

Preface



MY FINGERTIPS GINGERLY KISSED THE STORM DOOR'S COOL GLASS. The familiar screech of the opening door was unusually abrasive when contrasted with the heavy stillness outside. Muggy, thick air enveloped me as if I was trying to pass through a door covered in oiled plastic wrap—a marked difference from the controlled climate inside. Beads of sweat were already forming along my brow as I peered into the moody depths above me. The sky had transformed from a peaceful blue to a disturbing shade of green. Sirens would soon sound, I knew, warning all of impending danger.

Only six or seven then, tornadoes excited me. The family would rush to the basement with flashlights blazing, snacks, pillows, blankets, and a radio, and a party of sorts would begin. All other cares or responsibilities forgotten until the storm passed, then we would rush upstairs again to survey the inevitable damage.

I had witnessed it before, but this time, as I stood on the front porch—paused in time for just a moment—my blonde hair stretched back into a tight pony tail with a neon scrunchie, my peach shorts loose on my scrawny thighs, the storm seemed to pause in that same moment with me—contemplative—and may-

be a little unsure of the direction it would take.

The blaring sirens jolted me back to reality then just as my wailing baby wakes me now.

* * *

A person's life—what comes to define them—appears to be made up of nothing more than a long series of fleeting moments—some significant, others inconsequential—most confused as the other when trying to be understood in the present. I'm not trying to minimize goals, study, or preparation that shapes and guides a life. Simply speaking, I'm saying that when looked at literally our lives are made up of minutes—and moments (moments when goals are made and when they're forgotten). Moments that transform us into something more or less than we were—always changing us on some level—we're so malleable and usually oblivious to the alterations being made. Opportunities, both missed and seized, can help explain who we are, and why we chose to become just that.

So if life is just a series of events (and yes, in my case, sometimes very unfortunate ones), then I want to examine both the life-changing and the not-so-much to see if I can't tell the difference between them now. This is not meant to be a comprehensive life history by any means; after all, I'm still young (I'm only thirty, or is it thirty-one—let's go with thirty-one, I can never remember), but I *hope*, in the process of recording a few moments from my youth, to discover myself—not for a narcissistic purpose, but because I believe the process of self-discovery will lend me what I sometimes lack: *courage, wisdom, and peace.*

*All men should strive
to learn before they die
what they are running from, and to, and why.*

—James Thurber

Prologue



I GASPED DESPERATELY FOR BREATH. My heart cried out for mercy, *Please, please no. Not like this!*

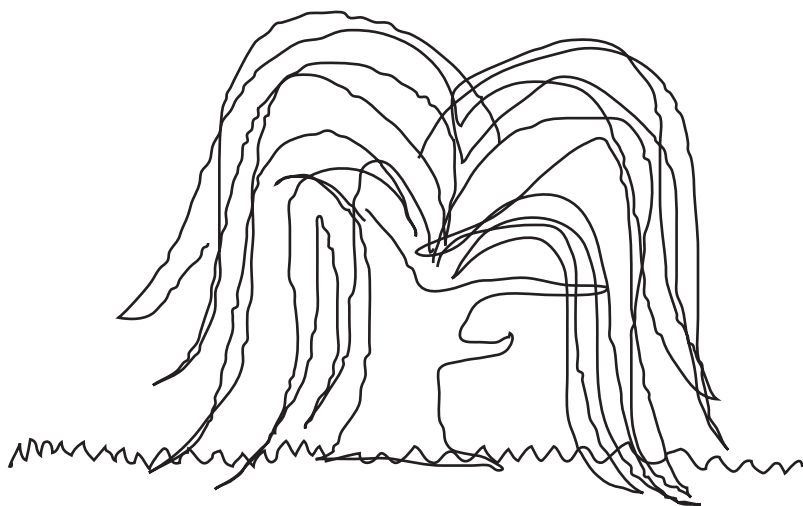
Faint voices surrounded me, but were easily drowned out by the furious pounding of my heart. I strained to listen. What were they saying? My eyes rolled back in my head. I knew I had to focus. Finally, I could see my mother's face. Everyone was shouting at me, imploring me to hang in there for a few more minutes. My mouth began to speak the only words that were racing through my mind. The refrain tumbled out in an instant, growing louder and more insistent each time. "I'm going to die. I'm going to die! I'm going to DIE!"

I couldn't stop shaking. My body had gone into shock.

I knew I would have to say my goodbyes soon.

I wasn't ready. But if it was God's will...I covered my face with my trembling hands. *Oh, how had it come to this?!*

King of the Castle



Chapter 1

MY HANDS ANXIOUSLY CURLED AROUND THE FAMILIAR BRANCH while my long fingers soaked in the texture of the bumps and crevices of the old weeping willow tree. With my left foot poised against the trunk, I threw my right leg over the branch and swung myself up to a straddling position. From there, I easily navigated the tree's limbs until I was perched high above the grass below. The willow's tallest arms gracefully bowed down around me, shading me from the afternoon's intense heat. Even though I was a decided tomboy, I couldn't help but feel like a queen overlooking her kingdom. My brow furrowed. Well, okay, maybe more like a king.

The late afternoon heat was still severe, but I could tell it had already sounded the retreat as evening threatened its approach. There was little noise, just the familiar clatter of neighbor children passing by on their bikes and the occasional car rumbling through the streets. A faint, yet tantalizing, barbecue aroma floated through the slight breeze until it hovered briefly beneath my nostrils, then passed on. I began to wonder if there was any dinner cooking at my house. I peered through the willow's long strands of leaves at my parents' castle. Of course, it wasn't literally a castle. It was just a small, white, ranch-style

home with black trim. 12414 Castelar St. Our castle on Castelar, we called it. And it *was* in my young mind. I was the youngest of four children: my sister, Angela (or Angie), came first, then Mark, then Paul. Then me. Named Jennette for my great-grandmother, I lacked the sophistication to pull off such a name at my age, and always went by Jenny, unless my dad was calling me.

Our backyard was not huge, nor was it filled with state of the art jungle gyms or trampolines. There was no need for a tree house to hang from the branches I called home anyway. There was just one other tree (that wasn't climbable) and a simple swing set. My mother's garden rested in the far right corner of the yard, just below the willow. My siblings and I spent countless hours in that yard: digging holes and tunnels in the garden, kicking a soccer ball, playing with frogs, capturing and "rescuing" birds, getting pooped on by birds, chasing our shih-tzu, Basho, and earlier our lhasa apso, Champy fan Quan (we called him Champ or Champy for short, and for obvious reasons) and playing with friends.

Most of my playmates at that age (around six or seven years old) were boys. One boy, Mike, was a bundle of extreme energy at all times. He laughed like a hyena; he had wavy light brown hair that joined into a long tail at the bottom of his hairline, sparkly blue eyes, a few light brown freckles sprinkled across his nose, and his two top front teeth were dead and gray from damaging them when he was younger. He swore up a storm every day that I saw him, and one day while we played in the garden, his mouth spewing curse words in every sentence, I also let a swear word slip out. I felt an immediate pang.

"Ahhh!" He pointed at me and began his obnoxious laugh. "You said a bad word!"

"It's cause *you're* always saying them!" I retorted, my face immediately getting hot.

"I'm going to tell your mom!" He threatened. The level of his hypocrisy was completely lost on him.

"No!" I shouted, nearing tears. My parents had taught us to never use foul language, and I knew they would be sorely disappointed in

me. I hated that Mike felt victorious in this, as though he had been waiting his whole life for me to say just one bad word. He had already started for the house. I chased after him, and angrily grabbed his arm, spinning him around. “No,” I repeated. I took a deep breath. “I’ll do it.” I gritted my teeth at his smugness. From there, I made the long journey to my mother in the kitchen. With a heavy heart, I confessed to her what I had done. She was loving, as always, and was glad that I had told her. She encouraged me not to swear ever again.

My parents raised our family in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our ancestry on both sides dated back to the earliest days of the Church, with faithful pioneers in our family tree. Being “Mormons” made us different in Omaha, Nebraska where our neighbors and friends were predominantly Lutheran and Catholic. Kids would come knocking on Sundays and Mondays, any other play day to them. But in my home, Sunday was our “family day” where we first spent three hours each Sunday at church (unheard of to my friends), then hung out with each other the rest of the day, and Monday evening was our “family night” where we had a gospel lesson and a game. While usually saddened because I couldn’t go out to play on those days, ultimately that time was well spent, because as friends came and went through the years, my best friends (my siblings) remained the same.

“Jenny!” I heard my mother’s voice calling out the kitchen window. “Come and eat!”

My stomach, rather than my mouth, growled in reply. As picky of an eater as I was, I was ready to eat whatever was on my plate that night...well, except maybe goulash. I shuddered. In my haste to get out of the tree and inside to my food, my little hands slipped, and my body plummeted straight down.

Crack!

I groaned in pain. My head had landed on a large protruding root at the base of the willow. Screaming, the world suddenly became a bouncing Monet canvas, out of focus and blurred through my tears as I ran.

I sought refuge inside—the comfort of my mother’s embrace. Her familiar scent and warmth calmed me, even as my head continued to throb.

Immediately following dinner, my mom had to leave. That night, as my dad and I played round after round of Go Fish (one of my favorite games), I continued to ask my dad the same thing. The knock on my head had left me temporarily discombobulated. My short-term memory suffered. “Where is Mom?” I asked him, over and over. His answer would satisfy me for a moment before I would ask again. “Where is Mom?”

As a child, I had no idea really where she went or what she did when she wasn’t tending us. It would only be years later that I understood just how involved she was in serving others or serving in our Church. She was always a leader in Relief Society, Primary, or Young Women’s. Even with young children, she was always looking out for others and doing her best to lift the hands that hang down.

So to answer my question then would be the same answer I’d receive today. “Where is Mom? Well, she’s either serving in her Church calling, visiting the sick and afflicted, baking goodies for the new neighbors, arranging flowers for the widow up the street, writing an Ensign article, not gossiping, preparing a lesson, reading her scriptures, or praying.”

Certainly no one is perfect, and I don’t pretend to have a perfect mother. But she is as good of a woman as I know and tries her best in everything she does. If anything, her imperfections have given me hope that I (with all of my many and varied weaknesses) can someday be as good as she is.

“She’ll be home in an hour, honey,” my dad patiently reminded me. He patted my head gently. “How’s your head doing?”

It hurt. I felt a little stunned still. I didn’t typically climb so high, but I had seen my brothers climb out to that long perpendicular branch, and I wanted to try it, too.

We sat on the living room floor, Basho sprawled out at my side. The storm door let the last light of the day sneak in for a kiss good night.

My father covered his mouth as he yawned.

My dad, Nick, worked for the Union Pacific Railroad (and would end up retiring from there after thirty years), just as his father and his father's father had before him. He worked as director of training for many years. He wasn't your typical railroad employee, though. He had gotten his bachelor's degree in art history. He was a gifted painter and had, at one time, hoped to become a curator. He had been raised in a loving but inactive home, and yet he was able to develop a testimony through the help of Church members, and ultimately was able to serve a mission to France.

I admired that commitment to the gospel, even though his parents had not instilled it in him. He consistently showed that dedication in always fulfilling his many Church callings. He was a deep thinker, and some of my fondest memories of him are when we all sat around after scripture time on Sunday afternoons or dinnertimes and discussed deep doctrine. All of our minds tended to think about things perhaps more than we needed to, but it was a fun and educational time. If there was an answer to be found in the scriptures to my many questions, he knew it.

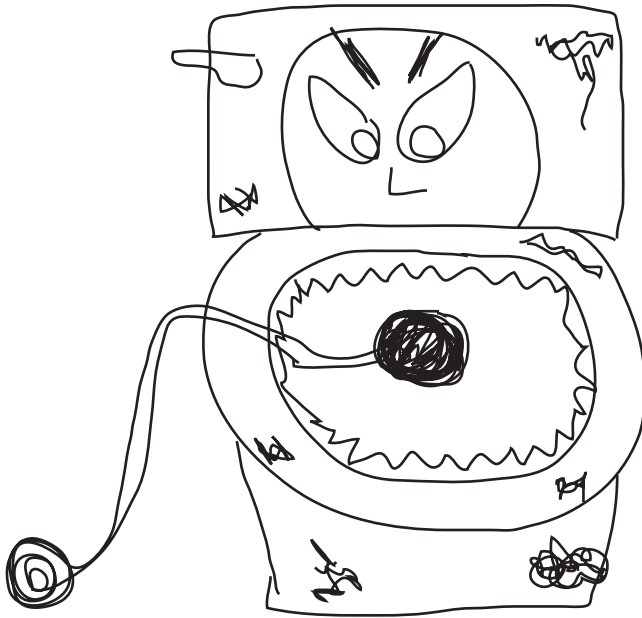
The day had turned to night once more, and I sauntered down the hall to the bathroom. I did what I had to on the toilet as quickly as I could, then called my mom in to flush it for me after I was clear of the bathroom. I had an irrational fear of the toilet overflowing on me and drowning me.

As I knelt down on my green shag carpet and rested my arms against the ruffly pink quilt, I said my prayers, "Dear Heavenly Father, I'm thankful for all the wonderful things, that includes all the dogs and cats, too. I'm sorry some of my friends don't believe in you. But I'm glad I believe in Jesus and that my family does. If I hadn't been born to Mormon parents, I'd be sad. Bless us that when we come down here to live that we won't make fools of ourselves, but figure out what do do in life, or when we go back up to Heaven, we will wonder why we came here if we can't behave ourselves. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

I hopped into bed, gave my mom a hug, then turned towards the wall to the right. The monsters could come from either side, but not from whichever way I was facing. I just had to keep vigil long enough...



E.J. and the Toilet Problem



Chapter 2

AS HEAVY LIDS FINALLY SLIPPED PAST MY WATCHFUL EYES, my waking mind relinquished control, and the last conscious thoughts of my young brain were swept briskly to the outskirts. And in that cloud of dust my terrors began to take their places. It was their turn to dance.

What was that? I bolted upright.

What?

Thump.

That!

In a second my heart was doing acrobatics, my veins visibly pulsating—well, if there'd been a light on it would have been visible. I peeled back the pink comforter and edged out of bed. I couldn't see two feet in front of me, and yet—I knew.

It was him.

Again.

The fear was suffocating, but I felt compelled to continue. After *him*. My tiny feet pattered through the bedroom, down the hallway, and just into the kitchen, when...

The soft glow of the digital clock illuminated the room—*just* enough. Our eyes met. *What was that in his hand?* I opened my mouth

to scream for my mother, but the shriek boiled, burned, and battled in my chest, hopelessly trapped. A slimy grin slid across his face, then he proceeded slowly—through the kitchen, to the landing, and down the stairs to the basement.

It was as though a rope was bound 'round his waist and mine, pulling me unwillingly behind him. I stopped at the top of the stairs. My chest heaved as I struggled to breathe. *Where did he go?* I couldn't see anything! Just a party of shadows, happily mingling. I stuck a foot out into the blackness. The sensation of weightlessness, coupled with slow, inescapable gravity left me dazed on the cold tile at the bottom of the steps. A light flickered in the adjoining room.

The bristles of my toothbrush tickled my arm as his cold, scaly hands scooped me up. A wave of curious calm washed over me. He smiled reassuringly as he laid me down on the couch beside him—in front of the soft glow of late night television.

* * *

Ugh. Not again. I had to go. I should have gone before, but, oh what did it matter now? I just had to find a bathroom. And quick.

There. A locker room. Girls bustled in and out. Rows and rows of blue stalls, each with a toilet right behind their doors. I just had to find one. One! Then I could get back to what I was doing. What was I doing again? Suddenly it didn't matter.

I began pushing back each unoccupied stall door. The chorus of flushing toilets surrounded me, taunting. I finally found a toilet that wasn't plugged. I inched closer and peered inside the bowl. Empty. No toilet paper clogging the hole, but no water either. I shivered and scooted out quickly to another stall and another and another. Everywhere I looked was filthy: feces, blood, urine, too much water, not enough. A locker room with fifty stalls didn't have one usable toilet!

Frustration was building. One left. The light above it flickered. I angrily pushed open the door. Once inside, I surveyed the situation. The stall was significantly smaller than the rest. But it seemed clean enough—doable. I grabbed the door to swing it closed, but it stopped

before gaining any momentum. Stuck! Unbelievable. There was no way to use the toilet without exposing myself. There were no more toilets.

* * *

My mom was quick to my side with a drink of water. She brushed my sweat-drenched hair from my face. “E.T. again?” she asked quietly.

I nodded, shivering.

If it wasn’t bad enough that I had to watch that movie, my brothers kept an E.T. sticker on the outside of their closet door just to torture me. It served its purpose, though, and easily prevented me from pilfering their toys when no one was around.

E.T. was merely a childish fear, though. That other dream I kept having...that was something else. For years, I thought that one, too, would slowly slip away into a file labeled “Weird recurring dreams I used to have.” But it never did.

Dreams that had nothing to do with using a restroom suddenly morphed into my most dreaded nightmare. It was not always a locker room. It could be any toilet anywhere. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that something was always wrong with the toilets. There was never one that I could use without tainting myself in some way.

For years I laughed about my toilet nightmares. I even used them as an ice breaker. I just couldn’t figure out why they persisted.

I believe I did finally figure it out, and since reaching this conclusion a couple years ago, the nightmares have occurred much less frequently. I came to the somewhat depressing realization that the dirty toilets had become a symbol for how I viewed the world: it was filthy. Everything and everyone in it. Every person was flawed. Some majorly. Myself, more than I wanted to think about. I was on an endless subconscious quest to find someone, or to *be* someone, who was always bright and shiny and clean. Unfortunately, in our world, I knew that person didn’t exist. My journey always ended in disappointment, frustration, and waking up.

My mom paused in my doorway and turned back to me. “Do you

need to go to the bathroom since you're awake?" she asked.

My body automatically curled into the fetal position under the covers. "No," I whispered. "I'll wait til morning."