

LEFT **CHAPTER ONE**

EMPTY

In my brother's house there's a bookshelf. It's nothing fancy. It just a dark-brown, tall, wooden piece of furniture. It's plain. It's simple.

It's a bookshelf.

This bookshelf is older than I am. It has survived every house and every move and every apartment since the early 1980's that my family has occupied. It has some miles on it. It has done some traveling. It has history. It has stories. The thing it doesn't have is books.

And it's a bookshelf.

You see, with all these things, the element that rises above every description and characteristic of this big brown rectangular box is its memories. This bookshelf has memories. Lining every one of the five wooden planks that make up its shelves is memory after memory after memory.

Memories from a time long ago.

Memories from an unescapable past.

This bookshelf, with all its contents, is worth a good bit of money. On every shelf is collector memorabilia. From Bo Jackson and Deion Sanders figurines to in-cased boxes of the '92 and '96 Dream Teams. The bottom few shelves are lined with album after album after album after album of collector's cards. And this bookshelf hasn't changed. Nothing on the shelves has ever moved the slightest centimeter.

Never dusted.

Never cleaned.

Always the same.

And on the very top shelf is a box of Wheaties.

This box of Wheaties was purchased some time during 1990. How do I know? On the front of the box is a picture of the Air Man himself, Michael Jordan. Jordan, during his playing years, was featured on the front of General Mills' breakfast of champions on several occasions, each having their different year. But this one, the one on my brother's bookshelf, is from 1990.

And it is unopened.

That's right.

On the top of my brother's bookshelf is a 23 yr old unopened box of Wheaties. I can't imagine how gross a bowl of that cereal would be.

The thing is, all these items on this bookshelf are very different. Cards. Figurines. Trophies. Placards. Displays. Cereal. Yet while they are all very different in form, they all contain the very same intangible quality. The items on these shelves all have one characteristic that binds them together, that joins every single one of them, making them all have the same value to my big brother.

All these things connect back to our dad.

Throughout our childhood, card collecting was the thing my dad and brother did together. They'd spend weekends at card shows, hunting for something worthwhile. Maybe a limited edition Penny Hardaway card or a rare Starting Lineup figure. All these things on his shelf point back to all those times. They aren't collector's items to him.

They're memories.

And sure, an unopened box of Wheaties is worth more than an opened one. I get that. But that Wheaties box is doing more than just sitting there. That Wheaties box is preserving memories and stories with my dad for my brother far better than it is keeping those crunchy, brown flakes fresh.

And it is.

It does.

It's not about Wheaties. It's not about Bo Jackson or Deion Sanders or the Dream Team or L'il Penny. It's about a time that is gone.

A time that doesn't exist anymore.

A time that gets a little bit farther back in history with every day that passes.

Every time my brother passes this bookshelf it rewinds his life. It takes him away from the present and into the past. It shows him, that no matter what is going on that day, that no matter what circumstances say, no matter how long it's been, no matter how or what or when or where, this bookshelf screams to him that his dad isn't a myth.

He exists.

He was around.

He is real.

He is a person.

And that's what this bookshelf is. It's a daily, tangible sign that our family wasn't always this way. It shows him that our dad wasn't always this far away. It shows him that he was near.

He was close.

He was here.

Each of us has our own way of this. There's a book in my living room that my dad signed and wrote a note to me in March of 2004. The book is a modern history of Saturday Night Live. The night he penned his note I had the opening of a play that was basically an episode of Saturday Night Live for my high school. My dad couldn't make the official curtain drop but showed up at the rehearsal and gave me the book with the note.

Because when I was in high school, being on Saturday Night Live was my dream. But I don't keep this book for that. It's not about Will Ferrell. It's about my dad. It's more than just a book.

It's a reminder.

My sister has a closet full of polar bear stuffed animals, all in black trash bags, stored at my mom's house.

Stored.

Not sold.

Each of these, just like a bookshelf full of collector's items or just one single book, represents for her a time.

A season.

A year.

A gift.

A person.

My dad gave her every single one. And they don't represent childhood.

They represent him.

It's because there's this picture in my office.

Much like my brother's bookshelf, it's nothing to talk extensively about. It's definitely nothing that Thomas Kinkade spent his time on and it's nothing close to Rob Bell's Velvet Elvis that was in his basement back in 2005. It's just a

photograph. It's probably a picture that many people have in their house or somewhere in their attic or workspace. It's simply a small picture of my wife and me on our wedding day surrounded by signatures on a white-bordered frame. Some big. Some small. Some from people I know and some from people I don't. Whenever I find myself looking at all of the handwriting and all the names my mind floods with memories, making endless connections to so many different people and so many different seasons of life. I am reminded of stories and inside jokes. I remember specific conversations, being drawn into past and present relationships and highs and lows and faces and places and all sorts of emotions.

All of this from signatures.

Tiny names on a white picture frame.

When I look at this frame and all the signatures surrounding the small, 5"x7" picture, it seems so cluttered. It seems so messy and so jumbled. These hundreds of little signatures are crowding this small picture. There are names everywhere and in all different sizes and shapes.

And although this white frame is filled to its borders in black ink, it's empty.

Amidst the clutter and claustrophobia, there's so much room. There's so much missing from the little space surrounding all these signatures.

Signatures from friends.

Signatures from aunts.

Signatures from uncles.

Signatures from mentors.

Signatures from grandparents.

Signatures from brothers.

Signatures from sisters.

Signatures from mothers.

All but one.

And even though I know it's not there, I always stop and look for my dad's name. But I don't find it. No matter how long I look, no matter how many times I look, and no matter how much I want it to be there, it doesn't show up. I can't find his name.

And no matter how many signatures crowd together, it will always be missing one. It will always have a hole. It will always have room for one more. It will always have an empty space that wasn't filled with a name.

His.

It seems staring at this picture jolts me out of the present moment and into another one just like my brother's bookshelf. Looking at this picture and these names, desperately searching for "Love, Dad" takes me back to my wedding day. I think about the suits and the food and the pictures and the flowers and the cake and the numbers and all the different details. I think about how there were too many people in our wedding party. I think about how there were too many people at the rehearsal dinner. I think about how there wasn't enough food. I think about how there were too many drawn out monologues with the microphone and how the stories lasted too long and how people were ready to leave. I think about how there were too many pictures and too many poses.

But then I think about how I was one groomsmen short.

I think about how there was time for one more toast.

I think about how I wanted one more picture.

I think about how there was room for one more at our table.

I think about how there was one person who didn't get to taste the fried chicken.

Right in the middle of the weekend's excess and abundance, there was shortage. Right in the midst of the fullness of the day's schedule, there was all the time in the world. Right when we thought there was too much, there wasn't enough.

And right next to joy and celebration was deep sadness and heartache.

It's because your dad is supposed to be at your wedding. He's supposed to give a toast and say how proud he is of you. He's supposed to say how excited he is to be getting a new member of the family. He's supposed to make people laugh. He's supposed to be there to give you advice and calm your nerves. He's supposed to be there to hug you. He's supposed to be there to take pictures with you.

He is supposed to be there.

And when he's not, it hurts. Knowing he's not there cripples you. It makes you sick to your stomach. Knowing he's not there to hug you and stand beside you makes you want a hug from him even more. It makes looking back on your wedding day something more difficult to do. It makes you wonder if he wanted to be there as

much as you wanted him to be. It makes you think about where he is and what he's doing. And in the end, it reminds you of how much you miss him.

It makes a day full of so many things feel at the same time so very empty. And my wedding day wasn't the first time this emptiness showed up.

| WHAT NOW

It was July of 1993.

I was 7.

I remember sitting in the living room with my brother and sister on our rust-colored floral couch. My mom and dad just told us they were splitting up. I remember them saying this wasn't necessarily for good, but it was for our good and for our well-being. They said this was for the good of the family. They said it was best this way. They said they were not getting a divorce, but that they were separating for just a season.

For our benefit?

For *just* a season?

I remember being unable to comprehend why that clarification mattered. I'm 7 years old, my dad just told me he's moving out of the house and the rest of the family is moving into an apartment where he won't be living and won't be coming over to visit. A 7 year old can't see the difference in that because to a 7 year old there is no difference. All I knew was that he was leaving and I wasn't going with him. I was the youngest of three. I was the baby and all I wanted to know was where my daddy was going off to and when was he coming home. What was so important that he had to leave?

I felt like my heart was split in two and one half had been taken from me. I wanted to be a family again.

I wanted to *have* a family again.

I knew after this there was no more cutting the grass together.

There was no more crawling up in bed with him to read the morning paper and watch cartoons.

There were no more crosswords on Sunday mornings.

There was no more watching him shave.

There was no more him.

How was this was for my good? How was his absence from my life a benefit to me? How was his not tucking me in at night and not driving me to my baseball games for the better? How was being picked up every now and then and driven to a hotel room to stay with him for one night the best option? I didn't want to do my homework in a hotel room with him. I wanted to eat dinner and do my homework with him at home, as a family, like a normal kid. Did they want me to believe his decision to leave was for my good to cover up that it was for his good and his good alone? Telling me it was in my best interest seemed to hide what was really happening; he wanted out, he was done and he was calling it off.

But how can you call off your family? By telling me he was making the decision while thinking of me disguised the real reason he was leaving and the reality that the decision was made for his own interests and gains. That is how I felt. From where I was standing on the porch while watching him pack up his car and pull out of the driveway it seemed this decision was serving him a lot better than it was serving the rest of my family. Nothing seemed good on that front porch. I wasn't happy. I wasn't whole. I was standing there, immovable and unable to utter any sound. It wasn't long before he had a new job, a new girlfriend, a new hair color, new clothes, and new activities. But here we were still the very same. Here I was still hurting and still fatherless.

He just

moved

on.

Sitting on the couch listening to his monologue all my mind could translate was

I'm sorry. It's just a lot better for me if I leave. It will be better because then I can quit pretending I want to be here. I've been a father for 13 years and a husband for 19. I've lost interest. I'm bored. I want to try new things. I want to have new experiences. Trust me, you will be fine. Let's shake hands and go our separate ways. I'll send a postcard.

What happened to family dinners and Friday movie nights with pizza? Didn't that mean anything to him? Was he not going to miss any of that? Was he not going to miss us? I couldn't bring myself to believe what happened. I couldn't bring myself to trust it.

It's distrust that rooted itself deep in my heart because I questioned whether or not my dad knew exactly what was happening to me. I doubted that he knew what my world looked like now and the intricate ways my heart was breaking. Life had taken such sudden, sharp, unexpected, and unpleasant turns. And when that happened, I found myself relegated to living in the fog of doubt and uncertainty. I felt so broken and so negatively affected by the decision made to split my family in two. This is tough for children to process because it does not make sense to us. We don't see this as logical. We can't see this as logical. We struggle to understand the reasoning that made divorce seem necessary. If a decision of such magnitude was made, leaving us terribly wrecked on the inside, it's hard to recover our trust. It's hard for us to believe in our family again. It's hard to believe in

a point,

a purpose,

a parent.

It's because if we were understood, if our needs were important, then we would still be a whole family. We wouldn't be with dad for Thanksgiving and with mom for Christmas. We wouldn't be without a concrete definition for what a family is, for what our family is. Our family would be would be easy to understand and easy to explain.

Our family would make sense to a child.

It would make sense to a 10-year old.

It would make sense to a 6-year old.

It would make sense to 15-year old.

It would make sense to us.

And what makes sense is that mommy and daddy stay together. It's because we're a family and to us that is what families do. We believe they stay together. We believe they help us rather than hurt us. We believe families should make us feel better, not worse. But the truth of our stories is that this isn't the case for us. Our families don't make sense to us. Our families make us confused. They make us unsure. They make us doubt. They make us lose trust.

Because he left us.

And I will never forget it. I kept asking my mom where he was and why wasn't he home. I wanted to know why he wasn't eating dinner with us and why his car wasn't

in the driveway. It bothered me. It kept me up at night. I didn't know how to process being home and living life without him there. I remember feeling so vulnerable and exposed. I remember being so uncomfortable. I had so many questions and so many concerns. It was here that I was reluctantly introduced to the empty space that would begin making its way through every aspect of my life. This vacancy, this void, was everywhere.

As I began re-imagining life and attempting to re-learn what my days, nights, holidays, meals, tee-ball games, Saturday afternoons, bed times, and home was going to look like, there was so much of this empty space. It was taking over. There was space in the living room where his big, blue leather chair used to be. There was a space at the end of the table where he used to sit and tell us jokes and talk about his day and tell me to always eat over my plate. There was a space in the driveway next to mom's van where his light blue Honda Civic used to be parked. There was a space in his bathroom at his sink where his toothbrush and toothpaste and deodorant used to be. There was space next to mom in their bed where he used to sleep. There was space in new pictures and on the mantle at Christmas where his stocking used to hang and in the laundry basket where his dirty clothes used to be.

But his clothes weren't there. Our laundry basket didn't have any of his t-shirts or pants or socks. All the clothes in the basket were too small for him. We didn't have any daddy clothes to wash.

The days and months pressed on with this ever-present, physical emptiness forced to be understood by a mind too young to comprehend anything inside this new way of life. I didn't know what to say or how to act.

I just...existed.

It was a whole new world to me and this new world I was in was much different than the one Aladdin and Jasmine sang about. Normal became foreign. Everything was strange. Everyday I woke up hoping it was all a dream. I'd run downstairs and there he'd be in his blue and white bathrobe with his brown leather slippers, drinking coffee and having breakfast doing his crossword. But once I woke up he was nowhere to be found and he left me nothing to help navigate and comprehend the hell I was in. He didn't leave me any instructions or guide to help me weather this monster of a storm that he created. I felt broken. I felt lost. I felt abandoned. There was no warning; nothing on the news to tell me where to go or how to hide or how to stay safe.

There was nothing to warn me that everything I knew, everything I called home and everything I called family, was going to shatter. And in the aftermath, there wasn't a class to take. There wasn't an instructional video to watch. It all just switched. One day he was there and the next day he wasn't.

Just like that he was gone.

And just like that there I was.

Left.

I hurt for answers, clinching my fist while screaming in my pillow. I cried for them. I'd lie in my bunk bed, my mind racing, aching to know what happened. It was a mystery. A giant riddle. No matter how hard I tried nothing helped. I found myself on my knees begging for some kind of deliverance. I just wanted to understand. I wanted to understand something that I don't think ever will make sense. I wanted to understand why families break and why parents leave. I wanted to understand why my family broke and why someone hadn't come to fix it.

I wanted to understand why was I not good enough.

Why was there this big empty space lurking in our house?

What was I going to do with this big hole in my heart?

I stared at pictures of him. Stared at the way he was hugging me. Stared at the way he was smiling. Stared at his arm hair. His glasses. I wanted a hug. I wanted him to tickle me. I wanted to smell his cologne. I stared at him while my eyes leaked and my nose ran and my heart broke and I'd whisper to the picture

Where'd you go?

Was it my fault?

Did I do something wrong?

If I say I am sorry will you come back?

Are we going to see each other again?

Are you angry?

Is this a dream?

When are you coming home?

Why me?

I wanted to collapse. I wanted to disappear. If I yelled louder and cried harder would he come back? Would he hear me? If he could just hear me and see the pain and

the agony my little heart was in he would come back. He would have to. Surely seeing his son in pain would make him not want to give up and would make him want to keep going and fight through whatever was going on. If only he could see. If only he knew.

He would fight for me, right?

He would fight for our family, wouldn't he?

I wanted my dad to suit up, put his armor on, and go to battle for us, his sons and his daughter and his wife. I longed for him to go to war for the unity of our family. I wanted to be worth something to him. I wanted him to care and I wanted everything to just go back to normal. The way that it used to be. I wanted

A different life.

A different scenario.

No abandonment.

No yelling.

No lying.

No discouragement.

No affairs.

No illusions.

I wanted more love.

More quality time.

More hugs.

More goodnight kisses.

More affirmation.

More honesty.

More fun.

More reassurance.

More dedication.

More permanence.

| CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

It's because Buzz Lightyear was sitting on the couch.

And so were Woody, Scottie Pippen, Shaq, Penny Hardaway, John Stockton, and the great David Robinson. [Many of which made it to that bookshelf I was telling you about.]

It's because Pixar released Toy Story in November of 1995 and Toy Story action figures were the hot Christmas items. Woody and Buzz were at the top of my list. In the back of my mind even as a 10 year old I thought maybe they would come to life like in the movie.

And there they sat on the couch in the living room of my grandma's house. Staring back at me from their plastic packaging. I tore open their boxes while my brother and sister tended to their respective pieces of furniture containing their wish lists.

It was Christmas.

And we were together.

We were together because after Dad left that first time in 1993, he came back to us several months later. He apologized. He wanted to be with us again. He wanted to be our dad again. He wanted our family to be what it was.

What we wanted it to be.

What we hoped it would be.

And so here we were. Together again. For Christmas.

Mom was helping Grace Anne with her presents while dad helped us with ours. He'd take pictures of us ripping the wrapping off and screaming once we could see a tiny corner of the box letting us know that yes, we did get some new PJ's. If anything amidst the holiday loot was packaged in that plastic that no human hand has ever been able to dismantle dad would bring the scissors in and break through to the toy that I thought I would never get to touch.

He was good like that.

He always helped us.

Next to Woody and the Toy Story crew was a big box of LEGOS.

He and I spent the whole day together putting together an underwater city. The complexity and the detail were clearly beyond my age range but I loved it. I loved that it was too hard for me to do on my own. I loved that he sat with me and helped me. It was the best being with him that Christmas day in Grandmommy's living room. We assembled and fortified the underworld palace. His work clothes were his blue and white bathrobe classically coupled with his brown leather slippers and without fail his coffee by his side.

We prepped all the men for their underwater life. Gave them all their helmets and oxygen tanks. We made sure they were prepped and ready to go.

And they were all smiling.

It's the most remarkable thing about life in LEGO land. It doesn't matter what was going on or what your job is or how much bumpy grass you have. It doesn't matter if you have brown hair, no hair, beard, or no beard. It doesn't matter if you're an astronaut or a policeman or a pirate or a prisoner or a deep-sea diver or Batman.

It doesn't matter.

You're yellow.

And you're smiling.

I felt like a LEGO guy that Christmas. I was smiling the whole time. I was smiling when I went to sleep by the fire and he tucked me in on Christmas Eve. I was smiling when we poured the milk and made the cookies and set them above the fireplace. I was smiling when I woke up the next morning and smiled the entire day.

And it wasn't because of his presents.

It was because of his presence.

But that Christmas shared with Woody and Buzz and the '96 Dream Team was the last Christmas 5 stockings hung from the mantle.

From then on there would always be room for

one

more

stocking.

His long, slender red and white striped stocking never got put up again above that fireplace. If I would have known that in the midst of those 1995 Christmas festivities I would have done things differently. I would have forgotten about the LEGO city and the toys and the candy and the pajamas and I would have simply snuggled with him. We could have sat by the fire and not said a word. Just him and me.

Father.

And son.

After that you don't think much about Santa or toys. Your Christmas wish isn't for Santa to come down your chimney it's for your dad to walk through the front door. You don't care what kind of shoes or skateboards or computers are in the living room waiting for you on the couch. None of it matters because you know the one thing on the top of your list, the one thing above all the toys and the games, was to have your family together again at Christmas. But deep down you know that it just won't happen. You know that Santa can't do that. He can't go down to his workshop and tell the elves to round up your dad.

It's because at Christmas Santa is more of a reality to you than your dad is. The myth of Santa never goes away. It doesn't leave. It stays. It's always, without fail, intangibly but tangibly there.

A few years ago I met with a freshman in college whose father abandoned his family before he reached his second birthday. It was very seldom he desired to bring his dad up in conversation. As far as he was concerned, his dad was not his dad and the only thing he had in common with the man was DNA. I asked him in what ways he believed his life was affected by the absence of his biological father, for better or for worse.

How much could I know about it? I don't know what it's even like to have a dad, much less realize what I'm missing without one. I never even think about it because it's not a big deal. It was good that he left when he did.

I wasn't shocked by his response but truly felt that his dad's absence from his life was affecting him in some way, whether he was aware of it or not. Just because it was a long time ago it doesn't erase the reality that one of his parents did, in fact, leave he and the rest of his family behind. Even if they left years ago, the truth still holds that they are not in the here and the now. I really pushed him to try and uncover any struggles and areas in his life that may be rooted in the absence of his father.

Just a few days later, we were at lunch and he told me how after spending some time praying and really asking the Lord to turn over stones in his past and in his heart how there was deep anger and bitterness toward his dad and his family situation in general. He was broken. He admitted how it hurt not having those experiences normal children have with a father. He said it hurt that he never got to go camping.

He never got to go fishing.

He didn't know how to change his oil.

He didn't know how to check his tires.

He was ignorant in a father-taught world.

He admitted that it hurt knowing and having to comprehend that he was left.

For those in these very same circumstances, we understand that real moms and real dads exist. We just struggle to know what it's like to actually have one of our own, one that stays around and one that cares.

Best-selling author Donald Miller expresses similar thoughts in his book *Father Fiction*:

For me a father is nothing more than a character in a fairy tale. And I know fathers are not like dragons in that fathers actually exist, but I don't remember feeling that a father existed for me. I know they are real people. I have seen them on television, sliding their arms around their women in grocery stores, and I have seen them in the malls and in the coffee shops, but these were characters in other people's stories, and I never stopped to question why one of these characters wasn't living in our house. I don't say this out of self-pity, because in a way I don't miss having a father any more than I miss having a dragon. But in another way, I find myself wondering if I missed out on something important.

For countless children this decision that was expressed to us as being for our good doesn't feel very good. It doesn't feel very good at all. We feel that we are missing out on something important. Why is it that our lives seem to have been made worse by this? We are now in situations where we are made fun of, singled out, cast aside. We feel abnormal and different.

Because it's different when you get back home from traveling over the holidays and you and your brother and sister go over to your dad's apartment and you get a few gifts.

That's not the same.

That's not Christmas.

When I was little and didn't understand any of it I thought it was neat getting two sets of presents and then on my birthday getting two parties and two sets of cards and two cakes.

But beneath all of the wrapping paper and candles and Christmas trees, there is a hole.

There's space.

There's a hole that wishes things had turned out differently because when it's all swept away, the parties, the clothes, the toys, and the family trips don't matter. Gifts fade away. Barbies and Legos get put in the garage and sold. Children grow up and when they do, they're not going to be concerned with the Playstations, the playhouses, and the action figures they got when they were twelve. They're going to wonder where their parents went, and if before they left, they did everything they could to not leave them behind.

They're going to wonder if their dad really believed a new bike would make up for the large space in the bed next to their mom where he used to sleep. They're going to question whether or not their mom thought buying them a new car would make them not think about the empty space in the driveway where she used to park.

Gifts and things that have a price tag aren't parents.

Parents are parents.

Parents give hugs.

Parents help you with your homework.

Parents make you feel better when you're sick.

Parents tell you everything is going to be okay.

Parents are around.

Parents are there.

Parents are present.

And when they are, you're able to throw away that old box of cereal.