



*“This is a book I could not put down. Neither will you.”*

**- DANIEL L. AKIN**

President, Southeastern Baptist  
Theological Seminary

# LEFT

THE STRUGGLE TO MAKE  
SENSE OF LIFE WHEN  
A PARENT LEAVES

JONATHAN  
EDWARDS

FOREWORD BY

TREVIN WAX





# PRAISE FOR *LEFT*

**"LEFT** is a raw, well-written account of a heart-rending journey filled with gospel hope. Readers will find their own stories, in big or small ways, reflected in Jonathan's account of a young man seeking in everything what he could only find in Jesus."

- **J.D. GREER**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, and author of *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart* and *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*

"Powerful. Strong. Brutally honest. Heart wrenching. Healing. Hopeful. These are the words that come to my mind after reading **LEFT**. Married to a lovely lady whose story is similar in many ways to Jonathan's, I have seen both the pain a fallen world inflicts on so many when abandoned by a parent(s), and I have seen the healing that comes through Jesus and a relationship with a perfect Heavenly Father. This is a book I could not put down. Neither will you."

- **DANIEL L. AKIN**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and author of *Engaging Exposition*

**"LEFT** is a raw and riveting series of reflections on life in the wake of parental abandonment. Those who have been through similar circumstances will find in Jonathan an articulate voice for this particular pain. Those who have not been through this experience will find a window into how best to minister and serve their friends from broken families."

- **TREVIN WAX**, Managing Editor of The Gospel Project at LifeWay, popular blogger (Kingdom People), and author of several books .

"When you open the pages of **LEFT**, you peer into the heart of anyone who has ever been abandoned by a parent. With raw emotion and haunting honesty, Jonathan Edwards poignantly pens of the lingering longing and gnawing ache that occurs when a parent leaves, and leads the reader to a place of healing and hope. If you have been left by a parent, you will see yourself in Jonathan's words and know that you are not alone. If you have a loved-one that is struggling with being left as a child, you will have a better

understanding of the heart wounded by parental abandonment."

- **SHARON JAYNES**, Best-selling author of *The Power of a Woman's Words* and *Your Scars are Beautiful to God*

"Some call this generation "the fatherless generation." And rightly so. If not orphaned, countless children are functionally fatherless. Abuse, abandonment, and neglect are all too familiar experiences for today's youth. These experiences are devastating. But there's hope. Jonathan points us to the fountain of hope and love in **LEFT**. By taking truth to struggle, Jonathan shows us that Jesus's grace sufficiently strengthens, sustains, and satisfies the believer in the midst of his or her grief and hardship."

- **TONY MERIDA**, Lead Pastor, Imago Dei Church, and author of *Faithful Preaching and Proclaiming Jesus*

"Concussed by his dad's leaving, Edwards narrates the particular, detailed miseries that he experienced as a boy, a teen, and an adult. But there is a turning, and his mother's love points him to the One who can heal, forgive and fill. To read **LEFT** is to grieve, but also to marvel anew at the Redeemer."

- **GLENN LUCKE**, President, Docent Research Group

"In **LEFT** my friend Jonathan Edwards provides a biblically-informed, heartfelt, and pastoral book about the existential realities of divorce. This is a moving and helpful book. Highly recommended."

- **BRUCE ASHFORD**, Dean of Faculty, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and editor of *The Theology and Practice of Mission*

"From the very first page I was struck by the importance of **LEFT**. How many millions of kids have tried to make sense of their feelings of abandonment? Edwards takes the reader through the raw agony of

rejection, the searing pain of loss and the brokenhearted emotions of a boy deprived of a father. Yet he has made a startling and redemptive move in writing this book. Rather than wallow around assigning blame, Jonathan works through the tragedy until he finds the peace of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness and healing find their way into his story and at the end he offers hope and a future to all those who still fight to keep their heads above water, never quite able to let go of their hurt or be rid of the nagging question, "What if...". Everyone knows someone who needs to read this."

- **DAVID HORNER**, Senior Pastor, Providence Baptist Church, and author of *When Missions Shapes The Mission*

"If a father could read this, he would nail his shoes to the floor. **LEFT** puts words to the experience and feelings of everyone who has lost a parent. Simply put, what Edwards says is so raw and so real, you will wonder how God could ever, ever heal a father-shaped hole in anyone's heart. But He can and He does. If losing a parent is part of your story, you will be so grateful for this book."

- **PAULA RINEHART**, Marriage and Family Counselor, and author of *Strong Women, Soft Hearts* and *Sex and the Soul of a Woman*

"Some stories inform. Others transform. Jonathan Edwards weaves a story that opens eyes to the dark world of kids left behind by abandoning parents. The winsome, well-written story telling in **LEFT** is much needed in the Christian community; for while Edwards exposes the seeming hopelessness of some divorces, he does not leave the reader in that state of hopelessness. Instead, he offers a way out, a way up. He offers the same hope to his readers that he has found himself in Jesus. He is empathetic. As the husband of a wonderful woman who was left by her own father, I have lived his story by proxy. As a Christian theologian I am hopeful that Jonathan's message will be heard in homes, coffee shops, and churches where hurting is real."

- **STEVE MCKINION**, Professor of Theology and Patristics, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and editor of *Life and Practice In The Early Church*

"**LEFT** is a journey in both the agony of abandonment and the joy of finding true healing in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Jonathan Edwards writes with a compelling and fresh style that draws the reader into the rawness of emotions and the intricacies of the movements of the heart through one of the most painful trials a person can experience—being left by a parent. This book will be a profound help to all who read it—both those who need the same kind of healing that God has worked in Jonathan's heart, and those who yearn to show compassion to others in that same situation."

- **ANDREW DAVIS**, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Durham, and author of *An Infinite Journey*

"In **LEFT**, Jonathan Edwards does something that is hard to do; take us through the storm of divorce and abandonment, show us the ugly aftermath, and carry us into the hope of a bright tomorrow that only Christ can bring. To get there, Jonathan must tear into some old wounds for our benefit and for the benefit for those yet to travel this lonely, often puzzling journey. Out of the stark reality of brokenness comes hope and out of the despair of a difficult past comes a future of promise. If you have been on this road or know someone currently walking it, **LEFT** is both a reminder of the destruction we can bring to each other and the promise that those scars can become markers toward a joyful next step.

- **STEVE TURNER**, Director of Campus Mobilization, North American Mission Board

"Jonathan writes with an honesty that will resonate deeply in the hearts of all who know what it's like to be disappointed, disillusioned and discouraged. In this candid, soul-searching memoir, Edwards exposes his struggles to make sense of the pain and loss he experienced in his father's abandonment. Ultimately, **LEFT** points to the hope found in God, our heavenly Father, who will never leave or abandon His children."

- **GWEN SMITH**, Speaker, Songwriter, and author of *Broken Into Beautiful* and co-author of *Knowing God By Name* and *Trusting God*





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# FROM THOSE WHO WERE LEFT...

**LEFT** echoes what I've often felt, thought and wondered about my own broken background, but have never really had the courage to say, the humility to admit or the words to express. Like other broken-homes the book describes, the home I grew up in was wrought with financial instability, emotional instability and an overall atmosphere which bred an insecurity about who I was. Interestingly and perhaps unexpectedly, this stemmed from the parent that chose to raise us, but was never really there for us. My dad, after having been physically, mentally and emotionally abused by my mother, was kicked out of his own house when I was a toddler.

For me I don't know what it's like to grow up with a mom that's supportive and encouraging of everything you achieve or want to accomplish. Any memories of what little love and support she showed to me are drowned out by years of unbridled anger and criticism. Fortunately, my dad worked around my mom to be more loving, supportive, encouraging and gentle well beyond what my mom could muster. My personal path of healing and recovery is still ongoing, but after reading **LEFT** I'm encouraged and reminded of the fact that the only way one can fully recover spiritually, mentally and emotionally from the effects of a broken background is found in the saving and restorative work of a loving, sovereign God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

- **NATHAN**, 26

This book carries a huge burden, not just for the author, but for many of those who will read it. Jonathan does a great job breaking down the impact of what happens spiritually to a fatherless son while at the same time displaying God's love as the only foundation that will hold that child up. **LEFT** relates to those who have had a parent walk out on them and as a result, been left on

their own to fight the daily spiritual battle against the memories of a past they wish to recreate. At the same time, this book gives those same children hope and comfort in our heavenly Father who will always be the sleeping bag that provides them safety no matter how bad the storm was or will ever be.

My father left when I was 8 due to an alcohol addiction. In the wake of all of it, God used my grandmother to fill in. No young boy should have to learn how to be a man from a 68 yr old woman. However, I am thankful and blessed God used her and even more thankful and blessed that I found the heavenly Father through it all. If you grew up in a fatherless home, this book will point you to the Ultimate Father.

- **BRYAN**, 38

The raw and real emotion of **LEFT** brought back memories from my childhood that I haven't visited in a long time. The words in this book were, just as it describes, shovels that uncovered the messiness from my childhood that was lived in the aftermath of my parents' divorce. I am thankful for the way Jonathan points and pushes the reader to the cross, but especially those readers who come from the broken-home background he describes.

I am thankful how he encourages us to not shy away from the mess but rather to come to the foot of the cross knowing that we are washed clean. This book is much needed in the culture today where broken families and single-parent homes are an epidemic that leave children in the wake of their family's destruction. Thankfully in **LEFT**, that destruction of growing up in a broken family is filtered through the lens of truth that restoration is coming and causes us to look to our faithful Provider when our families fail to provide what we need.

- **MICHELLE**, 24

This book is a beautiful example of God's strength, sovereignty and redemptive power in the midst of human weakness and pain. It's an honest and deeply personal reflection of hurt and confusion that finds its ultimate healing in the finished work of Christ. Jonathan's story will resonate with anyone who has experienced the pain of broken family relationships and it points us back to the only Father who can redeem and restore.

For me personally, **LEFT** was a powerful reminder that my joy and my identity are not dependent on my family's circumstances but rooted in Christ, who is the ultimate demonstration of God's unconditional love for me. Our families may fail us (and we may fail our families), but God is faithful to His word and relentless in his loving pursuit of us. He meets us in the middle of the mess, in the midst of the grief and pain, and gives us hope. For those who are trying to make sense of a loss, this book is where the hard and painful realities of life meet the love and grace of a Savior who one day will wipe every tear from our eyes.

- **KATY**, 25

Growing up as a kid in a single-parent home looks a million different ways, each one with their own story of heartache and longing. The emotions one experiences are varied, complex, and deep. In **LEFT** Jonathan explores the buried, even extremely painful and resonating fallout of how this has influenced his understanding of self as well as his relationship with God. These pages are filled with a raw and introspective look at the far-reaching effects of fatherlessness.

Yet, the ultimate response to this book is neither despair nor pity. On the contrary these personal experiences leave you pondering what it means to truly find joy, forgiveness, and even hope in a perfect, Heavenly Father. I'm grateful for Jonathan conveying this story to not only to remind himself of the comfort he's found in Christ but also to remind us, regardless of our upbringing, that we all have access through Jesus to an ever-pres

ent, endless, and overwhelming source of peace and love through Jesus.

- **ETHAN**, 36

I am grateful for this book. My hope is that it will be widely read by the lonely and desperate hearts that feel like no one understands their abandonment. Jonathan is a wise, empathetic voice that points us to another who walked the lonely road of rejection: Jesus. As a woman with a father that rejected me and an alcoholic mother, I believed I must be unlovable. It wasn't until my 30's that I allowed God, through my own broken marriage, to mend my heart and free me from bondage. Jonathan's story gives this same hope, that though abandonment scars, Jesus heals.

- **WHITNEY**, 35

I honestly started reading the book and could not put it down. Over the years I've often wondered if people struggled with divorce the way I have, and if being in a fatherless home raised the same emotions and struggles that I seemed to constantly deal with. So often over the years I have found myself reminiscing on thoughts and memories of my dad. I've wondered what it would have been like to have had him in the house with my mom, and what if I had gone through life without the pain and suffering of being in a broken home. Like Jonathan's story, I have constantly sought after my dad's satisfaction and love and have constantly been disappointed. I have been hurt and I have hit my low point several times, but this book has brought me some perspective and realization.

I've come to realize that I have learned more about myself and my relationship with Christ when I was at my lowest points in life. I believe God used my parents divorce to show me his unconditional love and glory. He has put certain people in my life to show

me what it means to be a godly man and a loving father because I was never given that in my own home. This just goes to show you how God hears us and how he provides. It's only through Jesus and my eternal Father that I will truly find and experience true satisfaction, and my earthly father will never come close to loving me the way my savior does. I haven't talked to my dad for some time now, and after reading this book and meditating in prayer, I've decided to contact him and forgive him.

- **HOLT**, 21

As a father myself, struggling to deal with the emotional wreckage left in the wake of a father who didn't seem to care, this book was just what I needed. Jonathan, through the telling of his own childhood stories, showed me that the pain I felt many years ago doesn't disappear over night or even over time if left unresolved. Jonathan's story placed me in a position to confront the pain in my heart and taught me much about the relationship between my present struggles and the scars of my past.

Dealing with those scars as I read **LEFT** left me with a greater appreciation of some foundational truths in my life. Through all of the pain, there is hope. Through all of the loneliness, there is love. Jesus loves me in the way I always hoped my father would. I am enough for him, and that is enough for me.

- **JOHNSON**, 33

Unfortunately, the words that Jonathan has written are shared with many men of this generation, the generation before, and regrettably the next generation. Jonathan's story is my story. Though my father was physically present, he still was absent in almost every other way. What Jonathan has done is capture what life is like when a father walks out. What he leaves behind. What my father left behind was a marriage, spouse, daughter, son, a

family. And that is something as a man that affected me, that makes me question what life could, should have looked like.

That's why reading **LEFT** was difficult, because it brought up so many feelings, emotions, memories. Memories that I never knew existed, or ones that I had tried to forget. But, Jonathan didn't end with hopelessness and living as a victim of his circumstance. He tells a story of a father who truly loves, never walks out, who is always present. God in his great mercy carried Jonathan, showed him what real love of a father looks like. That's where **LEFT** differs from other stories, it points to Christ, to hope. Because those memories of my father leaving, walking out are difficult but reading Jonathan's words tell me I am not alone there are others like me. There is a Father who loves me and allows me to love my family, my future kids, my future wife, and my father.

- **CHASE**, 28

This book takes a deep look into the messiness that results from a broken home and the stages of emotion that follow, yet also tells a story of hope in that while we may be left, we are not alone. I related with many moments in this book. There were many times I felt transported back to my childhood and could "feel" many of the emotions, like the shameful lunches, and the fear of my dad, and the weirdness of two Christmases and the never being "good enough."

Yet all broken homes are different and while my experience was different than Jonathan's, it was comforting to read and understand that like us, there are many others who experience hurt, pain and wounds that result from broken homes. But in the end, of course, it's always awesome to be reminded that Jesus is bigger than it all, and that He is ultimate hope and restoration.

- **JENNA**, 27

There's a malaise that has infected our culture for decades; children, preteens, and teens growing up in families amputated by the abandonment of a parent or both. Forsaken boys and girls grow up confused as to who they are and what they're to do. Constantly searching for someone or something to take care of them. This was my story.

**LEFT** exposed the lingering atrophy that still exists in my own soul as I battle with the wounds caused by an absent parent. Each chapter took me further and further into the hurts of my past. There were many times I wanted to stop reading. Memories of pain and fear almost suffocated me. But in my anguish I found healing. That's how the gospel works though. Paradoxical. The way down is the way up.

Jonathan's rigorous honesty has opened the door for those afflicted by the pandemic of desertion to make sense of their stories and to piece together the wreckage of their past. To see the upheaval of their childhoods as a means to find perfect love and acceptance in Jesus- who went through hell so we wouldn't have to. I'm praying others will walk with Jonathan as they begin to tell their own stories. Because that's the only way those affected by the disorder of being left will begin to find healing.

- **JUSTIN**, 35

For anyone affected by the brokenness of divorce and family dysfunction, **LEFT** offers more than just words; it offers the experience of being completely heard and understood. As you read, you'll find these pages tell your story, and so many stories of kids all across our country. America has become a culture where self-satisfaction is more important than keeping your word and raising a child you brought into this world. This book gives an entire generation of children "left on the front porch" a loud, clear, and necessary voice that deserves to be heard. Jonathan leads readers back to the dark places in their past and helps them come head to head with the pain, but doesn't leave them there.



More than just feeling understood, readers will feel empowered by the Gospel to move out of despair, anger, and resentment. **LEFT** offers us the message we need to set us free from the marring of being abandoned: the story of God who went through abandonment for us and offers us the ability to forgive. If you want to feel heard, understood, and more importantly set free from the wounds of divorce, you'll find your story intersecting with God's in the pages of **LEFT**.

- **ASHLEY**, 28

# LEFT

THE STRUGGLE TO MAKE  
SENSE OF LIFE WHEN  
A PARENT LEAVES

JONATHAN  
EDWARDS



**CITY**CHURCH  
MURFREESBORO, TN

resources



LEFT: The Struggle To Make Sense Of Life When A Parent Leaves

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## TO MY MOM

*You are the most wonderful person I have ever known or will meet. Thank you for being such a godly mother. Thank you for showing me what it looks like to truly entrust yourself into the hands of our Beloved Savior. You mean the world to me. I will never be able to repay you for all that you did and continue to do to love and care for us, your children. You made sure we knew that you loved us with every bone in your body. More importantly, you made sure we understood that, unlike our father and your former husband, Christ will never abandon us. Thank you for showing me that what Christ has done for us is such good and glad news.*



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# FOREWORD

## ABSENT

*BY TREVIN WAX*

Parents are important.

We know this. We recognize the need for a solid education, a stable home, and parents who are present and involved in the lives of their children.

But too often we think of parenting in generic terms, and thereby minimize the distinctive contribution of a father to a family.

How important is fatherhood?

Sometimes, you don't know how important something is until it's missing.

A few years ago, my wife and I were caught up in the popular television drama, *Lost*. The intriguing storyline and compelling characters had us coming back every week to see what would take place next.



Midway through the series, I was struck by how many of the main characters had “daddy issues.” Much of the ongoing struggle and personal conflict was traced back to the characters’ unresolved issues with their fathers – some who’d been present (and bad) and others who were absent.

Most disturbing was how, in some cases, the anger toward fathers led to patricide. Lost presented a frightening picture of what can take place when the biblical vision of fatherhood is missing. Suffering, anger, pain and violence followed a father’s abdication of responsibility.

Flash forward a few years, and I’m sitting in my living room with a group of college students. We’re talking about the subject matter for a new book I am writing – a work of fiction that teaches theological truth in story form. As I talk with them about the main character, a young college student struggling with big questions about Christianity, they advise me:

***There needs to be a dad problem.***

I was puzzled. But they insisted.

***If you want this book to resonate with lots of guys, the dad needs to be absent. College students will relate.***

There needs to be a dad problem.

Those of us who seek to proclaim the gospel today cannot ignore the massive implications of a distorted vision of fatherhood – fathers who have failed or fathers who have left. Due to fickle fathers and distant dads, our culture’s view of God has been massively affected by the failures of our fathers.

And yet, the gospel becomes all the sweeter when it gains a foothold in the heart of someone longing for a Father who never

fails. A Father whose gracious love for His creation led Him to reveal Himself as our Creator and Redeemer. In the gospel, we encounter a Son who was abandoned that we might be accepted, cast out that we might be brought in, crucified that we might be raised.

Jonathan Edwards understands the pain of fatherlessness. He also understands the sweetness of the gospel. This book is a raw and riveting series of reflections on life in the wake of parental abandonment.

If you are fatherless, you'll resonate.

If you are like me and you've been blessed with an earthly father who faithfully models our heavenly Father, you will find this book to be a window into how best to minister and serve our friends from broken families.

Here is a book that gives us a taste of a particular kind of pain, a pain felt by those who are seeking to remember what's good and forget what's bad, cherish the true and discard the false, love and forgive...and hope again.

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# INTRODUCTION

## MESSY

Digging a hole is tough. It's a lot of work. And you certainly don't want to be doing it in your Sunday best.

Because digging a hole is messy.

Your hands get filthy with dirt and it gets under your fingernails and covers your clothes and gets on your face. Even if it's a small hole for a small plant in the flower bed right in front of your steps leading up to your front porch. You put your garden gloves on and maybe a little apron and get your tiny shovel and the small pad for your knees and you get to work.

And you get dirty.

Because digging a hole is messy.

It's messy and it's interesting.

It's interesting because holes come in all different shapes and sizes and some take enormous amounts of time to create and others not so much.

Some holes are created in an instant, and some take days, weeks, and months.

Some small holes might not take as much time but they can be a lot more work just as well.

The time it takes is directly connected to what you're using to make your hole. You could be using a tiny garden shovel or a multi-ton excavator with a giant shovel arm extension. You could be using a shovel with a sharp point at the end, or one with a square head, perfect for shoveling snow.

Whatever the tool of choice, all of these were meant to do the same thing: make holes. And while that remains true, they weren't all meant for every kind of hole. You wouldn't break ground for the construction of a new building or collection of offices with a garden spade.

But yes, shovels are made to dig.

It just comes down to what kind of hole is being dug.

Have you ever realized how certain days on the calendar can be excellent shovels concerning our past?

Certain days throughout the year dig up all kinds of things: memories, feelings, emotions, laughter, depression, sadness, joy, and heartbreak. The thing is, different days are different kinds of shovels. One day in the summer could be a tiny little green garden shovel that reminds you of your first kiss that happened the year before.

Great memory.

One dug up by the numbers on your watch or computer or tablet letting you know what day it is.

Emotional.

Fun.

A small hole.

But other days are different. Other number combinations for different dates and times aren't your typical shovel from Lowe's or Home Depot. Other days are big, bright, green John Deere diggers and dumpers.

Excavators.

These days go deep. They go big. They excavate. They break through layers of soil. They bring up memories and days and emotions that are deep beneath the surface of the soul. These days are beyond the visible smiles and laughter and glossed eyes. These days hurt. These days are complicated.

They dig up and take us back and make us remember.

Even when we don't want to.

Because digging a hole is messy.

It's messy when we look at the calendar and realize it's been 9 years since he called. It's been 3 years since she died. It's been 5 years since the accident, or since the diagnosis came in, or since they left or since the operation. We look down and our hands are messy. Our shoes and pants and shirt are stained with the dirt from our past.

Because it's messy to relive and re-experience messiness.

We get dirty when our holes get re-dug.

For me, this is my dad's birthday. This day digs up all kinds of soil and plunges me right back into a huge pit. This day reminds me that he's not here. It reminds me that he left. It reminds me that I haven't spoken to him in almost 10 years. It makes me sad and it makes me ache. It makes me hate messiness. It makes me wish things were just normal and life was squeaky clean.

And just 4 days before this hole gets dug another one opens up and more dirt gets shoveled. Because that day reminds my wife that, for her too, it's been close to 10 years since she has spoken with her dad.

And that day is her John Deere.

But not because he left and he won't talk to her. But because 10 years ago on that day, her dad left this earth.

And that's a big hole.

A deep hole.

A hole that we wish never had been dug.

But it's there. And some days are like that. Some days are the giant shovels that dig out the earth and the soil that started to fill holes and cover certain aspects of our messy past that we keep buried. And that's what happens on days like that. They all are processed differently and dealt with in different ways because we all look at our holes differently from different angles. Some jump in and others stand up top and look down. But the holes are there for all of us. And it's tough when you know those days are coming. You glance at the calendar from a week out, maybe two, and realize

that you're going to have to face that Thursday.

You're going to have to deal with the dirt that gets unearthed.

You're going to have to get messy.

And what do we do on these days?

We get angry. We get sad. We get bitter. We cry. We yell. We yearn.

And we hurt.

Because life is messy and it's not always how we want it to be.

And we don't like messiness. We like to be clean and free from dirt and for everything to be where it should be and for nothing to go wrong. We want everything to be perfect, not messed up. We want to be smiling the whole time and to enjoy our experiences and to be happy. We want everything to be picture perfect. Just like a wedding day.

Weddings are not considered messy days. They are clean, proper, fancy, perfect, well-dressed, dolled up. People are perfect. Flowers are perfect. Cakes are perfect. Clothes are perfect. A wedding day is the one day in our lives where we all think that nothing should go wrong. It's that one special day. It shouldn't rain and the food should be right and the flowers should be placed perfectly and all the pictures should be great and no one should forget where to stand.

The perfect day.

No messiness.

But when we look at what marriage is, when we turn to the Scriptures, we understand that marriage is but a symbol of the ultimate



relationship between God and us, His people, His bride. And in this marriage, we see that God Himself, the very Creator of the flowers that overflow every room and chair and table at weddings, the cotton made to produce the dresses and the suits, the trees for the programs, the chemicals for the make up, the very Creator who made all these, chose for the joining of Himself to His bride to be something not perfect, but messy.

In the very beginning, in the creation account in Genesis, after God made His glorious creation and after forming man and knowing it wasn't the best for Him to be alone, He did something. He formed from Adam's side a helper.<sup>1</sup>

Eve.

She was his mate and his companion. But after this, after their union, we don't know how long, but we know after their union they were deceived and they chose a life for themselves and chose their desires over their God.<sup>2</sup>

They chose selfishness.

They chose idolatry.

And here we see not only the first instance of sin, but also the very intricate nature of sin and its effects.

They hide.

They fear.

They blame.

They're ashamed.

But God comes.

He confronts.

He explains.

He renders the consequences for their actions. And then He clothes them. He covers their shame. And this isn't some fine, Vera Wang gown, this is animal skins.

Attractive? No.

Messy? Yes.

You see, this clothing that he gave them was a mere temporary fix. We know this because in chapter 3, before dishing out punishments, he dishes out promise. In Genesis 3:15 we see the promise to one day destroy evil.<sup>3</sup> And guess what? He is going to do this by getting messy and getting his hands dirty.

Centuries later, a baby will be born and God Himself will throw Himself into the mess, putting on what? Human skin. Human clothes. Marred clothes. Messy clothes.

And so to provide what is needed for the ultimate marriage of God and His bride - us, His people - He had to get messy. To provide what was needed for restoration and renewal; for recreation and the defeat of death; for triumph over brokenness and hurt and sin and messiness - God plunged into messiness. Without the messiness, there's no restoration and there's no wedding when Christ returns and all things are made new.

Without the messiness of Jesus, we're still wearing our fig leaves. We're still messy with no promise or hope of being made clean and having our holes filled. While our lives are messy and circumstances and situations on this broken earth hurt and poke and make us uncomfortable and make us resent messiness, we need to find joy in it, knowing that it is through messiness that our hope

of God putting all things back together will come to pass.

So let us be joyful. Let us be grateful in the midst of our mess that because God himself came down and entered into our mess and our sin and our shame we now have the joy and the gracious opportunity to be restored and to be renewed and made clean. Because that's what we need. That's great news amidst our brokenness and our imperfections and our flaws.

Let us rejoice that the most important wedding of all time will be the most wondrous and the most regal. And it will all be about the Groom.

And let us keep in mind that it is possible only because the Groom Himself became messy.

And that is good news for messy people.

That is Great News.

And that's what we wait for. We long and we ache to be made new and for all creation to be restored when Jesus comes again. He will wipe away tears and heartbreak and loneliness and join together his family.

So just as we wait for that Day,<sup>4</sup> and just as we continue to live in the brokenness of creation, I urge you to do that with this book. Persevere. Press on.

Make it to the end.

Don't let the messiness and all the dirty laundry sideline you and keep you from moving on. I know it's messy and dirty and I know that this mess will unearth many things for many hurting people. But don't leave. There's great joy in the end, just as there will be for us who believe that Jesus is who he says he is and that he did

come to do what he promised he would do.

Only He promises new life and hope and joy and peace among life's greatest of voids.

All because he took on himself the death and decay that began in the garden, swallowing up the emptiness from our sin and shame and pain when he hung on the cross. All because he became messy to clean up messiness for good.

And only Jesus can do this.

Only he can fill our holes.

But not with just dirt.

Life.

L | 1



# CHAPTER ONE

## EMPTY

In my brother's house there's a bookshelf. It's nothing fancy. It's 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 that my family has occupied since the early 1980's. 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.

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 inescapable 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 encased boxes of the '92 and '96 Dream Teams. The bottom few shelves are lined with album after album after album of collectors' cards. And this bookshelf hasn't changed. Nothing on the shelves has ever moved the slightest centimeter from its original spot.

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 its own 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 24 year-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 of 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 collectors' 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 for my big brother. That Wheaties box is preserving memories and stories with my dad 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 further 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, 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 signs that he was around. In my living room, there's a book signed by my dad and keeping safe a note that he wrote 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.

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 or Jimmy Fallon. 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 displayed.

Not sold.

Each of these bears, just like a bookshelf full of collectors' items or just one single book with a short note, 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.

## | SIGNATURES

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 similar to ones many people have in their house or somewhere in their attic or workspace. It's simply a small, framed picture of my wife and me on our wedding day surrounded by signatures on a white matte background. 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 matte that frames a picture of my wife and me.

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 matte 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 among 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.

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 that staring at this picture jolts me out of the present moment and into another one just like my brother's bookshelf does for him. 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 groomsman 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 be your best man. 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 difficult to do rather than a delight. 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 at the same time feel 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 and 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 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 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 that his decision to leave was for my good to cover up that it was actually 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 he disguised the real reason he was leaving - 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 hobbies. 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.

Distrust rooted itself deep in my heart. 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.

For children of divorce, this is tough 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.

Because if we really were understood, if our needs were really important, 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 easy to understand and easy to explain.

Our family would make sense to a child.

It would make sense to a 15-year old.

It would make sense to a 6-year old.

It would make sense to 24-year old.

It would make sense to us.

And what makes sense is that mommy and daddy stay together, 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. 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 my father left my family.

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 unfolded with this ever-present, physical emptiness forced to be tolerated 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 from the one Aladdin and Jasmine sang about. Normal became foreign. Everything was strange. Everyday I woke up hoping it was all a dream, hoping that 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.

The next day he wasn't.

Just like that he was gone.

And just like that there I was.

Left.

I hurt for answers, clenching my fist while screaming into 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 will ever 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 always 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

There was Buzz Lightyear sitting on the couch.

And so were Woody, Rex, Ham, and Slink.

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 come true.

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 there we were. Together again. For Christmas.

Mom helped 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 side by side 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 and made sure they were ready to

go.

They were all smiling.

It's the most remarkable thing about life in LEGO land, isn't it? 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 giant LEGO man that Christmas, smiling the whole time. I was smiling when I went to sleep by the fire and when 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 a select few from the X-Men squad was the last Christmas 5 stockings would hang 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 had 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 us two.

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, is 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 doesn't erase the reality that one of his parents did, in fact, leave him 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 to uncover any struggles and areas in his life that may have been rooted in the absence of his father.

Just a few days after that conversation, we were at lunch. He told me after spending some time praying and really asking the Lord to turn over stones in his past and in his heart, he discovered 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 that 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 lacking so much in a father-taught world.

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

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 ones of our own, ones that stay around and ones that care.

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.***<sup>5</sup>

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 causes you to wish things had turned out differently because, when it's all swept away, the parties, the clothes, the toys, and the family trips, none of it seems to 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 find a way to stay.

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 forget 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.



## | MUCH LOVE TO THOSE WHO WERE A PART OF THIS

**MOM** for being the absolute greatest.

**STU** for being the best big brother during high and low times.

**GRACIE** for always being there to laugh with and cry with.

**AUNT B** for everything.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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# **PRAYING.**

**PRAYING THAT THE LORD USED THIS  
TO BLESS & ENCOURAGE  
YOU, RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE.**

**PRAYING THAT HE USES  
THIS TO HEAL MANY.**