

After The First Church of God

AFTER THE TIME HE SPENT in the psychiatric ward, my Dad was treated for his cancer at the Veteran's Administration Hospital in White River Junction, near the border between New Hampshire and Vermont. In those days, people with cancer were hospitalized for months. We drove each Sunday afternoon over the winding roads in our unreliable car that pumped exhaust into the back seat and made our stomachs and heads hurt. It was a long ride for my brothers and me, who sat, tired and cranky, cramped together.

When we finally got to him each week, my father was not the same man we knew. He was quiet. He was thin. He seemed more comfortable among pale men in faded johnnies playing sad hands of solitaire than he did with us. His neck was burned from radiation. That redness never did fade.

Ultimately, though, the cancer treatments worked and my father came back to us. He was shaky and weak, and so were we

really; but when we tell the story of those years, we always end with this: He was the only man on his ward who lived.

And though he survived when the doctors said he would die—causing us to confuse him slightly, but forever, with that other immortal, invincible Father we revered—we never did get our old life back. That one I had loved, where my Dad had just become a minister of the church. Where he stood in the pulpit preaching with his deep voice. And I sat proudly in the front row.

Over the months he was away from us in the hospital, my mother had taken a job as a waitress. It was the best job she could find in our small town, serving dinner in a fancy place that catered to the tourists who owned expensive property on the nearby lakes. My mother was friendly. The tips were good. But when word spread to The First Church of God, there was trouble.

The problem was this: my mother was serving alcohol and though she didn't drink herself, that wasn't the point. When my father got out of the hospital, a meeting was called. My parents sat in their usual pew. A vote of the congregation was taken. Hands raised in vote all around them. The numbers were clear. June Young had broken the covenant. She had to leave. And my father walked out the door with her.

Because she thought it the right thing to do, my mother still dropped my older brother and me off at Sunday school each week, waiting in the car while we learned our Bible stories. She didn't want us to have to miss out on church just because she couldn't be there.

Then one morning my teacher told the class that my mother was a bad woman. She used her as an example of sin for our lesson that day. I remember asking my mother, "What does

hypocrite mean?" She couldn't find a way to answer. I started to cry. She set her jaw. That was the last Sunday we went.

And so I, who loved church—who was so close to having memorized the names of all the books of the New Testament, so close to earning the mustard seed necklace and the kingdom of heaven, itself—I too was out.

Over the years I would sometimes ask my father, "So what was it, exactly, that happened?"

And my father would say, "We broke the covenant. They voted us out." And the way he said it—short answer, deep voice, heavy, certain punctuation—made it sound like that was a sufficient explanation. Covenant. Voted. Out. It was never enough for me, that answer. But I didn't know how to get any other.

I remember that covenant. It stated the rules that church members had to agree to abide by. It was written on a muslin cloth that hung behind the pulpit. There were big Roman numerals and words stenciled with heavy black paint. Certain words were done with red paint to make them stand out, but since I could not yet read, I did not know why. I only knew that there were words on that muslin cloth that made it okay to make my mother cry. And to make me cry too.

A few months after we got kicked out, I was standing in the bread aisle at Ellen's General Store. I was looking up and down the shelf for the bright colors of our favorite brand and as I turned the corner, I looked right in the face of my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Esther Nichols. She blushed. And with a slight tremor of—what was it—embarrassment? Disgust? (Might it have been shame?) She turned and walked away.

What had just happened? I had almost said hello. Smiled. I did not yet understand that I was *not* supposed to be glad to see her. And then I was afraid that someone else might have seen her turning away from me. Might agree with it even. And soon, no one in town would speak to me. Not even the ones who thought church was a waste of time.

I wondered if Mrs. Nichols was still in the store. Had I just heard her voice at the cash register saying something to the owner? I wanted to go to my mother, but to do that meant I had to walk past Mrs. Nichols.

Alone, in the bread aisle, I waited and tried not to cry.

How could I tell my mother what had happened? I was only six years old, but I knew enough had already happened to my parents. It would be mean to add one thing more. If I didn't tell them about Mrs. Nichols, it couldn't hurt them. And I was sick of people hurting my parents.

Recently, though, I've needed to talk about it. I try to sort it out. I ask my brothers what they remember. They say, it's over, why think about it now? But I need to understand the ways I still carry those early church experiences. I need to know now.

The first time I gave a copy of the early chapters of this book to my mother, I had been visiting her for several days. I had intended to give it to her sooner in the visit so we could have a few days to talk about it. But I knew I was asking her to move beyond the two sentences, "We broke the covenant. They voted us out," to a much more complicated conversation. I was asking her to help me put aside the cursory answers we'd relied on so long.

But the reality of that conversation scared me, so I waited until the last moment, before I kissed her goodnight, thinking that since I was leaving first thing in the morning I would do

this part now. Tell her I wrote something. Give it to her. We could do the rest later.

In the morning when I opened the bedroom door to the living room, I saw her curled up on the couch, staring out at Red Hill. She was drinking a cup of tea and staring up at that line of trees as if there might be answers there she could decipher.

I poured myself some coffee and went to her. "Nice morning," I said as I gave her a kiss. We were quiet. That's comfortable for us. Then she said, "So, I read your piece."

"You did?" I was surprised. Not ready. I tried quickly to remember what I had said about her. About Dad. About what it was like for a six-year-old girl who got kicked out of the church she loved.

"I never knew how hard it was for you," she began. Then, I heard her choke a huge sob, "I'm sorry . . . I broke . . . the covenant!"

I stared at her. I was incredulous as I watched my mother cry and heave that old shame. I didn't know what to say.

Trying to be funny, to shock her out of it, to do *something* to change this scary moment, I said, "Oh, screw the covenant!"

"Kate!" She scolded me like a child. "Don't talk like that."

I checked myself. This was fragile and rare and important. I mustn't leave what she was saying, but stay with her. *Don't dig a hole, shove her in, and then joke about it. No, I must be with this woman.*

"Mom," I said and reached toward my crying, crying mother. "Mom," I took a breath. "It was a really bad covenant."

She looked up at me, snuffled, and wiped her wet face with the back of her hand. "It was," she said. "And none of them helped me find another way. Not one of them said, 'I'll pay those bills, you don't have to work there.'"

"Oh, Mom," I said and I could see what my need for answers had cost her and would cost us both.

So now we talk. Now that I dare to ask about it, I can't seem to stop.

"Okay, you mean Doris Brown voted you out?" I asked recently. My mother nodded. "But did she still speak to you? I mean, did she vote you out and then stop by for a cup of tea?" My mother seemed confused. I moved on. "Ginny Muzzy? On her third husband? Did she vote you out?"

"Yes!" my mother said and I saw I'd awakened something in her. "And every husband with a girlfriend on the side, and every person who really did drink—but the church didn't know," she added vehemently.

Watching her hands tremble, I felt in that moment like her bodyguard. I am several inches taller than my mother, and stronger by far. I can lift my mother and sometimes, when I hug her, I feel I might squash her with my largeness. But now I feel my strong self running interference on this big, complicated field, opening a path for her to find her way across, and I will go with her.

"Mom," I said calling her back from her thoughts to me. "Your husband was just diagnosed with cancer. They told you he wouldn't live. You had three little kids. You were hemorrhaging. No money. Twenty-nine years old, Mom—that's a *girl*." I shuddered and heard myself pleading. "Did nobody see how wrong it was?"

I found myself losing my breath. It was not like I was sitting beside my mother in the house where she lives alone, years after my father died. It was as if it was thirty-five years ago and I was in the newly finished sanctuary of The First Church of God in Moultonboro, New Hampshire. And I am there, as the

woman I am now. I am my mother's only protector. And I am not going to stand for any of this.

"God," I call out. "Mrs. Nichols, Ginny Muzzy, somebody—please, listen to me." I am crying. "Don't kick my mother out. Please. There are some things we are *never* going to find again."

CHAPTER FOUR

Saving What We Could

IT WAS AROUND THIS TIME we moved to the place that would become the landscape I would rely on all my life. I read somewhere recently that for each person there is an event in childhood that forever marks the life. For me, it was moving to my father's farm.

I call it my father's farm because it was his dream, not my mother's. He had left the church he loved when they kicked out his wife, and had been told by the doctors at the big hospital across the state line that the cancer in his body was terminal.

But then he survived. Three years later, they declared him, miraculously, cancer-free. And so we moved to my father's particular version of Eden.

It had been Martha and Peter Larson's farm, where they raised their chickens and tended neatly planned apple orchards. My Dad wasn't much of a farmer, my mother even less so, but we moved there anyway.

I still don't know how they managed to scrape together the

down payment, but when my father set his mind to it, he could make things happen. He had decided that brooks and ponds and fields and coops and sheds and an enormous main barn were just what we all needed to get our lives back. In many ways, he was right.

What I remember about that house where I grew up is a huge hunk of granite that served as a front step and the squeaking rub of the oak door against the threshold. I remember the living room woodstove, so hot when it was really stoked, you couldn't sit in the same room.

But I have forgotten things too.

I forget the words to the songs my father sang, over and over, with his country and western band, The Woodville Ramblers, as my brothers and I tried to fall asleep at night.

I forget what year it was when my father came home with a Mexican burro that someone was giving away on his favorite radio show, "Swap-Shop." I forget the year, but I remember my mother's reaction when she saw the burro. How she did not even look up from her cigarette and cup of tea, but just stared out the window. And the way her hand shook.

I forget the taste of the rhubarb that grew in our back yard. But I recall the gigantic leaves and stalks, two and a half feet long, and how I once lay under them just to see what the sun looked like shining through those leaves.

And I remember, clearly, the feel of my hand in my father's as we walked past that rhubarb, down to the pond, my Dad and me, with a fistful of cracked corn for the mallards that were his favorite. And I remember thinking that my father was going to make everything come out okay even if people wouldn't speak to us.

It was just us. Mom. Dad. My brothers and me. And the farm. For a long while, it was enough.

My Dad embraced the farm the way he embraced everything in life—fully. He never seemed to be able to do something part way. And it made you love him if you were his kid. It made you crazy if you were his wife.

He bought a couple of Herefords, we named Millie and Martha for the two sisters buried in the little family cemetery at the edge of the orchard. These cows were intended to fill our freezer with fresh meat, but we became so attached to them they lived with us for many years as a lazy, calming presence.

He bought an old bay mare for us kids to ride through the orchards, and a pregnant sheep, just so we could watch it give birth. Moose Evans gave him ninety-nine chickens for free. Thinking that an egg business was a good way for kids to learn about money, my father excitedly brought them home.

It would have been a great idea if we had any serious layers in the group of hens. Most days, we were lucky to get two or three eggs.

My Dad sent away to a catalogue company all the way in California (that magical state where things happened faster than they did here) for fertilized quail eggs. We helped him build the incubators that filled one end of our large farm kitchen. We rigged brooders with light bulbs, wrapped in grid wire, to keep the chicks warm. We sent away to another catalogue for metal food dishes with small holes for their tiny beaks, and waterers that burbled.

My Dad got up those nights to turn the warming eggs. We waited. On our first attempt, out of two dozen eggs, we got one quail. Oh, but what a quail! We watched for hours as he pecked his way around and out of his tiny shell. We wanted so much to help him, to break it open. It would have been so easy. We begged my father to let us reach into the warm compartment and speed things up. "You'll ruin the bird if you do," he

warned. A bird had to do it itself, or it wouldn't know how to survive.

I stood as an omnipotent god, watching, able to help, but not doing a thing. I was wary of such influential power but trusted my father. We waited some more.

Hours later, exhausted and wet, our one lone quail shook off his egg and peered out at us. My father reached his huge hand in to lift the bird, not much bigger than an acorn, into the brooder for its first sip of water. "Hello, Lonesome," my Dad said, smiling, and held the little creature right up to his face. "You done good."

Lonesome lived a good long quail life. We kept him in our kitchen that first spring (pecking at our cereal bowls as we ate breakfast each morning) and later, when our experiments with eggs and incubators proved more successful, with a covey of various quail, grouse, and doves in a big barn room. We rigged the pen with apple branches and pine boughs for the birds to hide in, and fly from floor to limb.

Though we would come to have hundreds of birds, a few cows, pigs, and a goat and horse here and there, Lonesome was always my Dad's favorite. I think he loved him because Lonesome, like my Dad, survived.

Or maybe I am placing my meaning on things he never really thought through. What I know is this: when we stood around the brooder that night watching that bird get itself hatched, my father was teaching us something important about how you start a new life. You do it slowly, and bit by bit, and you just have to wait it through while it happens. He knew it, and we were learning it, and the fact that none of us said anything didn't take away from the lesson. Not even a little.

. . .

My father read that our part of the state used to be full of wild turkeys. He sent away for some eggs, dozens and dozens of them, and once they arrived he set about the tedious incubator schedule of turning and adjusting, turning and adjusting. Twenty-eight days later, we had turkeys. Nearly a hundred. My mother protested that her kitchen smelled like the barn and so we built yet another pen, outside.

The young turkeys grew quickly. We weren't allowed to go see them much, though, because my father was trying to keep them wild. He and his best friend, Ding Martin, were determined to repopulate our state with its native bird.

The morning we let them go had long been planned and anticipated. We got up early and went out to the barn. My Dad lifted the wooden door, and he and Ding moved through the pen with brooms shooing the turkeys out.

A turkey is not a smart bird. Or maybe they were smarter than we were. They knew where to get their two meals a day. Maybe they weren't ready for the beautiful New Hampshire woods that my Dad and Ding offered.

Our job was to run them off our land into the woods across the road. My brothers and I ran all morning, chasing birds, laughing, yelling, and trying like crazy to get them to go, while Ding and my Dad stood smoking near the stonewall, laughing at us all.

A couple of weeks later, Sam Perkins, the fish and game warden, pulled into our driveway in his dark green Fish and Game truck. "Good morning, Dick," he said stepping out. "I wonder if you know anything about these turkey sightings we've been hearing about?"

"Turkeys? No kidding? Isn't that something," my Dad said. He stood there looking concerned and serious, right into the

eyes of that Fish and Game guy, as the turkeys that just wouldn't leave us sat on the branches of our apple trees.

"You know what we're talking about would be illegal, right?" Mr. Perkins asked.

"Yes, I can see that it would," my father replied.

"Well, I guess that's it then," Mr. Perkins said, and climbed back into his truck and drove away. My father watched the truck pull out of the yard, and looked at the turkeys and then at us kids. He smiled. We were starting to see that with truth there was not just one way. And we were also beginning to see that starting anew, when you weren't so sure you could, was one way we might all survive.

*The House
Where the Hardest
Things Happened*

A MEMOIR
ABOUT BELONGING

Kate Scott Allen

DOUBLEDAY
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND