

Deep in the abyss of our subconscious minds, childhood experiences linger and secretly shape us into the adults we become. Can a hopeless man overcome the ghosts of past trauma and find peace? Count It All Joy illuminates his struggle to find connectedness with those around him as he seeks redemption in a broken world.

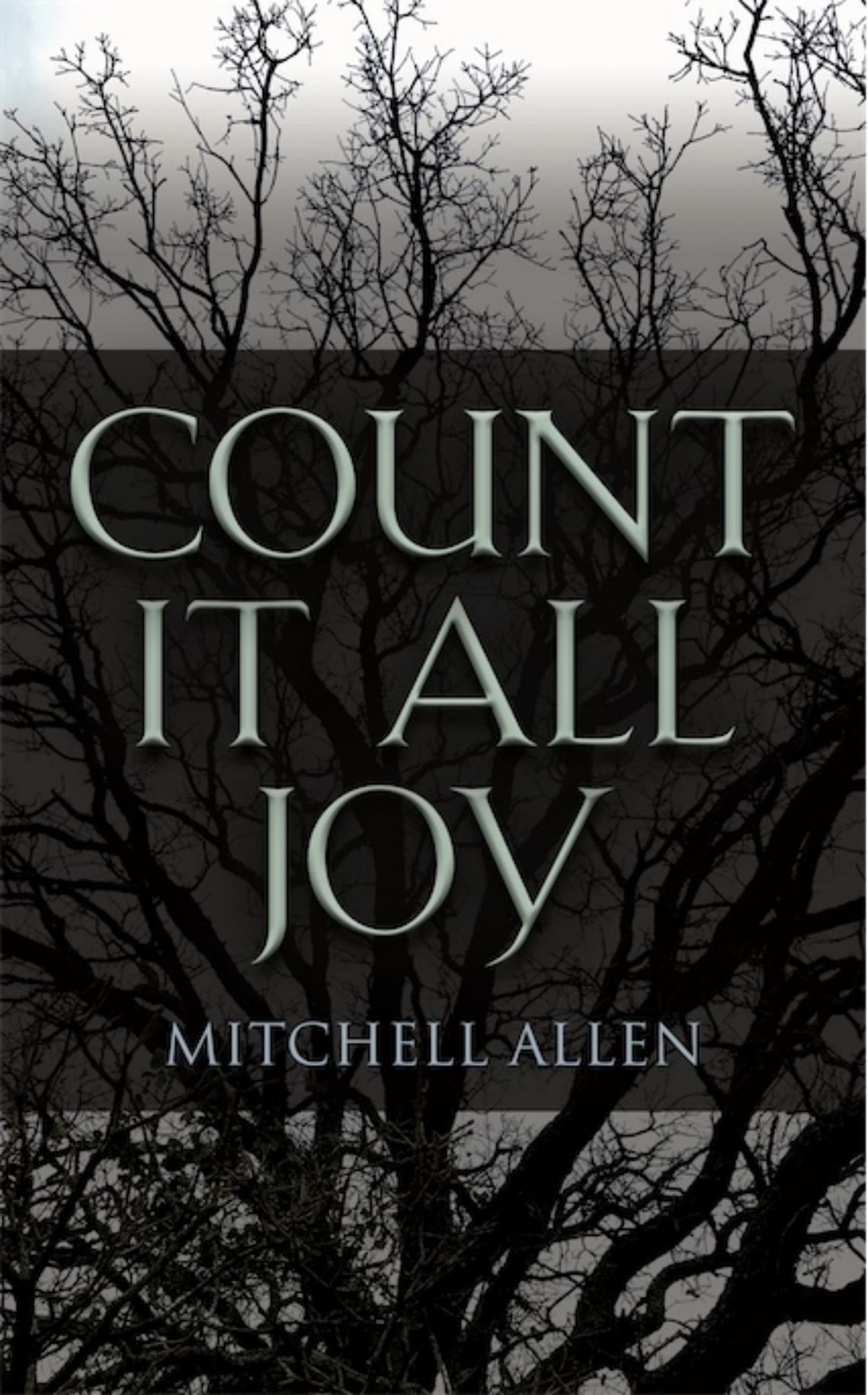
Count It All Joy

by Mitchell Allen

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MITCHELL ALLEN

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Chapter 1

The fairgrounds smelled like funnel cakes and cow manure. I didn't mind the smell of cow manure from a distance because it was a little sweet, but up close, it got too sour and stung my nose. The sun had set, and the lights on the rides and the game booths blinked intensely, painting puddles red and yellow and blue. I watched flies buzz around the trash cans. I watched the Texas flag wave over the Ferris wheel, and I watched the rides spin and rise and drop, the riders screaming as they bounced around in their seats. The music from the rides was too loud but sounded thin, like the speakers were old and worn out. It was fast rock music that was supposed to make you more excited on the rides. I didn't think it was good music for kids.

A lot of kids were at the fair. Most were older than me. They didn't stay by their parents, and a lot of them looked like they lived at the trailer park. They were mean and rough and happy, and I didn't understand what they had to be happy about. They moved around quickly and had a lot of energy and smiled at each other with mean, dirty faces. Watching them made my head feel funny, like it was being squeezed. I didn't want to talk to them.

Grandma and Grandpa had brought me to the fair to have fun, so I felt mostly happy. I was glad to be brought to a place to have fun, and if someone had

asked me if I wanted to be there, I would have said yes. But if I had asked myself if I wanted to be there, I would have said no. I didn't know that I could ask myself that question, and I didn't know that I would have said no. My grandparents were smiling at me, and I knew they were trying to make me have fun. Their smiles were bigger than usual, meaning that this was an important time for fun.

We had walked through the display building with all of the arts and crafts, and then we had walked through the livestock barn. I enjoyed watching the fat steers lounge happily on soft shavings with full bellies. When we came out to the main concourse, I told Grandma that I didn't want to ride any of the mechanical rides. They made me nervous, and I didn't like the exhaust fumes. We walked away from them, and I watched Grandpa's work boots make prints in the dirt. The prints had straight lines with a circle in the middle. I looked back at my shoeprints next to his, and they were much smaller with a zigzag pattern. We stopped at a part of the fair that wasn't so loud and bright, and I noticed the soft breeze on my face. It was easier to breathe. I looked at the cars parked outside the fence and the cars driving on the road away from the fair towards town. The distant lights looked like stars that had drifted down to settle on the flat landscape.

I put my hands in the pockets of my denim jacket and waited for Grandma and Grandpa to tell me what we should do next. Grandpa pointed at a ride where six small donkeys stood in harnesses attached to wooden poles that looked like wheel spokes. The donkeys

walked in a circle like they were the outside of the wheel. For five tickets you could ride a donkey for five turns and wave at your family each time you passed them. Grandpa asked me if I wanted to ride a donkey, and I said yes. Grandma led me to the entrance, and I stood in line as other kids rode.

One girl old enough to wear makeup yelled, “Woooo, this is just like riding my grandpa’s horse!” She raised her hands above her head and waved them side to side as her donkey walked. I thought she probably didn’t know much about her grandpa’s horse and only yelled like that so people would look at her. The other riders remained quiet.

The man working at the donkey wheel stood in the shadow on the other side of the ride from where I waited. He was skinny and old, and his hair stuck straight out of his hat like a scarecrow’s. His clothes looked worn out. He never said anything, and he held a lever that he pulled to make the donkeys stop and go. After they had walked for a few minutes, the man pulled the lever, and the donkeys stopped. Adults went in to help the kids off, and then it was my turn to ride. I looked at Grandma, and she put her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s your turn, Luke,” she said.

She led me to a brown donkey. The donkey held his head down low, and his eyes were half closed like he was about to go to sleep. His ears pointed back at his saddle, and he didn’t look at me or move at all when Grandma lifted me onto his back. My legs were too

short, and my feet didn't reach the stirrups. Grandma squeezed my hand onto the saddle horn.

"Hold on tight," she said.

The man pulled the lever, and the donkeys started walking. My donkey kept his nose just above the ground as he walked. I felt the thin, course hair on his neck. I didn't think the donkey was healthy, and I thought he looked sad. I passed the man working the lever. I expected him to be watching us ride to make sure everything was okay, but he wasn't. He was smoking a cigarette and looking at the road outside the fence. He had mean eyes, and I was glad when my donkey passed by him. I thought he didn't like me. My grandparents waved and cheered when I passed them, and I smiled. This was an important time for fun.

The donkeys stopped after five turns, and Grandma came to help me off. I looked at the donkey again. His eyelids drooped, and he didn't look at me. Grandma and I went back out to where Grandpa was waiting, and a kid in front of me jumped up and down as he walked to show that he was excited after riding a donkey. I didn't jump as I walked.

"Great job, bud. Ride 'em cowboy," Grandpa said.

I felt embarrassed because I didn't really ride like a cowboy. The man with the lever made the donkeys stop and go. But I smiled at Grandpa and nodded when he asked if I wanted to go get a treat. Grandma and Grandpa talked for a minute about what else we should do at the fair while I looked back at the donkeys. The scarecrow man pulled the lever again.

Chapter 2

The day after the fair was Sunday, so we were going to church. We didn't go to church every Sunday, but Grandma decided that we should go this morning. I set my alarm for 7:11 and knew I needed to eat all of my cereal before 7:30 to get dressed in time to leave. Grandma and Grandpa told me that I had to go to Sunday School. I also had to wear my nice black boots which were uncomfortable and didn't look right on me. They didn't look right because I was a kid and the boots looked like adult boots, just smaller. I also had to wear dark Wrangler jeans like Grandpa wore. When I put on the boots and jeans and looked in the mirror, I felt like I wasn't looking at myself. I looked like a grown-up with tiny boots and miniature jeans.

I looked in the bedroom mirror and put my right hand above my ear to measure where the part in my hair should go. I made the part and combed my hair back carefully. It was brown like Grandpa's, except his was starting to get gray on the sides. I stood staring into my eyes in the mirror, and my throat started to feel tight. This sometimes happened before I had to go somewhere with a lot of people. I looked at my reflection and watched my eyes get bigger and watery, and then my mouth opened even though I tried to keep it closed. I kept quiet and watched myself gag in the mirror. It felt like I was going to throw up, so I went to

the bathroom and threw up a little, quietly. I stood over the toilet for another minute until the gagging stopped, and then I looked at my red eyes and pale face in the bathroom mirror. I got my comb and fixed my hair. I went into the living room where Grandpa was walking around quickly, getting stuff ready to go to church. He clipped his tie to his shirt.

“Do you have my Bible?” he called to Grandma.

“No,” she yelled from their bedroom. “We need to leave in five minutes.” She was curling her bangs. She had blonde hair and wasn’t old like most grandmas.

“Can’t find my damn Bible,” Grandpa said. I stood still and watched him rub his thick mustache as he thought about where his Bible might be.

“Grandpa?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sick. I threw up. I can’t go to church.”

“You’re sick, huh.” He felt my forehead. “Are you really sick, or are you making it up?”

“I threw up some. I don’t want to go to Sunday School.”

“You’re going. You’ll be fine. You’ll have fun with the other kids. Sometimes if you’re feeling sick, it helps to get out and get started with the day.”

I went back to my room and sat on my bed. My bedspread had dinosaurs on it, but they were cartoons and different colors like red and yellow, which is not what dinosaurs are supposed to look like. I tried to imagine how tall a dinosaur would be if I saw a real one, and I thought I was probably small enough that it wouldn’t be able to see me. That made me feel relieved.

I looked at the wall, which had different shapes on it that Grandpa called texture. Some of the shapes looked like dinosaurs, and one spot looked just like a Tyrannosaurus head. I sat on my bed and looked at all the different shapes. Some of them looked like scary faces watching me.

“Okay, let’s get in the car,” Grandma said from the living room. We all went to the garage and got in the car. It was bright and hot outside as we drove to church. It only took a few minutes to get there. Cars filled up the parking lot, and kids ran on the sidewalks chasing each other in the last few minutes before they had to go inside and be quiet. The adults talked and laughed. The moms wore a lot of makeup and talked loudly in a circle. They moved their hands around when they spoke, and they smelled like perfume. The dads shook each other’s hands and sometimes pushed each other while they laughed and joked, like kids do. They all seemed happy to be there. Grandma, Grandpa, and I walked past them without talking and went into the church lobby. We had to go find our classrooms since we did Sunday School before big church. Grandma’s heels made loud clacks on the shiny tile floor as she walked in front of Grandpa and me. The hallway to the classrooms smelled like bleach. When people walked by, Grandma would smile with big eyes and say, “Hi, good morning.”

The row of kids’ classrooms was at the back of the hallway, and each room had two old ladies in it. The ladies greeted the parents as they dropped kids off for

Sunday School. Grandma, Grandpa, and I walked to the room with a FIRST-GRADE sign over the door.

“Ok, Luke, here we are. Go in and have a good time,” Grandma said. She put her hand on my back and gently pushed me through the doorway. It felt like the air changed somehow. I walked in, and one of the old ladies touched my shoulder.

"Good morning!" she said. She smiled very wide because she wanted me to feel like she was excited that I was at Sunday School. She took me to a table where I was to sit and wait for all the kids to arrive. Boxes of crayons and pencils were on the tables, and cartoon versions of people from the Bible decorated the walls. At the back of the room was a picture of a man in a robe and sandals sitting behind bars, petting a lion. Next to that was another picture, this one of a man with a dark beard and a long cane standing next to some sheep. The fluffy sheep smiled at the man.

When it was time to start Sunday School, the old lady with tall hair and bright red lipstick stood at the front of the room and said, “Good morning, boys and girls. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. To start, let us raise our voices in song.”

She started singing a song that began with “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” I had heard the song but didn’t know all the words. Most of the kids did and sang along with the old lady. She sang in a loud, high voice like an opera singer and motioned with her hands as she sang. Her bracelets jingled. I didn’t sing and hoped that no one was

watching me, although I thought Jesus or God might be since I was at church. I didn't know if they were different or the same person, and if they were different, I wondered which of them was the boss of the other.

The song ended, and the old lady said, "Jesus is the only way. He is the good shepherd who watches over us and keeps us safe. Now, boys and girls, we will do an activity to see how well you have learned the Bible verses we've been reading."

She passed out strips of manila paper with words written on them. "Each of you has one half of a Bible verse," she said. "You must find the person with the matching half to complete the verse, and then tape the completed verse to the board."

The words on my paper read IN NO ONE ELSE (ACTS 4:12). I didn't know what that meant. The other kids looked at their strips but didn't move.

"Go ahead, children, let's see those verses!"

Kids got up and started looking at the strips of paper and consulting with one another. They would get excited and walk up to the board together when they found a match. I didn't want to talk to any of them because they made me too nervous, and my voice didn't work very well when I was nervous, so I went to the board and taped my paper to it without finding a match. I sat back down and listened to the buzzing sound in my ears. It took eight more minutes before all the other kids sat back down. I looked up at the board, and someone had taped another strip of paper next to mine.

"Now, boys and girls, we will go over your verses," the lady said. "I will call on one of you to read

each verse and explain what it means to you. Would you please read us your verse?" She pointed to a girl at my table, who stood and walked to the board. She wore a big red bow on her head.

"It says: Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Colossians 3:20," the girl said.

"Yes, very good," the lady said. "What does this mean to you, dear?"

The girl smiled. "It means that my mom and dad know what I should do," she said.

"That's right," the lady replied. "God leads moms and dads so that they may lead their children down the right path."

The girl sat down, and the lady looked at me.

"Young man, would you please read your verse to the class?" she asked. She smiled and opened her eyes very wide to show that she was interested in what I had to say. My ears started buzzing so loud that I couldn't hear anything else. I got up and walked to the board, and it seemed like I was looking through one of the tunnels we had at the school playground. I could see the part of the board where my verse was taped, but I couldn't see anything else around it. I stood up close to the board and softly hummed to myself to see if my voice would work. It didn't because my throat was clogged, so I coughed as quietly as I could and then read the verse.

"There is salvation in no one else. Acts 4:12," I said. My voice always sounded different when I talked in front of people. It sounded like an old person's voice.

“Yes, and what does that mean for us?” the lady asked. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know. I stood very still. I was leaning to the right for some reason but couldn’t make myself straighten up. The lady smiled at me like before, but her eyes looked different. She kept looking at me, and I knew she was waiting for me to say something. I didn’t say anything.

“Well, it means that Jesus is our salvation,” she eventually said. “Accepting him into our hearts is the only way to Heaven. We are all sinners who fall short of God’s glory, but Jesus redeems us. Don’t you agree, boys and girls?”

The other kids nodded and looked at me silently. After that, the lady called on more kids to read their verses. I didn’t hear any of them, though. I sat and looked down at the table and waited for my head to shrink back down. It felt like it had gotten huge like a balloon when everyone was looking at me. After the activity with the Bible verses, we got a cookie and were supposed to make cards for a lady in the church who just had a baby. I got a piece of yellow paper and wrote **YOUR BABY IS GOOD** on it. I pushed it to the middle of the table and waited for Sunday School to end.

When Grandma and Grandpa came to get me from Sunday School, it was time to go to big church. We walked back to the lobby, and I heard the pipe organ playing, which meant that everyone was supposed to go in and sit down. The music echoed loudly in the big room called the sanctuary. Most people were still talking and had to hurry in to get to their pews. We

followed them in and sat in a row in the back. The tall man who led the singing in church walked to the front of the stage as the organ music stopped. He wore a dark-colored robe like the people in the choir. He raised his hands up high and loudly told us all to stand.

“Good morning, my brothers and sisters in Christ,” he said once everyone had stood up. “What a great day it is to worship the Lord. Turn in your hymnals to *Getting Ready to Leave this World*.”

A piano player started playing a fast song, and the organ player joined in. People in the choir began swaying side to side with the beat of the song, and some people in the congregation raised their hands like the music leader, who moved one hand up and down like a conductor. Everyone started singing when the music leader did. The part of the song that I remembered the most was:

*I'm getting ready to leave this world of sorrow,
I'm getting ready for the gates of pearl.
Keeping my record right,
Watching both day and night,
I'm getting ready to leave this world.*

The song confused me. It seemed like the people were singing about going away forever or maybe even dying, and it was strange that they were happy about it. I had never thought about death very much, but it didn't seem like a happy thing. I watched the people continue singing. Some sang loudly and danced. Grandma sang softly, and Grandpa mouthed the words. I watched everyone as they finished with the dying song and moved on to others. The singing lasted a long time, and

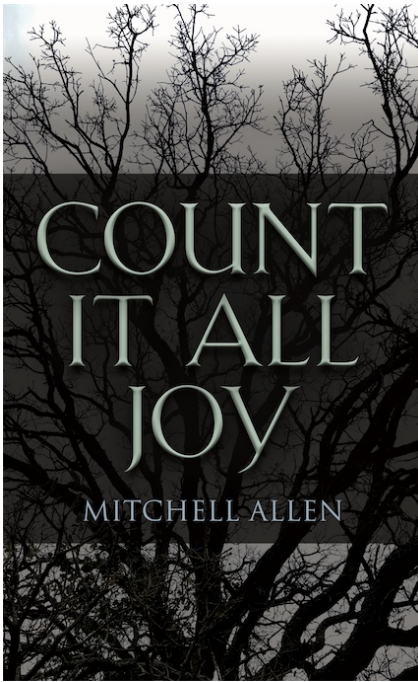
my feet started to hurt from standing in my boots. When it finally ended, the music leader said a prayer, and the preacher walked to the podium and told us all to be seated. His black suit matched his shiny hair. He was very fat.

“Can I hear an amen?” he asked. “Amen. Welcome to God’s house, congregation. It truly is a great day to worship, and I’m glad that each and every one of you is here. This morning, we’ll begin a new series on why we as Christians must face trials. Why bad things sometimes happen to good people. Please turn in your Bibles to the Book of James.”

Grandma opened her small, thick Bible. The edges of the pages were gold. Grandpa hadn’t found his Bible at home, so he took one out of the rack on the pew in front of us. He thumbed through it, looking for the correct page, which took a long time.

“The thing I like about James,” the preacher said, “is that he doesn’t pull any punches. He tells it like it is. Right at the beginning of his letter, he flatly tells us that we will face trials. Life is not all roses and sunshine for believers. Look at verse two of chapter one. James tells us that our faith must be tested and that we must remain steadfast and even joyful in our suffering. Joyful because we know that God is working on us and is right there with us as he puts us through trials and sorrow. We begin as lumps of coal, and God turns us into diamonds by teaching us lessons and applying pressure where we need it the most. So, rejoice, brothers and sisters, because trials and tribulations are coming. This is what we will discuss in today’s message.”

“Amen!” shouted a man at the front. The people sitting around us looked alert and ready to hear the message. The preacher continued with the sermon, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I felt very tired, and I didn’t understand what the preacher was talking about. I looked up above him at the stained-glass window. It was pretty. I started counting how many green triangles I could find and how many red rectangles I could find. I got drowsy after a minute. The preacher’s voice began to sound more and more distant, and as I made it up to 50 rectangles, my head drooped, and I fell asleep.



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