew

this. It wasn't just listening to NKOTB or Michael Bolton or whatever was the trendy pop thing going on when she was "rebellious." For me, these songs were my life.

Listening to my favorite songs was all I wanted to do. I wasn't going to stop no matter who said I couldn't like them. It wasn't just teenage angst or rebellion either. I got fed up with their bullshit rules, with no benefits to come from them. I knew I was a loser, and it was their fault. So, fuck off, and let me listen to R.E.M.

Chapter 77

I'm at WDRE in Philadelphia

(WKRP Reference Here)

Around this time, my favorite radio station, Eagle 106, changed formats and became a jazz station. I needed to find a new station for my music-loving needs. I found it one day, by accident, when I heard three R.E.M. songs in a row on a station called 103.9 WDRE. Two of the songs played weren't even singles from R.E.M.

It was the first time I knew such a thing as alt or modern rock radio existed. WDRE played all different bands from the '80s to the '90s, and they'd play deep tracks.

They played bands I knew, like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and sometimes Tori Amos. I also discovered bands I would grow to love, such as Nine Inch Nails, Belly, Smashing Pumpkins, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Concrete Blonde, 10,000 Maniacs, and so many others.

WDRE also played "Creep," the first song I heard from a band that eventually became so important to me that I went to their home country to see them play.

Many fans consider the song and its album *Pablo Honey* to be Radiohead with training wheels.

"Creep" was the perfect song about alienation and having the lowest self-esteem possible. It was a beautiful anthem for those who felt less than those who seemed to have everything going for them. It became a summer theme song that year for me, and the video reminded me of early R.E.M. I'm not sure why I thought this, but I did. It wasn't so much the sound of the song but a feeling I got from the video. Little did I know how important Radiohead would become, not just to me but to those who love interesting and great music.

But I am getting way ahead of myself. Let's get back to my god-awful life of being a 15-year-old kid with man boobs in a poor-as-shit neighborhood, worshipping God 24/7.

Chapter 78

I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

The rest of the first months of '93 consisted of me working, hanging out with my fellow Kenzo friends from work, my Christian childhood friends like Uriah, and getting beer whenever we could on the weekend.

My friends and I would go to the Kensington roller rink, which was the shittiest rink you'd ever see. We would meet neighborhood girls and make out with them, get the homeless people to buy us beer, and play "knock knock zoom zoom," where you knock on someone's door and run before they answer. We did typical teenage, semi-harmless things. Also, Uriah and my Christian friends were having fun going to malls, arcades, and the movies. And the whole time, *Automatic for the People* was my soundtrack. I was having a ball whenever I wasn't at home, school, or church, which was about 20% of the time.

At home, I would listen to music and/or cry a lot. At school, I would be bored and miserable. A couple of times, I would walk out of the building, angry, and go hang out somewhere alone, listening to my radio as I went.

One of those times, when one of the teachers gave me a hard time about not answering the Lifepac questions right, my frustrations took over and I just walked out the door and put my portable radio on. I found a song I listened closely to what would become one of my favorites from one of my favorite bands, U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." It was a great track to listen to while I walked and thought about my 15 years on this earth. The answers to what I wanted or was looking for were nowhere around me. Especially not at my make-believe school and with my make-believe religion. I was indeed in search of what I was looking for.

My father was uncomfortable with us going to Pastor Higgins' church, mainly because of the time Higgins showed up at our house to tell my dad we were leaving him again. He also thought Higgins was a no-good opportunist that shouldn't be trusted. So, my mom, sister, and I went back to worshipping the lord at Christ Independent Baptist.

Chapter 79

Until the Colors Bleed into One

Since we left Christ Independent, things really changed. It was mostly people from our old church in Kensington, Ontario Street Baptist, when they merged with CIBC at the same time Higgins took us to Maranatha Baptist. There was a whole lot of moving around for the born-againers in the early '90s.

I didn't know most of the people at the CIBC now. Most of my friends growing up in the church were at Maranatha or other Baptist churches. The biggest change was that this was the first time the churches we belonged to weren't mainly white. We were the minority now since Ontario Street and CIBC were mostly bringing in people from the inner cities of Philly, which tended to be where minority people lived.

The worst parts of Kensington and Frankford got abandoned by the white folks for the posher areas in Northeast Philly. My father loved to pull this fact out. He said Higgins took all the white people from CIBC who had jobs and brought them to his church in the Northeast since it was a safer neighborhood.

I was upset that I was leaving friends like Uriah and Josh behind, but I wasn't too worried since I would still see them. Plus, I had friends outside of the church to socialize with, and I liked people and could get along with anyone if they weren't dicks.

One good thing about being raised as a born-again Christian, at least in the inner cities of Philly, is they teach acceptance of everyone regardless of race or creed. For the most part, I was taught we're all God's children, and race doesn't matter in the eye of the lord. Racism was looked down upon as much as lying and stealing.

They taught bigotry toward sexual orientation but being racist had no place in our faith. I followed this logic, wasn't racist, and wanted everyone to feel welcome to talk to me. I hated the idea of anyone hating someone for skin color or facial features. I was the opposite of my great grandfather, the KKK member, and even other whites in the neighborhood who thought the enemy were minorities, even though they were just as poor.

There is an underlining dislike for someone who wasn't white throughout the white world. White adults and kids were full of prejudice taught by their peers and parents. Even poor whites in Kensington had to look down on someone to feel better about their situation. People of color were scapegoats or boogie men. While the rest of

society did the same thing to these poor white people, they thought they were better in their filth and poverty because of their pigment.

White privilege is a real thing. A perfect example is when poor white people think they are better than successful people of color.

Racism gets taught, and there were plenty of Caucasians looking to be a teacher on the subject. Racial slurs and stereotypes were prominent in my upbringing. These people acted like it was a secret society, and we all knew whites were better than Spanish and black people. They said things with certainty even if they never experienced it and would look at you for confirmation of these opinions. If you disagreed with them, they would say you're not old enough, and you'll see what they're talking about eventually.

I am not saying white people are the only racists and should carry all the blame, just most of it. People told me I have every reason to be racist and hate them for everything they did to me. I was smart enough to know that the kids picking on me and robbing me were assholes and prejudging me because of my skin or their peer influences. They were racist by attacking me or thinking I was an easy target for being alone and white, and if I hated them for it, so be it, but I can't just say it happened because of their race.

If I hated their race based on these small-minded assholes, then I am just as bad as them, and I wouldn't have learned anything. I knew all Spanish people weren't terrible due to my friendships with decent people like Renee. I knew not all black people were lazy and criminals because I knew plenty in the church who would do anything for you regardless of skin color. Plus, my dad went to jail and didn't work and was trying to get on social security disability, and he was white as can be.

I knew that it wasn't about color but financial class. The ironic part was these Spanish and sometimes black kids who jumped, robbed, or chased me for my belongings, most likely had more money or possessions than I did. But the prejudice is I am a white kid, so I must have money, or I have it better than those who were minorities. It was probably the case most of the time, but not when it came to Charlie Holesworth.

Nobody was learning anything. Everyone should have stopped blaming and judging the guy next to them who was in the same poverty boat and blamed the big wigs who wanted you to stay in poverty and lick their boots. This anger and hatred on both sides didn't align with my perspective. I was more in line with love and accepting everyone according to the life of Jesus and how much wisdom in life I was getting from Michael Stipe, whose stance on bigotry and racism reminded me of Jesus.

At church, I had no problems befriending new members, no matter their color. I struck a chord with a black kid named Joe from North Philly. He was an all-around good, optimistic kid. I would go to his house after church on Sundays in the afternoon,

have dinner with his family, and hang out with his friends until we went back to church for the night service.

His family was much like mine, in poverty. I would see roaches all over his house, and his toilet got so backed up that you would have to dump buckets of water into it to wash the waste down, the same as my family's toilet. We were of different races but had the same embarrassing home problems. A couple of times, he came to my house, and I was super embarrassed by the crumbling walls in my room. I told him it was in the process of getting fixed. Joe could see through my excuses like the cracks in the drywall.

We went to the movies and arcades. I even dated his cousin for a bit and got shit for it from some of the white people in my life. They said I was a "wigger" and made fun of me for kissing a black girl with dirty nappy hair. Some white people are dicks, not all of them (Stipe) but some. I just ignored their comments, or I'd quote Depeche Mode's "People Are People" to them.

Joe and I also liked to drink beers on Sundays. We'd get some Old English or St. Ides 40-ounce malt liquor and get blitzed between church. One time we were at a pool hall in deep North Philly, and I was pretty buzzed from my 40 when a bunch of guys started to go off about how a white cop stopped him and fucked him up. Joe saw it going bad when the Spanish guy was eyeing me, the lone white boy, and got me out of there pronto. I eventually lost contact with Joe, but I hope everything worked out for him.

One of those times we got drunk between church led to one of my first feuds with an authority figure at the church, Dave Holden. Pastor Dave Holden was one of the church leaders who came over when we left for Maranatha. I didn't know him, and he didn't know me and my history with the faith and my home life. He was the school administrator. I didn't know what he was like until I got a bit sick from drinking with Joe and ran to the men's room to vomit.

Holden decided to check up on me for whatever reason, and he could tell I had been drinking. The fucker told my mom! I was still going to Maranatha Baptist School, so Holden had no real authority over me, but he still decided to rat me out. I, of course, denied being drunk and said it was acid from my stomach making me hurl, and that's what the smell was. Mom bought it, and I thought nothing of it, but boy, Holden and I banged heads later that year when I had to go back to school at CIBA.

Around this time, I bought my first CD player. The first disc I bought was (big shocker) *Automatic for the People*. I had this cheap \$69 stereo I got at a shifty electronic store off Aramingo Ave. until it died in 1995. R.I.P. to my first experience with higher-quality sounding music.

Chapter 80

Boys of Summer Have Gone

The summer was fast approaching, which meant another escape from my worries to Wildwood, NJ. This year was different from the previous ones because I went down in June and would stay till September. A full summer in the sun and fun! The summer of 1993 would become my “coming of age” year and one of the finest times in my life.

It all started with finding a summer job. I told Mike Jericho I was going away for the summer, and he wasn’t happy about losing his number one seller. But I was 15 and going to enjoy myself as much as possible. A few local kids from West Wildwood and I went job hunting up and down the boardwalk.

I found a job at a restaurant at the very end of the boardwalk called Pompeo’s. It was open for breakfast in the morning and dinner at night. I was hired as a busboy, working mostly mornings, but sometimes I’d pick up a night shift or two. I would eventually also be the restaurant’s toast boy once or twice a week to fill in for the regular on his day off.

A toast boy is self-explanatory. I would ensure the right kind of toast would be buttered and put on the right breakfast plates. I would work on the other side of the cooks, and a slip of paper would print out saying what kind of bread and without or without butter. I would grab the bread, toast it, and use a small paintbrush to put butter on it if that was what the customer wanted. It was harder than it sounded. During the breakfast rush, I wouldn’t even have enough toasters to make all the toast orders, and I’d have cooks yelling, “Put rye on this one!” “White on this one!” and so on.

The benefits of being a toast boy once a week were that I got paid minimum wage for the day, which was about five bucks an hour, and I got to talk to the older cooks who told a bunch of jokes and stories. I also could wear whatever I wanted when I was in the kitchen. While being a busboy, I had to dress nicely, with a white button-up shirt and khakis. As a busboy, I only got paid two dollars an hour, and the waiters and waitresses would have to share their tips with us so we’d reach the minimum wage of five dollars. The waitstaff was not happy about that.

I had pretty much a good experience working at Pompeo’s that summer. I made friends with other busboys and some of the waitstaff, even though they were a bit older than us lowly busboys. The highlights of working there were: pocket money (a first

for me in Wildwood), hanging out with kids my age, and a sense of normalcy since this was my first real job besides guilting people into buying newspapers.

The summer was full of fun and bonding experiences. I met local girls and even went to an end-of-school 8th-grade graduation dance with one (it would be my first dance at school but not nearly my last). I had something to do on most days, with my circle of friends continuously growing.

I was only 15 but I went to senior parties at hotels when kids were down for senior week from Philly. Wildwood and the Jersey shore in general were the go-to places for prom weekends. Seniors who graduated high school that year would blow off steam for a week in a hotel with their peers. I would get invited to these parties, drink beer, smoke some pot, and sometimes throw up like a newbie since I was a newbie.

My friends and I would get drunk and go night swimming in the ocean, not knowing it was the time when sharks were looking for food. We would pool hop at night, which meant going to pools in the back yard of residents until they either heard you out there or you got tired of that pool and moved on to another one.

We would go up and down the boardwalk trying to meet girls. Wildwood was great for summer flings. Girls would come down for a week, you would meet them, and if there were a connection, you would hang out for a few days. Maybe you'd make out with them, and they would leave, then another girl would come down for a week. Mostly you would never hear from the girl again, and there was no reason to fall for any of them since they also knew it was just a fling. But silly me didn't follow this protocol and fell for a girl that summer.

Chapter 81

Jeanne, Jeanne the Boardwalk Queen

The boardwalk in Wildwood had two stores that focused on rock music memorabilia. Cookie's Fun Shop was where I bought many R.E.M. t-shirts, and another store in the boardwalk mall sold tons of posters and shirts. Going to these stores was pretty much a daily routine for me. I would walk in like a kid in a toy store, dreaming of what I wanted to buy.

Cookie's had owners who were big R.E.M. fans, so I shopped when I had money but also talked about music with them. I bought my first bootleg CD from them, which became my favorite thing ever. It was, of course, a R.E.M. show from 1992 in Athens, GA. They only played one or two shows that year. It featured predominantly *Out of Time* and *Automatic* songs but also contained some older gems. It had a crystal-clear sound, and I played it on a loop for months. The band was still a mystery to me, especially live. They sounded amazing. No matter how much I've seen R.E.M. live, I always wish they toured those years.

Side note: I was so eager to see R.E.M. that I would call the prerecorded hotline for the biggest arena we had in Philly in 1992-93, the Spectrum, to listen for concert announcements. I had the right venue, but I was a few years short.

Anyway, I would drag my friends to these rock n' roll shops almost daily. The one in the boardwalk mall had gigantic posters (about 4 feet tall) of different bands, including R.E.M. I ended up buying a few of the smaller ones, but my heart was set on the giant poster of the "Losing My Religion" single picture. It was a headshot of Stipe with his eyes closed, looking distraught and deep in thought. I eventually bought it before the summer was over, but in the meantime, I liked coming in and looking at it.

One of those days was July 20th, 1993, and a few friends were with me while I stared at my favorite poster. A girl said to her friend, "I want that Michael Stipe poster."

I did a double take and said something like, "Me too. I am planning on getting it any day now." To my surprise, I saw a pretty girl with brown hair, blue eyes, and freckles behind the voice.

She was a huge R.E.M. fan. We talked about how much we loved the band and discussed our favorite albums and which ones we were currently listening to (*Document* for both of us). After a few minutes, we parted ways.

My low self-esteem made me think she was nothing more than another R.E.M. fan talking about their favorite band. I thought there was no chance for romance to blossom. My buddy said to me on the way home, "That R.E.M. girl liked you."

I responded, "Yeah, right, she was too cool for me," and we dropped the subject.

Later that day, we were watching MTV at my buddy's house when they announced the nominations for the 1993 MTV Video Music Awards (this was important news to us kids in the '90s). R.E.M. was not only nominated for a bunch of the top awards for "Man on the Moon" but slated to perform as well! I couldn't wait to tell the R.E.M. girl from the poster store! But I didn't know her name or how to find her.

I didn't think about her until two days later when my friends and I went to the store again. I walked in, checked out all the R.E.M. posters and shirts I wanted to buy, looked to the right side of the store, and was pleasantly surprised to see the girl!

With the pure enthusiasm that only a 15-year-old boy who had nothing going for him but was blown away to be in the presence of a person he liked,

I said, "Hi, you're the R.E.M. girl!"

She replied, "I've been calling you the R.E.M. guy to my friends since I met you," which was beyond cool with me. I told her my name was Chaz, and she told me her name was Jeanne. She was from a place in New York called Pearl River, which reminded me of Pearl Jam and one of my favorite R.E.M. songs, "Find the River," so she had that going for her.

I thought it was strange for someone from New York to be in Wildwood since most of the tourists who flocked there were from PA or South Jersey. However, I was an open-minded guy with a lot of curiosity about what normal, secular people did, so I figured maybe people were coming down from other places besides the two states I knew.

As we talked in the middle of a store full of the '90s alt-rock greats, I noticed how pretty she was with her blue eyes and warm smile. I might have been at my peak height of 5'7 at this time, and she was a comfortable height for my fragile ego, a few inches shorter than me. Then we got to know each other better.

She was into a lot of good alternative bands, ones I heard of like Depeche Mode, The Cure, and 10,000 Maniacs, and others I didn't know, like The Smiths and their lead singer Morrissey. She was also into the alt bands that were popular at the time, like Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Belly, Juliana Hatfield, and Gin Blossoms. We both loved Radiohead's "Creep."

I knew from talking to her for that short time that she was an intelligent, cool, and nice girl who was way out of my league. It was verified when she told me she was starting her senior year of high school and would be 17 on October 9th. She told me it was also John Lennon's birthday and his son Sean's, and this bit of knowledge would stick in my head forever. Since I was 15 and not going to be 16 until next January, I did what anyone else with nothing to lose would do. When she asked me if I was 16, I

said yes without hesitation. When she asked me if I was heading into senior year, I nodded in agreement.

I know that starting a relationship with a lie is wrong, but I didn't know it in 1993. For some reason, I just wanted to agree with whatever she said. It wasn't a big deal to me. It was my first ever experience meeting a pretty girl who liked the same things I did. I was lost in the moment and too excited, fantasizing about being with her to think about anything else. Like most things in life, this will come back to haunt me when our maturity levels aren't in sync with each other. But there were some happy times before that.

It was obvious we liked each other, and there was a spark. Maybe it was the thrill of being in a shore town in the summer when school was out. The contrast between being a child in class and the desire to be an adult gets blurred in a way only teenagers left to their own devices can experience. Or maybe it was just two kids with similar interests feeling true feelings of excitement for one another.

Either way, I was all in. I tried to play it cool that night. We hung out with her like-minded friends who were also down for vacation. Jeanne and her friends were so different from anyone I had met up until now. Most people I knew were either poor Christian, or those in Wildwood who came from working-class families and were preppy with the need to fit in.

Jeanne and her friends liked cool bands and dressed more in line with their musical tastes. They were the first people I met who only liked alt music and knew bands others didn't know. Jeanne was like me, though. She dressed more on the conventional side with jeans and a rock band shirt. Her heart leaned toward different types of music and thoughts away from the top 40 mainstream, and I was right there with her.

We had a great night talking which led to us hanging out the next day on July 24th, when we went on rides and walked the boardwalk just talking. I even took her to Cookie's Fun Shop to see my favorite R.E.M. shirts.

We hit it off so well. I was walking on cloud nine and didn't care what would happen at the end of the week when she left, just like a 15-year-old would. At the end of the night, we said our goodbyes, feeling the excitement and anxiety of two teenagers who had mutual feelings for the complete stranger they fancied. We made plans to hang out the next afternoon after I worked and got ready. It would be the best day of my tortured life for quite some time.

Chapter 82

All of This is Coming Your Way

July 25th, 1993, I woke up and went to work as a busboy and was home by 12:30 to get ready for my date with Jeanne. I met her outside our usual spot, the boardwalk mall, located on the busy boardwalk. We walked down to where the rides were and rode the log flume and the bumper cars.

We talked a lot and got to know each other better. I found out she also liked baseball a lot, which was good because baseball was my favorite of the major sports. Her brother got drafted as a pitcher for, if I remember right, the Florida Marlins, and I believe he made it to the majors.

Coming from outside of NYC made her a NY Mets fan, and since I was a Phillies fan, we had one thing to argue over. That year, the Phillies bested the NL east. I remember her telling me how the Phillies were going to win the division that year, and I was still the weary fan whose only memories of the club were losing seasons, and I think I said, "We'll see." They could also blow it, but they didn't.

Jeanne wanted me to hear the song that Michael Stipe and Natalie Merchant from 10,000 Maniacs performed together at the inauguration party that MTV hosted when Bill Clinton got sworn in as president. They performed two songs that day, and I remember seeing replays throughout the week and loving the songs Stipe performed with Natalie. Later he would return to the stage with Mike Mills and two members of the band U2 to perform their brilliant song, "One." I loved Stipe's vocals on that one. The songs he sang with Natalie were "Candy Everybody Wants" from 10,000 Maniacs' latest album and a cover of a song used for the movie of the same name, "To Sir with Love."

She had a recording of both songs on a tape that she got off her local modern rock station, which was also WDRE. 103.9 in Philly was the sister station to Jeanne's WDRE. We came upon one of the many games of chance the boardwalk had to rob you of your money. The guy working there was playing music on his radio, and Jeanne asked if he would play her tape for me to hear.

The carnie said he would if I played the game he was operating. I agreed to this arrangement even though it was a game that wasn't my stronghold: basketball. I had to make three consecutive baskets in a row. The ball was probably an inch or two smaller than the net, so it was a challenge for me with my nonathletic abilities. I was

worried that I would embarrass myself with my lack of basketball skills, but miracles happen sometimes, and I sunk all three baskets in a row and won a top prize.

The prize was a white stuffed teddy bear that I, of course, gave to Jeanne. Somehow, we decided to name it Chaz Stipe. It was very accurate since I wished Michael Stipe was my dad, and let's face it, if Michael and I ever got married, I would definitely take his last name.

We also went to this recording booth that would record you singing popular songs like karaoke for 10 bucks or so, and you'd get a copy on tape. The songs they played sounded slightly different than the real ones, but it was fun pretending to be a rockstar for a day. We decided to sing "Losing My Religion," of course, and I thought we didn't sound too terrible. I would listen to that tape for many days to hear Jeanne's voice again when she wasn't around.

It was shaping up to be a perfect summer romance day in Wildwood, and it got better when I started walking her back to her hotel on the other end of the boardwalk. It was the opposite of Pompeo's restaurant. This part of Wildwood is called Wildwood Crest, and at one time, it was full of hotels built in the '50s and '60s and had a retro, nostalgic feel to them. It was where Jeanne and her friends were staying, about half a mile from the boardwalk mall. As we passed the mall, one of us, I don't remember who, but I hope and think it was me, got brave enough to reach for the other's hand, and was received without hesitation. We were walking slower and holding hands as my heart was pounding with excitement.

She had to go out to dinner with her friends and one of their parents, who brought them all down from NY. My plan was to walk her to her hotel and then meet up at our usual place (boardwalk mall) and hang out for the rest of the night before my curfew, set by my grandma, at midnight.

We got to the building of the hotel she was staying at, then we embraced in a hug that lingered a little longer, then she looked up at me, and we had our first kiss. It was nice and sweet and everything I hoped it would be. I didn't want it to end, but she had to get ready for dinner. She told me that I was a good kisser, which was the first time I heard that, and it made me proud (take that, Christine). She said I smelt good too, which also might have been a first. I guess it was because I had access to a shower at my grandma's and didn't have to boil water and carry it up a flight of broken stares to wash up.

I left to go back to the boardwalk and was never as happy as I was at that moment. I felt so alive that I was almost dancing and singing the first song I heard playing in one of the stores. It wasn't a happy song, but I was full of positive energy. It was a pop song from the early '90s called "King of Wishful Thinking" and was about getting over someone who broke up with you. It didn't fit in this situation, but it was upbeat, and so was I. Nothing could bring me down from that high, or so I thought.

Chapter 83

Try Walking in My Shoes

I went back to my grandma's house for dinner and to get ready for the second part of what would be my favorite day of my life so far.

After I was ready to go, I saw one of the local kids from West Wildwood on his bike. I asked him if I could borrow it so I could get to the boardwalk faster and get home for my curfew. The kid said yes. I got to the boards, locked up the bike near the mall, and waited in front of the entrance a little earlier than the planned 8 o'clock meet-up.

The boardwalk was packed with people on vacation since it was a midsummer July night. The mall was busy with hundreds of people coming in and out while I waited for Jeanne. 8 o'clock came, and she wasn't there yet. I thought she was running late, and there was no need to worry. Then it was 8:15, and I was still standing alone amid the crowds of people swerving around me. 8:30 appeared on the clock, and I was staring out into the sea of fast-moving tourists with some desperation and less hope.

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach that I had been let down and ditched by someone I really liked. But I still stuck it out. I went up to my favorite poster, thinking maybe Jeanne walked past me when I wasn't paying attention and thought we were supposed to meet there, but this was another letdown.

The shame and embarrassment finally took their course around 9 o'clock, and I gave up on waiting. I felt like a fool. I started to think irrational thoughts like, "Maybe she didn't like how kissed, and that's why she ditched me," and "Maybe she met someone else this week, someone cooler and better looking, and she met up with them instead." I even thought, "What if it was a joke and she's laughing about the ugly kid from Philly waiting for her for hours."

I finally decided to leave. I was more sad than angry. I was in the mood to mope, which I think I earned. I was going to go home but decided to visit some people I knew who worked or were hanging out on the boardwalk.

I caught up with this girl, Lynn or Linda, whom I met earlier that week, and I hung out with her and her friends for a bit. I may not remember her name, but her new favorite band was The Cranberries, who had just released their first single, "Dreams," and I liked them too. I didn't tell her what happened to me and how betrayed I felt. Instead, I acted moody, but Lynn or Linda didn't seem to mind.

She was leaving for her home near Philly that night and gave me her number and a quick peck on my lips. It made me feel slightly better, but it wasn't going to fix my night. We said our goodbyes and I went back to one of my favorite activities: walking down the boardwalk listening to music and feeling sorry for myself. I had one of my mixed tapes I made off the radio in my Walkman, and one of my favorite songs came on, Depeche Mode's "Walking in My Shoes," which was a perfect song to listen to while feeling sorry for yourself.

It was 10 o'clock, and I was about to give up on the night and go home. Then a strange feeling came over me, like a spark of determination to not give up yet and go to the boardwalk mall at that moment. One last desperate chance to see if Jeanne showed up. I did just that, and instead of slowly walking and looking down sadly, almost crying, I was walking fast and with purpose. Something told me to go past the boardwalk mall one more time.

I got to the mall, and who was standing in the same spot I was for an hour earlier? Jeanne, my boardwalk queen.

Our eyes met, and I saw her relief and honest-to-God happiness in seeing me. I can only imagine she saw the same thing but probably more so. We embraced in a hug and kissed again. She asked if I got the message she left with my grandma (I gave her the number in case something happened). She informed her she was running late with her dinner plans and would meet me around 10 o'clock. I told her I never got the message and was on the boardwalk all night. I said I waited until 9 pm and thought she ditched me. She said she would never do that to me or anyone, and I believed her.

Just like some episodes of *Seinfeld*, if we had cell phones, this story would have been way shorter and less time-consuming, but it was 1993, and I didn't have a beeper yet, let alone a cell phone.

I went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows, shooting back to a happy high all in a couple of hours. We didn't have much time since I had a midnight curfew, and it was already 10 pm, so we decided to sit on the beach right off the boardwalk and just be around each other.

We settled down on the sand and looked at the ocean and the clear, starry night, holding hands and talking. I was so overwhelmed by the day's events and my first experience with a true romance that I told her I didn't want it to end and that I had strong feelings for her. I didn't say the "L" word yet, but I came damn close.

I told her I wanted her to be my girlfriend, and she, the smarter one of us, said, "How can we if we live so far away?"

I said something like, "We will make it work." She agreed, and I now had my first girlfriend in quite some time. I broke the golden Wildwood rule of not getting attached to someone who would be gone after a week. I didn't care. I was head over heels for Jeanne and would stay in a long-distance relationship if she wanted to. I was naïve and

too full of new feelings to think anything different. I had to make it work no matter what.

I didn't care about my curfew either, which I was already late for when we left the beach, and I walked her back to her hotel. Jeanne was leaving in the early afternoon, and we made plans to see each other before she left.

I didn't have work that day, so it worked for me.

I got on my friend's bike and realized I wouldn't be back at my grandma's until 12:30-12:45 am. I would have to take my licks. My grandma was up and waiting for me. She was a very sweet person and wasn't mad, but she grounded me by setting my curfew for the next week at 10 pm. Since Jeanne was leaving the next day, I didn't care much about that. Then she told me a girl called and left a message for me. I read the note by the phone saying Jeanne would be late. Just seeing her name written on a piece of paper made me smile once more before going to sleep.

The next day, Monday, July 26th, 1993, was extremely windy and overcast. The weather was depressing, and it matched the feeling in my heart, and I think Jeanne's too, as we sat on the boardwalk waiting to say our goodbyes, not knowing if we would see each other again.

She gave me her number and address. Since there was no access to email yet, we'd have to rely on letters in the mail to correspond with each other. I stayed with her until she got into the car and watched as it went out of view. It was bittersweet. I was so happy to meet a girl like Jeanne and to have her like a guy like me, but I was going to miss her so much that I didn't know or care what I would do next that summer. I could have gone home then and would have had the time of my life.

A couple of days passed, and the feelings for Jeanne were still there. They washed over me and made me miss her voice, eyes, and smell. I don't remember who called who first, but I was so happy to talk to her, and I felt the electricity between us over the phone a few days later.

We called each other every day for a few days, then realizing how much it would cost for long-distance phone calls, we narrowed it down to every few days. We took turns calling each other to split the cost. One of those days before I called her, I was hanging out with my friend, Sue Patton, in West Wildwood, and I was telling her the Jeanne story and how much I missed her.

Sue, who was also about 15 years old, said, "You love her!"

I said, "I think I do," with a huge smile. I know, I was only 15 and caught in a whirlwind of feelings for a girl I met a week ago, but I felt something strong for someone I couldn't stop thinking about. It was definitely a 15-year old's version of love.

When I did talk to Jeanne that night, I told her that story, and when I said I think I do love her, Jeanne replied, "I think I love you too." That's it, checkmate, I was in love,

and she had me. She could have asked me to move to NY, and I would have in an instant.

We would write to each other at least two times a week, if not more. We would write about our favorite movies and music and tell each other how much we loved and cared for one another. We decided that our song (since we were a couple, we needed a song) would be the popular hit from UB40, their cover of Elvis' "Can't Help Falling in Love."

We also had a movie, *Sleepless in Seattle*, even though we never saw it together. It was about two people living far away from each other, meeting at the right time, and establishing a connection. It was romantic and felt similar to our situation. I watched it a few times that summer because it reminded me of Jeanne. We would quote lines from it in our letters to each other, which was the start of my love for Tom Hanks. I liked him in *Big* and *Bosom Buddies*, but *Sleepless in Seattle* was when I got on the Hanks' bandwagon just in time for his phenomenal roles in *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump*.

On August 2nd, R.E.M.'s video for my beloved song "Everybody Hurts" premiered on MTV, and the band looked awesome. I had goosebumps the first time I watched it that day. I couldn't wait to talk to Jeanne about it, which I did that night, and she loved it too.

This type of communication went on for a few weeks and our feelings, at least as far as I could tell, stayed true.

Then, good news came my way. Jeanne was coming down to another shore point in New Jersey, Seaside Heights. It was more of a New York shore point than Wildwood was, and they were about an hour and a half from each other. Jeanne told me that her friend's family, whom she was on vacation with, would bring her down to see me one day while they were in Seaside Heights.

I was so excited! I couldn't wait to see my summer love. It happened on August 12th, and I'd rank it as one of my favorite days. We hung out on the boardwalk, went on rides, held hands, and kissed like we didn't miss a beat.

The biggest takeaway from this day was Jeanne made me my first ever mixed tape. It was full of 1980s and '90s modern rock gems. She started it with the 10,000 Maniacs song "These Are Days." She included the two songs Michael Stipe performed with Natalie Merchant earlier that year, "To Sir with Love" and "Candy Everybody Wants." There were songs I never heard from

The Cure, like "Boys Don't Cry" and "Close to Me," and ones from The Smiths and Morrissey, like "Bigmouth Strikes Again," "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out," and "Every Day is Like Sunday."

She slipped a couple of R.E.M. songs on there just for the hell of it. She also put some of the alt-rock songs that were popular at the time, like Porno for Pyros' "Pets,"

Lenny Kravitz's "Believe," The Lemonheads' "Mrs. Robinson," and, of course, our song, UB40's "Can't Help Falling in Love."

There were a few more on the tape that I can't remember, even though I listened to it daily. Jeanne's almost all modern/alternative rock taste was a huge influence. I was still listening to all genres of music besides pop country and heavy metal. I still had some love for Bryan Adams and Bon Jovi, along with Duran Duran and Roxette. But I now had bands and songs that I might have never heard if I hadn't met her.

I bought several of the albums featured on the tape. I was still new to popular music and all its subcategories, so my taste was all over the place. Don't get me wrong, Jeanne liked other artists too, like Pearl Jam and Nirvana, and she liked songs from Janet Jackson ("Where Are You Now?" reminded her of me). But it was more of the "thinking man's" modern rock that would have the most influence on me.

I bought t-shirts of Morrissey and the 10,000 Maniacs after liking them through her. The shirts were ones I saw her wear, so part of me bought them because they reminded me of her. I was a sappy romantic boy who was in love, or whatever love could be at that age. I stayed faithful to her for the rest of the summer, even with friends encouraging me to find someone else and telling me she was probably dating other people and how long-distance relationships never work. I ignored them and thought, foolishly, Jeanne and I were in love and meant to be, and all that nice bullshit one thinks before they wise up.

I had plenty of disappointment already in my young, fragile life, but I had high hopes and thought this was God sending me such a wonderful girl. I believed it was a turning point in my life that I desperately needed. Unfortunately, I was wrong and didn't learn my lesson about having high hopes for quite some time.

We kept communicating, and the feelings were still there throughout the rest of the summer, especially when I decided to travel to Pearl River, NY, to see her.

Chapter 84

No Sleep till Pearl River!

My grandma decided to visit relatives in Seattle, WA. Because I didn't have adult supervision, off to New York I would go! She was going to be away for a week or so. I thought it was a sign since Sleepless in Seattle took place in Seattle and New York. I needed to go to NY to see the Meg Ryan to my Tom Hanks. I talked it over with Jeanne, who talked it over with her parents. They said it would be okay for me to come up for the weekend and stay at Jeanne's house!

Grandma Dolores went to Seattle with her nieces Mary Beth (a sweet, saint-like person) and Kathy (a cool 25-year-old who liked R.E.M.). I planned my voyage to Pearl River for the weekend of 8/20-23. Jeanne helped me plan it out since I was going by bus to an area I had never visited. She was concerned with my safety if I went straight to NYC and then transferred to a bus to get to Pearl River since I was 15 and scrawny as could be. We both knew The Big Apple would have eaten me alive, so I went the long way to see her.

The long way would be a New Jersey Transit bus with five transfers going from Wildwood to Atlantic City to Newark to Paramus to Hackensack, NJ., where Jeanne would be waiting with her mom to pick me up. Since it involved five different buses, the three-hour trip it would have taken if I was on one bus turned into a nine-and-a-half-hour journey to see my beloved.

My only experience with the New Jersey Transit bus system had been my two-hour bus ride From Philly to Wildwood over the years, so this was a big step for my traveling ways. The only other real adventure I had was in 1992 when I went to Eagle 106's station to get the tapes I won.

There were layovers in Atlantic City, which was a first for me. It looked like a lot of fun for adults. I went to the beach and walked around while I waited for the next bus, listening to music the whole time, particularly the mixtape Jeanne made. I called Jeanne from pay phones to update her on where I was. I even think I got a bit snippy with her about how long it took (sorry, Jeanne!), but I got over it.

When I got to the final spot, I called Jeanne and waited on a bench for her mom to pick me up in Hackensack. Some guy was hanging out at the bus station and started to ask me questions. I answered as much as I could. Somehow, music came up in the conversation, and when I told him how much I love R.E.M., he said, "That's weird.

Someone wrote “R.E.M.” on the wall over there,” pointing to the wall behind where we were sitting. There it was in big black letters. I thought that was a little odd.

Jeanne and her mom took me back to their upper-middle-class home in their upper-middle-class neighborhood. I walked in and saw Jeanne’s dad sitting at a table in the kitchen. When her mom said, “This is Chaz from Wildwood,” he answered, “Oh yeah, what’s he doing here?” I think he was joking, but who knows? Their house was nice, big, and clean. It was a mansion compared to my house on Wishart Street.

The first night, we drove with her friends (the two girls that came with her to Wildwood in July) around her town, listening to music. I remember kissing Jeanne now and then in the back seat. The radio in the car played Pearl Jam’s “Black,” and I thought it was cool that they were playing a non-Pearl Jam single. I was still learning how the music world worked and thought there was a video for every single. Since there wasn’t one for “Black,” I thought it was just another song on the album.

I was also still under the impression that artists released the best songs they had as singles because they wanted the world to hear that song and message first. I’m sure that’s a big part of it, but I would realize the commercial aspect of it later, that they usually put the songs out that are the most appealing to a demographic to give a sample of the album. I thought “Black” was better than the singles from *Ten*, and while that ballad of a love gone bad was playing, while my head laid on Jeanne’s lap in her friend’s backseat. I thought how this was a keeper moment, one I better keep safe.

Even though I liked Pearl Jam and Nirvana, I didn’t totally disassociate them with other hard rock bands popular in the early ‘90s. They all had long hair, played louder rock music, and would be on MTV’s programs like the *Headbangers Ball*, geared to those who liked harder rock songs. I had an inkling Nirvana was different than the rest of the hard rock scene, but bands like Soundgarden and Alice in Chains were a bit scary to me since I wasn’t 100% sure if they were the devil’s music or not.

It wouldn’t be much longer until I realized there is no such thing as the devil’s music or the devil at all, but at this time, I wasn’t completely deprogrammed from my Christian upbringing. I knew Pearl Jam wouldn’t send me to hell and that Eddie Vedder was a sensitive guy, not a macho asshole. I soon found out they were one of the anti-cock rock bands.

The next day we hung out with her other friend, whose name slipped my mind. She was more into heavier and faster alternative music like Pennywise and Tool, which was the first time I heard of those bands.

It was different in 1993 as far as what bands you liked. There were different sub-genres, but it was all under one big umbrella called alternative. So, a girl who liked punk and heavier bands could hang out with those who enjoyed the more thoughtful, mellow rock bands. I met people who were into music I knew little about or hadn’t heard of before.

They were different than the Kenzos I ran around with in Philly and a far cry from the Christians. They were more into being different and not just liking the top 40 acts because it was the only thing around or because that's what everyone else listened to, such as kids I was hanging out with who usually gave me shit about loving R.E.M.

Granted, these people had more money than us and probably more leisure time to discover new alt bands, but I was starting to feel a sense of belonging I hadn't felt before, a sense that I didn't have to try so hard to fit in with the peers around me. Too bad it didn't last past the weekend. It would take some time until I stopped caring what people thought of me. I'll always care because I have incredibly low self-esteem, but I now try harder to think outside my programmed box. I was starting to find my way, and Jeanne was helping me do that.

We returned to Jeanne's house, watched TV, listened to music, and made out. When she went up for the night, I was never as happy as I was at that moment. I missed her already and could still smell her scent on me. I thought this puppy love would never end. I thought this was God's or fate's plan for me, and everything would be okay now. I was getting the happiness I wanted.

I was wrong, of course, and the next day when I got dropped off at the bus station, we were both sad. It would be a while before we would see each other again. During my return trip, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. It was a depressing, overwhelming feeling, which made my nine and-a-half-hour ride even worse.

I repeatedly listened to the mixtape she made for me, trying to convince myself everything was okay. I always jump to the worst conclusion of things to brace myself or because I was used to the worst things happening to me. But it wouldn't go away, and when I returned to Wildwood and called Jeanne, it wasn't the same excitement and loving feelings I felt for the past month. The more we called and wrote to each other after my visit, the shorter and colder the communication became.

Chapter 85

Dear God, Hope You Get the Letter

I was still hopeful that this was in my head and that God wouldn't let me down. I may have been experiencing the world and what the born-againers would call sin, but I still believed in God and thought I was saved and all that nonsense. I was in a happy moment in life and thought God was behind it (that's the biggest "Ha Ha" Chaz moment). I was leaning toward being a normal Christian, like most Catholics I knew, and believed that the world and the things in it aren't as bad as the born-againers say they are, and God made them for us.

One letter Jeanne wrote me mentioned this band from the '80s called XTC. She told me how good "Dear God" is and how I should listen to it.

I caught it on MTV one night and was highly upset by the song's context. The lyrics blamed God for everything wrong on earth, and the singer would never believe in any of what Christianity had to offer.

I wrote back to Jeanne and let her have it via pen to paper about how sacrilegious the song was. And how I felt upset hearing such blasphemy about God. I wasn't ready for that yet. If it were a year later, I would have said, "Yeah, that song is awesome. Turn it up, Jeanne!" but I didn't want to rock the boat with God since I thought it was God who brought me my first ever love. Even our song, "Can't Help Falling in Love," had the line "Some things are meant to be," which made me think it was fate, not something I could control.

Chapter 86

I Read Bad Poetry into Your Machine

One afternoon, I missed Jeanne so much that I started to write her a letter in my notebook, then got a sense of inspiration and jotted down lines that were my best attempt at writing a poem about her. I didn't know anything about writing poems, so it was more like lyrics to a song, but without music.

The title was "Until I Met You." I barely remember how it went, but I am pretty sure it was God-awful and leaned more towards pop love songs from the likes of Bryan Adams and Bon Jovi than R.E.M. or Nirvana (their influence on my writing will become clearer later).

Some of the lines were, "When I was young I tried so hard to look for something to live for, something to love, something for my very own," and what would be the chorus if I knew how to write a song, "Until I met you my life and my heart were bitterly empty, and now I know there's no living without you."

It was tacky and generic, but it was my first attempt at being creative and would lead me to write a lot more through my years. I never did much with the things I wrote, mainly due to my self-loathing and complete disbelief in my abilities, but it was a coping method. I would keep a notebook of the ones I wrote from '93-'95 but lost it somewhere in my life. Most of them were about my crippling depression and shitty life or some girl I had a crush on. I sure wish I had them now just to see where my head was.

Chapter 87

Eddie Vedder Loves R.E.M.

Not to get off track about my first encounter with love, but other things happened in the summer of 1993 worth mentioning. I saw in the theatre what would become one of my favorite movies ever, the Quentin Tarantino masterpiece, *True Romance*. I bought the R.E.M. poster that brought me to Jeanne. I watched the 1993 MTV VMAs and witnessed R.E.M. lose every award they got nominated for (fuck you, MTV), mainly to Pearl Jam. But I also saw them perform two of my favorite songs, “Everybody Hurts” and a funky version of “Drive.”

I also discovered how much Eddie Vedder liked R.E.M., which made him even cooler in my book. Eddie said in an interview after the award show that music saved his life and how that R.E.M. song they played summed it up. I don’t know which one he was speaking of since they played two that night. Because both pretty much saved my life, I liked to think it could go either way.

Chapter 88

Chaz, You Really Don't Belong Here, You Fucking Creep

Then there was the rest of my time working at Pompeo's restaurant. I worked there through the end of summer and weekends when they were open in September. Around the end of summer, I started to feel isolated from my coworkers. I realized I didn't fit in with some of their conventional, everyday life ways and felt a little alienated.

Maybe I was starting to come into my own with what I liked and wanted to be (via Jeanne). Maybe I sensed that I was going back to Christ Independent Baptist for school and back to my drug filled neighborhood while other kids got to live comfortable, regular lives. I thought about the lyrics to one of my favorite songs that year, Radiohead's "Creep," while working with my fellow teenagers. The song about feeling like one doesn't belong and feels like a weirdo for not fitting in.

The lines hit home before, but this was a moment of clarity. I wasn't like these other kids. I quickly pushed the feeling away from my thoughts since I still had a sense that I wasn't that different and how I wanted to belong (it wouldn't be too long till I realized that was bullshit).

I did get along with one guy named Mike, who liked some of the bands I did. For one Sunday morning shift, he showed me two ice cream desserts he stole that Pompeo's made for the dinner shift. He gave me one, even though I barely liked ice cream or sweets. But I was a sucker for peer pressure and took one to go with the flow, much like earlier that summer when some local Wildwood kids pressured me into trying my first cigarette.

I was walking down the boardwalk to go home when my boss, the owner's wife, called me back to discuss next week's schedule. She saw what was in my hand and asked where I got it. Being loyal to a fault and not a rat, I said I found it sitting in the back when I had to get something from the dining room.

I tried to play it off like I thought I was allowed to eat food, but she wasn't falling for it. They didn't fire me at that moment, but when I tried to reapply the following summer, they said no because I was a thief. Mike apologized and thanked me for not telling on him. At least I had that going for me.

Chapter 89

Reality Indeed Bites

As the summer ended, Jeanne was understandably quite distant from me. She was about to turn 17 and start her senior year in high school. Meanwhile, I was a 15-year-old loser who had nothing waiting for him back in Philly and was dumb enough to dream of visiting Jeanne every week if possible. I even had fantasies of going to her prom and having a normal teenage relationship with her.

When I returned to Philly the week of Labor Day, I felt like Kensington got worse and, most likely, it did. It was probably due to not being exposed to the horrors of it for a few months. My summer high started to fade.

I had to suck it up reenter Christ Independent, which now housed about 35 kids from ages 4-18. It was the same bullshit we had at my last school with Higgins, but this time I didn't have Uriah, Joshua, and Charlie Glassey to pal around with me. Josh and Charlie stayed back in Maranatha, while Uriah and his sister Mary went to a school in Bensalem called Bensalem Baptist Academy. A few Christian kids we grew up with went there after everyone split from CIBA after Higgins left it. The Harmatas (Stephen, Mikey, and Shannon) were the first to go there.

Uriah will later tell me how much better it was in education and fun things to do than in the schools we grew up in, mainly because the school cost a lot more to attend. They could afford teachers, fun events, and sports teams. It made the idea of going out of reach, so I went with the flow again and dug in deep at my waisted life at CIBA.

I sat in a room that was once our church's nursery for the kids when their parents were in the church service. I was with about 12 other kids, against the wall, in cubicles, pretending to learn from my Lifepacs.

I was at the paper job during the week, and Mike was happy to have me back. I told him about my summer and, most importantly, about Jeanne. I showed him all the pictures taken of us she sent me and told him how I loved to look at her. He tried to use this for his paper selling schemes by saying I should put the pics in my pocket and only look at them after I sell a subscription. Good try, Mike

Chapter 90

Take Me Out Tonight, Take Me Anywhere

I still had hope that Jeanne loved me, and I wasn't ready to let go of that feeling and go back to my life as an uneducated Christian guy stuck in his house after dark.

I would try to go out as much as possible if I wasn't working with Mike Jericho.

I would hang out with Eddie and his brother Jeff at their mom's pharmacy at K&A. We'd stay there until it got dark and grab a bus or a cab since it was a good mile walk to our shithole area. I would go over kids' houses that I met through either the job or Eddie's friends he met through D&D games.

I would even drag people over to the mall in Northeast Philly that had a payphone where you could call anyone in the country for 25 cents a minute. In my house, we couldn't make long-distance calls, so this was my only option to call Jeanne. I would do this every chance I got, about once a week, and it usually went nowhere.

Either she was out living her life, or the calls would be very brief and consist mainly of her trying to be nice, hoping I would take the hint, which I didn't (not quite yet).

Chapter 91

To Die by Your Side

I wouldn't give up or get over Jeanne fully until next year. I hit a breaking point one weekend in Wildwood when I was working. I knew I was dumped and had to put my guard up and try to move on. I called Jeanne on a late September Saturday night, and she was once again distant.

She tried to get off the phone quickly. Stupid me tried to get an "I love you" from her as she hung up since it was a while since she said it. But instead, she pretended not to hear me and said goodbye. I cried all night and listened to my go-to sad songs from R.E.M. (typical me) and the tape Jeanne made for me. Especially "Boys Don't Cry" and "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out."

I retained some hope that she liked me going forward, only because I was a compulsive optimist. But I knew this was it. I would still call her and write her from time to time, but I knew she didn't feel the same, and it killed me.

She wrote to me once, telling me about her life as a senior, and even sent me a class picture of herself that I carried in my wallet until that wallet got stolen a few months later.

In early 1994, I volunteered to go with some church members to a mission in NYC to help out for the day. Not only because I wanted to see NYC, but I wanted to be in NY because that's where Jeanne was. I called her from a pay phone when we were at the mission in Queens, and she barely gave me the time of day. I think that would be the last time I talked to her until the last time I saw her in June of 1994.

Chapter 92

Here's to the New Boss

Life had to go on, and I was brave enough to try to get over Jeanne. The last weekend of work in Wildwood, I even tried to go on a date with a girl from the restaurant, but it didn't go so well because I was still hung up on Jeanne.

When I was back in Philly for the year, I worked more with Mike until October, when he told me he was leaving the job for something more secure and we would have a replacement boss. But after he left, and many of the kids I worked with also left to find other jobs, it wasn't the same. One thing that will never change is I don't know when to leave a situation and stick around way too long. I also should have found something else for more money, but I didn't know where to go. There weren't many options in Kensington then, so I stuck with the paper job, but I wouldn't work nearly as much as before.

A bunch of bosses came and went at the job over the next few months. None compared to Mike Jericho. He was more than a boss; he was a big brother, a buddy, and a guy I could talk to about life. But I guess he needed to find a job that didn't involve picking up a bunch of kids in an unmarked van.

Chapter 93

The New Adventures of the Old Christine

One of the people I became close with was my first real girlfriend, Christine. She called me out of the blue one day, eight months after dumping me for being a bad kisser. She wanted to talk and hang out. I thought it was odd that she called me just as I got back from Wildwood and even thought maybe she wanted to try to date me again. I didn't get my hopes up, but the thought did run through my teenage brain.

We decided to hang out that weekend. I helped Christine babysit someone in her neighborhood. I did think this was something that a boyfriend would do with his girlfriend, but nothing came out of us hanging out that night romantically. We watched an MTV special about their best live performances, and "Losing My Religion" was part of it. It was good that I didn't get my hopes up because the idea of us getting back together never came up. I left after the babysitting gig was done and walked home at night to my shit neighborhood.

Instead of being romantic, Christine and I became close friends. She would even call us best friends for a while. I would hang out with her and her group of friends I met in our "blink of an eye" courtship we shared. I spent many days with them, especially in Kensington, from 1993-1995. Most times, I was the only guy hanging out with Christine, Rose, Nicole, and Sandy.

I enjoyed their company very much. They were all nice girls who brought different personalities to the group, like the Spice Girls. We would hang out in the neighborhood, go to the movies, get some beers and drink at whoever's house was empty for the night (it was never my house), and whatever else we thought up. We would exchange presents at Christmas and go to South Street for a holiday dinner at a cheap restaurant that we Kenzos could afford. They all went to public high schools and were from non- religious backgrounds, so it was nice to have these girls around to escape my schooling and Christian predicaments.

Chapter 94

I'm Not Gay, I'm Stipesexual

Since I was the only guy in our little group, and because of my sensitivity (and love for Michael Stipe and Tori Amos), I got accused of being gay in the neighborhood and circles that the girls ran in. Christine didn't help with this reputation when she told people I was bisexual and in love with Michael Stipe. Since I spent most of my non-Christian time with them, these comments from Christine and the assumption of me being the token gay guy in a group of girls happened more times than not.

I wasn't gay or bisexual, but I didn't mind the "I'm in love with Michael Stipe" thing. I was still in the process of how I viewed homosexuality. I thought it was wrong for so long. I didn't understand what gay meant, and I didn't know what gay sex was. I did know I wasn't attracted to men and thought men kissing was gross, but I was starting to get over that thought pattern programmed into me from day one.

I wasn't the accepting guy I would be a few months later. What helped me get over this was, once again, Stipe. I started concluding that Stipe was bisexual due to the rumors, and I liked that people also thought I was bisexual without proof. It made me think of myself as a mini-Stipe or something. It was a little pathetic, but I loved him like no other.

I wanted people we met in Kensington or at a friend's house to wonder about that because it made me feel "Stipeish" and helped me overcome my built-in homophobia. The only thing I feared was getting beat up over it. It was a reality in the early '90s, but nothing violent happened to me.

One time, Christine told a party we were at in the spring of 1994 that I was bisexual. This party was full of kids from Christine's high school who were into punk and alt-rock bands like Pennywise and Helmet. They were obsessed with skateboarding. They were skater punks, the first ones I met, and they made us watch hours of videos showing kids attempting the same tricks that skateboard kids have been trying forever. Most of the videos were skateboarders failing and getting hurt. They all made agonizing noises after each fall. I appreciate the skills to take a wooden board with wheels and balance on man-made objects to show how great your reflexes are, but hours of videos of it were like watching your neighbor's cousin's wedding video.

I was insanely bored and wished we would leave, but Christine called the shots in our clique, so we stayed. Then she decided to tell the one skater fellow that I was bisexual and liked him. I never said I liked any of them because I did not, I was just sitting there minding my business, waiting for the que to leave.

The skater in question then pretended to be gay. He sat next to me like he was interested in me, put his arm around me, and tried to hold my hand. It made me pretty uncomfortable. He pretended to lure me to a room upstairs to do gay stuff with him. The whole time there were snickers and laughs from all the skater burnouts. I tried (like usual) to grin and bear it and wait till the ridicule was over, but when he made me stand up and go upstairs, I had enough. I said, "I'm not gay," and sat back down.

It ended there, but later, Christine told me if I went upstairs with him, he would have beaten me up. I selfishly thought of my safety and was relieved I didn't go into a trap that led to my harm. Then I thought how fucked up it is for those who are homosexual to get treated this way. I thought, "What if I was gay and went up to the room and got beat up over it?" These incidents were annoying and inconvenient for me, but they showed me that I was more in line with those deemed weak or easy targets, which I am sad to realize is what most gay youths have to deal with regularly.

Then came the realization of my friend's choices. Why would Christine do this to me? Did she think I was gay and needed to come out of the closet? Did she like to see me squirm for shits and giggles? Was she only busting balls for the sake of it? I'd never know. I could ask her now since I communicate with her via social media. But I am sure she'd have no fucking idea what I'm talking about since I have this Rain Man memory of events and others' actions and a strong desire to understand their motives. I am sure that will only last forever.

Chapter 95

Whoomp! There It Is

(Chaz Likes Sports... Sometimes)

The Philadelphia Phillies had shocked the baseball world by not only winning their division for the first time in 10 years, but they also went on to the World Series.

The players got written off for being past their primes with rookies still wet behind their ears. They captured the country's attention by coming out of the gate on fire at the beginning of the season.

I was in Wildwood for most of the summer, and those games didn't get televised much, so it was almost always the local news from Philly broadcasting in Wildwood or the newspaper that I used to catch up on games. I am not a sports nut by any means. I was not good at sports and never had the ability, opportunity, or confidence to develop any sporting skills. But I enjoyed watching sports growing up, and I would go with the flow, trying to fit in with my peers.

I liked watching football a lot. I was a huge Buffalo Bills fan since the first Superbowl I watched in 1990 at my grandma Peggy's house with my uncles. My uncle Tommy, who I thought was a cool guy, rooted for the Bills over the New York Giants, and so I followed suit. I would then have heartbreak over the next four years the Bills had in four consecutive Super Bowls. I was an emotional sports fan. When my team lost, especially in big games, I would throw things, punch doors, and smash whatever I could find. They were intense moments of anger and despair over something I could not control and had no real impact on my life besides bragging rights with my friends since "my" team won.

After the Bills' last Super Bowl loss, I was moving on in my life to other things that interested me, like music. I gave up caring about football in general, mainly because I got too emotional over games. But I also hated how the sport got shoved down your throat and over-commercialized. I became anti-football to combat people who think it's the only thing that matters. I liked the sport itself, it's fun to play and watch, but I would rather watch a movie that I love or listen to R.E.M. than watch a sport that became the measurement of masculinity.

One thing that never changed in my development was my fondness for baseball. The somewhat normal father and son experiences were few and far between, but sometimes my dad and I would play catch with a baseball, or he'd throw easy pitches for me to hit as far as I could. Of course, most people play these games in the backyard or front yard, which we didn't have. Instead, we played in an empty dirt lot next to abandoned factories about a block from our house.

We watched games when they were televised on one of our six broadcast channels, which wasn't that often. My dad always promised to take me to a Phillies game, but he never did. In fact, I took him to a game many years later. The only time I got to go to games back then was with the Christians when we would sit in the dirt-cheap seats (the 700 level at Veterans Stadium was beyond what would be called nosebleed seats). The born-againers would have a youth night at the ballpark to watch the team. When we went to these games, I would be starving but couldn't afford any of the vendors' prices. I would eat mustard and relish packets for the hot dogs that were out in the open. We kids would also bring our baseball gloves in the hopes of catching a fly or homerun ball. In the fucking 700 level that was so high, there was no chance of any ball getting up there.

Baseball was a relaxing sport that I enjoyed since it calmed me down (when things didn't go the wrong way) and reminded me of my favorite seasons, spring and summer. I was too young to experience and remember the 1980 Phillies winning the World Series, nor did I remember the 1983 Phillies going to the World Series and losing to Baltimore.

My first memories of my hometown team were lousy ones. Between 1983 and 1993, the Phillies didn't have a winning season. Most of the city considered them to be a team of bums. I viewed them the same way. I might have loved them and rooted for them since they were my hometown team, but terrible was all I saw from them, and I didn't think that would change.

Then the impossible happened. The Phillies were winning for the first time in my short life that I could experience. They captured the city's attention and made us all have "phaith" that year. It was out of nowhere and unexpected, making it even more magical and fun to watch. They were like the team from the movie *Major League*, all kinds of loveable characters who would much rather go to a bar than a four-star restaurant. We even had a relief pitcher nicknamed Wild thing, just like Charlie Sheen's character. The team's charisma and win-at-any-cost ways made them the talk of baseball and the town.

This team winning the division and making it to the World Series was the cherry on top of the best summer and year for me. The whole city had Phillies fever when the playoffs started. The National League Championship Series was coming in mid-October. It was the Phillies vs. our divisional rivals, The Atlanta Braves. Mike Mills

from R.E.M., a huge baseball fan, would be rooting for the Braves during this series. I had to side against him on this one. Sorry, Mike.

Wherever I went, there were Phillies flags, homemade posters and signs, and nonstop talk about the series. It was a bonding moment for the area. We even had a theme song that year. Every time the Phillies hit a home run, the loudspeakers at the stadium would blast “Whoomp! (There It Is)” by the rap act Tag Team, a popular song in 1993.

I had some money from my summer job in Wildwood and was still making some pocket loot from the paper job to throw around. I wanted to do something fun and exciting with my money, not just sit on it or buy things I didn’t need. I only had about 300 dollars, but it was enough to go to a concert or Phillies vs. Braves in game 6 of the National League Championship Series. I chose the latter.

My friend Matthew D somehow got two tickets at a reasonable price for the game that launched the Phillies to the World Series. They were 50-60 bucks each, and we didn’t even sit in the worst seats. I think we were in the 500 level. The players weren’t too small looking from up there. I even bought snacks that weren’t mustard packs for myself.

The Phillies were up 3-2 in the best of 7 games series. I was nervous going into the series since I always expected the worst. I didn’t get my hopes up because I thought every time something terrible happened to me, it was God punishing me. He probably thought I was a loser who liked lame things like the Bills and the Phillies, and they would fail too. Even with my doom and gloom mindset, I was somewhat confident they would clinch the pennant that night.

The crowd was electric. I never saw the Vet this packed with rabid fans. They won with a “Wild Thing” Mitch Williams strike-out pitch, and everyone went crazy!

Everyone was overwhelmed with excitement. Total strangers were hugging and dancing with each other. We were all together, no matter our differences, to celebrate this moment we thought would never happen. Philadelphia is the city that was a second thought to other cities. We had, and have, a huge chip on our shoulders, especially when none of our sports teams are winning championships much.

But not that night. That night was ours. We knew it was special and thought we could win it all.

Matthew and I ran around the stadium, slapping hands and yelling with the rest of Philadelphia until midnight. He convinced me not to take the usual route home from the ballpark. Normally, we’d take the Broad Street subway service to the City Hall stop, transfer to the El, get off at the K&A stop, and take a bus or walk a mile through the dark badlands. It was usually the “safe” way to get home to our shit area. Instead, Matthew suggested we take the Broad Street line to the Broad and Allegheny stop and walk two miles home through even more darkened badlands.

I trusted Matt, and we went his way. Usually, this might provoke the local kids to chase me and anybody walking home with me. But this time, everyone who was hanging out on their blocks or driving around blasting music in North Philly didn't bother us, and when it seemed like they were going to (I know the look), I would yell, "GO PHILLIES!" and they would honk or yell back about the Phils. At least this common bond would keep me safe till I was home that night.

The '93 Phillies were a group of characters with their own ways of living and winning. They had nicknames and played pranks on each other. They seemed to have fun being out there as grown men playing a kid's game. There was Lenny Dykstra, John Kruk, Dutch Daulton, Terry Mulholland, Curt Schilling, Mitch Williams, Kevin Stocker, Mickey Morandini, Wes Chamberlin, Mariano Duncan, Danny Jackson, Tommy Greene, Milt Thompson, Pete Incaviglia, and the mad man Jim Eisenreich to name a "few." The city thought this would be our second World Series championship in our 110year history.

It did not happen that way. The Phillies lost to the goddamn Toronto Blue Jays, mainly because of that goddamn Joe Carter and his goddamn walk-off home run in game 6 to win the whole damn thing. Fuck you, Joe Carter.

I watched this game at home with my sister, holding my breath on almost every meaningful pitch. I prayed to God during pauses in the game for the Phillies to win. I had on my Phillies clothing, which was probably a T-shirt, hat, and a windbreaker. I was full of the phaith the whole time until that final at bat that ended our miracle season run. The guy who clinched it for us to go to the Series gave up the worst-case scenario in baseball, a World Series-winning walk-off grand slam homerun. Mitch Williams even he had death threats against him in the days that followed the heartbreak lost.

After Toronto got what they wanted (Blame Canada!), my heart sank, and I felt like I got punched in the stomach. I probably threw whatever was in my hand, and I think I started to cry. At 15 years old, the next baseball season seemed like a lifetime away, and this feeling of disappointment wasn't going anywhere soon. I couldn't help but feel like this was just another disappointment in my life and that this was what life was full of, getting your hopes up to make you let your guard down so it can knock you back. Life is equivalent to a Joe Carter Walk off homerun. Fuck you, Life.

Chapter 96

Teenage Angst Paid Off Well

That fall, Nirvana and Pearl Jam both put out follow-ups to their hit records that put them on the map. As much as I loved *Nevermind*, it was Nirvana's *In Utero* that made me fall in love with the band. Maybe it was teenage mood swings, how angry I was about my home and school life or getting dumped by the girl I thought I loved, but I loved every song on the album.

It was louder and more aggressive than *Nevermind*, which wasn't usually my cup of tea, but I listened to it repeatedly at home and with Eddie Maurer, the only other Nirvana fan I knew. Eddie and Uriah (my two best friends) were into some of the bands I liked. I would make them both mix tapes (taking a page out of Jeanne's book) and put rare and live R.E.M. songs on them, but when it came to Nirvana, in our neighborhood, Eddie and I were lone fans of the legendary band. The rest of the world might have been on board with grunge, but we lived in an area where club singers K7 and Lily Suzy and rap music literally ruled the streets. Cars driving around would blast their songs with the bass so loud it set off all the alarms on the parked cars. Every day, every hour.

Nirvana was now my second favorite band after R.E.M. Rising to third (replacing 10,000 Maniacs) was Eddie Vedder and company. I know it wasn't that rare or unique to have the three most popular alt-rock bands as your favorite (and the 4th being U2), but I liked what I liked, and I still love all four of them.

Pearl Jam was a different tale. I loved the songs I heard on the radio. They stopped releasing videos on MTV in 1993, so the only way to hear new Pearl Jam was on the radio. I especially liked their song "Daughter", in which Eddie Vedder says to not call him daughter. This made my sister, who hated Pearl Jam (and every band I liked) ask, "Is he saying not to call him Daughter because of his long hair?" That's just ignorant, Sis.

I couldn't wait to get their second album *Vs.*, but I would have to wait because I won the album on the radio via a call-in contest. It was the third radio contest I had won. I was on a roll.

The first was the tapes from Eagle 106, and the second was tickets to the B-52s in 1992 that got canceled. The only problem was the top 40 radio station, 97.5 WPST,

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that I won it from, didn't send it to me before I could buy it. It took a month for them to send me the album.

I wanted to buy the album several times even though I knew it was coming in the mail. Eddie had to talk me out of buying it once. I bought Bryan Adams' greatest hits instead and listened to it a lot. I might have loved "Daughter" and "Heart-Shaped Box," but I was a sucker for that Canadian pop/rock singer.

Chapter 97

Columbia House Club

Was the Original Napster

Around this time, I discovered the glorious way of getting free CDs through Columbia House. It was something that was too good to be true. I have no idea how they made money or if others didn't take advantage of their deals. They had ads inside magazines like Rolling Stone with pictures of the newest and hottest albums.

Occasionally, R.E.M.'s *Out of Time* would be in one of the ads, making me smile. I saw older R.E.M. albums you could order from their "Cutting Edge" section, which also made me smile.

The deal was something crazy, like 10 CDs for a penny, then you had to commit to buying the monthly CD they were trying to push each month. They sent you the other CD, and you could have sent it back for another or just kept it and paid for it with an invoice later.

I jumped on this and picked 10 albums I was dying to have, including U2's masterpieces *Achtung Baby* and *The Joshua Tree*, Stone Temple Pilots *Core*, Belly *Star*, The Smashing Pumpkins *Siamese Dream*, *The Boomerang Soundtrack*, and a few others.

Here's the thing. When the monthly CD showed up (possibly a John Mellencamp album), I never paid for it nor sent it back. They kept sending me invoices, but I just ignored them. When I moved from place to place, I would do it again, getting the CDs I needed without paying for the ones they sent. They're probably just waiting for the right time to collect. Good luck, suckers. You don't have my social security number! I ordered those discs after I won the Pearl Jam CD, and they arrived first. That's the reason I brought them up.

Plus, I wanted to talk about how I got so many free CDs in the '90s.

Eventually, I got *Vs.*, and it was worth the wait. Since I had to wait so long, I already knew three songs that WDRE was playing. It was easy to get into. I listened to my new compact discs as much as possible, but *Vs.* and *In Utero* took up most of my time when I wasn't listening to R.E.M.

Chapter 98

The Time Eddie Stopped Me from Seeing Nirvana

I was eager to see one of my favorite bands live. I would have gone to any show just to experience it, but my heart was set on either Nirvana or Pearl Jam since R.E.M. still wasn't touring. I didn't know about the process of buying tickets, like when they went on sale or where the venues were. I quickly learned that Pearl Jam was not coming to my city for this tour. It wouldn't be for another five years when they would return, and then they never skipped us again for the most part.

So, it had to be Nirvana. They were coming on November 8th 1993, to a place called the Armory at Drexel University's campus. I had never heard of this place, but I was the guy who went to Pearl River, NY for the hell of it, so I was all in. I just needed someone to go with, so I asked Eddie. Below is our exact conversation word for word:

Me: Hey Eddie, do you want to go see Nirvana on 11/8?

Eddie: I can't. I'm broke.

Me: I'll pay for your ticket.

Eddie: Nah, man. I'm scared to come home that late.

Me: Come on, man, what if we die or Nirvana dies? We'll never get to see them.

Eddie (with foolish confidence): They're Nirvana. They're not going to die.

On April 8th next year, when the news reported Kurt Cobain's suicide, Eddie was the first person I called.

I tried some more to persuade him to go to no avail. I decided to buy the tickets anyway and see if Christine or someone else would go. I went to the Ticketmaster at the closest video rental store, but the Nirvana show was sold out. I was still eager to go to my first concert, so I looked through the catalog for upcoming shows and saw one for Duran Duran with The Cranberries opening. I liked both bands, so I thought I'd give them a shot live.

I bought tickets and didn't realize the show was an hour from me in Bethlehem. When I discovered how far it was and that local public transportation (Septa) wouldn't

get me there, I called the bus company I used most days. However, the show was on Sunday, and the last bus back to Philly would make me miss most of the show or end up sleeping at the bus station.

I tried to find someone I knew who would want to go and had the means (a car) to get there, and I came up empty. Most of my Kensington friends didn't have cars, and the ones who did were not Duran Duran fans. The Christians wouldn't do it either since this is as worldly as it gets.

I even called that girl Linda or Lynn from Wildwood since she liked The Cranberries. She gave me the cold shoulder, which I found odd since she seemed eager to give out her number when we met. I ended up eating the money and not going to the show. It really sucked for me since I lost \$100 on the tickets a small fortune for a Kenzo teenager, in 1993 I felt like it was another set back from seeing bands I like live, it was like this one thing I wanted so bad was being held just past my grasp. It would be another year until I finally got to go to my first concert. Once that happened, I was hooked for life.

Chapter 99

Where Do All the Hippies Meet

Before I went down that dark and dreary path I've talked about, one cool thing happened in the fall of 1993. I finally went to South Street (a Philly landmark for shopping and dining). It was a lively section between Center City and South Philly until the 2000's when the rebuilding of rundown neighborhoods like Fishtown took over the nightlife scene.

It had all these stores, bars, venues, and places to eat that were obscure and aimed at sub-culture folks. Since I was now leaning towards the alt-music stereotype, I wanted to go to this hippie and rock 'n' roll haven I first heard about in 1993. Being from North Philly, I didn't know much about South Philly besides the sports stadiums. I didn't know how to get to this mythical place that I built up to be greater than it was in my mind (I will do the same thing years later with a place called New Hope, the more expensive suburb version of South Street).

I asked Eddie a couple of times to take me there, but he always said, "One day we will go," or "It's not as cool as you think." I think he didn't know how to get there either or didn't want to leave the house, which was always the case with Eddie. He lived his life as if we had vampires for neighbors. When it was close to sundown, the guy was already home.

It was my old Bon Jovi-loving friend Renee who took me there on a random weekday that fall of '93. I walked a mile from the El stop at 8th and Market to South Street. It took us right to the middle of the bustling consuming paradise. I was taken aback by how far it went on with stores. There were the legendary stores like Zipperheads (where you bought punk rock clothes if you didn't want to pay punk rock prices) and Condom Kingdom (who sold condoms in any flavor and form you could think of).

South St. also had bars and venues I would frequent later. JC Dobbs is where Nirvana and Beck played when they broke through. The Copa, I'm told, served the best Margaritas in the city. Mako's offered free peanuts and let you throw the shells on the ground.

Tattooed Mom is a bar owned by a lovely lady with many tattoos. And the great Theatre of Living Arts is where I would see tons of live shows.

Chaz Holesworth

There were loads of used bookstores, art shops, and record stores with cheap, used CDs and tapes. People also dressed differently on South St. They dressed to express themselves rather than for fashion (though doing that was fashionable too, I realized later). It was a haven for those looking for the fringe side of things, which was where my head and heart were heading.

On my first trip of many to South Street, I didn't have much money on me, so it was a lot of window shopping and absorbing everything. Renee and I went into an ice cream shop. I was thrilled to be around people that seemed full of culture and had similar music taste. I started a conversation about music with two gentlemen who looked like they were members of P.M. Dawn or A Tribe Called Quest and told them it was my first time on South Street.

They were probably in their 20s and were cool and friendly to this 15-year-old newbie. They asked me what kind of music I liked. I went down my list of bands I loved and went over the top about my love for R.E.M. and Michael Stipe. One guy told his friend I look like the dude from R.E.M. Once again, I smiled ear to ear hearing this. The girl in the ice cream shop said I looked nothing like Stipe, but the guy defended his statement, this time pointing to my hero on my R.E.M. shirt as evidence. It made my first trip to South Street one of the best times I had there.

Chapter 100

At Home Drawing Pictures of Mountain Tops

My discovery of new music and exciting places to visit helped balance the not so-good things that continued to play out at home, school, and church. At home, it was the same old, same old. Dad was unemployed, and mom worked at a Hallmark store for minimum wage.

My sister was 19, angry, and depressed since her lack of proper education and job prospects provided no light at the end of the tunnel. Growing up, the only jobs I remember her having besides occasionally babysitting were her one summer working at Camp High Point in the kitchen and her stint as a waitress or counter person at a Marathon Grill restaurant.

I know she was upset about not knowing what to do with her life since graduating the previous year from our makeshift school. Her life was empty and sad, with no clear way to get a better one. She was miserable and did not hide it. She might have been right as rain in front of friends and family, but at home she let us know exactly how frustrated she was. She had always been moody and mean and took out her plight in life on my mom and me, but she was getting worse.

We were drifting apart like never before. I would call, especially when I was drunk, and tell her about my adventurous coming-of-age summer. She would lecture me about drinking and say she was worried about me. She didn't like my music taste. She was still listening to whatever was on the pop stations and thought my music was too worldly.

I was hanging out with people outside the church and having fun with friends doing normal things (the opposite of the born-again ways), and this upset her. Probably because she never ventured beyond the foundations of our sheltered religious circle. I was also miserable and hid it from everyone. When I was home, it was more apparent, but I would usually listen to music to soothe my soul. I was easier to talk to and approach. Cathy was best to leave alone or agree with whatever she said to avoid provoking her. The storm was coming though, and nothing would be the same for all of us soon.

Chapter 101

Tail of Two Mikes

Mike Jericho was gone, and the new boss who drove us kids around was named Mike Wang. He was not Asian, even though we all thought he was when we heard his name. Boy, it was a big difference in the work environment.

I wasn't working much since I didn't have old friends or Jericho to encourage me. When I did work, it was half-ass. I didn't put my whole heart into getting those orders, so my paychecks weren't as big as before. I had pocket money for the things I needed and would do without the things I couldn't afford. I even sold my video game system for some extra spending money.

The new kids who worked with us were on the rough side of life, and I got into fights with a couple of them when our teenage tempers unleashed. I'd win some and lose some. Wang was less organized than Jericho. He was a nice guy, but he would be late picking us up for work and moving us to the next blocks. He always seemed to be in a rush and trying to make up time. He was a bit of a hustler. He always trying to make ends meet.

He had a second job delivering local store advertisements bundled in a plastic bag with some New Jersey town's community paper. He would offer us the chance to help him a couple of times a week to make an extra buck. After we got done door-knocking for the newspaper, we'd go around the neighborhood and deliver ads or go to New Jersey to knock out a town's community paper. He'd give all six of us about ten dollars each and buy us a pizza. I would get home around 10 or 11 pm, and my mom wasn't happy about it. It was utter chaos working for him. I smoked pot during the job when the kids had some. Wang either didn't know we were smoking it in his truck, or he didn't care. He would bring his step kids sometimes when he had no one to watch them. One was a sexually active girl around my age (a trend in Kensington). Many young girls would do anything for boys' attention in Kensington, this girl was what they would call "boy crazy." It was some extremely white trash shit going on, with this girl making out with a bunch of poor kids in a van while her stepdad drove us around to sell newspapers.

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She would make out with us and wanted everyone to touch her everywhere. She gave me a nasty hickey one Saturday, and many Christian men at Church on Sunday gave me the third degree. I told them I fell or some bullshit to get them off my back. It would be a year or two until I realized how gross and white trash hickey were.

Chapter 102

Said I Loved You . . . But I Lied

I met my next girlfriend, Tonya, during this time on the job. I thought she looked like Whitney Houston, but most people didn't. I liked her and thought she was nice, but she told me she had a boyfriend. When I expressed my feelings and asked her out on a date, she told me she broke up with the other guy. But people told me she was still with him for the first part of our relationship.

So, I didn't trust her, nor did I take the four-month courtship that seriously.

Our first date was at the same place as my first date with Christine eight months earlier, the Franklin Mills Mall. We went to a movie and ate cheaply at a Chinese food restaurant.

She lived above a bar under Kensington Avenue between Somerset and Lehigh Ave, which wasn't the best area in 1993, let alone now. I sometimes walked from my house (about a mile) to her place because I used to have brass balls and didn't care how dangerous the neighborhoods were.

She lived with her little brother, who seemed to like me and wanted me to take him to pizza places and the movies, and her father, who was a pleasant man that gave me the talk about how people might have a problem with a white boy dating a black girl. He told me to take care of his daughter and be careful. For the most part, I did. I didn't care what people thought of us when we took Septa to malls or downtown. We were getting along well, and things were progressing.

We got each other Christmas presents that year. I got her some cheap gold-plated chain my Kenzo mind thought was nice. She got me a bootleg tape from the guys who sold them on the corner of K&A. I was more into alt-rock, with a soft spot for pop and R&B, but not so much for rap. Besides some songs from Arrested Development, Dr. Dre, and Cypress Hill, I wasn't a big fan. But she got me Snoop Dogg's first album, *Doggystyle*, and I listened to it once. It wasn't my cup of tea. My favorite thing about music was the vocals and words. I liked the singing, and when it came to rap, they weren't good enough singers to keep me interested.

Sometimes Tonya wouldn't want to make out and whatnot while hanging out. But when certain songs came on, she would get in the mood. Songs like R. Kelly's "Bump

n' Grind" made sense, but Michael Bolton's "Said I Loved You . . . But I Lied" really made me think.

Chapter 103

The Dark Side of the Holesworth

I was going through the darkest period of my young life. I didn't care about who I hurt or what I was doing. It was a dark path that I will stumble down a few times in my life. I get so full angry and full of despair that I don't think clearly about my actions.

I was mad as hell at God, my parents, school, and so on. I had typical teenage blues mixed with traumatic situations. Most of the time, I could calm myself down, or music would get me through these overwhelming emotions and circumstances, but sometimes I just went with it.

I woke up miserable every day. The only time I was okay was when I was with my non-church friends, like Eddie. I was drinking and smoking pot any chance I got, running around Kensington like my father before me.

Once, I was hanging out with Tonya and a couple of other coworkers. One of the girls told us some guy did something wrong to her either at school or in her neighborhood. It was enough for us to walk over there and throw bottles at their doorway once they answered. The glass broke inside the house, and we didn't care if anyone got hurt. We just wanted revenge for our friend. We ran as fast as we could to get away, which we did. That and my fights with people in the neighborhood and doing whatever for a thrill made me think I may be going down the wrong road.

I pumped the brakes before I went too far and crazy. I would pull myself back from times like this and think, "This isn't the R.E.M. way," or "What would Stipe do?" I now realize I was falling into the Kenzo trap and giving into my dark side, fueled by my no-future mindset.

I wasn't a total degenerate. Most days, I was tame and just depressed, but the wrong people or circumstances easily influenced me. Many of the kids I knew were from North Philly or lower Kensington and didn't have a plan for college or to get out of the shit holes we called home.

The only way to stay sane and not blow up was to live in the moment, drink alcohol, smoke weed or have sex to keep yourself entertained. It was the mindset we all had.

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Sex was just another fun thing to do that was adult. It's what happens when one doesn't have hope or proper role models.

Chapter 104

Let Me Tell You About My Best Friend

Eddie, who was smart for not wanting to come out after dark, was somewhat in the same boat. He was going to Kensington High School, one of the underfunded public schools in our area. He was a scrawny white kid in the mix of a bunch of kids in gangs looking for trouble.

He told me he was joking around with one of the Spanish kids in his class. He thought they were cool with each other. The kid said something to Eddie during class, and Eddie must have had a clever comeback, which made the Spanish kid pull out a knife and say he was going to kill him after school. Well, that was it. Eddie never went back to Kensington High.

One time Eddie met me, and one of his D&D friends, near K&A. He looked upset. He told us he was walking down the street, and a couple of kids pulled a gun on him and took his Walkman. The best part was Eddie, before turning it over to these assholes, pulled out the Nirvana *In Utero* tape from the Walkman. I tried this brave move a couple of years later when I got mugged at gunpoint, but it didn't work out for me.

Eddie almost got mugged again, waiting for the bus around Comly and Academy Road in Northeast Philly. This area is considered middle-class and safe in comparison to Kensington. A white kid dressed like he wished he was a rapper came up to Eddie and pulled a gun, asking for his money. Eddie, thinking this guy was a fake gangster, said, "Nope," and ran. The guy with the gun chased him down Academy. (a major road in the Northeast) until Eddie stopped and ran back toward the original spot. The guy followed suit. It continued until they got close to the 8th district police station on Academy and the would-be mugger gave up the chase. Eddie knew the kid was full of shit, and he wasn't in real danger. Growing up in such rotten conditions taught him when someone was ready to kill him or not for his wallet.

Chapter 105

My Own Private Kenzo

The weekend of 12/18/93 was remarkable. I was at church for some youth group thing, and one of the other teenagers, a Spanish girl named Irisol, liked me. We decided to go steady, but it was more like church steady and no real dating outside of the church. I was still seeing Tonya but going through the old “I don’t care about people and feelings” thing and sensed she was still seeing her ex-boyfriend.

My relationship with Irisol didn’t last long or blossom into anything. We didn’t have much in common. But one thing that came out of it was her cousin, Tami. Irisol said I should be friends with her because she loves weird music.

Tami lived about two blocks from me and would become a fixture of my teenage life for some time. She was the first Puerto Rican I met who wasn’t just into rock and metal music but also dressed like it. She wore all black most days, dark makeup, doc martin boots, a leather biker jacket, with NIN, Ministry, Slayer, and Type O Negative shirts. She stuck out like a sore thumb in our blocks full of people following trends and doing whatever to fit in.

We would talk on the phone for hours about music. Tami liked Nirvana and Tori Amos but not R.E.M. so much (though she appreciated my love for them). I believe she was an atheist, and I still somewhat believed in God as a supreme being, but I was angry at God for my life and for bringing Jeanne into it and then taking her away. I was starting to think outside religion altogether and doubting the concept of a God. Our conversations were as thought provoking as possible for a couple of poor teenagers from the ghetto. We remained close friends until about 1995.

We talked on the phone most days, and when I told her about my hopes and dreams, she gave me the nickname “Dreamchild,” which I liked. I was still writing shitty poems/lyrics without music, and I read them to her over the phone. She would humor me with good reviews, and I was thankful for that. It was the only encouragement I was receiving. I even wrote one about her called “Dreamchild.” I don’t remember how it went, but I’m sure it was God-awful.

Chapter 106

We Don't Need Another Hero

On Saturday December 18th, Eddie and I had to go low-budget Christmas shopping since even poor people celebrate Christmas. We decided to hit all the local stores on Aramingo Avenue in the Port Richmond section of Philly.

We were shopping for a good part of the afternoon when I heard a loud scream from an elderly woman in front of Kmart. I saw a white man, probably in his 40s, high on something, grabbing the woman's large bag.

We were on the sidewalk in front of Kmart, with the thief running parallel to us. Some instinct took over (too many action movies), and I turned to Eddie, handed him the purchases I was carrying, and said, "Hold my shit." I started to run as fast as I could to catch the purse snatcher. I saw he was now changing course and running towards the next cross street, which would put him in my path. He turned down the busy street on a red light for him and me since I was right behind him, with cars having to stop as we ran in front of traffic. We made it across the street, and I tackled him in front of an A-Plus gas station. Eddie was close behind me, so I threw the woman's bag behind me for him to get it.

Unfortunately, the woman's purse fell out of her bag, and the would-be robber grabbed it and said to me, "I'll kill you for that." He started to run some more, and I chased after him again. While I went by the door of the A-Plus, I saw a large stick tied to the handle.

I yanked it from the door and started hitting the robber as he ran while I yelled to anyone who cared to listen, "Stop him! He just stole an older lady's purse!" My words brought in the good citizens of the neighborhood like moths to a flame.

There was now a collective of men and kids my age surrounding this thug. One Spanish fellow took a screwdriver he was using to fix his car and hit the thief in the face with it. Then he took the stick I was holding and broke it over the guy's head. I walked over, grabbed the purse, and punched the bandit in the stomach with all I had, which probably wasn't much, but it was in the heat of the moment.

The cops came with the lady whose purse I was holding, and she was hysterical. Eddie handed me her bag, and I returned it to the woman.

She was so upset she didn't know who gave her back the purse.

The cops arrested the thief, and some kids from the neighborhood who helped surround the guy were saying to the cops, "You better remember this next time we do something wrong." Everyone laughed. I didn't get a thank you or an "Attaboy" from anyone besides a guy who told me he saw the whole thing from his car, and it was amazing. I was Eddie's hero for a while, and he told everyone we knew of my heroic stunt. I didn't do it for self-praise. I did it because it was the right thing to do. I guess I wasn't so bad after all. I also have a hero complex that I blame on my love of Luke Skywalker growing up.

At the end of this crazy weekend, R.E.M. debuted "Nightswimming," the final single/video from their masterpiece *Automatic for the People*. Unlike the other videos from the album that debuted on MTV during peak hours, this one appeared at midnight on the alt-rock video showcase *120 Minutes*. Fitting for a song with the lyric, "Nightswimming deserves a quiet night." I'm glad I stayed up for it because it was a beautiful video and the cherry on top of my wild weekend.

Chapter 107

Jesus Don't Want Me for A Sunbeam

While this was all going on, school and church were never more toxic. I was 100% in agreement with my sister's frustrations and warnings she gave to me when I was younger about how bullshit our education was.

I went to this sorry excuse for a school every day, wanting to be somewhere else. I felt I was wasting away there, and I knew I wouldn't have a future once I left. I didn't have any friends I grew up with who helped me get through the times there. I was surrounded by kids I barely knew or were still full-on Christians while I had serious doubts. I was alone as could be.

I was also extremely embarrassed at a school of 30 kids from K-12th grade. Our classroom now had about 15 kids from grades 8th-12th. When he had to go out for events, like Christmas caroling at the Franklin Mills mall, I would keep my head down and wish I was home listening to R.E.M. or Tori Amos.

Once, we went to a Christian summit filled with other Christian schools. Most of them were from upscale realms of the faith, while we were the bottom-of-the-barrel Jesus folk. Uriah was there with his new schoolmates from Bensalem Baptist. They were all good-looking kids wearing nicer clothes than the dark blue and white thrift store uniforms we were wearing. I was quite embarrassed, but Uriah told me later that some of the kids said I looked like I didn't belong with that crowd. It planted the seed for me to want to go to this school. But it was pricey as fuck, so I put that idea away for a bit.

I didn't care anymore if people thought I was worldly and liked rock music. It caused the authority figures at this makeshift school to bump heads with me. I was the only one really fighting against their bullshit rules and hammering of what they called the word of God. In a normal school, I would have been a good egg.

Dave Holden was in charge, and he was on the tougher side of the cross. He liked to try to make an example of me for being worldly, and his goal was to break me or win me back to the Lord. Everyone there thought I was what they called "backsliding" and that I needed to read my bible and get right with the Lord. They believed my way of life was a bad influence on other kids, so it was in their best interest to show me tough love to bring me back into the flock.

The problem was that most of their rules and theories turned me off, and I wanted little to do with them. I blamed Holden and other leaders throughout the born-again network for my lack of education and for breaking up my friends. They also made me go to a school that made the schools on *Little House on the Prairie* look big. I felt like a worthless loser due to my stature in life, being poor as dirt in an area no one in their right mind would visit, but also because of how fucked up my education was and how pathetic this schooling had become.

They wanted me to conform to their way of thinking because it's what they believed and taught me since the tender age of four. They weren't giving me any benefits I could use. I was supposed to believe everything because they said so and followed a five-thousand-year-old book written by people who didn't use toilet paper and thought the earth was the center of the universe.

I would listen to stories from Uriah on the phone about how much different Bensalem Baptist was, compared to our poor man's Christian school. They also wanted you to conform, but at least they provided education with actual teachers and had more than 12 kids your age to grow up within the school.

I was fed up and wasn't hiding it anymore. Holden started enforcing absurd rules just for me. No one was allowed to call me by my nickname "Chaz" because he said it was worldly. He wouldn't let me roll up my sleeves at school and church. I took pride in my *Beverly Hills, 90210* sideburns, so he told me I couldn't have them. At my cubicle desk, I wrote "R.E.M." on an index card and had it hidden on the board, and one of the Jesus freak kids in my classroom told on me, so Holden made me clean every desk in the room to teach me a lesson.

Holden tried to find out about this rock n' roll outfit called R.E.M. It was years before anyone around us had the internet, let alone Wikipedia, so I have no idea how or what he found out about them. But he told me they aren't living for the Lord, and I should only listen to God-centered music. It went in one ear and out the other.

When these things didn't work, he decided to put me in a room by myself. The "room" was the downstairs auditorium (classrooms were in three separate rooms in the upstairs part of the building), where we had our morning chapel and prayer nonsense. I was still facing the wall but without a cubicle. Just me at a table, struggling to learn from some bullshit book.

Other church leaders kept an eye on me, like the head pastor, Pastor Rivera, whose office was within striking distance from my spot. It was also supposed to shun and embarrass me, but I had no one to be embarrassed around since I didn't care what anyone in that place thought of me. I thought they were the ones trying to hold on to something that wasn't there, and I saw through all the bullshit they were trying to enforce to act like they were a real school.

We met in the auditorium every morning, and the other guy in charge, Mr. Peterman, would lead the announcements and prayer. He was Mike's father, who I

went on vacation with in 1991 and first heard R.E.M. I would talk to two classmates I got along with, Esther and Jimmy. Esther was a sweet Spanish girl who was pleasant to talk to, and Jimmy Flite was as rebellious as a five-year-old could be. Sometimes I would say something to get a laugh, and Mr. Peterman wouldn't have any of it.

If he told me to be quiet, I would respond with a half-ass apology and a sarcastic, "Yes, sir."

It made him yell, "I said be quiet!"

I would reply, "Okay, I will."

The frustrated pastor would get louder and more stern, shouting, "I said no more talking!"

We continued back and forth.

"I said okay."

"Not one more word!"

"I heard you the first time."

"I get the last word, in not you!"

"Okay."

"Enough!"

"You got it."

You could see how high his blood pressure was getting from the anger over this exchange of words. It would go on for about five minutes until I finally gave up and let the rest of the torture for the day start. The ones that liked me knew what I was doing and loved it.

I was being watched by these men all day long. Worst of all, I barely knew them. All the adults I grew up around in the church were long gone to other churches and schools, so I had this stranger Dave Holden trying to break my spirit in the name of the Lord, who didn't know anything about my struggles over the last 15 years. He wouldn't cut me any slack.

My stance on Christianity and God was confusing. I believed in a supreme being and still thought Jesus was the son of God. But I felt that the sector of Christianity I was a part of was not the right fit for me. I thought it was too strict and was against any growth or development in one's life unless it was about knowing more lines from the bible.

I was okay with thinking all Christians were trying to get to heaven, and God was the same God of all their different tribal branches. Catholics and Mormons were in the same Jesus-loving boat as the born-againers. But those in the born-again movement needed that absolute insurance that they would be forgiven for their bad deeds and go to heaven. I was fine with thinking God is cool with anyone following this message from the bible. I was sort of in an in between stage of what I wanted to think about God. I wasn't giving up on the idea of a supreme being, I just figured this supreme being knew of my situation and why I was so angry about it all.

I was fine with trying to fit in with the secular world, but I wasn't thinking about religion and God 24/7 the way I was raised. I was cool with letting it be and just trying not to be a complete piece of shit. But this was not good enough for the Xians surrounding me. They kept pushing and pushing me. They kept trying to break me with punishment instead of showing me why it was worthwhile to be like them.

If we had the money to go to Bensalem Baptist that year, I would have most likely gone with the flow and enjoyed a better education and the company of my peers who were a similar age. I would have probably been left alone with my theories of God being the same God of every branch of religion if I kept it to myself. But we were broke as possible and couldn't afford the 2000 dollars a year it cost to go there.

Instead, I got tortured so much for wanting to be a normal kid that I became turned off by every aspect of the faith. I became agnostic. I was starting to think about it all in a different way. It wasn't enough to believe that God was there and wanted me to be happy, and as long I did my best to be a good person, God was okay with me living my life.

I was on the road to questioning it all and finding big plot holes in their stories. If God is all-knowing, why would he create Lucifer, knowing he will turn on him and bring sin into the world, leading to death? Why does God say "love thy enemy" in some parts of the Bible, but in others, he commands the Israelites to destroy towns they were at war with? And they were so ungodly that God wanted everything associated with the people to burn to the ground, killing the children and livestock.

The lack of evidence of a god or Jesus was a deal breaker for me. They say that it's all about testing us, and it's all about having free will to choose to put your faith in this invisible god. But that's a cop-out. It's insane to say you have free will, but if you do anything besides what they tell you to do, you will burn in a lake of fire forever. Either you believe in this god guy with his giant ego or else. It doesn't make any sense.

They say that God is a jealous god and made man for fellowship. So, this God that has been around forever (a concept we cannot grasp) decided it was lonely after forever and created man. But it did it 5000 years ago because it wasn't lonely before then. And it made man worship it and make sacrifices in its name. Why would an ultimate being that created everything have loneliness and be vain enough to desire worship from a bunch of primitive mammals with their own sense of loneliness and vanity?

You can never prove God exists, so you're supposed to believe it because an old book told you it's true. The fact that your only shred of evidence for this belief pattern is an ancient book that says God is a he and made the earth in a day shows how primitive the believers (and writers) were. These were my thoughts at age 15-16. I would eventually expand on my theories on God and religion.

Chapter 108

The Needle and the Damage Done

1994 was one of my favorite years. It was full of change with ups and severe downs. It was my last year of being somewhat sane and anxiety free. I turned 16 earlier that year. Most people get a car or a birthday party for turning this milestone age, but I got a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels from my mom's card store. I might have been entering my mid-teen years, but I felt older and more bitter. I was tired of eating the same plain oatmeal for breakfast. I was disgusted with picking up the dog shit that our newly given to us dog would leave on my bedroom floor every morning. I was sick of going to a school that made me want to shoot myself most days. And I couldn't stand coming home to my roach-infested house, surrounded by drug dealers and other criminals.

My mom and I would be at odds most days. My dad was a jobless addict, so his influence on me was minimal. He became a fixture on the couch, watching daytime TV all day since 1992 after getting out of the correction facility. He was waiting, for years now, for his social security disability benefits to kick in after he applied for them in 1993 for his mental health issues. He was diagnosed with anxiety and paranoid schizophrenia, which I believe both came from his lifestyle of being an addict and running around the wrong circles of Kensington and being depressed. He also had hepatitis C, most likely from his years of sharing needles to shoot heroin.

Hepatitis C gave him liver damage, so drinking was now out for my pops if he wanted to live as long as possible. He was still shooting heroin, of course. I believe he started using the veins between his toes since his arms were shot. His friends who came over to hang out from the neighborhood were also addicts.

Butch would come over and hang out during the day with my dad often. When I was sick and didn't go to school, he'd hang with me too. We would watch MTV (when they still mainly played music videos) and talk about the songs. He was a hard rock guy and liked the Chili Peppers, Nirvana, STP, and Smashing Pumpkins videos. He explained the meaning of songs like "Low" from the band Cracker, which was on MTV a lot in early 1994. Because of Butch, I knew what "a million poppies" meant (it's about drugs).

I liked talking to Butch about the music I was into because he dug it and was curious about my favorites. I told him all about R.E.M. Butch enjoyed them too but

thought “Losing My Religion” was their first song and that they were a new band. I explained how LMR came out ten years after their first single, “Radio Free Europe.”

It was nice to talk to someone about R.E.M. My dad didn’t care about them and once said to Butch, “My son loves all these singers that don’t care about him.” In one ear and out the other thing there too. I didn’t care what he said about it, nor did I think he had the right to say anything since he barely showed he cared about me during these dark times. Don’t throw stones, dad, if you live in a glass house. And I think R.E.M. and Tori Amos care about me and all their fans! Besides, they might not care about me, but I sure do care about them.

My dad had no income and still had to feed his addiction, so he started doing things for extra cash. Over the next few years, he would max out credit cards and department store cards from places like Sears to take cash advances or buy merchandise, then sell it cheaper to get money for heroin. Some of these cards were in my mom’s name, so they damaged both of their credit. Every card went into default without any intentions or ability to pay them off. I also wrecked my credit after getting approved for cards when I was 19 or 20.

Like father, like son.

My dad and I never talked about his addiction and the things that came from it. His lifestyle led to my mom becoming born-again, which gave my sister and me a shitty education, surrounded only by people in our cult bubble.

We never talked about our fucked up house with no hot water, cracking walls, and missing/falling apart steps. No one discussed how we couldn’t afford to move because of his and my mom’s choices. The neighborhood was so dangerous that a drug dealer got shot and died in front of our house, and the other drug dealers asked if they could graffiti “R.I.P. ROME” on our wall. My dad was prideful, and sharing emotions and thoughts was not in the cards for us.

Even up until his untimely death, we never talked about it.

Chapter 109

The Bible and the Damage Done

My mother would constantly voice her concerns and opinions on my worldly lifestyle. She had a problem with my attitude and me always going out, doing God knows what. She thought I needed to walk closer with the Lord. I would chime in about how I hated myself and my life and wished I was never born.

It would hurt her feelings, of course, but it was how I felt.

One winter morning, MTV was playing Beck's video "Loser," and my mom was yelling at me for being worldly or something. I got annoyed and shouted that I felt like a loser who would never be anything because of her and the church. She automatically thought I felt this way because of the Beck song. She said, "I am going to write to them (Beck) and tell them they're putting thoughts in your head!" As crazy as it sounds, I would have loved to be in the room if Beck got a letter from some religious fanatic about how he made her son think he was a loser. My mom acting that way was equivalent to mothers freaking out about metal and hard rock bands kids liked in the '70s. It was my "Knights in Satan's Service" (what moms in the '70s thought KISS stood for) moment. With fucking Beck. I couldn't wait for her to hear Nine Inch Nails.

It never occurred to her that I felt like a loser before I heard the song. I felt like a loser for years because of a rotten-to-the-core home life and people constantly picking on me. I wasn't good at anything and had no future due to a terrible education spawned by her fears and irrational mind. It just happened there was an abundance of bands now singing about being alienated and feeling the pressures of not being popular or following every trend. In my case, I couldn't even afford to follow the trends.

There was an underbelly of people who felt like shit with anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. Some came from broken homes, and the music was starting to reflect those collective feelings. I usually tried to ignore my mom or go into other rooms alone. I have always been fine and dandy by myself.

But she was losing control over me with her Jesus ways, and she didn't know what to do about it besides continue trying to get through to me.

I think she figured I was like my sister when she was 16-17 and that I was just a moody teenager going through the growing pains of life. That was part of it, but I also had legitimate reasons to be upset. I didn't mind telling her this when she mentioned my walking with the lord crap.

Life and How to Live it

I knew myself very well in 1993-94. I understood how I ticked and how my emotions ran (even the negative ones). I knew I had a dark side full of anger and pain. Even if that wasn't always me, and that part of me would make the sensible side feel regret and guilt, it was still in me. I knew if things were going to continue this way, I would explode or do something drastic. But my mom didn't realize I wasn't my sister and that I wasn't just moody. I wasn't going to settle for the pathetic life laid out for me. I had hope and drive for something better. I didn't know how to get it, but I wanted more for myself.

Somehow, I convinced my mom to let me take guitar lessons. Music was my only source of enjoyment, and I was heading towards wanting to be a musician of some sort. However, I loved singing the most. I sang my favorite songs alone as much as possible because of my love for them and their emotional appeal. I was also trying to learn how to sing. I could not carry a tune, nor did I have any chance or avenue to find out how to. I knew I wanted to do it even though I was bad at it (this would be my plight for a good ten years), and I thought I deserved to do it because of how fucked my life was. I wanted to turn my poems into songs.

Chapter 110

I'm Worse at What I Do Best

I didn't know anyone who played guitar, so I thought maybe I could learn myself and put my words to music. I knew I would never be as good of a singer as Michael Stipe, but I looked at my other hero, Kurt Cobain, and thought I could probably sing as well as him. My favorite part of his songs was the words.

I felt I could sharpen mine until they were half decent.

I watched Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York* performance and thought Kurt sounded out of tune or off-key (like I knew what that meant). But his passion and depth in every note he belted out on songs like "Where Did You Sleep Last Night" and "The Man Who Sold The World" gave me goosebumps.

I started taking guitar lessons from a guy who worked at a music store in Frankford under the El. I paid \$5-10 a session every Saturday afternoon. I coughed up enough money to buy a 50-dollar acoustic guitar and tried my best, which wasn't that good.

The teacher tried to teach me simple power chords, which I somewhat got the hang of, but I struggled to move my fingers onto the next fret to capture the notes. I also had terrible timing. The hardest part was strumming only the strings for the notes and not all of them. He tried to teach me the beginning of Nirvana and Pearl Jam songs. I didn't do the Pearl Jam songs very well, but I think I played the beginning chords to Nirvana's "Teen Spirit" and "Come as You Are" okay. You could at least recognize them.

I went faithfully for several months until life, and my clumsy fingers that couldn't grasp the instrument thoroughly got in the way. I tried several times through my life to learn but I could never play an instrument. I will try to sing and sort of get not horrible at that, but not nearly good enough to be taken seriously or to be like the idols I looked up to. Instead, I will just give up and live with regrets like a normal kenzo.

Chapter 111

Ray of Light

I found a new friend at work who would remain important for years. Ray was a year younger than me. He recently moved to Kensington from South Philly, where he was born and raised. We met the same way I met Eddie, through the newspaper job. And just like Eddie, I felt like we were already friends. He seemed familiar to me. My dad sometimes dropped wise knowledge on me when he was sober enough. Once, he said, I'll notice the same type of people around me throughout my life. Perhaps this was one of those situations, or maybe I felt an instant bond with Ray. Either way, we became fast friends.

We started hanging out on weekends, going to South Street mainly. His part of Kensington was closer to the El and K&A, which was bad and full of degenerates but still better than my neck of the woods. We would hang around there, usually at a pizza shop, or get people over 21 to buy us beer. Ray was more into rap music than anything else. Though he did enjoy the popular rock songs of the times, like Beck's "Loser."

He was a funny kid who made me laugh whenever I was down and out. He was about 6 feet with black hair and dressed like the times with baggy pants, an NFL starter coat, and Snoop Doggy Dogg T-shirts. I might have been more into alt-rock, but in the early '90s in Kensington, I hung out with all walks of life.

Ray was like my little devil on my shoulder. He would want to do things I thought were trivial or childish, but I took part every so often. I threw an egg at a Septa bus once on Mischief night, but it barely hit the bus since I can't aim. He would also get me to tag or graffiti a name on any open spot. I tried this for a day, and my tag was R.E.M., but I only did it to promote them. We drank almost every weekend. When it came to stealing, I let him do most of it because I was too scared, but I would still reap the benefits.

We went to bookstores on South Street, and he would steal books I wanted about R.E.M. and Tori Amos and *Life After God* by Douglas Coupland (a short story collection including one dedicated to Stipe hence my need for it). I used to take it to church on Sundays, take the cover off, and read it while the preachers talked about

doom and gloom. He would also try to steal CDs for us. I almost stole an *Automatic for the People* collectors' box from a store in the Gallery that cost \$50 but chickened out at the last second. I had to wait till I was in my 30s to buy it off eBay.

Ray and I also did a lot of running, not for fun or a local charity in a 5K, but from angry mobs of kids trying to beat us for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It happened to Eddie and me as well. We would get chased by the Spanish kids in my neighborhood, usually getting eggs or rocks thrown at us. When we were in Ray's part of the area, the white trash kids would chase us and sometimes egg us. We got chased so much that we would laugh at the kids chasing us since they couldn't catch us due to well-practiced getaway running.

We always ran and didn't fight back because we were outnumbered. They never picked on us unless it was a group effort. There were no fair fights between them and us. It was always peer pressure-filled mobs of teens wanting to create some mayhem and we were easy targets.

Chapter 112

I'm Relying on Your Common Decency

Of all the times Ray and I ran from kids in Philly looking to do us harm, it was the first time we didn't run and tried to stand our ground. It was the first time we hung out together outside of work. It was a Saturday night, February 19th (a date still tragic to me). The plan was to get drunk and roam around South Street and to see where the night would take us. We got a homeless fellow on South Street to get us beer for a nice tip. I think we also bought him a 40-ounce of his choice. We drank our Old English 40 oz beers in an alleyway until I was pretty drunk.

The night was going good so far, we had run into some girls Ray knew from his high school that lived close by, we had a good buzz going, we ran into some bible thumpers and I didn't even feel too bad about them trying to win we to the lord (sometimes Christians would walk around South Street trying to get those sinners to the lord) and I bought a John Lennon greatest hits CD for my listening enjoyment. Then we decided to call it a night and planned our journey back to Kensington.

We both needed to catch the El to Kensington, so I started to walk up 8th street, about a mile, to my familiar stop. But Ray insisted we walk to Broad and South Street to grab the Broad Street subway line and get off at City Hall for the free exchange El train home. The walk was roughly the same distance as my preferred way.

Ray, being the native South Philly guy, wouldn't budge. It was winter, and there was snow from previous storms on the ground, so I get not wanting to walk far. But either way was a hike, and his route had much more in store for us. We approached a supermarket around 12th and South where a large group of loud teenagers were leaving. They made my Kenzo Spidey sense tingle.

One of the kids asked me if I had a dollar. I knew this routine well: pull out my wallet, get punched, and have my wallet/money taken from me. I said I didn't, and Ray and I walked away as fast as possible. We tried our best not to show panic or fear, hoping this time would be different than our other encounters with angry teens. It didn't matter. Once again, we were easy targets, and they were on us in a matter of minutes, demanding our wallets.

My instincts kicked in, and I was ready to run again as fast as I could. When I looked behind me, Ray was curled up in a ball. It was another way to protect yourself if you weren't fast enough. It helps protect your major organs and body parts from ruthless attacks. A bunch of punks were kicking and punching him in the head.

I, being loyal to a fault, ran over to help Ray. I was at my peak height of 5'7 and probably weighed a whopping 150 pounds, but I had spunk and heart, and I could take a punch. I went at the mob of kids, which was between 8-10 of them, punching and fighting off a few at once. It was only a matter of time till I got struck so much that I was on the ground. One of the kids said to stay down, or he'd kill me, and my pride got a hold of me. I kicked him right in his balls. It must have hurt because all I remember after it was countless punches making contact with my head and face until I passed out.

I woke up a few minutes later in a pile of snow, blind as a bat since my glasses flew off my face from the beating. Luckily, they didn't break. My head was pounding as if I got hit by a truck, and one of the kids must have had something metal on their hand, a ring or a key, because I had a red indented mark on my forehead.

I searched for my possessions and realized two things were missing: the fake black Gap hat that reminded me of the one Stipe used to wear, and my wallet. In my wallet was some cash, Jeanne the Boardwalk Queen's senior picture, and, for some stupid reason, my social security card. They didn't get the extra money I kept separate in case I got mugged (street smarts) or my newly bought John Lennon CD, which I had in my inner coat pocket. I'm not sure they would have wanted to hear songs like "Imagine" or "Power to the People," but "Instant Karma" might have made an impact if they wanted to do some soul-searching.

I checked on Ray. He was fine, just a little shaken up. I was still full of rage and wanted to chase them down and get my wallet back. I even said, "Let's go get those fuckers" to Ray. He ignored me. A nice woman and her two teen sons helped us up and flagged down a cop in his car to talk to us.

I explained what happened, and the cop said to me, word for word, "Were they white or black?"

I said they were black kids, and the cop replied, "Sorry, we can't help you."

I thought about that statement for a while. Did he mean he couldn't find the kids because they were black, and it would be too hard to find a group of black kids in a city full of that demographic? Was he saying it wasn't worth the effort because of fear of racial profiling? I have no idea, but it was clear that justice for Ray and I would never come.

We walked down to Ray's bright idea of a route, the Broad Street subway. I was going over the awful events that happened to us when an older black man sitting on the same subway bench as us, who must have been annoyed or fearful of my aggressive

speaking, pulled out a switchblade knife and started playing with it. He mumbled incoherently. I got up and told Ray that I had enough of this city. We waited down the platform, far away from the guy with the knife.

When I got home, I still smelt like beer, so I told my mom what happened and that the kids who jumped us, for some reason, poured beer on me. She bought it. I went up to my room and listened to some of the John Lennon CD I purchased and felt sorry for myself, which I think I had a right to do.

Everything that happened to me by other races had left me fearful and bitter. If ever I was to start having prejudices against other races, like some of the adults in my life with their words of “wisdom,” this was the time.

I felt anger and despair over these injustices happening to me daily. I was one of only a handful of white kids in the area, and there was a realistic fear of leaving my block or even my house. It was taking a toll on me. But I kept myself from turning ugly.

I think it was a combination of things. Church established the “I need to be Christ-like” thinking and taught me that Christ accepted everyone. I had experiences with people from all races and walks of life who were good people. Church itself had good black men who I liked to be around and respected. One man, Herman, would sometimes drive us home from church or the bus stop. He was down to earth, and I could talk to him about pop music, like Boyz II Men and Mariah Carey.

Matthew, who I went to the Phillies NLCS game with, was black and would pretty much do anything for you. My buddy Joe, whose cousin I somewhat dated, was a good guy with a gentle soul. There were the Spanish kids, like Ester, who were my friends. The church did that one thing right; they hated racism. They accepted interracial relationships and marriages without a glance. Except for those who were gay, they would take everyone in. It was with gay people that they drew the line. They could come to church but had to pray the gay away.

Not all churches were like this, I know. But the ones based in the inner city were color-blind. A few months before, my church had an all-night-long youth gathering with other churches from the tri-state area. It was in New Jersey if I remember correctly. There were dozens of churches involved. I would end up seeing Christian kids I hadn’t seen in years. It was set up as three events from 10 pm to 4 am. It started with some preaching, of course, then we went bowling, roller skating, and ice skating. I was hanging out with Joe and a bunch of other kids I knew from church. We were having a ball, falling repeatedly, trying to ice skate, which none of us tried before.

Kenny, a kid I knew from school before 1992 when the churches all separated to form their shitty small schools, told me I should act white. I was surprised he said this because he was the pastor’s kid and seemed nice when I knew him. Maybe he was just

going through a hateful phase or was listening to the wrong people, but I think I said something about that not being Christlike in a sarcastic way and went back to hanging out with my non-white friends and kept acting non-white.

Thinking about it now, I was wearing an R.E.M. shirt, flannel, and jeans with some cheap old shoes, and Kenny said I wasn't acting white. If I had long blonde hair, I would have looked like Garth from *Wayne's World*. He was basically saying I shouldn't be surrounding myself with black kids from North Philly who looked poor, wore cheaper clothes, and acted like they didn't care what people thought of them.

Well, Kenny, I was in the same boat as these kids, and we were just having fun. You were the one who made it ugly and shameful. It's not about acting white or black but keeping things separate between races. So, it keeps people like Kenny feeling superior and safe. The fact is, it's not about race; it's about class systems. And at that moment, I felt more comfortable as the only white boy around a bunch of black and Spanish kids with similar problems.

I also made good friends outside of the church who were Spanish and black, and I loved them as much as I loved my white as fuck friends (Eddie). There was Tami, Renee, my girlfriends, Irisol and Tonya, Joe and other kids I met through the job.

There was also the logical side of it all. I knew if I started down this road of hate and labeling, it would make me just as bad as those who attacked me for being white and an easy target. I was smart enough to realize it wasn't every person of color who was out to get me and being born black or brown doesn't make one a criminal or less of a human being (things white people often believe). And these beliefs will be voiced more than once in my direction over the years.

I realized that the kids who robbed me and lived in my area were also coming from rough environments and were just taking it out on the white kid. I didn't like it, but the peer pressure and lack of a moral compass or positive role models influenced how they treated other human beings. At least I had my Jesus complex instilled in me from day one to treat everyone how you wanted to be. I also had Michael Stipe and his love of all people to influence my good nature.

So, I kept myself from letting the anger take over. I even wrote a shitty poem about it called "Speak Out Against the Hate," which I lost decades ago, but it probably sucked. I also would listen to Depeche Mode's "People are People," which hit home with its message of tolerance.

Another song that I was obsessed with was Bruce Springsteen's hit from the movie *Philadelphia* called "Streets of Philadelphia."

It is a very somber and bittersweet song that captured what it was like to be a struggling guy in Philly. I felt bruised and battered. I felt alone and like some people from my neck of the woods, forgotten and hopeless. *Philadelphia*, starring my favorite

actor Tom Hanks, was a great film that made me tear up all throughout it. I was still struggling with accepting homosexuality and was scared shitless of AIDS since I met that couple who had AIDS when I was selling newspapers the year before. The movie put many things in perspective. There is so much suffering when a person has the disease. And a lot of prejudice comes with the stigma of being a gay man in the '90s. This movie and me coming to terms with my hero, Stipe, being attracted to men is when I started to wise up and push out the anti-gay programming in my head that the born-againers and the macho men put in there.

I went from thinking that gay people choose to live in sin and ignore the natural way of things to believing that the natural way is they were born gay, and that's just the way it is. I went from thinking it was gross and strange to see gay men kissing to accepting anyone's affection for another. I would eventually make up for my brainwashed views on homosexuality by making anyone who is gay or bisexual I come across feel as comfortable as possible with me. I even went so far as to embrace rumors that I was bisexual to make gay people feel at ease around me. I told anyone who had a problem with it to get over it. I would make them see the light that it's okay to be gay or make them angry for being so small-minded.

Chapter 113

Runaway Train

I bought the single for “Streets of Philadelphia” and listened to it quite a bit. It was sort of my theme song at the time. I was worn out from my shitstorm life and was about to break. I was already on the road to exploding before I got jumped, but the days that followed had me at my wit’s end.

On February 23rd, 1994 (Eddie’s 16th birthday), I finally had enough. We had church services that night, so my sister and I were getting ready before the church van picked us up. My mother was in the kitchen making dinner, and my father was doing the usual nodding off in a heroin nap on the couch. I was in my room listening to my R.E.M. live bootleg CD I got the previous summer. I went to my parent’s room to get some deodorant from dad since mine had run out.

My sister was in our doorless bathroom right next to my doorless bedroom, trying all kinds of things with her hair. She was in one of her bad moods and was yelling about something. I think she was frustrated with how her hair looked, but it was deeper than that. She was frustrated with life in general. She was looking for a fight or someone to take her aggression out on, and why not me?

The song playing in my room was the live version of R.E.M.’s “Drive” when I went to get the deodorant. My sister said to me in an angry tone that was uncalled for, “Would you turn that shit down?” I told her I would once I got back from our parent’s room.

It wasn’t quick enough for her. I guess R.E.M. performing one of their gems on my radio made her hair not crimp or curl correctly. She marched into my room and decided to take matters into her own hands by not just turning my radio down, as she asked me to do, but off. She didn’t just turn it off with the push of a button but unplugged it from the wall. I came into my room and was furious. I yelled that the CD was playing and that’s not how you turn a radio off. I also shouted, “I hope you didn’t ruin my CD or radio!” She acted like she didn’t care. She was proud of her smug self.

I ran into her room and unplugged her alarm clock radio in revenge. She then (knowing how to cut me deep) started to laugh at me hysterically. She was pointing and calling me an idiot. I hated being called dumb, and I hated people laughing at me. So, I said, “Fuck you” or “You fucking bitch.” She looked at me and screamed, “Mom, Dad, Charlie just cursed at me!” I have no idea what she was attempting to do. I do not

think my dad would have done anything besides telling me that it wasn't nice (which probably wouldn't have worked), and my mom had lost control over me, so what could she possibly do? They could try to ground me, but I wouldn't have listened. The fact that I lived my life without causing them any trouble and put up with the bullshit for so long gave me all the right to come and go as I pleased.

I don't know why a 19-year-old would call for her parents because her 16-year-old brother said a curse word to her, but this was my life. I still loved my sister and thought of her as a friend. I started to smirk and laugh because I thought she was joking when she called for our parents, who really haven't done much parenting in quite some time.

I put my finger to my mouth to say calmly and quietly, "Shhhh," and put my other hand up next to my face as a sign to stop.

Sis stopped yelling and then, in either a moment of madness or pure diabolical genius, looked at me for a second and yelled as loud as she could, "Mom, Dad, he's going to hit me!" I was very angry and tired of life, but I would never hit any woman, especially my sister. I swear to God, to Michael Stipe, I swear on my life and soul that I was not going to hit my sister, nor did I think about it. I was utterly shocked by her false accusation. I get that siblings fight, but we rarely did.

Even when we argued or fought, it was never that intense and never went beyond insults (more got thrown at me because I didn't have the sharp tongue that she did). I just looked at her and thought, "What the hell are you talking about?" while my dad came up our broken steps and told me to go down the broken steps.

I was outraged when I went down the stairs. However, I would have probably let it all slide and gone back to shoving the anger and frustrations down deep if I didn't overhear my dad say to my sister while trying to calm her down, "I know how he gets." First, my dad didn't know how I got. He was a sleeping fixture on the couch with no idea about the anger and despair I felt every day due to his decisions. Second, maybe I had anger problems and would throw and break stuff in my room, but I never hit anyone unless defending myself. And finally, she was a fucking liar, and my dad was taking her side. It was the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Sixteen years of putting up with all this bullshit that was not my fault was enough to deal with, but I was not going to get accused of something I didn't do or start. I had enough of the dirt-poor Kenzo lifestyle we suffered together. Without saying goodbye or telling them I was leaving, I put my coat on and, with whatever was on me at the time, walked out the door to never return.

I told my mom earlier that week that if things didn't change soon, I was going to blow. I held up the end of my self-fulfilling prophecy. I think I never tried running away before because I always got told to "Man up" or "It ain't that bad" when it came to my home situation. I just dealt with it.

Chaz Holesworth

I was told that my feelings weren't real or that it was just me feeling sorry for myself. It may have been the case when I had crying spells, but most of the time, it was as bad as it could be, and the only thing that got me through was music, especially R.E.M.

After the events, I wanted nothing to do with my dad or sister. I will have to talk to my dad again, but it will be seven years until speaking with her, and I was the one who took the first step to reconcile. I had no idea where to go or what to do. I just knew I could never go back. I had no money because of the robbery a few days earlier. I first decided to go to Irisol's house but thought I better not in case her mom told my mom where I went.

I went to Eddie's house and wished him a happy birthday, then told him I just ran away from home. I asked if he could lend me some money (he owed me \$9 anyway from the lacrosse game we went to the year before). He gave me what he had to spare, about \$3. He also gave me back my Depeche Mode CD I let him borrow. I thought if I had to, I could sell that at a used CD shop if I need a couple bucks the next day, I didn't want to sell it but I knew I couldn't go back to that house again. There was no going back. I was in survival mode now. I then made my way to K&A, thinking I could call a friend who lived nearby. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 114

The Streets of Philadelphia

Since I didn't have my Walkman, I sang my favorite songs to keep me occupied, including "Streets of Philadelphia." The song never rang so true to me as it did that night, walking around the slums of Kensington in the middle of winter. I felt hopeless but also like I had nothing left to lose.

*Ain't no angel gonna greet me
It's just you and I, my friend
My clothes don't fit me no more
I walked a thousand miles
Just to slip this skin*

I called Ray from a payphone and explained what had happened to me and how I needed a place to crash. We met up at the Dunkin' Donuts under the El at K&A (the one next to Eddie's mom's place of employment) and discussed my options. His parents wouldn't be okay with me sleeping over since I hadn't met them, so the plan was for me to stay all night at the Dunkin' Donuts until the daytime. Ray would sneak me into his house while his mom was asleep and after his dad went to work. Then I could nap for a few hours at his place and bide my time till I figured out what the hell to do next. Then I spent a second night at good old Dunkin Donuts with one cup of tea for several long hours.

K&A was a cesspool of drug addicts, prostitutes (who were also drug addicts), muggers, hustlers, and stores that sold cheap used clothes, records, pets, and the latest trendy sneakers. It was once the place to shop and spend a lazy Saturday afternoon. Those days were long gone when I was coming up, and now it was just heartbreaking.

This is one of the reasons born-again churches sprung up and were trying to make a difference. They saw how "sinful" and dangerous the neighborhood was and would try their darndest to save people by preaching the message that Jesus loves them and will forgive them no matter what. I see why they felt that K&A was ground zero for everything they were against as Christians. They weren't wrong. It was rotten to the core for as long as I could remember. Dunkin' at K&A was always full of homeless

folk and drug addicts (at least in the '90s) looking for somewhere to kill time and get out of the cold.

The presence of a 16-year-old kid spending the wee hours of the night there was nothing to bat an eye at. Ray and his girlfriend, Tina (I think), stayed with me for a few hours. She lived in Fishtown, and when we hung out, the white kids would chase us out of the neighborhood. One of the groups of kids had a gang named WTO which meant Whites Take Over. Yet even with such a family-friendly name, they still chased two white kids from the other side of the El away. I was pretty much by myself with nothing to do but think. Dunkin' was cool with people staying there all night, as long as you bought one drink every few hours.

I have no idea what I did to entertain myself that night, but I somehow did. I do remember my one shining moment of the night quite well. It was bad enough that I was on the run and had no idea what would happen next, and I had to spend a night or two in a dirty, smelly Dunkin' Donuts, but on top of it all, I had to have a bowel movement. The Dunkin' bathroom, which was as shitty as a donut chain place under the El in Kensington could be, was not working and was closed. I think this was partly a way to keep the homeless from bathing in the bathroom and junkies from shooting up, but either way, I had to go, and there was nowhere to go besides maybe a bar that I wasn't sure I would be allowed in.

I weighed my choices and saw two options. I either suck it up and go home and use the comfort of my doorless bathroom that didn't flush if too much toilet paper got used. There was also a bucket next to the toilet that would have to get filled and then poured into the toilet to let the shit go down. Sometimes doing this would make the bowl fill to the tippy top and occasionally spill onto the floor. Or I could try to find an alleyway to take a shit outside in the dead of night. I chose the latter.

I didn't have to go far from Dunkin' to find my spot. It was a small alleyway between the end of a strip of row homes and a store on Kensington Ave. The alley was full of trash (they all were). My luck turned around when I saw, to my astonishment, a chair sitting in the middle of the alleyway, missing the seat pad. It would be one lousy chair to sit on, but it made a great makeshift toilet. I did my business on the chair as fast as I could, so I didn't get caught. I used the napkins I grabbed from Dunkin' to wipe my anus. I think (and I'm truly sorry for this) I left the napkins under the chair where my stool now resided. I went back into the Dunkin', washed my hands (just to let you know, if you were starting to think I lost all my dignity), and sat there until it was time to go to Ray's, which was about 7 am.

I had to get some sleep. I dosed off now and then at Dunkin' but falling asleep was one thing the employees frowned upon. You'd get woken or kicked out if caught doing so. Once again, I think this was to ensure the homeless and addicts didn't set up camp there for the night.

I have slept on some strange things in my day, and this would be right there with the most uncomfortable. Ray rarely went to school, so he was home all day. He came up with the bright idea of me sleeping on his floor and putting his mattress on top of me (he was also one who wouldn't have a frame and just slept on a mattress on the ground) so his mom, who didn't work, wouldn't see some strange kid sleeping in their house instead of being in school. He snuck me into his house and room without his mom knowing I was there.

I was desperately tired and agreed to this bizarre sleeping arrangement and got a few hours of sleep. After waking up around 11 am, Ray and I decided to kill time on South Street, going in and out of stores, looking at stuff, or stealing beads and fake jewelry from a store that sold trinkets to make your own cheap bracelets.

I rarely stole due to my utter fear that I would get caught or God would make sure I suffered for the sin. But I did take a few trinkets just for the hell of it. It was extremely easy to steal from them because there were so many bins full of stuff, and they were short-staffed. Ray already knew about this and acted like a pro shoplifter there.

After wandering around with no money, we got hungry and panhandled like the homeless and drug addicts at K&A. South Street was a cleaner, more open-sky version of K&A, except there were no whores, more expensive stores, and a lot whiter people.

We got enough money for a slice of pizza and a drink, then panhandled again to get the El home. This time (and every time going forward) we went my way, walking up the smaller numbered streets until we got to Market St.

We got enough cash in no time flat and spent the rest of the day being degenerates around Kensington until another stint at Dunkin' for the night. I suddenly felt I should call home for the first time since I left.

I decided if anyone besides my mom answered, I would hang up and call again until I got her. I dialed from a pay phone and got her on the first try. She asked when I would be home, and I told her I didn't want to come back. She said my dad was upset and wanted me home. Even though he was doing a terrible job as a dad and head of the household, somewhere in his head, if we were under one roof as a family, we were somehow normal, and he was doing something right. I also think he didn't want anyone to know about the problems in our household, especially the church folk who liked to pry into other's lives because it made them feel better about theirs. I think he was keeping up the appearance that everything was okay as far as our extended family was concerned, but I am pretty sure they knew it was bad. Maybe not as bad as it was, but they had a general idea.

I told my mom I was staying with a friend and that I would call her back tomorrow to see what I would do next. I wasn't sure what I would do. I just wanted to get off the phone and figure it out. She was upset and wanted me home, but I wasn't going to do that. I told Ray I didn't want to spend hours in Dunkin' all night again, and we created a basic, fail-proof plan for me to stay in his house for the night.

I would sit on the living room couch with Ray, watching TV until 6 am when his dad gets up for work and his three younger brothers get up for school. If someone came down the steps or one of his family members woke up early, I'd leave through the back door in the kitchen (like most row homes in Kensington).

Ray tried his best to stay up with me, but around 1 am, I was left to my own devices. I was so scared to get up from the couch that I didn't move. I had to pee so badly, but I sat there watching late-night broadcast TV. It started with the Jay Leno show, followed by Conan O'Brien. Then NBC became redundant with nonstop segments on the 1994 winter Olympics and the scandal that was the attack on ice figure skater Nancy Kerrigan by her rival, Tonya Harding.

The segment ran for what seemed like hours. They showed the same footage of the skaters in motion and the fallout from the scandal. It made the winter Olympics that year exciting for the occasional viewer. I knew most of the story from SNL skits, but after that night, I was an expert on the saga.

I fell asleep and woke up around 6 am to a sound coming from upstairs. Someone was using the bathroom and started coming down the steps. I ran into the kitchen and tried to open the back door, but it was locked with two locks and was taking too long, so I hid between the stove and the kitchen cabinets.

I was hunched down low, hoping whoever it was would go back upstairs, so I could leave through the front door. They didn't leave, so I crouched down with my head leaning on the stove until I fell asleep. I got woken up by a screaming 10-year-old.

One of Ray's little brothers was screaming bloody murder that some guy was in the kitchen. I can only imagine what went through his little mind when he saw this strange guy crouching in his kitchen. His yelling woke everyone, including Ray's dad, who was coming to investigate and beat the shit out of the intruder. Finally, Ray woke up from his slumber, jumped up, and said it was a friend who spent the night. We explained what happened, and his parents were cool with me staying over if I needed to. They weren't upset with the explanation of why I was hiding in the kitchen.

We hung out for a good amount of time in his house with his family, who I liked a lot. Then Ray and I met up with these girls he knew from South Philly, and we all snuck into a movie. *Reality Bites* became one of my favorites for a while. I saw it four times in the theater and bought and loved the soundtrack. Since I didn't have a VCR, I didn't see *Singles* until much later in the '90s, so I didn't realize how much of a rip-off *Reality Bites* was. Both movies are good, but *Singles* is better. I thought Ethan Hawke's character was badass, and I was in love with Wynona Ryder. It was a good break from my present situation. One girl hanging out with us was named Jen, and we made out during the movie to be as cliché as possible.

I got Jen's number and tried to have a relationship with her, only to have her mess around with my head for shits and giggles. She told me she liked me a wanted to be a

couple, but then I didn't hear from her for days. I called her landline every day, and when she answered, she pretended to be someone else (I think her cousin) and would tell me how Jen had a boyfriend already. Then Jen would call me and say her cousin was making shit up and how we should get together soon. I even fell for her inviting me to South Philly to hang out, and she didn't show. I know I shouldn't have fallen for her shit, nor did I when she told me she was her cousin, but I was desperate for a real relationship, so I put up with it.

Ray told me I shouldn't care about love or anything like that and to just get with as many girls as possible. He was more of a player, and I may have had a couple of girls I was seeing, but it would only be when I got fed up. I would always go back to being the guy with a heart, looking for Mrs. Right. I was like goddamn Ted from the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*.

In retrospect, I deserved the treatment by Jen a little. I ended things with Tonya by not ending them at all. I just stopped calling her after I heard she was cheating on me with her ex-boyfriend, and instead of confronting her about it, I believed the stories and never called her again. After I left my house, I had no idea if she tried calling. I can be cruel sometimes. In my defense, I was trying to leave as much of Kensington behind me as possible. I was looking for a life-changing moment. And I got it and then some.

Chapter 115

Grandma Take Me Home

That Friday, I called my mom from a pay phone and told her I still didn't have any idea what to do next. She suggested going to my grandma Peggy's house in Mayfair for a few days or longer if she let me. My mom called my grandma and asked her if it was okay, and she said it was.

I went to her house around 10 pm. My grandparents worked overnights, so they weren't home when I got there. My cousin Billy (who also lived there) was home. I slept in his room since there were two beds. The next day, I talked with one of my uncles or aunts, I don't remember who, about me asking my grandma if I could live there for a bit. She would say yes, but I had to man up and ask her myself.

I talked to my grandma as soon as she woke up. She said I could stay, as long as I went back to school. I was not going to CIBA the whole time I was on the run, and I really wanted to cut them off too, but I couldn't go to any other public schools in Philly. I didn't have any credits and would have to test in, so I would have to start in 9th or 10th grade at age 16. No thanks.

I agreed to the arrangement and would be at my hellhole school on Monday. I told my mom about being able to stay there, and she was relieved. My dad wasn't too happy, though. The jig was up. Even though people knew it was bad, the genie was out of the bottle (and all other phrases to illustrate our terrible family issues at 163 E. Wishart Street).

I knew my decision to leave would change my life, but I had no idea how much it would impact my family for years to come. I changed our lives with one moment of utter frustration and determination that I wouldn't stand for this awful way of living anymore.

I wish I could say it was all sunshine and roses from here on out, but it wasn't. It got so much worse that I sometimes regret leaving that faithful night in February of '94, but it had to happen. No matter how bad it gets for me, I would have died or been a total degenerate if I had stayed in the pits of Kensington.

Chapter 116

Do the Evolution

I settled in at my grandmas nicely. Mayfair was a few neighborhoods away from Kensington and a lot cleaner and nicer. It was a quiet middle-class neighborhood full of hard-working people in nice row homes, surrounded by restaurants, mom-and-pop shops, fast food, and sports bars. I didn't have to look over my shoulder every other minute going to the bus stop or stores. Mayfair was where my old church and school, Maranatha, was located. I guess I could have gone back to school there, but since my mom taught kindergarten at CIBA, I got to go for free. I'd have to pay for a lackluster education at any other born-again school.

I started getting back to my routine of going to school and working for the paper job. At school, nothing changed. I was still sitting alone against the wall, getting a make-believe education.

One thing that they tried to teach us with the Lifepacs was Spanish. I'm not sure how one can learn a language by reading it to yourself and trying to figure out how the words sound. But I did try with some other kids to learn it. It was in a different room than usual. Holden, who I guess understood a little bit of the language, would come in every so often to say certain words out loud or to go over our answers, but it didn't take. I think this needed to be taught by an expert. Almost all of the subjects they had should have had a real teacher.

They did one thing right. They taught us to type on an actual computer. It was still too early for global accessibility to the internet, so the computer we used was in Holden's office and was just for keeping files and typing things to print out.

The older kids all got a shot at learning to type. We would go in one at a time and work on exercises that Holden had programs for teaching typing. It was the only thing I learned from those years that I would use often.

The only class we had that didn't involve teaching yourself with Lifepacs was a class taught by the Pastor called Creation. This class discussed the evidence of the bible's claim that God created everything in the universe in seven days. And how absurd the theory of evolution was. It was mainly based on the first book of the bible, Genesis. We had to do an experiment as a class to show the difference between creationism and evolution and how creationism was the only truth.

We decided to do the only thing I would ever really enjoy at this motherfucking school, and that was a performance for the entire school of 30 kids of the play *Inherit the Wind*.

It was based on a true story of a teacher who got arrested in the early 20th century for teaching evolution in his state-run classroom. The Scopes Monkey Trial was the coined name of this historical event.

It was basically a publicity stunt to put the town of Dayton, TN on the map and show the fundamentalist (born-againers) and the modernist (logical folk) differences and to have each prove their stance on the subject of the origins of mankind.

I knew of the story due to the born-againers love for it. They used it as their big triumph in the battle of fact-based science and holy moly hocus pocus about God making everything in seven days only 10,000 years ago. But where the Pastor of my church made a mistake was thinking this project would show me the evil ways of Darwinism and how mighty the words of Moses, who believed fire bushes were talking to him, were.

I found myself rooting for the character in the play who defended the guy teaching evolution. I also learned that the teacher was convicted and given a fine but served no jail time after appeals by his lawyer went to the Supreme court, where Scopes got freed on a technicality.

To me, this huge win for the fundamentalists was not as great as they claimed. The teacher said he didn't even know if he was teaching evolution but went along with the case so there would be a defendant for this national story that pushed it into the limelight. Yes, he had to pay a fine of \$100 and was not allowed to teach evolution in TN in 1925, but Darwinism and science won.

The country was starting to think more logically and pushing for modern science teaching in schools over religious beliefs with no proof besides an ancient book. It would transform even the diehard creationists to think that evolution was factual, but God was behind it, so it was still God that created man through evolution.

Eventually, proven science about our existence would be taught in state run schools, even after several states tried, and failed, to ban the teaching of evolution after the Scopes trials. So, in most cases, the Modernists won the battle, but the war is ongoing.

Anyway, since it was my idea to do the play, I oversaw everyone involved and was basically the director. I played the part of the defense lawyer, Henry Drummond (based on the defense lawyer, Clarence Darrow, from the Scopes Monkey Trial). I memorized my lines after practicing them as much as possible and was ready to play the part in front of the school. The only problem was the rest of the kids involved didn't give a shit about the play and never wanted to rehearse.

They waited until the last days to get together in the auditorium (where the play took place) and go over the scenes. The play was half-assed and not taken seriously by

anyone involved besides me. I had fun anyway and got to act like a lawyer (my inspirations were Denzel Washington in *Philadelphia* and Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men*). I did an okay job. I was interested in acting since TV and movies were my favorite things as a kid. I wanted to be an actor until my sister told me I had no talent and wasn't good-looking enough. When I decided singing was my life and tried teaching myself by singing along with my favorite songs in my room, my sister would be the constant negative voice telling me how awful I sounded.

This brief 20 minutes on a stage acting like a lawyer was fun, and I wish I had the outlet and encouragement to pursue it. If I were in a regular or normal born-again school, I probably would have been motivated and had a chance to pursue acting. However, I did get a compliment from the last person I thought I would, Dave Holden.

He told me I was good and that I had charisma. I didn't know what charisma was, so he told me it was something I have that attracts people. He said the other kids, especially the young ones, gravitate to me. He asked me what I wanted to do with my life and said, "I guess you want to do something with acting." Unfortunately, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life, and I never thought acting was in my future due to my self-doubt and low self-esteem ingrained in me as a child.

I also didn't think a Christian college or institute that would have me with my lack of credits and funds would provide any options for me to pursue acting the way that I wanted. Holden did say something about Christian movies and plays, but I didn't think I could go anywhere that would launch a career, especially one into bullshit Christian films about the rapture and whatnot.

Maybe if I were at a school like Bensalem Baptist with my BFF Uriah and got the right education that could get me into a traditional college, I would have had a chance. But I was stuck in this rut of having no options besides being a deacon or a "teacher" in CIBA if I wanted to "graduate" from such a poor educational system.

Chapter 117

I Fight Authority and Authority Always Win

I was a realist and knew my fate was doomed with these folk. If I had the chance then or within the next year to be motivated and led on the right path to use and discover my talents, I might have had a chance for a bright future. It did not happen. Instead, I was just a loser who didn't know what to do with his life, but I was hoping a career in music would be the answer. It was nice of Holden to tell me he thought I had a chance to be an actor, even if it was an actor in Christian propaganda.

Looking back, I don't think Holden knew how bad it was for us. He and many adults who oversaw our poor minds weren't educated as kids with Lifepacs in a small room with no other opportunities besides working in the ministry. They claimed it was the best job since it would be god's will or plan. God planned to brush away any backlash from failing to teach kids to do anything meaningful with their lives.

It doesn't matter if a bunch of geniuses and potential artists came through their schools. They would still have no chance to achieve anything besides living in the same areas and settling for jobs they can hopefully get after they leave their guidance. It's all under the umbrella of God's plan.

These adults came from conventional backgrounds and found Jesus later in life. Now they were in charge of crafting young minds to do what they thought was the right way to live, the way they lived. God was in control, and it was his will to be mediocre, poor, and uneducated. There was no need for extra things, like sports and acting, as long as you were doing God's will. It was there to keep kids in line and pretend their schooling was normal to make their jobs matter. Your God is a dick.

I tried to act later in life, but it was too late for me to have a career in a field so ruthless that you need confidence and nerves of steel to succeed.

Chapter 118

Jeanne, Jeanne, I'm Calling from Queens

I went to NYC for the first time with Holden and the other adults in the church to help some church in Queens with something I didn't care about because I wanted to go to NYC any way I could. I thought I would see sights like the Statue of Liberty, but I only saw it from the highway leaving that night.

When I realized, we were only going to Queens to move furniture into a church that was part of the born-again network, I was pissed. My real motive was to try to call Jeanne because I still thought we had something, and I thought, in my child-like hopeful mindset, maybe I could see her somehow.

I had no idea how far her house in Pearl River was from NYC, but I thought the pay phone call would be cheaper than from Philly. It was not. I thought it would be a quarter but ended up being a couple of dollars. She did answer, and I was happy to hear from her for the few minutes my change bought me.

Then the operator's message cut in asking for more money, giving Jeanne, who was being polite to this kid who didn't get the hint, a chance to hang up. I tried to get an "I love you" from her by saying I loved her as we were hanging up. When she didn't reply, half of me thought she was not saying it because she didn't feel that way (my logical side) and the other half thought she didn't hear me because of the operator's message (the idiot and optimistic side that gets me hurt a lot). And that was that. I would see Jeanne one last time when I finally got the hint. I was just too dense to see it till then.

Chapter 119

The Ice Storm Cometh

Back home, I was enjoying the comforts of the world that I never had. This included premium cable, hot water, accessibility to showers, no rodents or infestation of roaches, and a lack of drug dealers sitting on my steps, getting annoyed when I asked them to move so I could get into my house. I was hanging out with Ray a lot, mostly in Kensington or South Street, with his girlfriend. We did the usual stuff like drinking on the weekends and wandering the streets looking for something to do. Ray would steal things when I asked him to, like books and cigarettes, since I was smoking more than ever like a fool.

This was around the time I went to the skater party with Christine, and she told the one skater I was bisexual. Christine and I were close. She would call me her best friend. Earlier that year, a severe ice storm shut down the city. The Pastor of the church said it shows how great God is when a whole city must shut down over the weather.

The storm caused a traumatic event in Christine's life. Her father, an older gentleman with a kind heart, was going to work via Septa. I don't remember what he did, but it was important enough to go out in an ice storm.

There was an inch of ice all over the ground. We were told to stay inside if we didn't have to go out. Christine's dad was one of those who had to go out and was walking to the El stop a few blocks away from his house when he slipped on the ice and hit his head so hard that he got rushed to the University of Pennsylvania Hospital.

I got the call that night from Christine and met her at the hospital in the morning to provide some comfort. Her dad was not responding. He was in the hospital for days. I don't remember if he was in a coma or on life support, but the outcome did not look good. All of Christine's friends were camped out at the hospital the whole time, supporting her and her family.

One of the most touching moments was when Christine and I were at her dad's bedside, and she wanted to sing a song to him. He really liked the tune that was probably #1 on the charts, Mariah Carey's "Hero." Christine said he would watch the video and think Mariah was so pretty in her black gown.

Christine and I sang "Hero" to her dying father. He passed away not long after, and Christine, her mom, and her brother Dave were, of course, devastated. So, Pastor, your god might have shown his power over the city's trash pickup schedule and how

many schools were closed due to the ice, but it also took my friend's dad before his time.

During this tragedy, Christine and I were closer than ever. When I wasn't with Ray or Eddie, I was with her and the girls. It would be that way for some time until she made me angry too much for making fun of Michael Stipe. Our relationship was almost like we were siblings or maybe an old married couple.

We cared about each other but would also fight and make fun of each other (well, she made fun of me, and I would take it like a sap). Along with her telling the neighborhood I was bisexual; she also would say outrageous things about Stipe to get under my skin. She said he had AIDS for a while in the '90s. Then she called me, and suggested Stipe had cancer after he shaved his head and showed how skinny he was. I hung up on her that time.

Once, while waiting for a bus, we started talking about the meaning of life and death. It was like the talks that Tami (the metalhead Spanish girl) and I frequently had. It was about there being something else besides what the bible says.

The conversation could have gone nowhere or changed to something more pleasant, but instead, Christine got mad at me. She thought I was nuts for thinking anything deeper than what was in front of me. She didn't talk to me for a few days. I got Rose to intervein with us. She took my side and said it was nothing to be mad about; it's just how I think.

I realize this was only a few months after her dad's untimely death, and she was rightfully upset with anything that challenged the things that gave her comfort. I'm Sorry, Christine.

Chapter 120

The Day the Music Died

On April 8th, I came home after school and was tired, so I took a nap. I woke up around 5 pm and put on my usual channel, MTV. Instead of their most requested videos show, Kurt Loder, the MTV news anchor, was talking about someone being found dead in their home in Seattle.

I watched intensely for the name of who died, hoping it wasn't one of my heroes. But it was one of them. One that I held up high. Kurt Cobain was found dead from apparent suicide by a shotgun blast to his head. It was something I had never experienced before. One of my idols, at the young age of 27, was now dead.

It put things into perspective about music and the artist who made it.

Earlier that year, Cobain overdosed on painkillers. When the news broke, I thought he was partying too hard or accidentally took too much and wouldn't make that mistake again. Now, it seemed he was trying to kill himself then. I was in shock, and there was a sense of despair that weekend. It was like the wind got knocked out of you.

Kurt Cobain wasn't only dead, but he killed himself, making his persona and his words more real than ever to me. He meant it when he named the song "I Hate Myself and Want to Die."

The pain Kurt wrote about wasn't just a guy feeling bad about himself.

He was a tortured soul, and he was the real thing.

The first person I called was Eddie since he was the biggest Nirvana fan I knew besides myself. I told him we should have seen Nirvana last fall. He was in shock, like all of us. It was a big blow to those who loved the band. Kurt Cobain, during the height of his fame, left the world way too early.

I heard stories that month that Nirvana was going to headline Lollapalooza that year with the Smashing Pumpkins. I was excited to see two bands I liked, especially Nirvana. But once again, I would not see Nirvana live. I decided I wouldn't miss another band I wanted to see, even if I had to go to a show by myself or travel to other cities to see the acts I loved (which I did a lot).

That weekend on MTV was nonstop coverage of what happened to Cobain and tributes to his music. His wife, Courtney Love, read Kurt's suicide letter over a loudspeaker in a park in Washington, where fans of the band gathered to grieve the icon. It was bittersweet watching teenagers my age to people in their 50s mourn Kurt

while his widow (who I didn't know much about besides one song from her band Hole) read his sad, poetic suicide note.

I heard stories and articles during these tributes and news coverage of Cobain's death that got to me. I learned he was a huge R.E.M. fan and only wanted to make music with Michael Stipe. They called Cobain the spokesperson for his generation, which made sense, but his statements about R.E.M. made me realize how much we saw things alike.

He said the only band he appreciated or had respect for was R.E.M. He loved how they handled their fame and success on their terms. Kurt held Stipe in the limelight (like me). He was going to break up Nirvana, and the path this genius wanted to go down musically was one that Stipe was on.

MTV revealed that in the sleeve for *In Utero*, Nirvana thanked R.E.M. I ran to my copy of the album, and there it was, under my nose since the fall of '93. Nirvana loves R.E.M. I had no idea that there was such an appreciation for R.E.M. by a band that was on the louder side of rock. It made me like Kurt even more.

Like many kids, I was not there on day one. At the beginning of "About a Girl" from Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York*, Kurt said, "This is off our first record. Most people don't own it." I was "most people." I found out later that Kurt tried to capture the best of R.E.M. and Sonic Youth while making *Bleach*. I loved the albums I had by Nirvana. The first time I heard "Smells Like Teen Spirit," I had no idea what Cobain was singing. I wouldn't know entirely until a few years later, when I heard Tori Amos' quiet piano-driven version of the song. It made the lyrics clear. But I always loved how it sounded. *Nevermind* and *In Utero* are excellent records that impacted my development. I would, of course, go back and get *Bleach*, which I like a lot, but it would be the first two I owned that I hold up the highest.

In 1994, alternative rock was getting bigger, and more acts were crossing over to the mainstream. When I first heard Nirvana in 1991/92, I had no idea what was going on with rock music as it appealed to a popular audience. I thought Nirvana was just another hard rock band, and I had no idea they were leading the charge to get rid of other prominent rock bands like Def Leppard and Guns N' Roses. I didn't know it was a changing of the guard kind of thing with Nirvana and more thought-provoking music over the egotistical, male chauvinist essence of the hard rock/hair metal scene that took over the airwaves for the better part of the '80s and early '90s. But this scenario didn't happen as fast as people think.

It wasn't overnight that Nirvana took over MTV and G N' R was unemployed. I would argue that it wasn't just Nirvana that helped launch the alternative rock rise in the '90s to counter the jock rock of the '80s. R.E.M., U2, The Pixies, Sonic Youth, Depeche Mode, and The Cure were all going strong in the '80s and '90s, pushing the envelope and paving the way for what would eventually happen. R.E.M. and U2 had extremely popular albums the year Nirvana broke. The pendulum was already

swinging the way for an alt-rock takeover. It wasn't just one band that exploded out of nowhere.

There were tons of bands on their way to breaking through the same time as Nirvana, including Pearl Jam, The Smashing Pumpkins, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Soundgarden. However, I think Nirvana's success paved the way for these bands and kept them on their game. In 1994, alt-rock was big, but not like after Kurt died. It was almost like his death pushed alternative to be the biggest thing for a few years. A good example is before 1994, MTV had its countdown of the best videos of all time. Number one and two would be either "Thriller" by Michael Jackson and "November Rain" by G N' R, while Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" would be around number 11. I think "Jeremy" from Pearl Jam was higher than "Teen Spirit." After Kurt's death, the video went to number 3 and eventually number 1.

In Philly, there was only one alternative rock station, 103.9 WDRE. While other stations would play alt-rock, they also played popular music. Y100 played everything from Billy Joel and Poison to R.E.M. and Nirvana. I first heard Poison's cheesy ballad, "Every Rose Has Its Thorn," on Y100. In the summer of 1994, they shifted to an all-alternative station because the music was now mainstream.

Before Y100 went under in the early 2000s, they started moving their format to include newer Metallica, rap-rock, and for the life of me, I will never understand, Eminem. But in between, they pushed lousy CVS versions of "alt" bands like Third Eye Blind, Stroke 9, and Matchbox 20. They were all god-awful. It was the popular bands (Green Day and Weezer) that record companies wanted you to hear. WDRE was the best way to find groups you didn't know.

Before 1994, if you saw someone wearing the shirt of a band you loved, it was special and led to a conversation. After 1994, every kid wore either a grunge shirt or flannel. I know alternative was popular before the death of Cobain, but the takeover didn't fully take place until that year. At least, that's how it seemed to me.

Cobain didn't want to help record labels sell fraudulent bands that got signed due to Nirvana's popularity. Maybe he knew what was coming with the shit storm of mediocre bands on MTV and top 40 radio. But I think his death pushed fast forward, and we were flooded with terrible bands that the only thing they had in common with Nirvana was long hair and power chords. I'm looking at you, Bush and Silverchair.

Kurt was one of my top five heroes whose relatable lyrics helped me think about things differently. He was a feminist and would stick up for the underdogs and outcasts. He did all of this with songs that were catchy and enjoyable.

His death was the first like it for me. As a fan, I thought the band would never go away. I remember my aunt Mary saying that this was similar to when John Lennon died for her generation. I don't know if that was the case, but it remains one of the most heartbreaking deaths of a person I admired.

I will hear negative comments about Cobain killing himself for quite some time. It would be about how he had everything and killed himself, how selfish he was, and how he was wrong for leaving his daughter behind. People would ask, “Why does this bother you so much? You didn’t know him.” They thought he only did it to become more famous (which was absurd). I ignored these comments like I ignored the ones about R.E.M. sucking or how they “sold out.”

It was just people talking shit about things they thought they knew. Often, they were being dicks and trying to get a rise out of me. There are a lot of assholes out there. I saw Cobain as a guy with demons and depression that was too hard to handle. I identified with that and knew how hard life was. Add a horrible addiction that I also had firsthand knowledge of, and you get a disaster waiting to happen.

His death made me appreciate not just him but all my favorite singers. I watched Pearl Jam a couple of Saturdays later, when they were the musical guest on SNL. Eddie Vedder wore the letter “K” on the heart side of his shirt and sang the line, “Rock and roll can never die, there’s more to the picture than meets the eye,” from Neil Young’s “My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue).” In Kurt’s suicide note, he quoted the line, “It’s better to burn out than to fade away,” from the same song.

Michael Stipe was too emotional to say much in a public statement. He was close to Cobain and was working on music with him. He did say that he lost a partner or an ally. The entire rock world was touched by the death of a songwriter who wore his heart on his sleeve.

I hate to admit it, but I took Kurt Cobain for granted. I appreciate him more now, like many people who go too early. It kills me to say it, but with his death, I took his words more seriously. I often thought about not wanting to live or being born at all (the latter was more comforting). I now saw that one of my idols wasn’t just talking about sadness and not wanting to exist; he felt this way and acted on it. That, and his Stipe love, made me realize I had more in common with him than I ever knew.

Chapter 121

Monkey See Monkey Do. Rather Be Dead Than Cool

In the next few months, I would make some changes in my life, partially due to Cobain's death. I was still trying to play guitar and was still bad at it. But I was writing poems and was in the mindset of wanting to be a singer in a band. I was not a good singer. I would try to train myself to sing better, but I was clueless.

The first thing I decided to do to be a better singer was to quit smoking. I wasn't the biggest smoker. I only smoked for a few months, so quitting wasn't hard. My throat was scratchy, and I would cough a lot, so I thought stopping would help me sing. I got in touch with many things I wanted to do or was inspired to do by Stipe and Cobain.

I watched my dad and others around me suffer from their choices and substance abuse. I was drinking as much as the next teenager from Philly (on weekends mostly) but thought it would lead to my demise like my father and grandfather. I was starting to want to be in control of my feelings and actions and wanted nothing to stifle them, even when I was utterly sad or depressed.

I decided to stop drinking and smoking pot to stay in tune with my feelings. I also started my first step to becoming a vegetarian. It wasn't easy at first, but once I did it, I never looked back. I was finding myself, and all I wanted was to be myself, like my heroes. All these things were already in me but living in an area where things weren't so chaotic and traumatic gave me more time to develop my emotional being.

I had two things going on in my head at the same time. I wanted to be like Stipe, Cobain, and Tori Amos and would do anything to be like them (like changing my ways and trying to sing and write better). But I also thought there was a reason for everything I had gone through, and fate or God was in control. It's hard to escape that mentality (it took decades). I thought if I kept true to myself, it would take me where I wanted to go and be. It was a sense of meaning and purpose, maybe wrongfully placed or not.

I thought that singing and writing lyrics was my calling. I looked at Cobain and thought maybe I could achieve a life like his with my words and voice, which I thought my voice was sort of in his range. I wanted to be like Stipe and sing with beautiful depth, but I felt I couldn't be nearly as good as him.

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My low self-esteem constantly plagued me and created sadness in my life. I thought I couldn't do the things I truly wanted to do, so I relied on outside sources to carry me to the promised land of being a successful singer.

I was also a bit of a realist, so I would keep these thoughts to myself and keep trying to become a better writer and singer independently. But this double mindset will haunt me for decades. I will think, foolishly, that everything I do and every person I meet is part of my path to my destiny of doing something good with my life. In a way, everything that happens is indeed part of my development, but I thought it was more like destiny guiding me through life, and there was a reason behind it all.

This thought pattern might sound ludicrous, but it gave me the hope I needed. I had a dream. It's why Tami nicknamed me Dreamchild. I told her my thoughts and what I wanted to do, and she never judged or belittled me. She was my moral support when I was trying to figure out what everything in life meant. I was on the phone with her and told her I couldn't stop thinking of our existence, what made us, and the purpose of it all. She said that kind of thinking would drive me crazy (she was right), but I didn't care. I had to keep thinking and questioning things. It went from just wanting to have a normal life and being okay with a god figure controlling everything to needing answers to these questions the Christians made me think of since I was four. All they did was plug in their make-believe answers.

Now that I was fed up with their bible talk and foolish explanations of our purpose, I wanted to find the truth or at least a sense of understanding. It will be a long road I will travel that will lead to some insane thoughts. LSD may or may not be involved in some of it. But that is much later.

Chapter 122

Poetic Justice

I wrote a poem back then that I was quite proud of called “When I’m Gone.” I eventually turned it into a song when I finally started a band a couple of years later. I wrote it one afternoon after being sad about girls and my future and whatnot. Here is part of it:

*“I’m alone with nowhere to go
I am here with only the sins that I know
I am in as I am out
As I’m surrounded by all my doubts.
Will you miss me when I’m gone?
Will cry when you’re all alone
Will you try when everything has gone wrong
Will you miss me when I’m gone?”*

It was a lot longer, and I think it had some good lines but I have lost any copies of it besides the few lines I remember. I thought it was the best thing I had written yet, and many people thought it was nice. I even entered some con job poetry contest with a shorter version of it. It was a publishing company that offered \$1000 to the winner of the best poem. I got a letter saying I was a semi-finalist, and my poem would get published in their “best of” anthology from the contest. The catch was you had to send them 50 or 60 bucks in advance to own a copy of the book. I almost did it.

Then my instincts kicked in, and I realized I would not be published in the book unless I bought one, and if they got thousands of people to buy it, they would make a huge profit. In return, you get to display your mediocre poem in a sea of mediocre poems to your friends and family.

I will try this again with other poems in the future, but mostly to prove it was always the same letter that goes out, even with its special note from the editor telling me how good the poem was! But those fuckers wouldn’t get a dime from me.

The poem/song was good for me to vent about my feelings, but it was also the first time I thought what I wrote was good. Maybe I was getting better at my only creative

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endeavor. But my self-doubt always leers its ugly head to cut me down to size, making it fall on deaf ears.

Chapter 123

I Love Eddie Davis

I won another radio contest on a local top 40 station, 97.5 WPST. This time it was for Lollapalozza '94, the concert that should have been the first time I saw Nirvana. Smashing Pumpkins were headlining, and I really liked them, so that was enough for me to want to go. The other bands I liked were the Breeders and the Beastie Boys (even though I was never a fanatic, I liked a lot of their songs). I really didn't know much about the other bands besides L7, who had a few alt-rock hits. I also liked some of the hits from A Tribe Called Quest.

I wanted to go to my first concert, and what a first concert this would be, so I decided to call in for the contest. I got through, and the DJ decided I had to play a game to get the tickets. He made me go to a window in the kitchen and yell, "I love Eddie Davis!" who was WPST's morning show host. First, I had to change phones since I was on a corded one. I needed the cordless from upstairs to reach the window.

I put the DJ on hold, hoping he wouldn't hang up on me. When I returned from running to get the cordless phone, I was breathing loudly and deeply. The DJ made fun of me, saying, "Is that you breathing, or is there a windstorm over there?" I said (still catching my breath), "That's me breathing." He laughed and then I went to the window and shouted, "I love Eddie Davis, he's the best-looking guy I have ever seen. I want to marry Eddie Davis. I am in love with Eddie Davis!" and I won Lollapalooza tickets. The radio station would use that recording of me screaming during his morning show every day as it started. The lengths that I would go to for my first concert.

Chapter 124

Do You Have the Time to Listen to Me Whine?

The summer was fast approaching, and I was looking forward to another fun and relaxing time in Wildwood. Around late June, I got to go to my summer hometown and stay with my grandma Dolores for the last time.

It was different than the year before. Many stores were selling Kurt Cobain RIP 1967-1994 t-shirts, and kids were wearing more alt-rock shirts and dying their hair different colors. I let two cute punk rock girls talk me into dying my hair a bright red. They did the dye job on the boardwalk with a jar of manic panic, a hair dye marketed to those who wanted to stand out with offbeat hair color. It would be the first of many times I would dye my hair an outrageous color.

I kept in contact with one of the girls, and she would throw punk rock shows in her town at some church. It was the first time I heard of such a thing. These girls might have been the first punk rockers I ever met. They were the nicest and were really into Green Day, who were starting to get traction in the music world. In Wildwood, I get lost in a bubble of fun in the sun and don't know what's popular back home.

I had no idea Green Day was getting so huge and was helping bring more punk rock acts into the mainstream. I liked the band but wasn't crazy about them. I thought they were fun, like Weezer, but I didn't take them seriously until 2004 with their anti-war, anti-Bush Jr. album, *American Idiot*.

Alternative rock had taken over the youth that flocked to the boardwalk. Every kid was wearing an alt-rock shirt, and I thought the world was in the right direction. I thought progress was taking place before me, and I loved it.

Chapter 125

The Last Known Sighting of Jeanne the Boardwalk Queen

Music was my favorite thing to talk about. Now I saw a bunch of kids my age liking bands I liked or respected. I thought everyone loved their favorite bands as much as I did. I thought I found a place to belong and grow aside from the church.

I, not knowing any better, bought a Kurt Cobain tribute shirt. I wore it proudly to pay my respects to my fallen hero.

Then, during my first week in Wildwood, someone told me, “That shirt isn’t right. They are making a profit off someone’s death.” It was astonishing and wouldn’t sink into my 16-year-old brain for quite some time, but they were right. That person was Jeanne, The Boardwalk Queen! She was in town for her high school’s senior week vacation. Somehow, I convinced her (during one of my failed phone calls) to meet up with me when she got there. She, being nice as can be, agreed to meet me in front of the usual spot, the boardwalk mall.

She was with all these other seniors. They were annoying and making fun of me as much as they could without going overboard. I am sure they knew all about me and my not letting go of my summer love with Jeanne.

We hung out for a bit, but it was as if Jeanne was forced to do so. It was the first time I had seen her since August of 1993 when I went to her house, and soon after that, we started to fizzle out. Part of me thought if we saw each other in person, she might have feelings for me again or something along those lines. It was a child’s dream.

It was finally becoming a reality that Jeanne didn’t want to rekindle our summer fling from last year. I said goodbye to her and said, “This is probably the last time we will see each other.” She said not to say that, but it was the last time.

I let her off the hook to hang out with her friends and went back to West Wildwood to hang out with mine. I quit drinking, so that wasn’t an option to get over the situation. Instead, I felt the sadness and probably wrote a poem about it (don’t worry, all the poems I wrote around this time are long gone). Jeanne was now just a (mostly) fond memory, leaving me with another bit of wisdom about the Cobain shirt and the \$150

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phone bill we rang up talking to each other the summer before. I had to find a job to pay back my dear old grandma Dolores.

After Jeanne, I would never fall for a summer fling again. I would follow the Wildwood rule of liking them while they were there and forgetting them when they left.

Chapter 126

Make Your Money with Shrewd Denial

I started the summer late that year, so most jobs in Wildwood got taken by other kids and my favorite boardwalk workers, the Irish immigrants. They worked all summer and had the coolest accents. They also liked R.E.M. (since most Europeans have good taste in music).

I tried returning to my employer from the summer before, Pompeo's restaurant, perhaps as a waiter. They would not rehire me. I later found out it was because they thought I stole the ice cream sandwich Mike robbed from their freezer. I walked around for weeks with the same \$10 in my pocket. It was the only money I brought from Philly, and I was waiting to spend it when I had to.

I finally got a job from my buddy Harry Myers who worked at Burger King. I was trying to be a vegetarian but not always in it for the long haul (I found it hard to be one around non-vegetarians). I liked being one in front of the Xians after the Pastor told me I should read my bible, and being vegetarian would open me up to demon possession since I wouldn't give in to my primal urges.

I was pretty much done with meat, but I faltered a bit. The last meat I ate was chicken from the Burger King I worked at after I couldn't stand the guilt anymore. Burger King wasn't my best choice, but it was the only one since I had an in with Harry, and no one else would hire me. I had to pay my debts (and a Holesworth always sometimes pays their debts), and I needed money for my summer fun.

I met a coworker at the BK named Mike Moore. He loved Pearl Jam and played the drums. We became fast friends and hung out a lot even after we returned home (he was also from Northeast Philly). He was a down-to-earth dude and knew other cool people who liked the same music we did. BK became a place where I met girls and friends to hang out with for the night while they were on vacation.

Mike introduced me to a girl named Robyn, her mother, and her friend, Ryan. Robyn's mother had a house down the shore, and they stayed there most of the summer. They were very nice people from somewhere in New Jersey but closer to Philly than Wildwood.

I think Robyn had a little crush on Mike, but it was not mutual. Ryan had a crush on Robyn, but she didn't seem interested. That is the way sometimes in the vast uncertainty of teenage love. These details and names will come back later in this tale of mine.

Chapter 127

Hipsters Unite. Come Align for the Big Fight to Rock You

I finally got to go to my first concert, Lollapalooza. The radio station sent me four tickets. I took Uriah (who loved the Smashing Pumpkins), his brother Jonny (who wasn't a big music fan but came anyway), and Ray (who was a rap fan looking for fun). The venue was in South Philly at FDR park, located a stone's throw from all our sports stadiums.

The Lollapalooza tours were alt music's Woodstock. There were tons of bands playing at different times on three stages. Since it was my first show and outdoor festival, I had no idea what to expect. I wore my favorite R.E.M. T-shirt, jeans, and a pair of black ninjas shoes I got from this cool hippie shop in the boardwalk mall for \$5. I thought they would be the most comfortable to wear at an all-day event. I was right about the comfort but didn't factor in the mud that was in some spots. I ended up throwing those suckers out at the end of the day.

Walking in, I was so happy to be there. I had never seen so many neat people with dyed hair, body piercings, and many different band t-shirts. There were so many pretty girls that I met there, and everyone was so pleasant and down-to-earth. I was like a wide-eyed kid at a candy factory, just absorbing everything around me in pure delight.

We first went to the main stage, where most bigger name bands would play. If this show was the next day or two, I could have said the first band I saw live was Green Day since they joined the tour a day or two later. Instead, the first band I ever saw was one I hadn't heard of called Boredoms. They were loud, and the singer screamed a lot. I walked up to the stage, felt the bass and drums, and was fearful for a moment (thanks to the born-againers), but excited by the sounds.

I felt the rhythm in my heart and the tingling through my body. And just like that, I got hooked on live music. Even though I never listened to Boredoms (no offense) again, they left an impression on me since they were my first live band experience.

We stayed there for L7, who also had a vibrant, loud bass sound that made me feel alive. We took a trip or two to watch up-and-coming bands. We saw a little group called The Flaming lips, who I wasn't crazy about, but Uriah liked and ended up loving shortly after.

Another band we caught a glimpse of was The Verve. I wish I paid more attention to them. Three years later, I fell in love with them thanks to “Bittersweet Symphony.” But I didn’t know any better. I was having a ball and was proud of myself for not missing much because I only went to the bathroom once in the eight hours I was there. It was so hot that I sweated out most of my bodily fluids.

We returned to the main stage and caught parts of sets from bands I didn’t know, including Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (who I took too long to appreciate). The Breeders were one of the bands I wanted to see prior, and they were as good as I hoped they would be. Then A Tribe Called Quest and George Clinton had us all dancing and grooving.

The Beastie Boys came near the end of the day, and even though I wasn’t crazy about them, I had a good time watching them and jumped up and down to most of their songs. I was smashed between all these other alt-rock fans for hours, getting pushed and not having much room to move, but I loved every second of it. I was having a ball just being there.

Then one of the best moments of the day took place. In between sets, there would be songs playing over the speakers. Most of the time, I had no idea what was playing, but out of nowhere, the Lollapalooza gods played Nirvana’s “All Apologies.” Everyone there, or at least it seemed to me, sang along. It was a moving and binding moment that I will never forget. People started crowd surfing, which I wanted to do since I saw the R.E.M. video “Drive,” in which Stipe surfed over a sea of fans.

I turned to whoever was around, strangers mostly, and said, “I’m going up.” There was an unsaid code at these shows that if you wanted to crowd surf, you said the magic words (“I’m going up,” or something like that), and they would help you get on top of everyone so you could be pushed around on top of thousands of people.

Usually, it was when you loved a moment of the show or if you wanted to get out of where you were standing. Surfing would take you to one of the sides to go to the bathroom or if you wanted to take a break from being crushed. It was my first of many times doing things like this. I was 145 pounds, so I was an easy-going crowd surfer, and it lasted a decent amount of the song. It was liberating to be flung around the heads of thousands of strangers while singing one of my favorite songs. I also felt like Michael in the “Drive” video, which was always my favorite way to feel.

The headliner was The Smashing Pumpkins, the band I wanted to see the most. I somehow moved from the middle of the packed crowd to the front during The Smashing Pumpkins’ set. It was the peak of the festival. I was having the time of my 16-year-old life. I sang along to all the songs I loved. I was making eye contact, or at least thinking I did, during the line in their song “Quiet” when Corgan sang, “Jesus, are you listening up there to anyone at all?” Then, Corgan drank some water and spat it into the crowd. In my moment as a pure concert virgin, in a childlike way, I opened

my mouth and was thrilled to have some drops from his spit get into my mouth. You'd think I was a 16-year-old fan of the New Kids on the Block instead.

I didn't care. In fact, I told everyone I could after it happened. I would later read articles about their performance being angry and rushed during this tour, but I had nothing to compare it to and wasn't complaining about it. It was a perfect first (of hundreds) concert for me.

I caught the concert bug and won't get enough for quite some time. Live music was more than I hoped it would be. Going forward, I would go to almost any show that someone else wanted to attend. I would see anything, even if the band only had one song I liked. I just enjoyed being around live music in venues where it belongs. I loved the sound, the feel, the people, the smells, and the almost church-like experience I got from it. I traded going to church with born-againers for seeing rock bands with like-minded people. It was a good trade for me.

Chapter 128

You're in High School Again, No Recess

The same week as Lollapalooza, I went to my parent's house to give my mom an application I had to fill out to attend a new school. Sometime during the end of my school year at CIBA, I told my mom I couldn't return there. I needed to leave because I knew if I stayed there, I would have no chance of a future. Not to mention how much I hated being there and felt myself wasting away.

I knew I couldn't go to public school due to my lack of credits, so I told her about Uriah's time at Bensalem Baptist. It was a more straightforward school. Uriah was learning there, and I learned they didn't ask about what credits you had from our makeshift Christian schools. They just took your word for it when you said you had classes like chemistry or biology.

My mom contacted them, and even though it was about 2000 dollars a year to attend, she planned to pay them monthly, and Bensalem Baptist agreed to this. We were dirt poor, and there was no way my mom could afford that price. I didn't know how much it was or how it would come to pass that I got to go there. I was a kid and thought things would work out. I had no idea my mom wouldn't be able to afford it at all.

The application had questions like, "Do you drink alcohol?" "Do you smoke cigarettes?" "Do you go to the movies?" and my favorite that I had to lie about to get into the school: "Do you listen to rock music?" I said no to all of these questions. The rest of the application was about how I was saved and whatnot. Out of all of them, the rock music question was the one I felt guilty over. But my hiding of love for the rock and/or roll (that's a Simpson reference) won't last after I grow tired of doing so and must deal with the consequences.

Sometime in August (a few weeks after I filled out the application), I got the news that I was accepted. I would soon have my first chance at a semi-normal (as normal as I could hope for) education. I would even be a senior with my oldest friend, Uriah, who I had known since kindergarten.

For the first time, I was excited about the fall and going to school. I thought this was going to be it for me. Moving to Mayfair with my grandma, living in such improved conditions, and attending a school that was my best chance at a real future made me foolishly optimistic.

Life and How to Live it

I knew going to this school would be a change and a lot harder than the make-believe schools I was stuck in, but I was up for the challenge. I had no choice in the matter. This was it for my education, so I would give it my all.

And it would take it all from me.

Chapter 129

Sue, Sue the New Boardwalk Queen?

All summer, I would hang out with a girl on the boardwalk I met and usually make out with them. They would leave, another one would come down, and I would do the same thing.

One girl I sort of dated was Tara, who liked to go by her own-given nickname, Glitter. We stayed in contact through the fall and the next two summers. She dated one of my friends many years later. I liked her, but I was not going to give my heart away as I did with Jeanne the summer before. No way, no how.

One day, in mid-August, I met a girl named Sue. She was the coolest alt-rock girl I had met yet (sorry, Jeanne). When I first saw her come into the Burger King with her friend whom she was vacationing with, she was wearing a grey newsie hat (like mine), ripped-up jeans, Cobain-like sunglasses, a Nirvana T-shirt, and a pair of Doc Marten boots. She wore this all in the middle of summer.

I had a crush on her automatically. However, I was too scared to talk to her, so I made Mike come out and take his lunch break with me so I could build up the courage. She had more courage than me. After we made eye contact a few times, she called me over with her finger. I went over, and we got to know each other. She was very talkative and forward. She was about a year younger than me and liked the same bands I did. She told me she was from South New Jersey, which was basically a suburb of Philly.

Sue was a couple of inches shorter than my 5'7 peak height (another thing I liked about Cobain was he was also 5'7) and had long brown hair and stunning blue eyes. We hit it off immediately and talked about how we were both at Lollapalooza the week prior. We bonded over how much fun we had at the show and whatever else teenagers talked about in 1994.

We decided to meet up the next day. As I walked on the boardwalk to meet her, I felt a large drop hit my newsie hat. A seagull pooped on me as it flew by and was so heavy it made my hat sink to one side. They say this is good luck, but they are full of shit. I went to the bathroom, cleaned off the hit-and-run poop attack, and put the hat in my pocket until it dried.

It turned out I didn't need the hat to look my best. Sue obviously liked me, and the feeling was more than mutual. We went on some rides and got something to eat. We walked the busy boardwalk until we had to say our goodbyes, then kissed a little. The

kiss was something to remember. Soft and sweet. She smiled when we looked at each other, and my heart was pounding with thrilling excitement. I think she even said, "That was nice."

Sue was only staying in Wildwood for a couple of days, and we spent those days together when I wasn't flipping burgers. When she left, we exchanged numbers and planned to get together after the summer when I was back in Philly. I liked her a lot, and I missed her when she left, but I wasn't going to do to myself what I did with Jeanne in the summer prior. I was wiser now and wasn't looking for heartbreak. When she left, that was that. I went back to the bachelor lifestyle.

A week or so later, I had a written message waiting for me from my grandma from a girl named Sue. I called her back, but not right away. I was playing it cool and didn't want to get hung up on a girl I wouldn't see for another month. But we talked off and on for the rest of the summer, and it seemed like she really missed me and couldn't wait to see me again. The feeling, I was willing to admit, was mutual. Meanwhile, I put Sue (and her lovely smile) out of my mind. I tried to live every day to its fullest. There was plenty of time for Sue to let me down after I returned to Philly.

Chapter 130

I Wanna Be Just About as Happy as I Can Be

If the summer of 1993 was my coming-of-age year, the summer of 1994 was my coming-into-my-own year. I was slightly more confident than usual and was getting in tune with my thoughts and feelings. Every summer away from my shithole Kensington home was the time for me to reflect and unwind, but this year it was more so since my living arrangements improved significantly. I had hoped to get a real education, at least one good enough to get accepted into community college.

The big difference now was when I was in Kensington going to CIBA, I was full of anger and sadness. The anger subdued somewhat, and I had more time to deal with the depression and sadness. I would think about my childhood and what happened to me up to this point. It was therapeutic, especially while listening to my favorite songs. I thought about my family and how upset they had made me through the years. I thought about the negativity and doubts they put in my head throughout my upbringing. I thought about my religion, and my doubts about a god figure were amplified.

I was thinking more clearly than ever and would sometimes go home, listen to music, and write (bad) poetry instead of hanging out on the boardwalk looking for girls. I wanted to stick to some decisions I made. I wanted to be a singer in a band like Stipe or Cobain. I decided that summer that I would go for my dreams of being a rock singer since it's what I wanted to do most, and I deserve it.

If simply deserving something were all it took to make it, I'd be right as rain. I also wanted to feel everything that happened to me, good and bad. I wanted a pure experience of this life so I could write about it in my poems and (hopefully) songs. That way of thinking was my first mistake.

I had outrageous thoughts like I was supposed to go through things (good and bad), so I could do something greater in the long run. I was hoping this was in the form of writing songs. I got caught up in summertime bliss and the excitement of endless possibilities. I foolishly thought I was finally in control of my life and the sky was the limit.

Doubts plagued me after the summer, especially when I was sadder or depressed than usual or in a stressful situation. However, I thought it was also part of my creative development. I believed I needed to deal with my doubts and overcome them. I couldn't take comfort in things when I had these doubt sessions. I wouldn't drink, get high, or even eat if I was going through one of these periods. The Christians made me think I had to prove myself for everything I wanted.

Most days, I tried to convince myself I could reach my dreams and that there was a reason for my suffering. I kept trying to keep the doubts out. It was a problem for quite some time. I let bad things happen because I thought I was supposed to go through it or didn't want to hide from the pain. It will catch up to me when things get too big to handle. But at this moment, I was too naïve to see pride was indeed coming before the fall.

Chapter 131

And to Christ a Cross, And to Me a Chair

Wildwood somehow booked the band Live to play at their convention center. They were starting to break out with their lead single, “Selling the Drama,” from their newest album, *Throwing Copper*. I still think the song is about the lead singer growing up in a religious cult, as I did, and leaving it behind. But I thought that about most songs written back then.

It was a big deal for any band that wasn’t a cover band to play at the convention center, so the town was buzzing about it. I wasn’t too familiar with Live yet, but Mike Moore had their album, and I listened to it with him the weeks before the show and would buy a copy shortly after seeing them play.

I went to the show with Mike and met up with Glitter (Tara) and her father, who dressed like a high school math teacher. During the show, everyone started pushing and moving everyone around, and Glitter’s dad tried his best to keep people from bumping into his 15-year-old daughter. However, he was quickly overwhelmed and lost in the crowd. Mike and I felt a little bad for him, but we knew he never stood a chance.

After a few songs, I went with Glitter to the back of the venue to wait for her dad. She reminded me of Sally in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* with her long dark hair, buggy eyes and skinny as can be frame. She was grateful that I chose to hang out with her and her dad. Tara and I hung out more that week and made out under the boardwalk. We would call each other and write when we were back home, but I wouldn’t see her until next summer when things were completely different.

Chapter 132

It's Raining Bitches

A strange thing happened during the last few weeks of summer. Sometimes, people I knew from Philly would vacation in Wildwood, and we would meet up. Mary, Uriah's little sister, came down with her friends, and we were hanging out on the bustling boardwalk. She told me she had feelings for me and wanted to start a relationship when I returned to Philly and started going to Bensalem Baptist with her.

I was taken aback but told her I would think about it and give her an answer when I got home. It gave me some time because I cared about Mary, but I didn't know if I felt that way about her. She was pretty girl nice, but she was also a girl I had known since I was 4, and her brother was my oldest friend. We used to make out when we were 10, but that was before we knew better and were probably just acting out movies we watched.

Next week I got a visit from Christine. Like Mary, Christine had something to tell me. She missed me and thought she had feelings for me. It was more of a shocker than Mary. Christine was my first real girlfriend and my first real heartbreak, and when she reached out to me in the fall of 1993, I thought she was looking for a relationship, but it was purely platonic. So, I chalked us up as being good friends. Then she dropped this bomb on me. I don't remember how I responded, but she said we would talk about it in two weeks when I came home.

Unlike the situation with Mary, I had unresolved feelings for Christine. I would most likely pursue another relationship with her if given the chance. I didn't know what was going on, but like one of my favorite Simpsons characters would say, "Everything's coming up Milhouse!" This fall would be the first time in years I looked forward to going home. It will also be the last time I would look forward to much.

The summer of 1994 was complete, and I left with fond memories and contacts with friends I would know for years. I was more in touch with myself and the person I wanted to be. Eventually, this would fade, and I will spend the next 25 years trying to get those feelings back.

Chapter 133

I Got No Soul to Sell

Early that year I gave a band a try that I wouldn't usually. It started with the Tori Amos song "Past the Mission" with Trent Reznor on backing vocals for the chorus. I never cared for music on the heavier side, but Nine Inch Nails (NIN) struck my saddened heartstrings.

I first heard their song "Wish" in 1992 on MTV's Heavy Metal show. I feared it, being still born-again in most ways and 14 years old. It seemed too heavy for me, and it might have been the devil's music done by guys who wanted to possess me with their devil-worshipping ways.

In 1993, I heard "Head Like a Hole" on WDRE. It was more techno driven than industrial or heavy metal. I liked the song but was a little scared by the lyrics when he talked about bowing down to the one I serve.

It was borderline sacrilegious to me. When I got into NIN the following year, I realized it wasn't sacrilegious at all. It was about one of the seven deadly sins, greed. It wasn't the music that did it for me with NIN; it was Trent's lyrics. It was exactly what a struggling, soon to be ex born-again Christian needed. His songs were about disbelief in a god and religion, pain, and dealing with everyday suffering. It was a great outlet to get rid of the feelings I was dealing with to heal.

"Closer" was an industrial rock hit that summer, and I loved watching the grimy, horror house-like video for it. It hit home with the mention of his isolation, lack of a soul, absence of faith, and getting away from oneself. I slipped further into my feelings and thoughts while listening to their albums. I might have been typical by buying into NIN as the new hot band, but it wasn't about their popularity. Their album, *The Downward Spiral*, took me on a journey, song by song, of how depressed I was. Trent Reznor felt and thought the same way as me when it came to feeling like shit and questioning God.

Other acts were just as popular, and people went apeshit over them, but I thought they were only okay. Weezer, Collective Soul, and Green Day were fun bands, but I didn't get obsessed with them as I did with NIN. Don't get me wrong, NIN couldn't hold a candle to R.E.M. and Tori, but they took Nirvana's place as my angst band to stir out the demons.

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NIN will become a staple in my life and help me get through it as much as possible. I will go down a darker path while listening to them, but they will also keep me somewhat comforted in knowing I wasn't alone in this hatred of life. Songs like "Heresy," with lines about how God and religion were dying and how no one seemed to care, had a giant impact on me, as well as the album closer, "Hurt."

Chapter 134

Tunnel Vision from the Outsider's Screen

I returned to Philly in September, and this year was already different than prior ones. I usually had my Wildwood hangover, as I would miss it so much and would be in that mindset for a few weeks, especially in 1993 with Jeanne. This year I was ready to start my school year, thinking I would be a semi-normal student with a semi-normal high school experience. I also wanted to sing and write as much as possible and believed I had a chance to join or start a band. I also wanted to go to as many shows as possible because I loved the atmosphere.

Without bragging, a few girls were interested in me, and I was excited to see what would come next. I was finally coming home to a better structure and a peaceful neighborhood, which made leaving Wildwood easier than years before.

Of all these things, I was most excited for R.E.M.'s new album to be released on September 27th, 1994. Nothing will ever be as exciting as waiting for and hearing new R.E.M. music for me. I knew the album would be more rock driven than the slower, acoustic sounds of their last three albums. Peter Buck said he wanted to make a return-to-rock album before *Automatic for the People*, but the songs they wrote were too good not to use. This time Peter put the mandolin in the closet and brought out the Rickenbacker so R.E.M. could rock again.

They also had a world tour in-store for us fans, the first in six long years. I heard the song titles on WDRE when the album's info got released. A track called "Let Me In" was dedicated to the late great Kurt Cobain. The first time I heard the lead single/video, "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" was the world premiere on MTV. In those days, videos for the big acts would have a time slot during the day to debut.

I was at Christine's house. Within the two weeks it took for her to tell me she liked me again and for me to come home and talk to her about it, she changed her mind and wanted to stay friends. It was typical of Christine, and I was fine being friends.

The song was loud and energetic. The video was full of Michael dancing in what seemed to be a garage in a suburb in middle-class America. It was in your face and nothing like the R.E.M. I had known and loved over the past years. Stipe's head was freshly shaven, and he wore a cool red star t-shirt. Of course, I bought the shirt when

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I got the chance. Mike Mills appeared to be wearing an Elvis suit from the Vegas years, and Buck looked like he was Neil Young's little brother. Bill Berry looked the same, but he looked like he was having fun.

I liked the song a lot and thought it fit the times. It was quite popular with the kids. Since alternative music was now in charge of the airwaves, R.E.M.'s new song got played regularly. The video was on the MTV daily countdown for the most requested videos of the day. I never saw this before with their other songs, which led me to believe kids who liked more rocking songs now liked R.E.M. It made me think R.E.M. was cool to like. Of course, "Losing My Religion" was most likely on this countdown in 1991, but I didn't have MTV then like the rich kids.

Chapter 135

Just Give R.E.M. All the Awards for Christ's Sake

I knew Stipe shaved his head before the album because he was bald when R.E.M. was at the 1994 Grammy awards. The show made me angry. *Automatic for the People* was nominated for four awards and didn't win any. They got robbed of the album of the year by the goddamn *The Bodyguard* soundtrack. I owned and liked the soundtrack, but it wasn't an album. It had six songs by Whitney Houston and a bunch more that no one remembered. R.E.M. made a perfect album and deserved the recognition.

They lost the other ones too, but the one that stung was the award for best alternative music album/performance. They won this in 1992 for *Out of Time*, and it was full of great bands. It was the first time I owned all the albums nominated. This time, R.E.M. was up against Belly's *Star*, Nirvana's *In Utero*, The Smashing Pumpkins' *Siamese Dream*, and the winner, U2's *Zooropa*.

I thought since R.E.M. won in '92, they would surely win this one. Instead of giving it to a beautiful and perfect album, they gave it to U2's record, which was nothing but filler. Because I loved R.E.M. since I was a kid, I took everything that happened to my favorite thing in the world to heart. When they were losers, I was one too.

The 1994 MTV Video Music Awards that fall were a different story. R.E.M. got nominated for a bunch of awards for "Everybody Hurts," and unlike the prior VMA's, they would go home with some awards, which meant they were winners, and somehow, I was too. I watched it at home with my cousin Billy and his friends, who were more into rap music and its culture. They were about 3-4 years older than me. They were friendly people who were happy when I was happy (when R.E.M. was on stage accepting their awards).

One of the rap fans was upset that the artsy, black heritage cultured rap group, Arrested Development won an award for best rap video over the trendier rappers defined by attitude, anger, and having street cred. I was glad to see it go to Arrested Development. I preferred rap music with a message rather than bragging and hyping themselves up about how many girls they fucked and how they're the best in the world.

R.E.M. was on stage accepting an award for best direction in a video for “Everybody Hurts” when a man dressed in traditional German clothing, including lederhosen, jumped up as Stipe was about to give his acceptance speech. The man was MCA from the Beastie Boys. He stated that Spike Jones deserved the award (for his direction of the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage”) and had all the ideas for Star Wars and some other nonsense. I didn’t like it one bit. I felt bad for Stipe. He looked confused and just waited patiently until the lone Beastie left.

Throughout the night, including interviews before and after the show, I saw a side of Stipe I had never seen. He wasn’t the mystery man, shy and deep in thought. He was in your face, using hand gestures of him giving a woman oral sex as he went to accept an award.

He seemed more confident and cockier on stage, accepting the awards. He was cursing more in the interviews that followed and talked like he didn’t give a fuck about what people thought of him and seemed to relish fame and being considered an alt-rock icon. It wasn’t bad, it was just a different side of my hero, so I had to take it in and embrace it since I was head over heels infatuated with the guy.

His new persona only lasted a year or two. I think it might have been one of two things. He was pulling an Andy Kaufman on us, playing a character that was more in-your-face and sexual because their new album, *Monster*, had those elements. Or, since R.E.M. was now a household name, Stipe was coming to terms with being an icon. Millions of fans looked up to him. I believe it was a bit of him accepting it all and blowing off steam.

The other possibility is Stipe realized how fucking cool he was and was living in the moment. This persona was great for the upcoming tour. Stipe was at his peak of being a rock god. He was so cool with his dance moves and “if looks could kill” poses.

MTV also paid tribute to Kurt Cobain during the show, which made me a little emotional. One of the rap kids said the usual thing I would hear back then about how I didn’t know Kurt and I shouldn’t care that much that he died. He said Kurt was a heroin addict. I told him I knew about addicts and how Kurt reminds me of my dad because they were both young and dumb when they became addicts.

The kid asked about my dad, and my cousin Billy knowing the situation, quickly moved the conversation to another subject. I was grateful for that, as tears were about to come from my eyes thinking about everything. Good old sensitive me.

The saddest part of the night was when MTV, gave the award for best video to fucking Aerosmith’s Alicia Silverstone-filled “Cryin’.” It beat out R.E.M.’s “Everybody Hurts,” Nirvana’s “Heart Shaped Box,” and the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage.” I was close to giving up on MTV, but it wouldn’t be long until MTV gave up on us and music altogether. I want my MTV?

Chapter 136

Chaz Spoke in Class Today

I started my school year at the more functional Christian school, Bensalem Baptist. Uriah and I decided to wear all black to mourn the day. Another good thing about the school was there were no uniforms. You just had to wear a button-up shirt with a collar, a tie, and dress pants. Even though I was excited to see what this year would bring, it was still school. I didn't have black clothes that matched, so my shirt was a different shade of black than my pants. I heard that people laughed at me over it. By this time in my life, mainly because I found a new batch of friends and a whole world of music, I didn't care what anyone thought about me at Christian schools.

The days of CIBA and getting bullied by kids who were supposed to be Christ-like were out the window. I was finally feeling comfortable in my skin. The school was full of kids I knew who went their separate ways after Higgins left CIBA to start Maranatha. The families who could afford it send their kids to Bensalem Baptist. It was probably the best they could do at the time besides sending them to a real school, but then they might learn about evolution and condoms.

I wasn't a total stranger to some kids, but most were new faces. They were all nice to me, at least to my face. It was the first time since I was nine that I went to a school with real teachers who helped me learn. We had lockers for storing our books! That doesn't sound like much, but I was craving any normalcy. I was coming into my own and wanted the same experiences my friends outside of the church were having.

I lied and said I had taken certain classes already so I could be in the 12th grade with Uriah and Charlie Glassey. It was also Charlie's first year, and he was in the same financial situation as me. He came from a dirt-poor background, and his mom probably spent all she had to give him one last chance at a decent education.

The senior class was an extraordinary 5-6 kids. The school was in the basement of the Bensalem Baptist Church and had to keep up with the fire codes. Like CIBA in the '80s and early '90s, there was a limit on how many kids were allowed in the building (100-120) during the school year.

I told the school's principal that I took biology (I didn't) and geometry (I barely knew what that was) to be in chemistry and algebra with Uriah, Glassey, and Mike Harmata. Somehow, since I last saw Mike, he went from being a rap fan to embracing alt-rock fully. It was another sign of the turn of the tide in pop culture.

I also had a U.S. history class, a bible class (of course), and my favorite, English. I liked my English teacher. She inspired me. I forgot her name, but she looked like Sally Jesse Raphael. I think she liked me because I was the one who took the poetry assignments seriously, and when I read or turned in what I wrote, she (I gather) saw potential in my writing.

The faculty also consisted of Mrs. Skogen (I'm sure I spelled that wrong), who taught history; the Principal, Mr. Birtwhistle, who taught chemistry and math; and the head guy in control of it all, Pastor Love, who led the bible class.

To get a rise out of Mr. Birtwhistle (I definitely spelled that wrong too), kids would chirp like a bird and then whistle. Every so often, Birtwhistle would say he was trying to get in touch with Holden at CIBA to get transcripts to prove I had the credits to be in 12th grade. It always worried me that I would be found out and have to take those classes and not graduate that year. But Uriah told me Birtwhistle said the same thing to him the year prior, and they never got back to him, and he never brought it up again. But I was nervous the shoe would fall any day.

The teachers there were all kind and tried to make going to a born-again Christian school with only a hundred kids as normal as possible. It was a big contrast from the last ten years, especially the education. Most kids came from middle-class homes and could afford more things than those in the Kensington Baptist schools. The schooling was too expensive for most Kensington kids, including Charlie Glassey and me. But the price came with better education, a gymnasium, sports teams with uniforms, and outings for educational purposes.

I was a bit over my head with the schoolwork, but I was determined to make it work so I could have a future. I may have wanted to be a rock star like Stipe and Cobain, but I also wasn't a total idiot and was realistic about my future. I planned to get my high school diploma and go to college to see where that would take me. I would also try to sing in bands, which I truly wanted to do.

I was doing okay with the schoolwork. I got mostly Bs and a C in Chemistry, but I was passing. I was also making new friends, like Andre, the only African American boy in the high school classes, who was a down to earth and caring guy the type who would give you the shirt off his back. Chris Jones was a funny, goofy kid. Uriah took a liking to him, and they loved Green Day since they were goofy kids too.

Another friend there, Josh, told me Nine Inch Nails chose their name because of the nails put into Jesus' hands when he was crucified. He said the nails were nine inches long, and "nails" spelled backward is "slain" (it spells "slian," not "slain").

There was also Michele Kelly (the type of a person who seems to be happy to see everyone she comes across), Brian Gallagher (who was in a similar boat as me when it came to finances and the love of the rock and roll, baby), Andrea (who I had a small crush on), April (who everyone had a big crush on) and Tonya Love, the daughter of Pastor Love.

Chaz Holesworth

My old friends that I had not seen in a while, Mike, Uriah, Mary (Uriah's sister), Dennis, Kristy Brown (who broke up with me when I was 12 for another kid), and Shannon Harmata (who Uriah will marry) also made my days the best I ever had at a school.

Chapter 137

The Only One that Could Ever Reach Me Was the Daughter of a Preacher Man

The relationship that surprised me the most was the one I had with Tonya Love, the Pastor's daughter. She was roughly the same age as me (16) but a grade lower due to me starting school early years ago.

Tonya was a sweet girl who never said anything bad about anyone. She was strong in her faith in Jesus. I was still pretending or at least going through the motions of being a Christian, but it was no secret that I was a worldly kid who liked the devil's rock and roll. But we had an attraction to each other. Perhaps we were both trying to change the other one.

In a perfect world, if I had grown up in different circumstances or got out of them sooner, I would have been a good catch for Tonya. We could have had a romantic relationship, at least while she was still alive. Tonya was born with heart complications and wasn't supposed to live to her age now. This brave girl could pass away at any moment, and she lived with this knowledge.

Where most people would probably live every moment for themselves or develop some animosity towards their lord and savior, Tonya thought this was all god's plan, and it made her fear and love god even more. I was blown away by this attitude, even though I knew it was due to her born-again brainwashing from birth. I still thought she was one of the bravest people I had met.

I had to do a project for English class that fall, where I had to interview someone, I admired. I chose to interview Tonya since I thought she was courageous and embraced her certain death without fear. It was the beginning of my getting to know her. I found out she played the violin and was passionate about it. I asked her about her condition, the fact that she could die at any moment, and how she dealt with it.

She told me it was through Jesus that she lived this long and was grateful for the time Jesus allowed her to live. I admit I was attracted to her. She was pretty but not much like the girls I was interested in at the time (I loved the alt-rock chicks with the dyed hair and ripped-up jeans).

Maybe it was my inner born-again young self-peeking through, but there was a time I thought about asking her out to see if anything would blossom between us. I felt she was attracted to me, but she might have seen me as a project.

I was a challenge for a Christian girl looking to save me. I even wrote a poem about her and her kind heart, but I lost it long ago. It probably sucked, though. I was dating Sue and Mary at the time. Unlike Christine, Mary didn't move on after she told me she thought she loved me. But I wasn't looking for a commitment. Mary, I realize now, was also going through her journey and probably figuring out who she was. I was on my path, and I couldn't help her since I was independently getting used to myself. We had known each other since she was 3 and I was 4. We used to make out and play "house" when we were 9 and 10.

I didn't think she loved me romantically. I was a constant in her young life, and she was comfortable around me. I was in a different place, more focused on writing, getting through the school year, and going to college. We saw each other for the first month or two of the school year, and when I got closer to Tonya, Mary would get jealous. One time she told me she thought Tonya liked me and she was going to hit her so hard her bad heart would burst and die. I thought it was dark and mean, but she was exaggerating, and I found it a little comical due to the overly extreme nature of the statement.

Tonya would be dead the very next year. Then it wouldn't be funny at all.

Chapter 138

Touched for the Very First Time

I lost my virginity to Mary one day at my grandmom's house. For guys, losing your virginity isn't that big of a deal besides the excitement of it being your first time. For girls, I suspect it is different and brings more complex feelings. Mary and I went to see *Natural Born Killers*, then she came over, and we started making out in my room. Then I somehow talked her into having sex as a normal teenage boy would.

I had a condom, and we started to have sex. I believe it was both of our first times. After a minute, I looked up at her and saw her watching TV (I think Pearl Jam's "Jeremy" was on MTV), and she looked bored and uncomfortable. I stopped the act, thinking this was not what she wanted, and I was just a typical guy trying to get his girlfriend to have sex with him when she wasn't ready to. I would never try again with her. I decided to be the opposite of the typical guy. I would take everything slow and wait for the girl to want to have sex. Well, I will do this until my slutty year of 1999, when I got through another period of not giving a fuck about feelings and pretending I'm Jim Morrison (or Eddie Maurer since I follow his lead).

When I returned to Philly from my summer of fun in Wildwood, I got in touch with Sue. We would hang out, mainly in Center City Philly and South Street. She would take a train from New Jersey to Philly, and I would meet her at her stop. We wandered around with no place to go and not much money in our pockets. I was unemployed since I gave up on the paper job before I went to the shore that summer. I was trying to focus on school for the first time.

We met up a lot during those months, mostly on weeknights. It would be my life outside of the born-again world for a while.

I would come home from school, finish my homework, and go down to South Street with Sue while she smoked clove cigarettes, and we ate vegetarian food at places we could afford. She knew people who worked on South Street, and they became my friends. I would go to a party with all these hip people in their 20s. They were intelligent, fun, and into all kinds of different music. I didn't drink then, so I was the guy taking in new experiences and learning what young adults did in their ritzy Center City homes.

We also hung out with a guy who owned a body piercing shop. He was the first person I knew who had his tongue pierced. He was a cool guy who was probably in

his 20s, but he didn't judge me or make me feel like a kid. I got my nose pierced but not there because it was too much money. I got mine done with an ear-piercing gun at a store called Clair's by some teenager worker who shouldn't have done it. (I do not recommend it.)

Sue wanted to get our fortunes told by one of the numerous fortune tellers on South Street. We went to one named Madonna (since I liked the singer a lot), who only charged \$5 for a reading. Madonna told me I was a creative person. I realized that the trick in fortune telling is to read the person and assume about them. It was easy enough to guess right since I was a kid dressed like all his rock idols. She also said I would be married within a year, at age 17. In Madonna's defense, I had a goatee and looked older, so maybe she thought I was old enough to get married.

We would also go to some guy's house Sue was friends with who was loaded. Homes in Center City were sky-high in price. The kid was around 17 or 18 years old and had everything he wanted in his room. He had a huge stereo with 200 CDs from all kinds of artists. I was jealous of this, but the worst part was he didn't seem to care about the CDs or anything else he had that was a sign of his parents' wealth. I wasn't at the point where I hated people who were better off than me, but that green monster wasn't too far away.

After getting her clitoris pierced, Sue showed it to us at his house. I remember it vividly because it took her such an effort to pull her jeans down and her legs up as she leaned on this kid's couch to show us her piercing.

Even though I saw her naked, I never went further than kissing her before we said goodbye for the night. She said I was a gentleman and wished I would try more with her. I was taken aback. It was the opposite of what Mary wanted.

I thought taking our time getting to know each other was what she wanted. Perhaps we would get stronger feelings for each other before getting more physical. I was under the impression that artistic girls with deeper thoughts than the typical girl wanted love before sex. Instead, she challenged me, and the next time we got together, I think I did more than kiss her, but I don't remember how much. It was probably still PG-13. I really liked Sue. She was interesting, intelligent, liked good music, and wrote poetry.

We talked on the phone and read our poems to each other. Hers were more structured with a constant theme and sounded like a journal with no rhyming. My poems rhymed and had a rhythm of a song without music, except the ones in my head. It was nice to share them with someone, especially the person I had feelings for who meant the world to me.

The only thing we differed in was her use of drugs and my trying to be sober and drug-free. She did lighter drugs like pot but would also do crystal meth. She also shot heroin sometimes with her ex-boyfriend, who was still in the picture. I wasn't the judging type, but part of me wanted Sue to stick to marijuana.

Chapter 139

Fade Into You

We had a good time when Mazzy Star opened up for The Jesus Mary and Chain at the legendary Philly venue, the Trocadero. I was there for Mazzy Star since I loved their song “Fade Into You” so much that I wanted it to be my wedding song.

In April of '94, I fell asleep with MTV on and woke up in the middle of the night while “Fade Into You” was playing. It was always in rotation during the twilight hours. I loved its dreamy feel, especially when I was half asleep. It took five months for it to gain traction and become a hit that fall.

I was also there to see Velvet Crush, a rock band from Rhode Island that never broke through to the mainstream but would be the go-to opening band for acts that swung into town.

WDRE played them, and I liked them, so I bought their first album on cassette. It was so low-budget that the tape's second side ended with a half hour of tape left. I would have to fast-forward it to hear the beginning of the album again. They had a Soul Asylum feel to them, and I saw them open for Mazzy Star, then Oasis, before seeing them by themselves once.

The show with Sue was lovely because I got to hold her while we watched it from the back. Mazzy Star is what the kids like to call “shoegaze” music because it's so slow and spacey that you just stare down at your shoes and contemplate what you want to contemplate.

I liked the album that “Fade Into You” was on, but none of the songs could hold a candle to the hit single. While the singer, Hope Sandoval, was singing the third or fourth song, someone passed out in front of the stage. It caused some yahoo to yell, “Why don't you play another lullaby and put us all to sleep!”

Hope shouted (louder than anything else that night), “Fuck you!” then stormed off the stage. Her bandmates followed right behind her. That was it. They didn't play any more songs, and I never heard them play their hit. She did come back out to do the duet she and The Jesus and Mary Chain had on the radio, but I'd rather have heard “Fade Into You.”

Chapter 140

Devine Thing or Mace in the Face?

I found out the band Soup Dragons were coming to another legendary venue in Philly on South Street called the TLA (Theater of the Living Arts). I only knew three of their songs, but it was a deal at five bucks, and I wanted to be around the atmosphere of a live set.

I asked Mike Harmata to go with me since he had nothing else to do and liked live music. The place was packed. I think a lot of people took advantage of such a cheap show. We went and had a good time until something terrible happened to the young and naïve Chaz.

I saw that a mini dance/semi-mosh pit started during one of the songs. It was more like people jumping up and down and bumping into each other rather than a real mosh pit, so I decided I wanted to join in on the fun. I was enjoying myself with ten or so other concertgoers when someone sprayed mace or pepper spray into the crowd.

At first, I didn't know what was going on. I had this terrible taste in my mouth, and then I couldn't see. Everything was blurry and I panicked that something I did or happened to me was permanent. It felt like I got hit in the head too hard.

I ran to the first person I could find, a woman in her 20s. I said to her loudly (since the band was still playing), "I can't see!" I realized that I got sprayed with something that had blinded me. I put my face on this girl's shoulder, and she embraced me, then took my head in her hands and made me focus on her until I could see again.

She kept saying, "Focus on me. Can you see me?" It was hard since she was blurry, and it was painful to open my eyes.

I do not know who my heroine was, but she calmed me down until the panic was gone and the chemicals ran their course, and I could see again. I thought about why someone would do something like mace a bunch of kids just having fun for a while after that night. I came up with a couple of theories.

It's possible the perpetrator got hit or bumped accidentally and sprayed us in retaliation or they just thought we were idiots for trying to slam dance to The Soup Dragons and wanted to teach us a lesson. But it was probably just a dick who decided to take their anger out on a bunch of kids having a good time.

Mosh pits are part of the live experience and make standing-room-only tickets more exciting. It was only the 10th band I had seen live, and I knew the drill. Most

people get out of the way, but I guess assaulting us works too. In the end, they got what they wanted. We all stopped and nodded our heads to the music after the attack.

For one second, I could hear what the Christians would say about it: “This is what happens when you live a worldly lifestyle,” and “Rock n’ roll and its fans are evil.” I ignored these thoughts and chalked it up as a learning experience. I was only 16, and this was my second concert. I was still learning proper concert protocol.

Mike and I also went to see Deadeye Dick at the Troc for eight dollars. There were only 15-20 people there, including Uriah, who joined us. They were a one-hit wonder band with their poppy alternative hit, “New Age Girl.” It was on the radio a lot, but not enough to bring in a crowd. We had fun anyway, and the band was so laid back that they hung out with us for a half hour and talked about music after the show.

Deadeye Dick is the first (semi) famous band I met. I, of course, brought up R.E.M., and they also liked them. They told me about a band called Big Star, who I will later hear R.E.M. praise in interviews. It took me decades to finally listen to everyone and give them a try. It was mainly due to Mike Mills from R.E.M. loving them so much.

Chapter 141

I Feel the Pain of Everyone

Going to concerts, dressing how I wanted, and meeting interesting people happened because of my better living situation. I was out to experience anything and everything that life, fate, or God would throw at me. I was in a realm, and I desired to be surrounded by music and those who liked the same music.

I was feeling like never before, and I got addicted to it.

I felt everything: strong romantic feelings with Sue, extreme stress from my first real attempt at education, sadness from my life so far, and the overwhelming questions I had about God and the meaning of life. I was always a sensitive kid who wore his emotions on his sleeve. Now I had more time to think about things and to feel. Instead of fear, I felt safe enough to start healing from my childhood.

I was still under the impression that my sadness was something I had to deal with to help get me where I wanted to be (a musician like Coban and Stipe). I had to deal with it head-on and not hide from it. I embraced my thoughts and pain. Previously, I would bottle up so much anger I would blow up, probably break something, and it would distract me from feeling. There was too much chaos in my childhood, but now things settled. I had time to feel. It led me to dwell on my life and all the bad things that happened. The only thing I truly wanted would never happen due to my lack of talent. I thought my life was cursed.

The dwelling depressed me even more. I had strong doubts that would knock me down and make me want to quit or die. I don't think I was depressed as much as I was sad. It was pure and hurtful, but I embraced it and refused to numb the pain.

I thought if I let the sadness in until it passed, I would feel the happy things just as intensely. I was being honest with my feelings and the balance of life. I saw people all my life drink, do drugs, pray, eat, and fuck to soften the impact of how they felt. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to feel and think about these thoughts that weren't traditional.

I believed these feelings would make me stronger and great, like my heroes sort of great. I wanted to be a better person who felt alive all the time and express my powerful, in-depth feelings to help people.

The sadness was so overwhelming that I would go a day or two without food. Fasting was a big part of the Christian world. It's supposed to make one feel more holy

and closer to God. I fasted to prove I could do it, to not give in to any comforts to sedate my feelings, and I didn't want to eat and pretend everything was okay when it wasn't. I needed to work things out in my head before I could eat. I didn't want to think, "It's not so bad," while tasting food that would distract me from the things I had to deal with mentally. I would feel guilty or weak if I gave in to the temptation of eating. I felt this guilt when it came to sex and masturbation as well. This is what they did to me.

I was trying to always be in control of my urges and feelings. I was also keeping my anger in check and wasn't nearly as frustrated as I was in my old environment. I was finally on track to be where I wanted to be.

But there were downsides to working through my built-in demons (which I realized too late were others' opinions that I held higher than mine). During extreme sadness, I would want to die and hurt myself. Even though I had plans in store and was trying my hardest to make life better, I still had crippling self-doubt. Only my strong feelings for music, hope for better days, and dreams of being someone great kept me focused.

Chapter 142

God, Sometimes You Don't Come Through

I wasn't, and never will be, a total atheist. I have firm doubts about God and will not believe in the words of men from 5,000 years ago who say what God is and what life is about. However, I always wanted to figure out God. I sought to find some understanding in men who wrote stories when people didn't know jack shit about science and how things worked.

I couldn't shake the god complex at first. I still believed there was a higher power, which is probably one of the steps one takes to leave a cult such as religion that dictates your entire formative years. I knew the born-againers were wrong. They may have the right motives, but no god would want people to stop thinking and take everything said thousands of years ago as the end all be all.

On the other side of the spectrum, I knew people who didn't care about religion and wanted to live for themselves. The shortcut to questioning God and the mysteries of life is to distract yourself and not think about it. It is easier to say, "Fuck it" and just go along with the ride of life. I blame religion for this. If the church didn't stop the thinking process from childhood to adulthood, we might have come up with concepts of what it all means on our own. At least there wouldn't be any anxiety and panic when logic creeps in and tells you that all you know is not logically possible. They implemented their teachings with a strong feeling called "faith," fused with our childlike imagination. Trust in anything is possible, and we will be allowed into God's graces for being good children as if God is our dad or mom and our trust gets rewarded with our allowance.

I had both of these mindsets happening at once, at it will probably go on until I die. I was smart enough at the time to know I wouldn't know the answers yet. I knew my questions had merit, but I also knew I had to have balance in my daily battles of thinking about these things that most people avoid discussing.

When I was low, it was easier to blame a god figure for my suffering since I was told God knows all and controls everything. I was mad at this god thing and wanted to challenge it and figure it out. I was going in and out of thinking that God was a supreme

being. All the religions got that part right, but everything was based on ego and what was happening in their regions.

I thought that this supreme being was the one that wanted art and music to exist. And I thought it was either punishing me or testing me like those in the bible. I was so low that I had this concept that there was a balance between pain and pleasure. I thought good things would happen to me if bad things happened first. The pain I felt wasn't good enough for the balance since it was just a reaction. I also thought that everything I felt was fake. I was just a baby who had no reason to be upset. This (let's say it together) is what they did to me.

Chapter 143

To See if I Still Feel

I started to cut myself one day after I was so down that I wanted to punish myself for the things I had done (like overeating or sexual thoughts). I thought if I cut myself, maybe this supreme being would see my agony and leave me alone with all my doubts. My self-loathing also came into play, and I felt like I deserved the pain I was causing to myself.

I found a knife in my grandma's kitchen that was sharp enough to do the job. NIN had become a big part of the daily battles with my demons, and the song "Hurt" was a catapult for me to start cutting myself. I know it looks like I was just a typical kid going through teenage emotional battles, but mine were more severe and complex than the average kid.

It made so much sense to me, but I look back now and wish I could tell myself to go get a beer and listen to "Everybody Hurts" instead of "Hurt." I see now that I was in a bad spot. I would get out of it; I was sure of that. I just didn't know when.

A year prior I would have never thought of hurting myself, but the situation was so chaotic that I didn't have time to self-reflect. I would think about the past, how ugly I thought I was, how I had man boobs, and how the one thing I wanted to do I sucked at ("I'm worst at what I do best"). I started cutting my arms first. I was smart enough to harm my upper arm where I could hide the aftermath with a shirt.

I'm right-handed, so my left arm got the brunt of the scarring. I would switch it up and cut up my right arm to make it look even. I did a few on my lower arms but not too many that would cause someone to notice. I used my grandpa Russ' fishing knife (sorry buddy, if I knew better, I would have found my own). I tried to get used to the pain and sting of a blade since I started to think that if things didn't work out for me, suicide was the way to go. It was sort of like practice if I ever got the guts to slice my wrist.

It might sound pathetic and make me look like a Cobain wannabe, but I was deathly afraid of failing school and, more importantly, not fulfilling my dreams of being like my idols. Thoughts of suicide were comforting to me. It calmed down my anxiety. I told myself, "So what if you're a failure? You're going to die anyway. Why not earlier than later?"

Life and How to Live it

One of my favorite bands, Arcade Fire, wrote a song 20 years later called “Creature Comforts.” I believe it’s about teenagers with low self-esteem who body shame themselves and are borderline suicidal. One of the lines takes me back to this period: “God, make me famous / If you can’t, just make it painless.” That’s how I felt when I was cutting myself.

I did it off and on for a few months. Part of it was a way to feel something else besides doubts and sadness. I was also punishing myself for not doing what I was supposed to do, which was focusing on my feelings and having pure thoughts that went hand in hand with art and music. I see now that I was combining my love of music and the culture surrounding it with my religious rituals and belief patterns. I was only 16 and had no one to tell me otherwise.

I washed the bloody surface after every cut. Each one was pretty deep. I would end up with 30-40 scars on my arms, which are still visible today, along with my man boobs and hairy chest. It’s what keeps me from taking my shirt off in public. Sometimes I wished I was brave enough to cut my wrist and end it all. I was either too optimistic or too scared to do it. Okay, I was both.

Chapter 144

Dear Diary

My shit poems were getting darker and more focused on my disbelief in God. My real battle at the time was trying to figure out if there was a God and using their terms to cast my doubts.

I started a journal earlier that year when I moved in with my grandma. It began with me saying what I did each day and then turned into my inner thoughts of what was happening and how I felt. When I got into Douglas Coupland, I used my journal to write short stories and probably the very beginnings of my life story. Unfortunately, I lost it a long time ago. I sure wish I could get that back now. It was the only time I felt secure and somewhat content.

Chapter 145

The More You Suffer, the More it Shows You Really Care

Through all my self-loathing and despair, I got closer to the one girl in my life who got me. I cared deeply about Sue, and the days of taking it slow for self-preservation were now losing to my desire to be with only her. I was still scared since she lived in a different state, I didn't have a car, and I was terrified to be hurt again by letting my guard down. She was always trying to get me to let her in. I decided this was what I wanted.

I ended my relationship with Mary. I felt like an asshole for hurting her, and I probably have some scars on my arm for it, but it was for the best. She thought it had something to do with Tonya, but we fizzled out too due to the notes we would pass to each other and when it was clear I wasn't giving up rock music.

We wrote to each other a bunch during the early school year. It was mainly pleasant because I kept myself from revealing my inner thoughts since she was the pastor's daughter. However, one day, she asked me if I liked that good old devil's rock music. I was at the point in my life where I was tired of hiding and wanted to express myself and dress the way I wanted and tell the world how great I thought R.E.M. was.

Silly me decided to write her a letter and tell her that I love music and how it saved me in so many ways that I can't live without it. I know I should have just kept my big fucking mouth shut when talking to the daughter of the guy who could get me in trouble or kick me out of school, but I was on a kick of wanting to be myself and didn't want to be fake and lie about it.

She replied with a letter that said the rock music I listen to was from the devil and some nonsense about demons poking through to make me feel this way. No, Tonya, my dear, it was your religion, my shitty childhood, and people doing horrible things to me which made me feel this way. It's the music that comforts me and makes me feel less alone.

I don't remember if I ever wrote back. But after that, I didn't talk to her as much and stayed clear from her in school. I don't know why I thought she would be cool with me liking music. Maybe because alt-music with meaning was taking over the

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mainstream, I thought she would be on board too. But that was the end of that. In this situation, my big mouth struck again.

I was ready to give Sue all my attention and damn the consequences. I should have cared about the consequences.

Chapter 146

R.E.M. is Bigger Than the Beatles

The album *Monster* came out on Tuesday, September 27th, and Uriah and I picked it up at the Franklin Mills Mall after school and his dad was nice enough to drive us to get it. Uriah got it on CD while I got the tape version so I could listen in my portable tape player. I rushed home and I put it on the huge stereo my grandma owned at the house I was now living at and laid down on a couch and listened to the newest offering from my heroes.

I didn't know how I felt about *Monster* on the first listen. It was a first for me when it came to a R.E.M. album. I thought the band was nearly perfect, from *Chronic Town* (1982) to *Automatic for the People* (1992). For me, this was their first hiccup. It was still R.E.M., and I love everything they do, but *Monster* is still my least favorite album by them.

I get what they were going for: a raw, in-your-face album to stop them from getting pigeonholed as an acoustic band who will find their resting place on VH1.

I knew they wanted to put out a rock album, and songs like these would be more fun to play live, but it lacked something that the previous albums (and, thankfully, the next one) had. I also get that in the grand scheme of things, R.E.M. was trying something new and putting on a different hat. Any rock artist should be able to switch things up to stay relevant and not get bored and redundant (David Bowie made a fifty-year career out of this). It was where R.E.M. was in 1994-1995.

They were coming out of three years of being one of the biggest acts but keeping a low-key profile. The band didn't do many interviews and TV show appearances. I thought it was the best move for them then. They maintained their mysterious appeal and let the music speak for itself. But not with this album. R.E.M. was everywhere promoting it.

The album grew on me, but it took some time. The lead track and single, "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" was a solid anthem song. I like the sexy attitude of "Crush with Eyeliner" and "King of Comedy" had some good lyrics. The love song ballad, "Strange Currencies" was a heart stringer puller. "Let Me In," was a loud, chaotic tribute to Cobain (summing up his life perfectly), and the closer, "You," a dreamy, distorted, beautiful fucking mess of a love song. I accepted the other songs and did what I always did with Stipe's words: I took them in and adapted them to my life to

think and feel every one of them. Even though *Monster* didn't grab me like the others, I still played it nonstop. It was a break from listening to NIN and cutting myself.

The odd thing about *Monster* was that it was the first time R.E.M. was so popular that more of the young rock fan kids I knew liked them. They were more of a thinker/gentlemen's band, instead of Nirvana, whose fans would always sport their shirts and patches on their book bags to show their love for the band. Now, there were kids putting R.E.M. was finally getting their just due.

Stipe was all over the place doing interviews whenever he could. It was the opposite of 1991-93. He was coming out of the closet as a guy who didn't like labels but liked both sexes. I was already on board with gay people not being sinners and deserving equal rights. I thought they needed to stop getting bullied. I realized this during the summer when I had so much time to think about these issues. Now I was ready to help fight the battle.

Michael was such an inspiration that I would paint my fingernails and wear eyeliner like him to push the envelope and make those stuck in the past uncomfortable. I would even kiss boys in front of those who were too conservative so I could see their bigot selves squirm. I stopped denying and being outraged by claims about my bisexuality (thanks to Christine). I now embraced it and made people see that being this way is the least of their worries.

I did this for about 10 years. I even let those I knew were gay or coming out, think I was bi so they would feel comfortable around me. I wanted them to be themselves and not feel judged. My actions were all because of Stipe.

I went from a born-again Christian who got brainwashed to hate homosexuals to doing whatever I could to make those I hated to feel comfortable and accepted. I also went through a period where I thought I was bisexual since I loved Stipe and Cobain so much. People thought I was in denial, and I would second guess myself and think, "Maybe I am gay like everyone says I am." A big part of Tori Amos' audience is gay men, and I thought my inner gay self was breaking out. However, that got squashed when I realized through an intimate experience that I am definitely not attracted to men.

Michael said something in an interview that hit a chord with me. He said sometimes he feels masculine, and sometimes he feels effeminate. I felt this way too. I don't know if it was from being raised by such drastically different parents or if I was born super sensitive like my mom and stubborn like my pop. Either way, Stipe being more in the open and all over the place was a blessing, and I loved that my hero was getting the attention he deserved.

Monster was the number one album in America for three weeks. R.E.M. was on top of the world, and it seemed like it would never end. It was a gamble to put out such a different album from its predecessors, but it fit in at the time.

My favorite band, my lifeline in my miserable experience on this shit-hole planet, was the biggest in the world. It showed when the top 40 stations that used to play nothing, but catchy club and rap hits started to play R.E.M. It was like I won a battle against Rich from CIBA and my sister, who only liked music those stations played before she ran back into the folds of the born-again way.

I started to think again that alt-rock was taking over the world for good and the world was going to change for the good. I thought we were in some '60s type of revolution with music and the counterculture that came with it. I thought the times were changing, and people were starting to care about things that the hippies cared about, like the environment, civil rights, and being respectful (politically correct) to those who were different.

In some ways, I was right. I thought my generation wouldn't cast aside these issues and embrace the music and culture, unlike our parents, who seemed to give up when they reached a certain age. They chalked up these feelings to being childlike and immature and had to leave them behind to go along with society and their peers.

That is what I gathered when I heard adults say they used to think these things, and then they "grew up." They thought I was going through a phase that would pass. I hated this point of view and hated that my low self-esteem made me dwell on these opinions and sometimes outweighed my point of view, making me doubt my struggles. I combated this with the notion that my generation will be different, and we will change the world with art, music, and remembering our social concerns.

I thought there was hope and that soon we would change the country from the backward thinking of previous generations and get away from the flawed indoctrinated views of the bible. This sense of hope will be hard to hold to through the rest of my life.

Alt-rock, in my view, wasn't just the alternative to the mainstream. It was the mainstream now, which I thought was a good thing. It had the power to change people's thoughts and views. The music was more art-like with an almost family, hippie vibe. I assumed "alt-rock" was a broad term with tons of subgenres under its umbrella.

Everything from Punk to Ska to College Rock to Folky stuff all seemed to be on one side of wanting to make better music and most seemed to have a message to try to make it a better world we lived in. It was a melting pot of music that wasn't just the alternative to the top 40 bubble gum acts but an alternative to the mainstream way of life and those who were ignorant, bullies, and downright terrible people.

It took on subject matter that most people in America didn't want to think or talk about, like death, sex, life beyond their dogmatic views, women's rights, gay rights, mental health, and emotional issues. It wouldn't be the life of the party at frat houses. The genre pushed progressive thinking to the mainstream. It was a great time for pop culture music. So many bands got airplay on MTV and radio stations like WDRE that you could listen for hours and not hear a bad song.

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I didn't realize it then, but I discovered my love of popular music at a great time, when almost every act out was good and R.E.M. was the center of it all, sort of like the Beatles of alt-rock. I wore this like a badge and had a sense of pride for my favorite thing in the world. It gave me a sense that I was on the right track following my ride or die favorite band. That things were going to start to be okay for me.

Chapter 147

That's What Friends Are For

I was still roaming around Kensington with Christine and the girls, who loved alt-rock too now. Rose was dating Chris from the Olney section of Philly, who I thought was so cool. He was in a band called Kinsmen, and his favorite band was Pearl Jam. His best friend was Jennifer, who was in love with Kurt Cobain. She put anyone who said they were a fan to shame with her knowledge and Nirvana collection.

I went to a Halloween party with them and went as Kurt. It was the first time I dressed up for Halloween since I was eight. Technically, I was Stipe the previous year, but all I did was slick my hair back and wear a white shirt to look like him in the LMR video. Jennifer said I looked like Kurt with my blonde wig and cardigan. I was starting to get braver with my clothing.

I started to doodle on my jeans whenever I had a pen, mainly my favorite bands, stars, hearts, and peace signs. I let people draw on my pants and sign them like a cast. They got almost completely covered in writing.

Once, I needed a belt for school and didn't want to wear leather since I was trying to be a good vegetarian, so I used one of my neckties. I did this for the next 10-12 years. They held my pants up, and I liked how it made me look like the Karate Kid. Plus, no animals died over it.

I was also hanging out with Ray, who would still make me laugh and get me to do things I wouldn't usually do, like egging a Septa bus on mischief night.

Tami and I were still close and would pal around South Street. We held hands even though we were just friends. We cared deeply about each other, and she was my shoulder to cry on in person and on the phone. I probably did that way too much.

Eddie wasn't around, but I called him once, crying and saying I felt like nothing and wanted to make a difference and do something with my pitiful life. He tried to talk me off the ledge and said everyone makes a difference. If you look at someone differently on a bus and they wonder why you did that, you've made a difference. I don't know if that was making a difference, but I appreciated him saying this, even if it was not what I meant. He was trying to make me feel better. I was telling him because I knew he was the only person who might get it. I needed to make sense of my shitty experiences and was scared I never would. I am sure this won't haunt me for the rest of my life.

Chapter 148

Let Me Out

One of the things that brought me down was my inability to see myself doing the things I wanted to do in life. I would have doubts creep in, making me think I could never be that good, and the best I could hope for was to get a job that I would probably hate and be just like everyone else (miserable).

The Christians liked to shove in your face that nothing would compare to Jesus and the Holy Spirit. You will try to fill the void in life with everything, but Jesus was the only way to be whole. They put these thoughts in my head, causing an issue with the emptiness of life, and filled it with their answer that has kept them from thinking about how empty life is.

Now that I doubted their answers, I got left with a void and filled it with my favorite music and movies. But thoughts of nothing will last forever like Jesus will linger in my head for the rest of my life. The fear that I would go back to their way of thinking and give up my desires and quest for knowledge like a good born-againer was always in the back of my mind.

I saw Christian teenagers' rebel and go out into the world and always come back humiliated and loving the lord. I think they would do something worldly, like drink a beer or play with a girl's body part, then feel such guilt from their upbringing that they run back and beg for forgiveness. I didn't want that for myself, and I knew I was different than them. I saw through the teachings and wanted to think on my own and love the things I came to love that they saw as ungodly.

For as long as I can remember, my mind has produced several thoughts at a time rapidly. It was hard to maintain my clarity and feelings toward these thoughts. I would overthink things and jump to conclusions or panic at a possible conclusion that may occur daily. Occasionally I could calm myself down and feel it out, but this made my doubts and demons harder to conquer.

I would analyze every scenario, thought, and opinion I heard, especially ones directed at me, and try to make sense of it. Most times, it didn't hinder my life besides making me sad and feeling like I couldn't accomplish what I wanted. Later, it took over my daily life and then some.

Chapter 149

I Want My VHS

I used to watch the same movies weekly. I had a VCR at my disposal for the first time in almost ten years, and I would go to the local video store and rent the same movies over and over. I knew some of them by heart. I saw *The Lost Boys* unedited for the first time. *True Romance* was my favorite, though. I didn't know who Quentin Tarantino was, but he wrote the screenplay, and *Pulp Fiction* would soon make him a household name.

In the spring of '94, a couple of kids at the paper job said I reminded them of Lloyd Dobler from *Say Anything*. Apparently, I talked like him. I had no idea if this was true because I hadn't seen the movie yet. When I finally rented it, I fell in love with the tale of a poor boy who loves a well-off girl whose father comes between them. I also loved *Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael* (because of Winona Ryder), and *The Doors* since I admired Jim Morrison. I was drawn to his "Hey, look at me" schtick. Eventually, I will view Morrison as the godfather of cock rock, but I used to think he was idol worthy.

It made me feel like a normal kid, watching movies on a VCR in a house without roaches. I found an escape from my studies. I wish I could rewind my life to this simple and comforting time.

Chapter 150

The Downward Spiral

The rest of my time was tied up with Sue, either meeting her downtown or talking on the phone about life and poetry. Once I decided I wanted to have a steady relationship with her, I let my precious guard down. I let her into my life and my mind. She was begging to know more about what I had been through and what went on in my tormented mind. She said no matter what I told her, she would be there for me, and I could trust her.

I revealed some of my darkest thoughts and pain. I told her almost everything I had experienced. I explained my upbringing in the church, Kensington, my heroin-addicted father, my no-backbone mother, my fight with my sister, the bullies in my school, my terrible education, my stories of getting robbed and jumped, my doubts and overwhelming sadness, and my thoughts of suicide.

I don't know if she realized how bad it was and that I wasn't just a kid going through growing pains. But her reaction was lackluster and a little standoffish. She told me I should get help to deal with what I had been through and basically said, "Good luck with all of that."

It would have been fine and dandy if we resumed our routine of chatting often and getting closer. Instead, I didn't see or hear from her for days. It was strange since we talked almost daily. I would call her home number, and she wouldn't be there. I would leave messages for her over the weekend, but she wouldn't return the call.

It was very upsetting for me since I just told her things that I wasn't telling anyone else, besides maybe Eddie, and I was becoming emotionally dependent on her. When she finally got back to me, she told me she was with her ex-boyfriend doing drugs with him (I think it was meth or heroin). She was cold and distant on the phone, similar to how Jeanne was near the end of our puppy love story.

I was quite disappointed and decided to write my feelings down as a poem in my journal. I was extremely sad about the things I told her. Everything was fresh in my mind and out in the open, and I felt let down and alone again. I don't remember what I wrote, but it was dark and borderline suicidal. It was my typical mindset at the time. I would file this away as another moment of being Charles Holesworth if I didn't do something careless that would change things for me at Bensalem Baptist.

The next day or so, I turned in a homework assignment without knowing my suicidal journal entry was with it. The teacher gave it to the higher-ups out of genuine concern for my welfare. They brought me into the pastor's office and discussed my writings and mindset. I think they knew a little about my home life, and I based my reason for writing such dark things on that. I said I was venting and didn't want to kill myself. But they sent me to counseling with Pastor Skogan (my one teacher's husband), who was a nice enough guy but still a born againer, so I knew that I had to watch what I said to him. We met weekly in his office in the same building as the school and church.

He would ask me questions about what I was thinking and feeling, and I would say I was fine and just needed to vent. I had to attend these sessions to remain in the school, and I really did, so this was the only option.

One good thing Pastor Skogan did was help fix my broken glasses. I think I broke them at a concert. It was a common trend during my concert adventures. It's hard to go to shows that include moshing when you have glasses on. I had been putting scotch tape on the top right part of the frame to keep the lens inside. It looked like I had a bunch of rolled-up tape about two inches thick around my glasses, but I didn't care. I gave up caring about how I looked.

Pastor Skogan took the tape off and put clear tape over the frame with one layer instead of my method of five or six. I still needed new glasses (which took me another few months to get), but they looked much better.

In the beginning, I went to Mr. Skogan's office faithfully when they wanted me to but slacked off later that year. I also never told him what was really going on. I knew it would only get me in trouble when I told him what I thought of the born-again faith. I kept it as superficial as possible and didn't reveal my true thoughts. I believe Skogan had my best interests in mind, but he couldn't help me, and his theories and advice would always intertwine with their bible and childlike faith system.

They may have been concerned about my emotional state, which I am grateful for, but they wanted me to conform to their way of thinking and give up rock music, which was a deal breaker.

Other kids at school, including pastor kids, smoked pot, drank, and listened to popular music. They hid it all and got off the hook. I was clean and sober and wanted to know more about life and God. I was nice to everyone I met and more Christ-like than the others with my acceptance of all people. I took the classes seriously but didn't hide my love for secular rock and was embracing my sadness, so I was on the hot seat.

They even sent letters to my mom's house and my grandma's house saying that I needed to act accordingly to the rules and the way of Christ. Family members told me to act like a Christian when I was there and be who I wanted to be at home. But it was too late for that. I was proud of the music I liked and wanted to express myself. My

dealings with CIBA in the previous years and my newfound desire to be myself made it hard to hide how I felt. I didn't want to hide my feelings (I did that far too long).

One morning they had a sermon about the evils of rock music. When the pastor said to bow our hands and close our eyes, as we did at the end of every sermon, they asked us to raise our hands if we listened to rock music. I peeked to see who would own up to listening to the devil's music in secret. Out of the 20-30 kids I knew who liked rock n' roll, only five raised their hands, including me, Uriah, and Mary. I believe this sermon happened because of the letters I wrote back and forth with Tonya.

I was getting more cocky or confident that I was passing all my classes. I had this notion in my head that the born-again faith and those who follow it owe me (and Uriah and Glassey) a chance to graduate since our old schools in Philly screwed us up so badly. I was a fool.

Chapter 151

All the Fruitless Searches

After Sue gave me the cold shoulder, I decided not to let my guard down again. I didn't want my heart broken again, so decided to be single for a while. Who needs anyone who will just break your heart?

I was listening to Ray more often, who was the type who didn't give a shit about any girl's feelings and would date as many as he could at one time. I started thinking he was on to something, and I should do the same.

I was still seeing Sue, even after her disappearance in my time of need. But my heart was back to being guarded. She noticed I was different around her. I couldn't help it. I looked at her differently now. I would continue to see her a few more times and go through the motions of making out and whatnot, but I thought I was done with romance or pursuing it for a while. I was turned off. Who knows when I would let my guard down again and find what I was looking for (true love)? Then it fell into my lap a few days later.

November 8th, 1994, is forever marked in my brain as the day it all began.

"All," meaning my highest of highs and lowest of lows.

I woke up and went to school with my taped-up glasses and the stress of passing my classes in the back of my mind. And, of course, constant sadness in my heart. I thought it would be another day like the rest, but it changed my life forever.

Bensalem Baptist would sometimes let other kids visit. I guess it was an attempt to lure faithful kids to go there instead of other Christian schools. It happened to be one year exactly from when I should have seen Nirvana with Eddie if he wasn't afraid of the neighborhood (I was a sucker for dates and thought they were significant in youth).

We had two visitors who were friends of my schoolmates.

The first one I saw was a girl about 5'5 with a purplish tint to her chin length brown hair and beautiful blue eyes. She reminded me of Winona Ryder in *Reality Bites*. She wore a brown corduroy (Eddie Vedder would be proud) waist-length jacket and a hippish dress. I noticed her standing there with my friend Julie Dugan. She was the picture-perfect idea of an alt-rock girl in 1994, and I was smitten. I was so intrigued, especially when we made brief eye contact.

I wanted to know who this girl was pronto, but I kept my cool and didn't show my interest. I went to the room where my first class was held and went on with my day as usual. My '90s dream girl would be in different classes than me since Julie was a grade under me. I wouldn't see her until lunchtime when everybody ate together.

Meanwhile, the other person who visited us was another cute girl who was more preppy/church-going. I don't remember her name, but she was very nice, and I enjoyed talking to her. I spoke with her more than my alt-rock dream girl. During lunch, I purposely sat away from the dream girl and played the cool guy like Ethan Hawke in *Reality Bites*.

I watched "Winona" and wanted to know all about her. I think I caught her looking at me during lunch, but I wasn't confident enough to ponder that too much. I wasn't too shy to talk to her; I just listened to my gut for once and knew I should play it cool.

I would never see the girl who wore church clothes again, and the other would be the one I called the love of my life for most of my youth. But little did I know this at the end of the day when I watched them leave with their friends.

The next day I came into school with a skip to my step. I ran up to Julie and asked, "Who is she?"

She said, "That was my good friend, Laura Lee Sesar." They knew each other from attending Faith Baptist church. Julie wore a big smile as she told me about Laura, and I knew she was happy to see me smiling and excited about her friend. Something was brewing.

I told Julie I thought Laura was so pretty and I would like to get to know her better. I gave her my number to give to Laura.

She called me that night, November 9th, around 7 pm. We talked for hours. I sat in my grandma's living room for most of the call, then switched to the kitchen when my cousin Billy came in the room so I could have some privacy.

Throughout the call, I was so excited with an overwhelming sense of happiness. I hadn't smiled so much in my life. She felt so familiar but also new and refreshing. Her voice echoed her interest and excitement in talking to me.

I could feel the electricity in the air or through the plastic phones we were holding to our ears. Her voice was warm and compassionate, and I pressed the phone close to my ear to hear every word and tone of her voice.

We talked about all of our mutual interests. Laura loved Tori Amos, NIN, Nirvana, R.E.M. (though not nearly as much as me), and all the great bands and artists we were lucky enough to know about in 1994. I made her enough mixed tapes that R.E.M. eventually became one of her favorites.

She was a year and a few months younger than me and grew up in a suburb called Fairless Hills, a middle to an upper-middle-class neighborhood in Bucks County. It is quite the distance from me in Philly without a car. She also was raised as a born-again

Christian. Her parents were still practicing the religion, but Laura, and her older sister, Jamie, got to go to a public high school for their education called Pennsbury High.

She, like me, had serious doubts about our religion and wanted to break free from the faith. She was a thinker and had high hopes for life and humankind. She wanted to embrace the more artistic side of society, especially music.

By the end of the phone call, I was buzzing with excitement. It felt like something big just happened to me. This girl thought like me, liked everything I liked, wanted to know all about me, and was smart, honest, and genuine. My buzz lasted for days! I felt so good and positive about everything. I talked to her for a few more nights, then we decided to meet up with each other on Saturday.

I had no idea where Fairless Hills was or her local mall, The Oxford Valley Mall, but that is where we decided to meet. I took two Septa buses to see her, and it took me over an hour and a half.

The mall was about a 15-minute drive from her house. I knew I would be doing most of the traveling so we could see each other. Neither of us had a car, and I was already used to traveling on long bus rides to see the girls I liked. Laura's parents were a bit overprotective and wouldn't let her travel too far from her neck of the woods. Plus, I was a guy, and the guy is the one who does the most to see the girl he likes. It's how it always went in my life.

Eventually, I started taking a third bus that got me closer to her house. However, it only ran every hour and stopped service early on the weekends. We always had to watch how long we hung out before my Cinderella Septa bus turned into a pumpkin.

Not only was this week one of the best of my life because of meeting Laura, but R.E.M. was also scheduled to play my favorite skit show, *Saturday Night Live*. To top it off, Michael Stipe was the guest host for MTV's *120 Minutes* that Sunday at midnight. What a week for a young Chaz.

I soon met Laura's family, which consisted of two younger brothers, her sister Jamie, and her parents. Jamie was a year or two older than me and was into the same music. She also rebelled against parental authority and their born-again faith.

She told me a story (now I see it was a warning sign) about a boyfriend who was "worldly" and unsaved, and Mr. and Mrs. Sesar ended the relationship before it could blossom. Run, Chaz, run.

Her mom looked like most middle-aged moms and was pleasant enough to me. She made us lunch, which was pasta with meat sauce. I told her I was doing my best to be a vegetarian, and she made me pasta with just garlic (which I always loved too much).

Laura and I then went for a long walk around her neighborhood. We talked about everything we liked and all of our theories (well, mostly mine) about life and God. She listened to every word with great interest and seemed to know what I meant. It's important to note that she was the only girl who ever got exactly where I came from

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concerning our cult-like religion and wanting to break free. She understood why I desired to learn more about life, the human experience, and our purpose.

Throughout our relationship, she hung onto my every word. We both wanted to live our lives with our minds open to everything. We aimed to question the leaders and pastors who told us to think only one way or we're sinners going to hell.

Our goal was to embrace the things the church was holding us back from, whether it was music (the main culprit), movies, books, or other worldly things that contradicted their theories on life and how to live it.

I talked about my feelings and pain. She was a great listener and the comfort that I was dying to have. She was a beautiful girl inside and out. Her soul (if they exist) was true and pure, glowing with beauty and passion. I was in deep.

Chapter 152

You Are the Everything

It was a chilly, breezy November afternoon with an abundance of sun. It made me think about how important one star is to our survival and how delicate our spot in the universe is. It made me hopeful that there's something behind it all. Perhaps we will know one day if this god thing is real, though if it is, I doubt it's the God of the bible.

I told Laura that R.E.M.'s "You Are The Everything" meant a lot to me for numerous reasons, but the following lines affected me deeply: "The stars are the greatest thing you've ever seen / And they're there for you, for you are alone / You are the everything."

I explained that to me, it meant that this planet and everything that keeps it going (gravity, the sun, oxygen, etc.) is designed perfectly. It could have been an accident. Maybe we are in the right place at the right time to reap the benefits. Or we adapted to the conditions we were formed in, and it's all for us. It's possible this supreme being has a reason for us to be in such a delicate place in the galaxy. To do what we can with our time here. I was optimistic, even when I was the most depressed kid in town.

This thought pattern established itself in my teenage brain and would go further over time. I thought if there is a god, and it put everything in its right place for us to exist and survive, then why would we subject ourselves to a belief pattern that limits our possibilities and concept of god? Why box god into a gender and give it flawed human emotions like anger?

I meant every word, and Laura was on-board with my talk about going against our faith. She couldn't keep her eyes off me while I went on my rant.

The sun blinded me. Then I looked at her as we stood face to face in this schoolyard. Our eyes met. Hers were glimmering with beauty and life. We embraced, and then we kissed. It was sweet, soft, and passionate like we meant it, and I was happy. The moment would be near perfect, one of the only ones I would have in my life.

We spent the rest of the day wandering the lands of Fairless Hills. We held hands all the way back until her house was in view, so her mom wouldn't catch us sinning in

public. When I got dropped off at the mall for my bus ride home, I had never wanted to stay with someone so badly.

Out of teenage devotion, we decided to exchange jackets before I left. She got my cloth light brown jacket, and I got her brown corduroy jacket. I got the better deal since mine was as thin as could be. I wore hers faithfully for a couple of years, no matter how cold it got. It smelled like her and made me miss her even more. I was in even deeper now.

Chapter 153

I Am Smitten

Laura told me to call her when I got home, which I did a few hours later. We talked some more through the night. The first part of this wonderful weekend went perfectly. Now it was time to watch R.E.M. on *SNL*. She knew of my love for R.E.M. and was excited for me to see them perform that night. She was also going to stay up for it.

It was a preview of the upcoming world tour (that I was waiting years for). Most of the TV performances I had seen from them were on the acoustic side, so this would be a new R.E.M. for me to see.

The band looked like they did in the “What’s the Frequency, Kenneth?” video. Peter had the Neil Young hairstyle, Mills sported the Elvis suit, and Michael wore silver pants and a gold, shiny shirt. He danced like he felt every note. I couldn’t tell what Bill wore behind the drums.

Stipe played the rock star, cocky and full of steam. He seemed to know they were the “it” band and deserved it. They played three songs. It was odd for *SNL* since they usually limited artists to two songs. “What’s the Frequency, Kenneth?” was performed like they never missed a beat from the last tour. They also played “Bang and Blame,” the second single from *Monster*, and “I Don’t Sleep, I Dream.” I was surprised *SNL* let them play the latter since Stipe sings a line about oral sex. I had a little taste of what R.E.M. would be like live for their next tour, the first time I would ever see them.

On Sunday, I got to watch my “ride or die” Stipe host *120 Minutes* on MTV. It started at midnight, and I stayed up for its entirety. I didn’t care if I was tired at school the next day. Stipe comes first. It was cool watching him before and after videos and commercials. I loved getting a glimpse into his persona and attributes. I would take them and adapt them to my life self-consciously.

For the next few days, I only thought of Laura. I would come home as fast as I could and wait for her to call me, or I would call her. We would talk about our days and how good R.E.M. was on *SNL*. As we talked about how much we liked each other, I told her I wanted her to be my girlfriend and that I never met anyone like her. In my sensitive teenage head, a week was enough for me to know she was special.

Laura told me the same but gave me a warning I should have taken seriously. She told me she was scared to get into a relationship with me due to her parents’

overprotective ways. Laura had to break up with her last boyfriend, Mark, when her parents found out how close they got physically. She was afraid the same would happen to us.

She was catching on to how extremely sensitive and emotional I was, and I think she didn't want to cause me any pain. Laura never wanted to cause anyone grief or pain. She had a kind and enduring heart that would do anything for the ones she cared for. It was my favorite of her many extraordinary qualities.

I told her I would be okay and not to worry about me. I may be super sensitive, but I had been through enough that I felt I could handle almost anything life threw at me (you sad fool, Chaz). She said she didn't want to put labels on us, especially since if her parents found out we were boyfriend and girlfriend, they'd flip out.

I understood her point of view, but I told her I wanted to be with her exclusively. I said, "I'd sure love to call you my girlfriend" (like the Matthew Sweet song), and she finally agreed, sealing my fate.

On November 15th, Laura and I were in a committed relationship. I was on cloud nine and couldn't be happier. However, I had some alerts going off in me like always. I got consumed by worries of losing everything or having it taken away from me.

I was scared Laura would break my heart, but as we got closer over the next month, I threw all caution to the wind. I cut off the other girls I was interested in (sorry, Sue) and was all in for this girl from Fairless Hills.

Chapter 154

Past the Mission

Laura and I discussed theories about hypocritical born-againers and their teachings. We were trying to figure out why they say not to judge anyone while they sit and judge everyone who isn't Jesus crazy.

I told her that I wanted to be a singer and put my words to music someday. I explained that I wanted to attend the Community College of Philadelphia after I graduated. After that, maybe I could get into a university like Temple and pursue writing.

I never thought I would be able to plan my future. I foolishly got my hopes up for a higher education that would pull me out of the poverty tattooed on my self-confidence. Then I wouldn't have anything to do with the Christians and their outdated beliefs.

We talked about moving in together after she graduated the following year in 1996. She would pursue an education in art, and we would live a life of love and beauty, helping everyone we came across. Dreams at such a young and fragile age are as dangerous as love, which was where we were heading.

Stupid me thought it was the beginning of the happy times I deserved. I believed fate or God was casting good vibes on me to make up for such a rotten childhood. In retrospect, the last few months of 1994 were the sanest and most secure I ever was and will be. It was the best of times.

Chapter 155

Look at Me, I'm a Student

I was walking around Bensalem Baptist with more zip to my step and smiles on my face. I thought this life of mine was worth living with my newfound love and all the possibilities waiting for me after graduation.

During one of Pastor Skogen's sessions, I told him I felt so much better and wasn't having thoughts of sadness anymore. It was only partly true, but best for him to hear. I didn't think I needed the sessions anymore. He didn't agree, so I kept going except when I had more pressing things to do, like schoolwork or having fun with my classmates.

I started skipping sessions to clown around with my friends or go to gym class. Since no one said anything to me, I figured everything was cool, and they could see how better I was (everything was not cool).

During all this fun, Uriah shaved his head to look like Stipe. Even though I was the biggest Stipe nut I knew, he beat me to it. Uriah said he had a surprise for me the next day, and bam, there it was - a freshly shaved head down to the skin. I was jealous he did it before me, but my time would come for the bald look and then some.

Then I lost a pal at school who was in a similar position as me financially. Charlie Glassey missed many days because he was at home helping raise his younger brothers. I don't know if he dropped out or they kicked him out, but he was gone, and I didn't see him much afterward. His mom couldn't afford the school anymore.

It made me hope my mom was making payments. I assumed she was and that the Christians were being true to the Christ part and would let me finish the year either way ("Hahahaha" is what I say to myself for thinking this). Glassey leaving meant there was room for a new student under the fire code rules.

Even with my short time in the school so far, I left my mark. When we were playing tag or freedom, I ran to hide next to a wall, and I guess I was going too fast since I left the image of my small, scrawny butt on the wall's thin surface. I did own up to it, and I didn't have to pay for it, well, at least not yet. But I think this was another blow to my and Bensalem Baptist's fragile relationship.

We had a very relaxed gym hour policy since there was a lot of land to play recreational sports. The school offered many more group sports than CIBA.

There was an outside basketball court, and they were building an indoor gymnasium with a court that would be ready next year as long as enough parents paid for their kids to go to school. There was an area for volleyball, modest cheerleaders who cheered in culottes and shirts that covered most of the upper body, and enough field to play some good old fashion football.

In CIBA, if you were a boy, you were usually stuck playing whatever sport the useless gym “teacher” had picked that day, and since there was a limit to how many boys were in the school, every one of them played.

I was always the smallest and one of the worst at sports (due to not having a father who would regularly play catch or teach me how to swing a bat), so the anxiety always surfaced. If I had gone to a regular high school, I would have spent most of my time in an acting club or a creative writing class instead.

Sometimes I played volleyball (mainly with the girls) or football with other boys who weren’t tall enough for basketball. One time our gym teacher let us leftover kids play football, not just the usual touch football, but tackle, without pads or helmets. This teacher was like the rest of the church folk - a strong conservative with gun rights at the top of his political issues.

He wore t-shirts to gym class, expressing his right-wing beliefs. One had something to do with guns and his right to have them. The other was one that I didn’t quite understand yet, due to my ignorance of the confederate flag and its use in southern “pride.” It had a picture of the flag, and underneath it said, “If they can wear their X (referring to Malcolm X), then I can wear mine!”

Even though I didn’t know how ugly and offensive the confederate flag was to African Americans, I knew this shirt was racist and chalked it up as another born-againer being the opposite of what Jesus was about. He made me understand the ignorance of some white people and how they view people of color.

The kids who played football were all ages since gym class was free, except for those under eight. We were playing with kids from 10 years old to my age of 16. The gym teacher, who was in his 30s or 40s, also played. That was another thing about going to schools with a low number of kids - the teachers/adults had to participate to keep teams equally numbered.

We had a good time throughout the game. I may have given up on sports as a fan due to my anger issues, but I still enjoyed playing football. It was usually chaotic with friends in the neighborhood or in school without referees to mark downs and touchdowns.

I was surprisingly okay for a kid my size. I was fast on my feet and could run out other kids while playing. One time I was on the opposite team of the confederate flag-loving gym teacher, and his team had the ball. I was on defense (my favorite part of the game and life in general). We were playing iron man football, which is when you play both offense and defense, due to the lack of kids playing. My team was down and

had no way to catch up by the end of the period. But something came over me as I watched this bigot run up the field to score another touchdown after catching the ball.

He was yelling about how no one could catch him. I wanted to stop his attempt at athletic glory for scoring a touchdown while playing us misfit kids. I ran as fast as possible to reach this man who was a few inches taller than me and outweighed me by 100 pounds.

He was still bragging about how I couldn't catch him (most likely reliving his youth) when I was a step away from him. If we were playing two-hand touch football, I would have had him before he scored, and no one would have got harmed. I made a triumphant leap for his legs, successfully stopping him from scoring another touchdown.

As we both went to the grassy ground, I heard something snap. I jumped up and automatically thought it was me, but I was unscathed. The gym teacher wasn't so lucky. He was holding his leg in agonizing pain. I broke it so bad he had to get screws in several spots and walk with crutches for a few weeks.

I felt lousy, but I knew it wasn't my fault. I was 16, and he was an adult who encouraged these events. But the guy lost his job, and I never wanted to hurt anyone like that. However, I found it funny and somewhat deserving considering his gloating and racist shirt.

As he was lying there, one kid said, "Oh, come on, man, get up. It can't be that bad." And the teacher shouted back, "Shut up, you little bastard!" which is a big no-no in the born-again world.

He had to apologize before the whole school for saying such a bad word in his moment of weakness. He stood there acting humble on crutches, wearing another colorful shirt about his misplaced political beliefs, maintaining that the devil made him say a PG-13 curse word. It was the last time I saw him and his racist attire (which would be a big hit in the MAGA world 25 years later).

Chapter 156

The Sisters of Mercy

In the middle of all the Christian fun I could bare, Christine invited me to go away with her and her family for Thanksgiving break. She had family in Virginia. I can't remember the smaller than small town we went to, but it was in the middle of nowhere. We left the Tuesday before Thanksgiving and returned Friday night.

Laura visited family near Pittsburgh, PA, about five hours from Philly. We weren't in touch for several days, and I missed her badly.

I was looking forward to escaping the Christians for a couple of days, and even though I didn't do it much, I loved to travel. Christine, her mom, her brother David, and I took a couple of Greyhound buses down to Virginia.

Their relatives picked us up from the bus station and took us to their house.

My hopes of escaping the Christians went out the window when I discovered Christine's Virginia family were big time born-againers. Their house was an old Christian church/school complete with Lifepac desks. They didn't have a TV or radio. It reminded me of southern born-againers I had met through my years in the faith.

I knew my born-againers from Philly would say, "This is God trying to talk to you. He's showing you he's everywhere." But I was too smart to fall for that nonsense, and there was no way the Xians could bring me back to their backward ways. I just thought of it as my usual shit luck and that it was typical for a backwoods southern town.

Christine and I made the best of it. We took walks throughout the woodsy area, and at night I saw the most stars ever, thanks to the distance from a major city. Her born-again family consisted of a father and mother in their 40s and two children under age ten., They had another son who lived on his own and was married with a kid.

On the first day, Christine and I walked through the neighborhood with one of the kids and their basset hound. Their house was on a two-lane highway that seemed to dip and create hills for the drivers. It was a chilly fall day, and the crisp air matched the sea of leafless trees that went on for miles. It set the mood appropriately for what happened next.

The dog was on the other side of the road from us, exploring for a place to pee. We walked aimlessly through the grass on the acres someone in the area owned. The dog going off on its own seemed like a regular occurrence, and the kid who owned him didn't put him on a leash. They let him wander the wooded area freely.

This time, unfortunately, the dog tried to run across the highway (slowly) to our side and got slammed by an oncoming car. The boy was hysterical, and I had to carry his animal back to the house. The poor thing died and urinated on itself while flees were jumping off his corpse. It really broke my heart.

It wasn't the driver's fault. It was the family's fault for not putting the dog on a leash. The driver was an elderly gentleman who seemed upset but not enough to stay and talk to the family. He said some words of remorse and went on down the winding road.

We had to go to their born-again church the next night and go through the motions of being a born-againer like I was at CIBA. Another blow to my getaway from the Xians. It was a good thing I had my Walkman and all my favorite tapes to occupy my time and give me an outlet (NIN came in handy that week).

The next day was Thanksgiving, and dinner would be at the house with the company of Christine's oldest cousin and his family (the oldest son I mentioned earlier). Through these days of dealing with born-againers, I just grinned and bared it, thinking it was the same old same old. Christine's uncle changed this a bit with his one-on-one conversation with me about his son, Ed, who was coming with his wife, Venus, and their toddler.

He was a reserved fellow and the essence of a meek southern gentleman. He wasn't intrusive about religion the whole week and didn't ask about me and Christine's love for the secular world. He even gave us a small radio that picked up a local station to keep us entertained. There was no TV and not much to do but read the bible (or watch old dogs die).

We sat in a room that looked like an old Sunday school room turned into a makeshift dining room. He told me about his son, Ed, and his devil-worshipping ways. I was intrigued. I tolerated him for obvious reasons (like him letting us stay there and his relation to my friend), but he reminded me of the born-againers I've dealt with since I was four.

He was stuck in a bubble and thought anything outside of it was satanic. I knew what he was getting at. He was venting and preparing himself (and me) for his son coming over for dinner and how he disapproved of his lifestyle and religious outlook.

He was worried and troubled by his son's lifestyle. He thought he was glorifying the devil and going to hell and was telling me to beware of him. It was obvious that I was dressing like the music styles I enjoyed. I'm sure I only wore my favorite bands' T-shirts, so it wasn't like he thought I was on the same side as him in this born-again family battle.

I think he knew I was in a born-again school. During our talks, I never let on how many doubts I had about it, so maybe he thought I was rebelling and seeing his son practicing "devil-worshipping" might scare me straight or at least feel sympathetic

toward him. Much like my hopes of breaking away from the Xians, his plan went out the window when I met his estranged son.

I met Ed and his family a few hours before we ate dinner, and he looked like an average white guy in his 20s who liked rock music. He wore a shirt from a band I didn't know called The Sisters of Mercy. They are a gothic-type band that would scare most born-againers if they saw or heard them. He was about six feet tall with brown hair that wasn't long in the secular world, but to the born-againers, it was enough to judge him as wicked.

I didn't approach him about anything, nor did I side with him in this unspoken war between father and son that was tensely occurring during the evening. Christine's uncle mainly stayed quiet and guarded. During the family prayer, I noticed Ed and I were the only ones who didn't keep our eyes closed. We ate our food and had small talk to pass the time. Nothing too dramatic happened and God was never mentioned.

When I finally struck up a conversation with Ed and his wife, holy moly, it was like fireworks. I instantly knew I had found kindred spirits. It is my favorite Thanksgiving ever, though I don't really care about the holiday. I look at it as a marketing push to buy a bunch of food and a dress rehearsal for Xmas, so we can spend everything on that marketing push.

Ed and Venus were about 25 years old. Ed grew up in the born-again world and rebelled when he wanted to experience normal things like music. He didn't go that deep into details, but there were strict rules that his dad enforced through violence. It explained why the father was so stressed and defensive. Not only did he think he failed his son by not keeping him in the flock, but he also went too far and committed borderline child abuse over a teenage boy wanting to like rock music and to think for himself.

Ed and his wife were older than me by about a decade and were into music I had not listened to, such as Ozzy Osbourne, The Sisters of Mercy, and Concrete Blonde. I was new to the music world in general. I had only been in love with it for about three years and had a crash course in pop music. I went from pop bubble gum to the alternative bands that shaped me. Now I was shaking off the dust of bubble gum music and wanted deeper songs that matched my mental state and what I wanted for my future.

They were the perfect people to introduce me to music I would have never heard. I have always been weird about getting introduced to bands and artists. If someone tells me to listen to a group or singer, I usually don't appreciate them as much as if I discovered them. This mental handicap only gets pushed aside if someone I like, or respect shows me something. That's what it was like with Ed and Venus. I just met them and felt like they could be my foster brother and sister.

Then I learned about Ed's religious stance. He wasn't a devil-worshipper (a legit thing born-againers are afraid of); he was into new-age philosophy.

Chaz Holesworth

The conversations we had that night, and the next day greatly impacted my 16-year-old mind. But first, my selfish side decided to take over the driver's seat, and I wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Chapter 157

Pretty Hate Machine

I was listening to Richmond, VA's modern rock radio station, so we must have been close to that city. Throughout the week, I heard the DJs talking about NIN coming to Hampton, VA., which was not too far from where Ed and Venus lived.

I told Christine I wanted to go to the show, and she gave a half-ass answer of "We'll see." It reminded me of something my mom would say to change the subject. The show was the day after Thanksgiving, and now that I had Ed and Venus to talk to about music, I explained how badly I wanted to see NIN. I told them that the Philly show sold out and that I called Ticketmaster in Virginia, and they said there were still tickets for that show. I think Ed saw his younger self in me and decided, with his wife, to let me sleep over at their place with Christine and drive me to the Hampton show. I couldn't pass this chance up.

Christine wasn't happy, but I was not taking no for an answer. I needed to see NIN, especially after the week I had with dogs dying, surrounded by the Xians I thought I had escaped.

NIN was my angst music against the Xians, and they were feeding my self-loathing moments perfectly. It was a stretch for my born-again mold to get into at first. I usually avoided anything too heavy or aggressive for my sensitive undertones. But Nine Inch Nails was different because of Trent Reznor's lyrics and voice. I almost held him at the same level as Cobain.

I was writing lyrics and wanted to sing. Reznor was another voice in my range, and his appeal was his passion and agony, combined with dark, intense lyrics taking on religion, corporations, and dishonesty. I only became a fan of them that year, but I was hooked and would be so for decades to come. It started with their album *The Downward Spiral* and its songs about inner self-reflection and dealing with the pain and isolation that comes with being an outcast in a society demanding conformity.

I fell more in love with them when I bought their first album, *Pretty Hate Machine*. I was still living on a budget from the money I saved from my summer job, so I had to pick and choose what albums I bought wisely. I got *Pretty Hate Machine* before their EP *Broken*, and it was a good choice.

I loved every song on their debut LP, from the anti-corruption anthem that takes on greed, "Head Like a Hole," to the emotional ride, "Something I Can Never Have."

But it was the song that NIN wrote to take on the concept of God and religion, “Terrible Lie,” that I kept closest to my heart.

There might have been bands and singers with a similar message or passion, but NIN did it for me and helped me deal with a lot of born-again demons. I viewed other bands profiting from anger and aggression as mediocre and immature. Reznor sang lines of wisdom and depth that only a person who felt or dealt with these things would know.

NIN was different than other bands on the darker, louder, aggressive side of rock (like piece of shit bands like Korn and all the nonsense that came after them). Trent was intelligent and came off as real (two of my favorite characteristics). I was excited as a teenager could be to see NIN and couldn’t wait to tell Laura about it. I knew she would be so happy for me. But I had to wait to do that since she was in Pittsburgh and cellphones were only for rich people.

Christine’s uncle lost the battle that night during Thanksgiving dinner. I was hanging onto every word from Ed. It was clear how much we had in common regarding born-againers and our doubts. When my plan to sleep at Ed’s place so I could see a rock act got revealed, Ed’s dad was left defeated, and rightfully so. That night Christine and I slept at Ed and Venus’ two-bedroom apartment. It was one of my favorite nights ever.

Ed and I talked until the middle of the night about life and God and all that fun stuff. Venus (who wasn’t raised as a born-again Christian but saw how much it messed up Ed) would talk about music and another thing we shared - depression. They had so many cassette tapes in their apartment. We listened to Ozzy, Concrete Blonde (“Joey” became one of my favorites), The Sisters of Mercy (which I never took a liking to), ‘80s Depeche Mode, and The Cure. Venus loved music as much as I did and was eager to show me all the songs that keep her going. I’ll always miss this connection.

Chapter 158

It's the Beginning of the New Age

Ed told me how he saw the universe and life in general when it came to higher powers. I found it interesting, and it helped me on my road of trying to figure out what god or “it” is. Thanks to the born-again programming, my first instinct was to ignore this way of thinking because it was “wrong” to hear. I rejected these built-in fears of the unknown and listened to Ed with full attention.

This New Age way of thinking was satanic to the Xians. It was too foreign and went against their programmed belief structures, which saw everything in the universe under one body of existence which could be labeled “God.” We are in it to grow, learn, and become more spiritual, to be one with the god body (either be a part of it again or for the first time, depending on who is telling the story).

Basically, everything we do is a learning experience to make us better humans and, more importantly, more spiritual. Everything I do and all the challenges I face are set up for me to get passed and learn from them to not only help myself become a higher self but to try to help my fellow man in this body of existence.

These things made sense to me, but they seemed more like good advice to live one’s life and not so much about being spiritual. Ed would also fast and meditate to get closer to his spiritual side, which was something that the born-againers did. Maybe Ed and his dad weren’t so different after all. I also fasted to keep my feelings in line (which was probably the same feeling Ed had, but he called it spirituality).

The New Age belief system viewed evil as negative events that hindered spiritual growth. I believe it’s the reason there’s a goal for wanting to be good.

Evil things that happen to you are just a lesson to help you advance spiritually.

They think Christianity hinders spiritual evolution with their systems based on guilt and sin for things that aren’t one’s fault. I agree that Christianity hinders our evolution, but I don’t think it’s just spiritual (I don’t even know if I believe in spirituality). It also hinders scientific thinking.

If we all got on board with science-backed evidence in our teachings, we would be smarter (myself especially) and much further in understanding what makes us who we are.

Ed told me more about the New Age Movement he was embracing. Venus wasn't on board with it. I think she was more of an agnostic (which is where I was heading) than having to relive lives if one doesn't pass the negative tests handed to them.

I would dwell on this info and the theories for some time. I liked the idea that everything I do isn't bad or a sin but a way to improve myself. It made me feel less like things were my fault and that I'd be damned forever (the mindset that the Xians pushed).

It also seemed to be what a psychiatrist would have said to one who was feeling bad about one's past. It had elements of what other religions had. Good and evil, a god figure, and a quest to achieve something greater than us. It seemed like a good transition from being a born-againer.

I wasn't ready to join any religion, so I filed this stuff away to ponder later. If I were more gullible, I would have thought this meeting would teach me a lesson and help evolve my spirit (much like the Xians would have said going to a born-againers house for vacation was god's plan). But I was keeping my mind open, and I knew jumping into another belief system while dealing with the demons of the one I was currently in was not what I wanted. I knew, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

The next day, Ed went to work, and I hung out with Christine, Venus, and her kid until Ed came home and drove me to the NIN show. I got a ticket from a mall that had a Ticketmaster license to sell tickets. It was GA and cost about 40 dollars.

Ed would have loved to go to the show with me but had work the next night and was on a tight budget with his low-wage job and newborn. I was going solo to the NIN show, which was fine. Since I missed out on seeing Nirvana because of not having anyone to go with (goddamn Eddie Maurer), I would never miss out on a show for that reason ever again.

During the day, Venus and I talked about feeling sad and how music helped us. I told her about Laura, how I never met anyone like her, and how she was such a beautiful person. I told her that we had dreams, and I told her about my poems, how I wanted to turn them into songs, and how Laura and I wanted to live together. I let Venus know that meeting her and Ed gave me hope that we could make it work on a low budget.

I explained how they also gave me hope about not losing myself and the things I loved, like so many other adults. Too many people chalk up their dreams and passions to being young and dumb. I didn't want that, and it was one of my obsessions that would cause me to be compulsive from time to time.

I was too worried about losing myself.

Chapter 159

Doesn't it Make You Feel Better?

My GA ticket gave me access to any seat in the venue, so I made my way around, taking in the sounds, sights, and smells of this foreign venue. It was on the bigger side and probably held 10,000 people. I was people-watching and loving every moment. There were so many pretty girls but none as pretty as my Laura.

I decided that I would watch the opening acts on the upper levels. For NIN, I would go to the floor and try to get as close to the stage as possible. I watched a “freak show” traveling circus-themed act called the Jim Rose Circus. It consisted of people who could do cool stuff with their bodies, like hammering nails in their nostrils and picking up cement blocks with their testicles. Then Marilyn Manson played. They were unknown at the time but blew up a few years later. I wasn’t a fan.

I respected Manson because of his intelligence and no-nonsense way of dealing with the Xians. But he eventually lost my respect years later when I learned he was a sexual predator. They performed their cover of “Sweet Dreams” with foam penis props on stage, and Manson would either hump one of them or use it to hump something else. There was a lot of humping going on.

Finally, my boys in NIN were about to play. If this week was a test to see how fed up and how much of a non-born-again I was, it didn’t shake me. Trent came out wearing a “The Satanic Army” shirt, spoofing “The Salvation Army” logo. I got the gist of the shirt, which I believe was the tour shirt for Marylin Manson. (he wasn’t actually in Satan’s army, Xians).

I got to the middle of the floor by pushing my way into the sea of sweaty fans. I spent the remainder of the night there. NIN was incredible. They were full of energy and emotions, and Trent sounded amazing. I loved singing along with all these songs I was recently obsessed with, and it was hands down the best show of the five I had attended so far. There is nothing like singing songs you’ve been singing to yourself for months in a loud arena with the band who wrote them. Not to mention thousands of kids that seemed to get the same emotional appeal I got from NIN.

After the show, Christine and her family picked me up, and we went back to the middle of nowhere. Christine’s uncle didn’t say much to me, but I could sense he knew

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I had heard all the details of his fatherly ways when it came to Ed. His son won this round. That's one for the good guys.

Chapter 160

Strange Currencies

We left the next day for our multiple bus rides home. When I got home that night, I called Laura to tell her about the coolness of Ed and Venus and how I got to see Nine Inch Nails. But she wasn't home. She was supposed to return the same day as me but would be with her family in Pittsburgh for a few more days (according to her sister).

I was sad. I missed her so much and was upset that it would take a few days for us to speak. Then, she made me feel better instantly, in a way only her beautiful and thoughtful mind could.

I got a letter in the mail from her, probably written when her parents decided to stay longer in western PA. Before email, people really had to make an effort to correspond with someone.

I opened the letter with much enthusiasm, like a kid opening a Christmas gift but with butterflies in my stomach. I noticed it didn't contain a single paragraph or her signature. It just had two words written in the middle of the page:

Strange Currencies

My heart skipped a beat. Not only did it show how she felt about me, but she also used my favorite thing in the world: R.E.M.'s music.

"Strange Currencies" was my second favorite song on *Monster* behind "Let Me In." After this gesture, it was number one. It's a slow, beautiful track about love and the ups and downs that come with it.

She said the song reminded her of me after one of my moody phone calls when I was probably cold to her, most likely because I wished I could see her more. This song is about wanting someone so much you would go to great lengths to keep them or have another chance with them. It will become the theme song to our love story (I wish I could say it is a great love story, but it is terrible in the end).

I found out later that she missed me the entire trip and was upset it would be so long till she talked to me. She also told me she bought *Monster*, listened to it non-stop,

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and it made her think of me. It made me happy because my goal is to have everyone associate me with R.E.M.

Chapter 161

All my Childhood Toys with Chew Marks in Your Smile

Laura and I talked more than we saw each other during our courtship, mainly due to our distance and her parents thinking we might spend too much time together.

I was still making my two-hour, multiple bus rides trip to see her every other weekend. We watched TV, listened to music, and played video games with her brothers. We would also walk around her town and make out whenever we desired.

I was writing poems about her, of course, and making mixed tapes full of songs that reminded me of her. I also added songs I thought would help her through life. NIN, Tori Amos, Concrete Blonde (thanks to Venus), R.E.M., Smashing Pumpkins, Oasis (a newfound band I liked), and Nirvana. As the relationship got more emotional, my song choices got equally emo.

I would also record myself with a cheap microphone I bought that I plugged into my cousin Billy's radio. I would talk to her as if she was there, going off on my usual topics and gushing over how much I liked her. I would also read poems that I wrote for her. It might sound corny, but she loved it and would listen to those tapes when she missed me.

One night in early December, Laura had a fight with her mom about her being worldly, and she threatened Laura with not being able to contact me anymore. When she called me in tears, I thought this was it; the warnings she gave me were coming true. My heart sank when Laura said she didn't know if we could see each other anymore while her mom was flipping out in the background.

I started to panic, and my irrational mind jumped all over. Laura told me she had to go and would try to get back in touch later that night. Part of me wanted to run down to my grandma's liquor cabinet and get a buzz on to deal with the pain. Another part was screaming at myself for how stupid I was to think I could have a happy life. I thought I should go back to not caring about girls and be like Ray, not caring about their feelings. I calmed myself down with music and wrote some bad poetry. Just breathe, Chaz. Just breathe.

Laura called me back that night and said her mom calmed down and everything was okay. She had to find other ways to see me so her mom wouldn't think we were getting too close. One of those ways was a local basketball game close to her house. I hitched a ride to the game and rooted for the team with my friends from school, Uriah and Andre.

When Laura showed up, like every time I saw her, my heart pounded, and the rest of the world ceased to grab my attention. I could only see her. We couldn't embrace each other with a hug or kiss because it was a born-again basketball game. We decided to play it cool and just stand near each other until we could be alone outside.

I was not afraid to be myself in front of Laura. I may have hidden my struggles from others (sometimes too well), but she knew how I felt at any moment. I was sad over the events with her mom. I probably showed this with my tone, and I told her how scared I was when I thought her mom was making us stay away from each other.

She had to leave earlier than me, way before the game was over. It was the chance I needed to be alone with her. I wanted to hold her and kiss her and tell her how she made me want to be alive and do everything in the world with her.

Instead, I moped and showed how distraught I was with her leaving. She walked me away from her friend (her ride home) and said, "Charles, I really like and care about you." The sincerity in her eyes watered up with tears, and then she reached over and gave me another sweet kiss.

The assurance of her affection for me was all I needed to boost me up and make me feel the way only she could. I went back inside and was another person. I was fun and energetic.

I even had my fellow classmates and their parents laughing when our team was down 94-63. Hoping for a 100-point game, the other team's fans were chanting, "100! 100! 100!" I got up and yelled, "65! 65! 65!" It was the best we could hope to get. I think there was some dancing and me singing our star player Andre's name in the tune of the L7 song "Andre."

I was in a good mood for a change, all because of one girl.

Laura was the first girl who could make me feel happy instantly with just one look or a few words. I have memorized some of those looks and words for safekeeping.

Chapter 162

When Are You Going to Love You as Much as I Do?

Laura cared so much about little old me that she wanted to tell me via a song. A Tori Amos song. She wanted to express her love for me without saying the god forbid “L” word since we weren’t there to say we loved each other yet. Soon, but not yet. One night on the phone, she told me to listen to Tori Amos’ “Winter” in the dark with just Tori’s words and music to be heard.

The song was about Tori’s father, but Laura wanted me to focus on the chorus to let me know how she felt:

When are you going to make up your mind?

When are you going to love you as much as I do?

I cried tears of joy when I listened to the lines, even though I told myself she wasn’t telling me she loved me but saying I must love myself and stop going back and forth with my self-loathing and my dreams of being something better.

Too bad the self-loathing will outperform the dream part of my saga.

Then the happiest day of my young life happened, pushing away all doubts about how Laura felt. Our friend, Michele Kelly, had a Christmas party at her house in the suburbs. There were about 20 kids there from Bensalem Baptist. Even Jonny M was there with his brother, Uriah. All night long, I was in a good mood, showing a side of me that Laura had never seen. I was animated and energetic, trying to get all the kids to have fun with music (Mrs. Kelly was a laid-back Christian who let Michele listen to rock n’ roll), games, stories, and dancing.

We decided to mudslide down Michele’s backyard slope, which was deep enough to have fun. I would take deep breaths and sit down and talk to Laura and give her attention, but I also gave her space, and she gave me mine so I could act like a teenager, living in the moment and not caring about my problems, which I rarely did then.

She would also try to get these Christian kids to get up and have some secular fun. Laura and I made a great backsliding team.

Laura looked like she was in disbelief when she left the party. Maybe it was because of how sweaty I was from the running around and dancing, or she wasn't used to me not taking everything so seriously. Either way, she kissed me and told me to call her the next day as soon as possible.

Jonny was talking shit, like he usually did, about leaving the party and going to South Street to hang out. It was mainly to hear his voice and look cool in front of the other kids who liked alt-rock and found South Street cool. We did not even go to South Street. We just went back to our homes.

I knew how he was, but Laura took him for his word. She thought we went to South Street and She thought something happened to me when I did not call her that night, all because it was too late to call her house. She was worried that God or fate caused a terrible thing to happen to me before she could tell me how she felt.

I didn't call Laura when I woke up or before leaving the house. I thought she was supposed to phone me. Plus, I always worried that when I called, her mother frowned upon me wanting Laura's attention so much. I was afraid her mom always thought, "That gosh darn Charles is calling again."

When she rang Sunday morning, she was frantic. She was scared something had happened to me, and I reassured her I just got home too late to call her the night before. She then told me she had something to tell me, and she was scared that something had happened to me before she could tell me.

Laura explained that she was so scared to say "I love you" to me, partly due to her mom and the fear that she could be eavesdropping. She also feared that God or fate would set in motion something bad if we admitted to feeling this way about each other (this is the life of a born-againer).

When she told me she felt the way other girls like Mary and Jeanne did about me, I decided to say it first. I said to hell with fate and all the gods. I thought this was meant to be and was the beginning of my happiness and my path to a better, more meaningful life.

I said with all the certainty in the world, "Laura, I love you so much," and she whispered (in case her mom was around), "Charles, I love you too." And just like that, I was on cloud 900. She made me the happiest person on earth. I was in love with the most beautiful girl I had ever met and felt invincible. I felt like I could take on the world and God itself. I was loved by the girl I thought was my soulmate. What could possibly go wrong from letting go of all my emotional guards?

Chapter 163

Make Your Money Expert Advice

The rest of 1994 was spent calling each other and doing what young love birds do. We told each other how we felt for reassurance and to express our excitement. It was so perfect and unique that everyone in the world would be lucky to have it. I knew what we had was different than most people. I knew Laura was one in a billion.

I know our feelings were extra strong due to our upbringing in the faith, and mine were so strong due to Laura being the first genuine love I had (sorry, Jeanne). I was starting to really let my guard down. I was ready to throw caution to the wind and set out with the girl I love to follow our dreams of making a difference in the world.

We talked more about getting a place together (like Ed and Venus) after she graduated from high school. The plan was for me to get a job in any way I could and start saving so that when we got a place, we would have a big chunk of change to sit on.

It would give me a year to save up, and even if I was in college, I would still be able to work and save. It wasn't a bad plan for a 16-year-old. I tried to find a job through the want ads in the local paper, *Northeast Times*, where my grandma's house was located.

I went to a couple of interviews for telemarketing and customer service jobs that wouldn't hire me due to my age and school schedule. I tried local shops in Mayfair, but no one would hire me either. My only shot at saving money was the worst-case scenario for me – a fast-food chain that has sold billions of awful food to people.

Brian from CIBA worked at this fast-food joint on Cottman Avenue, three blocks from me. He said they would hire me on the spot. Seeing no other options, I took the job that I saw as the bottom of the barrel in employment for anyone older than 17. I had to wait till I was 17 to get the job, which would be in a few weeks. My plan (there goes that word again) was to work there briefly, save up as much as possible, then find a job where I wasn't touching dead animals all day and getting worked to death for the lowest pay they could throw at me.

I was trying my hardest to be a good vegetarian. I didn't eat any meat and didn't wear any leather. But I also believed that just because I followed a belief or diet, not everyone else had to. It was my stance, and I got that most of the world did not see eye

to eye with me. It was up to me to make as many small changes as possible that affected me rather than telling people how to live as the Xians told me for over a decade.

I did feel like a hypocrite working there and hated every minute of it, but I was also (like my dad) a realist and knew I had to make money. It was the only way I could at the moment. Also, I was a Kenzo and knew how to suck it up when I had to (I did take a shit in an alley not long before this). I would never want (and never will) to settle for such a terrible, lowest-of-the-low job that is only meant for kids or truly desperate Americans. I was desperate to get a place when I graduated and live with my Laura. Okay, enough trying to justify me for being a sellout for touching meat for \$4 an hour because I was born into the low end of a capitalist system that lacks empathy.

Chapter 164

Every Action has a Reaction

Back on Wishart Street, things took a different turn for my family. When I left, it set things into motion that would change us as a family forever. Shortly after, my sister decided to move in with her friend from CIBA, Kim, and her mom. Even though they only lived a few blocks from the house we grew up in, it was more structured and had fewer sticky fingers (aka my dad) around. My sister was saving money for her last attempt at a semi-functional life at a bible institute that her friends were attending. She wanted a “career” in the ministry of the faith.

I don’t know how much she saved, but we didn’t put money in the bank in the ghetto. We could never maintain the amount needed to avoid fees and didn’t trust anyone, so my sister kept her money somewhere safe. I did the same when I worked at the yellow-arched hell hole. One day, that money went missing, and the likely thief was the heroin addict living in the house. It was the final straw for my sister Cathy.

As she lived with other Christian women with stronger wills and backbones than our dear old mom, my sister would drown herself in the faith and let it take her over entirely. The attitude she once had about faith was gone, and she embraced whatever god had to offer her. With no real education or money, she didn’t have another choice.

Now that we were out of the hell that was the home we were raised in, my grandma decided she was tired of paying the taxes on the house (it went to her in the will after my grandpa died). She told my parents she sold the house for a buyer’s steal at 5,000 dollars. She also told them (on Xmas eve) that they had to be out by early 1995.

This news caused my folks to frantically search for a new place. I didn’t know much about this situation. My grandma kept me out of the loop since I was a teenager, and she thought it was best to keep me out of something that would make me feel terrible about my dad and my life. She already knew how bad it was for me growing up with a heroin addict.

I told her how my room had no working door. Most doors in the house leaned against the wall close to the doorway left in its place, so you could push it next to that spot for some privacy. And I told her about the roach infestation, the lack of hot water for half a decade, and the broken steps during the same period. She shook her head with disgust and shame because my dad was her first child.

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No one in our extended family knew how bad it was due to my dad hiding it well. I had a big mouth and told all without limitations (hence this book), mainly because it was such a crazy situation that I needed reassurance that I wasn't wrong in thinking it was all fucked up. My dad never backed me up (especially when he took my sister's false word over mine before I took the runaway train). He deserves this attention from his mom for his fucked-up behavior that led to his family living in such terrible conditions.

My parents found a place to live in the Frankford area of Philly through a church member's help. The place was a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a shitty, rundown duplex, two minutes walking distance from CIBA.

Chapter 165

The End of 1994 as We Know it

1994 was coming to an end, and the future looked promising. I was in love with a beautiful girl and was planning for the future for the first time. I never knew I could have a future worth having plans for. I was in total control of my feelings and was in tune with who I was (I even stopped cutting and hurting myself after Laura begged me to stop). R.E.M. announced dates for the first leg of their world tour. There were no Philly dates yet, but I was sure they would be announced soon.

I was passing all my classes and writing more poems than ever. It felt like this was my reward for living such a terrible life. I felt happiness was in my grasp, and nothing could bring me down from this sense of purpose and love I felt for Laura. Nothing could bring me down except 1995.

Chapter 166

17 and Strung Out on Confusion

1995 started out the way 1994 ended. I was happy and thought that life was finally worth living. My 17th birthday was on January 2nd, and the following Saturday, Laura got her sister to pick me up from the mall instead of me grabbing another bus to see her. She also went all out to wish me a happy birthday. She got an ice cream cake for me, and her family sang “Happy birthday” to me (even her mom).

She got me two gifts I loved: NIN’s EP, *Broken*, and a poster of a cluster of alt-rock icons hand drawn to look like a painting. It had R.E.M., Tori, Nirvana, Morrissey, RHCP, Pearl Jam, and more. All my favorite heroes. I framed it and loved it with all my heart until losing it somewhere in my travels.

Laura and I didn’t want to celebrate Xmas because we thought of it as a bullshit religious holiday designed to sell merchandise. It made people buy things only because everyone else was doing it. But for birthdays, Laura said she wanted to make the person feel special and loved. She did that for me and then some.

I started my terrible job at the fast-food place McShit and instantly hated it. I worked the 5-10 pm shift in the back and would tell myself every day that it was temporary and working there was for a greater goal. I only worked the bare minimum hours, maybe 20-25 a week. I got Ray a job there, but he worked a different shift, so I didn’t even have him to make me laugh. I just did my shit work, feeling like a terrible loser for getting paid to touch meat. I was in constant conflict, hating what I was doing but needing income in the dog eat-dog world I lived in (a common theme for me).

Chapter 167

Low, Low, Low

My parents moved into an apartment on Paul Street in Frankford, and my dad was in a program to deal with heroin addiction and mental health issues. He was still using but was on the road to being clean and sober, besides using methadone for the rest of his life for the physical addiction. He also saw a therapist and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, panic attacks, and depression. He was on several psyche meds and was still in the process of getting social security for being disabled and unable to work due to his mental health and hepatitis C contraction.

My father was denied disability by the government, so he hired a lawyer who specialized in such things to file an appeal. It took a good part of the year for him to get approved for disability and Medicaid, so the place they moved into was the cheapest they could find. The only money coming in was from my mom's minimum wage Hallmark job.

The apartment was 200 dollars a month (dirt cheap even in 1995). They got what they paid for. It came with run-down furniture, including a brown couch with mismatched cushions. The bathroom was located outside the apartment and didn't have a working shower. Like the house on Wishart Street, there was no door to my parents' bedroom. And the apartment was severely lacking in size. It was a slightly better neighborhood than our hell on earth on Wishart Street but still a dilapidated, poverty-stricken area with dangerous elements all around.

Chapter 168

I'm Telling You All It's Sabotage

I was on track to finding my way through life and thought nothing would prevent this. Laura and I saw each other as much as we could, including me taking buses to her school and surprising her with presents. I was still making her mixed tapes and poems to keep her smiling. I should have seen the signs of things to come when she told me she had turned down meat for dinner one night, which led to her dad commenting that my influence on her made her act different.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I decided to surprise Laura with a visit. When I got to the mall near her, I called her, and her mom made a big deal about me coming up and said we couldn't see each other that day. She said we were spending too much time together.

I went home disappointed and scared that I might have gone too far and wouldn't be able to see Laura for a while. Even worse, I might have gotten her into trouble with her parents. But that wasn't the case, and we talked like we always did over the phone for the next couple of days. Little did I know of the forces working against me. Little did I know decisions were being made about me that would change everything.

On January 20th, just four days later, my mom called me and told me she got a letter from Bensalem Baptist saying I was getting kicked out due to the lack of payments. She paid about 20-50 dollars of the 2000-dollar bill for the year. The letter said my last day at their school would be the following week. I don't know why they didn't just say I could never come back, but they gave me a couple of days to sulk about this news.

It was like a punch in the gut or a great shock that snaps you back into the real world. No longer was I in the dream world where Charles Holesworth would get what he wanted from life. My mom, bless her heart, called Bensalem Baptist and begged to let me stay and said she would pay more. I told her I would use my part-time job to help pay for my education, even though this would interfere with saving for my dream apartment with Laura.

I kept my hopes up, but on the following Monday, my mom received another letter. It was more detailed about why I wasn't welcome back to the school. They singled out my worldly ways and my love for rock music.

They said I was a bad influence on other kids with my love for rock bands and how I didn't hide it. My days at Bensalem Baptist and hopes of getting a half-decent education were numbered. I was beyond shocked and overwhelmingly depressed. My world was starting to crack.

The reason stated by the Xians might have been my love for R.E.M. and such, but their real motive was the lack of money my mom was sending. I found out later that I got kicked out to make room for another student to keep up with the fire code. Jen would start at the school the week after I left. Her parents had the money to enroll her and pay on time or upfront for the year.

I was furious over this betrayal. I felt that Bensalem Baptist had an obligation, as Christians, to provide me with a good education. I dealt with 13 years of shitty born-again schooling that ruined my life before attending Bensalem Baptist. I resented this girl Jen and her money. I started to remember the kind of life I had and how I was just a Kenzo with no options or connections.

I realized that going to this school was my first experience with people from the suburbs and people who had middle-class lives. Most had it 100 times better than me. It boiled my blood. Other kids whose parents paid for the year liked rock music and were caught making out and got suspended, but they hid it well. Those kids would never get kicked out. I never even got a demerit and showed up to school almost every day that year. I needed this school more than others there, and now I was losing it. I was losing my future.

I decided in a poetic, teenage angst way to make a statement during my last day at Bensalem Baptist. I was furious and felt that the Xians were picking greed over me. The love of money is the root of all evil, says the bible, but they were kicking a kid out who needed this school, like it was his last chance, over money. Fuck off, Paster Love. Fuck off to all of you fuckers, ruining lives with your cult-like faith that makes us depend on it for life.

Silly me taped money all over my head and chest, along with my first paycheck from my shitty job, and wrote on the cash in large letters, "Head Like a Hole" (NIN's song about greed and people picking profits over people). I would rather die than give them control, I thought. Their god money doesn't care about me.

I walked into school with all the courage I could muster (not caring how ridiculous I looked) and got my point across to a bunch of kids who didn't give two shits how my life was turning upside down. Some cared, like Uriah, Michele, and Ben, but most thought I was an idiot or deserved what I got for being too worldly. Just like that, my time at Bensalem Baptist and all the hope for a smoother life was over. Well, at least I still had Laura. Hahahahaha. Let's all laugh at me for that thought!

After I got kicked out, I saw Laura that Saturday, and it was a sad occasion. She was proud of me and my half-ass attempt at a protest via cash and NIN. She was still on my side and thought I could make something of myself. But we knew our plans and

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my future had hit a major setback. I was extra moody (which was justified), and my self-doubts were working overtime. I was calm though and thought this was another tribulation I had to get through for some reason (Like Ed said about the new age belief system).

I still had foolish faith in my dreams of being like my idols. I thought I just had to control my feelings and not let anger and depression take over and make me want to quit my dreams and life.

Chapter 169

Go on Take Everything, Take Everything. I Want You to!

The next few days were full of uncertainty. I was figuring out what to do with my life after a giant blow to my self-esteem and future. I told my grandma what happened, and she told me I had to go to another school or start paying rent to live with her, which was fair.

I didn't know what kind of school I could go to. I had no credits to transfer to a public school, and the last thing I wanted was to return to CIBA or Maranatha Baptist. I knew that I had to do something fast. I was becoming a cliché loser without a high school diploma, working a job at a fast-food joint. But I didn't have many options or guidance.

My decision was sealed a few days later. Laura was the most honest person I knew, and she couldn't hold anything back from her parents. She told them I was kicked out of school and how the Christians did this mainly over funds. Laura hoped it would be a wake-up call for her parents, showing them how hypocritical it was to kick a poor kid out of school over money.

How foolish we were in our tender teenage years to think we could reason with adults who made up their minds years ago about their faith. Instead of Mr. and Mrs. Sesar coming to our side on agnostic land, they decided to use my unfortunate situation for their own good. They told Laura she couldn't see me until I was in school again, working toward my future. It was another blow to my dreams and the fragile peace of mind I had with Laura. I didn't lose hope, though. I caved, went backward, and decided to suck it up for my love.

I told my mom to tell CIBA and Holden I needed to return to school there as soon as possible. I would torture myself by rejoining the place I dreaded as much as the house on Wishart Street, all for Laura. Holden and the fools running the school thought I was coming back because I had to. They figured I needed an education from them, and I was desperate like the rest of the kids stuck in that god-awful place, wasting away their teenage years.

Holden was licking his chops in anticipation of having me back so he could get another swing at breaking my spirit and conforming me. Now that I was desperate, unlike the year before when I knew I didn't need this place and my attitude showed it,

he would make me jump through hoops. I was desperate, but not for their bullshit education. I knew their Lifepac schooling would lead nowhere besides going to a Christian institute to get a bullshit Christian “job” in their ministry.

I was losing everything I had going for me; the foundation I was building to save my life and have the future I wanted. Seeing Laura a few times a month would help me through these dark times, and I would eventually get back on the right path.

I pondered how it was all a constant struggle in my life and that I needed to get through it to write about it in my poems. The realist in me thought about how I could get my GED (which was frowned upon in the Christian churches and poor society I lived in) and then go to a community college. These thoughts were in the back of my head, but I had no clue what to do. The pressing issue was to be in school and to see my girlfriend.

Holden had me where he wanted. Too bad I couldn’t break his leg in a football accident. He made me shave my facial hair, including my beloved sideburns (which I took pride in for many years). The jerk made me only wear white shirts, black pants, and a black tie (the opposite of how Bensalem let me dress). He also made sure I didn’t talk about anything worldly. I would have to start where I left off on the Lifepacs -, somewhere between 10th and 11th grade.

I felt defeated and violated every day I was there. It was starting to feel like a nightmare. I went from learning with kids my age, who I liked a lot, to a small room of kids pretending to be taught while trying to ignore the obvious waste of time it was.

Chapter 170

Can't Stop What's Coming, Can't Stop What's on Its Way

It was for love, and for the first week, it was all worth it knowing that Laura and I could still see each other. I am so thankful to the gods for that in my life. Hahaha (at me again). On February 2nd, another blow was struck against me.

But I did have a warning.

I had a dream during the day about Kurt Cobain. He was recording in a studio and said, "Be careful. Things are going to get worse." It was surreal and sort of comforting since it was a guy I admired, and I wanted to tell Laura about it when she got home from school. I usually called at a specific time, but instead, she called me. She told me she had to tell me something, but I had to promise not to hurt myself after she let me know what was going on.

It made me panic, and my blood pressure shot up. I felt a kick in my stomach as I waited for the next blow that life or God would deliver. I said I wouldn't hurt myself so I could hear the bad news. I would rather hear bad news than be lied to or have it hidden from me, no matter how much it hurt. I thought of one of my favorite Nirvana songs, "Lounge Act," where Cobain sings how he doesn't want to hear something that is just to make him feel better, just give him the truth, no matter how scary it is.

I braced myself for the inevitable. I thought I could take it, no matter how bad it was. I can handle anything these bastards throw at me. I was sure I knew what was coming from her lovely mouth, and I was right.

"Charles, my parents said we can't see each other anymore because they think we are too close and you don't have a future." That one hurt badly. I contained myself for the rest of the phone call, but inside I was panicking, frantically looking at all my posters of my favorite bands, including the one she bought me for my birthday. All I could think was, "Why is it always me?" and "How am I cursed to never get what I want?"

She was concerned for me and knew it would upset me greatly. She promised it wasn't the end and that we could still talk on the phone, and once I graduated or got my GED, I could see her again. The irrational parts of my mind thought she was only saying her parents broke us up because she thought I was a loser (and I was since I lost

at everything, I tried). However, she reassured me she still loved me and that this thing we had was real and we would be together again.

Throughout this time, Laura said things like, “We are beyond titles” and “You are my Charles.” She told me she was afraid of us being a couple, knowing what her parents would do to break us up. I was starting to lose my shit. I look back now and realize this was the day I started going down a darker path. Laura got off the phone after breaking my broken heart, and for the first time in several months, I let out a burst of anger. I smashed my radio, threw whatever was in my hand, and cried like it was the only thing I wanted to do.

Laura told me she would call me the next day, and we would talk as much as we did before her parents separated us. But it would take a lot of hope and faith to keep this dream alive. After being told I couldn’t see the girl I loved anymore after rejoining the school I hated with all my heart, I felt things I never thought I would ever have to feel.

I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t deserve to have all these letdowns and disappointments, one after another. I deserved more. Instead, I had to suck it up and go to my shit job for the night, pressing frozen meats on a hot grill. I thought about pressing my whole body down on this scorching surface and ending it all. I didn’t, but the thoughts of suicide were poking their heads around again.

I would go through a world of emotions every day over the next month. I would wake up and go to sleep sad and hopeless. I had been depressed and miserable most days over the past five years, but this was something I couldn’t fully explain. I was stuck between wanting to die and hoping that Laura and I were meant to be together and that everything would work out.

Ray told me to get over her and move on. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to. I knew I had found the one. She was everything I wanted. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever known. I didn’t want to go back to not having her in my life or trying to pretend we didn’t have something beautiful, something worth writing poems about.

I knew that I was different than most people without wanting to be. I knew she was different without trying to be. Our love was unique and forbidden. We thought alike and enjoyed each other’s company thoroughly. I was only 17 years old, and I knew this was it for me when it came to love. But I couldn’t do anything about it besides continue going to CIBA, work at McShit to save money, and hope something would happen soon.

So, that’s what I did. I kept my dream of living away from the church with Laura alive. It wasn’t pleasant, and every day during this month was an emotional rollercoaster of experiences. It was a daily battle of doubts and realizations about how much pain can be comforting and familiar. I was going down rabbit holes of despair.

My feelings would wash all over me and make everything seem more real. “How much more can I take?” was a constant thought rushing through my teenage brain.

I observed more of my thoughts and the sounds and words of the music I listened to. I listened to my usual favorites, but NIN and Tori Amos were the ones I put in my ears the most. *Pretty Hate Machine* and Tori Amos’ *Under the Pink* were the soundtrack to this time, the most emotional moments of my life. NIN’s “Ringfinger” made me feel the sadness and the trials I was going through to their fullest.

Most people didn’t get that I didn’t want to feel better or move on. I wanted to feel everything, embrace it, learn from it, and overcome it. I didn’t want to pretend everything was going to be okay when it wasn’t. That’s how one settles for their shitty circumstances. I wanted Laura. She was the only person who could get me out of my despair. Music was the only comfort I had.

NIN dealt with the self-loathing and self-pity aspects of what was going on in my head, but Tori was there for the rest. I still get transported back to the winter of 1995 whenever I listen to *Under the Pink*. It’s a weird emotional time-traveling trip through memories and raw feelings.

I listened to the album a bunch of times in 1994 when it was released, but this fragment of time would define it for me for decades. Every song on it, from the opener, “Pretty Good Year,” to the last song, “Yes, Anastasia,” was the comfort and blueprint to dealing with this uttermost grief I was facing.

I always took Tori’s songs and applied them to my feelings and experiences. I would interpret her words like one would interpret scripture from the bible and see how they fit into my life. Every song hit home for me during this month of adjustments after losing everything. They worked as a “Fuck you” to the Xians (“God,” “Past the Mission,” and “Icicle”) or as a reminder to relax and just keep going (“Pretty Good Year,” “Space Dog,” and “Yes, Anastasia”).

I could relate almost every line she wrote to what I was going through. I would listen to the album on a loop on my Walkman, on the bus, and while taking walks, and it helped me relax like nothing else.

My darker thoughts and pain gave me a sense of understanding like never before. Tori was the perfect person to listen to throughout this. Her lyrics took me on an emotional and mental journey that made me feel like I belonged. I will never have this sort of experience with any piece of music ever again. Not this strong or close to what it exactly was like in my head in 1995.

I didn’t know what all the lyrics were referring to, but it didn’t matter. I was in the worst pain of my life, and every note, passionate vocal, and proverb like lyrics intertwined with what was happening. The song that captured my suffering and state of mind the best is my favorite Tori song, “Bells for Her.” It’s on the darker side, with

just the right amount of eeriness to make it mysterious and dreamlike. The lines that hit me the hardest were:

*Brothers and lovers she and I were
Now she seems to be sand under his shoes
There's nothing I can do
Can't stop what's coming
Can't stop what's on its way
And now I speak to you are you in there
You have her face and her eyes
But you are not her*

I couldn't stop what had come and what was coming next. But I felt less alone with Tori's voice doing the warning. I was terrified that worse things were on their way. I started to think that it was so bad that I didn't know if there was an outside force, like God, causing these terrible things that were happening to me.

Maybe things were set in motion that would affect me that I didn't know about, like the Xians planning on kicking me out of school. This will be my thought pattern many years later, that it wasn't a god or fate doing to this me, but my fellow man making decisions that would control and punish me. I hated not being in control of my life and fate. I hated that these people or this god thing kept me controlled and boxed in.

Under the Pink became a cleansing of my thoughts and anxieties. Lines became metaphors and would create images in my brain, like a movie in my head. It was almost religious when I listened to the album, trying my best to kill demons and find out if evil things were coming toward me.

Tori Amos was the comfort through the storm I was in the middle of. It felt like she had my back. "Cornflake Girl", "Space Dog" and "Cloud On My Tongue" all were my anchor but it was the last song on the album that would be the one I let rattle in my head and heart the longest. "We'll see how brave you are, oh yes we'll see how fast you'll be running, we'll see how brave you are" from "Yes, Anastasia" made me toughen up as much as possible with all the negativity surrounding me. The problem was, I didn't know if I was brave enough to live this life of mine. At least I had the length of this album to keep me distracted for a bit.

Chapter 171

17 Years, On My Way to Hell

On February 3rd 1995, Johnny and Uriah took me out to cheer me up (Johnny was less of a bully during this time). We went to see a movie at the Franklin Mills Mall, and before we went to the theater, we went to a music store that let people post wanted musician ads.

I saw an ad for a band looking for a singer. I dared to dare and was intrigued. They were looking for a heavy metal singer. I had nothing to lose and thought, how hard could it be? Some of my lyrical poems were dark enough to be in a metal song.

I took the number down and called them during the week to set up a tryout. I went to the house they practiced at in the suburbs of Philly on February 10th. This would be my first shot at singing in front of people over live music. I had no idea how I would sound. I was practicing at home by singing along to the songs I had. I was trying to learn pitch (which I never got) and timing (which I eventually got). I was just going with my longing to be in a band with a “let’s see if this will work” mentality.

The band consisted of three guys: a drummer, bassist, and guitarist. We practiced at the drummer’s house who was the same age as me. He worked at a musical instrument store and was exactly what you would think a metal drummer would be like. He was full of energy when playing and had a “Fuck it” attitude. The guitarist was over six feet and weighed about 250 pounds. He was a gentle giant. He was such a good dude and was so desperate to have a vocalist for this band that he tried to compromise with my non-metal taste by playing songs that were more to my liking. The bassist was a kid who liked punk rock but was so bored he joined the band just to play bass.

I was so itching to join anything that I tried my best at metal. When I practiced at home, I had trouble figuring out when to come in and when to stop singing. NIN’s “Wish” was easy because of its very noticeable changes from the verses to the chorus. I knew all the words and practiced singing them at home many times. I thought I did well.

The guitarist learned the song in a week, so it would be the first one they played for my tryout. I didn’t realize how much I was in over my head when the band started playing. They obviously knew what they were doing, but I didn’t care anymore about getting embarrassed. I went with it as well as I could (which wasn’t well at all). It was

the first time I realized how hard it was to hear myself over loud live music. And how easy it was to get lost in the songs and timing.

We started with “Wish,” and it was okay. I sounded half decent and could tell when it was my time to sing. Then we started jamming on some originals. I was taking it all in to understand the process. I tried to fit some of my depressing lyrics into their songs. They gave me strange looks when I read them.

Maybe my stuff was too dark even for metal.

The guitarist tried to learn other NIN songs for me to sing, like “Terrible Lie,” which was mainly a keyboard/synth song. He even thought of trying to learn some R.E.M. songs and doing them in a metal format. It never happened, though.

We practiced a few times a week for a month until they realized I wasn’t what they wanted. The drummer delivered the disappointing news to me over the phone while he was at work. I could hear someone asking in the background, “Is he going to kill himself over this?” It was about a month after my demise had started, so it was another blow to my half-ass plans. I had a small notion that losing Laura and a Bensalem Baptist education was countered by my being in a band. Nope. It was just another letdown in a series of letdowns.

It was a great learning experience singing with musicians. Who cares if they laughed at me? I will never see them again. They went on their metal way, and I went on my shiny happy way through this existence the best I could.

Chapter 172

Won't You be My Valentine?

That Valentine's Day, I paid a surprise visit to Laura at her school. She was happy to see me and looked as beautiful as always. Her glass blue eyes focused only on me. She seemed both pleased and worried when she saw me waiting for her. I had nothing but love beaming from my face.

She was a little cautious about being caught together. She was scared one of her neighbors' parents would see us together and tell her parents, so my visit wasn't long. I gave her gifts, a card, and another mixed tape (which included me reciting poems), and we kissed goodbye.

I wish I had done this more often since it would be another month until I saw her again, and things would be completely different. Silly me, I thought there would be more chances, but there are never enough of them.

I started walking to the Oxford Valley mall. Halfway there, I had to have a bowel movement ASAP. I looked around and didn't see any place of business to conduct my urgent need. The only spot available was a patch of woods with enough cover to answer the call of nature. This time I had to use leaves to wipe myself instead of Dunkin' Donuts napkins. This was the second time I had to have a bowel movement outside. But who's keeping track?

Chapter 173

So, You Want to Be a Mallrat?

Eddie was living with John H. He was learning to play guitar and wanted to sing. He was now obsessed with R.E.M. (You're welcome, teenage Eddie) and Queen. I told him what was happening in my miserable life, and he informed me that he, Jonny, and another kid from Port Richmond named Nick hung out at Franklin Mills (a gigantic, enclosed mall in the far Northeast section of Philly) on Fridays and Saturdays. I asked, "What the fuck do you do at the mall all weekend?" He told me it was fun and I would see if I came out. So, on February 17th, I met up with Eddie, John H, Nick, Nick's cousin, Tommy, and three female friends of theirs: Erin, Nancy, and Sara.

John H and I knew each other from that D&D game Eddie brought me to back in 1993. Nick was two years younger than us but wilder. We hit it off instantly. He was a good-looking kid who liked NIN, Nirvana, Marilyn Manson, and heavier, popular alt-rock bands. He had his hair down to his chin and dyed some off-color, like green or purple.

Nick had an outgoing personality that matched toe to toe with mine (though mine was more outgoing in the long run). We fed off of each other's energy and personalities for years. I was used to going to a mall with Johnny and Uriah, sticking to ourselves, and maybe seeing a movie. Then I saw what Eddie was going on about.

Franklin Mills was crawling with "mallrats" (a term I hadn't heard before). Mallrats were teenagers and young adults with nowhere else to go, so they met at a common, open place like a mall. About 50-100 kids roamed the mall, sat in the food court or other areas, and dressed like me with band shirts, ripped-up jeans, and dyed hair. It was an alt-rock haven I hadn't experienced, not even in Wildwood.

I was overstimulated by meeting so many awesome kids at once. It was like I had found this secret compound of like-minded teens. I thought alt-rock was taking over the world, like the '60s movement, and this was the beginning of it. There were so many cute alternative girls (but none compared to my beautiful Laura, whom I still regarded as my girlfriend).

Everyone I met liked a different band, from Nirvana to Live, to NIN and Hole, and so on. They were from a middle/working-class area of the Northeast. I felt

comfortable with them because we were on the same page. I had no problem being outgoing with these complete strangers.

I channeled the part of my personality that Laura saw at that party at Michele's when she said people were feeding off my energy like a drug. I was genuinely excited about meeting them and wanted to talk about music and feelings. It was a game-changer for me. Nick matched my energy, and we had semi-normal teenage fun entertaining everyone.

Eddie and John (the introverts) would watch us and chime in occasionally to back us up. It will be the ongoing theme of our friendship for years. Eddie and Johnny would be the more mellow, mature ones, while Nick and I would be the wild boys, mainly acting out of our minds (In a good way).

I made friends with Severa, Amy, Nicole, Kevin, Katie, Candace, Katie, Gwen, Mike T, and the most significant of them all, a girl named Sarah.

Sarah was dating Kevin. When I met them, I thought his name was Kenneth, so I excitedly asked, "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" He grumpily replied, "It's Kevin." I quickly countered, "Oh, what's the frequency, Kevin?" but he was not amused. However, I caught a hint of something from Sarah, a slight attraction, but I brushed it away.

I was all over the place - a poster child for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. People gravitated toward me (and Nick). I had so much fun being crazy and entertaining all these new faces that I put my troubles and Laura in the back of my mind. I wouldn't let it bring down the buzz I was getting from the attention everyone was giving me.

After the mall was closed, we all went our separate ways. Most kids went home to nearby neighborhoods. I spent the entire weekend going back, looking for the same people and the same fun we had that first night. This would be our routine for the next month. Going to hang out with alt-rock fans at the mall. It was a fun break from my constant worrying.

As soon as we got on the bus to leave, the buzz from meeting those kids left, and reality hit. I was still the same loser going to CIBA, not seeing my love, and I had no idea what to do with my life.

Chapter 174

The Lloyd Dobler Effect

The next day I talked to Laura, and the conversation was solemn. I told her about the kids I met and how much fun I had. She said it sounded like I had the time of my life and that it should give me hope. I felt like she was trying to tell me that I didn't need her anymore because I found something that would give me a new outlook on life and probably a new girlfriend. It felt like she was trying to let me go.

I didn't want any of that. I only wanted to be on the path I was on the month prior, with the girl I knew was the one for me. Laura wasn't saying goodbye, even though that's what it felt like every time we talked. She said that someday we would be together, and I shouldn't give up on my/our dreams. It was getting harder to believe her, and I was losing faith. I didn't spend much of the money I made at my shit job because I still hoped to move in with Laura in a year. But now I was going out with my new friends and treating myself to things I didn't need.

I would spend most of my money on VHS movies and food when I was out. I was becoming just another teenager using instant gratification to mask my hurt and worries. Don't get me wrong, I was still feeling every moment of the pain caused by my present predicament, but I was starting to think my dreams weren't going to come true (especially the one-off with my true love, Laura).

One of the VHS tapes I bought was *Say Anything*. I said I didn't need it, but it helped me cope with what was going on with Laura. The main character, Lloyd Dobler, played by the great John Cusack, was in a similar situation as me. Someone told me earlier that year how I reminded them of Lloyd in how I acted and talked, but now I related with the character.

Lloyd is a poor kid who falls for the more well-off girl, Diane Court. Diane has a future with a lot of promise, while Lloyd doesn't know what to do with his life (I was right there with you, Lloyd). Diane's overly protective father sees Lloyd as a distraction/threat to his daughter's success in life and persuades her (through guilt and manipulation) to break up with Lloyd.

Other people in the movie tell Lloyd to move on and date other girls. Lloyd tells them he doesn't want anyone else, only Diane. It was me in a nutshell. Laura might have been out of my league with her family in the suburbs while I was just a poor boy

Life and How to Live it

from a poor family, but she was the only one I wanted. I would ugly cry watching this movie many nights during this depressing time.

Say Anything has a happy ending and might be a great love story, but this isn't *Say Anything*; this is one of the worst love stories ever told.

Chapter 175

Meet Me in the Crowd

I went through the motions at CIBA. I didn't communicate with most students since I figured they were all on the same side as the born-againers. We were all further apart than ever. However, I found out years later that some kids who were 5-10 years younger than me looked up to me and admired me for my rebellious ways. I spent my lunch and other free time with my mom in her kindergarten class.

I was still a momma's boy and loved my mom, so I would rather be in her classroom so I could mope freely without judgment (even though she was the reason I was there). The five-year-olds in her classroom liked me. I would hang out for a while and play a bunch of games with them.

I also influenced the kids by telling them we should start our own Jesus club called Shiny Happy People. I would have them all say, "What are we? Shiny Happy People!" My mom knew what I was doing but didn't stop me. It wasn't like I started a Losing My Religion club with them.

One kid was Holden's son, which made the Shiny Happy People thing even better. Years later, he would rebel, turn into a goth kid, and label himself bisexual. I am not saying that this rebellion was sparked by me implanting a R.E.M. song title into his 5-year-old brain, but if it was, that's one for the good guys.

Chapter 176

Port Richmond, 19125

I would blow off steam by hanging out with Eddie, John H, and Nick at the mall on the weekends. We brought other kids together. Everyone was in a clique or group, not wanting to be the first person to pursue a friendship.

I had nothing to lose and wanted everyone to be friends, embracing their similarities. It probably stemmed from my born-again upbringing. I was trading my religious cult for a cult of music. The born-againers were sort of like hippies. They believed everyone in their faith should get along as one fellowship with Jesus in common. Also, my desire to have fun and make as many friends as possible made me want to bring everyone together into a large group. I introduced groups to each other by taking the lead in starting conversations with them and showing them, how cool other people were too.

We were starting something that would go on for years at the mall (for better and worse). Then the four of us would go back to Port Richmond and listen to music or semi-jam with the one lousy mic we had for the low-budget karaoke machine Nick owned. Plus, John played guitar and had an amp. It was mostly for fun, but there was pipe dream talk of starting a band, and I was semi-excited for it to happen. If it did, Eddie would have been the singer since he had a better voice than me by a long shot.

I would sleep at Nick's or John's (where Eddie was living). John H was a huge Guns N' Roses fan and would get us to watch VHS concerts from their *Use Your Illusion* tour. John's pure love for G N' R rekindled my fondness for them.

He was into various rock bands, from Pink Floyd to Bon Jovi to the Beatles. But G N' R did it for him the most. He owned so many tapes and CDs that I was blown away and semi-jealous over his collection. He was cool with letting me make mix tapes from his abundance of music, which I did, including some G N' R songs that hit home with me over my struggles with not seeing Laura.

The songs "Estranged" and "Don't Cry" (with alternate lyrics) were on this tape, along with Shakespeare Sister's "Stay," Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart," and "Who Wants to Live Forever" by Queen I listened to that tape daily. John was not one to follow the trends. He liked some alt-rock bands but didn't go overboard like the rest of us. This is until the band Radiohead emerged later that year and made John say, "G N' R who?"

One day, Eddie and I were sleeping over John's, and we wanted to rent a movie. Eddie was in his artsy film mindset and suggested *Spanking the Monkey*, which he heard was good according to movie critics. We watched it, not really knowing what the plot was. Then we saw the part when the main character was taking care of his estranged injured mom, and they somehow got hot and bothered in an exchange of words and physical contact. Soon they were having intercourse.

John and I made fun of Eddie for half an hour. We asked him if he was trying to tell us something with his film selection. Instead of just putting up with it, Eddie called his mom and said, "We just watched this movie where a guy has sex with his mom, and now they are saying that me and you had sex because I picked the movie." His mom yelled at us over the phone and told us to knock our shit off, so we did. We couldn't go against Eddie's mom, after all. It was a good move on Eddie's part to shut us up.

I talked to these guys daily, and I will never forget how much fun and comfort Eddie and John gave me through this tough time. Eddie and I were getting closer than ever with our taste in music and desires to be singers in bands. Eddie and I had the bond of being poor and being the only kids around who liked the music we did (that we knew of).

We were both overly sensitive and put all our feelings and energy into the things we loved, like R.E.M. for both of us and Queen for him. Eddie was a shy, sensitive kid with a beautiful soul. I was sort of the same, besides the shyness. I was outgoing to a fault and would go to great lengths to not hold myself back from anything. Eddie was my best friend, and we got along like Forrest Gump and Bubba.

Chapter 177

It's Fun to Lose and to Pretend

We started talking to an odd fellow who would pop up a few times throughout the '90s. John A. (I won't say his full name for numerous reasons) made an impression on anyone he crossed paths with. He went to the same high school as John H. and other kids we palled around with from Port Richmond, including Jay O and good old D&D-loving Harold Haine.

John A. was like the rest of us in one way; he also had high hopes of being a singer in a band. He was into classic rock like Queen, Bowie, The Beatles, and Led Zeppelin. He would go off about how great the classic bands were and how '90s music was terrible.

Music was a competition to him. It was all about being the best. He hinted that my taste in music was mediocre at best. He would make comments about how my favorite bands were not good enough to past the test of time. They were not as good as the classic rock gods that were true musicians. He was pretentious as fuck.

We would talk about music for hours, and when I say we, I mean mostly John A. since the fucker loved the sound of his voice. To his credit, he had a good voice and would have been an interesting radio personality or DJ if he tried.

He had a con man's way to him (sort of like Johnny M). He would tell you what you wanted to hear or something that resembled a compliment, then follow it up with his real agenda, which was to show how great and wonderfully smart he was.

He was a manipulator who used his charisma to get the attention and praise he desired. He was a conceited motherfucker who thought he was the sharpest guy in the room. He liked to belittle people or make them feel uncomfortable in conversation. I was only 17 and did not realize what was happening for the most part, but I had a hunch this guy was out for himself.

John A. was bisexual (though I think he liked men more) and a republican who loved the likes of Rush Limbaugh. It was such a crazy concept to me that a man who liked other men would support a party that looked down on his way of life. Apparently, it stemmed from his family being conservative (mainly about money), which John A. had more of than Eddie and me.

He was two years older than me and knowledgeable about politics and music (at least, he came off that way). He talked loudly with confidence, so to someone like me with no self-esteem, I assumed he knew what he was talking about. I didn't agree with most of what he said, but I didn't know how to argue with him.

He would have been a good politician. Too bad he looked like Meatloaf.

John A. was nice enough, aside from his egotistical ways and manipulation. Eddie once saw him reading a self-help book titled *What to do When You're Better Than People*. He was big on showmanship, which bordered on cheesiness. The guy thought you should put on a show every time you played, even if it looked ridiculous. He was from the era when bands like Kiss and G N' R thought the more gimmicks, the better.

John wasn't a bad singer. He had a show tunes style voice that was full of confidence whether speaking or singing. He was trying to start a band with John H. on guitar and Eddie on bass. Eddie just started teaching himself bass after playing guitar. I think they jammed a few times, but nothing progressed fully.

Later that year, John A. rented a studio and recorded songs he wrote. They were as outrageous as him. The albums were only on cassette and started with a track called "When Nature Calls," which was just John recording himself taking a piss.

The final track, "When Nature Calls 2," was a recording of what sounded like John A. taking a shit. He told me he threw a bar of soap into the toilet to get the splash sound. He used a lot of reverb on one track to capture what was supposed to be a dream, but it sounded more like the theme from "Pigs in Space" from *The Muppet Show*. He went under the name Sparkle for this album for reasons I can't recall. Sparkle is the only thing I remember John A. ever recording or trying to pass off as music.

He would also try to get a rise out of people just for shits and giggles or to make himself sound superior. He once had me, Eddie, and John H. on the phone, asking if we wanted any of the music, he felt was mediocre that he owned. It was his passive-aggressive way of telling us how much better his intellect and taste in things were compared to ours.

John A. was trying to get rid of his R.E.M. and Hootie & the Blowfish CDs because he only wanted to listen to music that made a significant impact. He threw R.E.M. in there as a dig at Eddie and me, saying they were in the same boat as Hootie (who I couldn't stand). Even though I knew he was trying to start an argument, I played right into his chubby hands. I fought with him about how important R.E.M. was to the current alt-rock bands. He would try to conman his way with talking points he told himself before the phone call, trying to prove how mediocre R.E.M. was and how he was a bigger music fan.

He also had the balls to say Tori Amos wasn't a good singer and was only doing what "all women do," trying to pass off sexual moans and groans as singing. He shared

this opinion like it was gospel later in our “friendship,” so I knew to ignore it and not let it get the best of me. John A. was good at making people doubt themselves when they were at their lowest. He would downplay my pain and troubles and blame them on the chemicals in my brain or my lack of effort.

It was all typical republican bullshit, blaming the weak and poor for being weak and poor. He ridiculed my love for NIN, saying they weren’t real music, despite one of his icons, David Bowie, imitating, collaborating, and touring with them. John A.’s “better than you” attitude turned me away from artists like Bowie for years. He was the first Bowie nut I knew, so I automatically thought of him when listening to his songs. His bullshit ways of making me feel like my taste didn’t matter made it take years for me to appreciate the greatness of Bowie.

I don’t know if anyone else felt this way about John A., but I was an easy target to be talked down to and manipulated. I lacked the courage to defend myself in most situations, especially when others seemed so sure of themselves. I always think I’m the biggest idiot in the room. In February of ’95, I was still mentally and emotionally capable of fending off other people’s opinions and judgment, including John A’s.

He wasn’t a con man all the time. He was good at carrying a conversation and entertaining people. He was hilarious at making prank calls. John A. would call random things like musician-wanted ads or college dorms and have people going for 15 minutes or longer. Once, he called this college kid in his dorm. They used the same beginning three numbers for the entire campus, so it was easy to call random kids by picking the rest of the numbers. He would say things like, “Show me your dick.” He did it five times in a row until the kid got really frazzled. Then, John A. would call back, pretending to be campus security. He would say that they were getting complaints of prank callers throughout the building. Relieved, the kid would tell John A. anything he wanted to know, like his name and dorm number. John A. would get silent for a moment, then shout, “Show me your dick!”

Chapter 178

The Day I Tried to Live

I was keeping my head above water, waiting for things to go my way just a little. But it was depression and sadness all day, every day. Even with the fun I was having with my newfound friends, I would wake up and not want to go to CIBA. It was like there was a strong force keeping me from that exposure.

I decided not to go to my shit school and take a day or two to myself. I went to the mall but no one from the weekend was there. I bought a magazine called *Details* that featured an interview with Stipe. I read it in the mall while I listened to *Under the Pink*, and in the magazine was a picture of Stipe and Amos recording a song for a Johnny Depp movie. It never made it on the soundtrack (they went with Bryan Adams instead), and I will wish to hear it for the rest of my life.

The interview talked about Stipe's sexuality in the most detailed way I had heard. He said he was against labels of any kind and liked both sexes (something people speculated about for years). They printed a picture of him hitchhiking with his pants down and his butt exposed. It was the *Monster* version of Stipe.

The following day, I went to Ray's house. Because he was now a full-time high school dropout, I knew he would be home and ready to hang out. It was enough time to clear my head. I was ready to go back to CIBA the next day. When I got home from hanging out with Ray, my grandma said Holden called to see why I wasn't in school. I thought it was weird because I told my mom I didn't feel well and told her to tell Holden (and I'm sure she did).

It was a sneaky move on Holden's part (like the principal from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*), but I didn't think it was a big deal. If he wondered where I was, I would say I went to the doctor. I even considered telling Holden about Laura and how I needed time off to deal with my sadness. I was under the impression that born-againers were supposed to be forgiving, and since I was one of their own and raised by them, I wouldn't get into too much trouble over my truancy. Also, my mom was a devout servant and "teacher" at their school for the last 13 years. I was wrong, and it would change everything about me.

Chapter 179

March 2nd, 1995

I woke up on a chilly morning and got ready for school. I woke the same as I did for the last month, slowly coming out of a slumber to get slapped in the face by the dim reality of helplessness. I put on a plaid vest. I got it from April at Bensalem Baptist after I gave her my “Everybody Hurts” single to listen to after Steve Harmata broke up with her. I liked the vest, so she “lent” it to me.

I thought it was something Holden would consider worldly.

I made my way via Septa, playing my newest mixed tape on my Walkman that matched my mood and mindset. It featured songs like R.E.M.’s “Fretless,” “Country Feedback,” and “Half a World Away,” Nirvana’s “Aneurysm” and “Where Did You Sleep Last Night?” Frente!’s cover of “Bizarre Love Triangle” and some songs from Tori and NIN.

I listened to music until I got to my stop in the gritty slums of Frankford. The last song I played was “Fretless.” The track (taken from the *Until the End of the World* soundtrack) is about a passionate love triangle. Stipe captured every angle of everyone’s suffering with lyrics and a crackling passionate voice only he could pull off.

I wasn’t in a love triangle, but I felt every note Stipe hit in this obscure gem. No matter what geometrical shape your love is in, the line, “Don’t talk to me about being alone,” is universal. The song was a hidden treasure for R.E.M. fans. Most people didn’t realize their best songs weren’t singles.

I listened to “Fretless” until its last beautiful note, then put my Walkman in my bookbag. I walked the remaining few blocks to CIBA in silence so no one would catch me with a dreaded music player filled with devil tunes. I walked into “school,” and sat in the pews with everyone, thinking it was business as usual.

Holden tapped me on the shoulder. He said he wanted to talk to me alone. I was taken to the back door of the room. I figured this was him telling me he knew I wasn’t at home and I needed to get back to God. But this was not the usual born-again way of things. This was not someone being a light or good example to those hurting or not “right” with the lord.

Holden told me that because of my unexcused absence, I couldn't attend his pathetic excuse for school anymore. It was another blow, I thought, but one I could handle. I noticed there was no mercy in his voice. He was enjoying it.

He went on about following the rules and living for Jesus, but I tuned him out. I thought, "Who the fuck are you anyway? You came out of nowhere to this church and school. I've been here longer than you. Now you're on some power trip to make an example of me, Charlie Holesworth, the kid who had the worst life out of all you, who shut his mouth and went with the flow for 13 years! The kid who got stuck in this messed up life because of your teachings and your structure of beliefs. How is this Christ-like? Do you want to go further away from your lord? Because that is what's going to happen!"

But I kept my mouth shut. Until Holden said something that caused me to respond on cue. He said, "You can come back next year, but the rules won't change."

I quickly replied, "And neither will I" (cue the theme song to *The Breakfast Club* since I'm sure Judd Nelson's character would have been proud).

He mumbled something like, "That's fine if you want it that way," but I had enough of his shit and all their shit in that place. I walked back to my seat in the pews and grabbed my bookbag. The only thing I wanted at that second was my Walkman. I turned to the other kids and said with my "I had it up to here" grin, "See you all in my next life," and took to the streets of Frankford to figure out what to do next.

My mother, who was in the room when it all happened, followed me outside with her friend. She was asking me if I was okay, and I told her I was (I really was). I kept thinking it was just another setback in my long life of defeats, and I didn't want to go to this shitty school anyway.

I thought about what I would say to my grandma and Laura. Should I tell them this happened, that I got kicked out of my 2nd school in six weeks? I would have to pay rent to grandma if I wasn't in school (which was okay, I guess), but I was trying to save up for my dream of living with Laura in a year or two.

The bigger question: do I tell Laura? I didn't want to lie to her or hold things back. The beauty of our relationship was that we were totally upfront and honest with each other. But I knew if I told her, she would inform her parents.

She couldn't keep anything from them (even though they loved keeping things from her).

I was leaning toward not telling her until I figured out what to do next. As I stood there with my mom on that blistery, clear morning in March, I was dealing with what happened like a traumatic-experience pro. I was rationalizing what would happen next. I thought I would go to Ray's or John H's for the rest of the day. I didn't want to get caught in a lifestyle where I didn't pursue a better situation and settled for being another uneducated bum from the neighborhood.

Life and How to Live it

I knew another school wasn't an option, especially a public one. I didn't know if I could pass the GED test, but that was my last option. All these thoughts were going through my head, but the most important one was if I didn't lie to Laura, I would never be able to see or talk to her. I was upset but still intact. I believed I could handle it. That is until I caught a glimpse of the one person I didn't expect to see walking down the street.

Chapter 180

Everything in Its Right Place

I don't know what he thought when he saw his only son for the first time in a year, but it was emotional for me. I had a lot of built-up anger toward my dad for our horrible lives, which was never addressed and never will be. It was the first time I saw him since the night I ran away from home. I was taken aback by his oncoming approach.

He showed up in his Kenzo attire: a grey hooded jean jacket and blue jeans that made him look like the poor man's version of the Marlboro man. He stopped when he came upon us, and my mom filled him in on what was happening.

In his best attempt to give advice in a situation he knew nothing about, he told me to calm down and that I was only 17 and shouldn't worry so much. Then he was off to catch his bus. His comments belittled me and the struggles I had to deal with throughout my life, mainly because of him. His words that he thought would settle me down had the opposite effect.

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. The fact that he had no idea what was going on in my life over the past month or the pain and suffering he helped cause made me furious. At this moment, I lost my cool, along with the feeling that I could handle anything life threw at me.

I turned to him and yelled at the top of my rage-filled lungs in the middle of Frankford Avenue, "What the hell do you know about it? You're just a drug addict!" It was the first time I acknowledged my father's drug abuse. Before this, he probably assumed I wasn't aware of his problem, which made him think he wasn't as bad as he was. This was it: the moment I couldn't take anymore from him, my mom, God, or life in general.

One year and seven days after running away, I was at the tipping point again, but far worse. My hopes rose to the point where I thought I would finally break free from the Kenzo and born-again life, only to have them crash down fast and hard. I found the girl I wanted to spend my life with and knew it wouldn't happen. All the years of suffering and disappointment fueled me with the strongest feeling of helplessness and despair I would ever feel.

I felt I had no control of my life, and that God was punishing me as always for my sins that I couldn't help because to God, simply being alive was a sin ("Every whisper

of every waking hour, I'm choosing my confessions"). Or maybe fate planned to keep shitting on me no matter what I did.

I was done with this life, and I wanted to die. I didn't want to kill myself; I just wanted it to end. The stress I had over the past month and me just dealing with it caught up to me, and I had my first nervous breakdown. At least, that's what I thought it was since the only example of a nervous breakdown I knew came from the movies.

This time there was no way to run away from life (besides suicide). Still, I threw everything I had on me, including my bookbag and Laura's brown coat, and I ran like I was Forrest fucking Gump. I ran down the streets of Frankford from what was going to be my life. I knew this was it, I would suffer from here on out.

I ran for God knows how long until I finally had enough of my outburst and fell to the ground under the El covering Kensington Ave. I begged God to kill me (a normal conversation I had with this god thing). I was done with this life.

My mom and her friend pulled up in her friend's car, fearful that I would do something drastic like throw myself in front of traffic (which I thought of doing). I got into the car since I was done crying. Emotionally I felt like I did jump into traffic.

Chapter 181

And Then I Feel Nothing

I didn't know where to go since it was only 8:30 am. I couldn't go to Ray's yet, and I didn't want to go home to my grandma's until she left for work. To my dismay, I returned to my parent's one-bedroom apartment and stayed there until it was late enough to go to Ray's house.

While I sat in their borderline condemned \$300-a-month dump, I knew something was wrong with me. I had come to the brink of my tipping point numerous times before, but this was different. Something snapped inside of me. I was numb. Shell shocked.

I felt broken inside as if I'd gone through a war. I've cried my eyes out before, but usually, my feelings would be intact, along with my sense of self. Now I didn't know who I was.

This day changed me forever, and not in a good way. I felt too much.

I took a nap on the piece of shit couch that came with their apartment. It had bedroom pillows on it, covered with the same outdated pillowcases I grew up with.

It was supposed to compensate for the lack of comfort and throw pillows.

I went to sleep feeling wounded and spent and woke up confused and irritable. I felt like I wasn't there. I didn't care or want to care about things. I took pride in my strength and ability to withstand so much bullshit and still feel everything.

I was fed up with the hand I was dealt, and until things went my way, my feelings were on strike. This scared me more than anything. I felt the pain of everyone, then I felt nothing.

Chapter 182

We'll See How Brave You Are

I told my mom in early 1994 that if things didn't change for me soon, something would happen. I changed the course of my family's life by running away. Then I had the gall to think I had a chance at a better life and could be happy and deal with my trauma in the healthiest way possible.

I met the girl of my dreams, and she was ripped away from me. Because things didn't and couldn't change the way I wanted for me, I broke down. Knowing what I know now, I wish I could tell my 17-year-old self to rest and regroup. I would say I've been through enough, and it's time to heal. I would explain that fate and God aren't real, your suffering comes from people's actions, and your genuine feelings are reactions to things you have no control over as a poor-as-fuck kid who just wanted a normal life.

It wasn't as simple as losing my feelings, which I thought happened due to "growing up" and telling God I didn't want to feel anymore. I lost my confidence and what I knew was true since I based everything on my feelings. I should have cut off the world and dealt with these traumatic experiences and my crippling reality. I got diagnosed with PTSD many years later when I finally got mental health help, but I waited too long.

Instead, I went back and forth, thinking this was just another blow from life and that it was up to me to get passed it. I believed I was on the verge of self-discovery and didn't want to miss a beat. Plus, irrational thoughts, like I lost my feelings because I was having fun with new friends and not worrying about my problems and dealing with important matters. I was putting on this happy front to entertain people while ignoring my true self. This was punishment for that. The demons and self-doubt I held back with my intense feelings were now free to consume my energy and every moment.

Worry, anxiety, OCD, and depression would take over. And I will fight every moment to push them away and focus on the things I love. I knew who I was, and I knew I had a lot to say. I didn't think this was permanent. I held out that one day I would wake up with the feelings and confidence I had before. It would become my obsession that I would once again be like I was before I gave up. I would go back and forth thinking this was external and internal.

I blamed myself for everything, thinking I was weak, and that God or fate punished me for my lack of faith or discipline (thanks a lot, born-againers). I wasn't strong enough to feel. I even thought it was my fault for running away from the Kensington house. My exit led to my sister leaving, my grandma selling the house, and my parents rushing to find a place. The only place they could afford was right around the corner from CIBA. And the exact moment I was getting kicked out of school, my dad was on his morning routine, going to his day program. Every action has a reaction, and I set this up a year earlier.

I was a poor kid with no education and no chances sitting on his parent's couch in their shitty apartment with nothing going for me except the hope that I was better than this and could have more. Hope stings as it kisses.

Love for my favorite songs helped navigate me to a safer realm. I wanted to be a great free thinker and ponder things that were ignored purposely by those around me. This is what happens when you go against the flow.

I wondered if this happened to every kid who left the church or tried to be worldly? Did they all have a moment when they circled back to the church and God? I knew dozens of kids who left to try the world out and returned with their tails between their legs, feeling guilty. Did they give up?

I wasn't going back, no matter what. I will try everything and anything to stop that from happening. This is the church's fault. I will not kneel for them or their fake god. Even when it gets so bad that giving up makes absolute sense.

They knocked me down, but I refused to give them my pride.

This is how I officially entered the big evil secular world they warned me about - without the safety net of being extremely devoted to a faith that demands you stay put. It was the first time I would walk alone through the threshold of the invisible door that separated both worlds in my mind. And without my confidence and an abundance of feelings I once had at hand I would say:

*"We'll see how brave you are
Oh yes, we'll see how fast you'll be running
We'll see how brave you are."*

Epilogue

This concludes the first volume of my tragic story of survival and trying to experience life with the minimum of resources at hand. I ended this part of my life story with what I think was the moment that changed and ruined me for many years to come and pretty much my entire life.

The story at this point is about a confused and emotionally frantic kid trying to figure out what had just happened to him and is trying to keep going forward. I was always trying to keep going. But the story of my life and how I lived it doesn't end here.

If you have enjoyed my story so far or want to see what happens next, in volume two I will have a bunch more series of ups and downs. I will wrack my brain and mind on what is going on with me. I will find new relationships, new enemies and some once-in-a-lifetime adventures. I will enter the world of psychedelics and become a pretty popular party animal. I will get a little revenge on Bensalem Baptist and will see my beloved Laura a few more times. I will also get to not just see my heroes in action, R.E.M., but I will also get to meet them a few times.

The things that happen in volume two will be the product of one poor kid with muffled feelings trying to make it through his life. It will in some ways make volume one look like a walk in the park. So, I invite you to keep going down the rabbit hole of Chaz Holesworth, to come along for the fun and insanity. Let my suffering be your entertainment.

Life and How to Live It

Volume Two: Near Wild Heaven

This is volume two of my story of my life and how I lived it. This part takes place from 1995-2000 when I was 17 till, I was 22. We will call this period the crazy wacky Chaz years. These years can be summed up into a mesh of Forrest Gump, Jack Kerouac, and whatever it takes to survive. It's a bit hard to write about this time period of my life. The first part was gumdrops and rainbows compared to the aftermath of my break down from that fateful day in March. It will be filled with insane and irrational thoughts and embarrassing points of weakness on my part. I will go through a lot of tribulations and the darkest moments of my life that will linger for years. But I somehow get through a lot of it, as I wind up with a wife and a full-time job living in a home in the suburbs, but it will take over ten years to get there and even more to get right. I will go the long way to adulthood. At least I get a lot of crazy stories to tell from in between. And a way we go....

Chapter 1

Locked Out, Numb, Not up to Speed

I laid on the uncomfortable couch full of bed sheets and wrong-sized pillows in my parents' apartment, trying to get a grip on my feelings and thoughts. It was the first time I wasn't in a born-again Christian school. I got tossed into the cruel world to make it on my own. What was a fellow to do?

I left my parents' apartment feeling emotionally hungover and went to Ray's for the rest of the afternoon until I could return to my grandma's and eventually my fast-food shit job. That first day of feeling numb and shellshocked didn't concern me yet. I thought I would wake up the next day feeling like myself. But that didn't happen. I woke and still felt like a truck ran over my feelings. I still felt like I wasn't experiencing life at all. I had some feelings but not nearly as strong as before, and I lost my confidence and the belief that things would work out. I was in total survival and defensive mode.

The emotions I had after that day in March were dragged through another loop when Laura called me two days later, breaking the news I had expected for weeks. I decided not to tell her about getting kicked out of CIBA, so she wouldn't have to lie or keep it from her parents. I intended to regroup and get my head straight, then form a plan and tell Laura about it. It didn't matter now, because her parents said we couldn't see or talk to each other anymore.

They found tapes I made for her containing "ungodly" music and anti-Christianity poems. They said I was too much of a bad influence on her. I thought, "Of course, this is happening." Maybe this was goodbye forever.

Boom, another blow to my psyche. I didn't give up on her yet. I figured she couldn't talk to me freely with her parents around, and I was hoping she would try to sneak a call to me over the weekend. She did not. So, I took matters into my hands and took the three buses to her school to meet her when she finished class. It was a lot easier to just walk into a school in 1995, and I knew where her locker was, so I waited there for her.

After her last class, I saw her walking up to me, and she wouldn't even make eye contact with me. She was cold and short with me. She said she had to go and couldn't see me anymore (though I did see some love or happiness to see me in her eyes). Then

she turned and walked away, leaving me standing alone like a fool. I fell to my knees and cursed God, feeling even more alone and lost.

Everything I built up over the last six months was taken from me. It was the only time I was happy and thought I could live a meaningful life. The only time I let myself think past the rut of being a poor Kenzo. The only time I led myself away from the safety net of mediocrity, thinking I could avoid my fate of being just another bum from the neighborhood.

What should have happened if my school and church weren't so strict and run by lunatics was, I would graduate from school, go to college, date Laura, and sing and write away all of my sorrows. I would grow up and deal with my demons healthily and creatively. Instead, I was thrown into the world at age 17, confused without an education, without my love, and without any feelings.

Chapter 2

Uncomfortably numb

Once I started to see I wasn't myself and couldn't sleep off this muck or numbness, I was terrified that I did something to feel this way. I wasn't happy or sad. I was depressed and overwhelmed with doubts that plagued me before my fall. Without my feelings turned up high to keep them at bay, I jumped to every conclusion that entered my brain.

My lack of confidence and intuition was replaced by feelings of being a nobody. I felt like a clueless little boy who couldn't take the heat. I thought I would be stuck this way for the rest of my life, and I deserved it for not dealing with the situation and letting it overcome me. I felt like I was in an emotional coma, my thoughts hindered and fuzzy. I knew what I loved and wanted, but it was a continuous struggle to feel worthy of these things. I constantly tried to keep my hopes up from these dreaded thoughts that haunted me with doubts.

If I knew then what I know now, I would have told myself to see a shrink and get drunk to relax. But I had no idea how to see a shrink since I didn't have health insurance. I also didn't know how to explain what was going on in me or if it was just temporary and one day I would wake and be in tune with myself and my feelings again.

I also thought a shrink would only give me meds to make me fake happy. I didn't want that. I wanted to feel better on my own, and I knew this was not a chemical imbalance in my brain. I was a kid with normal thoughts and feelings reacting to horrible situations. I knew pills wouldn't help me. Maybe therapy would help since my mental problems were caused by trauma, but I didn't have anywhere to go for it. I also didn't trust anyone with my thoughts and mental issues.

Over the next few months, I talked to anyone I trusted who would listen. Most people gave me the same answer; that this happens when you grow up, and feelings change. But I knew that was bullshit. Granted, it was mainly teenagers with zero knowledge of the human condition and teenage trauma. However, friends and peers are the ones who really guide some in such circumstances.

This wasn't a normal growing-up thing for me. I had a breakdown and was stuck in my head, fighting off compulsive thoughts that popped up every waking hour. They were thoughts and feelings I collected over the years from those who made me feel small and foolish, including my sister and dad. I thought I did what all the other born-

againers did when they left the church to be worldly, and now I must return like them and be another “Yes” man for Jesus.

I thought I was being punished by fate or God for having too much fun with my friends and being the center of attention while my life was in ruins, and I didn’t deal with it. This thought made me become a hermit. I decided I didn’t want to be the center of attention, pretending I was happy in front of big groups at the mall. I started to think this was why I was so numb and unconfident.

I was smart enough to know this wasn’t a good thing. I could easily fall into a rut at this place, surrounded by kids who liked me and gave me the attention I always craved. I decided to stop going to the mall and cut off anyone I met there or spent time with. This separation included Eddie and Johnny H., which I regret more than anything I did then. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, and I had a pressing feeling that if I didn’t fix it soon, I wouldn’t be able to.

It was hard and borderline insane to cut off my best friend. But I was desperate and paranoid, and Eddie reminded me of what I thought was my downfall. I was mad at myself for having fun with people my age and thought I was neglecting my lot in life. I had intense regret and remorse. I had to run away from anyone involved in my mistakes. Eddie would call me to see if I wanted to hang out, and I would act like I was busy. I thought I was cheating on my feelings, or I wasn’t strong enough to have the balance of being a party animal and a poet, so I had to cut one persona out of my life. I chose to put the party animal to rest for a bit.

I was starting to jump to outrageous conclusions and paranoia. I thought I was wasting too much energy on entertaining people, causing me to feel numb and out of touch. I believed I had to focus on my problems to get back to myself and my dreams. I thought I was losing myself and the strength I gained from enduring pain and suffering by being a clown in front of strangers. I thought I was going to lose everything I loved or the feelings of love because of my weakness.

I thought there was a pattern or structure of negative and positive energy at play throughout our lives, and I was neglecting the negative things for the easier positives that lacked the stamina compared to the negatives that always surfaced. Meanwhile, I was ignoring Laura (and the hand dealt to me) for a bunch of cheap thrills I got from being a ball of energy for a bunch of kids I barely knew that didn’t know the real me. The real me was the poet/thinker who wanted to know the ins and outs of the universe and if this god character was based on Moses’ father or just a lack of imagination. These thoughts were ridiculous, especially for a kid, but this was the true me. So, I cut ties with every one of them and focused on the ones who were not a part of that short-lived moment for me, mainly Uriah and Ray.

Chapter 3

What They Did to Me

I relived that day in March a zillion times. I wonder what I could have done differently, why it happened that way, and if it was predetermined or just bound to happen. When I finally broke down, I thought God was fucking with me by placing my dad, a guy I loved and hated simultaneously, into a scene he was clueless about.

My first (juvenile) thought was this was the last straw or the icing on the cake from this vengeful god for doubting him. He set this course of events to kick the shit out of me emotionally. It seemed so well orchestrated like everyone played their part in the play of my fall.

I had the gall to start thinking for myself and the crazy notion that I was like those people I was meeting outside of the church, who could say what they wanted and listen to music they liked. But that wasn't for me. I was a fragile 17-year-old kid who was raised in a cult that made me think the creator of everything was out to get me if I thought about a girl sexually or romantically or thought beyond the boundaries set by this mystical white guy in the sky who chose them to be the end all of the life experience throughout a limitless universe. Like it's all only for one race of apes, on one planet, in one galaxy that has existed for a blink of an eye compared to the infinite capacity of everything!

Not only was I trying my darndest to figure out what the fuck was going on with me internally, but I was also back to harming myself. I went back to cutting myself attempting to feel something other than a lack of confidence. I thought it would wake up my feelings and make me feel alive again. And since Laura was out of the picture, there was no reason to not hurt myself. This, of course, didn't fix me either.

I was better when I was around people or distracted. But I was still stuck in my head, going through a series of panic-stricken thoughts that would make me jump to conclusions during a conversation or put me on the verge of another breakdown. It's what I feared the most, whatever diluted feelings I had left.

I had feelings that got muffled by powerful doubts that I self-consciously used to hurt myself every waking hour. I would combat these racing thoughts and doubts the only way I knew. I would chant or think of things that I considered good or beautiful. I relied on my upbringing of prayer without religion or saying prayers to any dogmatic

figure. It was the old way of thinking that I got myself out of before the breakdown, where I would have to constantly cleanse my “soul” before praying to God.

Back then, I needed to be pure before I had a conversation with god or god wouldn’t be able to hear me. I did my best to push out thoughts of sinning, then I would start my prayer. If sinful thoughts entered my brain during the prayer, I would have to start all over until I got through the prayer with a pure mind. Maybe God would hear me and save me from my hell of a life. This is what they taught me in those schools.

It became almost like a game I would play with myself. I wouldn’t be satisfied with my prayer and asking God for help unless I earned the prayer by fighting off the negative thoughts. It was sort of a race or a competition to get through a prayer before I let my sinful thoughts rush into my head. When I tried to prevent these thoughts from coming in, they would get harder to ignore. Sort of like saying to yourself to not think of something, and all you can do is think about it. I know; it’s fucking looney-sounding to me too. I was younger and still believed God was listening and that prayers meant something to him. I would always end my purified prayers with, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I plead the blood, amen.” It would comfort me from the eternal judgment of God for a few moments until I felt guilty or thought it was time to do it all over again. I wasn’t that bad at doing it too much in those days since my anxiety level wasn’t as high as it was after March 2nd, 1995.

Now that I was on my own emotionally, I was back to the same routines and rituals. I tried to drive away the bad thoughts (the doubts and crushing force of others’ opinions) by chanting the things I loved, in place of God or Jesus’ blood since I didn’t believe in them. It was more about thinking and feeling the words rather than chanting or saying them out loud. I usually only did that when I was having trouble concentrating on the exact order and feelings of love for the things. I had to think so I could feel secure. I was stuck in a state of confusion and went back to a defense mechanism. I would think about people who I loved. I needed to push away the doubts and those that had been ugly to me. I didn’t want to be like them. I would say things in my mind like “Tori Amos, R.E.M., Uriah, Laura, Sue,” then feel the love and strength I would get from them and end the insane ritual with the word “Forever.”

I didn’t realize it, but it was the same feeling of absolution I got when I prayed to God and pleaded for the blood of Jesus to protect me from bad things. I was throwing what I loved in the God category, and the devil’s slot got filled by those who caused me pain. Saying “forever” was my way to curb my anxious thoughts about external forces (God) trying to get me. It calmed my racing mind until something made me feel bad or worried again.

My anxiety would be in the form of an interaction with someone, a song, a memory, or a thought that cut me down to size again. I had thoughts that I believed were mainly external that would rush into my head. I couldn’t control them. These negative thoughts tormented me throughout my day. Sleep was the only time I felt

relief. The anxiety I felt from this trauma became enhanced by my consistent reminder of how I was on a time limit in life.

I knew that the way I was wasn't normal. I hoped daily I would wake up and be my old self again. But the fact that I was so obsessed with that made it impossible to heal right or to move on to a clear thought pattern that would let me be less anxious. I had a million thoughts and conclusions about what was happening to me, and I didn't know which was right, so I tried to work it all out on my own. If I didn't do something to change this, it would become my routine way of life. I didn't know if this was another hurdle I would conquer and get back on track. Part of me was tired of living and wanted nothing to do with pain or feelings that led to more pain. I was terrified of the next blow or bad thing God or life would hand me, so my rituals from my childhood mixed with the things I loved helped coast the storm in my head.

I wish I could tell myself this obviously stemmed from my hellish childhood and those who influenced me. I had two completely opposite parents who implanted their ways of dealing with life in me. I had an ultra-sensitive mother who believed in a faith that commanded one to turn off the logical parts of the brain to believe it. And I had a logical, realistic father who was barely there. The only emotions he showed were usually anger or belittlement. I attempted to be my own person (even if it was a Michael Stipe wannabe), but it was a lot harder than before breaking down and losing the confidence and knowledge that I knew I was right over these things.

Chapter 4

We Walk

I didn't tell my grandma I got kicked out of CIBA or what was happening in my head. Mainly because I didn't know what to do next. I was a bit of a coward who couldn't face reality. I figured I was bound to come back and have my wits about me any day. Until then, I went day by day, waiting for something to change in me.

I had to pretend I was still in school. I woke every day at 7 am and got ready like I was still going to CIBA. I would have to find something to do from 8 am until my grandparents went to their night job around 3 pm. Then I went to my job at fast food hell around 5 pm.

I had to kill some hours and didn't have many options. My job didn't have any morning shifts for me, and I didn't think I could get another job since I could barely do the shit job I already had. Some days I hung out in a coffee shop or at Ray's house. For the most part, I just walked places. I would get up at 7 am and start walking in any given direction until I couldn't walk anymore, or it was time to go to work.

One day, I walked north along Frankford Avenue (in the Mayfair neighborhood), which turned into Rt. 13. It took me to various small towns in the Bucks County suburbs. I walked for miles and miles. I would listen to music on my Walkman and think about everything. Sometimes I walked down to South Street, which was many miles from Mayfair.

I walked to Laura's school once, hoping to catch her to see if she still had feelings for me. But I got to the school too late, and she was gone (or her friend, Layla, said that to get rid of me).

All this walking happened from March till May and didn't do much for my mental health. I was alone for the most part and overthought every situation. I would replay the morning of March 2nd repeatedly, trying to make sense of it and see where I went wrong, so I could perhaps fix it. I would replay everything that happened to me over the past few months and try to figure out what I could have done better and what it meant for my path of discovery.

I pondered my dreams, thinking my chance to be with the girl I thought was my soulmate was jeopardized due to my lack of feelings. I was too weak to deal with my shit. These thoughts came rushing in and delivered a sharp pain to my stomach. I was

scared bringing them into existence was enough to make them real, and this might be my fate now, like God was reading my thoughts.

This is what they did to me.

I overcompensated for these fears by being overly positive that Laura and I were meant to be. I just needed to be true to her and what I wanted. It was all struggles that I must go through to be happy. I must go through hell to get to heaven. I based my life on this for way too long. It was meant to be I only had to want it hard enough.

At the same time, I was coming up with theories that would consume me, like I can't be positive or think good things will happen to me or the opposite would happen, or if I thought the most negative outcome, it would keep that thing from happening.

I tried to keep myself from being too positive about a situation. If I got excited, I would quickly try to find something negative about it. All to stop me from getting hurt by getting my hopes up and thinking God would make whatever I wanted not to happen since it made me happy. I would then think of the most pessimistic outcomes or scenarios to cover my bases and feel safe that bad things wouldn't happen from God or life. This is what they did to me.

It was a vicious cycle. I get now that this was all me and it was nothing external. I get it was me either defending myself or torturing myself as a sacrifice so that God would leave me alone or help me. I was utterly alone and confused as to what to do.

I went through this every day, countless times, and only had limited moments to myself to think clearly and be productive or do things I enjoyed that were anxiety and stress-free. These thoughts and compulsions wasted so much of my time over too many years. I got used to them. They became second nature while having negative thoughts. I didn't notice it most of the time.

Before this time, I had some grasp of reality. My tight grip on my feelings kept me sane. Now I needed to feel absolution again (a feeling they made me addicted to). The Christians said that nothing was as fulfilling as Jesus, and you will try, but not even love can do what Jesus can do for you. I was panicking that everything I loved wasn't good enough. I had to make sure I loved things almost every waking moment, or I wouldn't deserve them or would give it all up, taking in the absolution of Jesus and his love. This, my friends, is what they did to me.

One theory I came up with during my long walks around Bucks County was that these crushing doubts that were torturing me all the time were implanted by the Xians to get me to come back. I thought that was how they hooked you for life. I couldn't have that, so I did more of my rituals to push those thoughts away.

I realize now that I was in a state of traumatic shock, and these thoughts came from my anxieties and feelings of despair. But, in 1995, I thought it was up to me to battle these demons with rituals, listening to music, and writing poems.

Despite my disbelief in the Christian God, I still believed in a higher power and thought there was a destiny for me. I wanted to be important and matter to people like me. I aimed to help others see past their roadblocks and make the world better.

These dreams (or delusions of grandeur) were a double-edged sword. They gave me hope and made me feel that all the terribleness that happened to me would have a purpose and I would make everything good for myself. I just wanted something of merit to come out of all this suffering. I was letting my mind drift toward a bigger scope where things happened to me for a reason.

I was trying to calm myself down and not give up on my dreams. Walking alone wasn't the best for my mental health, but it seemed my only choice. At least I burned a lot of calories.

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Chaz Holesworth

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I dedicate this book to you.

Life and How to Live it



*Ontario Street Baptist Church where my mom found the lord
and a reason not to worry anymore.*

Chaz Holesworth



Little old me.



Circa 1982, the calm before the Christian storm.

Life and How to Live it



Christ Independent Baptist School and Church. The site of many of my miserable experiences and the place where I lost myself for the first (of many) times.

Chaz Holesworth



An example of our school life. We sat in these cubicles, teaching ourselves with adults supervising who were not qualified to teach us.