



Chapter Six

Friday Night Lights

"If you are out to describe the truth, leave elegance to the tailor."

— Albert Einstein

I do not recall anything problematic about my early years in California. I made the Little League all-star team, got good grades, had friends, and stayed out of trouble. Life was fun, busy, and active. But there were no real responsibilities. Life was about potential. Everyone at age ten is a future all-American. But sooner or later life becomes about accomplishment.

Trouble started for me in the seventh grade. This is also when I found out about my adoption, but I doubt that event itself caused my problems. I was grounded to nothing before learning I was not biologically attached as well. Sports felt genuine, but one does not live on a baseball diamond. At some point everyone goes home and for me that resembled house arrest. Other people led actual lives at home. At my house we merely pretended. I internalized the problem, taking responsibility for our tedium on myself. After all, I was given away for a reason. Not that I consciously thought about that very often, but the story of my relinquishment stayed around whether I addressed it or not. If one does not address such a conflict, a default position will fill in the gaps. Mine appeared to have been, not surprisingly, that my birthmother did not want to be associated with a tedious person like me. I was a hazard to positive thinking. She wanted to enjoy life. So I simply picked the most obvious problem, the paralysis of my family, and attributed it to me. One can address a mental conflict rationally or irrationally, but the issue will be addressed.

Pursuing my reality I would have been sad. I had lost my family and been sold to strangers. This was not a comedy, and a happy ending, if there

was to be one at all, remained many tears away. Relationships are not interchangeable like jars of mixed vegetables. I probably was sad much of the time but would not accept the feeling and could not understand it. Sad is an intrinsically workable feeling; it can be addressed like any other emotion. Sad makes people humble. It underscores what we cannot control. It gives people depth and keeps them from pursuing injurious distractions. And it serves as contrast for happy. But people consider sad a defeatist emotion. One is supposed to fight against it. Even vacuous smiles, mindless travel, or endless shopping are considered preferable. Yet the harder one grasps for happiness the more elusive it becomes. Gandhi said that happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony. If he was right, I was in trouble. Nothing about me was in harmony. I was just parroting phrases of people selling highway to happiness books.

Some things carried on relatively independent of my lack of cohesion. I continued to get good grades, largely because they did not matter to me. Had they mattered I would have worried about them and done poorly because of the anxiety. I was good enough in sports to make teams because of potential ability, but fashioning sports as my way out of this mess made the games mean too much. Practice and pick-up games, however, offered a sanctuary and likely saved my life.

On paper things looked okay. I was football and baseball captain, king of the Sadie Hawkins Dance, and a straight A student. Menlo-Atherton was not a small school. But I was emotionally empty, hated myself, and practiced positive thinking to the exclusion of sanity. And while I did well in games that did not matter, Friday Night Lights greeted me like headlights great a deer. I was outside myself at those times, directing my actions. That is no way to throw a third strike or hit to the opposite field. Relationships suffered as well. Nothing was authentic for me except sandlot games and my dog.

I told Bob about my adoption, but the conversation died and we never brought it up again. He was my best friend. I told no one else. Adoption was not supposed to matter. Perhaps it would not have if I had honest relationships at home, but we ran out of things to say in the first grade. Other people actually felt things, while I merely pretended. There was no addressing the problem and the gap grew worse. My escape was supposed to be some sort of success, athletically perhaps, but I was not that gifted and with this kind of pressure became even less effective. Sports are not intended to compensate for a lack of self. They are an avenue for an expression of self. The force flows out, not in.

I did not allow myself to think about my birth family. That would have been a sign of selfishness. Not thinking about them solved nothing. It simply meant that my thinking went on outside of awareness. It will go on, albeit unsupervised—the mind will not leave an issue like this alone. We are not kings in our mental castles. At best we occasionally get a vote. No one seriously challenges the concept of unconscious thinking any more. It is much too wedded to biology.

Those who do not remember history are doomed to repeat it. You cannot remember what you choose to ignore. A butcher shop job in Los Altos illustrates one of those repetitions. Los Altos is in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains and looks like a resort town. Diane had lived over a Laundromat on Willow Road before moving to Los Altos. I did not know her but presumed her life was not perfect. Add pretty girl with troubled experience to idyllic setting and my unconscious spelled it as birthmother. Returning home from these trips I sometimes felt desperate and trapped. This was a wave of emotion that made me fear for my sanity. None of it made sense. This was just a job, six dollars for two hours. But throw in adoption and it makes sense. It was about birth family and I could not reach them.

Repetition rather than recollection offers no resolution. It simply leads to one misguided enterprise after another. Resolution involves understanding the present in terms of the past and letting go of the past. This is less a cognitive act than an emotional one, like going on a diet is less than being on one. Letting go always involves grief. No one lets go without it. Grief is simply the outward manifestation of appreciating the depth of one's loss. We can fake grief or suppress it, but genuine loss is felt with one's heart not one's head. And the heart speaks with tears.

So I apparently was hoping for something to happen in Los Altos. That was my life. Some day it was going to begin. But Los Altos came and went. I earned six dollars. That was the deal. Trips back to Racine felt similar. We visited there several times after moving to California. I loved being with Uncle Frank, but vacation ended and with it my life. Going home felt like a funeral until I realized my emotions were showing. Then I feigned indifference. My solution always lay in a fantasy of some future accomplishment that would change everything. That is a luxury of the young, but an expensive one.

Upon learning of my adoption I vowed to someday find my natural family whereupon life would begin. That belief apparently colored much of my future experience. It explains Los Altos better than anything else. I did have a family out there, perhaps in some resort-like town. But I never

found them. Black markets leave few paper trails. I have, however, learned to accept life as intrinsically limited and not hold out for utopia. Waiting for heaven is a good way to turn this life into hell.

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I have few memories with Stanley and none of them are good. We went to a Giant's baseball game as an attempt to improve our relationship. In an effort to make conversation he asserted that number twenty-four was not very good. Twenty-four was Willie Mays. This was not going to work. We could have acknowledged having little in common. A simple question as to who the good players were might have sufficed. But he chose to be pretentious, and I chose to shut up.

I was sixteen on our last visit to Wisconsin. Stanley had been in the Coast Guard on Lake Michigan. Frank, Stanley, my friend Anne and I were going to a pier on Lake Michigan. Frank was somehow already out there. As the three of us got into a row boat, Stanley officiously ordered Anne and me about. You would have thought he was commencing the battle of Midway. I am sorry he felt insecure, sorry I was a lifeguard and he wasn't, but his pretentiousness was insufferable.

To be fair, we did not have many awkward interchanges. Instead, we had none at all. I have not shed a tear for him since his death and doubt he would have done so for me. Stanley said he did more for me than was required. That sums up our relationship. If Ann had died it is likely I would have been returned to sender.

Stanley viewed me as a means to an end, not as a sovereign individual. His parting line to me was that my history before they bought me was none of my business. I don't have a heritage, but it appears to me that people who do take an interest in them. They study their family trees. People's names, nationality, and family history become a part of their identities. But I have no right to mine. Perhaps that is the price of illegitimacy, and one of the reasons why adoptees are viewed as perpetual children with perpetual moral deficiencies. Also, my story might be so disgusting that I must be protected from it to avoid suicide, homicide, or worse. Records are sealed, birth certificates amended, and in Tennessee it can be a felony to search for your birth family. It all sounds pretty grim.

This is a part of my identity. Questions can always arise as to what went wrong and whether it is hereditary. Questions do arise. This is not an

egalitarian society. Pedigree means everything in some circles and something in every circle. That is life. I carry a liability, perhaps even a bad seed. But one can work around something if they know it is there (or in this case that it is not.). Instead I tried to prove myself, which can never be done. And I presumed the playing field to be equal, which it is not. The former breeds resentment because no one else has that onerous chore, and the latter reflects stupidity because it is so palpably false. Relinquishment is a liability. I can handle that. I cannot handle calling it a blessing. We live in reality, not fantasy.

It was clear to me that any interest in my life independent of the Andersens was not to be tolerated. They saw it as wanton disregard for the pain and suffering of Ann. It was her hysterectomy, but my problem. This made me suspicious of anything spontaneous and guilty for not wanting to sacrifice more. It appeared I was lacking an essential quality, some altruistic effluent. I hate their arrogance today and feel that even back then I sensed the injustice of it all. This was too big a responsibility to place on a child, and when faced with a choice between genuine and duty, I saluted—and sacrificed my soul. .

This dynamic caused no end of problems. My life has often been a choice between authentic and politically correct. The essence of this in my childhood was that I could pretend a heritage in exchange for room and board, or follow reality and risk institutionalization. The judge at my adoption asked if I wanted to stay with the Andersens or go to a boy's home—security versus liberty. I do not fault myself for my choice then—Franklin's aphorism about liberty and security was addressed to adults, not children. And I had a dog to think about as well. But the conflict generalized into a pattern that interpreted my natural impulses as dangerous and compliance as secure. Change the authority and repeat infinitely. But at some point I was no longer a child.

My need for honesty was dangerous with the Andersens because they preferred to live in pretend. In the larger world honesty is essential to survival. Gandhi said there is no god higher than truth. Meister Eckhart, a medieval theologian, said, "If God were able to backslide from the truth, I would cling to the truth and let God go." A choice needed to be made. Security without liberty is hollow. Liberty without honesty is precarious. I opt for truth today—and accept the isolation. ("As scarce as truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand," —Josh Billings) The trick to siding with truth is to take personal responsibility for security. Fear is the

greatest threat to truth. It must be contained. And a person does not order himself to be courageous. He is courageous because he has built with brick and stockpiled supplies. Ammunition works better than exhortation.

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My high school years were spent waiting for baseball while playing football, and visa versa. I lived in the next season, the current one never meeting expectations. But the charade continued and the years were lost. My grades survived and I went through the motions but it was hard to find a meaning or purpose. Something was always going to happen around the next corner, in the next relationship. Life happened while I waited for it to begin—probably with my real family, although that was never clearly conscious. Still, that appears to be a legacy of my relinquishment. It is hard not to idealize something that you are never supposed to consider. It becomes all too dramatic with the empty spaces filled by fantasy. Utopia always looks more attractive when the lights are turned down.

College amplified high school. It became apparent my life was a mess, and I changed my major to psychology to address that issue. It did not help. But I discovered sadness, recognizing that nothing was going as expected and finding myself unable to avoid the view. This occurred in the context of a relationship. Elizabeth and I met at Berkeley, but she transferred to nursing school at Stanford and I transferred to San Jose State. She was going somewhere. I was not. We could talk about life, and I could describe my abyss, but it remained disconnected from adoption and seemed defeatist. If this was honest, who would want to hear it? Elizabeth did, but nothing made sense and we drifted apart. Staying the course with the feelings would have worked, but she did not sign on for an identity overhaul. I do not recall specifically how we split. Perhaps I wanted to spare her the dysphoria. Still, this was a genuine relationship. We did not simply make idle conversation.

College became focused when I switched back to premed in my senior year. The idea came from a counselor. I had moved back home, and was working thirty hours a week in a machine shop while attending State. My focus was more on getting my life together than on classes, which I had cut down to the minimum that still qualified as full time. It was not Vietnam yet, but there was a draft.

The medical school idea caught on. It gave me a focus, something more tangible than finding myself, and something less conflicted than adoption. I needed an extra semester to make up physics and chemistry courses.

Classes became my life. I was inseparable from my slide rule and never without a book of practice questions. I was accepted to medical school contingent on my grades remaining stable. That presented no problem. I got the highest score out of 325 students in my physics class, and the highest of 87 in chemistry. This success was perhaps more due to determination than intelligence, but it does make we wonder about my birthparents.

I went to medical school to build my character, an intellectual version of joining the Marines. It seemed impossible to me that a doctor would lack self-esteem. Also, the Andersens believed that my father was a doctor and mother a nurse. My career choice apparently was not a random selection. And medicine appeared to be more of a meritocracy than many other fields. My long suit was not going to be pedigree and family connections. I felt alone in the world and would need a skill to pay the rent.

I attended Washington University in St. Louis. It is one of the top medical schools in the country, but I did not know that at the time. I picked it in part because it was relatively close to Wisconsin, where my birth family likely resided. I did not write on my application that I was interested in world peace or helping people. I told them I wanted medicine to become the best I could be. They did not object, and my test scores must have been good because they accepted me sight unseen.

The school treats its students well. I loved some of my classmates. And medical school was an adventure that would be hard to repeat. But it did nothing for my sense of self and little for my confidence, although I did learn medicine and felt more secure about paying the rent. What did not change was a belief that much about me was pretend (everything on my birth certificate), that somewhere out there reality existed for me (birth family), that I lacked some basic human quality (the Andersen's criticism of me and my default explanation for relinquishment), and that I was capable of egregious behavior (not sacrificing myself for Ann Andersen). These things took their toll, but I worked hard enough (that has never been my problem) and had enough capacity to make it through medical school without incident.

I learned medicine, but nothing changed about my sense of self. A medical degree does not validate a falsified birth certificate. They are different issues and need to be addressed separately. So while I could diagnose and treat a pulmonary embolism, I could not address my own identity issues. And I was sick of the Friday Night Lights problem, the not doing as well in big games. Big games occurred both literally and figuratively—literally on the softball field, and figuratively in any interchange (usually public)

of significant importance. It became obvious that my limitations were more emotional than physical. A softball game pushed me into psychoanalysis.

I shifted in college from baseball to fast-pitch softball. During medical school I played for Johnny Mac Sporting Goods and became their top pitcher. My first year of medical school I lived in the medical dorm and remember coming back from a game one evening to greet much of the class having a meeting in the lobby. This was so me, into sports, not into politics. I thought it signaled the end of my medical career, but really one could coordinate a sport and medical studies, although probably not politics as well. Anyway, I did not quit the team or flunk out of medical school.

I practiced down the street at Graybar Electric, throwing a ball against their brick building. Practice was always fun for me. I could be myself there and visited it often. It was nothing for me to throw a softball several hours at a time. The motion causes no wear on one's arm, quite unlike hard ball, where I have lost 15% extension of my elbow from throwing curve balls. So I worked on my pitching on the weekends. It offered both exercise and escape. Being a workout warrior is not a bad thing, but it should translate into performance. I found little connection between the two. My workouts prevented me from collapsing to zero but did not lead anyone to victory.

We were in a double elimination tournament and the coach held me back for the second game which he considered more of a challenge. But we got into trouble in the first game, and he called on me to finish it. We won, but no thanks to me. The last out was a line drive our center fielder pulled down over his shoulder. The endless hours of practice did not translate into performance. The problem was not physical. It was something else. I was sick of it.

I am going to make a big leap here and claim mental limitations to be comparable to physical. Society does not typically do this. While one might get surgery for a rotator cuff injury, emotional problems are apparently to be solved by will power. One is viewed as a medical condition; the other as a character flaw. This reflects a lack of understanding emotional conflicts. They are conceptual, true, and thus do not show up on an MRI, but they are none the less real. They are diagnosable, describable, and resolvable just like physical injuries, but live in the world of conception, not extension. Still, there are rules in both and thus solutions in both.

Real men are just supposed to just run over emotional problems. So one ignores the signs and develops character traits to cover the emotional reality. This results in secondary problems such as aggression, greed, consumption, and intoxication. These are defensive overreactions, the price

paid for ignorance, and can become a cultural norm. At that level the damage is greater.

Mental health, according to the dualists, is pretty simple:

“Start each day by affirming peaceful, contented and happy attitudes and your days will tend to be pleasant and successful.” —Norman Vincent Peale

“The person who sends out positive thoughts activates the world around him positively and draws back to himself positive results.” —Norman Vincent Peale

Can it get any easier? Think positive and good things will happen. Retreat and become a coward. But impossible means not capable of being achieved, even for the Marines. They just do not write that in their manuals.

I am saying the emotional problems are as significant as physical ones, except that they affect our software more than our hardware, cannot be seen on an MRI, and follow rules of logic rather than rules of physics. They are not character flaws, although they affect character, and they yield better to understanding and coordination than exhortation and condemnation. Moral indignation solves nothing. Understanding does not either, but understanding and action moves toward resolution. It's about learning and letting go.

Several factors contributed to my Friday Night Lights problem. One was the issue that I could not secure family in a business relationship. My answer to everything lay in developing a skill. I would make myself useful. But that is not the nature of a family. A family is close because they share the same biology, history and heritage. They relate primarily on the basis of identity, not service. A family member can pursue her personal truth and be confident the rest of the family will understand and benefit as well. But I would not share any of this. I would simply be useful, like perhaps a weed-eater. No service is going to form that type of connection. My quest was impossible. Perhaps the worst experience of my life was to be successful because nothing else happened. My life did not change at all.

One is not loved primarily because he is useful. Perhaps the opposite is more correct, that he is useful because he is loved. And he is loved because those involved share the same perspective. Individuals become a team and a team is more effective. For me that connection will never be blood. But it can be truth. Either one will work, truth probably better than blood. But my situation entailed neither. And without resolving the pretense about

blood there would be no truth. The answer for me lay not in becoming an All-American. It was in being honest. Employ that and the big games gain a new context. They never offered an avenue to family. They were an impossible project that collapsed en route to inevitability. I was smart enough to sense this, and the imbalance dimmed the lights. This was not character weakness to be suppressed by will power. It was a logical dilemma to be resolved through understanding. Understanding mandated building relationships on shared truths rather than exchange of services. Ones life was not then contingent on making a shot at the buzzer. That was just a game. Truth continued win or lose. And so then did relationships.

A second element was my fear of spontaneity. Of course I wanted to meet my birthmother. Of course that would upset Ann Andersen. She might then kill herself, and I would be charged with something like Crimes Against Human Sensibilities. I would prove my core to be empty and spend the rest of my time awaiting hanging. They did purchase me to compensate Ann for her loss. She had been considering suicide. Perhaps quality people throw themselves on the sacrificial fire for others, but that has never quite appealed to me. I don't mind helping, but mutual destruction makes no sense. Perhaps I was always at the point of rebellion, only one genuine emotion away from Armageddon.

Finally, there was the ever present reality that my life was on hold, awaiting reunion with my birth family. This means I was not really present at the events of my life. That is no way to play a game. Physical talent is one thing. I had a sufficient amount of talent. The coaches kept me in expecting it to surface. But showing up is an important part of winning, and much of me was off somewhere else, unable to let go of what my life should have been.

I do not put this example forward as a final examination of the Friday Night problem. There might be more and further reflection could prove useful. But this is a plausible explanation and it serves as an example of the nature of such conflicts. They follow laws of logic, not biology. The mind lives outside of time and space—where logic dwells. It listens to reasons, not insults.

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I went into psychoanalysis to address my problem. My analyses are best described in a cartoon where a lady lying on the couch says, "I did have this dream where something helpful actually came from of this analysis". I

spent five years with one analyst and the seven in a “training” analysis with another. But they were both designed as therapeutic. Nothing changed about my self esteem. The adoption never came up. The analysts knew about my adoption but did not consider it important. I was a dutiful soldier and if something crossed my mind I said it, but I apparently continued the job of protecting my adoptive mother. They could have asked. I could have wondered. But nothing happened and the analyses were largely exercises in futility. The “training” analysis transpired while I was matriculated at the St. Louis Psychoanalytic Institute. This was no small deal, twenty-five hours of training got crammed into a full-time practice, raising a family, and paying off medical school loans. This training lasted four years. I mention this because it presented a moral hazard to my analysis. I was in training to be a psychoanalyst. I would be earning my living that way. Pursuing an interest in my birth family and discussing that with my analyst still carried the taboo from childhood. I did not think about the adoption and refuse to address it on the couch, but it sat somewhere beyond that, in prehistoric layers.

I felt that ignoring Ann’s sensibilities suggested some moral degeneracy. And someone so insensitive would thereby prove himself to be unsuitable as an analyst. Robbery and murder might have even been more acceptable in an analytic candidate. There were perhaps some things that one presumed and did not discuss. I apparently took this to be one of them.

Again, neither analysis picked this up. And I gained nothing with respect to confidence or sense of integrity. This was an expensive diversion of time. But something else would have taken its place. I could not function as I was and the only thing holding me together was the hope that things would get better. Psychoanalysis offered that hope. It delivered nothing more. So I am suspicious of counseling and its claims. And the more it promises, the more I doubt. People change, but that happens in the context of every day experience. There is nothing magical about theoretical systems or analytic couches. Change is not conceptually complex. But it involves blood, sweat, and tears. And there is no shortcut.

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My life for some time was largely a quest for my birthmother, literally and via transference (unconscious substitutes). We do not, for example, deliberately imagine what a disc jockey looks like but realize it is not what we thought when we see that person on television. This means we have formed a picture of them outside of our conscious awareness. So it was with

my birthmother. I defaulted to a picture of her as a party girl who did not want to be tied down by someone like me. No surprise there.

One week after my adoptive mother died I met Barbara. She had run off to Hollywood as a teenager, partied every weekend, and lived the life I pictured for my birthmother. Typically I did not date someone like this, in part honoring some responsibility to my adoptive mother, but that no longer applied. Ann died and one week later I was in love. (However one views that, it certainly was not coincidental.) Falling in love meant Barbara resembled my image of my birthmother, and I idealized her. We lasted six months. I deferred to her on our activities and was tiring of it. And she was tiring of me. Barbara took up with her boss, and I got interested in my birthmother. Going into this relationship made little sense, but it felt real and I pursued it. I intended to exit the same way, staying with the feelings until they resolved. I cried for six months over her and another six months for my birthmother as feelings about her gradually replaced Barbara. From that point on I was conscious of my wishes to reunite. My reunion was never successful, but not from lack of effort. I have learned to live with never being able to say hello or goodbye to my mother. Accepting that once appeared to be an impossible task. But there are compensations, like perhaps writing this book. And I try to make the most of them.