

Steve Cameron is 16 and looking to fit in. But as his double life threatens to spiral out of control he will be faced with his ultimate challenge.

Youth Group

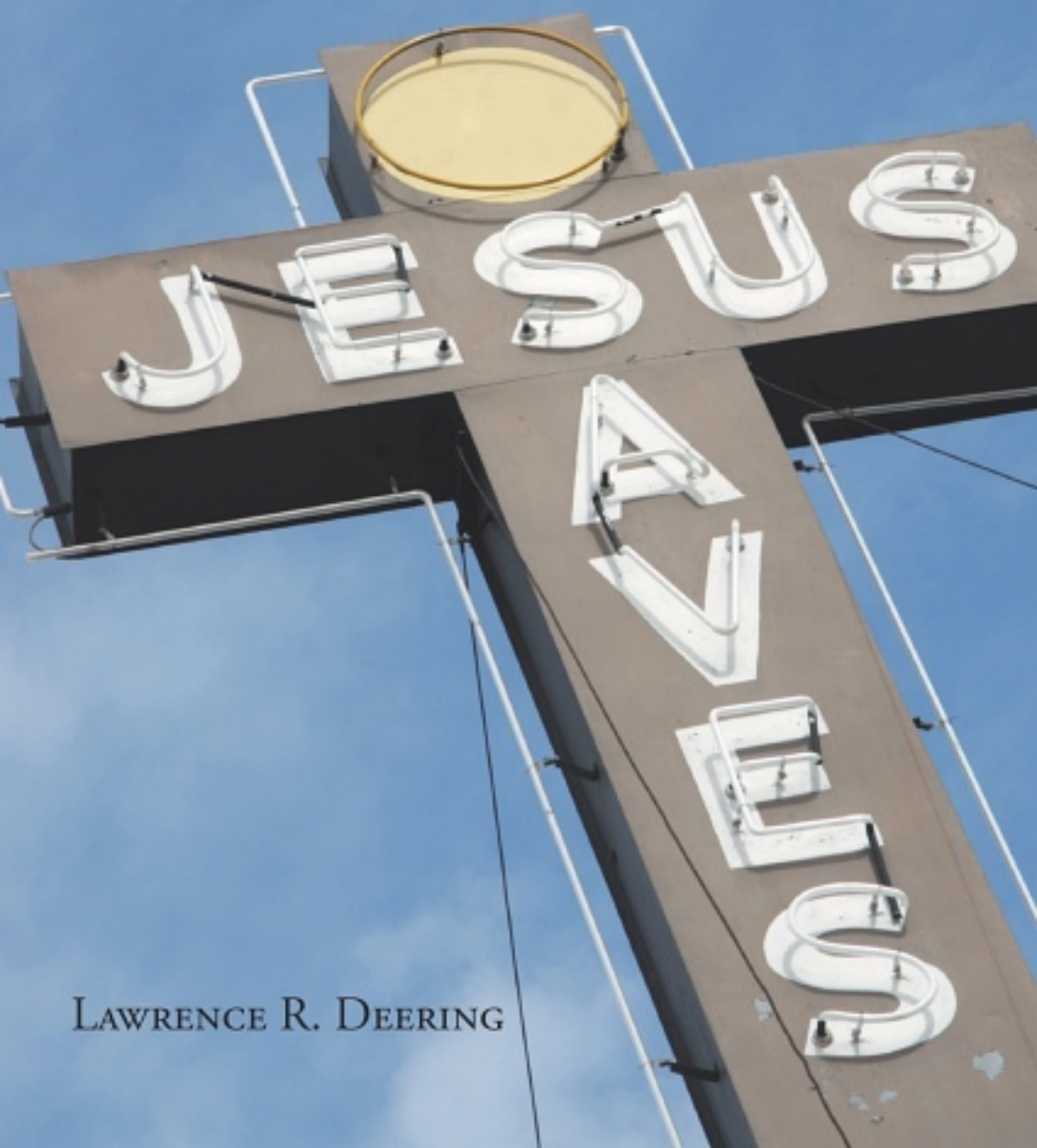
By Lawrence R. Deering

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YOUTH GROUP



LAWRENCE R. DEERING

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Second Edition

Chapter 1

My bedroom was next to his. There was no escaping my duty. I would lie in bed each morning and listen for the ever present lump of phlegm to lodge in his throat. My mother left for work at the crack of dawn. She reminded me last night that my grandfather had a doctor's appointment in the morning. I looked around my room at my stereo and my beloved record collection. My LPs were organized alphabetically, placed in plastic sleeves, and housed in several egg crates. I wished I could put on Led Zeppelin II, have a smoke and ditch school. Most of all I wanted to avoid going into the room next door.

I enjoyed the warmth of my bed until the last possible moment. Grudgingly, I threw the covers back, let my pajama bottoms fall to the floor, and made my way into the shower. I let the cool water rush over my shoulder length hair that my mother was always trying to get me to cut. It didn't make me feel cool, because I wasn't, but it was the one thing that I had control over. I lathered my hair into funny shapes and hummed the guitar parts to Living Loving Maid. After taking care of my hygiene issues I scoured the room for acceptable school attire. I found my favorite faded jeans draped over a chair and selected one of several black, Led Zeppelin Tee shirts from

the drawer. I glanced up at the poster of Robert Plant screaming into the microphone while Jimmy Page let his fingers fly up and down the neck of his 1959 Les Paul Sunburst guitar. I wished I was Jimmy Page.

I was summoning the courage to knock on the hallway door when I heard a loud pop. It was definitely a sound you didn't hear every day. It had come from my grandfather's room. He often fell out of bed but this wasn't the usual thud, but more of a cracking noise.

I turned the door knob, hesitated for a moment and swung the door open. The usual urine smell hit me in the face. I looked for my grandfather on the floor but he was still on top of the bed. His chest was covered with blood. He was holding the antiquated pistol that he kept under his pillow "for protection". Smoke wafted from the end of the rusted barrel. Time stopped for a moment and I could see the events unfold in slow motion. I knew something was terribly wrong but I didn't link the smoking gun with the blood that was enveloping the sheets and covers.

He looked up at me as he grimaced in pain.

"There you go you son of a bitches."

It was at that point it finally registered what he had done. Adrenalin filled my stomach and I felt nauseous. I closed the door. My first thought was that the police were going to think I did it. I didn't go very far into the room; did I? I ran to the phone on the wall just outside of the kitchen and dialed 911. I told the operator that my grandfather had just shot himself. She asked me if he was still alive. I told her I didn't know.

"Stay calm. Help is on the way," she said.

I didn't think anyone was going to be of much help. I called my sister Patricia. She had moved out of the house on her eighteenth birthday. When she told my mother she was getting married my mother disowned her. They hadn't spoken since.

My sister picked up on the second ring and I told her what happened. She said she would call her husband Brian who worked nearby and have him come over. I sat down in the green leather recliner in the TV room

and prayed. I don't remember what I prayed for but it brought me some comfort. A few minutes later the phone rang and my sister's pastor was on the telephone. He asked if he could pray with me on the phone. I could hear sirens in the distance and I knew they were coming to my house.

I opened the front door and was met by two paramedics who were holding what look liked small suitcases filled with lifesaving instruments. I was pretty sure they wouldn't need them. They asked where they should go. I pointed in the direction of his room. I heard more vehicles stop in front of my house. I looked out the open front door and there were two policemen coming up the walk. They sat me down in the living room.

"What's your name son?"

"Steven Cameron," I replied.

"How old are you Steven?"

"Sixteen."

"Who do you live with?"

"My mother Margaret and my grandfather Harold."

They asked me what happened and I told them what I saw. They asked me which hand my grandfather had held the gun. I played back the scene in my mind and said the right one. As the policeman finished their questioning I saw the paramedics come from the hallway pushing a gurney. My grandfather was lying on top with a sheet covering his entire body. I heard one of the paramedics tell the officer that they were going to go ahead and transport the body. The policemen stayed with me until my brother-in-law arrived. Brian ran in through the front door and asked where they were transporting my grandfather. The paramedic said St. Mary's.

We drove over to the hospital and went to the emergency room. Brian asked the nurse at the station about Harold Cameron's condition. When she was satisfied she was talking to a family member she told us that Mr. Cameron had expired. Brian called my sister and told her that her grandfather has passed away. She said that she was going to call one of my

mother's friends to bring her home. Brian and I had to stick around and fill out some papers.

Through this entire ordeal I never once considered calling my mother. I knew she would fall apart. So I did what I always did. I tried to handle the situation the best I could. When we arrived back at the house Mom was waiting for us. No one had told her what happened. She searched my face for some clue. They told her at work that her father had been rushed to the hospital. Brian told her that her father had shot himself and was dead. She began sobbing and said that the police would think that I did it. I thought that was very odd. That was the first thing that had entered her mind. I wondered if she thought I could do such a thing.

My sister arrived several minutes later and it was the first time that I had seen my mother and sister together in years. Patricia just held her while she let her emotions out. Most of what happened over the next week was a blur. My mother was incapable of making the funeral arrangements so Patricia and I made them all. We picked out the casket, the funeral home, the flowers – everything.

Mom insisted on a closed casket. There was no viewing the night before. There were no more than a dozen people at the memorial service. I'm glad the pastor did all of the talking because I couldn't think of one good thing to say about my grandfather. He had moved in with us a little over two years ago when my grandmother died. I think my mom and grandfather thought they deserved one another. They had mistreated each other their entire lives. My grandfather used what was left of his inheritance to buy us a modest house in a decent neighborhood. I went to a good high school for two years and made friends. Even though my grandfather made my life difficult I had a reasonably stable home life.

One day he was watching the news and decided that the rising interest rate environment would result in a crash in the Ohio real estate market. He put our house on the market. He neglected one small detail. He didn't tell us. I remember coming home from school and seeing a "For Sale" sign in

front of our house. I called my mother at work to ask her what was going on. She cried.

To make matters worse, about a month later I was coming home from school on a Friday afternoon. I was looking forward to the weekend. As I approached the house I saw the “Sold” sign. I walked in the door and my grandfather didn’t say a word. He was about five foot nine, had wispy white hair and his hands shook with early Parkinson’s. The shake was more pronounced when he was angry or nervous.

His false teeth really freaked me out. They had a slightly yellowish tint. I thought that was stupid. If you were going to pay good money for false teeth why not get the whitest pair you could buy? He often told me that I was lazy, and that I would never amount to anything. All I would see were those yellow teeth.

He was in the den watching wrestling. I said hello but he just grunted. His hands were shaking more than usual. Mom came home a little before six o’clock from work and immediately confronted him. He was apologetic. He admitted that he was scared of losing all his money and he panicked. He sold the house under market value, and we had to be out in thirty days. My mom went to her room and collapsed on the bed. I gently opened the door and lay down beside her. I told her that we didn’t need my grandfather. We could find an apartment and start a new life by ourselves.

The next day Mom was out with a realtor looking for a place for all of us to live. She couldn’t bring herself to leave my grandfather. I think she was still seeking his approval. She found a very nice house under construction that was almost finished. It was the only thing she could find that would allow us to move in within thirty days. The house was more money than our previous house which made the whole situation so ironic. We moved into the house that was three miles from our other house. Because of the way the school districts were drawn I would have to change schools.

After the move my grandfather became more verbally abusive, mainly to me. I came home from school and made sure he had something to eat. We

spent our time together with him telling me that I was a bum and worthless. I drew the line when he said something bad about my mother. I would just leave the room. Even if I was in the kitchen cooking him something to eat, I would turn off the stove and go to my bedroom. He got the message, and only said bad things about her when he didn't care if I stayed or not.

His Parkinson's was getting worse and he had trouble getting around the house. I went into his room every morning to change his urinal. He used his walker to go the bathroom during the day. I made sure he was dressed before I went to school. I knew he was miserable. My theory was that he thought long and hard about coming up with the most elegant end to his sorry life. He was tired of being dependent on others. His prognosis was not good. He could end his unhappy life and destroy ours at the same time. It was a win-win.

I was a pallbearer. Although I was sixteen and fairly muscular I strained under the weight of the casket. Up to that point I never shed one tear. I certainly wasn't sorry my grandfather was dead. I was angry more than anything else. Just when I thought he couldn't hurt us anymore he devised a new way to punish us. I hated him for that.

After the memorial service we got into the car and headed to the cemetery. I started to cry uncontrollably. I didn't know why I was crying but I couldn't hold back the tears. My mother told me to stop crying. She said I had to be strong. She was right. I was the head of the family. I wiped my tears on my suit jacket sleeve and stared out the window.

★

My mother Margaret had always been a victim. She was the younger of two children. Her sister Ellen was precocious and my grandparents doted on her. Ellen was smart and pretty. By the time Mom accidentally came along there were already strains on the marriage. Her father Harold was a trucker who worked when work was available, but times were tough. He spent most of his hours at a local drinking establishment where he was well known and respected for being a tough man. He was an excellent pool player and

hustled the local talent for beer money. Once, when he thought he had been snookered by a professional, he smacked the cue stick across the man's face. The more he drank, the hotter his temper became.

When Harold finally made his way home he used the opportunity to belittle his wife Gloria. He complained the house was filthy. He accused her of having an affair. In the same breath he would say that she was frigid. The only thing that softened his mood was Ellen. He would put her on his lap and watch TV and drink beer. He ran his fingers through her curly brown hair and told her how pretty she was. When he finally dozed off Gloria would gently remove Ellen from his lap and put her to bed.

Gloria claimed to know the instant she got pregnant with my mother. Harold was in between trucking runs and was spending more time at home. He cut back on his drinking and even did some chores around the house. Harold decided he would take Gloria out for a night on the town. He put on his best suit and a wide brimmed hat. Gloria put on her one "goin' out" dress. They had steak dinners at Carlo's and went dancing at the Royal Club. Harold could be a real charmer. He was almost six feet tall with wide shoulders and thick black hair. He had an electric smile that he used when it suited him.

When they returned home they whisked the babysitter out of the house and made their way to the bedroom. The next morning she felt different and told Harold she was sure she was pregnant. By morning Harold's mood had soured. He told Gloria that she better be wrong because he didn't "need no more mouths to feed."

Gloria was right. She delivered my mother Margaret nine months later. Harold was on the road and she was glad for it. He had become more and more verbally abusive and she could hardly stand to be in the same room with him. When he eventually returned home he grunted to Gloria and went straight to bed. When he emerged from the bedroom around noon the next day, Gloria asked him if he wanted to see his new daughter. Instead

he went out into the yard where Ellen was playing. That's how it was going to be.

Margaret and Gloria were as thick as thieves. They did everything together. They were brought closer by their mutual hate of Harold. Ellen was able to manipulate both parents to get her way. Ellen dominated her sister. It was clear that Ellen was the favorite and felt she deserved the best of everything. As they entered their teen years Ellen repeated her father's comments.

"Margaret, why don't you fix yourself up? You're stupid. You can't cook. How're you ever going to find a husband?"

Mom ignored Ellen as much as she could. When it came to her father, she avoided him. When Ellen turned eighteen she ran off with a young Marine and got married. Harold was devastated and started drinking earlier and more often. He never directed his anger at Mom. She was invisible to him. That was even worse.

My mother was looking for a way out and got married as soon as she was of age. Her husband Henry was in the Navy and away for long stretches of time. They were both running from disappointing childhoods. She got pregnant soon after they married. She gave birth to a beautiful girl they named Patricia. Although they both loved her they didn't have enough things in common to hold the marriage together. They divorced within two years. Patricia practically lived at my grandparent's house while Mom went to secretarial school and landed a steady job. She dated occasionally but was hesitant to repeat the same mistake again. She waited eight long years to remarry. Mom found another military man named Thomas and after a brief six-month courtship they became man and wife. He aggressively pursued her and she had loved the attention. Their happiness was short lived. Mom struggled with the demands of raising a child and being newly married. When she got pregnant, my dad was over the moon. She gave him the boy he always wanted. They named me Steven Andrew Cameron.

Thomas didn't have much use for the church and it gave Mom an excuse

to blame him for any perceived indiscretion. She had become deeply religious and expected her husband to be the same. She badgered him about going to church. The more she pushed, the more he resisted. In the fourth year of their marriage my father left for a tour of duty and never returned.

My mother had no husband, no job, no money, and two kids to support. My dad left the State and never contributed one dime of child support. Mom felt abandoned by yet another man in her life. She removed every memory of the man from the house. My grandmother, Gloria had to take over the child rearing responsibility again. Gloria and Harold had entered into a truce over the years. She wouldn't ask where he went or who he had been with and he left her alone. They lived down the street from us and Patricia and I there lived there during the work week. The middle school and high school years were difficult for Patricia. Mom fought with her about the way she dressed, what friends she was seeing, and anything and everything. I was the baby, so they both doted on me. When my sister turned eighteen she fell in love with Brian. Since my mother didn't approve, Patricia rented a small apartment and moved out. She and Brian married soon thereafter. I was ten years old and devastated by the loss of my sister. Mom disowned Patricia for leaving and getting married at such an early age. I was prohibited from seeing her. I didn't even get to go to her wedding.

Mom went into a tailspin. She refused to deal with the betrayal of both husbands and now her own daughter. She developed asthma so severe that she took to her bed off and on for several years. She couldn't work. Grandma became her nursemaid, benefactor, and my surrogate mother. Some days Mom would drag herself into the kitchen and make the same grape jelly and cream cheese sandwich that she made for my lunch. I couldn't get anything in trade from the other kids, so most of the time it ended up in the trash. While the other kids were going to the cafeteria for their twenty five cent hot lunch, I sat outside eating out of a paper sack. I felt poor and alone. My one joy was taking the nickel that Mom gave me for milk, and going to the student store and buying a candy bar. My favorite was a frozen zero bar that

I would lay on the picnic table and patiently wait while the afternoon sun softened it to the point that I could bite off a piece.

At night when Mom's asthma was particularly bad I would lie on my bed, propped up on my elbows, and listen to the gasp and wheeze emanating from her room. I would occasionally hear her use an inhaler and her prayers for relief. I prayed too. The worst was the silence. I would jump out of bed and quietly crawl next to her bed to make sure she was still breathing. I was often there so long that I would fall asleep on the floor. Night after night I would have a reoccurring dream. I would be lying in bed straining to hear any movement from my mother's room. I would listen for the rhythm of her breaths, but I couldn't hear anything. I would go to her bed. I would reach down and touch her cold arm and know that she was gone. I didn't know what would become of me if she died.

On one occasion she had a particularly severe attack. She refused to let me call 911. She made me help her to her car. I eased her into the front seat. She didn't have the strength to close the door. I begged her to let me call for help. She refused, put the car in drive and we headed to the emergency room. To this day I don't know how we made it. When I was allowed to see her, she told me not to feel bad if she died. Yea, right. Where was I supposed to live? Who was going to support me? What would my future hold?

When I turned 10 I decided I was going to take all the things that were too painful to deal with, place them in a large imaginary locked chest, and store them there until I was older and could deal with them. I even envisioned the key that I would use to open it. I also pledged that I would never be dependent on anyone again.

I don't know what triggered the change, but one day Mom got out of bed. She fixed her hair and put on some lipstick. She went into the kitchen and told my grandmother that she didn't want to die anymore. She wanted to see her son grow up.

Mom even dated sporadically after her asthma improved but soon lost interest. She accepted the fact she would be alone the rest of her life. She

turned to God to fill the void. Whatever decision she made, no matter how trivial, she asked God to guide her. Whether it was choosing between chicken and fish, the blue dress or the red one, the Waltons or Kojak, God had to be consulted. This made it particularly challenging for me who found it difficult to question Mom's decisions when they had been blessed by God.

I thought my mother was beautiful. She had long curly brown hair with red highlights. Her eyes were a chestnut color that could look right into your soul. I lived for her smile. I remember crawling up in her lap as a young boy and her telling me I was her special man. I did feel special. I never saw her show my sister that kind of affection.

Mom got a secretarial job and we settled into a comfortable routine. I was always a good student and she never had to worry about me. She was determined to raise me a God fearing man. She made me go to Sunday school and church every week. I hated spending one of my precious weekend days going to church while my friends were outside playing. I was already saved. I walked down the aisle to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Savior at seven years old. I heard Baptist preachers yelling at me all my life. Repent and ye shall be saved. If you didn't you were going to Hell. Choice made. Let's move on.

The next several years were good for me. I started high school. I had lots of friends. I was looking forward to getting my driver's license in a couple of years. Then we received a call from my grandfather in the middle of the night. He said my grandmother had fallen asleep in the chair and he couldn't wake her. My mother woke me out of a dead sleep and we ran down the block in our night clothes.

When we entered my grandparent's house Mom went to her mother's side and placed her hand on her cold arm. She was whiter than anyone I had ever seen. Mom started screaming. I called 911 but I couldn't remember the exact address only the street name. I heard the siren and went outside to direct the fire truck to the house. Two firemen attended to my grandmother

but told us she was gone. One of them sat on the bed and put his arm around my mother. He didn't say anything. He just let her cry.

My grandmother hadn't been sick. She just fell asleep and never woke up. All in all, I think she was pretty lucky. Mom decided we would find a bigger place and my grandfather would come and live with us. That is when the torment began. I know he must have been grieving, at least in his own way. Whatever he was feeling, it wasn't good, and he took it out on us.

I don't remember much about the second half of my freshman year of high school. My grades were okay but I was distracted and disinterested. I withdrew from my friends. I certainly couldn't invite anyone over to the house to hang out with my grandfather there. I hated my life. I dreamed of the day my grandfather would be gone. I'm sure he knew I felt that way. By shooting himself he made sure that I would feel guilty for the rest of my life.

*

After the "incident," Mom decided we needed a fresh start. She didn't want to stay in Ohio any longer. She put the house up for sale and we moved to sunny California. Mom had always loved the beach movies. She watched every Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon movie ever made. The only thing she liked as much were the Beach Boys. She would play "Surfer Girl" on her tiny record player over and over. She took the money from the sale of the house and we found a nice two bedroom bungalow on North Francisca Avenue, a few blocks from the beach in Redondo Beach, California. I think she was disappointed the first time we made it to the beach. She didn't see Annette and Frankie.

I enrolled in the local high school for the fall semester. Everything was so foreign to me. It didn't look anything like Ohio. There was concrete everywhere. I did love the weather and the young girls wearing their short shorts and bikinis. I think Mom and I were both willing to hit the reset button.

Chapter 2

To me the only thing worse than having to go to church on a beautiful Sunday morning was going to a “new” church. The day started like any other Sunday. I pretended to be asleep when Mom entered my room and made a halfhearted attempt to get me to open my eyes. About ten minutes later the scene repeated itself. This time she appeared next to my bed, placed her hand on my shoulder and shook me. I pleaded for a reprieve. I didn’t want to go to church. I was seventeen and capable of making my own decisions. None of these arguments proved to be persuasive. She towered above me and said in an authoritative voice, “as long as you are living under my roof you are going to church.”

We moved into our house two weeks ago and it was still full of unpacked boxes. The house was cottage style, as many of the houses in the area were. It had a wraparound front porch. You entered through the front door into a large bright living room surrounded by windows. Mom loved the hardwood floors. They reminded her of home. My bedroom was large and I had my own bathroom in the hall. I put my posters on the wall, hooked up my stereo, and lay on my bed for hours listening to music. I didn’t know how my mother felt, but it didn’t seem like home to me.

I stayed in bed until the last possible minute before I took my shower. I toweled off, went to the closet and chose a pair of pants and a long sleeve shirt that I got for the new school year. Mom yelled from the living room that she was going to warm up the car. I glanced in the mirror, not sure that I liked what I saw, and headed for the garage.

Mom had been a Southern Baptist since the first day she found God. She had attended a revival meeting after the collapse of her first marriage. The preacher went through his fire and brimstone spiel. One message that struck her during the service was when the preacher said “if you smoke, you smell like the Devil”. Margaret walked to the front of the stage when he gave the invitation, accepted Christ as her personal savior, and threw her cigarettes in the trash.

Mom rarely let me drive when we were together. She occasionally allowed me to borrow the car. This morning she was shepherding us to a small Baptist Church she had spotted from the car on her way to the grocery store. We arrived ten minutes before the eleven o'clock service. Mom stepped on the accelerator to the Buick to make it up the steep gravel driveway. I could hear the muffler scrape as we lurched forward.

We pulled in front of an old, white washed house, with broken shutters, missing shingles and plants in varying stages of decay. The lawn was mostly dirt with an occasional patch of grass. The church was brick with amber opaque windows designed to keep the outside world from distracting the parishioners inside. The pitched roof and the cross on the steeple all screamed Baptist. I thought it was a shithole.

There was a group of high school kids milling around the entrance to the church, and unattended children scattered in all directions. I was concerned for their safety as they chased each other between the cars. The few adults outside appeared to be rushing toward a side door. We entered the church's foyer through the main entrance and were greeted by a boy of no more than ten or eleven dressed in jeans, a worn collared shirt with uncombed hair. He gave us a toothy smile and handed each of us a church

bulletin. Mom immediately headed for a pew two rows from the front, left side, on the aisle. I dutifully followed behind.

The organist began playing the old hymn, Blessed Assurance. “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine. O what a foretaste of glory divine. Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.”

I looked around the sanctuary and noticed that with few exceptions, all of the girls my age were sitting on folding metal chairs on the stage directly in front of me. I assumed that this was the choir although they weren’t wearing robes. This was particularly unnerving as I was forced to stare directly into their faces. Mom was deeply engrossed in reading her bulletin and ignored my discomfort.

The interior of the church looked similar to every other Baptist church I had been in. The wooden pews were very uncomfortable. I think by design. God certainly wouldn’t want his followers to get too comfortable while worshiping Him. He expected sacrifice and their full undivided attention. Next to the choir was the requisite baptismal tub. In the Baptist religion you have to be completely submerged in water before your sins can be washed away. On the stage, which was about eight inches off the floor, there was a wooden chair with a padded seat for the preacher. It sat directly behind a podium from which he delivered his sermons.

As the organist finished the Interlude, a large disheveled man with jet black hair, who appeared to be in his late sixties approached the pulpit. He had “old man” black busy eyebrows and a large bulbous nose. He wore a somber black suit and tie. He looked like he was here to conduct a funeral. With a booming voice and his arms directed toward Heaven he declared, “Let us rejoice together and praise God, for this is the day that the Lord hath made.”

The choir members stood and the congregation followed their lead. The faithful had their hymnals open to number 42, and began singing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”. I reached down in the pew rack and grabbed a book. I looked over at Mom who was already singing. I held the book in

front of my face and began mouthing the words. “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer...” I have to admit I was pleasantly surprised. We sang stanzas one, two, and four. At my last church we sang all four.

The Pastor stood at the podium and adjusted the microphone which was totally unnecessary for a church of this size.

“Welcome to Calvary Baptist Church on this glorious summer day. Please feel free to take off your jackets.”

This would have been welcome on a hot day without air conditioning if anyone had bothered to wear a jacket. “For those visiting with us, I am Pastor Ward. It is my pleasure to have you worship with us today. I hope the Lord will bless you as you hear the Word of God.”

Pastor Ward looked over in our direction. I hoped beyond hope that he wouldn’t ask us to introduce ourselves.

“Would you folks mind standing up and introduce yourselves?”

I felt every eye in the church giving us the once over. I have never been self-conscious about my looks. I’m almost five foot ten with an athletic build, brown hair and blue eyes. But here in this church my palms began to sweat. I felt light headed. I began to rethink my wardrobe choice. When I picked out this long sleeve purple and white shirt I thought it looked sort of psychedelic, but now it reminded me of bad wallpaper. My gray pants were made of polyester and were sticking to my legs. I was more dressed up than any of the other kids. I stood and let my mother do the talking.

“I’m Margaret Cameron and this is my son Steven. We are new to the area and looking for a new church home.”

“We’re very glad to have you with us today and hope that you will join us after the service for refreshments. Let’s get on with the announcements. This evening’s service is at 6:30 PM in the sanctuary and our Wednesday night Bible study is at 6:00 PM in the Youth Group room, for those of you who may have forgotten where it’s located.”

There were a few muffled laughs.

“Please don’t forget, that immediately following next week’s service, we will be having our potluck luncheon. Mrs. Ward will be happy to provide suggestions as to what you can bring. Please keep Jack Kendrick in your prayers. He is back in the nursing home following hip surgery. Are there any other prayer requests?”

The congregation remained silent.

“Okay, then let’s praise God with our tithes and offerings.”

Pastor Ward nodded to the two men and women standing in the back of the church. They walked down the aisle side by side carrying a couple of round wooden offering plates. The men took the outside aisles and the women worked the center one. They passed the plates with practiced precision down one row and then the other. Each member dug into their pant pockets or purses and pulled out wadded bills, coins or offering envelopes provided by the Church and placed them into the plate. I dug into my pocket and came up empty. With the task accomplished, the four ushers returned to the front of the church where Pastor Ward stood waiting.

“Lord, thank you for the many blessings that you have bestowed upon us. Please accept these gifts from our hearts and may they be used in your service. Amen.”

The organist immediately starting playing the Doxology, “Praise God from Whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures here below, Praise Him above ye heavenly host, Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

Pastor Ward reached into one of his deep pockets. Out came a crumpled piece of paper that he unfolded and set on the podium in front of him.

“Our scripture passage for today is Proverbs 23:31-33. ‘Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the wineglass, when it goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes and your mind will utter things turned the wrong way.’”

Pastor Ward looked up from the black framed glasses that had slid to the end of his enormous red nose and stared out at the congregation. If I didn’t know better, I would have taken him for a skid row bum.

The preacher's voice filled with emotion.

"Alcoholism is a sin. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar. It ain't an illness. It's a personal choice. Being addicted to alcohol is no different than bein' addicted to pornography, gambling or anything else. If you are an ungodly man or woman you're going to be tempted by the things of this world. You're not going to church and study the word of God if you're committed to a life of sin. And there is no good reason for a born again Christian to be drinkin' and carryin' on like an unbeliever. Shame on you if you let the temptations of this world come between you and your Savior. Satan can tempt you, but you have to do the sinnin'. Don't use the challenges of life as an excuse to abuse alcohol. There is only one way to free yourself from the shackles and torment of sin and that is to turn your life over to Jesus Christ. With God you don't have to go through twelve steps you only have to go through one. Accept Him as your Lord and Savior."

The Pastor paused, reached into another pocket and unfolded a large white handkerchief, which he used to wipe the sweat from his commanding brow.

"I remember poor Bennie Johnson. He was a hardworking man with big worn hands. He worked in the coal mines of West Virginia. He would come home at night with coal dust covering his face and those big hands. He'd throw open the screen door to his modest house. His wife Sarah would tell him to wash up for supper. Bennie would scrub those hands trying to get the days hard labor off, but he couldn't wash away the years of disappointment and regret. After supper Bennie fixed himself a strong drink and then another. He drank until Sarah covered him up in his chair and then sought refuge in their small bedroom. Eventually Bennie even had a drink or two before he headed off to work.

It was a Friday afternoon when Sarah got the call. She was taking the sheets off the clothes line when she heard the phone ring. As soon as she heard Joe the foreman's voice she knew something terrible had happened.

'Sarah, there's been an accident. You better get down here.'

Sarah ran from the house down the dirt road toward the mine. When she arrived at the main office, Joe was in his chair sitting across from two other miners looking very somber.

‘Sarah, I don’t know how to tell you this, but there’s been an accident. Bennie didn’t make it.’

Sarah fell to the ground and wrapped her arms around her body. She sobbed and her body shook violently. When she composed herself long enough to speak she asked if anyone else was hurt. She explained that her greatest fear had been that Bennie would put someone else’s life in danger. Her greatest regret was not telling anyone about his drinking.”

Pastor Ward paused and shook his head.

“Sarah got down on her knees every night beside the bed she slept in alone. She asked God for the strength to be a good wife. She prayed her husband would change his ways. Bennie had a choice. He could have become a new man. God would have forgiven him. Instead, Bennie chose to hide from his failures inside a bottle. I John 2:15 says, ‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.’”

I had heard dozens of these types of stories. The preacher tugs on your emotions, the organ music starts, and then he goes in for the kill.

“Do you have disappointment in your life? Are you addicted to the things of this world? Then I invite you to walk down the aisle to the front of this church. You don’t have to face life’s challenges alone. You have a choice. God can give you the new life you want. Come my friend and accept Jesus as your Savior. Now we’re going to sing hymn number 107, ‘All Who Are Thirsty’. I’m going to step down from the stage and meet you half way. Let God take those burdens from you and give you rest.”

As the organist began playing the hymn the tearful congregation sang the words, “All who are thirsty; all who are weak. Come to the fountain. Dip your heart in the stream of life. Let the pain and sorrow be washed away in the waves of his mercy as deep cries out to deep.”

I looked over at Mom who was dabbing her eyes with a tissue. Pastor Ward made his way down to the front of the aisle.

As the music played he said in an anguished voice, “Don’t let this opportunity slip away. You don’t know what tomorrow may bring. Turn your life over to him.”

As the last stanza came to an end, he looked down the empty aisle and started to pray.

“Dear God, please soften our hearts so we may be receptive to your call. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for dying on the cross for our sins.”

Pausing slightly, the Pastor stood up straight and said in a loud voice, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; and whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Everyone waited with eyes closed until the last note had been struck. The younger kids immediately jumped from their seats and ran out the door and into the yard to play. An elderly woman who had been sitting in front of us turned around to introduce herself.

“Good morning, I’m Mrs. Densmore. It’s so nice to have you with us. And this good looking son of yours will love our youth pastor.”

I followed Mom down the aisle toward the front entrance where Pastor Ward was greeting each member as they exited the church.

“Mrs. Cameron, it was so nice to have you and your son with us today. I hope we met your spiritual needs and I hope that you will consider us for your church home.”

Margaret took the Pastor Ward’s outstretched hand in hers and said, “Pastor, we really felt at home here. I’m sure you’ll be seeing us again.”

Then the Pastor turned to me.

“Well young man you look like you’re a high school student?”

“Yes sir, I’m going to Draper High.”

“Well you’ll find plenty of kids here your age. It was nice having you.”

I thought we were going to make it to the car without being further accosted when a group of kids about my age came strolling up.

A nice looking girl stood in front of the others and said, “Hi, I’m Connie. This is Billy, his brother Tommy, that’s John and this is Valerie. What grade are you in?”

“I’m going to be a junior.”

I noticed Connie earlier. She was tall with curly brown hair that fell to her shoulders. Her brown eyes were wide and friendly. She had a perpetual smile on her face that I found kind of annoying. I also noticed her body. She was wearing a yellow sun dress cut just low enough to show the promise of what lay beneath.

“Hey, if you like baseball, we usually grab some lunch and head over to the middle school for a game,” said Billy. “Some of these guys can actually play.”

“Maybe. I’ll have to see what’s going on with my mother.”

Mom finally wandered over to the car with a cookie in her hand and said, “Steve go ahead and have some fun with these nice young people.”

“Oh shit, now I’m stuck,” I thought.

“All right, what time should I be there?”

“Meet us at Taco Palace in a half an hour and you can follow us from there.”

On the drive home, Mom glanced over.

“Well, what did you think?”

“I think this is the first church we’ve visited and we probably should visit a few more before we commit to anything.”

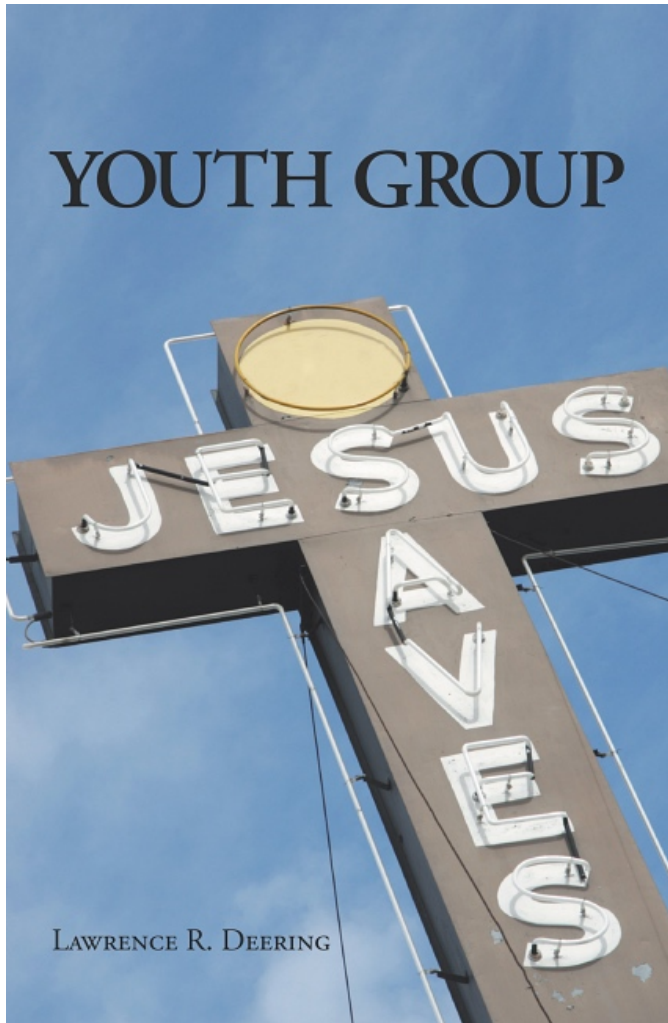
“Well I thought the sermon was very good and I have a good feeling about it. Look at all the kids here your age. You don’t know anybody here. This is an opportunity for you to get in with the right crowd.”

“Not like my friends back home?”

“I liked your friends. I just like them better now that they’re so far away.”

When I got home I yanked off my Sunday best and threw on the jeans that were lying in a heap on the floor.

I yelled as I ran out the door, “Mom, I’ll give this a try, but I’m not promising anything. I’ll be home for dinner.”



Steve Cameron is 16 and looking to fit in. But as his double life threatens to spiral out of control he will be faced with his ultimate challenge.

Youth Group

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