Motorhome Prophecies

A Journey of Healing and Forgiveness

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Nashville • New York

Cover design by Whitney J. Hicks

Center Street
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
centerstreet.com
twitter.com/CenterStreet

First Edition: March 2024

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sheffield, Carrie, author.
Title: Motorhome prophecies : a journey of healing and forgiveness / Carrie Sheffield.
Description: New York : Center Street, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023036572 | ISBN 9781546004387 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781546004400 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Sheffield, Carrie. | Sheffield, Carrie—Family. | Latter Day Saint fundamentalism—United States. | Poor—United States—Biography. | Children of sick parents—United States—Biography. | Adult children of dysfunctional families—United States—Biography. | Journalists—United States—Biography. | Ex-church members—Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—Biography. | Anglican converts—United States—Biography. | LCGFT: Autobiographies.
Classification: LCC BX8695 .S55 2024 | DDC 289.3092 [B]—dc23/eng/20230821
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023036572

ISBN: 9781546004387 (hardcover), 9781546004400 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.

—1 Peter 3:9

This is a book about sabotage. Sabotage from my father, others, and sabotage from myself—the kind that almost killed me. It's about how putting up fake fronts of perfectionism is fatally toxic. This book is also about identifying and defeating sabotage, the kind that's destroying families and society. For many years, I expertly put up fake fronts, and most people were surprised to find out about my abusive, dysfunctional childhood. But all those fake fronts built enormous pressure that eventually burst and landed me in the hospital nine times from complications due to anxiety, depression, PTSD, fibromyalgia, and nearly two decades of episodic suicidal ideation. This book is about tearing down false fronts, healing from the inside out, coming to peace with God, and forgiving others.

I am not the hero of this book, but I am also not the villain; though, for many years I painted myself in these absolutist,

black-and-white terms. God is the hero, and though I thought my father was the villain, I now see that he got crushed by severe religious zealotry, sparked by mental illness after suffering sexual assault as a toddler and enduring isolation and the death of his best childhood friend. He's just as deserving of God's mercy and compassion as I am. I love my father and am sorry I waited so long to forgive him. He gave me a deep love of our exceptional country, intellectual inquiry, and beautiful music. Though we've had many disagreements, I know his heart holds a deep desire to serve others through his work. I pray God's blessing on his life, especially during his struggles with Alzheimer's. I'm grateful to my mother for her decades of selfless prayers for me, even when I didn't appreciate them. I know God was listening.

This book is also about redemption, forgiveness, and separating the gold from the rubbish our families throw on us. I received loads of rubbish, though in the process of taking out the trash, I also threw out important treasures. If I'd taken the time to quietly heal from my trauma, I could have avoided many costly mistakes, failed relationships, and wasted years. Instead, I gave my trauma power over my life, blaming others for my own wrong choices.

I grew up one of eight children with a violent, mentally ill street-musician father, who believed he was a prophet that would someday become president of the United States and that Satan had "reassigned" lesser demons in order to personally torment our family. We lived a transient lifestyle, skirting authorities by constantly moving. Besides various houses, we lived in motorhomes, tents, mobile homes, and sheds. One of my five brothers was born in a tent when our family lived in the public campground woods of Greenbelt Park, Maryland.

When I was a bit older, my dad accepted some inheritance

money from his dad, and so we didn't starve like we previously had (child custody authorities loomed), but we still lived a dysfunctional gypsy lifestyle in our motorhome at truck stops and in Walmart parking lots while performing classical music on the streets and passing out religious pamphlets. I attended seventeen public schools and was partially homeschooled, all before college—yet somehow, I graduated with honors, landed a full-tuition scholarship to Harvard for a master's degree, and worked on Wall Street before returning to my first love, journalism.

With four older brothers, as the oldest girl I was the fifth child, but first to escape the motorhome. Leaning on a dear high school friend, I left home at age eighteen, despite my dad's "prophecies" of my rape and death. I was declared legally estranged from my parents, who would not allow me to visit home because they claimed I was satanic and would corrupt my siblings by urging them to leave. Dad said my blood changed when I left home, that I was no longer part of their family, and I was photoshopped out of family pictures. I wrongfully thought that bad things happening—my bike and purse getting stolen, breaking my glasses, getting bitten by a possibly rabid dog, losing my job in a round of layoffs, the terrorist attacks of 9/11—were all punishment from God for my evilness.

I believe my father's psychological abuse contributed to the schizophrenia of two of my brothers, including one who sexually assaulted me and attempted to rape me when I was seventeen. Later, my other schizophrenic brother accused me of attempting to seduce him to have sex. He claimed that, with his iron willpower, he fended off my incestuous temptations. Dad believed his lie and said I encouraged this by dressing like a slut.

I've seen firsthand how easily a child can fall through the social net meant to protect her from abuse. I've also seen how that same

net can later buoy up a wounded survivor and set her on the path of success. Fortunately, most of my siblings later left our dysfunctional confines and pursued a range of fulfilling endeavors. We've suffered mental illnesses ranging from PTSD and depression to various personality disorders. Sometimes I wounded them, and sometimes they wounded me. Sometimes they've been a lifeline to me, and sometimes I've acted as a sounding board and offered a lending hand (at times a shaky one) to help them along the path of healing.

I hope my story can help liberate people who feel trapped, whether in abusive family situations, mental illness, poverty, or religious fundamentalism. Others first trapped me, then I mentally held myself bondage. I've met many others who also feel trapped, and I know each of us can live a healthy and productive life without becoming the drunken slut or coked-up drug dealer in a body bag that our families threaten about.

My dangerous inner programming, created by daily indoctrination sessions—that could stretch on for hours at a time about my evilness and failures—contributed to my self-destructive feelings and suicidal ideations later in life. I was set up for failure, and fail I did—big time. But in many ways, I failed my way up the food chain. There are barnyards full of self-help literature (heck, even hardheaded economic literature from the likes of statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb) that tell you failure should be embraced and encouraged, that we should become, as Taleb says, "anti-fragile." That is, we're not afraid of hardship, we actually welcome it, because it helps us become strong.

Since "the unexamined life is not worth living," as Socrates told us, I've written out my journey of self-examination in hopes of generating some kernels of insight. I see my life as a case study in how

religious abuse (or abuse of any type, whether physical, spiritual, sexual, or mental) can be intensely psychologically damaging, and how escaping its allures can lead to Stockholm-syndrome behavior. This could include replacing one false cult (like my father's homemade one) with another. Humans build cults around religion, sex, power, money—you name it.

I've no intent to destroy religion—I see its value and hope for billions of people, especially since my Protestant Christian baptism in 2017, and I attend church each Sunday. I still love many people who practice the LDS faith, and there are many treasured cultural parts of Mormonism I will always carry within my heart. What I have done is trace the roots of my family's Mormon-offshoot extremism and explore its heartbreaking impacts. Intolerance flows among religious people as well as those who remain unaffiliated. This is not from God. One of the hardest lessons I've learned is that God is not religion, and my hope is this book makes the case for reconciling and striving for peace across denominations and nonbelievers.

After spending nearly twelve years as an agnostic, it took me much time and effort to believe in a God who 1) existed, and 2) was not vengeful, hurtful, or indifferent. Even now, as a practicing Christian, I still see numerous examples of the wrenching pain inflicted by religious people in the name of God.

Though it wasn't the case when I was younger, my faith in God is now unshaken by the heinous actions of "religious" people. I know that's not God—that's corrupted man. This book is for Christian believers and nonbelievers alike. It's for those who are abused and need help breaking free and recovering from trauma. It is for devout Christians to help us show greater empathy and instill

higher emotional awareness for the suffering of others, especially those wounded by human-run religion.

We live in an age of soaring rates of mental illness and domestic abuse, combined with plummeting spirituality, communal trust, and individual sense of purpose. This poisonous cocktail is brewing to create new generations teetering on the brink of suicide and depression, plagued by social media–induced insecurities and a culture that sows division and self-doubt. Humans have always lived in a broken world, but each generation has its own unique toxic manifestations, and my life contained many of them here in the late twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries.

My purpose in writing *Motorhome Prophecies* is to help bring others out of isolation. To let them know that "death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). My father prophesied my rape and death if I left his cult. I internalized those curses, and as a result, suffered many close scrapes with the demon of suicide. But to quote author Linda Schubert, "While my failures were 'legendary,' the love of God was even more legendary." I'm proud to say I've come through on the other side, and I'm thriving. I pray this book might help others thrive, too.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:9–10

Chapter 1

Hardscrabble Start

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."

—Jeremiah 1:5

Grandpa Ralph Sheffield's death was perhaps the greatest gift he could have bequeathed; it likely saved my life. A one-time beau later pointed out this chilling reality, which made me offer silent gratitude to a man I'd never met. His son, Ralph Jr., later became the source of my red-hot ire, and Ralph Jr. almost accidentally killed both me and my mom during my birth.

During the burning anger phase of my adult life, for years I called Dad by his first name, Ralph, because I didn't consider him worthy of the intimate title, "Dad." I didn't speak to him for about seven years after I decided to disown him in 2013. Sometimes I felt my anger toward him was as intense as what Salvador Dalí felt toward his own father, Salvador Rafael Aniceto. I first fell in love with the art of this

brilliant surrealist Spanish painter in 2011, during a visit to a museum dedicated to his work in sunny St. Petersburg, Florida. It's a futuristic, fantastical building filled with spacious, airy light flowing through the glass atrium entryway attached to eighteen-inch-thick concrete. The sun-filled skylight is oblong spherical and named "Enigma," with a seventy-five-foot-tall glass ceiling encompassing a conch seashell–shaped white spiral staircase. It's a captivating and fitting home for this revolutionary man who pushed the boundaries intersecting art, science, and metaphysics.

But Dalí clashed for decades with his father, a midlevel civil servant who didn't appreciate his son's creative, rebellious nature or his association with surrealists. Adding insult to injury, Aniceto disapproved of his son's muse and future wife, Gala. Dalí said he considered his true father to be psychologist Sigmund Freud, and later, quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg. Legend has it that Dalí gave his biological father a condom containing the artist's own sperm, exclaiming: "Take that. I owe you nothing anymore!"

Obviously, that's disgusting. But I confess, there was a time in my life when I might have considered buying a sperm sample from a donor bank and sending it to Ralph. I thought he'd die before I'd ever speak to him again.

Speaking of sperm and conception—I was lucky to get both a hospital and a doctor at birth. Other siblings weren't so fortunate. The brother just ahead of me was delivered in a tent—almost as though we lived in medieval times—with Ralph playing midhusband in the forest of a public campground in Greenbelt Park, Maryland. My sister Rachel entered this world while my mother was alone in a tiny apartment in the squalor of Roxbury, a Boston neighborhood then riddled with crime and poverty. Three other siblings were born at home with Ralph again acting as midhusband.

I entered our planet at a hospital in Fairfax, a town in the suburbs of northern Virginia, where doctors gave Mom an emergency Cesarean section because my umbilical cord coiled multiple times around my neck. Both Mom and I most likely would have died if Ralph tried to deliver once more. Ralph harbored a deep distrust of doctors and hospitals, not only because of how expensive they were (and because we didn't have health insurance), but because he said his firstborn suffered a head injury, his fragile infant face turning blue from a doctor's botched forceps. So Ralph checked out midwifery books from the local library and he was off to doula-town.

Ralph would later claim credit for the decision to have me in a hospital as one of his premonitions from God. The only problem with his 20/20 hindsight is he was more than two thousand miles away at Grandpa Sheffield's funeral in Utah. And this was in 1983, before ubiquitous cell phones, Skype, and social media. Breaking news was harder to send, especially with our vagabond lifestyle and difficulty paying phone or other utility bills. Ralph was understandably busy mourning, a luxury he wouldn't afford my mom when her own mother passed away many years later. (Mom refused to attend anyway, due to Ralph's brainwashing against her own family. She believed her mom was evil because Grandma had a baby out of wedlock. Mom also refused to attend her younger sister's funeral because of her sister's alleged sinfulness.) Ralph flew to Utah for the funeral on a flight paid for by his family. Mercifully, Ralph's absence on my birthday likely saved my life.

Mom started gushing blood, and no one knew why. Thankfully, Mom's sister became our heroine when Ralph dumped my family at her doorstep before jetting off to Utah. Mom's sister lived in nearby Fairfax, Virginia (her husband worked for the Secret Service—he had entertaining stories, like that Richard Nixon had the annoying

habit of leaving his wallet lying around), and shuttled Mom to the ER. My family lived across the river in a trailer park in tiny Stevensville, Maryland, some sixty-five miles away from Fairfax. Mom required multiple blood transfusions to keep her alive. The C-section was successful, and both of us survived. Now and then, my mom rubs it in that I caused her biggest delivery hullabaloo. She's right. I praise her incredible sacrifice and endurance. She was fighting steep odds by the time I came around: she was living in poverty and already bore six other kids, including two who tragically died as infants. Mom has a beautiful, deep love for children.

Given the timing of Grandpa Sheffield's death, I can't help feeling a special kinship with the man I never met. Family lore calls him a gruff force of nature. His obituary in the *Deseret News*, a Mormon-owned newspaper in Utah, lists his date of death at age seventy-nine as February 8, 1983 (I was born seven days later on February 15), and ticks off an impressive résumé: attorney, chairman of the Salt Lake City Zoning and Planning Commission for twenty-five years, seventeen years on the Salt Lake County Planning Commission, and elected member of the Utah House of Representatives for fourteen years. He was also president and chairman of the board at the Credit Corporation of America.

His official lawmaker portraits over the years give off Harry S. Truman vibes. They show a serious man, a bespectacled gentleman with short, wavy hair (dark red, my family says, though you can't tell in black-and-white photos) parted down the middle, a thin mustache, and crisp suits with snappy ties and bow ties.

His obituary notes he wrote the Utah state law allowing drivers to turn right at a red light. So whenever you're driving in the

Beehive State—thank Grandpa Sheffield for making it just a little easier!

And he was a super Mormon.

Grandpa Sheffield spent time as a young man as a missionary in the US South. I wish I could have heard his stories. Because of deep theological differences, the Bible Belt is notoriously anti-Mormon—difficult proselytizing ground. I experienced a small taste of this while working as a summer journalism intern in rural North Carolina during college. Once, I returned from lunch and found anti-Mormon pamphlets on my desk. They were placed anonymously, with no accompanying note, and they bashed founder Joseph Smith Jr. I felt violated and angry. The move backfired. It was a textbook example of how to make your Mormon colleague even more entrenched in her beliefs. I'd say the same applies to any disagreement, political or otherwise. Loving communication and relationship, not hostile insults, win people over.

Another time that summer, I attended church with coworkers who promised to attend mine in exchange. I kept my end of the bargain, but (just as some Mormon friends in town forewarned) they lied and never joined me. I imagine it would've been much worse as a missionary for Grandpa all those years ago.

As a married man with grown kids, Grandpa Sheffield and my grandma Cora Sheffield did "couples missionary" work in Oakland, California, and Independence, Missouri. All told, Grandpa Sheffield devoted ten years of his life as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (aka the LDS Church, informally known for many years by the nickname "Mormon Church"). Occasionally, during my twelve years as an agnostic, I felt pangs of guilt for leaving behind his legacy of faith. Yet even though I've departed that faith, I do admire some amazing cultural attributes of Mormonism,

including its focus on family and community. On balance, they weren't enough to keep me in the flock, and today as a Protestant Christian, I find major doctrinal teachings problematic. But I'm at peace now and seek to build bridges with my LDS friends.

I realize the appeal of Mormonism. After all, the founder Joseph Smith Jr. created a nirvana-esque, specific, and expansive description of our afterlife that inspired his followers to risk life and limb to practice his nascent religion. It was this Mormon interpretation of the cosmos that propelled my ancestors to cross oceans and settle in the middle of a desert wasteland that back then wasn't even technically part of the United States. My rebellious ancestors got expelled out of America into Mexico in 1847. It takes a heck of a payoff to make that sound like a good idea.

My parents met in 1975 at their local LDS singles congregation (aka "ward") and were engaged and married within a few months.

This is typical for many hormonal Mormon couples who are betrothed and wed at lightning speed to avoid committing fornication. Now, as a practicing Christian, I've returned to the biblical counsel against extramarital sex, but I felt angry because I thought my parents rushed getting married, and my mom's family could have sniffed out his abuse with more time. My parents were ancient singles by Mormon standards—Mom was twenty-seven and Ralph thirty-seven. They must have been chomping at the bit. (I hate picturing it, but this helps you get the idea.)

Mormons also believe you must be married to a fellow Mormon and "sealed" together within the walls of a Mormon temple to reach the highest level of heaven, "The Celestial Kingdom." They call this "eternal marriage." You're banished to a lesser Kingdom if

you're single, non-Mormon, or married to a non-Mormon. If your children are not baptized Mormon and "sealed" to you in the Mormon temple, then you are separated from them for eternity. Eternal marriage and sealing is a double-edged sword. If you can be sealed for eternity, you can also be banished for eternity. If the basis for that separation is belief in the LDS Church, that's a powerful form of gatekeeping control.

I think this type of extreme bonding can be beautiful in the sense that it motivates LDS families to love each other and dream of spending eternity in heaven as an affectionate family. A dark, twisted interpretation of this helped normalize my dad's extreme rejection of me—he thought he was doing God's will. Banning me from returning home during college and refusing to provide the data I needed to fill out my college financial-aid paperwork were his way of warning me that if I didn't change my ways, I would be separated from my family in the afterlife. He was just providing a foretaste.

Thanks to extensive genealogical records, our family knows lots about our lineage. My mother's maiden name is Black (and yes, kids would sometimes joke we are technically half black), a common moniker from the Emerald Isle. Mom's Irish and British ancestors crossed the pond to join Mormon settlers in America.

My mother is a petite woman at 5′3″ with brown eyes, auburn hair, and high cheekbones, which she likely got from her Native American ancestors on both parental sides. My own 23andMe DNA analysis shows 3.7 percent Native American ancestry. Mom's great-great-grandmother was a full-blooded Native American taken as a slave by another tribe and traded to white settlers for a quilt. Apparently, a quilt was then a valuable commodity. Or, rather, a young slave girl from a rival tribe wasn't.

In 1975, Mom was a shy elementary school teacher's aide, frustrated with the Utah dating scene. She was the daughter of a dressmaker and former school principal; Mom's grandfather had been a sheepherder in rural south-central Utah, tending his flocks against a stunning backdrop of dramatic red rock sandstone mountains.

Utah's legendary red rock national parks draw millions of visitors each year from around the globe, including to Capitol Reef National Park, near my family's small towns of Teasdale and Torrey. My mom's father, James Nephi Black, grew up in Richfield, Utah, and served in World War II as a member of the construction battalions of the Civil Engineer Corps of the US Navy (known as Seabees), building bases and harbors. He served thirty years as a blue-collar mill worker at Geneva Steel,[1] a factory created in Utah Valley in 1944 that's now defunct. (Fun fact: Grandpa Black's steel mill was used in the iconic dance scene in the cult classic 1984 film *Footloose* with Kevin Bacon.) Mom's parents had little money, but they always made sure their five daughters were fed and clothed, with a little extra money to spend on their beloved pet horses and dogs.

During an earlier stay with an older sister who lived in Hawaii, Mom began dating a handsome Catholic from Connecticut. She cut things off when it became clear they couldn't reconcile the religion question. So she moved back to Utah and prayed for her Mormon Prince Charming. Eventually, she got Ralph. But at first, no suitor materialized. Fed up again, she almost moved nearly three thousand miles away to accept a teaching post in Maine. I've wondered what would have happened in that alternative scenario—the Mormon pickings would have been slimmer. She may have either converted someone to LDS or become an old maid. But the Maine job was never meant to be.

"I went and talked to my bishop about it," I remember my mother telling me. "He said I could find someone here in Utah."

Mormon bishops occupy a revered place in the community, especially playing matchmaker for singles. Many of them relish the role. They act with such zeal it's almost like they get a bounty from God for each couple they forge, each new Mormon family built. After all, bishops are brokering heavenly entry for these lovebirds via a Mormon temple marriage.

Later, the story goes—both parents swear it—my mother and father each had separate revelations from God to attend a specific Mormon chapel in the Salt Lake City neighborhood of Federal Heights. It was the sign they both needed. They showed up there, met, and felt an instant spark. They were married several months later inside the Salt Lake City temple, the 253,000-square-foot crown jewel of Zion with its six meticulously sculpted gray granite spires, one adorned with the gold-plated angel Moroni sounding his trumpet, proclaiming the Restored Gospel. A small reception was held at my maternal grandparents' home forty-five minutes south in Provo.

My parents made up for lost time and did their part bringing Mormon spirits to earth. The ten of us were born within a span of thirteen years, along with a couple miscarriages and a stillbirth. Mom had nerves of steel, raising so many kids. But there were times she said she verged on a nervous breakdown—and with all those kids and so little support, I don't blame her. Having a big family can be a beautiful blessing, but you need the right community. My mom, Judy, is one of the most selfless people I know, though sadly Dad's influence made her an expert at negative self-talk.

Today, I cannot imagine being pregnant or recovering from miscarriages for a dozen years like my mother did. Growing up,

however, I felt that having eight surviving children was not enough. My cousins had ten kids, and my competitive side wanted to beat them. I wanted eleven children to "multiply and fill the earth" as Adam and Eve were commanded in the Book of Genesis. As I grew older, slowly that figure dwindled, from eleven down to six or eight. Then it was five for some time. But as the years flew by without finding the right match—and sabotaging my healthy relationships—I suffered considerable anxiety about whether that would come to pass as my fertility window shrank.

With no health insurance and scant prenatal care, when my birth rolled around, Mom knew little about what was happening inside her womb, which previously worked like a well-oiled machine. Before me, Mom already produced six children. She would later produce a stillborn son and three more healthy children (including two born at home) without the need for a C-section—a dangerous feat, considering some physicians advise against vaginal birth after Cesarean (VBAC), which was especially true back then, particularly without medical supervision.

Ralph didn't believe in health insurance. To him, it was attached to plodding office jobs held by schmucks who worked from nine to five.

"My employer was Heavenly Father," Ralph explained, "so we knew He would protect us."

Who could argue with that? Why hedge your health bets when the Almighty Himself is on your side? We were big winners in God's lottery, so we chanced it growing up.

During the December just before I turned ten, I played soccer with a brother in the basement and my foot slipped on the partially deflated ball. I fell backward, bashing my head against the

corner of the wall. Ralph laid a guilt trip on me almost as thick as the blood oozing from my head. If I chose to go to the ER like an average American and get stitches, Ralph would pay out-of-pocket expenses.

"That means no Christmas gifts for you and your brothers and sisters," he threatened.

Have seven angry siblings blame me as the Grinch because of my failed soccer skills? No thanks. That "selfish" decision would forever go down in the annals of family history. So I decided to be the anti-Grinch and save Christmas. I shook with fear and squeezed out tears as I made numerous silent prayers. Kneeling on our dolls' bench and grasping my teddy bear Pinky, I bowed my head and let Ralph play doctor, dousing the wound in dime-store rubbing alcohol. He sewed up the back of my head using Mom's needle and brown thread, the excruciating sound of the punctured weaving reverberating through my skull. He left the stitches in for about a week, with dry blood scabbing up in the meantime until he snipped the strings away. The scar on the left side of the back of my head—a smooth, white bald spot the size of a dime—is my permanent reminder of that harrowing night.

Ralph also regularly played orthodontist, using the broken stub of a Popsicle stick to move our teeth into what he considered alignment. When I was thirteen, my left incisor tooth stood at nearly a ninety-degree angle. My four older brothers mercilessly teased me, calling it my "snaggle tooth." Ralph's Popsicle-stick pressure felt like torture, and it backfired for me. Today, the root of my top left incisor is completely dead, requiring a root canal, and the top of the tooth is permanently discolored brown—despite attempted dentist whitening—because of his botched ortho work. My root canal is the manifestation of physical trauma from Dad, though it required

a much cleaner, quicker treatment than the countless hours of therapy needed to treat the emotional trauma. My "soul-onoscopy" took decades to complete.

In all, Mom gave birth to ten babies and suffered three miscarriages. She followed the Mormon cultural standard of bearing as many children as possible to provide unborn spirits with mortal bodies that would be raised LDS. (One LDS family I knew in Missouri had twenty-one children from the same mother!) Two of my nine live-birth siblings didn't make it past infancy, and some of us who did survive at times wished we hadn't. Those feelings came as we grew older.

I'm not sure where all we lived during our family's early years, but our birthplaces dot the map. Six out of ten were born in scattered Utah towns, the rest in Massachusetts, Maryland, and Virginia.

My earliest memories are around age four, living in Hudson, Massachusetts, a small town about forty-five minutes west of Boston. Ralph told us he had been working as a temp for a Harvard professor who quickly realized Ralph's genius and wanted to give him more responsibility. Things were looking up in our real-life *Good Will Hunting*.

Mom forced me to wear my dark auburn-brown hair with bowl-cut bangs. I despised those bangs, not only for their uniform rigidity but because the girls at church had long, flowing hair and bangs they could sweep back in ponytails with enviable frilly bows and curls pressed by their moms. Mom kept the back part of my hair slightly longer but cropped just above my shoulders. She wouldn't let me grow it too long because sometimes we didn't have running water to wash it regularly; plus, it'd get too tangled with rat's nests.

Besides Scripture, the first book I remember reading was

Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, a beautiful story about an orphaned five-year-old girl who lives in the Swiss Alps with her irritable grandfather. Through reading the Bible together, Heidi helps soften his heart away from anger against God for the tragic deaths of his son and daughter-in-law.

I also pounded out scales and études on our cheap, off-key secondhand piano.

"Do you love to sing and play, making music all the day? Curve your fingers nice and round, that will make a lovely sound." Those are lyrics from the first song I remember playing, a very simple melody requiring only the most basic motor skills because nearly each note was sequentially placed on the piano. Music gave me a happy escape. Playing the piano (and later, violin and oboe) is an immersive experience, and it gave me an outlet for my emotional angst as time went by. My dad said music did the same thing for him decades earlier as he reeled from childhood trauma.

When it was time to enter kindergarten, the teacher's aide told me to stop counting during my aptitude test because I could count ad infinitum thanks to drilling from Mom, who earned a college degree in elementary education and carefully taught us all how to read.

On paper, our family was strong. We had highbrow books and classical music. In academic studies, families are categorized by socioeconomic status, or SES. By this yardstick, we had the highest SES metric because my father has a master's degree and my mom a bachelor's degree and my grandpa owned considerable wealth. But SES doesn't capture how mental illness mixed with religious zealotry can completely unravel what nominally should be a stable home. The ravages of abuse and mental illness are great equalizers—they afflict billionaire and homeless families alike.

For my fifth birthday, I received a miniature broom-and-dustpan set made of shiny dark blue plastic with a black broom brush. It was the first of Mom's failed attempts at domesticating me into a clothes-sewing, apple-canning Mormon housewife. I hadn't asked for the set, but I do remember being excited about the fact that it belonged to me and me alone. It was also new. These were anomalies in my existence of thrift-store relics and hand-me-downs from cousins and church members. Such is communal life in large, poor families.

As much as I didn't love the miniature broom, I hated the full-size broom Mom used to prod and smack and punish us kids for myriad rebellions. Her techniques would rival the discipline described by hard-charging mother Amy Chua in her bestselling 2011 memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Chua complains that most Western mothers, unlike Chinese and other Asian mothers, are lax and coddling. We called my Mormon momma bear "Dragon Lady"—that was her CB-radio name as we connected our motorhome/car caravan traveling cross-country. (My eventual CB radio name was Big Hornet, after my seventh-grade basketball team, the Hornets.)

Mom deployed an effective blend of spankings and guilt with the utmost skill. Using her teaching experience, she taught numbers and letters to her toddlers, because preschool was for selfish women's libbers who entrusted their most precious, vulnerable assets to complete strangers. This was a recipe for disaster and potential abuse. And better to keep abuse in the family than farm it out.

My mother was the manager that kept the family running while Ralph, a modern-day Don Quixote, chased windmills. As a good Mormon wife, she supported Ralph's priesthood wholeheartedly.

All Mormon males are ordained in the priesthood order, not just a select few as in most other faiths, which have professional, full-time clergy. Thoroughly convinced of his exceptional spiritual gifts and unique mission to save America, Mom could be hard as nails with us kids, but when Ralph came around, she bowed quietly to his spiritual authority.

Somewhere around that fifth birthday, social workers tried to rescue us in Hudson. These "buttinskies" (they butt in—get it?) as Ralph liked to call them, were concerned that our physical needs weren't being met and that Ralph was bellicose and abusive. I'm not sure who notified them or how they took notice, but they decided the six Sheffield children were prime candidates for foster care. Perhaps it was a neighbor or teacher worried about our ability to eat regular meals. Here's one example from an essay Ralph wrote about God providing, sometime around 1985, while he edited his religious pamphlets:

> *One morning, during prayer, I was inspired, emphatically, to revise and enlarge the* Bookmark of Quotations *(into its present form), and that I must not leave the work—for any reason—until finished. This was a severe test of faith, because I feared we might run out of food, and that there wouldn't be enough money to buy more unless I worked the street project that day, as usual. Nevertheless, I understood that, having prayed for guidance, one must follow that guidance once it is given. So I quickly set to work on the* Bookmark*, trying not to panic.*
>
> *After several hours, the thing I dreaded—happened. My wife informed me that we didn't have enough food for the evening meal. "Thank you, Dear," I said, "I'll take care of it." Returning to my study area, I fell to my knees and pleaded with God to know*

how I could keep both *the scriptural command to "provide for my own,"* and *the directive He had given me to "not stop working on the* Bookmark *for any reason." The Lord responded that I should determine how much money we needed to get us by. Pondering briefly, I decided, "ten dollars would do it." (Our family was smaller at that time.) Immediately, I started to leave, intending to pawn my watch or ring in order to put a meal on the table, then resume work on the manuscript. But, as I reached for the door, I felt a terrible sense of rebuke, as if I were doing something very wrong. Again, I prayed, to know what it could be, since I was going to get the money, as I assumed I should. "No," the Lord reproved, "you were not told to* get *the money, but to* decide *how much you need. Now, return to your work." Almost trembling at this chastisement, I resumed editing the* Bookmark*—obedient, yet in galling suspense. But I was soon startled when our seven-year-old son came running into the room. "Daddy! . . . Here!" he said, handing me something. To my astonishment, it was a* ten-dollar bill*! Incredulous, I asked where it came from. "Behind the building in that pile of old boards," he answered. Instantly, I remembered Abraham, and how God had provided "behind him a ram caught in a thicket." Looking heavenward, I rejoiced, "Thank you, dear God! You can* still do *it, I see.* Thank *you!"* [2]

Beyond his tales of financial recklessness, Ralph also weaved fantastical street fighting stories as we kids gathered together for the obligatory morning and evening prayers or lay in bed at night. At bedtime, he had what he called his "story bag," tantalizing us by pulling out an imaginary script of a tale that he might first tease us with then later discard in favor of a different one for that evening. He loved to tell of his travels, of the street fights with bums and

fellow buskers who tried to block him from playing his music and passing out religious pamphlets. With a solid build, Ralph often bragged he was an intramural wrestling champion in his college days, so his stories usually ended with the enemy bleeding in the gutter or apologizing for their encroachment. Sometimes there was a mysterious intervention, like the stranger with a black belt in karate who defended Ralph from a bully (kicking Ralph's attacker in the throat) who was an experienced boxer. Occasionally, Ralph ended up in jail but was usually able to bail himself out by, say, pawning his watch.

Ralph later said he told these stories with such ebullience because he needed a way to entertain us, since we were too poor to afford a television. But when the social workers called us kids in for interviews, somehow these fights came up, and the horrified social workers were determined to snatch us from the clutches of a violent street beggar.

Yet my father, a charismatic and domineering man, had a way of beguiling people, at least long enough for him to make an escape. He also programmed us to defend him in any circumstance, a result of twice-daily indoctrinations we got during morning and evening Family Prayer. This was him in rare form, a man with a rapt audience expounding on everything from religion to politics to why fraternities were nothing more than collections of lazy, horny, spoiled potheads. Ralph himself apparently drank beer while a member of a college fraternity. It was one of his deepest regrets. He swore he didn't have consensual sex until marriage (though, tragically, he was sexually abused by a babysitter). He also swore later, as a married man, that God instructed him to go to strip clubs, ostensibly to preach to women and try to save their souls. Eye roll, please.

I remember feeling overwhelmingly special that, out of five

billion people (and yes, we're at eight billion today), I was born into a household with such an elevated and essential mission. So when the social workers came around, snooping into our personal business, it was no wonder we defended Ralph with a ferocity these nosy government bureaucrats must've rarely encountered. They were meddling with God's messenger, and gosh darn it if we would let them take us away from him. When they came to our house, I was so worried they'd steal me that I hid under the couch. But I couldn't outwit their wiles forever. They brought my siblings and me to their office.

I don't know which social workers' office it was, Boston proper or somewhere in Hudson township. I do remember the waiting room was filled with toys we didn't have at home. But I refused to let myself be tempted by the allures of the stuffed animals and the wire maze with wooden block beads, its gleaming primary colors taunting me, daring me to touch. I was too loyal to sell out for a cheap thrill.

Somehow, we convinced the authorities we were properly fed and that violence wasn't commonplace in our home—a temporary reprieve for Ralph. Such is the fate of many children and women trapped in cycles of poverty and abuse, too afraid or incapable of asking for rescue.

Years later, with my Harvard master's diploma in hand, I still can't verify that Ralph worked for anyone at the university, let alone for someone who admired his brilliance. Regardless, Ralph fled Boston, determined to escape the meddling ways of buttinskies—secular New Englanders and their pesky child-welfare interventions. We fled to the Wild West: Utah. I felt a mixture of relief and dread: happy we were free from prying child-welfare authorities, nervous about moving near the grandparents, aunts, and uncles my parents felt were wayward and spiritually lax. Would they corrupt us? We'd keep our armor up.