



*One*

# The Orphan



I was born on the side of a two-lane Virginia highway at 1:21 A.M. on February 1, 1983.

Sixteen years later on my birthday, just as he promised, Father gave me a thick manila envelope holding detailed police, paramedic, and investigative reports. Also included were transcripts from several interviews by a detective who perhaps cared more than he needed to.

Most of the documents were cold and sterile.

Some were revealing.

My mother's name was Libby Riffey, seventeen years old. A resident of Forest Pond Court in Centreville, Virginia. She'd been a ward of the Commonwealth until winning emancipation at age sixteen. That same day she accepted a long-awaited



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invitation to move in with her best friend, Christa Abbott, and her charismatic, divorced father, Ken.

The girls were inseparable.

Christa taught Libby to love ballet. The two took classes that Ken happily paid for at a prestigious dance studio in Fairfax. Libby had found a mentor there, a woman who believed she could one day dance professionally. Libby was crushed when her hero was diagnosed and killed by breast cancer in just ten months.

Christa taught Libby to deal with sorrow.

Libby taught Christa to stand up for herself at school.

Christa taught Libby to wear makeup and flirt.

Libby taught Christa how to navigate the Metro system in downtown Washington, D.C.

Christa's father loved both girls, but his affection for Libby was different. Just eighteen months after moving in, Libby was nine months pregnant and looking for a way out. Some suspected, but at the time only Libby and Ken knew with certainty the baby was his.

Only Libby cared.

At thirty-nine weeks she took her 1976 Ford Pinto for a Sunday evening drive. The investigator speculated that the young woman probably drove south on 29, then west on 66 past the battlefields of Manassas and the undeveloped fields of Gainesville. A light rain began to fall as she drove farther west.

The report noted that drizzle had likely turned to freezing

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rain by the time Libby neared the end of 66 and turned south onto 81 into the Shenandoah Valley. She'd taken Exit 298 in Strasburg to Route 11 and turned left, presumably looking to refuel and turn around. But long before she reached a gas station, Libby lost control and the deteriorating road conditions sent her spinning toward the centerline.

She collided head-on with a semitruck carrying leather couches and love seats from North Carolina.

The accident was *weather related* and attributable to *unsafe speeds given the conditions*, the report concluded.

I used to wonder where exactly the collision occurred. Had people said a quiet prayer the next morning when they passed the skid marks and remaining shards of glass too small for the VDOT brooms?

I wondered, too, what my mother saw when the bright lights blinded her. Was she reunited with the ballet instructor she must have still grieved for? Did they dance a familiar routine together?

Perhaps the final seconds were pancaked into one like the hood of her white Pinto. Or did they pass slowly, like those long, uncomfortable closing moments in church when I used to watch the clock from a back pew, waiting for the closing hymn and prayer to end, awaiting all the joy and excitement that called me to the creek at the property line.

Did she find herself weak and afraid, wishing she'd stayed home?

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Did she have time to pray?  
Did she think of me wriggling in her belly?  
Did she see the face of the horrified driver?  
Did she see the face of God?

A signed statement said every agency within fifteen miles responded: Virginia State Police, the Shenandoah Valley Rescue Squad, Strasburg Volunteer Fire Department, and even the town of Toms Brook. But by the time the first trucks arrived, two motorists had already removed Libby from the ravaged, enflamed Pinto. A third man was performing CPR while yet another ran vehicle-to-vehicle looking for blankets.

Three paramedics took over and checked vitals. Libby was in labor and, according to their best judgment, couldn't be transported or even moved to the ambulance without serious risk to mother or baby.

Moments later I was born on the left shoulder of Route 11, approximately a quarter-mile from the exit ramp to Interstate 81, with a dozen strangers watching in the freezing rain. No doubt others watched from the warmth of their cars.

While I was treated in one ambulance, Mother was loaded into another. Both raced north on 81 to the hospital in Winchester, their sirens screaming and lights flashing, radios buzzing with arrival times and protocols. But even I must have known Mother was dead long before they ever left the crash site.

An officer collected items from the glove box and backseat, but an undated note scribbled at the top of a canary copy of

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a sixteen-year-old police report said that the items were soon “misplaced or inadvertently discarded.” Never to be seen again were a map; a purse containing a half package of Trident; a birthday card; a wallet with pictures of my mother and Christa, and her ballet instructor; and a gym bag containing a leotard, two pairs of tattered pink ballet shoes, and an overdue library book: *Baryshnikov in Color* by Mikhail Baryshnikov.

The last item on the report had been found dangling on a silver chain from the rearview mirror: a wooden, keychain-sized white cross.

*Two*

## Sirens



I have always loved the sound of sirens.

When I was five my father picked me up from preschool in the basement of the Presbyterian Church and, because I asked, agreed to take the long way back to his pickup truck. *The long way*. I cannot recall a single time that my father said no to the long way.

The long way. Especially now, years after Father took his own long way Home, the words matter.

Father and I walked past the old Woodstock, Virginia, firehouse most Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays that spring. Yes, it *was* old, but not because I was a kid more enamored with fire trucks than architecture. It was old because Father said so; he remembered walking past it when he was a boy and the Ben

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Franklin Five-and-Dime was still on the corner of Court and Main Street.

My busy-boy mind cheered when Father was too late to register me for the other preschool just a few miles from the orchard we lived on near Route 55 in Strasburg. That preschool looked nice when we visited, and it had the extra-high metal slide with the two bumps that if you went fast enough you could catch air on the second one, but it wasn't anywhere near their town's firehouse. And besides, I doubted the Strasburg firehouse could possibly be as old as the one on Court Street.

The three women who ran the other preschool twenty minutes away in Woodstock said they would be *thrilled* to have me, even though we showed up two weeks into the school year. I didn't know what it meant to be *thrilled*; I only knew they made me feel safe the three days a week I ventured off the sanctity of the orchard.

"You want to walk the long way? Again? And what have you done to deserve taking the long way?" Father took my hand and led me westward on Court Street in the opposite direction of his truck.

I didn't answer because the routine didn't require it. Instead I squeezed his hand three times, giving the Wayne Bevan Family signal for *I love you*.

He squeezed mine back four times. *I love you, too*.

I looked up at him. In moments like those he seemed to

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tower taller than even the tallest trees on our fifty-three-acre apple orchard.

“John, I will never say no to the long way.” He said the words without a smile on his face. I didn’t mind that he didn’t smile much with his mouth. He smiled with words.

My senses stood up when we crossed Main Street, passed the jail, and approached the firehouse. There were six enormous white doors. The first two, built in 1930 according to a special stone placed in the brick wall, kept a pair of antique fire trucks safe from vandals and the elements. The middle two doors, built during the expansion of 1961, held two newer fire trucks. But the last two doors held the newest shiny trucks with the bold flat fronts.

They began to open and an innocent bell sounded.

I ripped free from Father’s grasp and ran toward the gap where I just knew I’d see a fire truck freed of the reflections in the wavy glass windows. I was stopped from behind just as I arrived at the fire truck’s path. Father grabbed the back of my blue fabric belt with one hand and placed the other strongly across my chest, like a thick, taut seat belt at impact. His bony fingers stretched completely across to the ends of my ribs.

Before I could protest, a chorus of angry sirens and horns jumped through the air. I jumped, too, right into my father’s arms. I covered my ears and Father backed us away while the fire engine roared out of the station. It turned right onto Main and punched its impatient siren twice more.

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Father carried me another block in our well-worn path back to the truck. It took nearly that long for my ears to stop ringing.

“Are you alright, John?”

“Uh-huh.”

He set me down on my feet.

“Do I need to tell you what you did wrong?”

I should have answered faster.

“John Bevan, are you *listening*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do I need to tell you what you did wrong?”

“No, sir.”

“That was loud, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know why they blast those sirens and horns?”

I knew, but I also knew he’d tell me anyway.

“They’re warnings, John. Warnings to stay away and warnings to make room.”

I nodded.

“You ever been that close when one was tearing off like that?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, John, they’re a different sort of beast when they’re on duty, aren’t they?”

“Yes, sir.” I jammed my index fingers into my ears and wiggled them. “My ears still sound funny.”

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“That’s normal, John.” He took my hand and we finished the long circular walk back to his truck parked by the Presbyterian Church. After buckling in and starting the engine, Father put his hand on my knee and said, “Some things are better appreciated from a distance, aren’t they, John? Those beautiful rigs are fun to see parked in their firehouse, but when there’s work to be done, we let them do it and stand clear, understood?”

I nodded, even though I hadn’t heard everything he’d said.

“You’re a good boy, John Bevan.”

Normally I would have smiled, maybe even said thank you. But this time I was too busy thinking of my mother.

Had she loved sirens, too?



*Three*

The Orchard



I was four when I first saw the orchard.

It wasn't meant to be permanent. I'd been in three foster homes already, but for "reasons beyond the parents' control," said the pretty caseworker with strong perfume and white tennis shoes on her feet, "things have not gone as agreed."

"I understand," Wayne Bevan said.

"It's good of you to do this." The caseworker straightened the strands that had fallen and messed with the careful part in my dark hair. "He should fit right in, and I'm confident the others will like him. He's a quiet, thoughtful boy."

"We're happy to have him."

"You'll put him to work in the orchard?" she asked.

"Of course, there's always work for one more."



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“Good. It’s just a month,” she insisted, “maybe two, and we’ll have a permanent adoptive family for him.”

“Understood.”

The tall and thin but sturdy man’s name was Mr. Wayne Bevan. He told me I could call him whatever I liked.

I called him Father.

He called me John. Never Bud, Champ, Pal, Tiger, Kiddo, or Cowboy. He said he called me John because John was my name. It was also the name of the EMT who delivered me, and no one had ever wanted to change it after they put it on my bassinets in the hospital’s nursery.

A month passed and the caseworker with the heavy perfume and tennis shoes never called, at least not that I knew. I saw her come by once, after two months, to check on me and report on her office’s progress. Just the two of us went for a walk around the orchard, and she asked me the same questions I’d been asked when staying in other homes.

I overheard their discussion at the kitchen table. “He seems happy, yes? Is he eating? You have a magical place here, Mr. Bevan. It’s just heavenly. Let’s try another few months, okay? And it would make me feel a great deal better, Wayne, if you’d try again to give up the cigarettes. I’m covering for you.”

“Of course,” Father answered, “anything for the boys. I’ll do it.”

Whenever the woman came to check on me she added a few more months and thanked Father for being one of the good

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guys. On one of her last visits she gave Father a fancy ballpoint pen with the words “I did it!” engraved on the side. She also gave him a hug and said loud enough for everyone to hear, “I knew you could quit.”

Eventually she stopped coming at all and before a judge at the county courthouse I became John Bevan. Permanently adopted. Just like Scott and Tim. The son of the orchardist on Middle Road.

Father said we were *survivors*.

*Survivor*. Sure, life on the orchard was hard. But it wasn't the living that was hard, it was the work, and despite my background I never felt like a *survivor*. There were long, grueling days every September, yes, when I felt spent and more like the seasonal workers who picked alongside us than the son of the orchardist who slept in a safe, comfortable bed in the house on the hill. But my childhood wasn't a broken tale of being overworked or neglected. It was a fluid story of red apples, yellow apples, and big brothers.

*The others* the caseworker referred to were two older boys my father cared for on the orchard and also adopted. Just like me, Scott and Tim both called him *Father*. I learned they'd both come from dangerous homes in Richmond, Virginia. They'd also both spent time in the foster system before landing at the orchard about seven months apart.

I was the youngest by six years; maybe that's why I was protected so well, treated so kindly. They taught me the ways of the orchard, where the creek was too deep for swimming alone, and

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how to sleep standing up when the fall harvest took such a toll that we lost sense of whether the sun was rising or setting.

During my first year on The Apple Orchard, as my father called it, Scott and Tim let me walk with them to the bus stop at the end of our long dirt-and-gravel driveway. It was 242 downhill steps from the concrete porch to the first row of trees that ran parallel to Middle Road. Father made us stop at that first row of trees standing guard some thirty feet from the busy country road. It was just a two-lane road, but it saw a lot of traffic as a popular shortcut from Strasburg to the big city of Winchester.

My brothers and I noticed that after every rainstorm a fresh line appeared in the driveway, drawn deep in the gravel and about the width of the heel of a work boot. Tim and Scott said the line was magic, and I played along at first, but I was pretty sure it was man-made.

Some boys would have tempted fate and traffic by venturing into the forbidden space between that line and the road.

I never thought to cross it.

As we waited for the bus Tim taught Scott and me things he'd learned roaming the streets of Richmond. He knew how to defend himself and his friends. He knew how to go hungry for three days without complaining.

More than anything he liked to tell stories about Grandpa Bevan, who he'd known better than Scott, and who I'd never even met.

Tim taught me that Father didn't like to hunt. Thankfully

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he didn't mind if we did, and when my brother got his first rifle it was Grandpa Bevan who taught him to load it, fire it, clean it, and keep it locked away from curious fingers. I heard Father wasn't happy the night Grandpa walked in the front door holding that brand-new rifle. But Grandpa was persuasive, and he and Tim spent the next day practicing on tin cans and milk jugs on the western edge of the orchard.

Practice led to hunting trips that Tim said convinced him he was born two hundred years too late. If he'd had his way, he and Grandpa Bevan would have beaten Lewis and Clark to the Pacific Ocean at the Columbia River.

How I envied all that Grandpa taught him.

Finally the bus rolled into view. But only when it came to a complete stop did my brothers race across the line and up the high steps to their dark green back-row seats.

Some boys would have been embarrassed by their younger brother waving obnoxiously as the driver pulled the door shut and rolled away.

My brothers waved back and pressed their noses against the glass until the bus disappeared over the hill.

When I thought there was no chance of the bus coming back because someone had forgotten their library book or math homework, which never happened, I counted the 242 steps slowly back up the hill and reminded myself that if it was Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, at least I had the firehouse by the preschool in Woodstock.

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Sometimes in the afternoon, if my chores were done before my brothers were home from school, I prepared a snack for them at the kitchen counter. I put peanuts or pretzel rods and mini-marshmallows in plastic bags and met them at the magic line at the bottom of the driveway. When I forgot my own snack they would smile, share, and chase me with the threat of a noogie. But I didn't mind. Sometimes I even forgot on purpose.

My brothers told me detailed tales of cafeteria skirmishes and we trudged like tired Civil War soldiers back up the hill to our split-level green house in the middle of the orchard. If one of them acted ornery I'd puncture a marshmallow with a pretzel and pretend it was a gun. I'd pursue them in and around the trees that lined the driveway, aiming and firing with a "Kapow-pow! You're down, soldier!"

Back then bad moods didn't last long at the orchard.

When I was still five, Father let both my brothers skip school and come to Woodstock for my preschool graduation. The other boys and girls had moms, dads, even grandparents. I had two brothers and a father. None related by blood, all bound by love, all smiling like I'd just graduated at the top of my class from Harvard Law.

When I was seven my brothers taught me to identify the types of apples we grew. I learned the mostly red apples were Red Delicious, Gala, and Braeburn. The greens were easier to remember: They were Granny Smith and tasted good with pea-

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nut butter. The yellows were Golden Delicious and my favorite, Ginger Gold.

I also learned how many apples made a bushel, how many bushels filled the wooden crates or bins, and how many apples we needed to survive each year.

When I was eight my oldest brother, Tim, a high school junior, took me hunting in Timberville. I wasn't allowed to hold a loaded gun yet—Father's orders—but I still felt old and smart and brave when he let me carry a backpack with water, venison jerky, apples, and extra ammo. During lunch we sat on a stump big enough for both of us.

Tim let me hold the rifle.

I remember how heavy it was in my hands.

I remember how scared his eyes looked when he realized he hadn't unloaded it yet.

I remember how he barked at me when I tried putting the scope to my eye and placed my eager finger on the trigger. "You're gonna kill someone, John!"

I remember that one year later during a senior trip to Ocean City, Maryland, Tim drowned.

I cried for days that became weeks. I cried until Father took me to the doctor and asked if there was anything he could do. If I hadn't been crying, I might have been embarrassed that Father asked the question in front of me.

The doctor put his hand on Father's shoulder. "Wayne, you might try asking him *why* he's crying."

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He did, and in the truck driving home I answered, “Who will keep me safe when you’re not here?”

Father pulled to the side of Route 11 and held me in his arms.

I sobbed until my stomach hurt.

“I’ll be here, John. Scott will be here, too. And the orchard will always, *always* be here.”

My throat was so sore and dry I was surprised Father heard me ask, “Can we take the long way home?”

“John, I will never say no to the long way.”

I fell asleep on his lap.

Father buried Tim in a familiar clearing at the highest point on the orchard.

Scott and I dug a much smaller hole next to him and buried the long end of a white cross Father made from the wood of an apple bin.

Father painted it just before every harvest until his last.