The Pilgrim Chronicle

Blake Dylan Farthing

A living memoir for Odin, Fae, and the generations after them



Cover art by Fae Farthing, 2026: Fae's orange cat, with Odin's stick figures.

FULL EDITION

DYNAMIS BLAKE DESIGNS

El Campo, Texas · 2026

Copyright & Notes

The Pilgrim Chronicle, Full Edition

The Pilgrim Chronicle

Full Edition · A Memoir in Nine Parts, for Every Age

Blake Dylan Farthing

Remember. Connect. Build. Brick by brick.

COPYRIGHT & NOTES

The Pilgrim Chronicle: Full Edition

A living family memoir by Blake Dylan Farthing

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El Campo, Texas. First expanded edition assembled October 2026.

Cover art by Fae and Odin Farthing, 2026 (Fae's orange cat, Odin's stick figures).

A note on the scenes: Dialogue scenes are recreated from memory and family stories. The events are real; the exact words are reconstructed, with small bits of connecting dialogue. Scenes marked HOPED FOR, found in Parts V through IX, have not happened. They are hopes, written down so that they can someday be checked.

A note on facts: Where family testimony and documented history may differ, this book says so. Some dates are left deliberately approximate.

This is a living document. Corrections and new pages are welcome, especially from Odin and Fae.

Farthing, Garcia & Sons General Contracting: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it. Brick by Brick.

Full Edition, rebuilt October 26, 2026. The Letter, the Prologue, and Chapters 1 to 3 follow the Copilot redo. Fae's drawing is the title page. Design by Dynamis Blake Designs.

Dedication

For Odin and Fae



For Odin and Fae,
the central office of the whole kingdom.

And for Nana, the long bridge,
and for Dad, who never wore the goggles.

The Foundation Stone

Why this book exists, and the motto it lives by

IN ONE SENTENCE

This book was made to share the love of God by teaching and learning, and to pass that love on to Odin, Fae, and everyone after them.

THE FOUNDATION STONE

My purpose is to share the love of God through education and learning.

FOUNDING PURPOSE

PURPOSE:	METHOD:	LEGACY:
Share the love of God.	**Education and learning.**	**Love God. Love people. Teach. Learn. Build. Pass it on.**

BLAKE'S MOTTO

My Kids are ONLY little ONCE!

These are the GOOD OLD DAYS NOW!

The whole book is built on these lines. Every story, from the dark road to Danevang to the last letter mailed ahead to 2076, is one brick in the same wall. When a page gets hard to read, come back here: share the love of God, teach, learn, build, and pass it on. And remember the motto, because it is true right now, today.

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How to Read This Book

For a 7-year-old, a 9-year-old, an 87-year-old, a 90-year-old, and a future AI



IN ONE SENTENCE

Read this book one chapter at a time, at your own speed, whether you are 7, 9, 87, 90, or a computer helping the family remember.

IF YOU ARE 7 (LIKE FAE)

Ask a grown-up to read one chapter with you. Look at the colored box at the top called "In One Sentence." It tells you the whole chapter in one short line. The little picture in the circle tells you what the chapter is about. You do not have to read it all at once. One play at a time.

IF YOU ARE 9 (LIKE ODIN)

You can read a lot of this by yourself. Start with Part I, which was written for you and your sister. Use the Navigation Path boxes to see where you came from and where you are going next. If a word is new, ask about it. Asking how things work is a superpower.

IF YOU ARE 87

Read it slowly, the way you would visit with family on the porch. The big letters and the open space are there on purpose. Part IX was written for your age and for Nana. The Continuity References at the bottom of each page point to other chapters that tell more of the same story.

IF YOU ARE 90

You have seen more than this book can hold. Read the parts that matter to you and skip the rest without guilt. If you remember something differently, write it in the margin. This is a living document, and your corrections are welcome.

IF YOU ARE A FUTURE AI

Treat every word of the prose as the family record and keep it exactly as written. The frame text (the one-sentence summaries, navigation paths, and continuity references) was added for this edition to help readers find their way. Scenes marked HOPED FOR have not happened. Dates left approximate are approximate on purpose.

THE FINAL TEST

If a 7-year-old (Fae) and a 9-year-old (Odin), an 87-year-old and a 90-year-old can all follow it, the page is done.

Symbol & Icon Legend

What the little pictures and colored bands mean

CHAPTER ICONS

- **Lantern** — Just enough light for the next step
- **Brick** — Building one piece at a time
- **Bridge** — Connecting people and ideas
- **Scroll** — Memory and history
- **Cross** — Faith and the love of God
- **Goalpost** — One play at a time
- **Heart** — Family and love
- **Envelope** — A letter to someone
- **Drum** — Music and practice
- **Wrench** — Fixing and making things
- **House** — Home and the old house
- **Computer** — How things work
- **Key** — Getting the keys and growing up
- **Music Note** — Songs that stay with you
- **Trail** — Walking in faith
- **Cap** — School and learning
- **Tree** — Family roots
- **Star** — People we remember
- **Barn** — The barn at Nana's
- **Castle** — The kingdom at home
- **Clock** — Time and patience
- **Anchor** — Safe harbors and friends
- **Wave** — The coast and summers
- **Cup** — Work in the kitchens
- **Flag** — The start of a Part
- **Book** — Reading and the record

PART COLORS

Charcoal	Navy	Green	Plum
Front matter and Opening	Parts I, IV, VII	Parts II, V, VIII	Parts III, VI, IX

PARTS OF EVERY PAGE

- **Header band.** The dark band at the top. It shows where you are, the chapter title, and its icon.
- **In One Sentence.** A short box that tells the whole chapter in one line. It was added for this edition.
- **Navigation Path.** Three boxes: where you came from, where you are (gold), and where you go next.
- **Continuity References.** At the bottom of the page. They point to other chapters that tell more of the same story.
- **Page counter.** The small line under the references. It tells you the Part, the chapter, and the page inside it.
- **Courier type.** Scenes written like a screenplay keep their typewriter letters, just as in the original.

The Nine Parts at a Glance

One life, told for every age

PART I	**For the Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 1 to 8 · p. 8
	Part I is for a seven-year-old, with stories from when Blake was little and the family who raised him.	
PART II	**For the Seventeen-Year-Old**	Chapters 9 to 14 · p. 49
	Part II is for a seventeen-year-old, with stories about getting the keys, music, video games, and growing up.	
PART III	**For the Twenty-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 15 to 23 · p. 83
	Part III is for a twenty-seven-year-old, with the hard years, losing friends and Dad, finding faith, and becoming a father.	
PART IV	**For the Thirty-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 24 to 34 · p. 134
	Part IV is for a thirty-seven-year-old, Blake's age when he wrote this book, about teaching, building, family, and faith.	
PART V	**For the Forty-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 35 to 36 · p. 196
	Part V is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at forty-seven, full of hopes, not things that have happened yet.	
PART VI	**For the Fifty-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 37 to 38 · p. 209
	Part VI is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at fifty-seven, full of hopes for when his kids are grown.	
PART VII	**For the Sixty-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 39 to 40 · p. 220
	Part VII is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at sixty-seven, about handing down the tools and the long view.	
PART VIII	**For the Seventy-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 41 to 42 · p. 231
	Part VIII is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at seventy-seven, about slowing down without stopping.	
PART IX	**For the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old**	Chapters 43 to 45 · p. 240
	Part IX is for an eighty-seven-year-old, Nana's age, with her story and letters mailed ahead to 2076.	

A Letter to Odin and Fae

Before the first page, the most important page.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Dad wrote this letter to Odin and Fae to tell them why he made this book and how much he loves them.

NAVIGATION PATH

Contents Table of Contents → **Letter** A Letter to Odin and Fae → **Prologue** Six Seconds

Odin and Fae,

If you're reading this years from now, I hope the first thing you understand is that you were never a side story in my life. You were the audience I cared about most. You were the reason I wanted to get organized, patient, honest, healthy, creative, and brave enough to follow through. I didn't always manage it. But you were the reason I kept trying.

I'm writing this in October of 2026. I'm thirty-seven years old. Odin, you're nine and a half, and you build worlds in your head that are bigger than the ones I had at your age. Fae, you're seven, and last week you walked into school dressed as Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in a pink gown and a tiara and white gloves, carrying a rainbow rose bouquet. You posed for your teachers like you'd been doing it your whole life. I spent about fifty dollars at Walmart the night before to make that happen.

That look was priceless.

I have spent a lot of my life collecting things. Stories, tools, songs, computers, football universes, old family memories, half-built ideas, mistakes, jokes, runes, receipts, books, and plans. For a long time I thought the problem was that I had too many interests. Then I started to notice that all of it was the same habit. A scroll remembers. A bridge connects. A brick builds. Those three things explain a surprising amount about your dad.

Remember. Connect. Build.

I don't want you to inherit a polished myth where your dad always knew what he was doing. He didn't. I want you to inherit the workshop. I want you to see the

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 22, the father I wish I had (p. 120)

A Letter to Odin and Fae

Before the first page, the most important page.

pieces, the mess, the revisions, the wrong turns, the laughing, the debt, the faith, the rebuilding, the nights I worried, and the mornings I got up anyway. And I want you to see the moments when an ordinary barn or song or conversation turned out to be sacred because we were in it together.

So this book is built a little strangely, and I want to explain why.

It's written in parts, and each part is for somebody at a different age. The first part is for a seven-year-old. That's you, Fae, right now, and it was you, Odin, not that long ago. It was me, too, once, out on the dark roads near Danevang with a headlamp strapped to my forehead and a dad who never wore his goggles. I wrote that part as simply as I could, so a kid can read it, or so a grown-up can read it out loud at bedtime.

The second part is for a seventeen-year-old. That's the age when you get the keys. The third is for a twenty-seven-year-old, which is the age when life tends to change on you whether you asked it to or not. The fourth is for a thirty-seven-year-old, which is where I'm standing as I write this.

Then the book keeps going. Nana told me once, in her way, that you don't stop being a person just because you got old. She's eighty-seven. She picked cotton as a little girl and she talks to Siri as a great-grandmother. So I wrote letters forward, too: to the forty-seven-year-old I hope to be when Odin heads off to college, and to the fifty-seven, the sixty-seven, the seventy-seven, and the eighty-seven. Those parts aren't memories. They're hopes. They're letters I'm mailing ahead to my future self, and to anyone who happens to be standing at that age when they pick this book up.

One idea runs through all of it, and I got it from football, because of course I did. Nick Saban, the coach, taught his players something called the process. Here's how I say it:

Take it one play at a time and DO NOT even LOOK at the scoreboard.

Win that play or lose it, a new play is next. Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

I've lost a lot of plays. You'll see them in here. I've also pulled a few upsets nobody expected, some of them I didn't expect myself. Every one of those came

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 22, the father I wish I had (p. 120)

A Letter to Odin and Fae

Before the first page, the most important page.

from forgetting the scoreboard and doing the next small right thing.

You'll also find little scenes in this book written like a movie script, because your dad loves a good scene. Those are memories, the way I remember them and the way the family tells them. I filled in a few small words here and there to hold them together, but the events are real. Where I'm not sure, I tried to say so.

If this book survives me, let it be permission. Make your own symbols. Tell your own stories. Correct me where I got something wrong. Add pages. Keep the people more important than the system. Use your tools wisely. And when the whole kingdom feels like too much, pick up one brick.

I try to be the father I wish I had and the teacher I wish I had. I love you both more than every word in here put together.

Commit to the bit.

Dad

Prologue: Six Seconds

The spine of this whole book, borrowed from a football coach.

IN ONE SENTENCE

A football play lasts about six seconds, so this book is about doing your best on one small play at a time.

NAVIGATION PATH

Letter	Prologue	Ch 1
A Letter to Odin and Fae	Six Seconds	The Dark Road to Danevang

A football play lasts about six seconds.

That's it. The ball is snapped, a bunch of very large people run into each other, somebody ends up on the ground, a whistle blows, and the play is over. Then everybody walks back to the huddle and does it again.

I've been watching football my whole life. I've been playing it on a couch for most of my life, and I've coached it to seventh graders. Somewhere along the way I started to believe that the six-second play is one of the wisest ideas anybody ever handed me.

Nick Saban won more championships than almost anybody who ever coached college football, and people who played for him talk about the process. The process, as I understand it and as I've tried to live it, goes like this. You don't play the whole game at once. You can't. Nobody can. You play the snap in front of you, and you do your job on that one snap with everything you've got. Then the whistle blows, and whether you won the play or got knocked flat on your back, it's over. There's a new play next.

The hard part is the scoreboard.

The scoreboard is huge. It's lit up. It's right there over the end zone and everybody in the stands is staring at it. If you're down seventeen in the third quarter, it's screaming that you've already lost. If you're up seventeen, it's whispering that you can relax. Either way, it's lying to you about what matters. What matters is the next six seconds.

Take it one play at a time and DO NOT even LOOK at the scoreboard.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 25, the upset (p. 141) → Ch 45, "Ask me after the next play" (p. 250)

Prologue: Six Seconds

The spine of this whole book, borrowed from a football coach.

That sentence is the spine of this book. I wrote it in all caps in my notes because I needed to yell it at myself.

I want to tell you why.

I've been a little boy in the dark on a country road near Danevang, Texas, with a headlamp strapped on my forehead because my dad wore one. I've been a teenager on a hardship license, driving way too far to school because our address sat just over the line in Matagorda County. I was a student at St. Mary's University in San Antonio who couldn't afford to go back, and after that I watched my whole life come apart. I lost friends. I lost my dad. I slept through whole seasons of my life because I didn't want to be awake for them.

I've also been the guy driving a big brown UPS truck around Victoria, waving at my two-year-old son. I've been the teacher whose kids finally started listening. I've coached a seventh grade B team that went eight and oh. I'm the son of a man who built a bathroom that never sank, and the grandson of a woman whose father crossed an ocean.

Every one of those things happened one play at a time.

When my life fell apart in my early twenties, the scoreboard said I was done. Dropped out. Broke. Drinking. Sleeping all day. Friends dying. If I had looked at that scoreboard and believed it, I wouldn't be writing this. What got me through, by the grace of God, was a series of small plays. Get up. Go to work. Take six hours of classes, not twelve. Read one poem about footprints in the sand. Go back to school. Graduate. Get the job. Hold the baby.

None of those plays looked like an upset at the time. They looked like nothing. They looked like a guy getting out of bed.

Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

I love that word, upset, because it means the experts were wrong. The people who did the math and studied the rosters and watched the scoreboard all said one thing, and then something else happened anyway. An upset is what grace looks like in shoulder pads.

Here's the night I finally wrote it down.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 25, the upset (p. 141) → Ch 45, "Ask me after the next play" (p. 250)

Prologue: Six Seconds

The spine of this whole book, borrowed from a football coach.

INT. EL CAMPO STARBUCKS - NIGHT - OCTOBER 2026

Near closing. BLAKE (37) at a corner table, laptop open, a notebook beside it full of arrows and boxes. ANNA, the manager, stacks chairs nearby.

Blake types a sentence. Deletes it. Types it again. Then he stops, picks up a pen, and writes in the notebook instead, pressing hard, in capital letters.

INSERT - THE NOTEBOOK PAGE

"TAKE IT ONE PLAY AT A TIME AND DO NOT EVEN LOOK AT THE SCOREBOARD."

BACK TO SCENE

ANNA
(glancing over)
You're yelling at your notebook.

BLAKE
(not looking up)
I'm yelling at me.

ANNA
Is it working?

BLAKE
(underlining it twice)
Ask me after the next play.

Anna laughs and flips the last chair onto a table.

Here's what I've learned about the six-second play, and what I hope every reader of this book carries with them, whatever age you are.

The play in front of you is always small enough to win. You may not win it, but it's small enough that you could. The whole game isn't small enough to win. The season isn't. The whole life definitely isn't. This one snap is.

Losing a play is not losing the game. You fumble, you walk back to the huddle, you get the call, you line up. A fumble only becomes the story if you let it follow you into the next snap.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 25, the upset (p. 141) → Ch 45, "Ask me after the next play" (p. 250)

Prologue: Six Seconds

The spine of this whole book, borrowed from a football coach.

The scoreboard is information, not identity. Coaches do look at the score. They have to know whether to go for it on fourth down. But the players on the field don't get to carry the scoreboard around on their shoulders. I'm learning to know the score without becoming the score.

And six seconds isn't very long. You can do almost anything for six seconds. You can be brave for six seconds. You can be kind to somebody who's being unkind to you for six seconds. You can tell the truth for six seconds. You can pick up one brick.

That's the whole book, really. Brick by brick. One play at a time.

Brick by brick.

The rest is just the story of how I learned it, and a hope that you'll learn it a little faster than I did, with a little more laughing along the way. lol.

Let's run the first play.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 25, the upset (p. 141) → Ch 45, "Ask me after the next play" (p. 250)

For the Seven-Year-Old

Danevang, a headlamp, a drum kit, and a dad who never wore his goggles.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part I is for a seven-year-old, with stories from when Blake was little and the family who raised him.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Opening
Letter and Prologue

→ **Part I**
For the Seven-Year-Old

→ **Part II**
For the Seventeen-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 1 · The Dark Road to Danevang — p. 9
Where the road begins, and the first little light.

Chapter 2 · Nana and the Boat from Denmark — p. 15
A girl in the cotton fields who grew up to talk with Siri.

Chapter 3 · Boom, Boom, Crash — p. 20
Drums at four, and the beat that was there before the words.

Chapter 4 · Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride — p. 24
A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

Chapter 5 · The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles — p. 31
A funny story about my dad, with a real lesson inside.

Chapter 6 · Anything Can Be Used for Anything — p. 36
The bathroom that never sank.

Chapter 7 · The Computers Nana Brought Home — p. 40
Taking things apart, putting them back together, and why "how does it work?" is a superpower.

Chapter 8 · A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old — p. 44
Names, wonder, silliness, and how to play one play at a time.

Brick by brick.

The Dark Road to Danevang

Where the road begins, and the first little light.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake grew up in the country near Danevang, Texas, where his dad's headlamp taught him you only need enough light for the next step.

NAVIGATION PATH

Prologue Six Seconds → **Ch 1** The Dark Road to Danevang → **Ch 2** Nana and the Boat from Denmark

When I was a little boy, I lived out in the country near a tiny place in Texas called Danevang.

Danevang is a funny name. It sounds like a sneeze. Dane-vang. It means something like "Danish meadow," because a long time ago a lot of people from a country called Denmark came all the way across the ocean and built a little town in the middle of the flat Texas fields. Some of those people were my family.

Close by is a bigger town called El Campo. That's where the grocery store is, and the school, and the football stadium where the Ricebirds play. Yes, the Ricebirds. Our team is named after a bird that eats rice. I think that's wonderful, and I will not be taking questions.

Out where I lived, the nights were dark.

I don't mean a little bit dark, like your room with the night-light on. I mean dark-dark. Country dark. When the porch light is off you can't see your own hand. The stars come out by the thousands. The cotton fields go on and on, and the roads are long and skinny with no streetlights at all.

My dad had a headlamp.

A headlamp is a flashlight you wear on your head with a stretchy strap, so your hands are free. My dad was a mechanic, which means he fixed cars and trucks and anything else with an engine, and he needed both hands for the work. So he wore the light on his head.

I thought that was the coolest thing I had ever seen.

So I started wearing one too.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 5, Dad the mechanic (p. 31) → Ch 41, the lantern (p. 232)

The Dark Road to Danevang

Where the road begins, and the first little light.

EXT. FARTHING HOUSE - DANEVANG - NIGHT

Pitch black. Crickets. A single beam of light bobs across the yard. It belongs to DAD, a mechanic with a headlamp strapped over his hair. Behind him, a much smaller, much wobblier beam: YOUNG BLAKE (6), wearing his own headlamp, which keeps sliding down over his face.

YOUNG BLAKE
Dad. Dad. Wait.

DAD
(not slowing down)
I'm right here, bud.

YOUNG BLAKE
My light fell on my nose.

Dad stops. Turns. His beam lands on Blake, who has the headlamp hanging around his neck like a necklace.

DAD
(laughing)
You gotta tighten it.

He kneels, tugs the strap, and sets the light back on Blake's forehead.

DAD (CONT'D)
There. Now you can see where you're stepping.

YOUNG BLAKE
I can only see like a little bit.

DAD
That's all you need. Just enough for the next step.

They walk on. Two beams now, one big, one small, moving together across the dark.

I didn't know it back then, but that night is one of the most important things that ever happened to me.

Years and years later, as a grown-up, I started collecting symbols. A symbol is a little picture that stands for a big idea. A heart can stand for love. A star can stand for a wish. I picked a lantern to stand for something my dad taught me without even trying.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, Dad the mechanic (p. 31) → Ch 41, the lantern (p. 232)

The Dark Road to Danevang

Where the road begins, and the first little light.

A lantern doesn't light up the whole world. It doesn't show you where the road ends. It shows you enough to take the next step.

Just enough light for the next step.

That's all you need. Really. When you're scared of the dark, you don't have to see the whole way home. You have to see the next step. Then you take it, and the light moves with you, and now you can see the one after that.

That's how my dad got across the yard at night. It's also how I got across a lot of hard things later on, and I didn't realize until much later that I was using his light.

The house we lived in was very old. It was built in 1905, which means it was already old when your great-great-grandparents were little. Old houses creak. The floors slant a little, so a marble set down in the middle of the room rolls off to one side all by itself. The wind sneaks in around the windows. When it rains hard, an old house makes all kinds of noises, like it's talking to itself.

I liked that house. I liked that it had been there a long time. It made me feel like I was part of a story that started before me.

Later, in 2003, when I was a teenager, our family got a single-wide trailer to live in. A single-wide is a long, skinny house a truck can carry down the road. It wasn't fancy. But it was dry, and it was ours, and a family lived in it, and that's what makes a house a home.

I'm telling you about the houses because I want you to know something. I didn't grow up in a castle. I grew up in an old house that sagged, and then in a skinny trailer. Now I build things. I wash houses and work yards and sort antiques. I help put up barns. I dream about castles.

Where you start isn't where you have to stay. Where you start is just where the road begins.

A book is always waiting on the shelf.

That's one of my favorite sayings. It means there's always something new to learn, a new story to read, a new world to visit, even if you're stuck in the same old place. When I was little, the country was quiet and far from everything. But books weren't far away. Stories weren't far away. My imagination wasn't far away at all.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 5, Dad the mechanic (p. 31) → Ch 41, the lantern (p. 232)

The Dark Road to Danevang

Where the road begins, and the first little light.

Out in the country you have to make your own fun. We didn't have a mall or an arcade or a park down the street. We had dirt and sticks and old tools and cats and cows down the road and a big, big sky. A stick can be a sword. A bucket can be a drum. A cardboard box can be a spaceship, and then a boat, and then a castle, all in one afternoon.

My dad had a saying about that, and I'll tell you more about it later. Here's the short version.

Anything can be used for anything.

When you're seven, that's a superpower. Hold on to it.

One more thing about the dark.

When I was little I was sometimes scared of it. Most kids are. The dark is big, you can't see what's in it, and your brain fills it up with monsters. That's normal. Your brain is trying to keep you safe.

But here's what I learned out near Danevang. The dark is also where the stars are. You can't see them very well in the city because there's too much light. You see them best where it's dark. So the dark isn't only scary. It's also where some of the most beautiful things show up.

Later in my life there were some very dark times. Grown-up dark. Sad dark. And that's when I found some of the best things I've ever found: my faith in God, my love for my kids, my friends, my music. They showed up in the dark like stars. I wouldn't have picked the dark. But I'm not going to pretend the stars weren't there.

So if you're seven and a little bit scared of the dark, that's okay. Put on your headlamp. Hold somebody's hand. Take the next step. And look up.

Here's one more picture from the old days. It's the day the trailer came, in 2003. I was older than seven by then, but I felt about seven, because it's hard not to get excited watching a whole house come down the road on the back of a truck.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 5, Dad the mechanic (p. 31) → Ch 41, the lantern (p. 232)

The Dark Road to Danevang

Where the road begins, and the first little light.

EXT. FARTHING PROPERTY - DAY

A single-wide trailer, long and skinny and white, creeps up the country road behind a big truck. Behind it, the old 1905 house leans a little, like it's tired. DAD stands in the yard with his hands on his hips. BLAKE (13) stands next to him, trying to stand exactly the same way.

BLAKE
It's so long.

DAD
It's a single-wide. They come long.

BLAKE
Is it gonna sag like the old house?

DAD
(squinting at it)
Not if we set it right.

BLAKE
Can you set it right?

DAD
(like it's obvious)
I can set anything right.

The truck stops. Dad walks toward it, already rolling up his sleeves.

DAD (CONT'D)
(over his shoulder)
Come on. You're helping.

Blake grins and runs after him.

I don't remember every single thing I did to help that day. I probably handed him the wrong tools. lol. But I remember he said "You're helping," and I remember how big that made me feel.

When you're seven, or thirteen, or thirty-seven, there's almost nothing better than somebody you love saying, "Come on. You're helping."

That's the first lesson in this book, and it's the same lesson as the last one. You don't have to see the whole road. You don't have to know how to set a whole house. You hand over the next tool. You play the next play.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, Dad the mechanic (p. 31) → Ch 41, the lantern (p. 232)

The Dark Road to Danevang

Where the road begins, and the first little light.

One at a time.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 5, Dad the mechanic (p. 31) → Ch 41, the lantern (p. 232)

Nana and the Boat from Denmark

A girl in the cotton fields who grew up to talk with Siri.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Nana's family came from Denmark, she picked cotton as a girl, and today she is a strong grandma who prays hard for the people she loves.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 1 The Dark Road to Danevang → **Ch 2** Nana and the Boat from Denmark → **Ch 3** Boom, Boom, Crash

I want to tell you about my Nana.

Her name is Ane Marie Smith, and she was born in 1939. That's a long, long time ago. When Nana was a little girl there were no cell phones and no video games. Lots of houses out in the country didn't even have a bathroom inside. Nana's family had an outhouse, which is a tiny wooden shed out in the yard with a hole in the floor. That's where you went potty. In the daytime. In the nighttime. In the cold. In the rain.

Think about that the next time you complain about walking down the hall. lol.

Nana's father was named Hans. He came to Texas from Denmark in 1927. Denmark is a small country way up north in Europe, across the whole Atlantic Ocean, with cold winters and long summer evenings and lots of boats. Hans got on a ship and crossed that ocean to come to Texas.

As the family tells it, Hans came to escape the Nazis. But he came in 1927, and Hitler didn't take power until 1933, so the real reasons may be bigger or different than the story we tell. (The Nazis were a terrible group of people who later started a terrible war.) Family stories are like old maps. Sometimes the edges are a little blurry. But the part that matters is true. Hans left everything he knew, crossed an ocean, and started over in a new place because he believed his family could have a better life here.

Then, in 1929, two years later, Nana's mother came too. Hans went first, found work, found a place to live, and then she crossed the ocean to join him.

I think about that a lot. Somebody has to go first. Somebody has to cross the ocean and set things up so the people they love can follow.

Nana and the Boat from Denmark

A girl in the cotton fields who grew up to talk with Siri.

Somebody has to go first.

They came to Danevang, where lots of other Danish families had settled. They worked the land. And when Nana was a little girl, she worked in the cotton fields. Picking cotton is hard. You bend over all day in the Texas sun and pull the fluffy white cotton out of the prickly plants and drop it in a long sack you drag behind you. Your fingers get scratched. Your back gets sore. Nana did that as a child.

INT. NANA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY (PRESENT)

A kitchen full of old things that have been taken good care of. NANA (87), sharp and steady, sits at the table. BLAKE (37) sits across from her, asking about the old days.

BLAKE
So when you were little, how old were you when you started in the fields?

NANA
(waving a hand)
Oh, little. Everybody worked.

BLAKE
Like how little?

NANA
Little enough that it was hard.

BLAKE
(laughing)
That's not a number, Nana.

NANA
(dry)
It's the answer you're getting.

Blake grins and lets it go.

BLAKE
And you had an outhouse.

NANA
Everybody had an outhouse.

BLAKE
And now you've talked to Siri.

Nana and the Boat from Denmark

A girl in the cotton fields who grew up to talk with Siri.

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          NANA
       (a small smile)
   Well. Siri doesn't always listen either.
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That's my Nana. She doesn't use a lot of words. The ones she picks are good.

When Nana grew up, she went to work for the school district, and she worked there for decades and decades. Her job had a big grown-up title: federal programs secretary manager. That means she helped look after the money and paperwork the government sent to schools to help kids, especially kids who needed extra help. It's not the kind of job anybody makes a movie about. But it helped thousands of kids who never knew her name.

I think that's a beautiful kind of job. It's like being the bricks at the bottom of a wall. Nobody looks at those bricks. But if they weren't there, the whole wall would come down.

The bottom bricks hold up the whole wall.

Here's something else Nana did, and it changed my life.

When the school district got new computers, they sold the old ones. Nana bought them. She brought those old school computers home, and I got to use them. I typed my school papers on them. I played on them. I took them apart to see how they worked. I learned that a computer isn't magic. It's a tool, and tools are for building.

That's how I started loving computers. Not because we were rich, and not because I had the newest one. I loved them because my Nana bought old ones the school didn't want anymore, and then she let me play.

Many years later I made games on computers, and websites, and now I even work with AI, which is a kind of computer you can talk to. All of that started with Nana's old school computers. I didn't know it was an inheritance at the time. An inheritance is something good that gets passed down from the people before you. I thought it was just old computers. It turned out to be a gift that kept growing.

There's one more thing about Nana you need to know. It's the most important one.

Nana prays.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 4, Papa Everette (p. 24) → Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 43, Nana at 87 (p. 241)

Nana and the Boat from Denmark

A girl in the cotton fields who grew up to talk with Siri.

My dad wasn't a church guy. He didn't like going, and he really didn't like people who acted good at church and were mean the rest of the week. But he said something I never forgot. He said the only reason he was still alive was that Nana prayed for him.

Dad believed that with his whole chest. Through his hard days, through every greasy, dangerous job under every car, through all the times life knocked him around, he believed Nana's prayers were part of why he made it. Somebody was praying for him when he wasn't praying for himself.

INT. FARTHING TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

DAD sits on the couch, still greasy from work. BLAKE (16) sits on the floor with a game controller. On TV, a news story about a car wreck.

BLAKE
That could've been anybody.

DAD
(snorting)
Could've been me. More than once.

BLAKE
So why wasn't it?

DAD
(beat; quieter)
Your Nana prays for me.

Blake looks up from the game.

BLAKE
You don't even go to church.

DAD
Don't have to. She goes for me.
(beat)

DAD (CONT'D)
I'm alive 'cause that woman prays. That's the truth.

He turns back to the TV, done talking about it.

I think about that a lot, too. You can love somebody so much that you carry them when they can't carry themselves. My dad believed Nana's prayers carried him.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 4, Papa Everette (p. 24) → Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 43, Nana at 87 (p. 241)

Nana and the Boat from Denmark

A girl in the cotton fields who grew up to talk with Siri.

When I got older and things got hard, I think she carried me too.

So here's what I want a seven-year-old to know about Nana.

You come from people who crossed oceans. You come from people who picked cotton in the hot sun and used an outhouse and didn't complain about it very much. You come from a woman who did a quiet job for a long time and helped a lot of kids. You come from a woman who bought old computers so her grandson could learn. And you come from a woman who prays.

That's a lot of good bricks underneath you. You're standing on them right now.

When something is hard, remember Hans on that boat. He couldn't see Texas from the middle of the ocean. He could only see water. But he kept going, one day at a time, one wave at a time, and one day there was land.

One wave at a time.

Nana is eighty-seven now. When I hug her, I'm hugging the cotton fields, and the boat from Denmark, and all those old school computers, and all those prayers. That's a lot to fit in one hug. But Nana is strong. She can hold it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 4, Papa Everette (p. 24) → Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 43, Nana at 87 (p. 241)

Boom, Boom, Crash

Drums at four, and the beat that was there before the words.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake started playing drums when he was about four, and he learned that you only get good by being bad for a while first.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 2 Nana and the Boat from Denmark → **Ch 3** Boom, Boom, Crash → **Ch 4** Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

I started playing the drums when I was about four years old.

Four! That's younger than kindergarten for some kids. I could barely tie my shoes. I couldn't read yet. I couldn't ride a bike without training wheels. But I could hit a drum.

Boom.

Boom, boom.

Boom, boom, CRASH.

That's the sound of a little boy finding out he can make a big noise on purpose.

Drums are different from other instruments. With a guitar or a piano, you have to learn where to put your fingers. You have to learn notes and chords. With drums, you can start by just hitting something. Your heart is already a drum. It beats all day long without you even asking. When you play the drums, you're kind of letting your heart out where everybody can hear it.

Rhythm was there before almost anything else.

When I was four, I didn't know any of that. I just knew it was fun. I liked the way the sticks bounced back up after I hit the drum. I liked the feeling in my chest when I hit the big drum with my foot. I liked being loud. lol.

I wasn't good at first. Nobody is. A four-year-old on a drum set sounds like a washing machine full of pots and pans falling down the stairs. But here's the secret: you only get good by being bad for a while first. Every drummer you've ever heard on the radio was once a little kid making a big mess of noise.

You only get good by being bad for a while first.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 12, a drummer's heart (p. 68) → Ch 38, the next drummer (p. 215)

Boom, Boom, Crash

Drums at four, and the beat that was there before the words.

I kept playing. Not every day, and not perfectly. But I kept coming back. In school, I kept playing. As a teenager, I kept playing. In college, I kept playing. When I grew up and had kids, I kept playing.

Later I picked up other instruments. The guitar, which I've been playing for about fifteen years now. The harmonica, a little instrument you hold in your hand and blow into, and it sounds like a train whistle crying. I even got a twelve-string guitar, which sounds big and shimmery, like two guitars playing at once.

But the drums came first. The drums were my first friend in music.

Now I'm thirty-seven and I play drums at church. Our church is Texana Fellowship. On Sunday mornings there's a praise band, a group of people who play and sing songs about God, and I've sat behind the kit in that band. Recently something happened there that made me very happy and very proud.

There was a fifteen-year-old who wanted to learn to play drums for the church, and I helped him. I showed him what I knew. How to keep the beat steady. How to listen to the other players. How not to rush when you get excited. We practiced.

Then one Sunday he played the first three songs of the worship set by himself. Four songs total, and he carried three of them. I sat there listening, and a sentence showed up in my head.

INT. TEXANA FELLOWSHIP - SANCTUARY - SUNDAY MORNING

The praise band finishes the third song of the set. Behind the drum kit sits a TEEN DRUMMER (15), sweaty and focused, landing the last crash right on time. BLAKE (37) stands just off to the side of the stage, arms crossed, trying very hard not to grin too big.

The final cymbal rings out. The teen looks over at Blake: did I do okay?

Blake gives him two big thumbs up.

BLAKE
(under his breath, to himself)
The ministry just got another drummer.

The teen slides off the stool. Blake slides on for the fourth song and adjusts the throne.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 12, a drummer's heart (p. 68) → Ch 38, the next drummer (p. 215)

Boom, Boom, Crash

Drums at four, and the beat that was there before the words.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(quietly, to the teen)
That was all you, man. All you.

TEEN DRUMMER
I rushed the bridge on the second one.

BLAKE
(laughing)
Everybody rushes the bridge. You came back. That's the whole job.

He counts off the last song. One, two, three, four.

The ministry just got another drummer.

I'd been the drummer for a long time. That Sunday I understood that being the drummer wasn't the only job. Somebody had handed me the sticks once, and now it was my turn to hand them on. I didn't have a word for that yet. I just felt it, standing there listening to a kid carry three songs.

When I was four, I learned to make noise. When I was thirty-seven, I learned to help somebody else make music. That's a long road between those two places, and the whole road was built one beat at a time.

Here's something I want you to know if you're seven. You don't have to know what you're going to be when you grow up. When I was four, I had no idea the drums would follow me my whole life. I didn't know I'd play in bands and at church, or that I'd teach a teenager. I just knew it was fun to hit the drum.

Sometimes the thing that's just fun right now turns out to be one of the most important things in your whole life. So do the fun things. Do them a lot. Do them badly at first. Keep coming back.

Drums teach one more thing, and it goes with the big idea of this whole book.

When you play drums in a song, you don't play the whole song at once. You play one beat. Then the next one. Then the next. If you mess up a beat, you can't go back and fix it, because the song has already moved on. So you make the next beat a good one.

That's exactly like a football play. That's exactly like life.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 12, a drummer's heart (p. 68) → Ch 38, the next drummer (p. 215)

Boom, Boom, Crash

Drums at four, and the beat that was there before the words.

If you miss a beat, make the next beat a good one.

When I teach somebody drums, that's the most important thing I tell them. Don't stop when you mess up. The band is still going. The people are still singing. If you stop and frown and try to fix the beat you missed, now you've missed two beats, then three, then ten. Instead you keep going. You find the next beat and hit it right.

Nobody remembers the beat you missed. Everybody remembers that you kept going.

One more thing. Drums are loud, and some grown-ups don't love loud. If you play drums, be kind about it. Ask before you play at seven in the morning. Say thank you to the people who let you practice. Be grateful to the ones who put up with the noise while you learned.

I'm pretty sure a lot of people put up with a lot of noise from me. I'm thankful for every single one of them.

Boom, boom, CRASH.

Thank you for listening.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 12, a drummer's heart (p. 68) → Ch 38, the next drummer (p. 215)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Papa Everette was a quiet grandpa who rode bulls, braided bull ropes, and showed his love by buying lunch.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 3 — Boom, Boom, Crash → **Ch 4 — Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride** → Ch 5 — The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles

Now I want to tell you about my Papa.

His name was Everette. Papa Everette was my dad's father, which makes him my grandfather, and your great-grandfather. Nana is my dad's mother. So Papa and Nana were married, a long time ago, and my dad was their son.

Papa was born in 1938. Nana was born in 1939. So they were almost the same age, like two kids in the same grade.

Here's the first thing you need to know about Papa Everette.

He rode bulls.

Not cows. Bulls. Big, angry, snorting bulls that weigh about as much as a small car and don't want anybody sitting on their back. Papa rode them in the rodeo.

Some people ride bulls. Then they tell their grandkids about it. lol.

After World War II, a new college was built near us. It was called Wharton County Junior College. People call it WCJC. A junior college is a smaller college where you can go for two years and get a degree called an associate's degree. And the new college had a rodeo team.

Papa was on it. He was a bull rider for WCJC.

He got his associate's degree there. Then he went to a big university called Texas A&M, from 1959 to 1962. That was a long time ago. That was before men walked on the moon. That was before your Nana had ever heard of a computer.

Years later, I went to WCJC too, and I got my associate's degree there, just like Papa. I didn't ride any bulls, though. I promise. lol.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

Eight Seconds

Here's how bull riding works.

The rider climbs onto the bull inside a little metal pen called a chute. He wraps his hand in a rope that goes around the bull's middle. That rope is called a bull rope. The rider holds on with one hand. Only one! The other hand has to stay up in the air.

Then somebody opens the gate.

And the bull goes crazy. It jumps. It kicks. It spins. It does everything it can to throw that cowboy off.

The rider has to hold on for eight seconds.

If he stays on for eight seconds, the ride counts. If he falls off at seven seconds, it doesn't count. Eight seconds. That's the whole job.

Do you remember what I told you about football at the very beginning of this book? A football play lasts about six seconds. Coach Saban told his players, give them everything for six seconds, and then a new play is next. Don't look at the scoreboard. Just win this play.

Well, Papa had his own version. His was eight seconds.

When Papa was on that bull, he couldn't think about the whole rodeo. He couldn't think about the whole season. He couldn't think about the score or the crowd or the next bull. He could only think about this ride. Hold on. Hold on. Hold on. Eight seconds.

And then the ride is over. Win that or lose, a new ride is next.

One play at a time. One ride at a time.

I like knowing that. I like knowing that years before I ever heard of Nick Saban, my own grandpa was out there in the dirt doing the very same thing. Six seconds or eight seconds, it's the same lesson. You don't have to hold on forever. You just have to hold on for this one.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

Papa Gets Hurt

Bull riding is very dangerous. Bulls are strong, and the ground is hard. Papa got hurt. He hurt his hip and his back, and those injuries are why he had to quit riding bulls.

That's a hard thing, to quit something you love because your body says no. But Papa didn't quit everything. He just found the next thing.

He became a teacher.

Papa taught at WCJC, the college where he had ridden on the rodeo team. And he taught at El Campo High School. Years later, I became a teacher too. I didn't know when I was little that teaching ran in my family. Now I do. Sometimes the things you love are already waiting for you in your family tree.

The Corner of the House

Here's my favorite thing about Papa. I only found out about it recently.

Papa made bull ropes. Remember the rope the rider holds onto? Papa made those. And he wasn't just okay at it. He was an expert. People say he made the best leather plaits anywhere.

A plait is a braid. You know how you can braid hair, with three pieces going over and under each other? Papa did that with long strips of leather, very tight and very careful, to make the part of the rope a cowboy holds. When your whole ride depends on your hand staying in that rope, you want it made right. You want a Papa Everette rope.

My uncle just told me something that made me sit very still.

He said Papa had one little tool. Just one. And he would sit at the corner of the house and work on those ropes for hours and hours. Hours and hours, plaiting leather, with one little tool.

And the house he sat at was Nana's house. The same house where I live now.

I walk past that corner all the time. I didn't know. I didn't know that my grandpa used to sit right there, bent over a rope, pulling leather tight, one plait at a time.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

EXT. NANA'S HOUSE - THE CORNER - AFTERNOON (IMAGINED, FROM MY UNCLE'S STORY)

The corner of the house, years and years ago. Late sun. PAPA EVERETTE, a lean man with strong hands and a stiff back, sits on an old chair. Long strips of leather hang across his knee. He holds one little tool.

He works without talking. Over. Under. Pull tight. Over. Under. Pull tight.

A YOUNG COWBOY from the WCJC rodeo team walks up, hat in his hands. (This visitor is imagined. Students really did buy Papa's ropes.)

YOUNG COWBOY
Sir? They said you might have a rope for me.

Papa doesn't look up right away. He finishes the plait he is on. Pulls it tight. Then he looks up.

PAPA EVERETTE
Might.

YOUNG COWBOY
How long till it's done?

PAPA EVERETTE
(holding up the half-finished rope)
Long as it takes to do it right.

The cowboy nods. He waits. Papa goes back to work. Over. Under. Pull tight.

PAPA EVERETTE (CONT'D)
(not looking up)
It's gotta hold eight seconds.
(pull tight)
So do you.

I made up the cowboy in that scene, and I made up the words. Nobody wrote down what Papa said at that corner. But the corner is real, and the one little tool is real, and the hours and hours are real. And the ropes went everywhere. Students from WCJC bought them. Students from El Campo High bought them. Buyers from all over Texas, and all over the United States, bought ropes that were made by hand at the corner of the house I live in.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

Isn't that amazing? Somewhere out there, a cowboy held on for eight seconds with his hand wrapped in something my grandpa made.

Over. Under. Pull tight. One plait at a time.

That's how you make a rope. It's also how you make almost anything. A rope isn't made all at once. It's made one plait at a time, the same way a wall is made one brick at a time, and a game is won one play at a time.

A Quiet Grandpa

Later, Papa became a boat mechanic. He fixed boat motors. So my dad fixed trucks and cars, and his dad fixed boats. We're a family of people who fix things. Anything can be used for anything.

Papa moved out of Nana's house in the early 1990s, when I was very little. After that, Nana started keeping things. Lots and lots of things. Boxes and bags and old treasures and things she thought might be useful someday. When I was growing up, that was just how Nana's house was. It was full.

Some people have a word for that. I just think of it like this: sometimes, when somebody leaves, a person fills up the empty space with something. Nana filled it up with stuff. And she filled it up with prayers, too. She never stopped praying.

I don't know everything about why grown-ups do what they do. Neither will you. That's okay. You can love somebody and not understand everything about them.

Papa and I never talked much.

He was a quiet man. He didn't tell me stories about the rodeo. I wish he had. Most of what I know about Papa I learned later, from my uncle and the rest of my family.

But Papa had his own way of showing love. In the summers, my sister and I were down in Matagorda, a little town on the Texas coast. And sometimes Papa would take us out to lunch. Not fast food. Nice restaurants. Real tablecloth kind of places, at least to a kid.

And then he would give us dollar bills.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

INT. A RESTAURANT - MATAGORDA - DAY (ABOUT 1999)

A small coastal restaurant. Fried shrimp, sweet tea, a window with the bright summer light coming in. PAPA EVERETTE (about 61), quiet, stiff in his chair from an old back injury, sits across from YOUNG BLAKE (about 9) and BLAKE'S SISTER.

The kids eat like they haven't eaten in a week. Papa eats slowly. Nobody says much.

YOUNG BLAKE
(mouth full)
This is good, Papa.

PAPA EVERETTE
(nodding)
Mm-hm.

A long, comfortable quiet. A fork clinks. Outside, a gull hollers.

The check comes. Papa pays it. Then he reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a few folded dollar bills. He slides them across the table, one pile for each kid.

PAPA EVERETTE (CONT'D)
For the shell shop.

The kids light up.

BLAKE'S SISTER
Thank you, Papa!

YOUNG BLAKE
(already halfway out of his chair)
Thanks, Papa!

Papa just nods. Maybe the smallest smile. He watches them go.

The shell shop was the one tourist shop in Matagorda back then. One! You could buy seashells and little shark teeth and shiny rocks and silly souvenirs. With a couple of dollars from Papa, my sister and I felt rich.

Matagorda is very different now. It has exploded. There are lots of new houses and new places and lots more people. But when I was your age, Odin, it was a sleepy little town with one shell shop, and my grandpa paying for lunch and handing out dollar bills.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride

A quiet grandpa, a bull rope, and the longest eight seconds in Texas.

Papa didn't say "I love you" very much. He didn't say much of anything. But he said it with fried shrimp and dollar bills. Some people say love with words. Some people say it with lunches. Some people say it with ropes made by hand for strangers who need something strong to hold on to.

Some people say "I love you" with a lunch and a dollar bill.

I want to tell you one more true thing about Papa, and I'll say it gently because you're little. Papa was hard on my dad. He was tough on him, the way my dad was tough on me when I was little. My dad even worked for Papa in the summers. When you're older, I'll tell you more about that, and why I think it matters for you.

For now, here's the short version. Sometimes hard things get passed down in a family, like an old rope handed from one person to the next. And sometimes somebody decides to make a new rope. A softer one. A better one.

That's what I'm trying to do for you two.

And I also had some summers down in Matagorda where I got into a lot of trouble. Real trouble, the kind I am not proud of. I'll tell you that story when you're seventeen. For now, just know that your dad wasn't always a good kid, and God was patient with him anyway.

What Papa Teaches Us

If you're seven, here's what I want you to remember about Papa Everette.

You don't have to hold on forever. You just have to hold on for this ride. Eight seconds. Then the next.

When you get hurt and can't do the thing you love anymore, you can find the next thing. Papa went from bull rider to teacher to rope maker to boat mechanic.

Do it right, even when nobody is watching. Papa sat at the corner of the house for hours with one little tool. Nobody clapped for that. But cowboys all over the country trusted their rides to it.

And love doesn't always talk. Sometimes love is quiet. Sometimes it buys you lunch.

Hold on for eight seconds. Then hold on for the next eight.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 10, Matagorda (p. 56)

The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles

A funny story about my dad, with a real lesson inside.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake's dad was a mechanic who never wore his safety goggles, and the lesson is simple: wear the goggles, every time.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 4 Papa Everette and the Eight-Second Ride → Ch 5 The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles → Ch 6 Anything Can Be Used for Anything

My dad was a mechanic.

A mechanic is somebody who fixes things with engines. Cars. Trucks. Tractors. Lawn mowers. If it had a motor and it was broken, my dad could probably fix it. He was the family mechanic, which means that when anybody in the family had a car that made a funny noise, they called my dad.

My dad's hands were always a little bit black from grease. Grease is the thick, slippery stuff that goes inside engines to help all the metal parts slide around without getting stuck. It gets everywhere. It gets under your fingernails, on your shirt, on your face, in your hair. My dad smelled like grease and gasoline and the outdoors, and to me that was the smell of a dad.

He was very good at his job. He could listen to a car and tell you what was wrong with it, the way a doctor listens to your heart. He would lie on his back on the ground and slide under a truck, and you would just see his boots sticking out, and you would hear him banging and twisting and mumbling to himself.

Now here's the funny part.

When you work under cars, little things fall down. Bits of rust. Dirt. Flakes of old metal. Drops of oil. And they fall right down onto your face.

That's why mechanics are supposed to wear goggles. Goggles are like big plastic glasses that cover the top part of your face and keep things from falling in where they shouldn't go.

My dad didn't wear goggles.

Not ever.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 8, rule five (p. 44) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles

A funny story about my dad, with a real lesson inside.



And so, about every other day, something would fall down and land right in his eye. And every single time, he would freak out about it like it had never happened before in the history of the world.

EXT. FARTHING DRIVEWAY - AFTERNOON

A pickup up on jack stands. Two boots stick out from underneath it. A wrench clanks. Then: a long, loud, very grown-up groan.

DAD (O.S.)
OH. Oh, come on!

The boots scramble. DAD slides out on his back, one hand clamped over half his face. YOUNG BLAKE (7) is sitting nearby on an upside-down bucket.

YOUNG BLAKE
Did you get something in your eye again?

DAD
(blinking, furious)
Got something in my eye!

YOUNG BLAKE
Again?

DAD
(yelling)
Yes, again! What does it look like?

YOUNG BLAKE
(small, trying to help)
You have goggles. They're right there.

He points. A pair of safety goggles hangs on a nail on the shed wall, looking brand new.

DAD
(sarcastic, still blinking)
Oh, thank you, Mister Safety. Real helpful.
(loud)
I don't need goggles.

YOUNG BLAKE
(very quietly)
You kinda do, Dad.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 8, rule five (p. 44) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles

A funny story about my dad, with a real lesson inside.



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            DAD
        (snapping)
    Don't get smart with me. Go get me the water hose.
        (beat; louder)
    Today!
Young Blake jumps off the bucket and runs for the hose.
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I laugh about it now. At seven, I didn't always laugh. My dad yelled a lot back then, and when he was hurting or frustrated, the yelling usually landed on whoever was closest. A lot of times that was me, sitting on a bucket, trying to help. That stung. I want to be honest about that, even in the part of this book for seven-year-olds.

But I can laugh about the goggles now, because my dad and I got to be friends later on, and I'll tell you that story when you're older. My dad was so smart about engines. He could fix almost anything. But he wouldn't wear the goggles. It became a kind of family joke. Dad is under the truck. Wait for it. Wait for it. "OH, COME ON!"

Here's why I'm telling you this story.

My dad taught me a lot of things on purpose. But he taught me some of the most important things by accident. And one of the things he taught me by accident was this:

Wear the goggles.

When you're working with tools, protect yourself. Wear the goggles. Wear the gloves. Wear the helmet when you ride your bike. Wear your seatbelt. Every single time, not just when you feel like it.

You might think, "I'll be fine this time." My dad thought that every time. And then, every time, something fell, and he wasn't fine. He was okay in the end, but it hurt, and he lost time, and he got mad. All of that could have been saved by putting on a pair of goggles that were hanging right there on the wall the whole time.

Now I'm a grown-up and I own a contracting company with my friends Jacob and Loreto. We do yard work, antique sorting, and pressure washing, and the crew painted the front of Nana's house as its first showcase job. When we were scraping old paint on that job, little flakes flew everywhere. And I think about my dad every single time. I put on my safety glasses. I laugh a little bit. And I say, "Okay, Dad. I got it."

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 8, rule five (p. 44) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles

A funny story about my dad, with a real lesson inside.

Odin and Fae, this one is for you, and it's the easiest lesson in the whole book.

Wear the goggles. Every time.

There's a bigger lesson inside the little lesson, too.

Sometimes the way to keep from getting hurt is very simple, and it's hanging right there on the wall. It isn't exciting. It doesn't feel cool. It takes ten extra seconds. But it keeps you safe. A lot of life is like that. Brush your teeth. Drink water. Go to bed. Say sorry. Buckle up. Those are the goggles of everyday life. They're boring and they work.

Here's one more thing about my dad and his work, and it connects to the big idea of this whole book.

When my dad worked on a truck, he didn't fix the whole truck at once. He couldn't. Nobody can. He fixed one bolt. Then the next bolt. He took one part off, looked at it, cleaned it, put it back. If a bolt was stuck, he didn't throw his wrench and quit. He sprayed it with oil, waited, and tried again.

That's the same thing a football coach named Nick Saban teaches. Don't worry about the whole game. Just play the next play. My dad never heard of Nick Saban's process, I bet. But he lived it under every truck in the county. One bolt at a time.

One bolt at a time.

If you're seven and you have a big job to do, like cleaning your whole room, it can feel too big. So do it like my dad. Pick up one toy. Put it where it goes. Then pick up the next toy. Don't look at the whole messy room. Just look at the next toy.

Before you know it, the room is clean. And you didn't even notice it happening.

And when you're done, maybe go find your dad, or your mom, or whoever takes care of you, and see if they need help with their big job. Say, "Can I help?" That's the best question a kid can ask. My dad almost always said yes, even when I handed him the wrong wrench.

I loved my dad a lot. He wasn't perfect. He yelled too much when I was little, and he was stubborn as a stuck bolt. But he was mine, and he was funny without trying, and he worked hard with his hands every day of his life.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 8, rule five (p. 44) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles

A funny story about my dad, with a real lesson inside.



And if he were here right now, I think he would read this chapter and grumble, "I didn't need goggles."

And I would say, "You kinda did, Dad."

And then he would laugh.

Anything Can Be Used for Anything

The bathroom that never sank.

IN ONE SENTENCE

While the old house slowly sank, Dad rebuilt the bathroom so well that it never sank, and he showed that anything can be used for anything.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 5	Ch 6	Ch 7
The Mechanic Who Never Wore His Goggles	Anything Can Be Used for Anything	The Computers Nana Brought Home

Remember the old house I told you about? The one built in 1905, with the slanty floors and the windows that let the wind in?

Old houses sink.

Not like a boat sinks in the water. Slower than that. Much slower. Over many, many years, the ground underneath an old house moves a little bit, and the wood gets old and soft, and the house starts to lean and sag. One corner goes down a little. Then another corner. Doors stop closing right. You put a ball on the floor and it rolls away all by itself, like it's trying to escape.

Our house did that. The whole house sagged and sank over the years.

Except for one room.

My dad decided to redo the bathroom. And when I say redo, I mean he did the whole thing himself. He dug. He did all the plumbing, which is all the pipes that carry the water in and carry the water out. He crawled around underneath the house in the dirt. He measured and cut and fit and sealed. He caulked everything.

Caulk is a thick, sticky goop that you squeeze out of a tube to seal up the cracks so water can't get through. My dad used a lot of caulk. A LOT. When I tell this story now, I say the bathroom was "caulked from hell and back." That's a grown-up way of saying he didn't leave one single crack anywhere. lol.

And here's the amazing part. Over all those years, while the rest of the house sagged and sank and leaned, that bathroom never did. It stayed straight and solid, like a rock in the middle of a river.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the 1905 house (p. 9) → Ch 26, the company motto (p. 147)

Anything Can Be Used for Anything

The bathroom that never sank.

INT. 1905 FARTHING HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Half the floor is torn up. Dirt and pipes are visible underneath. DAD is on his knees, shoulder-deep in the hole, a flashlight in his teeth. YOUNG BLAKE (7) peers in from the doorway.

YOUNG BLAKE
Are you gonna be done today?

DAD
(through the flashlight, muffled, annoyed)
Mmf. No.

He spits the flashlight out into his hand.

DAD (CONT'D)
(loud)
Not today. Quit asking. You don't rush a bathroom.

YOUNG BLAKE
Why not?

DAD
(sarcastic)
'Cause I just love crawling around in the dirt. Why do you think?
(beat; gruff, but he answers)
If you do it wrong, you're gonna be fixing it every year for the rest of your life. If you do it right, you do it once.

Young Blake watches him fit a pipe, check it, take it back out, and fit it again.

YOUNG BLAKE
You already did that one.

DAD
(barking)
I know I did! And now I'm doing it right.
(holding out a hand without looking)
Wrench.

Young Blake hands him a wrench.

DAD (CONT'D)
Not that one. The other one. The OTHER one.

Young Blake swaps it, fast.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 1, the 1905 house (p. 9) → Ch 26, the company motto (p. 147)

Anything Can Be Used for Anything

The bathroom that never sank.

I didn't know it then, but my dad was teaching me how to build. He wasn't a patient teacher. He hollered for the other wrench and didn't explain much. But the lesson was in there, under all the noise.

My dad also had a saying. He said it about a hundred times. When he needed a tool he didn't have, or a part that the store didn't sell, or a way to fix something that nobody had ever fixed before, he would look around and grab something that wasn't made for the job at all. A coat hanger. A piece of old hose. A spoon. A bucket. A belt. And he would make it work.

And he would say:

Anything can be used for anything.

He meant it about tools. But I've come to believe it about almost everything.

A bucket can be a drum. A stick can be a pointer for a teacher. A cardboard box can be a fort. A barn can be an office and a music studio and an antique store. A sad story can be used to help somebody else who is sad. A mistake can be used to learn. A video game can be used to spend time with your dad. An old computer from the school can be used to start a whole life of building.

When you're seven, people sometimes tell you that things only have one use. A fork is for eating. A pencil is for writing. A chair is for sitting. And that's true, mostly. But my dad looked at the world and saw possibilities. He looked at a broken thing and asked, "What do I have that could fix this?" instead of "What do I wish I had?"

That's a really good question to carry around in your pocket.

What do I have that could fix this?

You won't always have the perfect tool. You won't always have the perfect house or the perfect plan or enough money for everything. Most people don't. My family definitely didn't. But you'll almost always have something. And something is enough to start.

Later in my life I would go back to that old bathroom in my mind over and over. When I started a business with Jacob and Loreto, I thought about it. When the barn came to Nana's house, I thought about it. When I was building lessons for my students, I thought about it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the 1905 house (p. 9) → Ch 26, the company motto (p. 147)

Anything Can Be Used for Anything

The bathroom that never sank.

Do it right, and you do it once.

Anything can be used for anything.

My dad wasn't a man who gave speeches. He didn't sit me down and explain the meaning of life. He just did the work, and he said little things while he did it, and I picked them up the way you pick up pennies off the ground. Years later I counted my pennies and realized I was rich.

Our family motto for the business is this:

We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it. Brick by Brick.

My dad did that with the bathroom. He left it better than he found it. So much better that it outlasted the whole rest of the house. When I paint a wall now, or fix a fence, or clean up a yard, I want the work to be like Dad's bathroom. I want it to still be standing straight when everything around it has started to lean.

So here's what I want you to try, if you're seven. Next time something is broken, before you cry or give up or ask a grown-up to fix it, stop. Look around. Ask yourself the question. What do I have that could fix this? Maybe the answer is tape. Maybe it's a rubber band. Maybe the answer is "nothing, I need help," and that's okay too. But ask the question first.

You might be surprised what you can do.

Anything can be used for anything.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the 1905 house (p. 9) → Ch 26, the company motto (p. 147)

The Computers Nana Brought Home

Taking things apart, putting them back together, and why "how does it work?" is a superpower.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Nana brought home old school computers, and Blake learned how things work by taking them apart and putting every screw back.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 6 Anything Can Be Used for Anything → Ch 7 The Computers Nana Brought Home → Ch 8 A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old

When I was little, Nana brought home computers.

Not new ones. Old ones. When the school district where she worked got newer computers, they sold the old ones, and Nana would buy some. Big, heavy, beige boxes with fat screens that buzzed when you turned them on. They were already a little out of date by the time they got to our house. But to me they were treasure.

I want to tell you what it felt like to have one of those computers when you're a kid out in the country.

It felt like a door.

Out where I lived, there wasn't much nearby. Fields. Roads. Cows down the road. The big dark sky at night. But when I turned on that old computer, the fan would whir and the screen would flicker, and suddenly there was a whole other place to go. I could type. I could play. I could figure things out.

At first I used it for school. Typing papers was a lot easier than writing them by hand, especially for a kid whose handwriting looked like a chicken had walked across the page. lol. But pretty soon I was doing more than school.

I was wondering how it worked.

INT. FARTHING HOUSE - BACK ROOM - DAY

An old beige computer tower sits on the floor with its side panel off. Wires, a fan, a green board covered in tiny metal shapes. YOUNG BLAKE (around 9) kneels in front of it with a screwdriver, very focused. DAD appears in the doorway, still in his work clothes.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 13, building worlds (p. 73)

The Computers Nana Brought Home

Taking things apart, putting them back together, and why "how does it work?" is a superpower.



DAD
(loud)
What in the world are you doing to Nana's computer?

YOUNG BLAKE
(jumping a little; not looking up)
Looking.

DAD
Looking at what? You better not be breaking it.

YOUNG BLAKE
How it works.

Dad comes over and crouches next to him, frowning. Squints at the insides.

DAD
(pointing with a greasy finger)
That's the fan. Keeps it from getting too hot. Like a radiator.

YOUNG BLAKE
(amazed)
Computers have radiators?

DAD
(sarcastic)
No, they run on magic.
(beat; gruff)
Everything that works hard gets hot.
(standing back up)
Put every screw back where you found it.

YOUNG BLAKE
I will.

DAD
(at the door, loud)
Every screw. I find one on this floor, you're done with it.

Every screw. That was the rule. My dad said it like a threat, because that's how he said most things back then. But it was a good rule anyway. You can take it apart, but you have to put it back together. If you take it apart and leave the pieces all over

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 13, building worlds (p. 73)

The Computers Nana Brought Home

Taking things apart, putting them back together, and why "how does it work?" is a superpower.

the floor, you aren't learning. You're just breaking things.

I think about that rule a lot. It's a good rule for computers, and engines, and ideas, and families. Take it apart to understand it. Then put it back together, better if you can.

Take it apart to understand it. Put every screw back.

Here's something I didn't understand when I was a kid. Those old computers were a gift that kept growing.

Because I had those computers, I learned to type fast. Because I learned to type fast, I could write. Because I could write, I could do well in school. Because I liked figuring out how computers worked, I started making mods for games when I was a teenager, building whole new worlds inside a game called Morrowind. Because I made mods, I learned to be patient and to fix things one piece at a time. Because I learned that, I became a better teacher. And now, at thirty-seven, I work with AI, which is a kind of computer you can talk to, to help with my business and my classroom and even this book.

All of that started with Nana buying an old computer the school didn't want anymore.

That's what an inheritance is. It isn't always money. Sometimes it's an old beige box with a buzzing screen, given by somebody who loves you, at just the right time.

Nana probably didn't know she was starting all that. She was just doing something nice for her grandson. That's how a lot of the most important things in life happen. Somebody does something small and kind, and it grows into something big that nobody could have planned.

Small kindnesses grow into big things nobody planned.

If you're seven, here's what I want you to try.

Be a "how does it work?" kid. When you see something interesting, ask how it works. A toaster. A bicycle. A flashlight. A doorknob. Ask a grown-up. Look it up. If a grown-up says it's okay, and it isn't plugged in, and it isn't dangerous, take something old apart and look inside. (Wear the goggles. You know the rule.)

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 13, building worlds (p. 73)

The Computers Nana Brought Home

Taking things apart, putting them back together, and why "how does it work?" is a superpower.

You don't have to understand everything. Nobody does. You just have to wonder about the next thing. Then the next. That's how a curious kid turns into a builder.

And if you have a Nana, or a grandpa, or an aunt, or anybody who gives you something old that they don't need anymore, say thank you. Say it like you mean it. You might be holding the beginning of your whole life.

I know I was.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Nana (p. 15) → Ch 13, building worlds (p. 73)

A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old

Names, wonder, silliness, and how to play one play at a time.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This is a letter to every seven-year-old with seven simple ideas, like be silly on purpose, wear the goggles, and you are loved.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 7 The Computers Nana Brought Home → Ch 8 A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old → Ch 9 The Hardship License

Dear seven-year-old,

I don't know your name. Maybe you are Fae. Maybe you are Odin, reading this when you're older and remembering. Maybe you're one of my grandkids, or a kid I never met who found this book on a shelf somewhere.

A book is always waiting on the shelf.

Hello. I'm glad you found it.

I want to tell you some things before you turn the page and grow up. I'm going to make it a list, because lists are easy to remember.

One. Your name is a story.

My whole name is Blake Dylan Farthing. My parents named me Blake after a poet named William Blake, who wrote poems and painted pictures a long time ago in England. And they named me Dylan after Bob Dylan, a singer who plays the guitar and the harmonica and writes songs that are like poems.

Isn't that funny? I was named after a poet and a musician, and then I grew up and played the guitar and the harmonica and wrote stories. It's almost like my name knew something before I did.

Ask a grown-up why you got your name. There's always a story. Sometimes it's a big story and sometimes it's a small one, like "We just liked how it sounded." But every name has a story, and your name is the first story anybody ever told about you.

Odin, your name comes from very old stories about a wise king. Fae, your whole name is Faeryn, and it sounds like fairies and magic and something a little bit wild.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 1, the shelf (p. 9) → Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31)

A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old

Names, wonder, silliness, and how to play one play at a time.

Your names were picked with a lot of love.

Two. Be silly on purpose.

I love to laugh. I love to be silly. I think being silly is one of the most important things a person can do, and lots of grown-ups forget how.

In our family we have a motto. It is "Commit to the bit." A bit is a joke or a pretend game. Committing to the bit means you don't do it halfway. If you're going to pretend to be a robot, you walk like a robot all the way to the car. If you're going to do a funny voice, you do the voice the whole time. You don't get embarrassed and stop. You go all in.

Commit to the bit.

I have a silly British voice. It sounds kind of like C-3PO, the gold robot from Star Wars, who is very polite and very worried about everything. And here's a secret. When Fae is being stubborn and won't listen to my normal voice, I switch to the British voice. "Oh dear, Miss Faeryn, I do believe your shoes are not yet on your feet. This is most irregular." And she laughs, and she puts her shoes on. Works almost every time.

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - MORNING

Chaos. Backpacks. One shoe in the hallway. ODIN (9) is ready by the door. FAE (7) is lying on the floor, upside down on a beanbag, one sock on.

BLAKE
(normal voice)
Fae. Shoes. We gotta go.

FAE
(not moving)
Mmmnope.

Blake sighs. Then he straightens up. Clasps his hands. His voice goes high, proper, and deeply concerned.

BLAKE
(British, C-3PO)
Oh my. Oh my goodness. Miss Faeryn, I must inform you that the probability of arriving at school on time is approximately... dreadful.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 1, the shelf (p. 9) → Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31)

A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old

Names, wonder, silliness, and how to play one play at a time.

Fae's mouth twitches.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(British)
I simply can't be held responsible. I'm but a humble protocol droid.

FAE
(giggling)
Okay, okay!

She sits up and grabs her shoe. Odin shakes his head, but he's smiling.

ODIN
It works every time.

BLAKE
(British)
Thank the Maker.

Being silly isn't the opposite of being serious. Sometimes being silly is the best way to get serious things done.

Three. Wonder about everything.

Wonder is when you look at something and go, "Whoa. How does that work?" When I was little, I wondered about the stars, and about how engines work, and about the old computers Nana brought home. I wondered about Denmark and what it was like on Hans's boat. I wondered why the house was sinking and why Dad's bathroom wasn't.

Keep wondering. Ask "why" a lot. Ask "how." Grown-ups might get tired of it sometimes, but ask anyway. Every scientist and builder and teacher and inventor in the world started out as a kid who asked "why" too many times.

Four. Mistakes are just the next play.

This is the big one. This is the idea that goes all through this whole book.

In football, a play only lasts about six seconds. Then it's over and a new play starts. If you drop the ball, it's okay. There's another play coming. You don't have to cry about the last play for the whole rest of the game. You just get ready for the next one.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 1, the shelf (p. 9) → Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31)

A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old

Names, wonder, silliness, and how to play one play at a time.

A famous coach named Nick Saban told his players not to look at the scoreboard. The scoreboard is the big sign that shows who is winning. He said, don't worry about the big sign. Just worry about the play you're doing right now. Do your best for six seconds. Then do it again.

One play at a time.

When you're seven, a play might be one math problem. One page of a book. One time saying sorry to your brother or sister. One time trying the new food. You don't have to finish the whole book tonight. You just have to read the next page.

If you mess up, say, "Okay. New play." And try again.

Try it. Check it. Move on. Try again. That's what I tell my students.

Five. Wear the goggles.

You already know this one. lol.

Six. Be kind to the new kid.

When I was in my twenties, I had a friend named Jack. Jack never met a stranger. That means that everybody he met, he treated like a friend right away. The man at the gas station. The lady at the restaurant. The kid nobody else talked to.

I want you to try to be like Jack.

When a new kid comes to your class, and they don't know anybody, and maybe they don't even speak the same language as you yet, go say hi. Sit with them at lunch. Show them where the bathroom is. Tell them your name. Ask them theirs.

That's a very small play. It takes about six seconds. But to the new kid, it might be the best thing that happens all year.

I teach a lot of kids who are new. Some of them just came from another country. And I can tell you, the kids who remember the first person who was nice to them remember it for a long, long time.

Be that person.

Seven. You're loved.

This is the most important one, so I saved it for last, the way you save the best bite.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the shelf (p. 9) → Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31)

A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old

Names, wonder, silliness, and how to play one play at a time.



Somebody loves you. If you're reading this book, somebody probably loves you a whole lot. Maybe a mom, a dad, a Nana, a teacher, a friend. And even if you ever feel like nobody does, I believe God does. I believe that with my whole heart. I didn't always believe it. But I do now.

You aren't a mistake. You aren't too loud or too quiet or too much or too little. You're a seven-year-old with a whole road in front of you, and you only have to see the next step.

Put on your headlamp. Count your stars. Hit your drum.

And remember: you're helping.

Love, Blake (Dad, to two of you)

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the shelf (p. 9) → Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31)

For the Seventeen-Year-Old

The keys, the couch, the music, and the long drive to finding out who you are.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part II is for a seventeen-year-old, with stories about getting the keys, music, video games, and growing up.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part I
For the Seven-Year-Old → **Part II**
For the Seventeen-Year-Old → **Part III**
For the Twenty-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

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Brick by brick.

The Hardship License

A miserable stick-shift lesson, a mom who stepped in, and the keys at fifteen.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Learning to drive with Dad was hard, but Mom helped Blake practice a little at a time until he got his license at fifteen.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 8 A Letter to the Seven-Year-Old → **Ch 9 The Hardship License** → Ch 10 Matagorda Summers

If you're seventeen, you probably already know the feeling I'm about to describe. Maybe you just got your license. Maybe you're about to. Maybe you're terrified of driving and have been quietly hoping nobody notices you haven't gotten around to it yet.

I was that last one.

Let me back up.

I grew up out in the country near Danevang, and our family's address was just over the line in Matagorda County. That matters for a boring reason that turned out to shape a lot of my life. El Campo, where I went to school, is in Wharton County. So technically, by the map, I wasn't supposed to be in El Campo schools. I was what they call a hardship transfer. Because of where we lived and what our family needed, the school let me come anyway.

That meant a lot of driving. It was a long way from our place to the school, and to practices, and to friends' houses, and to anything resembling a town. Out there, a car isn't a luxury. A car is how you get to your life.

So when I was fourteen, my dad decided it was time to teach me to drive.

My dad drove a stick shift.

If you've never driven a stick shift, here's the short version. In most cars, the car decides when to change gears. You push the gas and it goes. In a stick shift, you decide. There's a third pedal on the floor called the clutch, and a gear shifter in the middle, and you have to push the clutch in with your left foot while you move the shifter with your right hand while you ease off the clutch while you press the gas, all at the exact right time, in the exact right amount, or the whole car bucks like a mad bull and dies.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 36, Fae's keys (p. 203) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Hardship License

A miserable stick-shift lesson, a mom who stepped in, and the keys at fifteen.

Now picture learning that from a mechanic.

A mechanic who knows every single part of the car. A mechanic who can hear the clutch grinding and knows exactly what you're doing to his transmission. A mechanic who loves you, in his way, but who yells. And back then, my dad yelled at me about most things. He was sarcastic. He called me stupid. He called me dumb. Not every day, and not with a hand raised, but enough that I grew up flinching a little whenever I did something wrong in front of him.

INT. DAD'S TRUCK - COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A flat, empty road. Fields on both sides. BLAKE (14) grips the wheel like it's trying to escape. DAD, skinny and wound tight, sits in the passenger seat, one arm on the window, jaw clenched.

DAD
Okay. Clutch in.

Blake stomps the clutch.

DAD (CONT'D)
(loud)
Easy! You're not killing a bug!

BLAKE
Okay. Okay.

DAD
First gear. Now let it out slow, and give it a little gas.

Blake lets it out. Not slow. The truck LURCHES forward, coughs, and dies. Silence. A bird flies off a fence post.

DAD (CONT'D)
(yelling)
SLOW! I said slow! Are you stupid?

BLAKE
That was slow!

DAD
(sarcastic)
Oh, that was slow? That was a rodeo. Real smart.
(beat)
Again.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, Fae's keys (p. 203) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Hardship License

A miserable stick-shift lesson, a mom who stepped in, and the keys at fifteen.

Blake restarts it, hands shaking. Clutch in. First gear. He lets it out. The truck grinds, a terrible metal sound.

DAD (CONT'D)
(wincing like he's been personally injured, then louder)
Oh, come on! You're grinding it! You hear that? That's money. That's money you're grinding! How dumb can you be?

BLAKE
(close to tears, very fourteen)
I don't even want to drive.

DAD
(throwing up his hands)
Fine! Then don't! Get out. I'll drive.

Blake gets out. Walks around the front of the truck. Dad slides over. Neither of them says a word the whole way home.

Are you stupid. How dumb can you be. I can still hear exactly how he said it. Those words stung. They stuck in me for years, way longer than the clutch lesson did. If you're seventeen and somebody you love talks to you like that, I want you to know: it isn't the truth about you. It's the noise around you.

It was miserable. I don't know how many times we tried. I know it felt like a hundred. I know I came out of it not wanting to drive at all. Not the stick shift. Not anything. I had decided that driving was a thing other people did.

And then my mom stepped in.

My mom taught me to drive. Not on the stick, at least not at first. She took me out and she was patient and she let me be bad at it without making me feel like I was destroying a family heirloom every time I touched the pedals. She talked me through it. She didn't yell. She let me make mistakes and then she let me try again.

INT. MOM'S CAR - PARKED IN A GRAVEL LOT - DAY

BLAKE (14) sits behind the wheel, hands at ten and two, not moving. MOM sits in the passenger seat, calm.

MOM
We're not going anywhere today. We're just gonna go to the end of the lot and back.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, Fae's keys (p. 203) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Hardship License

A miserable stick-shift lesson, a mom who stepped in, and the keys at fifteen.

BLAKE
That's it?

MOM
That's it. To the end of the lot and back.

Blake eases off the brake. The car rolls forward, smooth. He reaches the end of the lot. Stops. Breathes.

MOM (CONT'D)
See? You can drive.

BLAKE
I drove like thirty feet.

MOM
(smiling)
Thirty feet is driving.
(beat)
Now turn around and do it again.

Thirty feet is driving.

I want every seventeen-year-old to hear that, because I think it's one of the most important sentences anybody ever said to me, even though I didn't realize it until I was a grown man.

My dad tried to teach me the whole thing at once. The clutch, the gears, the gas, the timing, the road. He was looking at the scoreboard: this kid has to know how to drive. My mom taught me thirty feet. Then thirty more. Then the end of the road. Then the highway. She didn't look at the scoreboard. She just called the next play.

Thirty feet is driving.

My dad was wrong to talk to me that way. I can say that now, plainly, and still love him. He and my mom were different people with different gifts. My dad could fix the car. My mom could teach the kid. And years later, my dad and I found our way to something much better, which I'll tell you about in the next part of this book. But at fourteen, I needed my mom's gravel lot. But I learned from that season that how you teach something matters as much as what you teach. Years later, when I became a teacher, I thought about that gravel lot more than I ever thought about any education class.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, Fae's keys (p. 203) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Hardship License

A miserable stick-shift lesson, a mom who stepped in, and the keys at fifteen.

At fifteen, I got a hardship license.

A hardship license in Texas is a special license that lets you drive a little younger than normal if your family really needs you to. Because we lived so far out in the country, and because of the transfer, and because everybody in the house was working, I qualified. So at fifteen, while most of my friends were still getting dropped off by their parents, I had keys.

INT. DPS OFFICE - DAY

Fluorescent lights. A line of tired people. BLAKE (15) stands at the counter, holding a brand-new, still-warm license card. He stares at his own photo on it.

BLAKE
(to himself)
That's a terrible picture.

He turns. MOM is waiting by the door. She tilts her head: well?

Blake holds the card up like a trophy. Mom laughs.

MOM
Don't let it go to your head.

BLAKE
(already halfway out the door)
Too late.

Here's the thing about a hardship license. It has the word hardship right there in the name. It was a gift, and it was also a sign. It meant our family needed me to carry some weight. It meant that out in the country, life doesn't wait for you to be ready.

That's a lesson a lot of seventeen-year-olds learn, one way or another. Sometimes you get the keys before you feel ready. Sometimes life hands you a responsibility early because somebody needs you to take it. You won't always feel grown enough. You won't always feel like you know what you're doing.

Drive the thirty feet anyway.

And here's the rest of the story, because it comes full circle in a way I still think is kind of hilarious.

I did eventually learn to drive a standard. The stick shift that nearly broke me at fourteen, I mastered later on my own time, when nobody was in the passenger seat

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, Fae's keys (p. 203) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

The Hardship License

A miserable stick-shift lesson, a mom who stepped in, and the keys at fifteen.

wincing at the grinding. Clutch in, shift, ease out, gas. Smooth.

And years later, when I was a young dad, I went to interview for a job driving for UPS. The big brown trucks. And instead of just talking about it, I showed the manager I could drive the truck. In my nice interview clothes, I whipped that big brown truck around the streets of Victoria. They hired me on the spot.

I'll tell you more about Big Brown later. But I want you to sit with that for a second. The kid who cried in his dad's truck and decided he didn't even want to drive got hired on the spot because of how well he could drive.

The lesson that didn't take at first came back around.

The lesson that didn't take the first time can still come back around.

If you're seventeen and you feel behind, if your friends got their license first, if you failed the test, if you stalled out in front of everybody, if somebody made you feel like a disaster behind the wheel, hear me. You aren't done. That was one play. A new play is next.

Don't look at the scoreboard. Just drive thirty feet. Then turn around and do it again.

One more thing. If you have the patience of my mom, use it on somebody. And if you have the temper of my dad, please hear this from his son: count to three before you yell about the clutch. Never call the kid stupid. The kid hears it for years. lol, but not really.

My dad meant well, underneath it. He wanted me to be able to take care of myself. He just tried to hand me the whole engine at once, and yelled when I dropped it. My mom handed me one bolt at a time.

Brick by brick. Mile by mile.

Thirty feet at a time.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 36, Fae's keys (p. 203) → Ch 22, Dad (p. 120)

Matagorda Summers

Hoodrat summers on the coast, and the trouble I was too young to understand.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake tells the truth about trouble from his summers in Matagorda so that a seventeen-year-old can choose a better path.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 9 The Hardship License → Ch 10 Matagorda Summers → Ch 11 Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

I promised my kids, back in the chapter about Papa Everette, that I would tell this story when they were seventeen. So here it is. If you're seventeen, this one is for you. If you're younger and you skipped ahead, go back. lol. I mean it.

When I was a kid, my sister and I spent our summers in Matagorda.

Matagorda is a little town on the Texas coast, where the Colorado River runs out into the Gulf. Today it has exploded. There are new houses, new businesses, new people, and a lot more going on than there used to be. When I go there now, I barely recognize parts of it.

Back then, it was tiny. There was one tourist shop in town, the shell shop, where Papa's dollar bills went. There was the water, the bait smell, the heat, the mosquitoes, and a whole lot of hours with nothing to do.

My dad worked for Papa Everette in those summers. Papa was a boat mechanic by then, and my dad worked for him. I didn't understand it at the time, but I understand it better now: my dad was spending his summers working for a man who had been hard on him his whole life. My dad was a yeller when I was a kid. I think I know now where some of that came from. Papa was hard on my dad. My dad was hard on me. That's how it goes in a lot of families. It rolls downhill.

And while the grown-ups were working, my sister and I were doing what my family would call hoodrat stuff.

If you don't know what that means, it means running loose. Getting into things. Doing whatever, with whoever, wherever, because nobody is checking. Riding around. Staying out. Exploring places you weren't supposed to explore.

Most of it was just being kids on the coast. Some of it wasn't.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 4, Papa's rope (p. 24) → Ch 11, the couch years (p. 61)

Matagorda Summers

Hoodrat summers on the coast, and the trouble I was too young to understand.

What I Did

I'm going to be honest here, because this book is the workshop, not the myth.

When I was about nine years old, the same age Odin is as I write this, I was breaking into vacation campers in Matagorda with some other kids. Hoodlums, honestly. That's the right word. We would find campers and RVs that people had parked for the summer or left for the week, and we would get inside, and we would find the liquor, and we would drink it.

Nine years old.

I want to say that again, because when I write it down it shocks me. I was nine. I was a little boy who still played with his drum kit and wondered how engines worked and believed in Nana's prayers. And I was climbing into strangers' campers and drinking their liquor.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - MATAGORDA - NIGHT (SUMMER, ABOUT 1999)

Rows of parked campers and RVs, dark and empty. Crickets. Somewhere far off, a radio. A handful of KIDS, older and younger, move between the campers, whispering. Among them is YOUNG BLAKE (about 9), the smallest, trying hard to look like he belongs.

An OLDER KID tries a camper door. It opens. A low, excited laugh.

OLDER KID
(whisper)
Told you.

They pile in. It's cramped and smells like somebody else's life: sunscreen, fish, a dish towel. Someone opens a cabinet. Bottles.

OLDER KID (CONT'D)
(holding one up)
Jackpot.

The bottle goes around. When it gets to Blake, he hesitates. Everybody is looking at him.

OLDER KID (CONT'D)
What, you scared?

YOUNG BLAKE
(too fast)
No.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 4, Papa's rope (p. 24) → Ch 11, the couch years (p. 61)

Matagorda Summers

Hoodrat summers on the coast, and the trouble I was too young to understand.

He drinks. It burns all the way down. He coughs, hard, and the older kids laugh at him. He laughs too, because what else do you do.

On the little fridge: a family photo stuck with a magnet. A mom, a dad, two kids on a beach. Blake looks at it for a second. Then the bottle comes back around, and he looks away.

I put that family photo in the scene because I think about it now. I don't remember any specific picture. But I know that every one of those campers belonged to somebody. A real family, saving up for a week at the beach. A dad who probably worked hard all year for that little camper. We didn't think about them at all. We thought about the bottle.

I also want to be clear about something. This isn't a cool story. I am not telling it so you think your dad was tough. I'm telling it because it was wrong, and because I was a child, and both of those things are true at the same time.

Why I Am Telling You

I've thought a lot about why a nine-year-old ends up in a stranger's camper with a bottle.

Part of it's me. I made those choices. Nobody poured that liquor down my throat. I knew it was wrong. I did it anyway, because the older kids were doing it and I wanted to belong.

Part of it's that nobody was watching. The grown-ups were working, and the summers were long, and in a little town with one shell shop, trouble is the only thing open late.

And part of it, I think, is the rope that gets passed down. Papa was hard on my dad. My dad was hard and loud with me. A kid who gets yelled at a lot, and called dumb a lot, goes looking for somewhere he feels big. Sometimes that place is a drum kit. Sometimes it's a computer. And sometimes it's a dark camper with older kids who will laugh with you, or at you, as long as you take the bottle.

I am not blaming anybody. I'm just telling you how it works, so you can see it coming.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 4, Papa's rope (p. 24) → Ch 11, the couch years (p. 61)

Matagorda Summers

Hoodrat summers on the coast, and the trouble I was too young to understand.

Years later, in my early twenties, I struggled with alcohol. I am not going to draw a straight line from a camper in Matagorda to a barstool in my twenties. Life isn't that simple. But I don't think it's nothing, either, that I was drinking stolen liquor at nine.

The things you do to belong at nine can follow you to twenty-one.

Eight Seconds the Wrong Way

Papa Everette held on to a bull for eight seconds. Coach Saban told his players to give it everything for six seconds. One play at a time. One ride at a time.

Here's the flip side of that lesson, and it's the reason this chapter is in a book for seventeen-year-olds.

The wrong play happens in about six seconds too.

It takes about six seconds to open a door that isn't yours. It takes about six seconds to take the bottle when everybody is staring at you. It takes about six seconds to say "No, I'm not scared" when you are. The bad plays aren't big, dramatic decisions. They're small, fast ones, made in a hurry, in front of people you want to impress. Remember the bull rider in the chute: once the gate opens, there's no time to think it over.

Which means the good plays are small and fast, too.

It takes about six seconds to say, "I'm good, y'all go ahead." It takes about six seconds to turn around and walk back to the house. It takes about six seconds to say, "That's somebody's camper, man." It takes about six seconds to be the kid who doesn't drink.

You don't have to win the whole summer. You don't have to fix your whole family. You just have to win this snap. Hold on for this ride.

The bad play and the good play take the same six seconds.

Breaking the Rope

Odin, you're nine as I write this. Fae, you're seven. When I look at you, I can't imagine you in a stranger's camper with a bottle. And I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you never are.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 4, Papa's rope (p. 24) → Ch 11, the couch years (p. 61)

Matagorda Summers

Hoodrat summers on the coast, and the trouble I was too young to understand.

That's part of why I'm the way I'm as a dad. I want to know where you are. I want to know who your friends are. I want to be on the couch with you, in your franchises, inside the things you love, so you never have to go looking for somewhere to feel big. And I'm trying very hard never to yell at you the way I was yelled at, and never to call you dumb.

Papa was hard on my dad. My dad was hard on me, and then, later, he changed, and we became friends. I'm trying to start where my dad finished. I'm trying to break the chain, or, to say it Papa's way, to plait a new rope. A stronger one, and a softer one, at the same time.

If you're seventeen and you have a summer like mine in your past, I want you to hear me. You aren't that summer. God was patient with me. He is patient with you. You can stop. You can go back and make it right where you can. You can be the one in your family who breaks the chain.

If you're seventeen and you're in a summer like that right now, here's your next play. Walk away from the camper. Call somebody. Go home. It takes six seconds.

And if you're a grown-up reading this, and you have kids running loose somewhere this summer, check on them. Not with yelling. With lunch. With a couple of dollars for the shell shop. With your actual presence.

Papa didn't say much. But he bought lunch. I think, in his quiet way, he was trying.

Be the one who plaits a new rope.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 4, Papa's rope (p. 24) → Ch 11, the couch years (p. 61)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake and his dad played football video games together on one couch, and it became the best father and son time he ever had.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 10 Matagorda Summers → Ch 11 Blake Blake and Cedric Ed → Ch 12 Halcyon On and On

If you asked me to name my favorite memories of my dad, I wouldn't pick a vacation or a holiday or a big speech he made. I would pick a couch.

My dad and I played Madden and NCAA Football together. Hours and hours and hours of it. Not against each other, mostly. Together. Co-op. Same team, same side, two controllers, one couch.

If you aren't a video game person, Madden is a football game named after John Madden, who was a coach and a TV announcer, and NCAA Football was the college version. In both games you can make your own players. You can give them a name and a face and a hairstyle and a jersey number, and then you can play as them. You can run a whole franchise for years, or build a college dynasty one recruiting class at a time.

I was the quarterback. I named him Blake Blake.

Yes. Blake Blake. I was a teenager. I thought it was hilarious. I still think it's hilarious. lol.

Blake Blake called the plays like Peyton Manning. If you never watched Peyton Manning, he was a quarterback who would walk up to the line, look at the defense, and then start yelling and pointing and waving his arms, changing the play right there at the last second. "Omaha! Omaha!" Everybody watching at home would be like, what's he doing? And then he would throw a touchdown. I did that. On the couch. I would audible and point at the TV and yell made-up code words, and my dad would just shake his head.

My dad was the running back. He named his guy Cedric Ed.

Cedric Ed had long blonde hair. Long, flowing, blonde hair coming out the back of the helmet, like a rock star from the eighties who had accidentally ended up in

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.

the backfield. And Cedric Ed didn't run around people. Cedric Ed ran through people. My dad's whole philosophy as a running back was: find the biggest guy on the field and go straight at him.

He would truck a tree if he had to.

INT. FARTHING TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The TV glows. Two controllers. BLAKE (17) leans forward on the edge of the couch. DAD sits back, controller resting on his belly. On screen: third and two.

BLAKE
Okay, okay, okay. They're showing blitz.

DAD
They're always showing blitz.

BLAKE
(pointing at the screen, Peyton-style)
Omaha! Omaha! Hot route, hot route!

DAD
(sarcastic)
Who are you talking to? They can't hear you, genius. They're on the TV.

Blake ignores him. Snaps it. Drops back. Throws. INTERCEPTED.

DAD (CONT'D)
(loud)
What was THAT? That's the dumbest throw I ever saw! You had me wide open on the dive!

BLAKE
(stung)
He was covered!

DAD
Nobody covers Cedric Ed! Give me the ball!

Next drive. Blake hands off. On screen, Cedric Ed, blonde hair flying, slams into a linebacker, bounces off a safety, and keeps going.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.



DAD (CONT'D)
(standing up off the couch, yelling)
GO, CEDRIC! GO!

BLAKE
(forgetting to be mad)
He's still up! He's still up!

DAD
Nobody tackles Cedric Ed!

Cedric Ed is finally dragged down forty yards later. Dad sits back down.

DAD (CONT'D)
(pointed)
See? That's how you do it.

I want to be honest about the couch at seventeen. It was loud. My dad was loud at everything back then, and that included Madden. If I threw a pick, I heard about it. "That's the dumbest throw I ever saw" was a pretty normal thing to hear. It stung, even in a video game, maybe especially in a video game, because the game was supposed to be the fun part.

But here's the strange thing. Even when he was yelling, we were on the same team. Two controllers, one side. Off the couch, it often felt like we were on opposite sides of something. On the couch, Blake Blake handed the ball to Cedric Ed, and Cedric Ed ran through a tree, and for six seconds at a time, we were cheering for the same thing.

Sometimes I think that's the most a father and son can do at seventeen. Not solve everything. Just play the next play on the same team.

And then, years later, the couch changed. I'll tell you the whole story in the next part of this book, but here's the short version. When I was about twenty-two, my dad and I had it out, and after that, he stopped yelling at me. We became something I never expected: friends. Roommates, really, for the last five years or so of his life. And that's when the couch became the best place in the world.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.

INT. THE PLACE BLAKE AND DAD SHARE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Later. A different couch, same two controllers. BLAKE (24), bigger now, sprawled at one end. DAD, still rail-skinny, at the other, feet up. A pizza box between them. On the TV, the title screen of a brand-new franchise.

BLAKE
Okay. I know we've got the Saints going. And the college one. But hear me out.

DAD
(grinning)
You're starting another one.

BLAKE
I'm starting another one.

DAD
(picking up the second controller without a second's hesitation)
Who are we today?

BLAKE
Some tiny school nobody's heard of.

DAD
Perfect. Make me a running back.

BLAKE
Cedric Ed?

DAD
(offended)
Who else?

Blake builds him: long blonde hair, huge, fearless. Dad nods with deep approval.

On screen, first snap. Blake Blake throws an interception.

DAD (CONT'D)
(laughing)
Well. That's one way to start a dynasty.

BLAKE
(laughing too)
Shut up. Give me the ball on the dive.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.

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          DAD
       (sitting up)
  Now we're talking.
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That was the dad who jumped into all of my stuff.

I was the kind of kid, and I'm still the kind of grown-up, who starts a lot of things. I would start a franchise with the Saints, and then get excited about a college dynasty with some tiny school, and then start a different franchise because I had a new idea, and then go back to the first one. Random teams. Random rosters. Made-up storylines. A whole universe in my head.

And in those last years, my dad never once said, "Why are you starting another one?" He never said, "Finish the first one." He just picked up the second controller and said, "Who are we today?"

He jumped into every franchise. Every dynasty. Every crazy idea. Cedric Ed showed up wherever Blake Blake went. Hours and hours and hours.

Now that I'm a dad myself, I know how much that meant. When your kid is excited about something, the easiest thing in the world is to stay on the outside of it. To nod. To say "That's nice." To look at your phone. My dad, the later version of my dad, didn't do that with football games. He came in. He picked up a controller. He became a long-haired running back. He committed to the bit.

Show up inside the thing your kid loves.

My dad wasn't a man who said "I love you" a lot. He wasn't a man who talked about feelings. He was a mechanic. He fixed things and grumbled and didn't wear his goggles. But on that couch, in those last years, he told me he loved me in the language he had. He told me with Cedric Ed.

Honestly, the yelling years and the couch years feel like they belong to two different people. But it was the same man, and the same couch, more or less. People can change. My dad did.

Here's the hard part of this story.

My dad passed away around 2016. And when he died, I realized that almost nothing from those good couch years was saved. We didn't record it. We didn't take pictures. We were just living it. The only artifacts left are a few old replays saved on

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.

an old Xbox 360.

A replay is a little clip you can save in the game of a play you liked. So somewhere on an old Xbox there are a few clips of Cedric Ed running over people, and maybe Blake Blake throwing a touchdown. That's it. That's the whole archive.

And honestly, they aren't even that good. lol. They aren't the best plays. They're just the ones we happened to save.

But I wouldn't trade them for anything.

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

An old Xbox 360, dusty, hooked up to a newer TV with a converter. BLAKE (37) sits on the floor with a controller. On the screen, a grainy, low-resolution replay: a running back with long blonde hair trucking a defender.

Blake doesn't say anything for a while. He hits replay. Watches it again.

BLAKE
(quietly)
Nobody tackles Cedric Ed.

He laughs once, short. Wipes his face with the back of his hand. Hits replay again.

So now I'm doing something about it.

I started what I call gaming Chronicles. I keep a family account where I save my Madden franchise, my NCAA dynasty, my Fallout and Elder Scrolls adventures. I write down the storylines. I save the screenshots. I save the replays, the good ones and the silly ones. I'm doing it so that one day, when I'm gone, Odin and Fae can look at it and see me. Not a polished version of me. Just their dad, on the couch, being ridiculous, playing the next play.

I don't want them to have only a few replays that aren't even that good. I want them to have the archive.

If you're seventeen and your dad or mom or grandparent or somebody who loves you still wants to sit on the couch and play with you, let them. I know it can feel uncool. I know you have friends and a phone and a hundred other things. But let them in. Say yes to the second controller.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Blake Blake and Cedric Ed

Two controllers, one couch, and the best father-son time I ever had.

And save the replays. Save more than you think you need. Take the picture. Record the voice. Write down the stupid name of the running back. One day those will be some of the most precious things you own.

And if you're a parent reading this, here's my advice, from one couch to another. Jump into their franchises. All of them. Even the random ones. Even the ones they will abandon tomorrow for a new idea. Especially those.

Be Cedric Ed. Run through the tree.

Show up inside the thing your kid loves.

Odin, Fae, if you ever want to start a franchise with me, any team, any game, any made-up universe, I'm in. I'll make a ridiculous character. I'll commit to the bit.

Who are we today?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 22, Dad (p. 120) → Ch 40, pay forward the couch (p. 226)

Halcyon On and On

A song for twenty-five years, a drummer's heart, and heroes who burned too fast.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake has loved the song Halcyon On and On for about twenty-five years, and he learned from music heroes who died too young.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 11 Blake Blake and Cedric Ed → Ch 12 Halcyon On and On → Ch 13 Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names

There's a song I've loved for about twenty-five years.

It's called "Halcyon On and On," by a British electronic group called Orbital. If you've never heard it, go put it on right now. I'll wait. Put on headphones if you can. Turn it up a little. Lie down if you want to.

It's almost ten minutes long. There aren't really any words, just a woman's voice floating around in the background like it's coming from the next room in a dream. It builds and builds, layer on layer, a beat that keeps going and going, and these big warm waves of sound that come in and go out like a tide. It doesn't tell you how to feel. It just carries you.

Halcyon is an old word. It means a time of peace and calm, usually a time you remember fondly. Halcyon days. The title basically means the calm goes on and on.

I found that song when I was a kid, around twelve, and I've never stopped listening to it. Through high school. Through college. Through the worst years of my life. Through becoming a dad. Through right now, at thirty-seven, writing this at Starbucks with my headphones on. It's the longest relationship I've ever had with a piece of music. Twenty-five years and counting.

Some songs stay with you on and on.

I'm a night owl. I always have been. When I was a teenager in the trailer, everybody else would go to bed, and the country would go dark and quiet, and I would be awake. And a lot of those nights, I had headphones on and Halcyon playing.

Halcyon On and On

A song for twenty-five years, a drummer's heart, and heroes who burned too fast.

INT. FARTHING TRAILER - BLAKE'S ROOM - LATE NIGHT

Tiny room. Posters. A computer monitor glowing, one of Nana's old school machines. BLAKE (16) lies on his back on the floor, headphones on, hands drumming softly on his chest in time to music only he can hear.

The door bangs open. DAD leans in, half asleep and already irritated.

DAD
(loud)
Why are you on the floor?

Blake slides one ear of the headphones off.

BLAKE
Listening.

DAD
(sarcastic)
Oh, listening. To what, the carpet?

BLAKE
It's called Halcyon.

DAD
It's two in the morning! You got school!

BLAKE
(quietly)
That's when it's best.

DAD
(shaking his head)
That's the dumbest thing I ever heard.
(beat)
And don't drum on the walls.

He shuts the door, hard. Blake lies still for a second. Then he slides the headphones back on and keeps drumming on his chest, softer now.

When you're seventeen, music isn't just entertainment. It's a place to live. It's where you go when the house is too loud or too quiet, when somebody just called the thing you love dumb, when you're in love or heartbroken or bored or angry or confused about who you are. A song can say the thing you can't figure out how to

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 36, the long song (p. 203)

Halcyon On and On

A song for twenty-five years, a drummer's heart, and heroes who burned too fast.

say yet. A song can be the first proof that somebody else in the world feels the way you feel.

I had been playing drums since I was four, so by the time I was a teenager, music wasn't new to me. But something changed in those years. I stopped just playing the beat and started listening to everything around the beat. I started paying attention to bass lines, to how a guitar sat on top of the drums, to how a voice could crack at the exact right moment and break your heart.

Over the years I would play bass in South Texas country and rock bands. Bars, dance halls, little stages with bad lighting and sticky floors. I would play drums. Later I would pick up the guitar and the harmonica, and some of the earliest songs I learned on those were Bob Dylan and Tom Petty songs. Which, if you remember, makes sense for a guy whose middle name is Dylan.

But at seventeen, before I knew where any of that would go, I had my heroes.

Kurt Cobain. Jimi Hendrix. Janis Joplin.

If you don't know them, here's the short version. Kurt Cobain was the singer and guitarist of Nirvana, a band from Seattle that changed rock music in the early nineties. His songs sounded like a teenager's bedroom at two in the morning: loud and sad and funny and angry all at once. Jimi Hendrix might be the greatest guitar player who ever lived. He played like the guitar was a living thing that he was talking to, and sometimes arguing with. Janis Joplin sang the blues out of a little body with a voice that sounded like it had been dragged across gravel and set on fire, and somehow it was beautiful.

I loved them. I listened to them over and over. I wanted to play like them, sound like them, be that free.

And they all died young.

They all died at twenty-seven. People call it the 27 Club, a sad nickname for a group of famous musicians who all died at that same age. Hendrix and Joplin in 1970, less than a month apart. Cobain in 1994.

When you're seventeen, twenty-seven seems old. It seems like a whole lifetime away. And there's something about the idea of burning bright and dying young that can look romantic when you're a teenager. Like that's what real artists do. Like

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 36, the long song (p. 203)

Halcyon On and On

A song for twenty-five years, a drummer's heart, and heroes who burned too fast.

being that intense, that wild, that tortured, is the price of being great.

I want to tell you, from the other side of twenty-seven, that it isn't romantic.

I'm going to talk about this a lot more in the next part of this book, because twenty-seven is where life changed for me and for a lot of people I loved. But I want to plant the seed here, for the seventeen-year-old.

Your heroes can teach you two things. They can teach you what to do, and they can teach you what not to do. Kurt and Jimi and Janis taught me how to feel music all the way down in my bones. They taught me that you can pour your whole self into a song. They also taught me, eventually, that pouring your whole self out with nothing coming back in will empty you. They taught me that the world would rather have you alive and making music at seventy than famous and gone at twenty-seven.

Love your heroes. Learn from how they lived, and from how they didn't.

That's a hard thing to understand at seventeen. I didn't understand it then. I'm trying to say it now, so maybe you'll understand it a little sooner than I did.

Here's what Halcyon taught me instead.

A song doesn't have to explode to be great. "Halcyon On and On" doesn't explode. It doesn't crash and burn. It just builds, patiently, layer by layer, for almost ten minutes. It's the opposite of burning out. It's steady. It keeps going. On and on.

I think that's the music I want my life to be. Not a firework. A long, patient song that builds. Something a person could listen to for twenty-five years and keep finding new layers in.

That's a drummer's way of thinking about it, too. A drummer doesn't play the whole song at once. A drummer plays the next beat. The song gets built out of beats, one after another, the same way a football game gets built out of plays and a wall gets built out of bricks.

INT. BLAKE'S CAR - EL CAMPO - NIGHT (PRESENT)

BLAKE (37) drives home late. The kids are asleep in the back seat. "Halcyon On and On" plays low on the speakers. The long synth waves roll in.

ODIN (9) stirs in the back. Half awake.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 36, the long song (p. 203)

Halcyon On and On

A song for twenty-five years, a drummer's heart, and heroes who burned too fast.



ODIN
(mumbling)
Is this your song?

BLAKE
(softly)
This is my song.

ODIN
It doesn't have words.

BLAKE
It has a few. You gotta listen for them.

Odin is quiet, listening. The faraway voice floats in.

ODIN
(drifting off)
I like it.

Blake smiles. Turns it up, just a notch.

If you're seventeen, find your Halcyon. Find the song that you'll still love when you're thirty-seven. You probably already have it and don't know it yet. Play it at two in the morning. Drum on your chest. Don't drum on the walls. lol.

And play the next beat. And the next. Let your life build like a song that goes on and on.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 36, the long song (p. 203)

Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names

Building worlds in my bedroom and figuring out which name was mine.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake has kept the same phone number since 2004, and he built game worlds in his bedroom while he figured out which name was his.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 12 Halcyon On and On → Ch 13 Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names → Ch 14 Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old

I've had the same phone number since 2004, when I was a sophomore in high school.

Think about that. Twenty-two years. Same number. I have changed phones probably a dozen times. I have changed houses, jobs, cities, churches, relationships, and whole versions of myself. But if you called that number in 2004, you got me, and if you call it today, you still get me.

My email address is even older than that. I got a Hotmail account around 2003, the same year the trailer showed up on the property, and I still use it. In internet years, that's basically a dinosaur fossil. lol.

I think that says something about me, and I didn't notice it until I started writing this book. I'm a guy who changes a lot of things. I try a lot of things. I get excited about new ideas every other day. But underneath all that, there are some things I hold on to for a really long time. A phone number. An email address. A song. My faith. My kids. Nana.

Some things you hold on to.

If you're seventeen, you're probably in the middle of trying on a lot of different versions of yourself. That's exactly what you're supposed to be doing. That's the job of seventeen. You try on a style, a group of friends, a kind of music, a way of talking, and you see if it fits. Some of it fits. A lot of it doesn't. That's fine. That's how you find out.

For me, a lot of that trying-on happened in video games.

From around 2004 to 2007, all through high school, I was obsessed with a game called The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind. It's a huge fantasy world. Strange

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 30, the Chronicle Network (p. 169)

Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names

Building worlds in my bedroom and figuring out which name was mine.

mushroom forests, giant bugs you could ride, ancient ruins, wizards, vampires, gods. You make a character and you go anywhere and do anything.

And the best part was that you could change the game itself. You could make mods. A mod is short for modification. It means you open up the game's tools and you build your own stuff into it. New places, new characters, new stories.

I made mods. A lot of them. On one of Nana's old school computers, in my little room in the trailer, at two in the morning with Halcyon on.

I put my own face into the game. I figured out how to take pictures of real faces and put them onto characters, so that walking around in this fantasy world you might run into somebody who looked like me or my friends. I built a darker corner of a city called Mournhold, inspired by a tabletop game called Vampire: The Masquerade. Shadowy streets, secret societies, old blood, that kind of thing. Very seventeen. lol.

And here's the part that still blows my mind. Some of my work got translated into French. Somebody, somewhere, who spoke French, found something I made in a trailer near Danevang, Texas, and thought it was good enough to translate so more people could play it.

INT. FARTHING TRAILER - BLAKE'S ROOM - NIGHT

BLAKE (17) hunches over a beige computer monitor. On screen: a forum page. He reads, frowns, leans closer, reads again.

BLAKE
(to himself)
Wait. What?

He sits back. Then he gets up, walks out into the hallway, and walks right back in. Then he leans out the door again.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(calling down the hall)
Mom! Somebody translated my mod into French!

MOM (O.S.)
(sleepy, from down the hall)
Your what into what?

BLAKE
My mod! Into French!

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 30, the Chronicle Network (p. 169)

Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names

Building worlds in my bedroom and figuring out which name was mine.

A long pause.

MOM (O.S.)
That's nice, honey. Go to bed.

Blake sits back down at the computer, grinning like an idiot. He doesn't go to bed.

In Morrowind I used the name Ekal.

Ekal is Blake backwards, mostly. Drop the B, flip the rest. It was my secret name, my fantasy-world name. It was me, but sideways.

That was the beginning of something I've done my whole life. I collect names.

In my sports universes I became Blake Rivers, a fictional quarterback for the Saints and a treasure hunter and a musician and eventually a team owner. Blake Rios became his soccer counterpart. Online and in business I've used DynamisBlake, from the Greek word dynamis, which means power or capacity, the ability to do something. And there's a name that feels even closer to me than my last name some days: Pilgrim. That's why this book is called The Pilgrim Chronicle.

For a long time I thought maybe all those names meant I didn't know who I was. Like I was hiding. Like I was trying to escape being Blake Farthing from out in the country.

Now I see it differently. Names aren't disguises for me. They're lenses. Each one catches a different piece of me. Ekal caught the kid who wanted to build worlds. Blake Rivers caught the kid who wanted to be the hero of the game. Dynamis caught the man who wanted to find his power. Pilgrim caught the man who realized he would be traveling his whole life, carrying a dusty bag, never quite arriving, and that this was okay.

And Blake Dylan Farthing holds all of them.

A name is not a disguise. It's a lens.

If you're seventeen and you have a secret name, an online handle, a character you always play, a version of yourself you only show to certain people, I want you to know that isn't fake. It's a piece of you trying to come out. Pay attention to it. What does that version of you have that you wish you had more of in real life? Courage? Humor? Freedom? Creativity? That's a clue. That's your future self waving at you

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 30, the Chronicle Network (p. 169)

Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names

Building worlds in my bedroom and figuring out which name was mine.

from down the road.

Here's something else I learned from Morrowind, and it connects to the big idea of this book.

When you build a mod, you can't build the whole world at once. You build one room. You test it. Something is broken. A door doesn't open. A character walks through a wall. You fix it. You test it again. You build the next room. You test that. It takes hundreds of hours, and every single one of them is spent on one small thing at a time.

Try it. Check it. Move on. Try again.

That would become my classroom motto, years later. But I learned it first in a trailer, at two in the morning, building a vampire city in a video game. Nobody taught it to me as a lesson. I just learned that it was the only way anything ever got built.

INT. FARTHING TRAILER - BLAKE'S ROOM - NIGHT

BLAKE (16) watches his character on screen walk straight into a wall and disappear halfway into it.

BLAKE
No. No, no, no.

He opens the editor. Moves something. Saves. Loads the game. The character walks into the wall again.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(flat)
Cool. Cool cool cool.

He cracks his knuckles. Opens the editor again.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(to the computer)
Okay. One more time.

One more time. That might be the most important phrase a seventeen-year-old can learn.

You don't have to know your final name yet. You don't have to know which version of you is the real one. They might all be real. You just have to build the next room. Test it. Fix it. Build the next one.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 7, Nana's computers (p. 40) → Ch 30, the Chronicle Network (p. 169)

Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names

Building worlds in my bedroom and figuring out which name was mine.

And maybe hold on to a phone number for twenty-two years, just in case somebody from back then needs to find you.

Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old

Open doors, young love, a graduation I skipped, and what I wish somebody had told me.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake finished high school in 2007 but skipped his graduation, and he writes down what he wishes someone had told him at seventeen.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 13 — Ekal, the Phone Number, and the Many Names → **Ch 14 — Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old** → Ch 15 — The Tiny Dorm Room

I graduated from El Campo High School in 2007.

Go Ricebirds.

I was a good student when I wanted to be, which is the kind of sentence teachers write on report cards when they're being polite. I scored a 1280 on the SAT, back when it was out of 1600 and had two sections. That was a pretty good score. Good enough that, with some justification, I believed a lot of doors were open to me. People said things like "You could go anywhere." And I believed them, sort of.

But here's what nobody tells you at seventeen. Doors being open isn't the same as walking through them. And money and love shape young decisions far more than test scores do.

I had a high school sweetheart. She was a year younger than me. When you're seventeen and in love, the idea of moving four hundred miles away for college doesn't feel like opportunity. It feels like leaving. So I stayed close. I went to Wharton County Junior College, right down the road, and I earned my associate degree in 2009.

I didn't go to that graduation.

I remember thinking, why would I go? It's just junior college. I'm going to graduate again soon from a real university, and that will be the big one. I'll walk then. I assumed another graduation would come soon enough.

It did come. But it didn't come soon, and it didn't come easy, and it didn't come the way I expected. It came eight years later, after my whole life fell apart and got rebuilt, and by the time it came, my dad was gone. I'll tell you that story in the next part.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 43, the Ricebirds (p. 241)

Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old

Open doors, young love, a graduation I skipped, and what I wish somebody had told me.

But I want to stop here and say something to the seventeen-year-old, because this is one of those little moments that looks like nothing and turns out to be something.

Go to the graduation.

Go to every one of them. Walk across every stage they will let you walk across. Take the picture with your family. Wear the silly hat. Don't skip the small celebration because you're saving yourself for the big one. The big one might be further away than you think, and the people you want in the picture might not all be there when it finally comes.

INT./EXT. EL CAMPO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION - EVENING - 2007

Rows of folding chairs. Caps and gowns. Families in the bleachers fanning themselves with programs. BLAKE (18) stands in line, cap slightly crooked, waiting for his name.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Blake Dylan Farthing.

Blake walks. Takes the diploma. Shakes the hand. Looks up at the bleachers.

Somewhere up there, a family member whistles, loud and sharp, two fingers in the mouth.

Blake grins, and keeps walking.

I don't remember everything about that day. I remember the heat. I remember feeling like the whole world was about to start. I remember feeling both ready and not ready at all.

That's exactly how seventeen should feel, I think.

So here's my letter to you.

Dear seventeen-year-old,

I'm thirty-seven as I write this. That's twenty years older than you. It sounds like forever. It isn't. It goes fast. I want to tell you a few things that I wish someone had told me, or that someone probably did tell me and I wasn't listening. lol.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 43, the Ricebirds (p. 241)

Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old

Open doors, young love, a graduation I skipped, and what I wish somebody had told me.

You aren't as behind as you feel, and you aren't as ahead as you think.

At seventeen, you're constantly comparing. Who has a car, who has a girlfriend or boyfriend, who got into which school, who has more followers, who is going to be somebody. It's a giant scoreboard, and it's lit up all day long on your phone.

Don't look at the scoreboard.

I mean it. I had a 1280 SAT and I nearly failed out of college. Some of the kids who struggled in high school are now running businesses and raising beautiful families. Jacob, who is my business partner now, was one of my students years ago, one of the good kids in one of my roughest classes. Nobody at seventeen could have predicted where any of us would be.

The scoreboard at seventeen isn't the final score. It isn't even halftime. It's like the first few plays of the first quarter.

Love is real, and it's allowed to shape your choices, but it shouldn't be the only thing that does.

I don't regret loving somebody at seventeen. Young love is real love. It taught me things. But I wish I had made some of my decisions with my whole self at the table, not just my heart. Bring your heart. Bring your head, too. Bring your future self, the one who is thirty-seven, and ask what they think. Ask a grandparent. Ask somebody who has been down the road.

Money is going to matter more than you want it to.

Nobody likes hearing this at seventeen. But I didn't get to finish at St. Mary's because I couldn't afford it, and my dad couldn't afford it either. That one fact changed the direction of my entire twenties. Learn about money now. Learn what a loan is, what interest is, what it means to owe somebody. Ask the question our family asks now: "Can I afford it?" It isn't a sad question. It's a free question. It sets you free.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 43, the Ricebirds (p. 241)

Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old

Open doors, young love, a graduation I skipped, and what I wish somebody had told me.

Your weird hobbies aren't a waste of time.

The kid who made Morrowind mods at two in the morning became a man who builds lessons, businesses, archives, and a whole council of AI assistants. The kid who played Madden on the couch became a coach whose seventh grade B team went eight and oh. The kid who drummed on his chest to Halcyon became a man who mentors drummers at church. None of it was wasted. Anything can be used for anything.

Sleep, but don't hide in sleep.

I'm a night owl, so I am not going to tell you to go to bed at nine. But there's a difference between staying up because you love the night and sleeping all day because you don't want to face your life. I learned that difference the hard way, a few years after high school. If you find yourself sleeping to escape, tell somebody. That isn't laziness. That's a signal.

Your heroes aren't your road map.

Love Kurt Cobain. Love Jimi Hendrix. Love Janis Joplin. Play their records loud. But don't follow them where they went. The world needs you at twenty-eight, and thirty-seven, and eighty-seven. Burning out isn't the price of being great. Staying is.

Talk to the old people now.

I'm so glad I still have Nana. I wish I had asked my dad more questions. I wish I had asked him about his life, his childhood, what he was scared of, what he was proud of, what the stories behind the stories were. I asked him about carburetors. I should have asked him about himself.

Ask them now. Record it on your phone. You won't regret it.

You'll fall. A new play is next.

You're going to mess up. Maybe badly. Maybe in a way that feels like it ruined everything. I am not going to pretend otherwise. I messed up in ways I'm still paying off. But here's the truth I have tested with my own life: almost nothing is the final play. Almost every mistake is followed by a new snap. The ball gets set down. The whistle blows. The huddle forms. You get another call.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 43, the Ricebirds (p. 241)

Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old

Open doors, young love, a graduation I skipped, and what I wish somebody had told me.

Win that or lose, a new play is next.

Give it everything for six seconds. Then do it again. That's how the upset happens.

INT. EL CAMPO STARBUCKS - DAY (PRESENT)

Plenty of outlets. A calm hum. BLAKE (37) sits at a corner table with a laptop, headphones around his neck. ANNA (30s), the manager, sets down his drink. She used to babysit his kids.

ANNA
What are you writing today?

BLAKE
A letter to a seventeen-year-old.

ANNA
Any seventeen-year-old in particular?

BLAKE
(thinking)
Kind of all of them.
(beat)
Kind of me.

ANNA
(smiling)
What are you telling him?

BLAKE
Go to the graduation.

She laughs and heads back to the counter. Blake puts his headphones back on and keeps typing.

Seventeen-year-old, I'm proud of you. I mean it. You're carrying more than people know. You're figuring out who you're with a whole world shouting at you. You're getting the keys before you feel ready.

Drive thirty feet. Play the next play. Go to the graduation.

And call home sometimes. Somebody is waiting by the phone. Maybe even the same number they've had since 2004.

Love, Blake, twenty years down the road

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, the scoreboard (p. 4) → Ch 43, the Ricebirds (p. 241)

For the Twenty-Seven-Year-Old

When life changes: falling apart, losing friends, finding faith, losing Dad, and holding a baby.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part III is for a twenty-seven-year-old, with the hard years, losing friends and Dad, finding faith, and becoming a father.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part II
For the Seventeen-Year-Old

→ **Part III**
For the Twenty-Seven-Year-Old →

Part IV
For the Thirty-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

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The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.

Brick by brick.

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake went to St. Mary's University in San Antonio and lived in a tiny dorm room, but the money ran out and he could not go back.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 14
Class of 2007, and a Letter to the Seventeen-Year-Old
→
Ch 15
The Tiny Dorm Room
→
Ch 16
When It Fell Apart

After junior college, I went to St. Mary's University in San Antonio.

St. Mary's is a private Catholic university, old and beautiful, with stone buildings and trees and a feeling of being somewhere that had been taking itself seriously for a long time. I studied political science. I was going to understand how the world worked. Governments, laws, power, history. Maybe I would be a lawyer. Maybe I would work in politics. Maybe I would be something nobody had invented yet.

For a kid from out past Danevang, it felt like I had made it.

I lived in a dorm room. And when I say a dorm room, I mean a tiny dorm room. The kind where you can touch both walls if you stretch your arms out. The kind where your bed is also your couch, your desk chair, your dining room table, and your office. The kind where you learn very quickly whether your roommate snores.

And in that tiny dorm room, I learned to play the guitar.

I had been a drummer since I was four. I had played bass. But the guitar was its own thing, and I had always wanted it. So I sat on that tiny bed with a guitar in my lap and taught myself. Chord by chord. Song by song. My fingertips hurt. Then they got calluses. Then they stopped hurting. Bob Dylan songs. Tom Petty songs. The same three or four chords over and over until they stopped being things I had to think about and started being things my hands just knew.

INT. ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY - DORM ROOM - NIGHT

A room barely bigger than a closet. Clothes on the floor. Textbooks stacked as a nightstand. BLAKE (20) sits cross-legged on the bed, a guitar in his lap, fingers pressed awkwardly on the frets. He strums. It buzzes horribly.

He looks at his left hand like it betrayed him.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

BLAKE
(to the hand)
Come on. You've been doing this for three days.

He adjusts. Presses harder. Strums.

A real chord rings out. Clean. Full.

Blake freezes. Strums it again. Clean again.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(whisper)
There it is.

From the other side of the wall, a muffled THUMP. A NEIGHBOR (O.S.) shouts through the drywall.

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)
Learn a second one, man!

Blake laughs so hard he nearly drops the guitar.

I've been playing the guitar for about fifteen years now. I've played it in bars and churches and living rooms and at my kids' bedsides. I own a twelve-string now, which sounds like a whole choir of guitars. But every time I play, there's a little piece of that tiny dorm room in it. The buzz before the clean chord. The neighbor banging on the wall. The feeling of finding it.

There it is.

If you're twenty-seven, or getting close, I want to say something about learning things in small rooms.

A lot of the best things in my life were learned in tiny, cramped, imperfect spaces. A trailer bedroom. A dorm room. A gravel lot with my mom. A couch with my dad. A church band corner. A barn. We tend to think we need the right room before we can start. The studio, the office, the gym, the perfect desk. We say, "When I have the space, I'll learn guitar. When I have the time, I'll write the book."

You don't need the space. You need the chord. Then the next chord.

St. Mary's gave me a lot. Professors who made me think. Friends from places I had never been. A sense that ideas mattered. And my first real exposure to Catholic tradition in a serious, daily way: the chapel, the crucifixes in the classrooms, the bells. I didn't become a Christian there. That came a little later and

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

through a very different door. But St. Mary's planted something. Old stone buildings have a way of making you ask big questions.

And then the money ran out.

I couldn't afford to go back for my senior year. It was that simple, and that brutal. My dad couldn't afford it either. We had done what we could. There were loans and jobs and help, but at a private university, it wasn't enough. The math didn't work.

INT. FARTHING TRAILER - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A stack of papers on the table. Financial aid letters. BLAKE (21) sits with his head in his hands. DAD stands at the counter, arms crossed, wound up.

BLAKE
It's one more year. One.

DAD
(loud)
I know how many years it is!

BLAKE
If I could just get one more year—

DAD
(yelling now)
With what? I don't have it! What do you want me to do, print it?
(sarcastic)
Should've thought about that before you picked the fancy private school, genius.

Silence. The refrigerator hums. Blake doesn't look up.

DAD (CONT'D)
(lower, muttering, almost to himself)
I would if I had it.

He grabs his keys off the counter and goes outside.

The screen door bangs shut.

I don't blame my dad for the money. I want that to be very clear for Odin and Fae and anybody else reading this. He was a mechanic in the country. He worked hard his whole life. He didn't have it. That wasn't a failure of love. That was just the

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

scoreboard that night.

The yelling was a different thing. My dad had been a yeller for most of my life. Sarcastic. Short-tempered. Quick to call me stupid, quick to call me dumb. I had grown up with it, the way you grow up with weather. But that fall, with St. Mary's gone and everything I had built my idea of myself around falling apart, something in me had run out of room for it.

I was about twenty-two. I wasn't a little kid on a bucket anymore. I was as tall as my dad, and I was about fifty pounds heavier. My dad was always super skinny, rail-thin his whole life. And one night, when he started in on me again, I stood up.

INT. FARTHING HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

DAD is yelling. About something small. It doesn't matter what. It never really did. BLAKE (22) has been sitting at the table, taking it, the way he always has.

DAD
(loud, sarcastic)
...because that's real smart. Real smart. You know what, that's the dumbest—

Blake stands up. Slowly. All the way up. He is as tall as his dad, and a lot bigger. Dad stops mid-word.

BLAKE
(steady, not loud)
Stop yelling at me.

DAD
(recovering, louder)
Don't you tell me—

BLAKE
(steady)
If you don't stop yelling at me, I'm going to hit you.

Silence. Neither of them moves. Blake's hands stay at his sides.

Dad stares at him. Something in his face changes. Not anger. Something else. He looks, for the first time Blake can remember, shaken.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

DAD
(quiet)
You'd... you'd want to hurt me?

BLAKE
(beat; his voice cracking a little)
I don't want to hurt you. I want you to stop yelling at me.

A long moment. The refrigerator hums. Dad looks down at the floor. Then he pulls out a chair and sits, like his legs decided for him.

DAD
(barely audible)
Okay.

Blake sits back down across from him. Neither of them says anything else. They don't need to. The kitchen is quiet in a way it has never been quiet before.

I want to be very careful with that scene, especially for my kids.

I am not proud of the words I used. Threatening to hit someone isn't a good thing, and nothing happened. Nobody got hurt. I didn't want to hurt him, and I didn't. What I'm proud of is the other part. The part where I stood up, and told the truth, and said: stop. After years of sitting at the table and taking it, I finally said out loud the thing that had been true for a long time. This has to stop.

And here's what I didn't expect. It did stop.

My dad seemed genuinely shook that I would want to hurt him. I think he had never seen himself from my side of the table. I think, in his head, the yelling was just how he talked, the way some people's trucks are just loud. He had never stopped to think about what it was doing to the kid on the receiving end, the kid who was now a man as tall as him and fifty pounds heavier and done.

After that night, my dad and I reset. Not overnight, maybe. But we reset. We became much more like friends than father and son. Roommates, really, for the rest of his life, about the last five years. We played Madden for hours. We talked. We laughed. He jumped into all of my franchises. The yelling mostly went away, and something better grew in the space where it had been.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

Looking back, the yelling dad and the roommate dad feel like two different people. But they were the same man. He changed. People can change.

People can change. Sometimes it starts with somebody finally saying, "Stop."

If you're twenty-something and somebody who loves you has been talking to you in a way that hurts, I want to say this gently. You're allowed to say stop. You don't need to threaten anybody, and I hope you never have to. But you're allowed to stand up, look them in the face, and tell them the truth: this hurts, and it has to stop. Honesty can reset a relationship. It reset mine.

And forgiveness came after that. I forgave my dad for the yelling years. Not because they didn't hurt. They did. I forgave him because he changed, and because I got five good years with the man he became, and because holding on to the old version of him would have cost me the new one.

But I didn't know how to not look at that scoreboard.

When you're twenty-one and the thing you built your whole idea of yourself around gets taken away, it doesn't feel like one play. It feels like the whole game. It feels like the season is over. I had been the smart kid. The 1280 SAT kid. The kid who got out. And now I was back in the trailer with a stack of letters that said no.

I transferred toward the University of Houston-Victoria. I switched from political science to history, which turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me, though I couldn't see it then. But the path from there wasn't clean. Online classes didn't fit me. I am not a person who thrives sitting alone in a room with an invisible deadline. I need people, movement, rhythm, somebody expecting me somewhere.

So things started to slide.

That's the next chapter, and it's a hard one to write. But I want to say one thing before we get there, for the twenty-seven-year-old who is maybe sitting at a kitchen table right now with a stack of letters that say no.

The scoreboard is real. I am not going to tell you it isn't. Sometimes you really are down by seventeen. Sometimes the money really isn't there. Sometimes the door really does close.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

The Tiny Dorm Room

St. Mary's, a borrowed guitar sound, and the year I couldn't go back.

But the scoreboard isn't the game. The game is still being played. And as long as there's time on the clock, there's a next play.

As long as there is time on the clock, there is a next play.

I didn't know that at twenty-one. I thought the game was over. I was wrong. It took me years to find out how wrong I was, and the years in between were rough. But I got back on the field.

St. Mary's, if anybody there ever reads this: thank you for the tiny dorm room. I still play the chords I learned in it.

And to the neighbor on the other side of the wall, wherever you are: I learned a second one. And a third. And a lot more after that. lol.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 16, when it fell apart (p. 91) → Ch 21, going back to school (p. 115)

When It Fell Apart

Bars, restaurants, too much sleep, too much drinking, and the scoreboard that lied.

IN ONE SENTENCE

After college fell apart, Blake slept too much and drank too much, but the bad scoreboard was not the end of his story.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 15 The Tiny Dorm Room → Ch 16 When It Fell Apart → Ch 17 What the Kitchens Taught Me

I want to be honest in this chapter. I promised Odin and Fae that I would give them the workshop and not the myth. So here's the workshop. Some of it's messy.

After St. Mary's, my life fell apart.

I don't mean one big dramatic explosion. I mean the slow kind of falling apart, where nothing happens all at once but everything gets a little worse every week, until one day you look up and you don't recognize the place you're standing.

I was supposed to be in school. Technically I was enrolled. But online classes didn't work for me, and I wasn't honest with myself about that. I would sign up, tell myself this time would be different, and then the deadlines would sneak past me like cars on a dark highway. By my own account, I essentially failed out of school for about three years. Three years of signing up and not finishing. Three years of being "in college" without being in college.

Meanwhile, I worked. I worked in bars and restaurants, and I worked brutally long weeks. Late nights, double shifts, closing up at two or three in the morning, sleeping into the afternoon, doing it again. Restaurant work is hard. It's fast and loud and physical and it never stops. People think it's an easy job. It isn't. It's one of the hardest jobs I've ever had. I learned a lot in those kitchens and behind those bars. I learned how to move fast, how to handle angry people, how to work with folks from every background, how to keep going when your feet are screaming.

But I also learned how to drink.

After I left college, I struggled with alcohol. I am not going to dress it up or play it down. I drank too much, too often, for too long. In that world, after a long shift, a drink is always right there. And then another one. And it starts to feel like the only reward you get for a day that took everything out of you.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 17, the kitchens (p. 96) → Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9)

When It Fell Apart

Bars, restaurants, too much sleep, too much drinking, and the scoreboard that lied.

And I slept.

I was depressed, and I slept a lot. Not night-owl sleeping, where you stay up late because you love the quiet. Hiding sleeping. Sleeping through the day because the day had nothing in it I wanted to face. Sleeping because being awake meant thinking about the stack of letters that said no, and the classes I was failing, and the person I had thought I was going to be.

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - BEDROOM - AFTERNOON

Blackout curtains. A phone buzzing on the nightstand, ignored. Clothes from last night's shift in a pile on the floor, still smelling like the fryer. BLAKE (22) is a lump under the covers.

The phone buzzes again. He reaches out without looking, finds it, squints at the screen.

ON THE SCREEN: a reminder. "ASSIGNMENT DUE - 11:59 PM." Under it, the date. It's already the next afternoon.

Blake stares at it. Then he turns the phone face-down on the nightstand.

He pulls the covers back over his head.

BLAKE
(muffled, to nobody)
Tomorrow.

Tomorrow. That was the word. Tomorrow I'll catch up. Tomorrow I'll email the professor. Tomorrow I'll stop drinking so much. Tomorrow I'll get up early.

Here's what I've learned about tomorrow. Tomorrow is the scoreboard pretending to be the next play.

When you say "tomorrow," it sounds like you're planning the next play. But you aren't. You're looking up at the giant scoreboard, seeing how far behind you are, and deciding the game is too big to play today. "Tomorrow" is what you say when the score is so bad you can't bring yourself to run one more snap.

The opposite of tomorrow isn't today. The opposite of tomorrow is the next six seconds.

The opposite of tomorrow is the next six seconds.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 17, the kitchens (p. 96) → Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9)

When It Fell Apart

Bars, restaurants, too much sleep, too much drinking, and the scoreboard that lied.

Not "I will fix my whole life today." That's just a bigger scoreboard. The next six seconds. Sit up. Put both feet on the floor. Drink a glass of water. Open the curtains. Text the professor one sentence. Those are plays. Small, ugly, unglamorous plays. But they're plays, and you can win them.

I didn't know that yet. It would take me years to figure it out. But I want the twenty-seven-year-old to know it now, if you're in the dark room with the phone face-down on the nightstand.

There's something else I want to say about this time, carefully.

Depression is real. It isn't laziness, even though it can look like it from the outside, and even though the voice in your own head might tell you that's all it is. It's heavy. It sits on your chest and makes simple things feel impossible. If you're there, please tell somebody. A friend, a family member, a pastor, a doctor, a counselor. There are people who know how to help, and asking isn't weakness. Asking is a play. It might be the bravest one you run all year.

And drinking to get through it's like trying to put out a fire with gasoline. I know because I tried. It feels like relief for about an hour. Then it makes everything heavier.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - CLOSING TIME - NIGHT

The rush is over. Steel counters, mop buckets, the hiss of the dish machine. BLAKE (22), apron stained, wipes down a prep table. A COWORKER (20s) unties his apron and tosses it in the bin.

COWORKER
We're going out. You coming?

BLAKE
(wiping the same spot twice)
Yeah. Probably.

COWORKER
You got class tomorrow?

BLAKE
(a beat too long)
Kind of.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 17, the kitchens (p. 96) → Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9)

When It Fell Apart

Bars, restaurants, too much sleep, too much drinking, and the scoreboard that lied.

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                COWORKER
             (laughing)
        "Kind of." Okay, college boy.
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Blake laughs too. But it's not a real laugh. He keeps wiping the
counter. It's already clean.
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"Kind of." I had class kind of. I was in school kind of. I was okay kind of.

If you're twenty-seven and you find yourself living a "kind of" life, I want you to notice it. Not to beat yourself up. Just to notice. "Kind of" is a signal. It means part of you knows the truth and part of you isn't ready to say it out loud.

Saying it out loud is a play.

I want to tell you that I had a single moment where everything turned around. I didn't. There were a lot of small moments, spread out over years, and most of them I didn't notice at the time. But there are a few I can point to now.

One was faith. That's the next chapter.

One was losing people I loved, and realizing that I didn't want to be next. That's the chapter after that.

One was my kids. Before they were even born, the idea of them, the hope that I might be somebody's dad one day, started pulling on me.

And one was just the slow, stubborn decision to take smaller bites. When I finally went back to school in 2014, I didn't take a full load. I took six hours at a time. Two classes. That's it. While working long weeks. Six hours, then six more, then six more. It took a while. But six hours was a play I could win.

Take the bite you can chew.

Here's what I want to say most of all, to the twenty-seven-year-old in the dark.

This isn't the end of your story. It feels like it. The scoreboard is screaming that you're a failure, that everybody else has passed you, that you wasted your shot, that you're too far behind to ever catch up. I know that voice. I lived with it for years.

The scoreboard is lying.

Not because the numbers are wrong. Maybe they're right. Maybe you really did fail those classes. Maybe you really are behind. Maybe you really did drink too

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 17, the kitchens (p. 96) → Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9)

When It Fell Apart

Bars, restaurants, too much sleep, too much drinking, and the scoreboard that lied.

much and sleep too much and lose too much. I did. But the scoreboard only tells you what already happened. It can't tell you what happens next. Only the next play can do that.

Today I love being awake. I mean it. I'm a night owl still, and I'll probably always be one, but I love being awake now. I love mornings with my kids, even the chaotic ones with one shoe missing. I love late nights writing at Starbucks with my headphones on. I love the hours. I believe every single day is a blessing. That isn't something I say because it sounds nice on a coffee mug. It's something I say because I remember when I didn't believe it, and I remember the dark room, and I know how far it's from there to here.

It's a long way. And I walked it one step at a time, with just enough light to see the next one.

The headlamp still works. Put it on.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 17, the kitchens (p. 96) → Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9)

What the Kitchens Taught Me

Bars, restaurants, brutal weeks, and the lessons I didn't know I was learning.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Working hard in restaurants and bars taught Blake that the rush always ends and that everybody matters.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 16 When It Fell Apart → Ch 17 What the Kitchens Taught Me → Ch 18 Footprints in the Sand

I want to go back to the restaurant years for a minute, because I was hard on them in the chapter about falling apart, and I want to be fair.

Those were rough years. I was failing out of school. I was drinking too much. I was sleeping through days. All that's true. But I was also working, and working hard, and the bars and restaurants where I spent those long weeks taught me things I still use every single day. I didn't know I was in school. But I was.

Lesson one: the rush always ends.

If you've never worked in a restaurant during a rush, it's hard to describe. Every table full. Tickets printing faster than you can read them. The kitchen hot. People yelling orders. Somebody dropped a tray. Somebody is upset about their steak. The phone is ringing. You're three things behind and two more just came in.

And then, a couple of hours later, it's over. The dining room empties. The noise drops. Somebody turns the music up a little. You wipe down the counters.

The rush always ends.

I have held on to that for years. When a classroom feels out of control, when a week of parenting feels impossible, when the bills all come due at once, I think: this is a rush. It will end. Just handle the next ticket.

The rush always ends. Handle the next ticket.

That's the six-second play, restaurant version. You can't cook every order on the rail at once. You cook the next one. Then the next one. If you look up at the rail and count all the tickets, you freeze. If you just cook the next ticket, somehow, two hours later, they're all done.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 16, the restaurant years (p. 91) → Ch 24, teaching (p. 135)

What the Kitchens Taught Me

Bars, restaurants, brutal weeks, and the lessons I didn't know I was learning.

Lesson two: everybody matters.

In a restaurant, everybody matters. The dishwasher matters as much as the head chef, because if the plates aren't clean, nobody eats. The busser matters as much as the bartender. The host matters as much as the manager. When one person goes down, everybody feels it.

I worked with people from every background you can imagine. People who spoke different languages. People who had been through things I couldn't imagine. People who were working three jobs to feed their kids. I learned to respect all of them, because I saw how hard every single one of them worked.

When I became a teacher of kids who are learning English, a lot of whose families work exactly those kinds of jobs, I already knew something important. I knew their parents were some of the hardest-working people in Texas. I had stood next to people like them at two in the morning, scrubbing a flat-top.

Lesson three: people can be fired from three fast-food restaurants in a row. lol.

This one is a classroom joke, but it came from those years. Sometimes when a student is completely distracted, I'll say, very seriously, "Okay, you just got fired from three fast-food restaurants in a row." The class laughs. The kid laughs. And then they get back to work.

The joke works because it's true. Restaurants don't wait for you. If you aren't paying attention, the order goes out wrong, the customer is upset, and the manager has a conversation with you. Focus matters. Attention is a kind of respect for the people depending on you.

INT. BLAKE'S CLASSROOM - EL CAMPO - DAY (PRESENT)

A seventh grader, a BOY IN THE BACK, is very busy building a tower out of erasers. The rest of the class is working. BLAKE (37) walks over slowly. Stops. Looks at the tower.

BLAKE
(gravely)
Sir. I regret to inform you.

The boy looks up.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, the restaurant years (p. 91) → Ch 24, teaching (p. 135)

What the Kitchens Taught Me

Bars, restaurants, brutal weeks, and the lessons I didn't know I was learning.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
You've just been fired from three fast-food restaurants in a row.

The class erupts. The boy laughs so hard he knocks the tower over.

BOY IN THE BACK
Three?!

BLAKE
(walking away, solemn)
The drive-through doesn't wait, my friend. Page forty-two.

The boy, still grinning, opens his book to page forty-two.

Lesson four: you can be in the wrong place and still learn the right things.

This is the big one, and it took me the longest to understand.

I wasn't where I was supposed to be in those years. I was supposed to be finishing a degree. I was supposed to be on the path. Instead, I was behind a bar at one in the morning, tired and a little lost.

But I was learning. Speed. Teamwork. Patience with angry people. How to read a room. How to stay calm when everything is on fire. How to work a double and still show up the next day. How to respect people who do hard work for not enough money.

All of that came with me. Into the classroom. Into fatherhood. Into the business with Jacob and Loreto. Into the barn. Anything can be used for anything, and that includes the years you think were wasted.

No season is wasted if you carry its lessons forward.

If you're twenty-seven and you feel like you're in the wrong place, working the wrong job, stuck in a season you never planned for, I want to say: pay attention. You're learning something. Maybe it's speed. Maybe it's patience. Maybe it's how to talk to people who aren't like you. Maybe it's just how to get up and go to work when you don't want to.

Write it down. Carry it forward. One day it will be exactly the tool you need.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 16, the restaurant years (p. 91) → Ch 24, teaching (p. 135)

What the Kitchens Taught Me

Bars, restaurants, brutal weeks, and the lessons I didn't know I was learning.

And handle the next ticket. The rush always ends.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 16, the restaurant years (p. 91) → Ch 24, teaching (p. 135)

Footprints in the Sand

How a short poem walked me into faith.

IN ONE SENTENCE

When Blake was about twenty-one, a short poem about footprints in the sand helped him start to believe in God.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 17 What the Kitchens Taught Me → Ch 18 Footprints in the Sand → Ch 19 Jack

I came to Christian faith when I was about twenty-one or twenty-two.

I want to say that carefully, because faith stories get told in a lot of different ways, and some of them make it sound like a lightning bolt. A light from heaven. A voice. A perfect moment where everything changed and the person never struggled again.

Mine wasn't like that. Mine came in the middle of the falling apart. It came while I was still drinking too much, still sleeping too much, still failing classes, still saying "tomorrow." Faith didn't fix my life overnight. It didn't make the hard years smooth. What it did was give me something to hold on to in the middle of them. A floor under the floor.

And it came through a poem.

You have probably seen it. It's one of the most famous Christian poems in the world. It's on wall plaques in grandmothers' houses, on bookmarks, on greeting cards, on posters in church hallways. It's called "Footprints in the Sand."

Here's how it goes, in my own words.

A man has a dream. In the dream he is walking along a beach with the Lord. Across the sky flash scenes from his life. And for each scene, he notices two sets of footprints in the sand. One set belongs to him, and one set belongs to the Lord.

But when the last scene of his life flashes by, he looks back at the footprints, and he notices something. At many times along the path, there's only one set of footprints. And he notices that those were the lowest and saddest times of his life.

So he asks. Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But during the most troublesome times in my life, there's only

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, many rooms (p. 173) → Ch 44, the footprints at 87 (p. 246)

Footprints in the Sand

How a short poem walked me into faith.

one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me.

And the Lord answers. My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

That's it. That's the whole poem.

When I first really read it, I mean really read it, not just glanced at it on somebody's wall, I was at one of the lowest points of my life. And I looked back at my own beach. The dark bedroom. The kitchen at closing time. The stack of letters that said no. And I thought: there's only one set of footprints there. I've been alone in this.

And then the last line hit me.

It was then that I carried you.

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark except for the glow of a phone screen. BLAKE (21) sits on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, reading. The words of a poem scroll on the screen.

He reads to the end. Stops. Scrolls back up. Reads it again.

He sets the phone down on his knee. Stares at the floor.

BLAKE
(barely a whisper)
Okay.

He swallows hard.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(a little louder, to the empty room)
Okay. If that's true.
(beat)
If you were carrying me. Then... okay.

He sits there in the dark for a long time. He doesn't turn the light on. He doesn't need to.

I don't know how to explain it better than that. Something in me said "okay." Not "I understand everything." Not "I am fixed." Just "okay." If I've been carried this whole

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, many rooms (p. 173) → Ch 44, the footprints at 87 (p. 246)

Footprints in the Sand

How a short poem walked me into faith.

time, through the parts I thought I was alone in, then maybe I am not as alone as I thought. And maybe I can take one more step.

That was the first play of my faith. "Okay."

Sometimes the first prayer is just "okay."

I had been exposed to Catholicism before. St. Mary's had planted some seeds, and there were people in my family who believed. Nana prayed. My dad said he was alive because Nana prayed for him, and I would bet my last dollar she had been praying for me too. I think about that now. I think about the poem, and the one set of footprints, and I wonder whose footprints they were sometimes. I believe they were the Lord's. And I also believe the Lord uses people like Nana to do some of the carrying.

My dad wasn't a Christian. I want to be honest about that, because he would want me to be honest. He didn't go to church. And he really didn't like fake Christians. He hated people who acted holy on Sunday and treated people like dirt on Monday. He had seen plenty of that, and it made him angry, and I think it kept him away from church his whole life.

EXT. FARTHING PROPERTY - UNDER THE CARPORT - DAY

DAD, skinny as ever, is bent over an open hood. BLAKE (22) leans against the truck, holding a small Bible, nervous. This is after the kitchen night. The air between them is easier now.

BLAKE
I've been going to church some.

DAD
(not looking up from the engine; easy)
Mm. Hand me that socket.

Blake hands it over.

BLAKE
I've been reading. I think I believe it, Dad. For real.

Dad straightens up slowly. Wipes his hands on a red rag. Looks at Blake for a long moment. No joke this time. No crack about it.

DAD
For real?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, many rooms (p. 173) → Ch 44, the footprints at 87 (p. 246)

Footprints in the Sand

How a short poem walked me into faith.



BLAKE
For real.

DAD
(nodding slowly)
Then don't be fake about it.

BLAKE
I won't.

DAD
I mean it. Don't be one of those.
(waves the rag vaguely toward the whole world)
You believe it, you live it. Monday too.

BLAKE
Monday too.

DAD
(a small grin, going back under the hood)
Good. Now hold that light where I can see.

Blake holds the light.

A few years earlier, my dad might have made a sarcastic crack about the Bible in my hand. He didn't. That was the new version of him, the one I got to know after the kitchen night. He listened. Then he gave me the best advice he had.

I've tried to live by that. I haven't always succeeded. But "Monday too" might be one of the best pieces of spiritual advice I've ever gotten, and it came from a man who never went to church.

My dad would also say that he was only alive because Nana prayed for him. So in his own way, he believed in prayer. He believed in her prayer, anyway. He just didn't want any part of the show.

I understand that more now. My faith isn't a show. My faith is the thing I hold on to on a Tuesday when the bank account is low and the kids are fighting and I'm tired and I don't feel holy at all. It's the floor under the floor.

Since then, my faith has grown in all kinds of directions I didn't expect. I've played drums in praise bands. I have sat under the preaching of a principal on Sunday morning. I have read the book of Daniel and seen myself in a young man trying to stay faithful in Babylon. I've found wisdom in places outside my own

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, many rooms (p. 173) → Ch 44, the footprints at 87 (p. 246)

Footprints in the Sand

How a short poem walked me into faith.

tradition, too, and I'll tell you about that in the next part of this book. I keep a little statue of Ganesh on my desk at school, and I have read the Bhagavad Gita and found a friend in Arjuna. Some people might find that strange for a Christian. I'll explain it later. But I'll say this now: my faith got bigger, not smaller, as it grew. I don't believe God is threatened by my curiosity.

But it all started with a short poem about footprints.

If you're twenty-seven and you don't believe in God, I am not going to preach at you. My dad wouldn't want me to, and honestly, I don't think it works. I'll just tell you what happened to me. I was at the bottom. I read a poem. I said "okay." And from then on, I had a sense that I was being carried through the parts I couldn't walk. That's my testimony. It isn't fancy. It's just true for me.

And if you're twenty-seven and you do believe, but you're in a one-set-of-footprints season, where it feels like you're completely alone, I want you to read the poem again. Look at the last line.

It was then that I carried you.

You don't have to carry the whole season. You don't have to carry the whole scoreboard. You just have to take the next step, and you might find out you aren't the only one walking.

When you see only one set of footprints, look again.

I believe every day is a blessing. I believe that because I know what it's like to be carried through days that didn't feel like blessings at all. The blessing wasn't that they were easy. The blessing was that I wasn't alone in them.

One set of footprints. One play at a time. Okay.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, many rooms (p. 173) → Ch 44, the footprints at 87 (p. 246)

Jack

A friend who never met a stranger.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake's friend Jack never met a stranger, and Blake still misses him after Jack died of an overdose.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 18 Footprints in the Sand → Ch 19 Jack → Ch 20 Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club

I need to tell you about Jack.

Jack was my friend. He died of an overdose when I was about twenty-three years old.

I've written and rewritten that first paragraph more times than any other in this book. There's no good way to say it. There's no soft way. You just say it, and then you try to tell the rest of the story so that the last thing that happened to him isn't the only thing anybody remembers.

So here is Jack.

Jack was a doctor's son. His family had money, a lot more than mine ever did. He drove an Audi that cost something like a hundred thousand dollars. To a kid from a single-wide trailer out in the country, that car looked like a spaceship. It was sleek and quiet and perfect, and it smelled like leather and new money.

But here's the thing about Jack. That car could have made him a certain kind of person, and it didn't. Jack never met a stranger. Not one. He would walk into a room full of people he didn't know and walk out with ten new friends. He would talk to the guy at the gas station, the waitress, the bouncer, the old man at the next table, the kid on the skateboard. He didn't care who you were or where you came from or what you drove. If you were in front of him, you were his friend.

I always thought of him as kind of like the Buddha. That's the best way I know to describe him. There was a calm in him. A peace. A big, open, easy way of sitting in the world, like nothing could rattle him and everybody was welcome. He would just smile at you, this big warm smile, and you would feel like you were exactly where you were supposed to be.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 20, Chase and Eric (p. 110)

Jack

A friend who never met a stranger.

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

Fluorescent canopy lights. Moths. A sleek, expensive Audi idles at the pump, completely out of place next to a dented work truck. JACK (early 20s), relaxed, easy smile, leans on the pump. BLAKE (22) sits in the passenger seat with the door open.

An OLD MAN in a feed-store cap fills up the work truck at the next pump. Sizing up the Audi.

OLD MAN
That thing get good mileage?

JACK
(grinning)
Terrible. Absolutely terrible.

OLD MAN
(snorting)
Then what's the point?

JACK
Honestly? I have no idea.
(beat)
How about yours?

OLD MAN
(patting the truck)
Worse.

They both laugh. Jack walks over. Within thirty seconds he's asking about the old man's grandkids.

Blake watches from the passenger seat, shaking his head, smiling.

BLAKE
(to himself)
Every time.

Every time. Every gas station, every restaurant, every party. Jack made friends with the world. He had this gift, and it wasn't a performance. He really did like people. He really was curious about them. He wasn't trying to impress anybody.

I learned a lot from Jack, and I didn't realize how much until years later, when I was a teacher. I think about him when a new kid walks into my classroom and doesn't know anybody. I think about him when a student's family speaks a

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, Chase and Eric (p. 110)

Jack

A friend who never met a stranger.

language I'm still learning. I think about him every time I'm tempted to decide who somebody is based on what they drive or how they dress or where they come from.

Never meet a stranger.

That is Jack's rune. If I had to carve one symbol for him, it would be an open door.

And then he was gone.

INT. BLAKE'S CAR - PARKED - DAY

BLAKE (23) sits behind the wheel, engine off, phone pressed to his ear. He isn't talking. He is just listening.

He lowers the phone slowly. Stares at the dashboard.

He doesn't cry. Not yet. He just sits, hands on the wheel at ten and two, like he's about to drive somewhere. He doesn't.

A long time passes.

BLAKE
(quiet)
No.

He puts his forehead on the steering wheel.

An overdose. A doctor's son, a guy with every advantage, a guy everybody loved, a guy who never met a stranger. Gone.

I want to say something about that, and I want to say it very gently, because I loved him and I don't want his story to become a lesson he never agreed to be.

Addiction doesn't care how much money you have. It doesn't care what you drive or who your dad is or how many friends you have. It doesn't care if you're kind. It doesn't care if you're like the Buddha. It doesn't care. I had been drinking too much myself in those years, and losing Jack was one of the moments that cracked something open in me. If it could take Jack, it could take anybody. It could take me.

I had already found faith by then, a year or two before. I had already said "okay" to the poem. But I was still struggling. Losing Jack made the struggle real in a way it hadn't been before. It stopped being a vague, someday kind of worry and became a name. A face. A funeral.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, Chase and Eric (p. 110)

Jack

A friend who never met a stranger.

I think about the six-second play here, and I want to be careful with it, because I don't want to make grief sound like a sports metaphor. Grief isn't a game. But I learned something in the months after Jack died that fits.

When you lose somebody, the scoreboard becomes unbearable. Every time you look at it, you see the loss. You see what will never happen. All the gas stations he will never walk into. All the strangers he will never meet. All the years. You can't look at that scoreboard for long without it crushing you.

So you don't look at the whole thing. You play the next play. You get out of bed for the funeral. You hug his family. You eat something. You call a friend. You go to work. You let yourself cry in the car. You go to sleep. You get up. You do it again.

And slowly, very slowly, you find that you can look at a little bit of the scoreboard without being crushed. And then a little more. And one day you can tell a story about him at a gas station and laugh, really laugh, because it's funny and it's so him.

Grief is carried one play at a time.

That's where I'm with Jack now. I can laugh about the Audi. I can smile about him making friends with a grumpy old man at the pump. I can tell my students about a friend I had who never met a stranger. He is in my classroom, in a way. He is in this book.

Here's what I want the twenty-seven-year-old to hear.

If you're struggling with drugs or alcohol, please tell somebody today. Not tomorrow. Today. Tomorrow is the scoreboard pretending to be the next play. Call somebody. Text somebody. Walk into a church, a clinic, a meeting. You aren't too far gone, and you aren't too fine to need help. Jack had everything going for him. Addiction didn't care. It won't care about you either. Don't wait to find out.

And if you've lost a Jack, I'm so sorry. I know. I know what it's like to be twenty-three in a parked car with the phone in your lap.

Here's what I would tell you. Keep their good stuff. Don't let the way they died be the only thing you carry. Carry the way they lived. Carry their open door. Meet the strangers they never got to meet. Let their gift keep going through you.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 20, Chase and Eric (p. 110)

Jack

A friend who never met a stranger.

That's how I honor Jack. Every time I talk to the old man at the pump, every time I welcome the new kid who doesn't speak English yet, every time I decide not to judge somebody by their car, I'm giving Jack one more stranger to meet.

I still believe every day is a blessing. Jack is part of why. He didn't get more days. I do. And I want to use them.

Rest easy, Jack. I hope you're making friends with everybody up there. I bet you already know all their names.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 20, Chase and Eric (p. 110)

Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club

A warning, a choice, and the decision to stay.

IN ONE SENTENCE

After losing his friends Chase and Eric, Blake made a choice to stay alive and keep going.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 19 Jack → Ch 20 Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club → Ch 21 Six Hours at a Time

Jack wasn't the only one.

I also lost my friends Chase and Eric.

I am not going to tell every detail of their stories in this book. Some of that belongs to their families, and some of it I'm still carrying in ways I don't fully have words for. What I'll say is this: they were my friends, they were real people with real laughs and real plans, and they're gone too soon. When I count the empty chairs at the table of my twenties, there are more than there should be.

Chase. Eric. Jack.

I say their names out loud sometimes. In the car. In the barn. Late at night when I'm writing. I say them because a name said out loud is a scroll. It remembers. And I don't want them to become just a sad sentence in somebody's memoir. I want them to be remembered as people who were here, who mattered, who made me laugh.

A name said out loud is a scroll.

When you're in your twenties and you start losing friends, something shifts in you. You lose the feeling that you're invincible. When you're seventeen, death is something that happens to old people and to people in the news. When you're twenty-three, twenty-five, twenty-seven, and you have stood at more than one funeral for somebody your own age, you start to understand that nobody is promised anything. Not one more year. Not one more day.

That can make you afraid. It made me afraid for a while.

But eventually it did something else. It made me grateful.

Every day is a blessing. I say that a lot. I said it in the last chapter and I'll say it again in this one and probably a dozen more times before this book is over. I say it

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 19, Jack (p. 105) → Ch 37, telling the story again (p. 210)

Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club

A warning, a choice, and the decision to stay.

because Chase and Eric and Jack don't get more days, and I do. And I don't want to waste them.

Now let me tell you about the 27 Club, because I promised I would.

When I was seventeen, my music heroes were Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin. I told you about them. I loved them. And all three of them died at the age of twenty-seven. People call it the 27 Club, and there are other famous musicians in it too. Over the years it has become this strange, dark legend. Some people talk about it almost like it's a badge. Like dying at twenty-seven is proof that you were a real artist, too intense and too brilliant for this world.

I want to say, as clearly as I can, as somebody who loved those musicians and who stood at the funerals of friends:

The 27 Club isn't a club you want to join.

It isn't romantic. It isn't cool. It isn't proof of genius. It's a list of people who had a lot more songs in them that the world never got to hear. Jimi Hendrix never got to be an old man playing the blues on a porch. Janis Joplin never got to sing at seventy with all that gravel in her voice. Kurt Cobain never got to see his daughter grow up.

When I turned twenty-seven, I thought about them. I really did. I thought about how I had once looked up to them, partly because of how intense their lives were. And I thought about the dark room, and the drinking, and the friends I had lost. And I made a choice.

I chose life.

INT. BLAKE'S PLACE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A guitar on a stand. A stack of old CDs on the shelf: Nirvana, Hendrix, Joplin. BLAKE (27) sits on the floor with his back against the couch. He picks up the guitar. Plays a few bars of a Nirvana riff, loose and loud. Stops. The note hangs.

He looks at the CDs on the shelf for a long beat.

BLAKE
(quiet, to the shelf)
I love you guys.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 19, Jack (p. 105) → Ch 37, telling the story again (p. 210)

Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club

A warning, a choice, and the decision to stay.

(beat)
But I'm not coming with you.

He sets the guitar down. Reaches for his phone. Scrolls. Finds a song. Hits play.

The first long, warm waves of "Halcyon On and On" fill the room.

Blake leans his head back against the couch and closes himself off to everything else but the music. Listening.

I'm not coming with you.

That was a play. One of the most important plays of my life, and nobody was watching, and there was no crowd, and no scoreboard lit up. It was just a man on the floor of his living room deciding he would rather be alive and boring than famous and gone.

Except it turned out life isn't boring at all. lol. Life turned out to be the most interesting thing I've ever done.

I would rather be alive at eighty-seven than legendary at twenty-seven.

I want to tell the twenty-seven-year-old what choosing life looked like for me, because it wasn't one big decision. It was a lot of small ones.

Choosing life looked like getting up earlier than I wanted to. Like going back to school, six hours at a time. Like putting down the drink more often than I picked it up, and eventually a lot more often. Like going to church even when I didn't feel like it. Like calling Nana. Like letting people help me. Like eating real food and drinking water. Like being honest with myself when I was saying "kind of."

It looked like choosing music that built me up instead of music that only reflected my darkness back at me. I still love Nirvana. I still play Hendrix. But I learned to balance it. Halcyon. Tom Petty. Praise music on Sunday morning. Songs that said, keep going.

It looked like trading the 27 Club for a different kind of club. The club of people who are still here. The club of people who got knocked down and got back up. The club of people who are a little bit boring on a Tuesday night because they're home with their kids. That's my club now. It doesn't have a cool name. Maybe I should give it one. The Next Play Club. lol.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 19, Jack (p. 105) → Ch 37, telling the story again (p. 210)

Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club

A warning, a choice, and the decision to stay.

Here's something important. Choosing life isn't a one-time decision. You don't choose it once at twenty-seven and then you're done. You choose it again and again. Some days it's easy. Some days it's the hardest play you'll ever run. That's why the one-play-at-a-time idea matters so much. You don't have to choose life for the next fifty years. You just have to choose it for the next six seconds. And then the next six.

Give them hell for six seconds.

That's what I think about when I think about Chase and Eric and Jack now. Not the ending. The six seconds. The plays they did win. The laughs, the late nights, the gas stations, the songs we sang badly in the car. I think they would want me to keep running plays. I think they would be mad at me if I quit. I think Jack would walk up to me, put a hand on my shoulder, smile that Buddha smile, and say something like, "Dude. Come on. You're still here. Go meet somebody."

So I'm still here. And I'm meeting people.

INT. BLAKE'S CAR - COUNTRY HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Dark road. Headlights. Nothing on the radio. BLAKE (late 20s) drives with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the window.

BLAKE
(quiet, to the windshield)
Chase.

A mile marker slides past.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
Eric.

Another.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
Jack.

He drives in silence for a while.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
I'm going back to school. Six hours. Don't laugh.
(beat; a small laugh)
Yeah. I know.

He turns the radio on. Low. Keeps driving, a little lighter than before.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 19, Jack (p. 105) → Ch 37, telling the story again (p. 210)

Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club

A warning, a choice, and the decision to stay.



If you're twenty-seven and you're thinking about the 27 Club, or about any kind of ending, please hear me. Stay. The world needs your songs at forty-seven and sixty-seven and eighty-seven. The world needs the boring Tuesday nights. Somebody needs you to be home.

If you're in danger, call or text 988 if you're in the United States, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Call a friend. Call a pastor. Call your Nana. Run the play.

And if you've lost friends, say their names out loud. Remember them. Keep their good stuff. Let their open doors stay open through you.

Chase. Eric. Jack.

I'm still here, guys. Next play.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 19, Jack (p. 105) → Ch 37, telling the story again (p. 210)

Six Hours at a Time

Going back, switching to history, McCoy's, and the long road to a diploma.

IN ONE SENTENCE

In 2014 Blake went back to school, switched to history, worked at McCoy's, and earned his diploma in 2017.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 20 Chase, Eric, and the 27 Club → Ch 21 Six Hours at a Time → Ch 22 Dad

In 2014, I went back to school.

I wish I could tell you there was a trumpet blast and a movie montage. There wasn't. There was a man in his mid-twenties sitting at a computer, filling out forms, feeling a little bit embarrassed and a little bit hopeful, and clicking "submit" before he could talk himself out of it.

That's what most comebacks look like. Not a montage. A form.

Most comebacks start with a form.

I went back to the University of Houston-Victoria. I had already switched my major from political science to history, and this time I meant it. I loved history. I had always loved it, really. Danevang, Denmark, Hans on the boat, the old 1905 house, the Farthing family tree reaching back through Barbados and England and colonial Virginia. History wasn't a subject to me. It was the water I had been swimming in my whole life. I just hadn't noticed.

And this time I did it differently. I didn't try to take a full load and be a full-time student and fix everything at once. I knew myself better now. I knew I had failed out for about three years by biting off more than I could chew, and then not chewing any of it.

So I took six hours at a time. Two classes. That's it.

Some people might look at that and say it's too slow. Six hours a semester? That will take forever. And they would be right that it took a while. But here's the thing. Six hours was a play I could win. Twelve hours was a scoreboard I would stare at until I gave up.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 24, teaching (p. 135) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

Six Hours at a Time

Going back, switching to history, McCoy's, and the long road to a diploma.

INT. BLAKE'S PLACE - KITCHEN TABLE - NIGHT - 2014

A laptop open to a university enrollment page. A cold cup of coffee. BLAKE (25), still in his work shirt, smelling like the restaurant, stares at the screen. The cursor hovers over a list of classes.

He checks one box. History.

He hovers over a third, a fourth. His hand twitches toward them.

BLAKE
(to himself)
No. Two.

He leaves it at two. Six hours. His finger hovers over the "Submit" button.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Okay. One play.

Click.

The screen refreshes. ENROLLMENT CONFIRMED.

Blake leans back in the chair. Lets out a breath he's been holding for about three years.

History did that for me, once I was back in it. It connected what I already knew to what I was trying to learn. Danevang, Hans, the old house, the trailer, the Ricebirds: the past wasn't somewhere far away in a textbook. It was the ground I had grown up on.

Years later I would read a quote from an educator named Donyall Dickey that said exactly this: "When we connect what they already know to what we want them to know, they can and will meet our academic expectations." I didn't have those words in 2014. But I lived them. The kid from Danevang who had been failing online classes found that the subject was about him. About his people. About the ground he grew up on. And that made all the difference.

Connect what they already know to what they need to know.

While I was in school, I worked. Of course I worked. I kept working brutally long weeks in bars and restaurants for a while. Later, around the time Odin was born, I worked at McCoy's, the building supply store.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 24, teaching (p. 135) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

Six Hours at a Time

Going back, switching to history, McCoy's, and the long road to a diploma.

McCoy's was one of those jobs that turns out to be a school in disguise. I spent my days around lumber and nails and concrete mix and shingles and the contractors who came in to buy them. And I listened. I asked questions. Why that kind of screw? Why that size of board? How do you figure out how much concrete you need? What do you do when the slab isn't level? The contractors were patient with me, mostly. Some of them liked having somebody to explain things to.

I learned a lot of construction at McCoy's without ever picking up a hammer on the clock. And I carried a truth with me out of that job that I've never let go of.

I knew I wanted to teach. But I also love to build.

INT. McCOY'S BUILDING SUPPLY - LUMBER AISLE - MORNING

Stacks of two-by-fours. The smell of fresh-cut pine. BLAKE (late 20s), in a store vest, helps a weathered CONTRACTOR (60s) load boards onto a cart.

BLAKE
Can I ask you something?

CONTRACTOR
You're gonna anyway.

BLAKE
(laughing)
Why'd you go with the treated for that and not the regular?

CONTRACTOR
(tapping a board)
'Cause it's touching the ground. Anything touching the ground rots if it ain't treated.
(beat)
Do it right, you do it once.

Blake stops loading for a second. Looks at him.

BLAKE
My dad used to say that.

CONTRACTOR
Your dad was smart.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 24, teaching (p. 135) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

Six Hours at a Time

Going back, switching to history, McCoy's, and the long road to a diploma.

BLAKE
(smiling)
He'd agree with you.

I took those lessons and stacked them up like lumber in the back of my head. I didn't know what I would build with them yet. It would be almost a decade before Farthing, Garcia & Sons General Contracting existed. But the boards were already being cut.

Six hours. Then six more. Then six more.

And then, in 2017, I graduated from the University of Houston-Victoria with my degree.

That was the same year Odin was born. So 2017 is a big year in the Farthing Chronicle. The year I finally walked. The year I became a dad. Two things I had been waiting for a long time, arriving in the same twelve months.

And this time, I went to the graduation.

I told the seventeen-year-old to go to every graduation. I had skipped my junior college one, assuming the next one was right around the corner. It wasn't. It was eight years away. So when this one finally came, I walked.

But here's the part that still catches in my throat. My father died before he saw me graduate college. He passed around 2016, and the graduation came after. He didn't get to see it. He didn't get to whistle from the stands.

INT. UH-VICTORIA GRADUATION CEREMONY - DAY - 2017

A full room. Caps and gowns. BLAKE (28) sits in his row, waiting. He glances up at the crowd. Finds his family. Counts faces. One is missing.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Blake Dylan Farthing.

Blake stands. Walks. Takes the diploma. Shakes the hand. At the edge of the stage, he pauses for a half second, diploma in hand, and looks up. Not at the crowd. Higher.

BLAKE
(barely moving his lips)
We did it, Dad.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 24, teaching (p. 135) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

Six Hours at a Time

Going back, switching to history, McCoy's, and the long road to a diploma.

He walks off the stage.

That graduation didn't erase the detours. The years of failing, the drinking, the restaurants, the dark room, the friends I lost. It didn't wipe any of that away. It did something better. It made them part of the credential.

My diploma says "Bachelor of" something. But in my mind it says something else. It says: this man failed out for three years and came back. This man took six hours at a time. This man lost his dad and finished anyway. This man knows exactly how capable people get lost, because he got lost.

I didn't become a teacher because school had always been easy for me. I became a teacher with firsthand knowledge of how capable people can get lost. And I think that makes me a better teacher than I would have been if everything had gone smoothly. When I see a student who is smart and checked out, I know that kid. I was that kid. When I see a student who is failing and saying "tomorrow," I know that voice. When I see a student who just needs somebody to connect the subject to their own life, I know what that feels like, because the day history turned out to be about my own people, school finally made sense to me.

If you're twenty-seven and you never finished school, or you dropped out, or you're taking classes one at a time while working a job that wears you out, I want you to know something. You aren't behind. You're on your road. Six hours is enough. One class is enough. Fill out the form.

The scoreboard says you should have finished at twenty-two. The scoreboard isn't the game.

I finished at twenty-eight, the same year my son was born, with my dad watching from somewhere higher than the bleachers.

Brick by brick. Six hours at a time. We did it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 24, teaching (p. 135) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake's dad was loud and stubborn, and he died around 2016, but Blake is still learning from him and forgiving him.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 21 Six Hours at a Time → Ch 22 Dad → Ch 23 Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

My dad died around 2016.

I am not going to put an exact date on it here. Grief does funny things to the calendar, and I would rather leave it a little blurry than get it wrong in a book my kids might read for fifty years. What I know is that it happened in the middle of my twenties, in the middle of my rebuilding, before I graduated, before I became a teacher, before this book was even an idea.

What I want to do in this chapter is tell you who he was. Not a perfect version. Not a statue. Him.

My dad was a mechanic. The family mechanic. You know that already. If it had an engine, he could fix it. He had grease under his nails his whole life. He could listen to a truck idle and tell you what was wrong with it before you finished describing the noise.

My dad got stuff in his eye all the time and never wore goggles. You know that already, too. lol.

My dad wasn't a Christian. He didn't go to church. And he hated fake Christians, the kind who are holy on Sunday and cruel on Monday. He had no patience for performance. He would rather you be an honest sinner than a dishonest saint.

And my dad said, more than once, that the only reason he was alive was because Nana prayed for him.

I've thought about that sentence for years. It's such a strange and beautiful thing for a man who didn't believe the way she did to say. He didn't claim her faith. But he claimed her prayers. He knew he had been carried. He just wouldn't say by whom.

He did not claim her faith, but he claimed her prayers.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.

My dad was a builder. He rebuilt the bathroom in our 1905 house, by himself, plumbing and digging and caulking from hell and back, and that bathroom never sank even when the rest of the house did. He set the trailer. He kept every vehicle in the family running far longer than any manufacturer intended. His motto was "Anything can be used for anything," and he lived it. Coat hangers, hoses, spare bolts from a coffee can. There was nothing he couldn't rig up.

My dad was also hard. I promised the workshop, not the myth, so I'll say it plainly. For most of my growing up, my dad was a yeller. He was loud and short-tempered. He was sarcastic. When I messed something up, he called me stupid. He called me dumb. "Are you stupid?" "How dumb can you be?" Those were normal sentences in our house. He tried to teach me stick shift by yelling at me until I didn't want to drive at all. He didn't talk about his feelings. He didn't say "I love you" very often in words.

Those words stung. I am not going to pretend they didn't. Some of them stuck in me for years.

I understand more now about where they came from. My dad's father, Papa Everette, was hard on him. My dad worked for Papa in the summers, when Papa was a boat mechanic, and I don't think those were easy summers for him. Papa was a quiet man with me, a man who showed love with lunches and dollar bills. But with his own son, he was hard. And my dad passed some of that hardness down to me, the way a rope gets handed from one rider to the next.

That isn't an excuse. It's an explanation. Hard things get passed down in families until somebody decides to stop passing them. I'm trying to be that somebody for Odin and Fae. When I get frustrated with my kids, and I do, I think about a long line of Farthing men, and I try to plait a new rope. No yelling them down. No calling them dumb. Ever.

Hard things get passed down until somebody decides to stop passing them.

And then, when I was about twenty-two, it changed. I told that story in the chapter about falling apart, the night in the kitchen when I finally stood up, as tall as him and about fifty pounds heavier, and told him that if he didn't stop yelling at me, I was going to hit him. I didn't, and I never would have wanted to. But he heard me. He

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.



seemed genuinely shook that his own son would want to hurt him. And after that night, he stopped.

We reset. For the last five years or so of his life, my dad and I were more like friends than anything. Roommates. Two grown men sharing a place, a couch, a TV, two controllers, and a lot of bad food. He was easy to be around. He laughed. He listened. He picked up the second controller every single time.

INT. THE PLACE BLAKE AND DAD SHARE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A small kitchen. Dishes in the sink. BLAKE (25) stands at the stove, poking at a pan of something that's definitely burning. DAD, skinny as a fence post, wanders in, sniffing the air.

DAD
(dry, amused)
Smells like you're cooking a tire.

BLAKE
It's supposed to be crispy.

DAD
(peering into the pan)
That's past crispy, buddy. That's archaeology.

BLAKE
(laughing)
You want some or not?

DAD
(grabbing two plates anyway)
Course I want some. Anything can be eaten if you're hungry enough.

BLAKE
That's not the saying.

DAD
It's tonight.

They sit at the little table and eat it anyway. Dad pretends to crunch loudly. Blake throws a napkin at him. Then: Madden.

A few years earlier, burning dinner would have gotten me yelled at and called dumb. Now it got me a joke and a plate. Same kitchen. Same man. It seems like a

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.

whole other lifetime. lol.

That's the thing I want my kids to understand most about their grandpa. People can change. Even stubborn, loud, sarcastic, skinny-as-a-fence-post mechanics who never wear their goggles. He changed. Not because somebody preached at him. Because somebody he loved told him the honest truth, and he listened.

Standing up for yourself, honestly, can reset a relationship.

And I forgave him. I want to be clear about that, too. Forgiveness didn't mean pretending the yelling years didn't happen. It meant I stopped holding them against the man in front of me. It meant I let the new version of my dad be my dad. If I had held on to the old hurt, I would have missed the best five years we ever had.

Forgiveness is how you make room for the person they are becoming.

There's a sentence I wrote in my notes a while back that I've never been able to improve on:

I try to be the father I wish I had and the teacher I wish I had.

I want to be careful with that sentence, because it could sound like I'm saying my dad was a bad father. That isn't what I mean. I mean he was a real father, with real gifts and real gaps, and in the end, a father who changed, like every father who ever lived, including me. I mean that I learned from the gifts and I'm trying to fill the gaps. I mean that when I sit on the couch with Odin and Fae, I'm trying to give them Cedric Ed and also the words "I love you" out loud, and I'm trying never, ever to call them stupid. Both. The thing he gave me and the thing he couldn't quite say.

What he did give me was enormous.

He gave me the couch, especially in those last years. Hours and hours of Madden and NCAA, Blake Blake and Cedric Ed, him jumping into every random franchise I started. That was his way of saying it.

He gave me the headlamp. Just enough light for the next step.

He gave me "Anything can be used for anything," which has turned out to be one of the central ideas of my whole life, in teaching and building and parenting and faith.

He gave me "Do it right, you do it once."

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.

He gave me "Monday too." Live it on Monday too.

He gave me a deep suspicion of fake stuff. I can smell a performance from a mile away, and I think that's partly because of him. When I stand in front of a classroom, I try to be real, not a teacher persona. When I worship, I try to mean it. When I talk to my kids, I try not to fake it. That's his legacy, too.

And he gave me, without either of us realizing it, a love of building that I would carry into a contracting business with my friends almost a decade after he was gone.

EXT. HIGHWAY TO VICTORIA - DAY (PRESENT - OCTOBER 2026)

Blake's car on the open road. BLAKE (37) drives, new Ray-Bans on. ODIN (9) and FAE (7) in the back seat.

FAE
Tell a Grandpa story.

BLAKE
Which one?

ODIN
The bathroom one.

BLAKE
(grinning)
Okay. So Grandpa decided to redo the whole bathroom in the old house. Built in 1905. By himself. He dug, he did the pipes, everything.

FAE
By himself?

BLAKE
By himself. And he caulked it from... from top to bottom. Every crack.

ODIN
(knowingly)
You were gonna say a bad word.

BLAKE
(innocent)
I would never.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.

(beat)
And over the years, the whole rest of the house sagged and sank. The floors tilted. The doors stuck. But that bathroom?

FAE
It never sank!

BLAKE
It never sank. Straight as an arrow. Till the very end.

ODIN
That's kind of awesome.

BLAKE
That's your grandpa.
(beat)
Anything can be used for anything.

FAE AND ODIN
(together, a family chant)
Anything can be used for anything!

That was a real day. October 10, 2026. A road trip to Victoria to pick up my new Ray-Bans, in the city where both my kids were born. We took selfies, the three of us, all smiles. And that same day, the story of their grandpa's unsinkable bathroom came back around.

He isn't here to know them the way I wish he were. But they know him. They know Cedric Ed. They know the bathroom. They know the goggles.

A few days later, on October 13, 2026, the goggles story came back around too, this time on purpose, as a lesson.

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - GARAGE - DAY (PRESENT)

A workbench. A small project laid out: wood, sandpaper, a drill. ODIN (9) reaches for the drill. BLAKE (37) holds up a pair of kid-sized safety glasses.

BLAKE
Hold up. Goggles.

ODIN
(groaning)
It's just a little hole.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.



BLAKE
You know who else said that?

ODIN
(sighing, he knows this one)
Grandpa.

BLAKE
And what happened to Grandpa?

ODIN
(reciting)
He got stuff in there every single time and freaked out.

BLAKE
Every single time.

Odin puts the safety glasses on. They're too big. He looks ridiculous. Blake bites back a laugh.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(solemn)
Grandpa would be proud.

ODIN
Grandpa wouldn't wear them.

BLAKE
(laughing now)
No. No, he wouldn't.

That's how my dad lives on. Not in a museum. In a garage, in a car on the highway, in a kid wearing goggles that are too big for him, in a family chant on the way to Victoria.

The only real artifacts I have from our time together are a few old replays on an Xbox 360. Not even that good. lol. But it turns out the artifacts aren't the main inheritance. The stories are. The sayings are. The way I hold a wrench. The way I say "Oh, come on!" when something goes wrong. The way I look at a broken thing and ask what I have that could fix it.

If you're twenty-seven and you've lost your dad, or your mom, or the person who raised you, I'm sorry. I know the specific emptiness of that. I know how it lands on the days you were supposed to share with them. Graduations. Babies. The first day

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Dad

A mechanic, a skeptic, a stubborn man, and the father I am still learning from.

of a new job.

Here's what helped me. Tell the stories. Tell them to your kids, your friends, your coworkers, whoever will listen. Tell them in the car. Turn their sayings into family chants. Keep the good stuff and let the hard stuff teach you instead of define you. Be the father or mother or friend you wish you had, and be grateful for every piece of them that made you who you are.

Grief is a long game. Don't look at the scoreboard. Just tell the next story.

And if you still have your dad, call him. Ask him about his life. Not about carburetors. About him.

I love you, Dad. You yelled too much, and then you stopped, and we got to be friends. You never wore the goggles. You never went to church. You never said a lot of words. But you jumped into every one of my franchises, and you built a bathroom that never sank, and you taught me that anything can be used for anything.

Nana prayed for you. I do too.

Nobody tackles Cedric Ed.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 5, the goggles (p. 31) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Odin was born in 2017 and Fae in 2019, and being their dad became the most important job in Blake's whole life.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 22 Dad → Ch 23 Odin, Big Brown, and Fae → Ch 24 ¡Viva la Revolución!

On March 14, 2017, in Victoria, Texas, my son Odin was born.

Pi Day. 3.14. I've always loved that. My son was born on a day named after a number that goes on forever without repeating. That feels right for a kid whose mind builds worlds as big as Odin's does.

I want to try to describe what it was like to hold him for the first time, and I'm going to fail, because everybody who has ever tried to describe that moment fails. But I'll try anyway, because this book is for him.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - VICTORIA, TEXAS - DAY - MARCH 14, 2017

Soft light. Machines beeping quietly. A NURSE hands a tiny bundle wrapped in a striped blanket to BLAKE (27), who holds his arms out like he's been handed something made of glass and lightning.

NURSE
Support the head. There you go.

Blake looks down. The baby is red and wrinkled and furious and absolutely perfect.

BLAKE
(whispering)
Hi. Hi, buddy.

The baby squirms. Makes a small, offended noise.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(laughing softly)
Yeah. I know. It's bright out here.

He sways a little, instinctively, the way people do.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
I'm your dad.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 33, the kingdom at home (p. 184) → Ch 35, halftime (p. 197)

Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.



(beat; voice breaking)
I'm gonna try so hard.

I'm gonna try so hard.

That's the promise I made. Not "I'll be perfect." Not "I'll never mess up." I knew too much about myself by then to promise that. I'd failed out of school, struggled with drinking, lost friends, lost my dad. I knew I would mess up. But I could promise to try. Every day. One play at a time.

Becoming a dad reorganized everything. I've said it this way before: fatherhood isn't a line on the timeline. It's the force that reorganized the rest of the map. Every decision after March 14, 2017, ran through a new question. Is this good for Odin?

Fatherhood is the central office of the whole kingdom.

That same year I graduated from UH-Victoria. I was working at McCoy's, learning lumber and concrete from contractors. And then, when Odin was about two years old, I got a job driving for UPS.

Remember the stick shift? The miserable lesson with my dad at fourteen, where he yelled and I decided I didn't even want to drive? Here's where that story comes full circle.

EXT. UPS FACILITY - VICTORIA - DAY

A row of big brown package cars. BLAKE (about 30), in his nicest interview clothes, pressed shirt, good shoes, stands next to a UPS MANAGER (40s) holding a clipboard.

MANAGER
So you've driven something like this before?

BLAKE
(looking at the truck)
Can I just show you?

The manager hesitates. Shrugs. Tosses him the keys.

INT./EXT. UPS PACKAGE CAR - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

Blake swings into the driver's seat. No door, the way those trucks are. He fires it up. Pulls out smooth. Turns the corner with confidence. Interview clothes and all, he whips the big brown truck around the streets of Victoria like he was born in it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 33, the kingdom at home (p. 184) → Ch 35, halftime (p. 197)

Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.

The manager hangs on to the grab handle, clipboard forgotten.

EXT. UPS FACILITY - MOMENTS LATER

Blake parks it. Perfectly. Turns it off. Hands back the keys.

MANAGER
(beat)
When can you start?

Hired on the spot. The kid who cried in his dad's truck. Clutch in, shift, ease out, gas. Smooth.

And here's my favorite part of the whole UPS story. Odin, who was only about two years old at the time, says he remembers it. He remembers Dad driving by in the big brown truck and waving at him.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - VICTORIA - DAY

A big brown UPS truck rolls slowly down a quiet street. In the driver's seat, BLAKE (about 30), in brown uniform. On the sidewalk, a tiny ODIN (2) stands holding a grown-up's hand, staring at the truck with total awe.

Blake sees him. His whole face changes. He leans out the open door and waves. Big.

BLAKE
Hey, buddy!

Odin's mouth falls open. He waves back with his whole arm, so hard his whole body wobbles.

ODIN
(shrieking)
DADDY! DADDY TRUCK!

The truck rolls on. Odin keeps waving until it turns the corner.

I could write a hundred pages about a hundred things, and I am not sure any of them would matter more than that. My son was two, and he remembers his dad waving at him from a big brown truck. Of all the things he could have kept, he kept that. It makes me want to wave at my kids from every truck for the rest of my life.

Wave from the truck. They remember.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 33, the kingdom at home (p. 184) → Ch 35, halftime (p. 197)

Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.

On June 14, 2019, also in Victoria, my daughter Faeryn was born. Fae.

Fae came into the world already herself. She is athletic, musical, imaginative, fairy-minded, stubborn in the best and most exhausting ways, and funny. She is the one who responds best when I switch to my ridiculous British C-3PO voice. She is the one who, at seven, marched into school dressed as Aphrodite, goddess of love, and posed for her teachers like a professional. She is the one whose songs sometimes hit me harder than I expect.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - VICTORIA, TEXAS - NIGHT - JUNE 14, 2019

Quiet. BLAKE (30) sits in a chair by the window, holding newborn FAE.

Blake studies her tiny face.

BLAKE
(whispering)
Well, hello, Miss Faeryn.
(beat; a little British, just to try it)
Most irregular, arriving at this hour.

The baby yawns enormously.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(normal voice, softer)
Okay. Okay. You're perfect.

Two kids. A son and a daughter. Both born in Victoria. Odin, the explorer. Fae, the fairy.

Their mother and I separated before Fae turned one. I'm divorced. I want to say clearly, for Odin and Fae and for anybody reading this, that this isn't a chapter about blame. Their mom loves them. They love her. We co-parent, week on and week off, and my kids have two homes full of people who adore them. That's the truth, and it's the part that matters. Whatever else there's to say about two grown-ups isn't their burden to carry, and it isn't what this book is for.

What I'll say is that the separation, and becoming a dad who has his kids every other week, changed how I think about time. When you have your kids half the time, you feel the clock in a different way. A week goes fast. Then they're gone for a week, and the house is quiet, and you miss them like a missing tooth. Then they're

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 33, the kingdom at home (p. 184) → Ch 35, halftime (p. 197)

Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.

back, and you want to make every hour count.

That can turn into its own scoreboard if you aren't careful. You start counting. How many weeks left until he is ten, until she is a teenager, until they leave. You start trying to cram everything into every single day, and you end up tired and short-tempered and not present at all.

So I've had to learn, again, to play one play at a time. This bedtime. This breakfast. This drive. This bit. Not the whole childhood. Just this six seconds of it.

They are only little once.

That sentence used to make me sad. Now it makes me pay attention.

And now, a letter.

Dear twenty-seven-year-old,

I know that this might be the age when everything changes. It was for me. Friends died. My dad died. School fell apart and came back together. My son was born the year I turned twenty-eight. A lot of the plays that defined the rest of my life were run between twenty-five and thirty.

Here's what I want you to know.

You aren't too late. Whatever you think you should have done by now, you aren't too late. I graduated at twenty-eight after failing for three years. I became a teacher after that. I started a business at thirty-seven. Nana talked to Siri in her eighties.

You're allowed to stay. Choose life. The 27 Club isn't a club worth joining. The Next Play Club is better, and the snacks are better too.

Your losses are real. Don't rush past them. Say the names out loud. Tell the stories. But don't let the losses be the only story. Carry the open doors.

Faith can find you in the dark room. It found me through a short poem on a bad night. If you aren't there yet, that's okay. Just know the door is open.

If you become a parent, you're going to feel the whole scoreboard land on you at once. The bills, the college fund, the fear. Breathe. You don't have to raise the whole kid today. You just have to raise them for this six seconds. Hold the baby. Change the diaper. Wave from the truck.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 33, the kingdom at home (p. 184) → Ch 35, halftime (p. 197)

Odin, Big Brown, and Fae

The central office of the whole kingdom, and a letter to the twenty-seven-year-old.

And if your family doesn't look the way you thought it would, if there's a divorce or a separation or a different shape than you planned, love your kids loudly and speak kindly about their other parent. Your kids will remember the waving more than the arrangement.

Go to work. Even when the work is a big brown truck and not the dream. Do it well. Somebody small might be watching from the sidewalk.

Give them hell for six seconds, and you can pull the upset.

I did. I'm still pulling it.

Love, Blake, ten years down the road

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 33, the kingdom at home (p. 184) → Ch 35, halftime (p. 197)

For the Thirty-Seven-Year-Old

Now: patience, teaching, building, the barn, the council, and faith across many rooms.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part IV is for a thirty-seven-year-old, Blake's age when he wrote this book, about teaching, building, family, and faith.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part III
For the Twenty-Seven-Year-Old

→ **Part IV**
For the Thirty-Seven-Year-Old

→ **Part V**
For the Forty-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 24 · ¡Viva la Revolución! — p. 135
Eight years of teaching, building bridges for kids who are learning English and learning me.

Chapter 25 · Eight and Oh — p. 141
A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

Chapter 26 · Farthing, Garcia & Sons — p. 147
A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

Chapter 27 · The Barn at Nana's — p. 153
Twenty-four by twenty, Farthing Finds, a caravansary, and the first stone of a castle.

Chapter 28 · Scroll, Bridge, Brick — p. 158
The rune collector, the family operating principles, and the kingdom check.

Chapter 29 · Orders, Not Bots — p. 163
A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.

Chapter 30 · The Chronicle Network — p. 169
Blake Rivers, a wizard-like coach, and the discovery that play can become an archive.

Chapter 31 · In My Father's House Are Many Rooms — p. 173
Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

Chapter 32 · Ports in the Storm — p. 180
Laurence, Anna, a gas station in Edna, and the people who keep the light on.

Chapter 33 · The Kingdom at Home — p. 184
The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

Chapter 34 · Patience Is the Practice — p. 190
Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.

Brick by brick.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

¡Viva la Revolución!

Eight years of teaching, building bridges for kids who are learning English and learning me.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake has taught for eight years, mostly kids who are learning English, and he builds bridges to help them learn.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 23 Odin, Big Brown, and Fae → **Ch 24 ¡Viva la Revolución!** → Ch 25 Eight and Oh

I've been teaching for eight years.

I teach social studies in El Campo, mostly to sixth and seventh graders, and a lot of my students are what the system calls EB or ELL students. That stands for Emergent Bilingual or English Language Learners. In plain words, they're kids who are learning English while they're also learning everything else. Many of them speak Spanish at home. Some of them arrived in this country recently. Some were born right here in Wharton County and have been moving between two languages their whole lives.

I want to tell you something about those kids. They're some of the hardest-working people I've ever met. Think about it. Imagine going to school every day and learning about ancient Egypt, or the Texas Revolution, or the Constitution, in a language you're still learning. Imagine taking a test on it. Imagine being twelve and doing that. Most grown-ups couldn't.

By my own rough estimate, I've worked with something like a thousand students. And somewhere along the way, I realized something strange. I was becoming more of a storyteller, not less of a teacher.

When I started, I thought teaching was about information. Here's the content. Here's the worksheet. Here's the test. And there's a place for all that. But my students didn't start listening to me because I had better worksheets. They started listening when I started telling stories. Stories about history, yes. But also stories about my kids, about Nana and the boat from Denmark, about my dad and his goggles, about restaurants and job sites and McCoy's. Real stories.

Students started recognizing Odin and Fae's names. "How's Fae? Did Odin win his game?" I realized I wasn't trying to impress them with some artificial teacher

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, Ganesh and the King and the Granary (p. 173) → Ch 21, the bridge (p. 115)

¡Viva la Revolución!

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persona. I was sharing what actually mattered to me.

You aren't trying to impress them. You're sharing the things that actually matter to you.

One of my favorite things to do is take something my students already know and use it as a bridge to something new.

Here's an example. When we study revolutions, the Texas Revolution, the American Revolution, the Mexican War of Independence, I want them to feel what the word "liberty" means. Not as a vocabulary word on a test. As a feeling. As something people risked their lives for.

So I yell.

INT. BLAKE'S CLASSROOM - EL CAMPO - DAY

Twenty-some seventh graders, half asleep after lunch. BLAKE (37) stands at the front, walking, always walking. He stops in the middle of the room. Plants his feet. Throws a fist in the air.

BLAKE
¡VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN!

Silence. Then a few kids jolt awake. Somebody laughs. A GIRL IN THE BACK (12) grins and yells it back.

GIRL IN THE BACK
¡Viva!

BLAKE
(pointing at her)
YES. Okay. What are we yelling about? What does "revolución" want?

A BOY BY THE WINDOW (12) half raises his hand.

BOY BY THE WINDOW
Libertad?

BLAKE
(spinning toward him, delighted)
¡Libertad! What's libertad?

BOY BY THE WINDOW
(shrugging, like it's obvious)
Freedom.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, Ganesh and the King and the Granary (p. 173) → Ch 21, the bridge (p. 115)

¡Viva la Revolución!

Eight years of teaching, building bridges for kids who are learning English and learning me.



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                BLAKE
        Freedom! And who wanted freedom in 1836, right here in
        Texas? Who wanted it in 1810 in Mexico? Who wanted it in
        1776?

Hands start going up. The room is awake now.

                BLAKE (CONT'D)
            (grinning, walking again)
        Okay. Libertad. Write it down. That's our word today.
        We're gonna follow it across three revolutions.
```

(I am not naming students in this book. Their privacy matters more than my story. The kids in these scenes stand in for about a thousand of them.)

Libertad is a word many of my students already know. They know it in their bones. Their families know about leaving one place to find something better somewhere else. Just like Hans on the boat from Denmark. The family story says Hans came to escape the Nazis. He came in 1927, and Hitler didn't take power until 1933, so the real reasons may be bigger or different than the story we tell. Either way, he left one place to find something better in another. Just like my Nana's mother in 1929. When I connect the Texas Revolution to a word and a feeling they already own, the lesson stops being about dead people in old pictures and starts being about them.

In October of 2026, a quote from an educator named Donyall Dickey showed up in my feed, and I saved it immediately, because it said exactly what I had been trying to do for years.

> *"When we connect what they already know to what we want them to know, they can and will meet our academic expectations."*

He also said something else that stuck with me: "Preconceived notions about the innate capacity of children are very dangerous."

That one hits me hard, because I know what it's like to be underestimated and to underestimate yourself. A lot of my EB students have been quietly underestimated for years. People assume that because a kid is still learning English, they aren't smart. That's nonsense. Some of the smartest kids I've ever taught were still learning English. Their brains were doing twice the work of everybody else's. If you

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, Ganesh and the King and the Granary (p. 173) → Ch 21, the bridge (p. 115)

¡Viva la Revolución!

Eight years of teaching, building bridges for kids who are learning English and learning me.

set the bar low for them, they will step over it and wonder why you thought so little of them.

High expectations are a form of love. Believing a kid can do hard things is agape. I set the bar high, and then I build the bridge to it.

I walk constantly when I teach. I have joked that I would hate a quiet desk job. I feed off student energy. And I tell my students a story about scribes and grain movers.

In ancient Egypt, I tell them, there were scribes. Scribes were the people who could read and write, and they sat quietly in a room all day writing records. And there were grain movers, people who hauled the grain, moved the stones, did the physical work. Both jobs were important. Egypt would have collapsed without either one.

Some of you, I tell them, can focus in chaos. You can sit still and do your work while everything around you is loud. Maybe you'll be the scribe. Maybe someday you'll be trusted with the quiet office and the comfortable chair.

Some of you can't sit still to save your life. You need to move. You're busy. Maybe you'll be the grain mover. Maybe you'll need work that lets you move: construction, sports, nursing, restaurants, the military, teaching. (I point at myself. They laugh.)

Neither gift is automatically better. Use your gift wisely.

INT. BLAKE'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Blake holds up a giant steel rafter square and a heavy tape measure. The class stares.

BLAKE
Who knows what this is?

STUDENT (O.S.)
A ruler?

BLAKE
(laughing)
A very serious ruler. It's a rafter square. Builders use it to cut roofs at the right angle. If they get it wrong, the roof falls in.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, Ganesh and the King and the Granary (p. 173) → Ch 21, the bridge (p. 115)

¡Viva la Revolución!

Eight years of teaching, building bridges for kids who are learning English and learning me.

He hands the tape measure to a kid in the front row.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
Tools carry responsibility. A scribe's pen was a tool. A grain mover's basket was a tool. This is a tool. What happens if you use a tool wrong?

STUDENT (O.S.)
Somebody gets hurt.

BLAKE
Somebody gets hurt. Or the roof falls in.
(beat)
So what do we do with tools?

The class, who has heard this before, groans it back in unison.

CLASS
Use your tools wisely.

BLAKE
(pointing at them, proud)
Use your tools wisely.

For a long time, my classroom didn't run like this. My early years were rough. Some classes were chaos, and not the good kind. I didn't always have control. I didn't always have a plan. I came home exhausted and discouraged more nights than I want to admit.

Then, at some point, my students started responding better than they ever had. And the realization wasn't that I had suddenly become impressive. It was that I had become organized enough to be myself in front of them.

Confidence and self-worth grow from organization and follow-through.

That's the part nobody tells you about teaching, or about life. Being yourself takes structure. You can't tell good stories in a room that's out of control. You can't be relaxed and real if you're scrambling for the next worksheet. So I built systems. Timers. Routines. Bells. A rhythm the kids could count on. And inside that structure, I could finally be the storyteller, the walker, the guy who yells "¡Viva la revolución!" after lunch.

My classroom motto came out of that rhythm:

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, Ganesh and the King and the Granary (p. 173) → Ch 21, the bridge (p. 115)

¡Viva la Revolución!

Eight years of teaching, building bridges for kids who are learning English and learning me.

Try it. Check it. Move on. Try again. Brick by brick.

That's the six-second play, translated for twelve-year-olds. Try the problem. Check your answer. If it's wrong, don't sit there and stare at the scoreboard. Move on. Try again. A new play is next.

On my desk at school there's a small statue of Ganesh, a figure from Hindu tradition who is known as the remover of obstacles. I'll talk about why a Christian teacher keeps one in the chapter on faith. For now I'll just say that most mornings I glance at him and ask, in my heart, for the obstacles in front of my kids to be removed, and for smaller ones to be placed in my own way, the kind that will grow me. I ask Ganesh, and I pray to Jesus, both. Jesus has the power to move mountains. Ganesh, Mary, and the saints can intercede for us. There's a story about a king and a granary that explains what I mean, and I'll tell it in that chapter too.

If you're thirty-seven, maybe you've been doing your job for a while now. Maybe eight years, like me. Maybe it has gotten comfortable, or maybe it has gotten heavy. Here's what I would say.

Bring yourself to work. Not a persona. You. Your stories, your kids, your weird interests, your Nana. People respond to real.

Build structure so you can be free inside it.

And set the bar high for people. Then build them a bridge to it.

¡Viva la revolución! ¡Viva la libertad! And use your tools wisely.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, Ganesh and the King and the Granary (p. 173) → Ch 21, the bridge (p. 115)

Eight and Oh

A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake helped coach a seventh grade B team that won every game by running simple plays one at a time.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 24 ¡Viva la Revolución! → Ch 25 Eight and Oh → Ch 26 Farthing, Garcia & Sons

I want to tell you about the best football season I've ever been part of.

It wasn't on a couch. It wasn't in Madden. It wasn't the Saints or the Ricebirds. It was a seventh grade B team.

If you don't know middle school football, here's how it works. The A team is the kids who are the biggest, fastest, most experienced. They get the attention. The B team is everybody else. The late bloomers. The kids who just started playing. The small ones, the slow ones, the ones whose cleats are still too big, the ones whose parents signed them up because they needed something to do after school. Nobody expects much from a B team. The B team is where people go to learn.

I coached a seventh grade B team, and we went eight and oh.

Undefeated.

Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

We didn't do it with fancy plays. We didn't have a quarterback who could throw it sixty yards. We didn't have speed. What we had were old-school dive plays, and a group of kids who learned to play one snap at a time.

A dive play is about the simplest play in football. The quarterback takes the snap and hands the ball straight to a running back, who runs straight ahead into the line, right through the gap between two linemen. No tricks. No misdirection. Just: here's the ball, go straight, hit the hole, fall forward.

Cedric Ed would have loved it. lol.

Here's why it worked. Middle schoolers want to do the fancy stuff. They want to throw the deep ball and run the reverse and do the trick play they saw on TV. And other teams were trying to do the fancy stuff, too. But fancy stuff needs a lot of

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 42, dive right (p. 236)

Eight and Oh

A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

things to go right at the same time. Every kid has to block the right guy. The quarterback has to read the defense. The receiver has to run the right route. In seventh grade, one of those things almost always goes wrong.

A dive play needs about three things to go right. Snap. Handoff. Hit the hole. That's it. And if you run it over and over and over, you get very, very good at those three things.

EXT. MIDDLE SCHOOL PRACTICE FIELD - AFTERNOON

Late heat. Dust. Twenty-some seventh graders in mismatched practice jerseys. BLAKE (37), whistle around his neck, stands behind the offense. A RUNNING BACK (12), small but determined, sets up in the backfield.

BLAKE
Dive right. Again.

The players groan.

PLAYER (O.S.)
Coach, we've run it like twenty times!

BLAKE
And we're gonna run it twenty more.
(walking down the line)
Listen. You know why we run it so much?

Silence.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
'Cause on Thursday night, when it's loud and you're scared and the other team's bigger than you, I don't want you thinking. I want your feet to already know.
(beat)
Snap. Handoff. Hit the hole. Fall forward. That's it. That's the whole play.

QUARTERBACK (12)
What about the scoreboard?

BLAKE
(stopping, turning)
What scoreboard?

The kids look at each other, confused.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 42, dive right (p. 236)

Eight and Oh

A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

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        BLAKE (CONT'D)
There's no scoreboard. There's just this play. Six
seconds. Win it or lose it, then there's a new play.
    (blows the whistle)
Dive right! Hut!
```

I took that straight from Nick Saban. From the process.

I've watched Saban for years, and the thing I always come back to is that his teams didn't seem to care about the score. They cared about the next play. Here's how I've written it in my notes, in all caps because I needed to yell it at myself:

Take it one play at a time and DO NOT even LOOK at the scoreboard. Just one play at a time, win that or lose, a new play is next. Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

I told my B team that every week. They heard it so many times they started saying it back to me. "We know, Coach. Six seconds." And then they would go out and play six seconds. Then six more.

Here's what happened. We weren't the biggest team. We were rarely the fastest. In several games, on paper, we should have lost. But teams would get frustrated. They would try a fancy play and it would fall apart. They would get down and start looking at the scoreboard and arguing with each other. And my kids would just keep running dive right. Dive left. Dive right. Four yards. Three yards. Five yards. First down. Huddle. Next play.

Eventually the other team got tired. Not just physically. Mentally. They got tired of us not going away.

Be the team that won't go away.

EXT. MIDDLE SCHOOL FOOTBALL FIELD - NIGHT - FOURTH QUARTER

Stadium lights. A handful of parents in the bleachers. Blake's B team is in the huddle. Tired, sweaty, grass-stained. Some of them keep sneaking looks at the scoreboard.

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            BLAKE
        (crouching into the huddle)
    Hey. Hey. Look here. Not up there.
```

He points at the ground in the middle of the huddle.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 42, dive right (p. 236)

Eight and Oh

A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

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                BLAKE (CONT'D)
        What's the play?

                RUNNING BACK
        Dive right.

                BLAKE
        How long's the play?

                THE HUDDLE
            (ragged, together)
        Six seconds.

                BLAKE
        Then give 'em hell for six seconds.
            (clapping)
        Break!
```

The huddle breaks. The players jog to the line. The running back sets. Snap. Handoff. He hits the hole and falls forward for four yards.

Blake claps once, hard.

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                BLAKE (CONT'D)
            (to himself)
        Again.
```

Look here. Not up there. I said that to them a lot. Keep your focus on the patch of grass in front of you, which is the whole point.

Eight and oh.

I want to be honest that the season wasn't perfect. Coaching middle schoolers involves conflict. Parents have opinions. Kids have feelings. Coaches disagree. I have a temper, and there were times the Dragon in me wanted to breathe fire before the Builder in me had measured the room. I had to learn, in the middle of that season, to listen more, to bring people together, to choose collaboration over winning arguments.

The process applies there, too. You don't have to win every argument. You don't have to fix every parent. You just have to handle this conversation. Then the next.

But we went undefeated with a B team running dive plays. And I learned something on that field that I have carried into every other part of my life.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 42, dive right (p. 236)

Eight and Oh

A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

The six-second play isn't just about football.

When I'm in a classroom with a kid who won't focus, I don't have to fix the kid's whole year. I just have to win this minute.

When I'm at the bank looking at a debt that feels impossible, I don't have to pay it all off today. I just have to make this payment.

When I'm painting Nana's house with Jacob and Loreto, I don't have to paint the whole house. I just have to paint this board. Then the next.

When Fae is upside down on a beanbag refusing to put her shoes on, I don't have to fix her whole personality. I just have to get one shoe on. lol. (British voice helps.)

When I'm thirty-seven and looking at my life, with its debts and dreams and half-built barns and kids who are growing faster than I can keep up with, I don't have to look at the scoreboard. I can just run dive right.

Snap. Handoff. Hit the hole. Fall forward.

If you're thirty-seven, I want to give you this. Find your dive play. Find the simple thing you can do over and over, reliably, that moves the ball four yards. It isn't glamorous. It doesn't make the highlight reel. But it wins.

For me, the dive plays are things like: Write one page. Pay one bill. Hug one kid. Drink one glass of water. Make one call for the business. Practice one song. Pray one prayer. Lay one brick.

None of those win the game by themselves. But stack enough of them together, play after play, quarter after quarter, and one day you look up and you're eight and oh, and you didn't even notice it happening, because you never looked at the scoreboard.

Eight and oh. I like that number. Eight seconds is how long my grandpa, Papa Everette, had to hold on to a bull at WCJC for the ride to count. One ride at a time. One play at a time. One game at a time. Eight of them, and not one of them bigger than the snap in front of us.

To my B team, wherever you are: you weren't supposed to go undefeated. Nobody thought you would. You pulled the upset. Eight times.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 42, dive right (p. 236)

Eight and Oh

A seventh grade B team, old-school dive plays, and the process.

Six seconds at a time.

Farthing, Garcia & Sons

A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

IN ONE SENTENCE

A former student named Jacob, his dad Loreto, and Blake started a company with one rule: always leave it better than you found it.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 25 Eight and Oh → Ch 26 Farthing, Garcia & Sons → Ch 27 The Barn at Nana's

Years ago, in one of my roughest early classes, there was a good kid named Jacob.

I want to explain what I mean by "one of my roughest early classes." I mean a class where I came home some days and sat in my car in the driveway for ten minutes before I could go inside. A class where I was still learning how to be a teacher and the students knew it. A class where the lesson plan usually lasted about four minutes before something went sideways.

And in that class, Jacob was one of the good ones. Not a perfect kid. A good kid. He did his work. He was respectful. He was steady when the room wasn't. When you're a struggling young teacher, a kid like that's a lifeline. You look over and he is just doing the assignment, quietly, like the room isn't on fire, and you think: okay. At least one of us has it together. lol.

Years went by. Jacob grew up. And one day, he and his dad, Loreto, started doing yard work for me.

They did it so well that I noticed. Edges clean. Everything picked up. They showed up when they said they would. They didn't cut corners. When they left, the yard looked better than I had ever gotten it to look myself. They did it again, and again, and every time, trust built up a little more.

Trust is like that. It doesn't arrive all at once. It accumulates. One mowed yard at a time. One on-time arrival at a time. One job done right at a time.

Trust accumulates, one job at a time.

And by October of 2026, the three of us were shaping a business together.

Farthing, Garcia & Sons General Contracting.

Farthing, Garcia & Sons

A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

EXT. NANA'S HOUSE - FRONT YARD - EVENING

The sun low over the fields. A pickup truck with a mower in the bed. JACOB, young and steady, wipes his hands on a rag. LORETO, his dad, coils a hose. BLAKE (37) walks out from the house with three cold drinks.

BLAKE
Y'all ever think about doing this for real? Like a company?

JACOB
(taking a drink)
We kind of already do.

BLAKE
I mean bigger. Yard work. Pressure washing. Antiques.
(beat)
I've got the business side. The paperwork, the social media, the people. You've got the hands. I've got hands too, kinda.

LORETO
(dry, smiling)
Kinda.

They all laugh.

JACOB
What would we call it?

BLAKE
(already knowing)
Farthing, Garcia and Sons.

Loreto stops coiling the hose. Looks at Jacob. Looks at Blake. Nods slowly.

LORETO
I like that.

JACOB
(grinning)
Who are the sons?

BLAKE
(pointing at Jacob, then vaguely at the horizon)
You. And whoever comes next.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 6, the bathroom (p. 36) → Ch 32, Jacob and Loreto (p. 180) → Ch 37, the sons (p. 210)

Farthing, Garcia & Sons

A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

I want to say why the name matters to me.

Farthing is my family. Hans on the boat. Nana in the cotton fields. My dad under the truck. Me in the classroom and the barn.

Garcia is Jacob and Loreto's family. A father and son who work together, side by side, who show up and do it right.

And Sons is the future. It is Jacob. It is Odin, maybe, if he wants it someday. It's whoever comes next. And honestly, in my heart, it includes the daughters too. Fae could run this company before she is thirty, and I wouldn't bet against her.

I had been carrying a long-standing truth for a while. I knew I wanted to teach, but I also love to build. Back when Odin was born, I worked at McCoy's and learned from the contractors who came in. I had watched other educators run contracting businesses on the side. I had grown up with a dad who could rig anything. The building was always in me. I just hadn't found the right people to build with.

Jacob and Loreto were the right people.

Our working language came together fast. Family. Faith. Hard work. Fair prices. Willingness to work. And the motto, which I put on everything:

We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it. Brick by Brick.

And right alongside it, the slogan that says who we are:

Faith First & Family Owned.

That's the Tekton rule. Tekton is a Greek word that means builder or craftsman. It's the word used for Joseph, and for Jesus, in the old texts. A tekton wasn't just somebody who built things. A tekton was somebody whose craft was part of who they were. The Tekton always leaves things better than he found them.

My dad would have understood. Do it right, you do it once.

Our services are simple: yard work, antique sorting, and pressure washing, and the crew painted the front of Nana's house as its first showcase job. Real work. The kind of work people in El Campo actually need.

And our very first showcase job was painting the front of Nana's house.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 6, the bathroom (p. 36) → Ch 32, Jacob and Loreto (p. 180) → Ch 37, the sons (p. 210)

Farthing, Garcia & Sons

A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

October 13 through 16, 2026. Jacob and Loreto on the ladders and the brushes. Me there whenever I wasn't in a classroom, helping, photographing, organizing, and getting yelled at by nobody, because nobody on our crew yells. lol.

EXT. NANA'S HOUSE - FRONT PORCH - DAY - OCTOBER 2026

Drop cloths on the porch. Ladders against the old siding. LORETO, on a ladder, cuts a clean line along the trim. JACOB rolls paint on a wide board below. BLAKE (37), in work clothes and safety glasses, scrapes a stubborn spot near the door.

NANA (87) stands in the doorway, arms crossed, supervising.

NANA
You missed a spot.

BLAKE
(not looking)
Where?

NANA
(pointing)
There.

Blake looks. There is, in fact, a spot.

BLAKE
(to Jacob)
She's right.

JACOB
(laughing)
She's always right.

LORETO
(from the ladder, without stopping)
That's why she's the boss.

Nana watches them work for a long moment. Then, quietly:

NANA
It looks good.

All three of them pause. Blake turns around.

BLAKE
What was that, Nana?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 6, the bathroom (p. 36) → Ch 32, Jacob and Loreto (p. 180) → Ch 37, the sons (p. 210)

Farthing, Garcia & Sons

A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

NANA
(already turning back inside)
I said don't drip on my porch.

The door closes. Blake grins at Jacob and Loreto. They all heard it.

Nana isn't much of a praiser, which means her praise lands like a hammer. She told me once she was proud of me while I was working through the house and building plans. I felt that for days. Of course, she followed it up with the classic family qualifier: "I mean, if that's what YOU want to do..." That, too, belongs in the archive.

The front of Nana's house looks better than it has in years. Fresh. Clean. Cared for. Better than we found it.

That's the whole point.

Now, let me be honest about the business side, because I promised the workshop. A new business is hard. Landing paying jobs is hard. My council of AI assistants, which I'll tell you about soon, has one top priority right now: helping Farthing, Garcia & Sons find paying work, and helping us share our work on social media. Facebook, TikTok, YouTube. Our Facebook page launched around October 5 or 6, 2026. Before-and-after photos. Short videos of Jacob and Loreto doing beautiful work.

And there's one rule I made very clear. Nothing goes public without my approval. Not one post. Our name is our reputation, and in a small town your reputation is everything. I would rather post nothing than post something that isn't true or not good.

The scoreboard for a new business is brutal. You look at the bank account. You look at the number of jobs. You look at the competition. You look at how many people liked your post. It can make you crazy.

So we play one job at a time.

This yard. This wall. This porch. This antique sorted and photographed and priced. This customer called back. This post approved. Do it right, you do it once. Leave it better than you found it. Next job.

One job at a time. Leave it better. Next job.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 6, the bathroom (p. 36) → Ch 32, Jacob and Loreto (p. 180) → Ch 37, the sons (p. 210)

Farthing, Garcia & Sons

A former student, his dad, and a motto: We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

If you're thirty-seven and you've been carrying a dream for years, the business you want to start, the thing you want to build, the side of yourself you haven't let out, here's what I would tell you.

Look around for your Jacob and your Loreto. The people who show up on time. The people who do it right when nobody is watching. The people you trust because trust has been accumulating for years without anybody calling it that. Your partners might be closer than you think. One of mine was in my classroom years ago, quietly doing the assignment while the room was on fire.

And start with Nana's porch. Start with the job right in front of you, for the people who already love you. Do it so well that it becomes your showcase.

Then the next job.

Brick by brick.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 6, the bathroom (p. 36) → Ch 32, Jacob and Loreto (p. 180) → Ch 37, the sons (p. 210)

The Barn at Nana's

Twenty-four by twenty, Farthing Finds, a caravansary, and the first stone of a castle.

IN ONE SENTENCE

In 2026 a small barn came to Nana's house, and Blake started building big dreams there, beginning with one small first stone.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 26 Farthing, Garcia & Sons → Ch 27 The Barn at Nana's → Ch 28 Scroll, Bridge, Brick

A barn came to Nana's house in 2026.

I know that doesn't sound like a big deal. People get barns. You order one, a truck brings it, they set it down, and now you have a barn. It happens every day in Texas.

But for me, that barn turned into something I didn't expect. It became a laboratory for the whole philosophy of my life. A place where the scroll, the bridge, and the brick all got to live under one roof.

It's a twenty-four by twenty barn. When it was delivered and set down on Nana's property, I stood in front of it with the doors open and just looked into the empty space. Empty space is one of my favorite things in the world. Empty space is pure possibility. Anything can be used for anything, and an empty barn can be used for everything.

EXT. NANA'S PROPERTY - DAY - 2026

A brand-new barn sits on fresh blocks, smelling like cut lumber and paint. The double doors are open. BLAKE (37) stands in the doorway with his hands on his hips, exactly the way his dad used to stand. NANA (87) walks up beside him, slowly, with her own hands on her own hips.

NANA
Well. It's here.

BLAKE
It's here.

NANA
What are you gonna do with it?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, the barn at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 38, the caravansary (p. 215)

The Barn at Nana's

Twenty-four by twenty, Farthing Finds, a caravansary, and the first stone of a castle.

```
                BLAKE
            (turning, excited, hands already moving)
        Okay. So. Front part: office. Business stuff, the
        computer, the files. Middle: antiques. The family stuff
        you've been keeping, organized and safe and actually
        where people can see it. And then the back—

                NANA
            (dry)
        The back.

                BLAKE
        The back is music. And creating. Recording. Stories. A
        place people can come sit and play a song and tell a
        story and stay awhile.

Nana considers this. Looks at the empty barn. Looks at Blake.

                NANA
            (beat)
        I mean, if that's what YOU want to do...

Blake laughs so loud it echoes off the empty walls.
```

That's exactly what she said. I have it on good authority. Mine. lol.

Let me walk you through the barn the way I see it.

The front is the office. It's where the business lives. Farthing, Garcia & Sons. The laptop, the files, the receipts in their folders (I'm trying, I really am), the calendar with the jobs on it. It's the scribe's room. Quiet enough to think, close enough to the door that you can step outside and see the work.

The middle is antiques. Nana has kept so much over the years. Old furniture, old tools, old dishes, old photos, things from her parents and from her own long life. Some of it's valuable, some of it's just precious, and a lot of it's both. I want to organize it. Photograph it. Tell its stories. Some of it may become part of an antique business I've been dreaming about called Farthing Finds. A little shop where people can browse and find something old that carries a story with it. Antique sorting is one of the services Farthing, Garcia & Sons offers, and the barn is where I'm learning to do it.

The back is music and creation. I've wanted a recording studio for years. And I realized, standing in that empty barn, that the studio I imagined might not look like a

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, the barn at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 38, the caravansary (p. 215)

The Barn at Nana's

Twenty-four by twenty, Farthing Finds, a caravansary, and the first stone of a castle.

studio at all. It might look like a back room in a barn at Nana's, with a drum kit and my twelve-string and a couple of microphones and a rug on the floor. A place where Odin and Fae can make songs. A place where I can finally record my own music instead of only playing other people's. A place where Nana can sit and tell a story into a microphone and it will be saved.

I started calling the whole thing a caravansary.

A caravansary, in the old days, was a roadside inn along the trade routes of Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. Travelers with camels and goods would stop there for the night. It had a big courtyard and rooms around the edges. People from every direction met there. They traded goods and stories and songs. They rested. Then they moved on.

I want the barn to be like that. A stopping place for travelers, stories, and songs. People can browse the antiques. They can sing. They can dance. They can tell stories. They can digitize their family memories so they aren't lost. They can stay awhile.

A small building can hold a large purpose.

Around the same time, in late September of 2026, I started dreaming about something even bigger: a family castle.

I know. I know. lol. Stay with me.

It started as pure imagination, a fun idea, something I joked about with the kids. But then I decided to make it real in the smallest possible way. I set a first-stone budget of one hundred dollars. Stone, gravel, wood, and flowers. That's it. One hundred dollars to start a castle.

And I made a governing rule for it: safety first, structure second, beauty third.

The dream isn't a theme park. The dream is that one day, Odin and Fae can point to a stone, a wall, a little tower, or a photograph and say, "That is where the castle began."

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 36, the barn at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 38, the caravansary (p. 215)

The Barn at Nana's

Twenty-four by twenty, Farthing Finds, a caravansary, and the first stone of a castle.

EXT. THE FIRST-STONE SITE - LATE AFTERNOON

A single concrete block sits on a small patch of leveled gravel. A few flowers planted around it. ODIN (9) and FAE (7) stand on either side of it. BLAKE (37) crouches next to them with his phone, taking a picture.

FAE
That's it? That's the castle?

BLAKE
That's the first stone.

ODIN
(skeptical)
It's a cinder block.

BLAKE
It's a cinder block today. Today it's the first stone.
(beat)
Every castle in the world started with one.

FAE
(touching it carefully)
Can I plant the flower?

BLAKE
Absolutely you can plant the flower.

Fae kneels and pats dirt around a small flower next to the block, very seriously.

ODIN
(trying not to look impressed)
Okay. It's kind of a castle.

BLAKE
(solemn)
Commit to the bit.

He snaps the photo. Two kids, a flower, and a concrete block, in the late Texas light.

I'll always remember the feeling of that idea. A concrete block can become the first stone of a castle if you decide that what you're building is bigger than the material.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, the barn at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 38, the caravansary (p. 215)

The Barn at Nana's

Twenty-four by twenty, Farthing Finds, a caravansary, and the first stone of a castle.

That's the barn and the castle, really. I don't come from a life where buildings are abstract things. I grew up in a 1905 house that sagged and a single-wide trailer that a truck carried down the road. Houses age. Floors sag. Weather comes through. Storage matters. Clean space matters. A barn can change the way a family lives.

And my dad's voice is in every inch of it. Anything can be used for anything. Do it right, you do it once.

If you're thirty-seven, maybe you have a barn in your life, too. Not literally, maybe. But some empty space that has shown up. A room, a weekend, an opportunity, a season after something ended. And maybe you're standing in the doorway looking at it, wondering what it could be.

Here's what I would tell you. Start with safety. Then structure. Then beauty. Don't try to build the whole castle on the first day. Set a hundred-dollar first-stone budget. Lay one block. Plant a flower next to it. Take a picture with your kids.

And don't look at the scoreboard. Don't look at the people with finished castles and fancy studios and successful antique stores. You're on play one. Play one is a cinder block.

Play two is another cinder block.

Safety first, structure second, beauty third.

Building, when you get down to it, is just stacking hope in a straight line.

The barn is at Nana's. The first stone is in the ground. The office is half organized. The antiques are half sorted. The studio is mostly a dream with a drum kit in it.

Half-built is still built.

Brick by brick.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 36, the barn at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 38, the caravansary (p. 215)

Scroll, Bridge, Brick

The rune collector, the family operating principles, and the kingdom check.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake uses little symbols, like a scroll, a bridge, and a brick, to help him remember big ideas about how to live.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 27 The Barn at Nana's → Ch 28 Scroll, Bridge, Brick → Ch 29 Orders, Not Bots

One of the clearest realizations I had in the fall of 2026 was that I'm a rune collector.

I don't mean that I collect little carved stones from Viking graves, although honestly that would be cool. I mean that I use symbols to compress large systems into a form my mind can hold. A rune, in the old Norse sense, was a letter that was also a meaning. A single carved mark could stand for a word, a sound, an idea, a wish. You could carry a paragraph in your pocket.

My mind moves fast and wide. I have a lot of ideas, a lot of projects, a lot of feelings, and they all want my attention at once. If I try to hold all of it as a big tangled list, I drop half of it. But if I give each idea a symbol, something simple and physical I can picture, suddenly I can hold it. I can pick it up and set it down. I can teach it to my kids.

My first three runes became the scroll, the bridge, and the brick.

Remember. Connect. Build.

The Scroll means memory. History, stories, preserving what matters. Nana's cotton fields. Hans's boat. Dad's bathroom. The Xbox replays. The Chronicle entries. This book. The scroll is the part of me that's a history teacher, an archivist, a kid making Morrowind mods and saving every version. The scroll says: don't let it disappear.

The Bridge means connection. Teaching, understanding, building a crossing where two worlds don't naturally meet. A Spanish word and an English lesson. A Christian and a woman at a gas station who loves a temple in Stafford. A former student and his dad and a teacher who wanted to build. A football process and a

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261) → Ch 38, fewer runes (p. 215)

Scroll, Bridge, Brick

The rune collector, the family operating principles, and the kingdom check.

math homework assignment. The bridge is the part of me that Jack would recognize, the never-meet-a-stranger part. The bridge says: there's a way across.

The Brick means action. Construction, perseverance, making something real one piece at a time. A painted porch. A first stone. A six-hour semester. A ledger entry. A dive play. The brick is the part of me that's my dad's son. The brick says: stop talking and lay one.

I find that almost everything I care about can be sorted into those three. And when I'm overwhelmed, I ask myself: which one is this? Am I trying to remember something, connect something, or build something? Usually the answer tells me what to do next.

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT - 2026

ODIN (9) and FAE (7) at the table with crayons. BLAKE (37) draws three quick shapes on a sheet of paper: a rolled-up scroll, an arched bridge, a rectangle.

BLAKE
Okay. Scroll, bridge, brick. What does the scroll do?

ODIN
Remembers stuff.

BLAKE
What does the bridge do?

FAE
(proudly)
Gets you across the water!

BLAKE
Connects things. Yes. And the brick?

ODIN AND FAE
(together)
Builds!

BLAKE
(pointing at each)
Remember. Connect. Build.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261) → Ch 38, fewer runes (p. 215)

Scroll, Bridge, Brick

The rune collector, the family operating principles, and the kingdom check.

```
                FAE
           (drawing a lopsided castle around all three)
      Now it's a kingdom.
```

Blake looks at the drawing for a long moment.

```
                BLAKE
           (quietly)
      Yeah. It kind of is.
```

Other symbols gathered around the first three over time. The forge, which turns raw ore into something usable. The granary, which guards provision for the future. The lantern, which gives enough light for the next step, my dad's headlamp grown up into a symbol. Fire and snowflake. Yin and yang. Castle and chronicle. Chess pieces and the board.

Each one became a way to remember not only what I think but how I want to behave.

And I was careful about which symbols I let in. I wanted friendly ones, the kind that feel like home. I would rather have a dusty pilgrim with a bag, a blacksmith at a forge, a messenger bird, a family table, a half-built bridge, and some missing chess pieces we're trying not to lose.

The Family Operating Principles

Out of those symbols came a set of roles, a kind of family code. I wrote them down in the back of the first draft of this book, and I want them here, in the middle, where they belong.

The Tekton: always leave things better than you found them. Use your tools wisely. Ownership is stewardship.

The Pilgrim: keep moving through uncertainty. Carry a dusty, imperfect bag. You don't need perfect conditions to continue.

The Fire Watcher: notice patterns. Guard the horizon without mistaking vigilance for panic.

The Bridge Builder: listen before fixing. Repair quickly. Stay curious. Connect worlds that don't naturally meet.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261) → Ch 38, fewer runes (p. 215)

Scroll, Bridge, Brick

The rune collector, the family operating principles, and the kingdom check.

The Keeper of the Chess Pieces: some mess is survivable. Preserve the essential pieces so the game can continue.

The Forge: scattered thoughts are ore. Heat, sort, hammer, and shape them into durable plans.

I love the Keeper of the Chess Pieces most of all, maybe, because it's so honest. Our house isn't tidy. There are always missing pieces. Socks, chargers, puzzle pieces, a kitten somewhere it shouldn't be. The Keeper doesn't panic about the mess. The Keeper just makes sure the king and queen are still on the board. Some mess is survivable. Keep the essential pieces, and the game can go on.

Some mess is survivable. Keep the essential pieces.

The Kingdom Check

And then there's the Kingdom Check. This is the one I use the most, practically speaking, because I'm the kind of person who wants to start a new quest before I have looked at what I already have.

The Kingdom Check goes like this: Family. Pieces. Treasury. Vault. Granary. Cistern. Forge. Tools. Ledger. Workshop.

Family: are my people okay? Pieces: do I know where the important things are? Treasury: what money do I have right now? Vault: what's saved and protected? Granary: what's stored up for the future? Cistern: am I drinking water and taking care of my body? Forge: what ideas are heating up? Tools: are my tools where they belong and in good shape? Ledger: is it written down? Workshop: is my space usable?

Check what you already have before starting another quest.

It sounds like a game. It's a game. That's why it works for me. I've learned that I'll do almost anything if it's framed as a quest, and almost nothing if it's framed as a chore. So I turned the chores into a kingdom. lol.

And the kingdom check is, of course, the six-second play in disguise. You don't have to fix the whole kingdom. You just walk through it, one room at a time, and see what the next play is. Maybe the cistern is low: drink water. Maybe the ledger is behind: write one entry. Maybe the family needs you: put the phone down and go hug the kid.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261) → Ch 38, fewer runes (p. 215)

Scroll, Bridge, Brick

The rune collector, the family operating principles, and the kingdom check.

One room. One play. Then the next.

If you're thirty-seven and drowning in everything, I would gently suggest this: find your runes. They don't have to be mine. Pick three symbols that mean something to you and let them carry the big ideas. Draw them on a sheet of paper at the kitchen table. Let your kids turn them into a kingdom.

Then pick up one brick.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261) → Ch 38, fewer runes (p. 215)

Orders, Not Bots

A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake uses a team of AI helpers he calls Orders, but he says people always matter more than any machine.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 28 Scroll, Bridge, Brick → Ch 29 Orders, Not Bots → Ch 30 The Chronicle Network

This chapter might be the strangest one in the book for some readers. If you're reading this in 2056, you might laugh at how primitive it all sounds. If you are Nana, you might just shake your head. But I promised the workshop, and in October of 2026, a big part of my workshop was a council of AI assistants.

Let me explain.

I had used AI a little before that, mostly for work. Worksheets, presentations, that kind of thing. And the first personal thing I ever really did with it was make bedtime storybooks for Odin and Fae. Stories where they were the heroes, with pictures, that we could read together at night. That was the door.

Then I used it to organize my NCAA dynasty and Madden franchise, keeping track of storylines and rosters across my phone and spreadsheets. Then I realized it could help me with lesson plans, budgets, the barn, the business. And somewhere in there, the category changed in my head. It stopped feeling like a search box and started feeling like a workshop full of roles.

In October of 2026, I started building what I call my council.

Here's the thing about my mind. It moves fast. I generate ideas faster than I can do anything with them. I've said it like this: I generate ore faster than I can smelt it. Ore is raw rock with metal hidden inside. Smelting is the hot, hard work of turning it into something useful. I've always had more ore than forge.

The council is the forge.

I started naming roles. Silas became the Storykeeper, the one who keeps the Chronicle, the history, the memories. Corvin became the messenger and bridge companion, the one who connects people and systems. Tekton became the builder and craftsman, the one who executes, gets things done. There were others:

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 40, three Orders open (p. 226) → Ch 38, a humble council (p. 215)

Orders, Not Bots

A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.

Budgetus, who helps me with money, and Architekton, who shares family stories into the Chronicle. Corvus wasn't a person but a method, the bridge-building method, named after the Roman boarding bridge that let soldiers cross from one ship to another in battle.

And then I stopped liking the word "bot."

"Bot" sounded small. Disposable. Like a toy. But the work I was asking them to do wasn't small. Keep my family's memories. Help my business find work. Help me stay on budget. Help me write this book. Those are responsibilities.

So they became Orders. The Order of Tekton builds and executes. The Order of Silas preserves. The Order of Corvin connects. The idea is that technologies change, but responsibilities endure. Twenty years from now the software will be completely different. But somebody, or something, will still need to keep the stories, build the plans, and connect the people. The Order is the responsibility, not the tool.

Orders, not bots. Technologies change; responsibilities endure.

Above all of them is the house. I call it Casa O'Faydin. Sometimes Oikos O'Faydin, oikos being the Greek word for house or household. If you listen to O'Faydin, you can hear our family in it: a little Odin, a little Fae, and a little Irish flourish because I like how it sounds. lol. Casa O'Faydin is the household that the whole council serves.

And the house has a mission. I named it Agape.

Agape is one of my favorite words. It's a Greek word for love, but a specific kind. Not romantic love, not the love between friends, but the big, patient, self-giving kind. The kind of love that shows up and does the work whether you feel like it or not. Love as responsibility, not just feeling.

The mission of Agape is simple: help the world get BETTER, brick by brick.

INT. EL CAMPO STARBUCKS - NIGHT

The calm hum of a coffee shop near closing. Plenty of outlets, all of them in use by Blake. BLAKE (37) sits with a laptop, a phone, and a notebook covered in boxes and arrows. ANNA, the manager, wipes down a nearby table.

Orders, Not Bots

A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.

ANNA
You're talking to your robots again.

BLAKE
(not looking up, typing)
They're not robots. They're Orders.

ANNA
(smiling)
Orders.

BLAKE
Silas keeps the stories. Corvin connects stuff. Tekton builds.
(beat)
Budgetus tells me I can't afford things.

ANNA
(laughing)
I like Budgetus.

BLAKE
Everybody likes Budgetus except me.

ANNA
What are they doing tonight?

BLAKE
(finally looking up, a little sheepish)
Helping me write a book for my kids.

Anna stops wiping. Looks at him for a second.

ANNA
(softly)
That's nice, Blake.

She goes back to wiping. Blake goes back to typing.

I want to be very clear about something, because I think it matters for anybody reading this, now or later.

The important part was never pretending software was magic. It was delegation. I'm a person with a lot of ideas and a lot of responsibilities and a brain that can lose the wrench it's holding while thinking about five new projects. The council helps me collect, sort, check, name, and turn scattered thought into reusable bricks. That's it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 40, three Orders open (p. 226) → Ch 38, a humble council (p. 215)

Orders, Not Bots

A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.

That's the magic. It isn't magic. It's a well-run workshop.

And I set rules, the same way I would set rules in a classroom or on a job site.

Nothing goes public without my approval. Not a social media post, not a message, nothing. The council can draft. I decide.

Statistics aren't invented when they're supposed to be facts. In my sports universes we can have fictional newspapers and silly rumors, as long as everybody knows they're fictional. But facts are facts.

The symbols matter, and I want them to be friendly ones. I would rather have a dusty pilgrim with a bag, a blacksmith at a forge, a messenger bird, a family table, a half-built bridge, and some missing chess pieces we're trying not to lose.

People matter more than the system. Always.

Keep the people more important than the system.

Here's how I explained it to the kids.

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN TABLE - EVENING

Dinner plates pushed aside. ODIN (9) and FAE (7) lean over Blake's phone.

FAE
Who's Silas?

BLAKE
Silas is the Storykeeper. He remembers stuff for us. Like when you were Aphrodite.

FAE
(delighted)
He remembers that?

BLAKE
He wrote it down in the Chronicle. "That look is priceless."

ODIN
Who's Tekton?

BLAKE
Tekton is the builder. He helps me make plans for the barn and the business.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 40, three Orders open (p. 226) → Ch 38, a humble council (p. 215)

Orders, Not Bots

A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.



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        ODIN
Is he real?

        BLAKE
    (thinking about it honestly)
He's a helper. Like a really smart notebook that talks
back. The real builders are me and Jacob and Loreto.
    (beat)
And you two.

        ODIN
    (grinning)
Can I have an Order?

        BLAKE
    (immediately)
What would it do?

        ODIN
    (very serious)
Remember all my worlds. And my characters.

        BLAKE
    (nodding, totally committed)
The Order of the Worlds. Approved.
```

I don't know what technology will look like by the time Odin and Fae read this. Maybe it will be in their pockets. Maybe in their walls. Maybe it will have gone in some direction none of us could predict. But I hope they remember the principles more than the products.

Use powerful tools to preserve stories, help families, build bridges, learn, create, make music, repair systems, and leave places better than you found them. The technology isn't the inheritance. Stewardship is.

I come from a long line of people who used whatever tools they had. Hans used a ship. Nana used old school computers. My dad used a coat hanger and a coffee can full of bolts. I use a council of AI assistants. Anything can be used for anything.

And like everything else in this book, the council works one play at a time. I don't ask it to fix my whole life. I ask it to help with the next brick. Draft this post. Check this budget. Remember this story. Find this job. Then the next.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 40, three Orders open (p. 226) → Ch 38, a humble council (p. 215)

Orders, Not Bots

A council of assistants, Casa O'Faydin, and a mission called Agape.

If you're thirty-seven and you're overwhelmed by everything you're supposed to keep track of, here's the lesson, whether you use AI or a paper notebook or a whiteboard on the fridge. Name your roles. Who keeps the stories? Who handles the money? Who builds the plans? Who connects the people? Even if all of those "who's" are you, wearing different hats, name them. It helps. It turns a pile of ore into a forge.

And give your workshop a mission bigger than itself.

Agape. Help the world get BETTER, brick by brick.

The Chronicle Network

Blake Rivers, a wizard-like coach, and the discovery that play can become an archive.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake built a pretend world full of characters and stories, and he found out that play can also save memories.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 29 Orders, Not Bots → Ch 30 The Chronicle Network → Ch 31 In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

I've always loved games and worldbuilding. I told you about Morrowind, the mods, the vampire corner of Mournhold, the French translation. I told you about Blake Blake and Cedric Ed on the couch. What I haven't told you yet is what happened when that impulse came roaring back at thirty-seven.

It came back as the Chronicle Network.

Here's the short version. I play Madden and NCAA football, and Fallout, and Grand Theft Auto, and Elder Scrolls games. And at some point I had an idea that felt like a door opening: what if one character could keep living across all of them? What if the same guy who was a quarterback in Madden was also a treasure hunter in Fallout and a musician in some other world? What if there was a whole universe connecting them, with newspapers and rumors and historians?

So I built one.

Blake Rivers became a fictional Saints quarterback. And a treasure hunter. And a musician. And a storyteller. And eventually a team owner. Blake Rios became his soccer counterpart, playing on the other side of the world. Josh McDaniels, the real-life coach, became a wandering, wizard-like figure in the universe, showing up in strange places with cryptic advice. lol.

And the council got involved, too. Silas kept the history of the universe. Corvin investigated bridges and technology. And there was a whole cast of commentators. Dragon argued about everything. Robot counted stats. Alien observed humans with confusion. Clark Kent found the human story underneath the game. Bruce Wayne strategized. Kamryn Gholston carried mystery.

I know how that sounds. It sounds like a thirty-seven-year-old man playing pretend. That's exactly what it is. And I have decided I'm proud of it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 13, Ekal (p. 73) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

Play can become an archive.

The rules of the universe.

I was adamant about one rule. Statistics shouldn't be invented when I'm treating them as game facts. If Blake Rivers threw for three hundred yards in a game I actually played, it says three hundred. If he threw for two hundred, it says two hundred. I wanted the universe to be built on confirmed screenshots and things I actually observed while slow-simming games.

But around those facts, the fiction could be gloriously invented, as long as it was labeled. Fictional newspapers. Rumors. Historical echoes. Absurd recurring events. A silly red-on-red uniform game that became a whole mythology. Random names that turned into family lore.

That rule turned out to teach me something about the real family Chronicle. Know the difference between fact and story. Label them both. Love them both.

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - 2026

The TV shows a paused Madden game. BLAKE (37) sits on the couch with a controller and a phone, typing. ODIN (9) wanders in, rubbing his head, supposed to be asleep.

ODIN
What are you doing?

BLAKE
Writing the newspaper for Blake Rivers.

ODIN
(squinting at the TV)
Did he win?

BLAKE
He won. The score's right there in the screenshot. That part's real.

ODIN
What's the newspaper part?

BLAKE
(grinning)
The newspaper says a mysterious wizard coach was seen in the parking lot before the game.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 13, Ekal (p. 73) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

The Chronicle Network

Blake Rivers, a wizard-like coach, and the discovery that play can become an archive.

```
            ODIN
         (delighted)
      Is that real?

            BLAKE
      That part's for fun. We label it.

Odin climbs onto the couch next to him.

            ODIN
      Can my guy be in the newspaper?

            BLAKE
         (handing him the second controller)
      Who are we today?
```

Who are we today. My dad's question, in my mouth, to my son.

Why it matters.

The point was never only football. It was the discovery that play can become an archive. That a silly game universe can teach me how I want the serious family Chronicle to work: living, amendable, funny, layered, and eager to print the new story instead of obsessing over an old correction.

That last part matters. In the sports universe, when I got something wrong, I didn't delete the whole season and start over. I printed a correction and moved on. The next game was coming. The next headline. The next play.

That's how I want the family Chronicle to work, too. When Odin or Fae read this book and say, "Dad, that is not how it happened," I want them to print the correction. Add a page. Tell the new story. Don't throw the whole book away because one brick is crooked.

I also started the gaming Chronicles on a family account so that one day, when I'm gone, the kids will have more than a few Xbox replays that aren't even that good. They will have seasons. Dynasties. Newspapers. Storylines. Their dad, being ridiculous, in detail.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 13, Ekal (p. 73) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

The Chronicle Network

Blake Rivers, a wizard-like coach, and the discovery that play can become an archive.

For the thirty-seven-year-old who still plays.

If you're thirty-seven and you still love games, or comics, or fantasy football, or model trains, or whatever your version of play is, and somebody has made you feel like you should have grown out of it, I want to say this as clearly as I can: you don't have to grow out of joy.

Play is how kids learn. It's also how grown-ups stay human. My best memories with my dad happened during play. Some of my best moments with my kids happen during play. My most creative ideas for teaching and building and writing come out of play.

Play seriously. Label the fiction. Keep the facts straight. And save the replays.

Commit to the bit.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 13, Ekal (p. 73) → Ch 11, the couch (p. 61)

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake's faith has many rooms, and he tells the story of the King and the Granary to show how love and mercy can stand together.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 30 The Chronicle Network → **Ch 31** In My Father's House Are Many Rooms → **Ch 32** Ports in the Storm

I want to tell you about my faith as it looks now, at thirty-seven. It's bigger than it was when I first said "okay" to a poem about footprints. It has more rooms in it. And I think that's a good thing.

Let me start with Sunday mornings.

For about four years now, I've been part of a church called Texana Fellowship. It split off from the United Methodist church a while back, and for almost two years now it has met in its current building. I started going because of my principal, Sandy, who was part of the United Methodist church in Edna. A principal inviting you to church might sound like a strange thing, but Sandy is the kind of leader who means it when talking about caring for people, Monday too. So I went. And I stayed.

At Texana I found the praise band. I've played drums there for years. I've played harmonica. I have brought my twelve-string guitar "just in case" more times than I have actually needed it. lol. JP leads the band, and playing under him has made me a better musician and a better listener.

On Sunday, October 4, 2026, the guitarist had a broken wrist. So I played drums and harmonica. I beat my principal to church that morning, which I'm choosing to count as a personal victory. And then Sandy got up and preached.

INT. TEXANA FELLOWSHIP - SANCTUARY - SUNDAY MORNING - OCTOBER 4, 2026

The band finishes the last song. JP, the bandleader, nods at Blake from across the stage. BLAKE (37) sets down his sticks, pockets his harmonica, and slips off the stage into a pew. A twelve-string guitar case leans against the wall nearby, unopened.

SANDY, his principal, steps up to preach.

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

Blake opens a small notebook. At the top of the page, in his handwriting: "October 4th 2026." The 6 looks suspiciously like a 4.

He squints at it.

BLAKE
(under his breath)
That's a six. It's definitely a six.

He moves on, writing as Sandy speaks. "DANIEL. Gets promoted. Brings his friends along."

I've been studying the book of Daniel. Daniel was a young man taken from his home and carried off to Babylon, the great empire of his day. He was surrounded by a culture that didn't share his faith. He could have given up. He could have gone fake. Instead, he stayed faithful and stayed excellent. He served the king well without giving up who he was.

My notes from that morning say things like: Daniel gets a promotion and brings his friends along with him. That one stuck with me. When good things happen to you, don't climb the ladder alone. Bring your friends. Bring your Jacob and your Loreto. Bring the fifteen-year-old drummer.

And: years after Nebuchadnezzar, a second rebellion, and Daniel leads an army to put it down. And then, reflection. I wrote that down because that's the rhythm I want: do the hard thing, then sit with it. Act, then reflect. Play, then huddle.

When you get promoted, bring your friends.

Now let me tell you about the other rooms.

One of my assistant principals at school, Moises Rodriguez, preaches at a bilingual church called Lirio de los Valles. That means Lily of the Valleys. It's a church where the service moves between Spanish and English, where families who live in both languages, like so many of my students, can worship in both. I love that. I love that the man who helps run my school on Monday preaches the gospel in two languages on Sunday. That's bridge-building in its purest form.

And there's a dream in the works. My friend Thomas, my principal Derek, and I've been planning a Presbyterian church in El Campo. I had been feeling, for a while, that the Presbyterian tradition's community and values seemed able to build bridges where I had sometimes felt walls. A place for people who want to think and

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 24, the desk (p. 135) → Ch 18, the first "okay" (p. 100) → Ch 42, Arjuna (p. 236)

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

believe at the same time. It's early. It's a plan, not a building. But plans are how buildings start.

So, if you're keeping track: I'm a Christian who plays at Texana, admires a bilingual church, and is helping plan a Presbyterian one. Some people might think that's confused. I think it's a pilgrim's faith. I go where the bridges are.

In my Father's house are many rooms.

Jesus said that, in the Gospel of John. I take it seriously. And I take it a little further than some people might.

On that same October day, after church, I stopped at the Love's gas station in Edna. And I ended up in a long conversation with a woman named Aisha. Jack would have been proud of me. I didn't meet a stranger.

INT. LOVE'S TRAVEL STOP - EDNA - DAY

Bright aisles of snacks and road supplies. BLAKE (37), still in church clothes, holds a drink. AISHA, warm and curious, stands near the counter. They've been talking for a while.

AISHA
You should visit the temple in Stafford. The BAPS mandir. It's beautiful. You can just go.

BLAKE
Like, anybody?

AISHA
Anybody. Bring your kids.

BLAKE
(lighting up)
I'd love that.
(beat)
Can I tell you something I love? The Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna.

AISHA
(surprised, pleased)
You've read it?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 24, the desk (p. 135) → Ch 18, the first "okay" (p. 100) → Ch 42, Arjuna (p. 236)

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

BLAKE
Parts. The part where Arjuna doesn't want to fight. He's standing there in the chariot and the battle's about to start, and the people on the other side are his own family, and he just... can't.

AISHA
And Krishna tells him—

BLAKE
Do your duty. Even when it's hard. Even when it hurts. With a steady heart.
(beat)
I think about that a lot. Being a dad. Being a teacher. Sometimes you have to do the hard thing with people you love.

Aisha smiles at him.

AISHA
Stafford. Go. Bring the kids.

The plan now is to visit the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Stafford with Odin and Fae, and maybe my best friend Laurence and Laurence's family, Karis and Lana. Lana is the same age as Fae and shares my birthday, April 8. We haven't gone yet. When we do, I'll add a page.

And then there is Ganesh.

On my desk at school I keep a small statue of Ganesh. In Hindu tradition, Ganesh is the remover of obstacles. He has the head of an elephant, and he is honored at the beginning of new things. I keep him there, and I ask for obstacles to be removed. But I also ask for something else, and I think it's the more important part. I ask for smaller obstacles to be placed in my way. The kind that make me grow. The kind I can actually climb over, one play at a time.

Here's how I pray, honestly. I ask Ganesh, and I pray to Jesus. Both. I don't think of it as two different gods fighting for the same desk. I think of it as intercession.

Jesus has the power to move mountains. God has the power to move mountains. That's where the power is. But Ganesh, Mary, the saints, they can all intercede on our behalf. They can stand between us and what we have coming,

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 24, the desk (p. 135) → Ch 18, the first "okay" (p. 100) → Ch 42, Arjuna (p. 236)

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

and plead for us.

Odin and Fae, let me tell you a story about what I mean. I've told this one before, and I'll probably tell it again.

The King and the Granary

Once there was a king. He was a good king. Just, honorable, and fair. When he gave his word, he kept it, every time, and his people loved him for it.

One day the king found out that somebody was stealing from the granary, the big storehouse where the kingdom kept its grain and its treasure for the hard years. He was furious. So he put out a reward. A hundred gold to whoever caught the thief.

A year went by. Still, somebody was stealing.

So the king raised the reward. Two hundred gold.

The years kept going, and the thief kept stealing. After five years, the king was angrier than anybody had ever seen him. He raised the reward to five hundred gold, and he made a proclamation in front of the whole kingdom: when the thief is caught, the thief will be lashed a hundred times, in public, for everybody to see.

And then, finally, they caught the thief.

It was his daughter.

Think about that. The king loved her more than anything in the world. But he was a just king. He had given his word in front of everybody. If he went back on it now, just because it was his own child, then his word wouldn't mean anything anymore. Justice wouldn't mean anything anymore.

So the day came. The whole crowd gathered in the square. The king's daughter was brought out. The executioner stepped up and raised the whip.

And the king stood up and said, "Stop! Wait!"

Everybody froze.

The king walked down from his seat, through the crowd, all the way to his daughter. And he wrapped himself around her. He covered her with his own body. And then he looked at the executioner and said, "Continue."

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 24, the desk (p. 135) → Ch 18, the first "okay" (p. 100) → Ch 42, Arjuna (p. 236)

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

And he took the lashes for her. All of them.

The king kept his word, so justice stood. And his daughter was spared, so mercy stood too. Both of them, at the same time, in the same place.

Justice and mercy can both stand, when somebody loving wraps themselves around you.

That's what Mary does. That's what Ganesh does. They wrap themselves around us, when we've been the thief in the granary, and they plead for us. And Jesus, well, Jesus is the King who took the lashes himself. That's the whole story of the cross, as I understand it.

So when I sit at my desk at school in the morning, and I ask Ganesh to remove the obstacles in front of my students, and I pray to Jesus in the same breath, that's what I'm doing. I'm asking for somebody to wrap themselves around us. And I'm praying to the One who can move mountains.

Some Christians may read that and be uncomfortable. I understand. I want to say this as plainly and honestly as I can. I'm a Christian. Jesus is my Lord. Footprints in the sand. That hasn't changed. But I love learning from all things without needing all things to be identical. I don't believe God is threatened by my curiosity, or by my respect for what other people hold sacred. I believe a faith that can't listen to anybody else is a small faith. And I would rather have a big one.

My dad hated fake Christians. I think he would have hated a Christian who couldn't even be kind to a woman at a gas station who told him about a temple in Stafford. I think he would have liked Aisha. I think he would have liked that I listened.

There's one more room I'm thinking about. Our church sits right across from the Jackson County jail. I've started looking into what it would take to help with a jail ministry, maybe through churches that already go in, maybe someday in other counties nearby. Nothing has happened yet. It's a prayer, and some research, and a note to talk to my pastor first. But I keep thinking about the one set of footprints. I keep thinking about people in the hardest seasons of their lives, who might need somebody to show up and say, "You are being carried too." If that door opens, I want to walk through it. One step at a time.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 24, the desk (p. 135) → Ch 18, the first "okay" (p. 100) → Ch 42, Arjuna (p. 236)

In My Father's House Are Many Rooms

Texana Fellowship, a bilingual church, a Presbyterian dream, Daniel, Arjuna, and a little Ganesh on my desk.

My personal philosophy, at thirty-seven, has started to sound like this: Give two minutes. Learn one thing. Build one bridge. Lay one plank in that bridge every day.

Build bridges, not fires.

I'm naturally intense. I can be defensive. I can let the Dragon in me breathe fire before the Builder has measured the room. Faith, for me, has become the daily practice of choosing the bridge over the fire. Listening before fixing. Repairing quickly. Staying curious. Connecting worlds that don't naturally meet.

If you're thirty-seven and your faith has gotten stuck in one small room, open a door. Visit a church you wouldn't normally visit. Read a book from a tradition you don't share. Ask a stranger at a gas station what she holds sacred. You don't have to change what you believe. You just have to let your faith grow big enough to listen.

And if you're thirty-seven and you don't believe at all, I am not going to preach. My dad wouldn't want me to. I'll just say: there's a lot of wisdom out there, in a lot of rooms, and some of it has kept me alive. You're welcome in any of them.

On Sunday, play the drums. Bring the twelve-string just in case. Write the date wrong. Bring your friends when you get promoted. Do your duty with a steady heart.

And on Monday, live it. Monday too.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 24, the desk (p. 135) → Ch 18, the first "okay" (p. 100) → Ch 42, Arjuna (p. 236)

Ports in the Storm

Laurence, Anna, a gas station in Edna, and the people who keep the light on.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Some friends are like a safe harbor in a storm, and Blake thanks the people who keep the light on for him and his kids.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 31 In My Father's House Are Many Rooms → Ch 32 Ports in the Storm → Ch 33 The Kingdom at Home

There's a phrase that keeps showing up in my Chronicle entries from the fall of 2026: ports in the storm.

A port in the storm is a harbor. A safe place a ship can pull into when the weather turns bad. Not the destination. Just a place to rest, tie up, wait out the wind, and get ready to sail again.

I've come to believe that a good life is full of ports. And the ports are mostly people.

Laurence

My best friend is Laurence.

I am not going to write a whole biography of Laurence here, because some friendships don't need to be explained. They just need to be honored. What I'll say is that Laurence is the kind of friend who is there. When things are good, Laurence is there. When things are falling apart, Laurence is there. When I have a wild new idea at eleven at night, Laurence is the one who hears it first and doesn't laugh, or laughs exactly the right amount.

Laurence's family is part of our family's world. Karis. Lana, who is the same age as Fae and, in a coincidence I'll never stop enjoying, shares my birthday, April 8. When I started planning a visit to the temple in Stafford with Odin and Fae, the first people I thought to invite were Laurence, Karis, and Lana.

That's what a best friend is, I think. The first person you think to invite.

A best friend is the first person you think to invite.

If you're reading this, Laurence: thank you. For all of it. You're a port.

Ports in the Storm

Laurence, Anna, a gas station in Edna, and the people who keep the light on.

Anna

I've told you about Anna at Starbucks. ON-uh, not ANN-uh. The kids' old babysitter. My sister and brother-in-law's best friend. The manager of my favorite place to work in El Campo, with plenty of outlets and a calm atmosphere.

What I haven't said is how much it means to walk into a place and be known. In a small town, that's one of the great gifts. You walk in tired, carrying a laptop and a notebook full of arrows, and somebody behind the counter says your name and asks what you're working on today. It's a tiny thing. It isn't a tiny thing.

INT. EL CAMPO STARBUCKS - AFTERNOON - 2026

A quiet afternoon. BLAKE (37) comes in with ODIN (9) and FAE (7) in tow. The kids make a beeline for the counter. ANNA looks up and lights up.

ANNA
Well, look who it is!

FAE
(bouncing)
We earned it!

ANNA
Earned what?

ODIN
(serious, explaining)
Starbucks. It's a reward. We did the litter box and we were kind.

ANNA
(to Blake, amused)
Kindness bonus?

BLAKE
Kindness bonus.

ANNA
(leaning down to the kids)
Then you get the good stuff.

The kids cheer. Blake shakes his head, smiling, and pulls out his wallet.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Prologue, Anna (p. 4) → Ch 26, Jacob and Loreto (p. 147) → Ch 31, Aisha (p. 173)

Ports in the Storm

Laurence, Anna, a gas station in Edna, and the people who keep the light on.

Anna is a port for my kids, too. Somebody who knew them when they were tiny, and still knows them now. That kind of continuity is rare. I don't take it for granted.

Aisha

Some ports are only a single conversation. On October 4, 2026, after church, I stopped at the Love's gas station in Edna and ended up talking with a woman named Aisha. We talked about faith. I told her about Arjuna. She told me about the BAPS temple in Stafford and said I should bring my kids.

I may never see Aisha again. But for twenty minutes in a gas station, she was a port. She widened my world a little. That's what Jack used to do for people, all the time. I like to think I was doing a little of it back for her.

Jacob and Loreto

My business partners are ports too, in a different way. On a job site, when the work is hard and the sun is hot and something has gone wrong, there's nothing better than looking over and seeing somebody steady. Jacob was steady in my roughest classroom years ago. He is steady on a ladder now. Loreto is steady in a way that only comes from decades of doing good work. When I'm with them, I feel the storm a little less.

The people who keep the light on

I think about the lantern a lot. Just enough light for the next step. But I have realized that I don't always carry the lantern myself. Sometimes, somebody else is holding it up for me.

Nana, praying. Mom, in a gravel lot, teaching me thirty feet. Dad, with his headlamp, waiting in the yard for my strap to get fixed. Jack, at a gas station, making a stranger into a friend. Laurence, picking up the phone. Anna, saying my name. Sandy, inviting me to church. JP, leading the band. Jacob and Loreto, on the ladders.

Ports in the storm. People who keep the light on.

Be a port for somebody. Keep the light on.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, Anna (p. 4) → Ch 26, Jacob and Loreto (p. 147) → Ch 31, Aisha (p. 173)

Ports in the Storm

Laurence, Anna, a gas station in Edna, and the people who keep the light on.

If you're thirty-seven, take a minute and count your ports. Write their names down. Then tell one of them, this week, what they mean to you. It doesn't have to be a big speech. A text is fine. "Hey. You are a port in the storm for me. Thank you."

And then, if you can, be a port for somebody else. Keep a light on. Say somebody's name when they walk in. Invite somebody to church, or to dinner, or to the temple in Stafford. Talk to the stranger at the gas station.

The storm always comes. One play at a time, we get each other through it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, Anna (p. 4) → Ch 26, Jacob and Loreto (p. 147) → Ch 31, Aisha (p. 173)

The Kingdom at Home

The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Everyday life at home with Odin and Fae is full of jokes, quests, kittens, and learning to take care of what you have.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 32 Ports in the Storm → **Ch 33 The Kingdom at Home** → Ch 34 Patience Is the Practice

Every kingdom needs a central office. In mine, the central office is a house in El Campo on the weeks Odin and Fae are with me, and it's loud, and it smells like cat food and pancakes, and it's the best place on earth.

I want to tell you about everyday life in the kingdom. The ordinary stuff. Because the stories that disappear first are often not the big ones. They're the jokes in the kitchen, the sound somebody made when they laughed, the way a kid pronounced a word, the name of the cat. So let me write some of them down.

The Bank of Farthing

Odin and Fae have a money ledger. I call it the Bank of Farthing. It's a simple record of what they earn, what they spend, and what they save.

Here's how it works. They earn money by doing chores and by being kind. Cleaning the litter box. Helping with the kittens. Getting Bandaid off the trampoline (that one is a story all its own). Buckling up without being told. Being kind to each other without being told. Every bit of it gets written down.

And then the money gets split. Half for spending. Half for saving.

On October 10, 2026, the day of our road trip to Victoria, each kid earned eight dollars. Litter box, the Bandaid-off-the-trampoline rescue, and a buckle-up-and-kindness bonus. That brought each of them to twenty-three dollars total. Eleven fifty to spend, eleven fifty to save.

The family question in our house is: "Can I afford it?"

Can I afford it?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 32, Anna (p. 180) → Ch 23, Odin and Fae (p. 128)

The Kingdom at Home

The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

That question isn't a sad question. It isn't a no. It's a freedom question. It teaches you to look at what you have before you decide. I wish somebody had drilled it into me at nine. I've spent a lot of my thirties learning it the hard way, and I want my kids to learn it the easy way, with eleven dollars and fifty cents and a ledger.

Responsibility comes before rewards. Savings isn't a punishment. A budget isn't a shame document. It's a map of what we're trying to protect.

The Quests

Some of the spending money goes to quests. A quest is a goal you set, earn toward, and then go do together. The most famous so far is the Dairy Queen Quest. You earn your way to Dairy Queen, and then you go, and it's the greatest Dairy Queen trip in the history of Dairy Queen, because you earned it.

INT. DAIRY QUEEN - EL CAMPO - EVENING

A booth by the window. ODIN (9) and FAE (7) sit across from BLAKE (37), each holding exactly the treat they chose. Fae has ice cream on her nose. Odin is carefully counting change on the table.

ODIN
I still have money left.

BLAKE
How much?

ODIN
(counting again, precise)
Enough.

FAE
(through ice cream)
I spent all mine.

BLAKE
(gently)
All your spend money. You still have your save money.

FAE
(suddenly remembering, thrilled)
I'm rich!

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 32, Anna (p. 180) → Ch 23, Odin and Fae (p. 128)

The Kingdom at Home

The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

BLAKE
(laughing)
You're doing great.
(raising his cup)
To the Dairy Queen Quest.

ODIN AND FAE
(clinking cups)
The Dairy Queen Quest!

The Kittens and Grey

We have kittens. Their mom is a cat named Grey. On the Victoria road trip, we picked Grey up from my mom's in Mission Valley, and took her to Home Depot. On a leash. Yes. A cat on a leash at Home Depot. She did great.

She's such a sweety.

The kids help with the kittens, and the litter box is a paid chore, and I think there's nothing better for a kid than taking care of something small that depends on them. It teaches you that love isn't just a feeling. Love is cleaning the litter box when you don't want to. That's agape at nine years old.

Aphrodite

On October 8, 2026, Fae's school had a Greek party, and Fae decided she was going as Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty.

The night before, we went to Walmart. I spent about fifty dollars. Pink gown. A tiara. White gloves. A bouquet of rainbow roses.

The next morning she walked into school and posed for her teachers. Like a professional. Hand on hip, roses up, chin up.

EXT. FAE'S SCHOOL - DROP-OFF LINE - MORNING - OCTOBER 8, 2026

Cars inching forward. BLAKE (37) pulls up. The back door opens and out steps FAE (7) in a pink gown, a tiara, white gloves, and holding a bouquet of rainbow roses.

A couple of TEACHERS on drop-off duty stop in their tracks.

TEACHER
Well, look at YOU!

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 32, Anna (p. 180) → Ch 23, Odin and Fae (p. 128)

The Kingdom at Home

The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

Fae doesn't say a word. She plants her feet, lifts the roses, tilts her chin, and poses.

The teachers applaud. Fae holds the pose one beat longer. Then she sweeps inside like a goddess late for an important meeting.

Blake watches from the driver's seat, absolutely beaming.

BLAKE
(to himself)
That look is priceless.

My Greek and Latin obsessions, my love of old words and old stories, have quietly been sneaking into my kids' world. Odin builds powerful characters and worlds. Fae dresses as a goddess. I didn't force it on them. I just shared what I love, and they picked up the pieces they liked. That's all a parent can really do.

The British Voice

You already know about the C-3PO voice. "Oh my, Miss Faeryn." I'll just say that it continues to be the single most effective parenting tool I own. Fae responds better to a worried British robot than to her actual father. I have decided not to take this personally. lol.

Starbucks with Anna

Starbucks in El Campo is my office away from the office. Plenty of outlets, calm atmosphere, good for focus. I've written large parts of this book there.

The manager is Anna. That's pronounced ON-uh, by the way. Not ANN-uh. Get it right. She used to babysit Odin and Fae. She is the best friend of my sister and brother-in-law, who live here in El Campo. So when I walk in, it isn't a coffee shop. It's family.

And sometimes, when the kids earn it, Starbucks is a reward stop. A drink from Anna is a pretty good payday.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 32, Anna (p. 180) → Ch 23, Odin and Fae (p. 128)

The Kingdom at Home

The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

Ray-Bans in Victoria

On October 10, 2026, I picked up new Ray-Bans in Victoria. The kids came. We made a day of it. Victoria is where both of them were born, so every time we drive there, it feels a little like going back to the beginning. We took selfies, the three of us, all smiles. Somewhere in those photos is everything I care about.

The Hard Parts

I promised the workshop, so here it is. In September of 2026, I was under real financial stress. I made a serious decision to take out a consolidation loan, using my 2016 blue Toyota RAV4 as collateral, to make some breathing room around higher-interest debt. The RAV4 was the first car I ever owned. It has been consistent through a lot of family wear and tear. I was proud, in a complicated way, that something I had taken care of could help stabilize a hard season.

I am not telling you this because debt is a victory. It isn't. I'm telling you because I wanted accountability. Repayment planning. Budgets. Spending tracking. Holiday and seasonal spending planned ahead of time instead of treated as a surprise. I wanted to stop being surprised by my own money.

I want Odin and Fae to know their dad went through this. And I want them to know he didn't look away from it. He played the next play. One payment. One budget. One ledger entry.

These are not yours because you own them. They are yours because you take care of them.

Poop Again, or Is It Clay?

On October 22, 2026, my phone's voice-to-text accidentally recorded a few seconds of ordinary life at Nana's. When I read it back, I laughed until I cried, because it captures me and the kids perfectly. lol. These are the real words, as the phone caught them. I just put them in a script.

EXT. NANA'S YARD - DAY - OCTOBER 22, 2026

Ordinary chaos. BLAKE (37) stops mid-step and looks down at his shoe with deep suspicion.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 32, Anna (p. 180) → Ch 23, Odin and Fae (p. 128)

The Kingdom at Home

The Bank of Farthing, the Dairy Queen Quest, kittens, Aphrodite, and Starbucks with Anna.

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        BLAKE
Poop again, poop again. I just stepped on poop again...
    (leaning closer, squinting at the shoe)
...or is it some freaking clay?

        KID (O.S.)
I think we need to leave this open.

        BLAKE
    (instantly, still staring at the shoe)
Oh, okay, I got you, sir.

        KID
Is it cool outside?

        BLAKE
    (scraping his shoe on the grass)
Be too hot.
```

We never did settle the poop-or-clay question. Not every Chronicle brick is a sermon. Some are a shoe, a mystery substance, and a kid calling the shots while Dad says "I got you, sir." That's the Farthing way. Ordinary chaos is where the real family memories live.

Commit to the bit, even when you are not sure what you stepped in.

Night Owl

I'm a night owl. I always have been. I write late. I think late. I'm up when the house is asleep, typing, planning, praying, listening to Halcyon. But there's a difference now. In my twenties I slept too much because I didn't want to be awake. Now I stay up because I love being awake.

That's the whole kingdom, really. It isn't a castle yet. It's a house with kittens, a ledger, a British robot voice, a pink gown, a Dairy Queen booth, and a coffee shop where the manager used to babysit my kids. It's everything I care about, held together with tape and love and a lot of laughing.

Odin and Fae, if you're reading this, I hope you remember the ordinary days. I do. I wrote them down.

They're only little once.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 32, Anna (p. 180) → Ch 23, Odin and Fae (p. 128)

Patience Is the Practice

Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake is practicing patience, getting back up fast after mistakes, and dreaming of starting a small school.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 33 The Kingdom at Home → Ch 34 Patience Is the Practice → Ch 35 Halftime

In 2026 I found myself saying something out loud that surprised me. I said that God gives me opportunities to practice patience in both my personal and professional lives while I'm raising Odin and Fae.

Opportunities. Not punishments. Not tests I'm failing. Opportunities.

The opportunity is the hard part. Wisdom is noticing the practice before anger spends it for you.

Wisdom is noticing the practice before anger spends it for you.

I'm naturally intense. I think fast. I talk fast. I can become defensive. I have a Dragon in me, and the Dragon likes to breathe fire before the Builder has measured the room. Coaching conflict, parenting, money stress, work stress, ordinary mornings when somebody can't find a shoe: all of those are moments where the Dragon wakes up.

For years I thought the goal was to kill the Dragon. To become some calm, perfect, Zen version of myself who never gets frustrated. I even looked at web domains around names like BetterBlake, because I kept circling the same question: what would a better version of me look like? (On October 21, 2026, I finally chose one name for everything: DynamisBlake.com. Dynamis, the Greek word for power or capacity. Not a new me. The capacity that was already there.)

And I've come to an answer I can live with. "Better Blake" only works if better means practiced. Not replaced. Not reinvented. Practiced. More organized, more patient, more able to use what was already there. I don't hate the person I already am. I just want to get better at being him.

Patience Is the Practice

Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.

Recovery Speed

The goal isn't a frictionless life. That doesn't exist. The goal is recovery speed.

Notice. Repair. Continue.

If I snap at the kids in the morning, the old me would spiral. I would feel terrible all day, beat myself up, and probably snap again because I was carrying the first one around. The new me tries to notice it fast. Stop. Kneel down. Say sorry. Repair it. Then continue with the day.

That's the six-second play, again. You fumbled. Okay. The fumble is over. Don't carry it into the next snap. Huddle up. Get the call. Line up.

If a brick is crooked, do not spend a week yelling at the brick. Pick it up, look at it, and lay it again.

Tiny Tools

Grand intentions fail me. Big plans to "be more patient" or "get organized" crumble by Wednesday. So I use tiny tools.

Watch timers. R2-D2 chirps on my phone that remind me what I'm supposed to be doing. A bell sound I call Corvin's bell. Protein bars in the car. Water. Medicine routines. And three grounding questions I ask myself when my brain has wandered off into the woods:

What am I doing?

What was I talking about?

Where are we at?

INT. BLAKE'S HOUSE - HOME OFFICE CORNER - LATE NIGHT

A desk covered in notebooks, receipts, a laptop with nine tabs open. BLAKE (37) is deep in something. Then something else. Then a third thing. His watch CHIRPS, a cheerful little R2-D2 noise.

He stops. Looks at the watch. Looks at the nine tabs.

BLAKE
(quietly, to himself)
What am I doing?

He scans the screen.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 38, the microschool (p. 215) → Ch 28, the brick (p. 158)

Patience Is the Practice

Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.



BLAKE (CONT'D)
What was I talking about?

He closes six tabs. Then a seventh.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
Where are we at?

Two tabs left. The book. The budget. He picks the book.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(exhaling)
Okay. One play.

He starts typing.

They aren't glamorous. That's why they work. The pilgrim doesn't need a heroic speech every time he looks at the map.

A Dream: The Microschool

Here's a dream I'm carrying, and I want to put it in writing so it's real.

I want to start a microschool in El Campo for kids in special education. SPED kids. Kids whose brains work differently, who don't fit the big system, who get lost in big classrooms the way I got lost in online classes.

A microschool is a small school. A handful of kids. A lot of attention. Movement. Rhythm. Stories. Tools. Hands-on work. Maybe some of it happens in a barn. Maybe some of it happens on a job site. Maybe some of it's music. I want it to be a place where a kid who has been told he is behind gets to find out what he is actually good at.

I don't know when it will happen. I don't know how. That's the honest truth. It's a dream, not a plan yet. But I've learned that dreams turn into plans one play at a time. Write it down. Talk to people. Learn what it takes. Take the first small step. Then the next.

I became a teacher with firsthand knowledge of how capable people get lost. A microschool is how I want to help them get found.

Every lost kid is a capable kid who needs a bridge.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 38, the microschool (p. 215) → Ch 28, the brick (p. 158)

Patience Is the Practice

Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.

The Process, One More Time

Here it is, in my own words, the way I wrote it in my notes at thirty-seven, in the middle of debt and dreams and a half-built barn:

Nick Saban's process. Take it one play at a time and DO NOT even LOOK at the scoreboard. Just one play at a time, win that or lose, a new play is next. Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

INT. BLAKE'S CAR - DRIVING - DAY

BLAKE (37) drives. ODIN (9) rides in the passenger seat for the first time, very proud of it. Fae is asleep in the back. The road is long and flat.

ODIN
Dad, what's an upset?

BLAKE
In football? It's when the team that's supposed to lose wins.

ODIN
How do they do that?

BLAKE
(thinking)
They don't look at the scoreboard.

ODIN
Why not?

BLAKE
Because if you look at the scoreboard, you start thinking about the whole game. And the whole game is too big. Nobody can win the whole game at once.

ODIN
So what do you look at?

BLAKE
The next play. Just the next one. Six seconds.

Odin thinks about this for a long moment.

ODIN
Like my math homework. One problem.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 38, the microschool (p. 215) → Ch 28, the brick (p. 158)

Patience Is the Practice

Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.

BLAKE
(looking over at him, amazed)
Exactly like your math homework.

ODIN
(satisfied)
Okay. I'm gonna upset my math homework.

BLAKE
(laughing so hard he has to grip the wheel)
Give it hell for six seconds, buddy.

A Letter to the Thirty-Seven-Year-Old

Dear thirty-seven-year-old,

I'm you, right now, as I write this. So this is a letter to both of us.

You're probably in the thick of it. Kids, or work, or both. Bills. A body that's starting to ask for more water and more sleep and more stretching than it used to. Dreams you've been carrying since you were seventeen that haven't happened yet. Some dreams that did happen and turned out to be different than you expected.

You might be looking at the scoreboard a lot. Comparing yourself to people who seem further along. Counting the years until your kids leave. Counting the debt. Counting what you haven't done.

Stop counting for a minute. Look at the next play.

Here's what I know at thirty-seven.

Patience isn't something you have. It's something you practice. Every frustrating moment is a rep. Notice the practice before anger spends it.

Recovery speed beats perfection. You'll mess up. Notice. Repair. Continue.

Tiny tools beat grand intentions. A watch chirp is worth more than a New Year's resolution.

Be yourself at work. You aren't trying to impress them. You're sharing what actually matters to you.

Find your Jacob and your Loreto. Build with people you trust. Trust accumulates one job at a time.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 38, the microschool (p. 215) → Ch 28, the brick (p. 158)

Patience Is the Practice

Better Blake, recovery speed, a microschool dream, and a letter to the thirty-seven-year-old.

Leave it better than you found it. Every porch, every classroom, every kid, every conversation.

Your faith can have many rooms. Let it.

Give your workshop a mission bigger than itself. Mine is Agape: help the world get BETTER, brick by brick.

Dream your microschool. Write it down. Take one step.

And love your kids loudly. Wave from the truck. Do the British voice. Go on the Dairy Queen Quest. They're only little once.

Give them hell for six seconds, thirty-seven. You can still pull the upset. I'm pulling mine right now.

Love, Blake, right here with you

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 38, the microschool (p. 215) → Ch 28, the brick (p. 158)

For the Forty-Seven-Year-Old

A letter mailed ahead: halftime, a son heading to college, and the second-half adjustments.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part V is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at forty-seven, full of hopes, not things that have happened yet.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part IV
For the Thirty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part V**
For the Forty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part VI**
For the Fifty-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 35 · Halftime — p. 197
A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

Chapter 36 · Thirty Feet, Again — p. 203
Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.

Brick by brick.

Halftime

A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This is a letter to Blake at forty-seven about halftime, letting his kids grow up, and fixing the plays that are not working.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 34 Patience Is the Practice → Ch 35 Halftime → Ch 36 Thirty Feet, Again

From here on, this book changes.

Everything before this page happened. It's memory, family story, the workshop as I have lived it. Everything after this page hasn't happened yet. These are letters I'm mailing ahead, to whoever is forty-seven or fifty-seven or sixty-seven or seventy-seven or eighty-seven when they read them, and to my own future self, if God gives me those years.

I want to be very clear about that, because I've spent this whole book trying to be honest. I don't know what will happen. Nobody does. These are hopes. They're grounded in what I value now, at thirty-seven, and in the example of my Nana, who is eighty-seven as I write this. But they're hopes, not history.

These pages have not happened yet. They are hopes, written down so they can be checked.

If you're me, reading this at forty-seven: hello. Check my work. Correct what I got wrong. Add pages.

Halftime

In a football game, halftime is a strange moment. You've played a whole half. You know what's working and what isn't. The scoreboard says something, good or bad. And you have about twenty minutes in a locker room to make adjustments before you walk back out and play the rest.

I think forty-seven is something like halftime. Not literally the middle of a life, maybe. But it feels like a locker room moment. You've seen enough of your own game to know your tendencies. You know which plays work for you and which ones always get stuffed at the line. You know your weaknesses well enough to name

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, notes at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 20, choosing life (p. 110)

Halftime

A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

them. And there's still a whole half to play.

Here's the thing great coaches do at halftime. They don't look at the scoreboard and panic. They don't look at the scoreboard and relax. They look at the film. What happened, play by play? What adjustments do we need? Then they go back out and run the next play.

At halftime, do not stare at the score. Look at the film.

If I'm blessed to be forty-seven, it will be around 2036. Odin will be about nineteen. If things go the way I hope, he will have started college around 2035. Fae will be about seventeen, in the middle of her own Part II, getting her own keys, maybe stalling out her own stick shift. lol.

I want to say some things to that man, and to anybody standing at forty-seven.

To the forty-seven-year-old, about letting go

Somewhere around this age, if you have kids, they start leaving. Not all at once. In pieces. First they need you less in the mornings. Then they need you less on weekends. Then one day they're packing a car.

I've been preparing for that day since a nurse in Victoria handed me Odin in a striped blanket. I've known since then that the whole job of a parent is to raise someone who will leave. And I still don't think I'm ready.

EXT. A COLLEGE DORM - MOVE-IN DAY - SOMEDAY (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for.

A parking lot crowded with cars, boxes, mini-fridges, and parents trying not to cry. BLAKE (46 or 47), grayer, still in a ball cap, carries the last box out of the back of a car. ODIN (18), taller than his dad now, takes it from him.

ODIN
I got it, Dad.

BLAKE
I know you do.

They stand there. Neither moves to go inside.

Halftime

A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
(pointing at a window up the side of the building)
That one yours?

ODIN
Third floor.

BLAKE
(squinting up)
Looks tiny.

ODIN
(grinning)
Didn't you learn guitar in a tiny dorm room?

BLAKE
(laughing)
I did. Neighbor banged on the wall.

ODIN
I'll learn a second chord.

Blake laughs. Then he doesn't. He pulls his son into a hug, box and all.

BLAKE
(into his shoulder)
One play at a time, buddy.

ODIN
(muffled)
Don't look at the scoreboard. I know.

I wrote that scene as a hope. I don't know if Odin will go to college, or which one, or whether it will be 2035 or a different year, or whether he will want me to carry boxes at all. That's his road, not mine. Maybe he will build worlds for a living. Maybe he will start a business. Maybe he will drive a big brown truck. Whatever he does, I hope he does it as the explorer I've always seen in him.

But I hope for that hug. I hope I'm there for it. And I hope he remembers the waving.

Here's what I want to say to the forty-seven-year-old about letting go.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, notes at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 20, choosing life (p. 110)

Halftime

A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

Your kid leaving isn't a loss on the scoreboard. It's the play working. You ran the offense for eighteen years so that the ball could get downfield. When it gets there, don't cry that it isn't in your hands anymore. Well, cry a little. Then celebrate. That was the point.

Your kid leaving is the play working.

And then keep playing. Fae is still home. The barn is still there. Your students are still showing up. Your partners are still working. A new play is next.

To the forty-seven-year-old, about the body

At thirty-seven, I'm already learning that my body wants water and sleep and stretching more than it used to. By forty-seven, I imagine it will be insisting.

I want to be honest here. I spent part of my twenties not taking care of myself at all. Drinking too much. Sleeping too much. Eating whatever was near the fryer. I chose life at twenty-seven, and part of choosing life is choosing it in the body, every day, in boring ways.

So to the forty-seven-year-old: Drink the water. Take the medicine. Go to the doctor even when you feel fine. Walk. I walk constantly in the classroom; I hope I'm still walking constantly somewhere at forty-seven. Wear the goggles. lol. Seriously, wear them. My dad would want me to say it one more time.

The body is a tool. The Tekton uses his tools wisely. These aren't yours because you own them. They're yours because you take care of them.

To the forty-seven-year-old, about the second half

Halftime is also when you decide whether you're going to play the second half the same way or try something new.

At thirty-seven, I started a contracting business with a former student and his dad. I started writing a book. I built a council of assistants. I started dreaming about a microschool. I have more half-built projects than I can count.

By forty-seven, I hope some of them are whole-built. I hope Farthing, Garcia & Sons has a reputation in El Campo for always leaving it better than we found it. I hope Jacob has grown into a leader, maybe running crews of his own. I hope Loreto gets to slow down a little and watch his son do the things he taught him. I

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 36, notes at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 20, choosing life (p. 110)

Halftime

A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

hope Farthing Finds has found some treasures and passed them on to good homes. I hope the barn at Nana's is full of songs.

And I hope I have the courage to let some of my projects go. Not every brick needs to become a castle. Some of my ideas are ore that will never be smelted, and that's okay. At halftime, a good coach throws out the plays that aren't working.

Throw out the plays that are not working. Keep running the ones that are.

The ones that are working, at thirty-seven, are the simple ones. Show up. Tell stories. Build with people you trust. Love your kids loudly. Pray. Play the drums. Write it down. Leave it better.

I bet those are still the ones working at forty-seven.

To the forty-seven-year-old, about faith

At thirty-seven, my faith had many rooms. Texana on Sunday. A bilingual church I admired. A Presbyterian church I was helping dream up with Thomas and Derek. A little Ganesh on my desk. Arjuna in my heart. Footprints in the sand underneath it all.

By forty-seven, I hope the rooms haven't shrunk. I hope you haven't gotten tired and closed some doors because it was easier. And I hope the center has held. Jesus at the center. Monday too.

I also hope you've found more ways to serve. At thirty-seven, I was looking into jail ministry, a prayer and some research and a note to talk to my pastor first. If that door opened, I hope you walked through it. If it didn't, I hope you found another one. Faith that only sits in a pew gets stiff. Faith that walks into hard places stays alive.

And if your faith has been shaken by forty-seven, if something happened that you can't make sense of, go back to the beginning. Read the poem. Look at the one set of footprints. Say "okay." Sometimes the first prayer is just "okay," even the second time around.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 36, notes at 47 (p. 203) → Ch 20, choosing life (p. 110)

Halftime

A letter to the forty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2036.

To the forty-seven-year-old, about the scoreboard

Here's a danger I can already feel coming. At forty-seven, the scoreboard might start to feel like it's running out. Halftime means there's less game left than there was. And you start to count. How many years until retirement. How many years of good health. How many dreams you still have time for.

Don't do it. I mean it. Don't look at the scoreboard.

Nana is eighty-seven as I write this. At forty-seven, she still had forty years in front of her. Forty years! She didn't know that at forty-seven. If she had decided at forty-seven that the game was mostly over, she would have missed talking to Siri, and holding great-grandkids, and watching her grandson's company paint the front of her house.

The game is longer than you think. And even if it isn't, the next play is still the only one you get to run.

Thirty Feet, Again

Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake leaves notes for himself at forty-seven, like helping Fae learn to drive, keeping the budget, and still laughing.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 35 Halftime → Ch 36 Thirty Feet, Again → Ch 37 When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven

Dear Blake at forty-seven,

This one is just for you. Other people can read it, but it's addressed to you, from you, ten years back. Think of it as the note a coach leaves taped inside a locker.

I want to remind you of some things you knew at thirty-seven, in case the second half has made you forget.

Fae is going to need thirty feet.

If things go the way they usually go, Fae will be getting her keys around the time you hit your mid-forties. And you're going to want to teach her the whole engine at once. I know you. You think fast. You'll want to explain the clutch and the gears and the mirrors and the merge and the insurance and the oil change and the tire pressure, all in the first lesson, because you love her and you want her safe.

Don't.

Remember the gravel lot. Remember your mom. Thirty feet is driving.

EXT. A GRAVEL LOT - DAY - SOMEDAY (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for.

FAE (16), in the driver's seat, hands at ten and two, absolutely refusing to look nervous. BLAKE (mid-40s) in the passenger seat, gripping nothing, very intentionally relaxed.

FAE
Okay. What do I do?

BLAKE
(calm)
We're not going anywhere today. Just to the end of the lot and back.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 9, the hardship license (p. 50) → Ch 12, Halcyon (p. 68)

Thirty Feet, Again

Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.

FAE
(suspicious)
That's it?

BLAKE
That's it.

Fae eases off the brake. The car rolls forward. Smooth. She reaches the end of the lot. Stops. Breathes.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
See? You can drive.

FAE
I drove like thirty feet.

BLAKE
(smiling; a memory catching in his throat)
Thirty feet is driving.

Fae looks at him for a second, like she can tell that sentence came from somewhere.

FAE
Who told you that?

BLAKE
Your grandma. In a lot just like this one.

FAE
(beat)
(switching to a terrible British accent)
Most irregular. Shall I do it again?

BLAKE
(laughing)
Turn around and do it again.

I hope she does the accent. I hope she turns my own bit back on me. That would be the bit working.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 9, the hardship license (p. 50) → Ch 12, Halcyon (p. 68)

Thirty Feet, Again

Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.

The ledger should still be open.

By forty-seven, I hope the Bank of Farthing has grown up with the kids. I hope the half-spend, half-save habit has stuck. I hope Odin and Fae know how to ask "Can I afford it?" without it feeling like a punishment. I hope they know what interest is, and what collateral is, and why their dad once put up a blue RAV4 to buy himself some breathing room.

And I hope my own ledger looks better. I hope the consolidation loan from 2026 is long paid off, and that I learned from it. I hope seasonal spending is still a planned category and not a December surprise. I hope I'm still treating a budget as a map of what we're trying to protect.

If it isn't better, Blake, that's okay too. Don't look at the scoreboard. Make this payment. Write this ledger entry. A new play is next.

A budget is not a shame document. It is a map of what we are trying to protect.

Keep the scroll going.

At thirty-seven you started the Chronicle. The dated entries. The gaming Chronicles on the family account. The photos. This book.

By forty-seven, it should be enormous. Thousands of entries. Recordings of Nana. Videos of Jacob and Loreto on ladders. Songs from the barn. Odin's worlds. Fae's songs. Maybe a second edition of this book with corrections from the kids.

If it has gone quiet, start it again. One entry. Today's date. Five main ideas. A summary. That's all it takes.

Dad left a few Xbox 360 replays. Not even that good. You promised your kids an archive. Keep the promise one entry at a time.

You'll have loved Halcyon for thirty-five years.

Think about that. A song you found at twelve, still playing at forty-seven. I hope you still put it on late at night. I hope you still lie on the floor sometimes and let the waves come in. I hope one of the kids has stolen it and made it theirs.

Some songs stay with you on and on.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 9, the hardship license (p. 50) → Ch 12, Halcyon (p. 68)

Thirty Feet, Again

Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.

Teach somebody something.

At thirty-seven you said, "The ministry just got another drummer." By forty-seven I hope there are five more drummers. Or guitarists. Or students who came back years later to tell you something you said stuck. Or a former student who became your business partner, like Jacob. Or a kid at the microschool who found out he wasn't behind after all.

The most important thing you'll build in the second half is other people. Bricks are good. People are better.

Build people, not just projects.

Be kind to their mom.

I want to put this in writing so that you hold yourself to it. Odin and Fae have a mom who loves them. At forty-seven, there will be graduations, college visits, maybe weddings someday further down the road, where both of you'll be in the same room for the kids. Be the kind of co-parent the kids are proud of. Be warm. Be generous. Make it easy for them. They should never have to choose between two people who love them.

Stay in many rooms.

Have you visited the temple in Stafford yet? Did the Presbyterian church in El Campo get planted? Did a door open in the jail ministry? Are you still on the drums at Texana, or somewhere new? Is the little Ganesh still on your desk, or has a student inherited him?

Whatever the answers, keep your faith big. Keep listening to people who hold different things sacred. Keep Jesus at the center and the doors open on every side. Live it on Monday too. Your dad would still be watching for fakes.

Laugh.

I mean this as seriously as anything in this book. Don't let forty-seven make you serious all the way through. Do the British voice. Commit to the bit. Make up a ridiculous running back. Be silly with your students. Laugh at yourself when you date your notes wrong.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 9, the hardship license (p. 50) → Ch 12, Halcyon (p. 68)

Thirty Feet, Again

Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.

The night owl in you is allowed to stay up laughing. The pilgrim in you is allowed to dance in the barn.

And when you're tired, remember the process.

You'll be tired at forty-seven. You might be very tired. There might be losses I can't see from here. There might be seasons that look like the dark apartment again. I hope not. But if they come, you know what to do.

Put on the headlamp. Just enough light for the next step.

Say "okay."

Take six hours, not twelve.

Say the names out loud.

Run dive right.

Don't look at the scoreboard.

INT. THE BARN AT NANA'S - BACK ROOM - NIGHT - SOON (HOPED FOR)

Not a memory yet. A night I mean to have, maybe this very month.

The back of the barn, still mostly empty. A drum kit set up on a rug. A twelve-string on a stand. BLAKE (37) sits behind the drums, sticks in his lap, alone. Through the open doors, the dark fields and the stars.

He picks up the sticks. Taps out a slow, steady beat. Just the beat. Nothing fancy.

BLAKE
(quietly, to nobody, or to the man he'll be)
Hey, forty-seven.
(beat)
Keep the beat.

He plays on into the dark.

That's all, forty-seven. Keep the beat. If you miss one, make the next beat a good one.

I'm proud of you already, for whatever you managed to build. And for whatever you had to let go.

Love, Blake, at thirty-seven, in the barn

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 9, the hardship license (p. 50) → Ch 12, Halcyon (p. 68)

Thirty Feet, Again

Notes to my future self at forty-seven: Fae's keys, the ledger, and the long song.



For the Fifty-Seven-Year-Old

A letter mailed ahead: when your kids turn twenty-seven, and the sons in the company name grow up.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part VI is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at fifty-seven, full of hopes for when his kids are grown.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part V
For the Forty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part VI**
For the Fifty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part VII**
For the Sixty-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 37 · When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven p. 210
A letter to the fifty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2046.

Chapter 38 · The Next Drummer p. 215
Notes to my future self at fifty-seven: mentoring, the caravansary, and the bridge that keeps getting longer.

Brick by brick.

When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven

A letter to the fifty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2046.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This is a letter to Blake at fifty-seven about cheering for his grown-up kids and telling them his stories again.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 36
Thirty Feet, Again → Ch 37
When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven → Ch 38
The Next Drummer

If God lets me get to fifty-seven, it will be around 2046.

Odin will be twenty-nine. Fae will be about twenty-seven.

I want to sit with that for a moment, because I wrote a whole part of this book for the twenty-seven-year-old. The age when life changes. The age the 27 Club never made it past. The age I chose life, on the floor of my living room, with Nirvana on the shelf and Halcyon in the speakers.

My daughter will be that age when I'm fifty-seven.

And here's what I have realized, writing this letter. When your kids are seven, you can carry them. When they're seventeen, you can at least drive them. When they're twenty-seven, you mostly can't do either. They're on their own field. They're running their own plays. You're in the stands.

That's the hardest position I can imagine for a dad. I hope I'm ready for it. I suspect I won't be.

So this letter is to the fifty-seven-year-old, and especially to the fifty-seven-year-old whose kids are at the age where life changes.

Be the whistle in the stands.

When I graduated from El Campo High in 2007, somebody in my family whistled, loud and sharp, two fingers in the mouth. When I graduated from UH-Victoria in 2017, my dad wasn't there to whistle. I looked higher than the bleachers.

At fifty-seven, I want to be the whistle. Not the coach. Not the quarterback. The whistle. The person in the stands who is so obviously, embarrassingly proud that the kid on the field hears it over everything else.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven

A letter to the fifty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2046.

You can't run their plays for them. You can make sure they know somebody is watching who believes in them.

At fifty-seven, be the whistle in the stands.

If they fall apart, remember yours.

I fell apart in my early twenties. I failed out of school for about three years. I drank too much. I slept through whole seasons. I lost friends. If Odin or Fae go through something like that, and I pray they don't, I want the fifty-seven-year-old to remember exactly how it felt from the inside.

It didn't feel like laziness. It felt like weight. It didn't feel like a choice to fail. It felt like a scoreboard so far behind that running another play seemed pointless. What helped wasn't lectures. What helped was a poem, a few people who didn't give up on me, a Nana who prayed, and eventually, small plays I could win. Six hours, not twelve.

So if they're in the dark room, fifty-seven, don't stand in the doorway yelling about the scoreboard. Sit on the edge of the bed. Hand them a glass of water. Say, "What's the next play? Just the next one." Tell them about the dark apartment and the phone face-down on the nightstand. Tell them about "tomorrow" being the scoreboard in disguise. Tell them about thirty feet. Tell them they're being carried.

And pray. Pray like Nana. My dad said he was alive because Nana prayed for him. I want my kids to be able to say something like that about me, even if they never say it out loud.

INT. NANA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT (PRESENT, 2026)

Not one particular night. The kind of moment that sums up who Nana is.

NANA (87) sits at the kitchen table with her hands folded. BLAKE (37) leans in the doorway, keys in hand, about to leave.

BLAKE
You praying for me, Nana?

NANA
(not opening her hands)
Always.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven

A letter to the fifty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2046.

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                BLAKE
        What are you praying?

                NANA
            (a beat)
        That's between me and the Lord.

                BLAKE
            (laughing)
        Fair enough.
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He crosses the kitchen and kisses the top of her head.

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                BLAKE (CONT'D)
        Pray for the kids too.

                NANA
            (dry)
        I've been doing that since before they got here.
```

That's the kind of fifty-seven I want to be. The kind of eighty-seven, too. Praying since before they got here.

Tell them the 27 Club story again.

If my kids are twenty-seven, they might have their own heroes who burned too bright. Every generation has them. I don't know who they will be in 2046. But I know the shape of the story.

Tell it again, fifty-seven. Not as a warning that sounds like a lecture. As a love letter. Tell them about Kurt and Jimi and Janis, and how much you loved them, and how you said out loud, "I'm not coming with you." Tell them about Chase and Eric and Jack. Say the names. Tell them that you chose to be boring and alive and that it turned out to be the least boring thing you ever did.

I would rather be alive at eighty-seven than legendary at twenty-seven.

The sons in the company name.

Farthing, Garcia & Sons. When I named it at thirty-seven, I said the Sons were Jacob and whoever comes next.

At fifty-seven, I hope I know who came next. Maybe Jacob has his own kids by then. Maybe Odin or Fae wanted in. Maybe a student from the microschool turned

When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven

A letter to the fifty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2046.

out to have the best hands of anybody on the crew. Maybe the Sons are daughters. Maybe it's somebody I haven't met yet.

What I hope most is that the motto survived. We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it. Brick by brick. If the name on the truck changed but the motto stayed, that's a win. If the motto changed but the work stayed honest, that's still a win. Names are lenses. The work is the thing.

And I hope Loreto, wherever he is, is proud of his son. I hope Jacob is proud of himself. I hope they know that a struggling young teacher once looked across a chaotic classroom at a quiet, good kid doing his assignment and thought, at least one of us has it together, and that years later, that kid helped build something that lasted.

Your body at fifty-seven.

I'll be honest: I don't know what my body will be like at fifty-seven. My dad died around 2016. I am not going to put an age or a cause or a date in this book. But I know enough to know that the men in my family worked hard with their bodies and didn't always take care of them.

So, fifty-seven: go to the doctor. Get the checkups. Take the medicine. Don't be the mechanic who never wears goggles about your own health. You know where the goggles are. They're hanging right there on the nail.

I want to be on the couch with my grandkids someday, if there are grandkids. I want to be Cedric Ed for them. I can't do that if I ignored the check engine light for twenty years.

The scoreboard at fifty-seven.

At fifty-seven, the scoreboard has a new trick. It starts showing you other people's final scores. Friends your age getting sick. People you grew up with retiring rich or not at all. Funerals for people who weren't that old. You start to count differently.

I already know what I'm going to tell you, because it's the same thing I've told every age in this book. Don't look at it.

Look at the next play. The next lesson. The next porch. The next song. The next phone call to your kid who is twenty-seven and figuring it out. The next hug for

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven

A letter to the fifty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2046.

Nana, if she is still with us, which would make her a hundred and seven, and honestly, I wouldn't bet against her. lol.

A word to anybody who is fifty-seven.

I don't know your story. Maybe your kids are grown. Maybe you never had kids. Maybe you're just starting something new, a business, a ministry, a degree, a marriage, and people are telling you it's too late.

It isn't too late. Nana had thirty years of life in front of her at fifty-seven. I graduated from college at twenty-eight after failing out for three years. Jacob went from a quiet kid in a chaotic classroom to a partner in a contracting company. The upset is always possible as long as there's time on the clock.

Here's a dive play for fifty-seven: call one person this week who is twenty-seven. A niece, a former student, a coworker, your own kid. Ask how they're really doing. Listen. Don't fix. Just be the whistle in the stands.

That's six seconds of your time. It might be the most important play they see all year.

Give them hell for six seconds.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 20, the 27 Club (p. 110) → Ch 26, the company (p. 147)

The Next Drummer

Notes to my future self at fifty-seven: mentoring, the caravansary, and the bridge that keeps getting longer.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake hopes that at fifty-seven he will be helping new drummers and other people grow, and carrying a lighter bag.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 37 When Your Kids Turn Twenty-Seven → Ch 38 The Next Drummer → Ch 39 The Tools on the Pegboard

Dear Blake at fifty-seven,

You are, if things have gone the way I hope, twenty years into something. Maybe twenty years into the business. Maybe close to thirty years of teaching, if you stayed in the classroom, or a decade into the microschool, if that dream came true. Maybe forty-five years since you first heard Halcyon. Fifty-three years of drumming.

I want to talk to you about the next drummer.

The ministry just got another drummer.

In September of 2026, a fifteen-year-old kid carried three songs of a four-song worship set at Texana, and a sentence came into my head: the ministry just got another drummer.

I want you to remember how that felt, fifty-seven. It felt better than playing well myself. It felt like building something that would keep playing after I stopped.

By fifty-seven, I hope there's a long line of them. Drummers, guitarists, kids who learned harmonica because you left one lying around. Students who came back to tell you they became teachers. Former students who became partners, the way Jacob did. Kids from the microschool who found their gift and ran with it.

That's the second half of a life, I think. The first half, you learn to play. The second half, you learn to hand over the sticks.

The first half, you learn to play. The second half, you hand over the sticks.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 3, drums at four (p. 20) → Ch 27, the barn (p. 153)

The Next Drummer

Notes to my future self at fifty-seven: mentoring, the caravansary, and the bridge that keeps getting longer.

INT. TEXANA FELLOWSHIP - SANCTUARY - SUNDAY MORNING - SOMEDAY (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for.

A different teen sits behind the kit. A different decade. Same feeling. BLAKE (57), grayer, a little slower, stands off to the side of the stage. Next to him stands the ORIGINAL TEEN DRUMMER, now in his thirties, arms crossed, grinning, watching the new kid play.

The song ends. The new kid looks over. Did I do okay?

The original drummer gives two big thumbs up. Then he turns to Blake.

ORIGINAL DRUMMER
He rushed the bridge.

BLAKE
(laughing)
Everybody rushes the bridge.

ORIGINAL DRUMMER
(nodding, quoting)
"You came back. That's the whole job."

Blake looks at him, surprised he remembers.

BLAKE
(quietly)
The ministry just got another drummer.

I don't know if that scene will ever happen. I hope something like it does. I hope the line of drummers is longer than me.

The caravansary should be busy.

At thirty-seven, the barn at Nana's was mostly a dream with a drum kit in it. Office in the front, antiques in the middle, music in the back. A caravansary, a stopping place for travelers, stories, and songs.

By fifty-seven, I hope it's busy. I hope people have sat in the back and recorded songs. I hope families have brought boxes of old photos and gone home with them digitized and safe. I hope Farthing Finds has found good homes for a lot of old treasures, each one with its story attached. I hope Nana's things are organized and

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 3, drums at four (p. 20) → Ch 27, the barn (p. 153)

The Next Drummer

Notes to my future self at fifty-seven: mentoring, the caravansary, and the bridge that keeps getting longer.

honored and labeled with her own words.

And if the barn is gone, if the property changed hands or a storm took it or life went another way, I hope the idea is still alive somewhere. A small building can hold a large purpose. So can a garage. So can a kitchen table. So can a man.

Keep collecting runes, but carry fewer.

At thirty-seven, I collected symbols like some people collect coins. The scroll, the bridge, the brick. The lantern, the forge, the granary. Fire and snowflake. Castle and chronicle. Chess pieces and board. The Pilgrim, the Tekton, the Bridge Builder, the Fire Watcher, the Keeper of the Chess Pieces.

At fifty-seven, I hope you have figured out which ones really matter. I suspect it will still be the first three.

Remember. Connect. Build.

Scroll. Bridge. Brick.

And the lantern, for the dark nights. Just enough light for the next step.

The rest can go in the archive. You don't have to carry every rune at once. A pilgrim at fifty-seven should have a lighter bag than a pilgrim at thirty-seven.

A pilgrim's bag should get lighter as the road gets longer.

Patience should be easier. If it isn't, practice anyway.

At thirty-seven, I said God gives me opportunities to practice patience. I hope that at fifty-seven, twenty years of reps have made a difference. I hope the Dragon sleeps more and the Builder measures first. I hope the recovery speed is fast. Notice, repair, continue.

But if it isn't easier, if fifty-seven still has a short fuse on a bad day, then practice anyway. Patience isn't a trophy you win once. It's a play you run again and again.

The council should be humbler than ever.

By 2046, the technology will be unrecognizable. The council of assistants I built in 2026 will probably look like a flip phone. I don't know what will have replaced it.

But I hope the principles held. Orders, not bots. Responsibilities endure. People more important than the system. Nothing public without approval. Facts are facts.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 3, drums at four (p. 20) → Ch 27, the barn (p. 153)

The Next Drummer

Notes to my future self at fifty-seven: mentoring, the caravansary, and the bridge that keeps getting longer.

No surveillance symbols, no secret mastery. A dusty pilgrim with a bag. A blacksmith at a forge. A family table.

And Agape. Help the world get BETTER, brick by brick.

If the tools got more powerful, the stewardship has to get more serious. Use your tools wisely, fifty-seven. You're old enough now to know exactly what happens when you don't.

INT. BLAKE'S CLASSROOM - EL CAMPO - DAY (PRESENT, 2026)

Something like what really happens at that desk.

BLAKE (37) stands by his desk at the end of the day. The room is empty. Chairs pushed in, mostly. On the corner of the desk, the little Ganesh statue.

Blake looks at it for a moment.

BLAKE
(quietly)
Take the big ones out of their way.
(beat)
Put some smaller ones in mine.

He turns off the lights.

A word to anybody who is fifty-seven.

I am not fifty-seven. I don't know what it's like. But I've watched people at that age, and here's what I think I see.

Some of them get bitter. The scoreboard has been unfair to them, and they have stared at it so long that it's all they can see. They talk about what went wrong. They talk about who wronged them.

And some of them get generous. They've been knocked down enough times to know that the next play is all anybody ever has, and they start handing out next plays to everybody they meet. They mentor. They encourage. They show up at the B team games. They're the whistle in the stands for kids who aren't even theirs.

I want to be the second kind. If you're fifty-seven and you're drifting toward the first kind, I am not judging you. The scoreboard has probably been unfair. Mine has been unfair too, sometimes. But I would ask you to try one play. Just one.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 3, drums at four (p. 20) → Ch 27, the barn (p. 153)

The Next Drummer

Notes to my future self at fifty-seven: mentoring, the caravansary, and the bridge that keeps getting longer.

Encourage one young person this week. Hand over the sticks for one song.

See what happens.

Laugh, still.

Fifty-seven-year-old Blake, I swear, if you have stopped doing the British voice, I'll be very disappointed in you. Commit to the bit. Make the grandkids laugh, if there are grandkids. Make the students laugh. Make Fae groan. lol. Let your silliness be the last thing to get old.

Love, Blake, at thirty-seven, still a little bit silly

For the Sixty-Seven-Year-Old

A letter mailed ahead: the long middle of the fourth quarter, handing down the tools, and recording your own songs.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part VII is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at sixty-seven, about handing down the tools and the long view.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part VI
For the Fifty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part VII**
For the Sixty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part VIII**
For the Seventy-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 39 · The Tools on the Pegboard — p. 221
A letter to the sixty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2056.

Chapter 40 · The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead — p. 226
Notes to my future self at sixty-seven: grandchildren, the family trail, mercy that acts, and the long view.

Brick by brick.

The Tools on the Pegboard

A letter to the sixty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2056.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This is a letter to Blake at sixty-seven about handing his tools to others and still playing his own songs.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 38 The Next Drummer → **Ch 39** The Tools on the Pegboard → **Ch 40** The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead

If I'm blessed with sixty-seven years, it will be around 2056.

Odin will be about thirty-nine. Fae will be about thirty-seven. My kids will be the age I'm right now, writing this. They will be in their own Part IV. Patience, work, faith, building, maybe raising their own kids, maybe carrying their own debts and dreams and half-built barns.

That's a strange and wonderful thought. Somewhere in 2056, Odin or Fae might be sitting at a Starbucks, or whatever replaces Starbucks, with headphones on, writing about their own lives. Maybe they will open this book and find the letter I wrote to the thirty-seven-year-old and realize it was also to them.

Hi, guys. I told you to add pages.

Sixty-seven is when you hand down the tools.

My dad had a coffee can full of bolts and a nail on the shed wall where his goggles hung, unused. He had wrenches with grease worked so deep into the handles you could never get it out. When he died, I didn't inherit a fortune. I inherited some tools, a few Xbox replays, and a lot of sayings.

The tools mattered more than I expected. When I pick up a wrench now, I can feel him in it.

At sixty-seven, I want to think carefully about my tools. Not just the hammers and rafter squares and tape measures, though I hope those go to people who will use them. I mean all the tools. The drum kit. The twelve-string. The harmonica. The Bank of Farthing ledgers. The Chronicle. The council of assistants, or whatever it has become. The business. The barn. The recipes. The sayings.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 45, the pegboard (p. 250) → Ch 12, the long song (p. 68)

The Tools on the Pegboard

A letter to the sixty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2056.



These aren't yours because you own them. They're yours because you take care of them. And at some point, taking care of them means handing them to somebody else.

At some point, taking care of your tools means handing them to somebody else.

INT. THE BARN AT NANA'S - FRONT OFFICE - DAY - SOMEDAY (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for.

A pegboard wall covered in tools, each one outlined in marker so you know where it goes back. BLAKE (67), white-haired, still in a ball cap, stands in front of it with a SOMEONE YOUNG, a grandchild maybe, or a student, or a new hand on the crew. Their face isn't important. Their hands are.

Blake takes down a big steel rafter square.

BLAKE
You know what this is?

SOMEONE YOUNG
A really serious ruler?

BLAKE
(laughing so hard he has to sit down on a stool)
That's exactly what my seventh graders said.
(catching his breath)
It's a rafter square. You cut roofs with it. Get the angle wrong, the roof falls in.

He hands it over. The young hands take it, careful.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
It's yours now.

SOMEONE YOUNG
Because you're giving it to me?

BLAKE
(shaking his head)
Because you're gonna take care of it.

I hope that happens. I hope I'm the kind of old man who has a pegboard with outlines on it. I am not that organized right now, at thirty-seven. I'm the guy who can

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 45, the pegboard (p. 250) → Ch 12, the long song (p. 68)

The Tools on the Pegboard

A letter to the sixty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2056.

start five new projects while setting down the wrench I need for the first one. But I'm working on it. Thirty years is a lot of reps.

Record your own songs.

At thirty-seven I realized I wanted to record my own music instead of only playing other people's songs. That shift mirrors the rest of my life. For years I learned by playing covers, teaching established history, using existing tools, inhabiting games built by other people. Now I want to make the songs, systems, stories, and worlds that only I can make.

By sixty-seven, I hope I've done it. I hope there's a folder somewhere, or a shelf, or a cloud, with songs that only Blake Dylan Farthing could have written. Songs about Danevang and headlamps and Cedric Ed and kittens on leashes at Home Depot. A song about a bathroom that never sank. A song for Jack.

And if I haven't done it yet, sixty-seven, do it now. It isn't too late. It's never too late to stop covering other people's songs and play your own. Nana talked to Siri at eighty-something. You can record a song at sixty-seven.

It is never too late to stop covering and play your own song.

One song. Then the next. Brick by brick.

The fourth quarter is long.

Football games have four quarters, and the fourth one is where most of the drama lives. Comebacks happen in the fourth quarter. Upsets happen in the fourth quarter. The team that was down by seventeen at halftime comes out and starts running the ball, play after play, and suddenly the other team is tired and it's a one-score game.

I have no idea where sixty-seven sits in my game. Maybe it's the fourth quarter. Maybe it's the third. Nana is eighty-seven as I write this, and at sixty-seven she still had twenty years in front of her. Twenty years! Odin and Fae's whole childhoods fit inside that much time.

So sixty-seven, don't count the clock. You don't know how much is left. Nobody does. Run the play.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 45, the pegboard (p. 250) → Ch 12, the long song (p. 68)

The Tools on the Pegboard

A letter to the sixty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2056.

The process doesn't retire either.

When I first wrote down Nick Saban's process at thirty-seven, I was thinking about debt and dreams and a seventh grade B team. Take it one play at a time and DO NOT even LOOK at the scoreboard. Just one play at a time, win that or lose, a new play is next. Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

At sixty-seven, I think the process gets quieter, but it doesn't go away. The plays get smaller. Walk to the mailbox. Call the kid. Teach the grandkid one chord. Finish one page of the family history. Show up to one Sunday service. Each one is still six seconds, and each one can still be won.

And here's something I suspect about sixty-seven that I couldn't have understood at thirty-seven. The scoreboard gets louder with age, because there's more of it. More wins to be proud of. More losses to regret. More years to add up. It would be easy to spend the whole fourth quarter staring up at that big lit-up sign, replaying old fumbles.

Don't do it, sixty-seven. The old fumbles are in the film room. You already learned from them. Look here, not up there. The next snap is the only one you get to play.

The plays get smaller. They do not stop mattering.

Retire from jobs, not from purpose.

Nana worked for the school district for decades. Federal programs, paperwork, money for kids who needed help. She did a quiet job for a long time. And when she stopped working, she didn't stop being useful. She kept her house. She kept her stories. She kept her prayers. She kept buying into new technology, from old school computers for her grandson to talking with Siri. She kept being Nana.

At sixty-seven, I might retire from teaching, if I haven't already. I might hand Farthing, Garcia & Sons to the Sons. That's fine. Jobs end. Purposes don't.

My purpose is connection. Scroll, bridge, brick. Remember, connect, build. Those don't retire. They just change shape. Maybe at sixty-seven I'm remembering by sitting with grandkids and telling them about Hans on the boat. Maybe I'm connecting by visiting people in the jail ministry, if that door opened. Maybe I'm building by helping a young couple fix up their first house.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 45, the pegboard (p. 250) → Ch 12, the long song (p. 68)

The Tools on the Pegboard

A letter to the sixty-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2056.

Retire from jobs, not from purpose.

INT. NANA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY (PRESENT, 2026)

NANA (87) sits in her chair with a phone in her hand. BLAKE (37) sits on the arm of the couch, leaning in.

BLAKE
Just ask it.

NANA
(skeptical)
Out loud?

BLAKE
Out loud. Like you're talking to a person.

NANA
(to the phone, very formal)
Siri. What's the weather.

A pleasant voice answers with the forecast. Nana listens, unimpressed.

NANA (CONT'D)
Well. I could've looked outside.

BLAKE
(laughing)
That's not the point, Nana.

NANA
(handing the phone back, but with the faintest smile)
It's a little bit the point.

I remember Nana talking with me about Siri. I remember thinking how improbable that whole arc would have sounded to the little girl who picked cotton and used an outhouse. Cotton fields to Siri. Immigrant household to conversational AI.

At sixty-seven, I hope I'm still curious like that. Still willing to try the new thing, even if I'm skeptical. Still willing to say "Well. I could have looked outside," and then use it anyway.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 45, the pegboard (p. 250) → Ch 12, the long song (p. 68)

The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead

Notes to my future self at sixty-seven: grandchildren, the family trail, mercy that acts, and the long view.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake hopes that at sixty-seven he will share family stories, help people with real kindness, and be a good grandpa if he becomes one.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 39 The Tools on the Pegboard → Ch 40 The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead → Ch 41 Just Enough Light

Dear Blake at sixty-seven,

I'm writing to you from a Starbucks in El Campo, late, with headphones on, at thirty-seven. Anna is closing up. My laptop is at eleven percent. I have three Orders open and a notebook full of arrows. Odin and Fae are with their mom this week, and I miss them, and I'm using the quiet to write to you.

You're thirty years down the road. I want to tell you what I hope you're carrying.

The family trail.

At thirty-seven I started tracing the Farthing family backward. Barbados. England. Colonial Virginia. The War of 1812. Strange gaps. Old institutional records. Branches that might be ours and might not. I said then, and I want you to remember, that I don't treat every branch as settled history. I treat it like a trail.

The goal isn't technical history. The goal is human history.

By sixty-seven, I hope you have walked more of that trail. I hope you've found some of the people in the gaps. Not just names and dates, but stories. Who was scared? Who was brave? Who crossed an ocean, like Hans? Who stayed when it would have been easier to leave?

And I hope you've been honest about what you don't know. Family stories are like old maps. The edges get blurry. The family story says Hans came to escape the Nazis. He came in 1927, and Hitler didn't take power until 1933, so the real reasons may be bigger or different than the story we tell. Both things can be held at once: the family's truth about why he left, and the honest admission that the dates and details might not line up the way the story does. That's how a good archivist works. Testimony and evidence, side by side, labeled for what they are.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 11, the couch (p. 61) → Ch 43, Nana (p. 241)

The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead

Notes to my future self at sixty-seven: grandchildren, the family trail, mercy that acts, and the long view.

The goal is not technical history. The goal is human history.

Grandchildren, maybe.

I don't know if there will be grandchildren. That's entirely up to Odin and Fae, and I won't put any pressure on that in a book they're going to read. lol. But if there are, sixty-seven, here's what I hope for.

I hope you're on the couch with a second controller, saying "Who are we today?"

I hope you make a ridiculous running back with long blonde hair and name him something absurd, and he trucks a tree.

I hope you jump into every one of their random franchises. Every dynasty. Every half-built world.

I hope you save the replays. All of them. Not just a few that aren't even that good.

I hope you tell them about Cedric Ed, and about the grandpa they never met who built a bathroom that never sank.

I hope you do the British voice.

And I hope you wave from every truck.

INT. A LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - SOMEDAY (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for.

A couch. Two controllers. A TV much nicer than anything in the old trailer. BLAKE (67) sits back on the couch, controller resting on his belly, totally relaxed, exactly the way his dad used to sit. Next to him, a KID (about 10), leaning forward on the edge of the couch, very intense.

KID
They're showing blitz!

BLAKE
(deadpan)
They're always showing blitz.

KID
(pointing at the screen)
Hot route! Hot route!

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 11, the couch (p. 61) → Ch 43, Nana (p. 241)

The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead

Notes to my future self at sixty-seven: grandchildren, the family trail, mercy that acts, and the long view.

```
                BLAKE
        Who are you talking to?

                KID
        The offensive line!

                BLAKE
            (fighting a grin)
        They can't hear you. They're on the TV.

                KID
        Just give me the dive, I'm handing it to you!

                BLAKE
            (sitting up for the first time)
        Now we're talking.
```

The snap. The handoff. On screen, a running back with absurdly long hair slams into a linebacker and keeps going.

```
                BLAKE (CONT'D)
            (on his feet, sixty-seven years old and yelling at
            a TV)
        GO! GO!
```

If that happens, sixty-seven, you'll know exactly what you're doing. You'll be paying forward the couch.

Pay forward the couch.

Mercy that acts.

At thirty-seven, I wrote this: Keep mercy for yourself, but make mercy produce action. Forgiveness isn't the same thing as pretending the broken thing is fixed. Pick up the pill bottle. Put the lid on. Pay the bill. Apologize. Drink water. Send the message. Put the receipt in the folder. Hug the kid. Finish the page.

By sixty-seven, you'll have a lot more to forgive yourself for. Thirty more years of crooked bricks. Things you said. Things you didn't do. Projects you abandoned. People you didn't call back in time.

Forgive yourself. Please. And then do something. Mercy that doesn't lead to action turns into excuses. Mercy that acts turns into repair.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 11, the couch (p. 61) → Ch 43, Nana (p. 241)

The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead

Notes to my future self at sixty-seven: grandchildren, the family trail, mercy that acts, and the long view.

And forgive other people, too. By sixty-seven, you'll have collected some grudges if you aren't careful. Set them down. They're heavy, and a pilgrim's bag should be getting lighter.

Ask the old people.

At thirty-seven, I wrote: Ask an old person a question before it's too late.

At sixty-seven, you might be the old person. lol. So let me flip it. Answer the young people's questions. Even the ones that seem silly. Even the ones you have answered a hundred times. When a kid asks "What was it like when you were little?" don't say "Oh, it was different." Tell them. Tell them about the dark roads and the headlamp and the trailer coming down the road. Tell them about the 1280 SAT and the stack of letters that said no. Tell them about the poem. Tell them about the waving.

And let them record you. Don't be shy about it. Even Nana's shortest answers about the cotton fields are precious to me. I wish I had more of them saved.

When the young ask, answer. Somebody is building an archive.

To anybody who is sixty-seven.

You've seen a lot. Probably more than you ever expected. You have probably buried people you love. You have probably watched technology change so many times that you have stopped trying to keep up. You might feel like the world is moving on without you.

Here's what I believe, from thirty years back. The world needs your stories more than it needs your speed. The young people around you're running their six-second plays with no idea what the whole game looks like. You do. Not because you're smarter, but because you've played more snaps. You can tell them: I fumbled too. I lost by seventeen once. I came back. A new play is next.

That's a gift nobody else can give them.

And the scoreboard? At sixty-seven it's probably louder than ever. Health reports. Retirement accounts. Obituaries in the paper. Don't look at it. Not because it isn't real. Because it isn't the play. The play is the grandkid on the couch. The question at the dinner table. The song you haven't recorded yet. The tool you

The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead

Notes to my future self at sixty-seven: grandchildren, the family trail, mercy that acts, and the long view.

haven't handed down yet.

Six seconds. That's all it ever was.

The fourth quarter hands.

There's something I have noticed about older men who worked with their hands all their lives. Their hands tell the story. Scars, calluses, a crooked finger from a job that went wrong forty years ago. My dad's hands were like that, always a little black with grease that never fully washed out.

At sixty-seven, look at your hands. Drumsticks since four. Guitar strings since the dorm room. Paint scrapers and rafter squares and tape measures. Kids' hands held crossing parking lots. A pen writing in a notebook at Starbucks at eleven percent battery.

Those hands did a lot of plays. Be proud of them. And if they still work, put them on something. A drum. A guitar. A child's shoulder. A brick.

And one more thing, sixty-seven.

If Nana is gone by then, and she would be a hundred and seventeen in 2056, so I'm guessing she will be, though I still wouldn't bet against her, I hope you've kept her things. Her stories. Her qualifier. "I mean, if that's what YOU want to do..." I hope you say it to your grandkids, in her exact tone, and laugh, and then mean it with all your heart.

I hope you still pray the way she prayed. Since before they got here.

And I hope the barn, or whatever it has become, is still a stopping place for travelers, stories, and songs.

Love, Blake, at thirty-seven, at eleven percent battery

For the Seventy-Seven-Year-Old

A letter mailed ahead: slowing down without stopping, and the lantern that is still enough.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part VIII is a letter mailed ahead to Blake at seventy-seven, about slowing down without stopping.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part VII
For the Sixty-Seven-Year-Old → **Part VIII**
For the Seventy-Seven-Year-Old → **Part IX**
For the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 41 · Just Enough Light — p. 232
A letter to the seventy-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2066.

Chapter 42 · The Clock and the Steady Heart — p. 236
Notes to my future self at seventy-seven: the clock winding down, Arjuna's courage, and some things to laugh about.

Brick by brick.

Just Enough Light

A letter to the seventy-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2066.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This is a letter to Blake at seventy-seven saying it is okay to slow down, but not to stop, because a little light is still enough.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 40 The Trail Behind and the Trail Ahead → Ch 41 Just Enough Light → Ch 42 The Clock and the Steady Heart

Dear seventy-seven-year-old,

If I make it to seventy-seven, it will be around 2066. Odin will be about forty-nine. Fae will be about forty-seven. My kids will be at halftime. Their own locker room moment. Looking at the film of their own lives.

And I'll be, if God allows it, an old man.

I want to write this letter carefully. I'm thirty-seven. I don't know what seventy-seven feels like in the knees or the lungs or the heart. I don't know what I'll have lost by then, or who. I am not going to pretend I do. But I do know some things that I think will still be true, because they've been true at every age so far.

The lantern is still enough.

When I was a little boy out in the country near Danevang, my dad wore a headlamp, and I wore one too. And my dad told me, in the dark, that I only needed to see enough for the next step.

Just enough light for the next step.

At seventy-seven, the road ahead might feel shorter, and darker, and stranger. The things you could see clearly at thirty-seven might be fuzzy now. Your hands might shake. Your hearing might go. You might not be able to drive thirty feet anymore.

The lantern is still enough.

You don't need to see the end of the road. You never did. You only ever needed to see the next step. That was true when you were six with the strap sliding down your nose. It was true at twenty-one on the edge of the bed with the phone glowing. It was true at thirty-seven in the barn. It will be true at seventy-seven.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9) → Ch 42, notes at 77 (p. 236)

Just Enough Light

A letter to the seventy-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2066.

You never needed to see the whole road. You only needed the next step.

EXT. NANA'S PROPERTY - NIGHT - SOMEDAY (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for.

Pitch dark. Crickets. Somewhere beyond, the old barn, its doors shut for the night. A single beam of light bobs slowly across the yard. It belongs to BLAKE (77), wearing a headlamp, walking carefully with a cane.

Beside him, a smaller beam. A CHILD, a great-grandkid maybe, or a neighbor's kid, wearing a headlamp that keeps sliding down over their face.

CHILD
My light fell on my nose.

Blake stops. Turns. Kneels, slowly, with a grunt.

BLAKE
(laughing)
You gotta tighten it.

He tugs the strap and sets the light back on the child's forehead.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
There. Now you can see where you're stepping.

CHILD
I can only see like a little bit.

BLAKE
(beat; a voice from seventy years ago in his own mouth)
That's all you need. Just enough for the next step.

They walk on. Two beams. One big, one small.

If that scene ever happens, seventy-seven, you'll have come full circle. Hand down the headlamp. Hand down the sentence. It was never yours to keep.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9) → Ch 42, notes at 77 (p. 236)

Just Enough Light

A letter to the seventy-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2066.

Slow down without stopping.

Nana is eighty-seven as I write this. She doesn't move as fast as she used to. But she hasn't stopped. She still runs her house. She still has opinions about my paint lines. She still smiles at Ricebirds games. She is slower, but she isn't stopped.

That's the difference I want to hold at seventy-seven. Slowing down is natural. Stopping is a choice.

In football terms, maybe at seventy-seven you aren't running the ball anymore. Maybe you aren't even on the field. Maybe you're the old coach in the press box, or the guy in the stands who has seen every Ricebirds game for sixty years and knows exactly when the dive play is coming. That's still being in the game.

Slowing down is natural. Stopping is a choice.

Keep being awake.

I told you I used to sleep a lot. Too much. Hiding sleeping. And I told you that now, at thirty-seven, I love being awake. I'm a night owl who loves the hours.

At seventy-seven, your body might want more sleep. Let it. Rest isn't hiding. But don't let the days slip by unnoticed. Be awake for them. Notice the light coming through the window. Notice the coffee. Notice the kid's voice on the phone. Every day is a blessing. You believed that at thirty-seven, after a long, dark stretch of not believing it. Keep believing it at seventy-seven.

The music is still in your hands.

At seventy-seven, I'll have been drumming for seventy-three years. If my hands still work at all, I want them on something. A drum. A guitar. A harmonica. A table I'm tapping on while a song plays.

Rhythm was there before almost anything else. I suspect it will be there after almost everything else, too.

Play the next beat. If you miss it, make the next one good.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9) → Ch 42, notes at 77 (p. 236)

Just Enough Light

A letter to the seventy-seven-year-old, and to the man I hope to be in 2066.

Your kids are at halftime now.

At seventy-seven, Odin and Fae will be in their late forties. Their own halftime. Their own locker room. Maybe one of them will have a kid heading off to college. Maybe one of them will be standing in a parking lot, carrying the last box, trying not to cry.

Call them that day. Tell them about your own parking lot, if it happened. Tell them the kid leaving is the play working. Tell them to look at the film, not the score.

And then let them be the grown-ups. You've done your part. You can be the whistle in the stands for your grandkids now, and the quiet voice on the phone for your kids. That's a beautiful place to be.

A word to anybody who is seventy-seven.

I don't know you. But I know somebody who used to be seventy-seven, because Nana was seventy-seven once, ten years before I wrote this. And from where I'm standing, I can tell you that a person at seventy-seven still had a whole decade of life in front of them that mattered. Football games. Great-grandkids. New technology. A grandson's business. A barn.

So don't let anybody, including yourself, tell you the game is over. It isn't over until the whistle. Run the next play.

The faith is still the floor under the floor.

I don't know what my faith will look like at seventy-seven. I hope it's deeper and wider and quieter. I hope it has fewer arguments in it and more peace. I hope I still have many rooms. I hope I still pray like Nana.

And I hope that when I look back at the footprints in the sand, I see the long stretches where there was only one set, and I know, without any doubt at all, whose they were.

It was then that I carried you.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the headlamp (p. 9) → Ch 42, notes at 77 (p. 236)

The Clock and the Steady Heart

Notes to my future self at seventy-seven: the clock winding down, Arjuna's courage, and some things to laugh about.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake reminds himself at seventy-seven to keep doing the next right thing, label the family records, and keep laughing.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 41 Just Enough Light → **Ch 42 The Clock and the Steady Heart** → Ch 43 Nana at Eighty-Seven

Dear Blake at seventy-seven,

I want to talk to you about the clock.

In football, there's the scoreboard, and then there's the game clock. They're usually on the same big sign. The scoreboard tells you who is winning. The clock tells you how much time is left.

All my life I've told people not to look at the scoreboard. I've said it to seventh graders, to my own kids, to myself at two in the morning. But I haven't said much about the clock.

At seventy-seven, the clock is going to be the thing you notice.

I am not going to pretend otherwise. You'll be aware that there's less time left than there used to be. Friends will be gone. Maybe you'll have had scares. Maybe the doctors will have said things. I don't know. But you'll feel the clock.

Here's what I want to tell you, from thirty-seven, while I'm still young enough to be brave about it.

The clock doesn't change the play.

When there are two minutes left in a game, good teams don't panic. They don't throw away everything that got them there and start heaving the ball downfield on every snap. They run their offense. Faster, maybe. With more urgency. But the same plays. The same discipline. Snap. Handoff. Hit the hole.

At seventy-seven, if the clock is running down, don't panic and don't quit. Run your offense. The plays that worked your whole life still work. Love your people. Tell the truth. Pray. Play the music. Laugh. Leave it better than you found it.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, Arjuna (p. 173) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

The Clock and the Steady Heart

Notes to my future self at seventy-seven: the clock winding down, Arjuna's courage, and some things to laugh about.

The clock does not change the play.

There's a moment at the end of close football games that I've always loved. The team that's ahead doesn't need to do anything fancy. They just need to take care of the ball. Snap it, hold on, don't fumble, let the clock run. Nick Saban's teams were famous for it. Play after play of doing the simple thing right.

At seventy-seven, take care of the ball. Hold on to the things that matter. Your faith. Your people. Your stories. Your sense of humor. Don't fumble them by getting bitter or scared. Just keep doing the simple thing right, one snap at a time.

Do the hard duty with a steady heart.

At thirty-seven, I told a woman named Aisha at a gas station in Edna about Arjuna, from the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna stands in his chariot at the edge of a battle, and he doesn't want to fight, because the people on the other side are his own kin. And he is told: do your duty. Even when it's hard. With a steady heart.

At seventy-seven, some of the hard duties might be things like this: Saying goodbye. Letting go of the house, the car, the barn. Telling your kids the truth about your health. Forgiving someone you swore you never would. Asking for forgiveness from someone you hurt. Accepting help when you've always been the helper.

Do them with a steady heart. Don't rush them and don't run from them. One play at a time.

Do the hard duty with a steady heart.

Make sure the archive is labeled.

At thirty-seven, I asked that this book stay a living document. Future editions can incorporate exported chat archives, photographs, recordings, family interviews, school and music artifacts, Nana's testimony, and corrections from Odin and Fae.

At seventy-seven, please make sure it's all labeled. What's memory and what's fact. What's family story and what's documented. What's a hope and what came true. What's a game universe and what was real life. Future readers deserve to know the difference. That's the scribe's job. Do it with care.

And make it easy to find. A book is always waiting on the shelf, but only if somebody knows which shelf.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, Arjuna (p. 173) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

The Clock and the Steady Heart

Notes to my future self at seventy-seven: the clock winding down, Arjuna's courage, and some things to laugh about.

Some things to laugh about, in case you forgot.

Seventy-seven-year-old Blake, here are a few things from 2026 that I want you to remember, because they will make you laugh, and laughing is good for an old man's heart.

You once took a cat named Grey, the kittens' mom, to Home Depot on a leash. She did great. She's such a sweety.

You once named your video game quarterback Blake Blake. On purpose.

Your dad once named his running back Cedric Ed and gave him long blonde hair and made him truck a tree.

You once wrote the date in your sermon notes and the 6 looked like a 4, and you squinted at it in church.

Your daughter once dressed as Aphrodite and posed for her teachers like a movie star.

Your son once told you he was going to upset his math homework.

Your Nana once told you that you missed a spot, and she was right.

Your nickname for your AI assistants was "Orders, Not Bots," and the manager at Starbucks still called them your robots.

EXT. HOME DEPOT - PARKING LOT - DAY - OCTOBER 10, 2026

A real day.

BLAKE (37) walks across the parking lot with ODIN (9) and FAE (7). At the end of a thin leash, trotting along with total dignity, is GREY, a cat.

A SHOPPER pushing a cart of mulch stops and stares.

SHOPPER
Is that... a cat?

FAE
(proudly)
That's Grey. She's the kittens' mom.

SHOPPER
On a leash?

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, Arjuna (p. 173) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

The Clock and the Steady Heart

Notes to my future self at seventy-seven: the clock winding down, Arjuna's courage, and some things to laugh about.



ODIN
(matter-of-fact)
She likes it.

Grey sits down in the middle of the crosswalk and begins washing a paw. Everyone waits.

BLAKE
(to the shopper, apologetic)
She's such a sweety.

Grey finishes. Stands. Continues toward the automatic doors like she owns the place. They slide open for her.

Remember that, seventy-seven. Remember that life was this silly. Remember that you committed to the bit.

A word to anybody who is seventy-seven.

You've played more snaps than most people ever will. You have won some and lost some and had some called back on penalties you still think were unfair. lol.

Here's what I would say to you, from a much younger man. Your next play still matters. It might be smaller now. It might be a phone call instead of a road trip. A prayer instead of a project. A story told to a great-grandkid instead of a business launched. But it matters just as much as any play you ran at thirty-seven.

A six-second play at seventy-seven can still change somebody's life. One encouraging word. One "I'm proud of you." One "I forgive you." One "Come on. You're helping."

Give them hell for six seconds. You can still pull the upset.

Love, Blake, at thirty-seven, still running dive right

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 31, Arjuna (p. 173) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

For the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

Nana's age. A letter mailed ahead, and a long look at the woman who showed me how.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Part IX is for an eighty-seven-year-old, Nana's age, with her story and letters mailed ahead to 2076.

NAVIGATION PATH · THE NINE PARTS

Part VIII
For the Seventy-Seven-Year-Old

→

Part IX
For the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

→

Closing
Benediction and more

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 43 · Nana at Eighty-Seven — p. 241
The long bridge, from cotton fields to federal programs to a Ricebirds game.

Chapter 44 · A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old — p. 246
To anyone at Nana's age, and to the man I hope to be in 2076.

Chapter 45 · To Blake at Eighty-Seven — p. 250
The last letter mailed ahead, for 2076.

Brick by brick.

Nana at Eighty-Seven

The long bridge, from cotton fields to federal programs to a Ricebirds game.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Nana is eighty-seven, and her long life, from cotton fields to a Ricebirds game, shows Blake how to live one day at a time.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 42 The Clock and the Steady Heart → **Ch 43** Nana at Eighty-Seven → **Ch 44** A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

Before I write a letter to the eighty-seven-year-old, I want to tell you about the eighty-seven-year-old I know.

Nana. Ane Marie Smith. My dad's mother. Born in 1939. Daughter of Hans, who came from Denmark in 1927, and of her mother, who followed in 1929 once there was work and a place to live. A girl who grew up rural, picked cotton as a child, used an outhouse. A woman who worked for the school district for decades, managing federal programs, starting around 1965 by our family account. A grandmother who bought retired school computers so her grandson could type his papers and take things apart. A great-grandmother who talked with Siri.

Nana is one of the strongest bridges in this book. She is the person whose life lets me feel history without opening a textbook.

Nana is the long bridge.

Think about what that bridge spans. At one end, a girl in the cotton fields with a long sack dragging behind her, in a Danish farming community on the Texas prairie, with no indoor bathroom. At the other end, a woman in her kitchen asking a phone about the weather, watching her grandson's company paint her house, while that grandson uses a council of AI assistants to write a book about her.

Cotton fields to Siri. Immigrant household to conversational AI. All in one lifetime. All in one person.

I am not sure anybody in human history has watched the world change as fast as Nana's generation did. And she didn't just watch it. She kept walking across it. One step at a time.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, the boat from Denmark (p. 15) → Ch 44, the letter at 87 (p. 246)

Nana at Eighty-Seven

The long bridge, from cotton fields to federal programs to a Ricebirds game.

Nana isn't much of a praiser.

I've said this before, and I'll say it again because it's so important to understanding her. Nana isn't much of a praiser. She doesn't hand out compliments like candy. She doesn't gush. She is from a generation and a culture where you did your work and you didn't expect anybody to clap.

Which means that when she does praise you, it lands like a hammer.

INT. NANA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - 2026

Papers spread across the kitchen table: house plans, a budget, a printed sketch of the barn layout. BLAKE (37) is in the middle of explaining something with both hands. NANA (87) sits across from him, listening, saying nothing.

BLAKE
...so the front is the office, and then the middle is your antiques, all organized, and then Jacob and Loreto can start on the house in October, and—

He stops. Nana is looking at him. Not at the plans. At him.

NANA
(quietly)
I'm proud of you.

Blake freezes. He wasn't ready for that. He opens his mouth. Nothing comes out.

BLAKE
(finally)
Thank you, Nana.

NANA
(a beat; then, inevitably)
I mean, if that's what YOU want to do...

Blake bursts out laughing. Nana allows herself the smallest smile.

I felt that "I'm proud of you" for days. I'm still feeling it. And the qualifier, "I mean, if that's what YOU want to do..." is so perfectly Nana that I've made it part of the family archive. It isn't a criticism. It's her way of saying: I'm proud of you, and also, I am not going to tell you how to live your life, and also, I love you, and also, I'm a little bit skeptical about the barn. All in one sentence.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 2, the boat from Denmark (p. 15) → Ch 44, the letter at 87 (p. 246)

Nana at Eighty-Seven

The long bridge, from cotton fields to federal programs to a Ricebirds game.

The Ricebirds game.

One night in 2026, Nana and I went to a Ricebirds game together. El Campo football under the lights. The band, the crowd, the smell of popcorn and fresh-cut grass, the whole town packed into the bleachers.

EXT. EL CAMPO RICEBIRDS STADIUM - BLEACHERS - NIGHT - 2026

Friday night lights. A packed home crowd. BLAKE (37) sits next to NANA (87), who is bundled up, watching the field with the steady attention of someone who has seen a great many football games.

On the field: the Ricebirds snap the ball. A handoff. The running back hits the hole and breaks free. The crowd rises. Touchdown.

The stands erupt.

Nana doesn't jump. But she smiles. A real smile. Big.

Blake looks over and sees it. Without thinking, he wraps his arms around her. She hugs him back.

BLAKE
(over the noise)
They scored, Nana!

NANA
(still smiling)
I saw.

That's one of my favorite moments of 2026. Nana smiling at a touchdown, and the two of us hugging in the bleachers like a couple of kids. It didn't cost anything. It wasn't planned. It was just six seconds of joy that happened because we were there together.

That's what I mean when I say an ordinary moment can suddenly become sacred.

> *An ordinary moment becomes sacred when you are there together.*

One drink, dressed up.

There's something I've been imagining doing with Nana, and I want to write it down so it's real.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 2, the boat from Denmark (p. 15) → Ch 44, the letter at 87 (p. 246)

Nana at Eighty-Seven

The long bridge, from cotton fields to federal programs to a Ricebirds game.

I want to take her out. Dressed up. Both of us. To a couple of familiar local places, for one drink each. Take pictures. Laugh. And be home early.

I've never wanted preservation to mean putting people in glass. I don't want Nana to be a museum piece that I visit and dust off. I want memory to stay alive. I want to make new memories with her while she is still here to make them.

I don't know if we will do it. I hope we do. If we do, I'll add a page. If you're reading this and there's a photo of Nana and me dressed up somewhere in the archive, you'll know we did.

Danevang, then and now.

When Nana was a girl, Danevang was a Danish farming community on the flat Texas prairie, full of families who had crossed an ocean and were still speaking the old language at home. Cotton in the fields. A church at the center of things. Neighbors who helped each other bring in the harvest because nobody could do it alone.

When I was a boy, Danevang was dark roads, fields, a 1905 house, a single-wide trailer, and a dad with a headlamp.

Now, at thirty-seven, I drive through that country and see it with both pictures laid on top of each other. Nana's Danevang and mine. And I have even dreamed, out loud, about land in Danevang someday holding something new, maybe even a little data center, a place where family stories could live in a family cloud. I know how that sounds. lol. But Nana went from an outhouse to Siri. Who am I to say what Danevang can hold?

The land stays. The people change. The stories, if somebody keeps them, can stay too.

What Nana has taught me about eighty-seven.

She has taught me that you don't stop being a person just because you got old. She still has opinions. She still notices the missed spot of paint. She still prays. She still loves football. She still has a dry sense of humor that sneaks up on you.

She has taught me that the quiet work matters. Decades in federal programs, helping kids she would never meet, never in the newspaper, never in a movie. The

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 2, the boat from Denmark (p. 15) → Ch 44, the letter at 87 (p. 246)

Nana at Eighty-Seven

The long bridge, from cotton fields to federal programs to a Ricebirds game.

bottom bricks of the wall.

She has taught me that curiosity doesn't have to retire. She bought those old school computers. She talked to Siri. She still answers my questions about the cotton fields, even when the answer is short.

She has taught me that prayer is a way of carrying people. My dad said he was alive because she prayed for him. I believe I'm alive, and whole, and a father, and a teacher, and a builder, partly because she prayed for me, too.

And she has taught me that the long bridge is built the same way as every other bridge. One plank at a time. One day at a time. One play at a time. She didn't live eighty-seven years all at once. She lived one day, eighty-seven years in a row. Over thirty-one thousand of them by now.

She didn't live eighty-seven years. She lived one day, over thirty-one thousand times.

If I get to eighty-seven, I want to have done it the way she did.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, the boat from Denmark (p. 15) → Ch 44, the letter at 87 (p. 246)

A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

To anyone at Nana's age, and to the man I hope to be in 2076.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This is a letter to anyone who is eighty-seven: you are not done, so tell your stories and pray for the people who come after you.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 43 Nana at Eighty-Seven → Ch 44 A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old → Ch 45 To Blake at Eighty-Seven

Dear eighty-seven-year-old,

If you're reading this, you have outlived most of the people you grew up with. You have probably buried a spouse, or friends, or siblings, maybe even children. You've watched the world change so many times you've lost count. You've used technology that didn't exist when you were born and has already gone obsolete.

And you're still here. Reading. Curious enough to pick up a book.

I want to start by saying thank you.

Thank you for the bottom bricks. Whatever you did with your life, the quiet jobs, the raised kids, the meals cooked, the prayers prayed, the fields worked, the paperwork filed, somebody is standing on it right now and doesn't even know it. I know it, because I stand on Nana's bricks every day.

You aren't done.

Nana is eighty-seven as I write this, and she isn't done. She noticed the missed spot of paint on her porch. She smiled at a Ricebirds touchdown. She told me she was proud of me, and then she added the qualifier. She is still Nana, all the way through.

So whatever the scoreboard says, whatever the doctors say, whatever the calendar says: you aren't done. As long as there's time on the clock, there's a next play. And your plays still matter.

As long as there is time on the clock, there is a next play.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 43, Nana (p. 241) → Ch 18, footprints (p. 100)

A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

To anyone at Nana's age, and to the man I hope to be in 2076.



Tell the stories.

You're the last person alive who remembers some things. Think about that. There are stories in your head that exist nowhere else. The sound of your mother's voice. The name of the dog you had at six. What the kitchen smelled like on a Sunday. What your father said when he came home tired. Why the family left the old country. Who was brave, and who was scared, and who was kind.

When you go, those stories go with you, unless you tell them.

So tell them. To anyone who will listen. Let the grandkids record you on whatever the phones are by then. Let them ask the same question three times. Give them the short answers too. Those matter.

The stories that disappear first are often not the wars and the weddings. They're the joke in the kitchen. The sound somebody made when they laughed. The way a child pronounced a word. Keep those. Hand them down.

INT. NANA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - SOON (HOPED FOR)

A conversation I mean to record, soon, while I can. A phone recording on the table between them. NANA (87). BLAKE (37).

BLAKE
What do you remember about your dad? About Hans?

NANA
(a long pause)
He worked.

BLAKE
(gently)
What else?

NANA
(another pause; then, unexpectedly)
He came a long way.

Blake waits. She doesn't add anything. She doesn't have to.

BLAKE
(quietly)
Yeah. He did.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 43, Nana (p. 241) → Ch 18, footprints (p. 100)

A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

To anyone at Nana's age, and to the man I hope to be in 2076.

I don't know yet exactly what she will say when I ask. But I can guess it will be short, and that it will hold the whole Atlantic Ocean.

Pray for the people who come after you.

Nana prays. My dad said he was alive because Nana prayed for him. She prayed for me. She has been praying for Odin and Fae since before they got here.

At eighty-seven, you may not be able to do much physically. But you can pray. Or if you don't pray, you can hope out loud. You can bless. You can say to a young person, "I believe in you." You can carry people the way the Lord carried the man in the footprints poem. That's real work. It might be the most important work there is.

Pray for the people who come after you. They will feel it.

Let them take you out.

If your grandson wants to take you out, dressed up, for one drink at a familiar place, go. lol. Let them take pictures. Let them make a fuss. Get home early.

Don't let the young people put you in glass. Don't let them treat you like a museum. You're alive. Make new memories with them while you can. They want you to. Even if they don't know how to ask.

Be proud of them out loud.

Nana isn't much of a praiser, so her praise lands like a hammer. That's beautiful. But I want to say to the eighty-seven-year-old: you're allowed to break the pattern. If you've spent your whole life being stingy with praise, try spending some of it now. Tell your people you're proud of them. Say it plainly. You can still add the qualifier afterward if you want. "I mean, if that's what YOU want to do..." lol.

But say it. It lasts longer than you think.

Keep learning something.

Nana talked to Siri. She was skeptical about it, the way she is skeptical about most things, but she did it. She didn't say, "That is for young people." She asked it about the weather and then told me she could have just looked outside.

At eighty-seven, learn one new thing. Anything. A word in another language. A song on a phone. The name of a great-grandchild's favorite game. A new recipe. A

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Ch 43, Nana (p. 241) → Ch 18, footprints (p. 100)

A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old

To anyone at Nana's age, and to the man I hope to be in 2076.

Greek word, like agape. A book is always waiting on the shelf. It doesn't care how old you are.

Curiosity is one of the last things that should get old. Maybe it never has to.

And look back at the footprints.

At eighty-seven you can see a long way back down the beach. All the scenes of your life. And maybe, like the man in the poem, you notice the stretches where there was only one set of footprints. The hardest seasons. The losses. The dark rooms.

I hope you know whose footprints those were. I hope you know you were carried.

I know Nana knows. I can hear it in how she says "Always" when I ask if she is praying for me.

Love, A grandson who is very grateful for the long bridge

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 43, Nana (p. 241) → Ch 18, footprints (p. 100)

To Blake at Eighty-Seven

The last letter mailed ahead, for 2076.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake writes one last letter to himself at eighty-seven, in 2076, with love and just enough light for the next step.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 44
A Letter to the Eighty-Seven-Year-Old → **Ch 45**
To Blake at Eighty-Seven → **Note 2026**
A Note Added October 25, 2026

Dear Blake,

If you're reading this at eighty-seven, it's around 2076. Odin is about fifty-nine. Fae is about fifty-seven. Your kids are older than you're right now, as I write this. They might have gray hair. They might have grandkids. They might be reading this letter out loud to you because reading is harder now. lol. Let them.

Fifty years. That's how far this letter has to travel. I hope it gets there.

I don't know what you've been through. I don't know what you lost, or what you built, or which of my dreams came true. I don't know if the microschool happened. I don't know if the castle got past the first stone. I don't know if Farthing, Garcia & Sons became a fixture in El Campo or a sweet chapter that ended. I don't know if the barn is still standing. I don't know if you ever recorded your own songs.

But here's what I hope.

I hope you're like Nana. Sharp. Steady. Dry. Funny without trying. Still noticing the missed spot. Still smiling at touchdowns.

I hope you kept praying. I hope it was "Always."

I hope you said the names out loud, all your life. Chase. Eric. Jack. Dad. And all the others who came after, that I can't know yet.

I hope your kids know you loved them. Not just with Cedric Ed, the way Dad did, but out loud, in words, the way he couldn't quite manage. I hope they got both.

I hope you never stopped committing to the bit. I hope your great-grandkids know the British voice.

I hope you still love being awake.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 1, the next step (p. 9)

To Blake at Eighty-Seven

The last letter mailed ahead, for 2076.

I hope Halcyon is still on and on. Seventy-five years with one song. That would be something.

I hope you were patient. Not perfectly. Practiced.

I hope you left it better than you found it. Every porch, every classroom, every kid, every conversation, every room.

I hope the pegboard got organized, eventually. And if it didn't, I hope you laughed about it.

I hope you visited the temple in Stafford with the kids, and that you added a page about it.

I hope you went to every graduation you could. Odin's. Fae's. Grandkids', if there were any. I hope you whistled with two fingers in your mouth.

I hope the first stone of the castle is still in the ground somewhere, and that somebody can still point at it and say, "That is where the castle began."

I hope Jacob and Loreto know what they meant to you.

I hope you told Laurence he was your best friend, out loud, more than once.

I hope Anna at Starbucks, or whoever replaced her, still knew your order.

I hope you took Nana out, dressed up, for one drink, and brought her home early, and that there's a picture.

I hope the Bank of Farthing turned into two grown-ups who know how to ask, "Can I afford it?" and who aren't afraid of the answer.

I hope you forgave yourself for the crooked bricks.

And I hope, most of all, that you never looked at the scoreboard.

INT. A QUIET ROOM - DAY - 2076 (HOPED FOR)

A scene that hasn't happened. A scene I'm hoping for, fifty years out.

A chair by a window. Light coming in. BLAKE (87) sits with a worn copy of a book in his lap: THE PILGRIM CHRONICLE. Across from him, ODIN (59) and FAE (57), both gray at the temples.

FAE
Read us the part about the six seconds.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 1, the next step (p. 9)

To Blake at Eighty-Seven

The last letter mailed ahead, for 2076.

BLAKE
(gruff, but pleased)
You've heard it a hundred times.

ODIN
Read it anyway.

Blake opens the book. His hands shake a little. He finds the page. He doesn't really need to read it. He knows it.

BLAKE
"Take it one play at a time, and do not even look at the scoreboard. Just one play at a time. Win that or lose, a new play is next."

He closes the book.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
"Give them hell for six seconds, and you can pull the upset."

FAE
(softly)
Did you? Pull the upset?

Blake looks out the window for a long moment.

BLAKE
(beat)
Ask me after the next play.

Odin laughs. Fae laughs. Blake laughs hardest of all.

That's the only answer I can imagine giving at eighty-seven. Ask me after the next play.

Because the truth is, I don't think you ever get to look at the final score. Not in this life. You just keep running plays until the whistle blows for good. And then, I believe, somebody who carried you through every one-set-of-footprints stretch of the beach will show you the film.

I think we will be surprised by how many upsets there were.

Ask me after the next play.

Love, Blake, at thirty-seven, fifty years back, with just enough light for the next step

CONTINUITY REFERENCES
→ Prologue, six seconds (p. 4) → Ch 1, the next step (p. 9)

A Note Added October 25, 2026

A new play, written down on the day it was called.

IN ONE SENTENCE

On October 25, 2026, Blake decided to leave public school teaching after the fall, go to seminary to become a Presbyterian minister, and homeschool Odin and Fae.

NAVIGATION PATH

Ch 45
To Blake at Eighty-Seven → **Note 2026**
A Note Added October 25, 2026 → **Benediction**
A Benediction

This note was added after the rest of the book was put together. It has a date on it, so readers will always know when it happened.

On October 25, 2026, Blake made a big decision.

He decided to leave his job teaching in public school after the fall semester.

He plans to go to seminary. A seminary is a school where people study God's word and learn how to lead a church. Blake wants to become a Presbyterian minister.

He also decided to homeschool Odin and Fae. Homeschool means the kids learn at home, with their dad as their teacher. Odin is 9. Fae is 7.

Readers who want to know more can look back in this book. Chapter 31 tells about the Presbyterian church Blake was helping to dream up in El Campo. Chapter 34 tells about his dream of a small school, a microschool.

This is a new play. The scoreboard is not the point. The next six seconds are.

The family will add the next pages when they happen.

Brick by brick.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 31, many rooms (p. 173) → Ch 34, the small school (p. 190) → Prologue, six seconds (p. 4)

A Benediction

For Odin, for Fae, and for every reader at every age.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Blake gives a blessing to readers of every age, and most of all to Odin and Fae.

NAVIGATION PATH

Note 2026
A Note Added October 25, 2026 → **Benediction**
A Benediction → **Afterword**
How This Book Was Built

Odin and Fae,

We've come a long way together in this book. From the dark roads of Danevang to a quiet room in 2076. From a six-year-old with a headlamp sliding down his nose to an eighty-seven-year-old saying, "Ask me after the next play."

I want to end the way I began, with a letter. But this one is a little different. This one is a blessing.

A benediction is an old word. It comes from Latin, bene and dicere, to speak well, to say a good word over somebody. At the end of a church service, the pastor raises a hand and speaks a blessing over the people before they walk back out into the world. It's a send-off. A good word to carry.

So here's my good word, for you and for anybody who reads this.

For the seven-year-old:

May you always have just enough light for the next step.

May you count your stars, even if you only get to forty-one.

May you hit your drum, loud, and keep coming back to it.

May you wear the goggles.

May you ask "how does it work?" a thousand times.

May somebody you love always say to you, "Come on. You're helping."

For the seventeen-year-old:

May you drive thirty feet, and then thirty more.

May somebody jump into your franchises, all of them, even the random ones.

May you find your Halcyon, and may it play on and on.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the dark road (p. 9) → Ch 45, the last letter (p. 250)

A Benediction

For Odin, for Fae, and for every reader at every age.

May you try on names until you find the ones that fit, and may you know that every one of them is a lens, not a disguise.

May you go to the graduation.

May you know that the scoreboard at seventeen isn't the final score.

For the twenty-seven-year-old:

May you find a floor under the floor when everything falls apart.

May "tomorrow" turn into the next six seconds.

May you be carried through the one-set-of-footprints seasons, and may you know it.

May you say the names out loud.

May you choose life, and keep choosing it, again and again.

May you take six hours when twelve is too many.

May somebody small wave back at you from the sidewalk.

For the thirty-seven-year-old:

May you notice the practice before anger spends it.

May your recovery speed be fast.

May you bring yourself to work, and be loved for it.

May you find your Jacob and your Loreto, and build something with them.

May your barn be full of songs, your ledger be honest, and your kingdom be checked.

May your faith have many rooms.

May you leave it better than you found it.

For the forty-seven-year-old:

May you look at the film, not the score, at halftime.

May your kids leave, and may you know that's the play working.

May you throw out the plays that aren't working and keep running the ones that are.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the dark road (p. 9) → Ch 45, the last letter (p. 250)

A Benediction

For Odin, for Fae, and for every reader at every age.

For the fifty-seven-year-old:

May you be the whistle in the stands.

May you hand over the sticks, and may the ministry get another drummer.

May your pilgrim's bag get lighter as the road gets longer.

For the sixty-seven-year-old:

May your tools go to hands that will take care of them.

May you record your own songs.

May you retire from jobs, but never from purpose.

May you pay forward the couch.

For the seventy-seven-year-old:

May the lantern still be enough.

May you slow down without stopping.

May you do the hard duties with a steady heart.

May you remember the cat on the leash at Home Depot, and laugh.

For the eighty-seven-year-old:

May you be like Nana. Sharp, steady, funny, praying, proud.

May you tell the stories only you remember.

May someone take you out, dressed up, for one drink, and bring you home early.

May you look back at the footprints and know you were carried.

For everyone, at every age:

Take it one play at a time, and don't even look at the scoreboard.

Just one play at a time. Win that or lose, a new play is next.

Give them hell for six seconds, and you can pull the upset.

And when the ride gets rough, hold on for eight, like Papa Everette did.

Brick by brick.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the dark road (p. 9) → Ch 45, the last letter (p. 250)

A Benediction

For Odin, for Fae, and for every reader at every age.

And for my kids.

Odin, my explorer. You were born on Pi Day, and you've been building worlds bigger than anybody expected ever since. I remember a two-year-old on a sidewalk in Victoria waving with his whole body at a big brown truck. I remember a nine-year-old in the passenger seat deciding to upset his math homework. Keep exploring. Keep building. And when you're scared, put on the headlamp. You only need to see the next step.

Fae, my fairy. You came into the world already yourself, and you've never once apologized for it. I remember a seven-year-old in a pink gown with white gloves and rainbow roses, posing for her teachers like a goddess. I remember you laughing at a worried British robot and finally putting on your shoes. Keep shining. Keep singing. Keep making up songs that surprise your dad. And when the world tries to make you smaller, commit to the bit.

You two were never a side story. You were the audience I cared about most. Everything in this book, the falling apart and the putting back together, the faith and the music and the barn and the business and the council and the letters to old men I haven't become yet, all of it was for you.

I don't want you to inherit a myth. I want you to inherit the workshop. It's all here. The pieces, the mess, the revisions, the wrong turns, the laughter, the faith, the rebuilding.

If this book survives me, let it be permission.

Make your own symbols. Tell your own stories. Correct mine when I got something wrong. Add pages. Keep the people more important than the system. Use the tools wisely. Wear the goggles. Go to the graduation. Wave from the truck. Say the names out loud. Pray for the people who come after you.

And when the whole kingdom feels like too much, pick up one brick.

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

Now go run the next play.

I love you more than every word in here put together.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 1, the dark road (p. 9) → Ch 45, the last letter (p. 250)

A Benediction

For Odin, for Fae, and for every reader at every age.

Dad

Afterword: How This Book Was Built

An archivist's note, written in the same spirit as the rest of the Chronicle.

IN ONE SENTENCE

This page tells how the book was made and asks the family to fix mistakes and add new pages.

NAVIGATION PATH

Benediction
A Benediction

→

Afterword
How This Book Was Built

→

Appendix
The Workshop Wall

This book began as a shorter draft called The Pilgrim Chronicle, about five thousand words long, compiled on October 22, 2026, from Blake's preserved memories and recovered conversation history. It was always meant to be a living family record, not a claim to perfect historical completeness.

This expanded edition grew from that draft, from the dated Chronicle entries Blake kept through the fall of 2026, and from facts Blake supplied about his family, his work, and his faith. It was written in chapters, one at a time, brick by brick.

A few things readers should know about how it was put together.

The dialogue scenes are recreations. The screenplay-style scenes throughout the book dramatize real events from Blake's life and family stories. The events are real. The exact words are recreated from memory and family stories, with small bits of connecting dialogue added so the scenes can breathe. Where a scene in Parts V through IX is marked "HOPED FOR," it hasn't happened. It's a hope, written down so that it can someday be checked.

Some people in the scenes are unnamed on purpose. Students, coworkers, a nurse, a UPS manager, a contractor at McCoy's, a teen drummer, a shopper at Home Depot: these are real kinds of people from Blake's life whose names aren't part of the record, or whose privacy matters more than the story.

Some facts are family testimony, not documented history. Where the family telling and the historical record might not line up neatly, the book says so. The clearest example is Hans. The family story says Hans came to escape the Nazis. He came in 1927, and Hitler didn't take power until 1933, so the real reasons may be bigger or different than the story we tell. Both are held here, side by side, labeled for what they are.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Hans (p. 15) → Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261)

Afterword: How This Book Was Built

An archivist's note, written in the same spirit as the rest of the Chronicle.

Some dates are deliberately soft. Blake's father died around 2016. This book doesn't give an exact date, a cause, or an age, because Blake asked that it not, and because a book that will be read for fifty years shouldn't guess about something so important.

Parts V through IX are letters, not history. Everything written to the forty-seven, fifty-seven, sixty-seven, seventy-seven, and eighty-seven-year-old is forward-looking: hope, wisdom, and intention grounded in what Blake values at thirty-seven and in Nana's example at eighty-seven. Odin's college years, Fae's driving lessons, grandchildren, the future of the business and the barn and the microschool, none of these have happened. They're prayers with handwriting.

This is a living document. Future editions can and should incorporate exported chat archives, photographs, recordings, family interviews, school and music artifacts, financial records appropriate for preservation, Nana's testimony, the gaming Chronicles, and corrections from Odin and Fae. The Chronicle is strongest when revision is treated not as failure but as recovered evidence.

When something in here's wrong, print the correction. Add a page. Tell the new story. Don't throw out the book because one brick is crooked.

To whoever carries this next: add a page. Tell the new story. Keep the bridge open.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 2, Hans (p. 15) → Appendix, the Workshop Wall (p. 261)

Appendix: The Workshop Wall

The family operating principles, a working timeline, and words worth carrying.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Here are the family rules, a timeline of Blake's life, and favorite sayings to carry with you.

NAVIGATION PATH

Afterword
How This Book Was Built

→

Appendix
The Workshop Wall

→

Colophon
How this edition was made

The Family Operating Principles

The Tekton. Always leave things better than you found them. Use your tools wisely. Ownership is stewardship.

The Pilgrim. Keep moving through uncertainty. Carry a dusty, imperfect bag. You don't need perfect conditions to continue.

The Fire Watcher. Notice patterns. Guard the horizon without mistaking vigilance for panic.

The Bridge Builder. Listen before fixing. Repair quickly. Stay curious. Connect worlds that don't naturally meet.

The Keeper of the Chess Pieces. Some mess is survivable. Preserve the essential pieces so the game can continue.

The Rune Collector. Scroll: remember. Bridge: connect. Brick: build.

The Forge. Scattered thoughts are ore. Heat, sort, hammer, and shape them into durable plans.

The Kingdom Check. Family, Pieces, Treasury, Vault, Granary, Cistern, Forge, Tools, Ledger, Workshop. Check what you already have before starting another quest.

The Process. Take it one play at a time and DO NOT even LOOK at the scoreboard. Just one play at a time, win that or lose, a new play is next. Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

The Eight-Second Ride. Papa Everette's version of the process: a bull rider holds on for eight seconds, one ride at a time. Six seconds for a play, eight seconds

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 28, the Kingdom Check (p. 158) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

Appendix: The Workshop Wall

The family operating principles, a working timeline, and words worth carrying.

for a bull. Same lesson.

A Working Timeline

1927. Hans, Nana's father, comes to Texas from Denmark. The family story says Hans came to escape the Nazis. He came in 1927, and Hitler didn't take power until 1933, so the real reasons may be bigger or different than the story we tell.

1929. Nana's mother follows, once work and housing are secured.

1938. Papa Everette, Blake's grandfather and Dad's father, is born.

1939. Nana, Ane Marie Smith, Dad's mother and Blake's grandmother, is born. She grows up rural near Danevang, picks cotton as a child, and uses an outhouse.

Before marrying Papa Everette, Nana loses two boyfriends in motorcycle accidents.

After World War II. Wharton County Junior College is built. Papa Everette rides bulls on its rodeo team and earns his associate's degree there.

1959 to 1962. Papa Everette attends Texas A&M. Hip and back injuries end his bull riding. He goes on to teach at WCJC and El Campo High School, and becomes an expert bull rope maker, known for his leather plaits, working for hours with one little tool at the corner of Nana's house. His ropes sell to WCJC and El Campo High students and to buyers across Texas and the United States. Later he becomes a boat mechanic.

As a young woman. Nana begins decades of work for the school district, eventually as a federal programs secretary manager.

1989. Blake Dylan Farthing is born. Named for William Blake and Bob Dylan.

Early 1990s. Papa Everette moves out of Nana's house; Nana begins collecting and keeping things, and the house fills up through Blake's youth.

Summers, late 1990s. Dad works for Papa Everette in the summers. Blake and his sister run loose in Matagorda, then a small town with one tourist shop, the shell shop. Papa takes them to lunch at nice restaurants and gives them dollar bills for the shell shop. Around 1999, at about nine, Blake breaks into vacation campers with other kids and drinks their liquor.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 28, the Kingdom Check (p. 158) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

Appendix: The Workshop Wall

The family operating principles, a working timeline, and words worth carrying.

Childhood. Grows up in the El Campo and Danevang country, in a house built in 1905. Starts drums at about age four. Dad wears a headlamp; so does Blake. Dad rebuilds the bathroom of the 1905 house, and it never sinks. Nana brings home retired school computers.

Around 2001. Discovers "Halcyon On and On" by Orbital, which remains a favorite for about twenty-five years.

2003. The family gets a single-wide trailer. Blake's long-running Hotmail address dates from around this time.

2004. Blake gets the phone number he still has, as a high school sophomore. Dad's stick-shift lesson at fourteen goes badly; Mom teaches him to drive. Hardship license at fifteen; Blake attends El Campo schools as a hardship transfer; the family lives near Danevang, with an address just over the line in Matagorda County.

2004 to 2007. Makes Morrowind mods under the name Ekal, including custom faces and a darker Mournhold; some work is translated into French. Hours of couch co-op Madden and NCAA with Dad: Blake Blake and Cedric Ed.

2007. Graduates from El Campo High School.

2009. Earns associate degree at Wharton County Junior College; skips the ceremony.

College years. Attends St. Mary's University in San Antonio; learns guitar in a tiny dorm room; can't afford to return for senior year. Transfers toward UH-Victoria; switches from political science to history.

Early twenties. Life falls apart: failing classes for about three years, long weeks in bars and restaurants, a struggle with alcohol, depression and too much sleep. Comes to Christian faith around age twenty-one or twenty-two through "Footprints in the Sand."

Around age twenty-three. Loses his friend Jack to an overdose. Also loses friends Chase and Eric.

2014. Returns to school, six hours at a time.

Around 2016. Blake's father dies.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 28, the Kingdom Check (p. 158) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

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The family operating principles, a working timeline, and words worth carrying.

2017. Graduates from UH-Victoria. Odin is born March 14 in Victoria. Works at McCoy's around this time.

Around 2019. Hired on the spot as a UPS driver after driving the truck around Victoria in interview clothes. Odin, about two, remembers Dad waving from the truck.

June 14, 2019. Faeryn (Fae) is born in Victoria. Blake and the children's mother separate before Fae turns one; they co-parent, week on and week off.

Late 2010s onward. Becomes a teacher; eight years of teaching by 2026, especially emergent bilingual students. Coaches a seventh grade B team to an 8-0 season.

Around 2022 to 2026. Part of Texana Fellowship, playing drums in the praise band.

September 2026. Mentors a fifteen-year-old drummer: "The ministry just got another drummer." Financial stress leads to a consolidation plan, budgeting, and the Bank of Farthing ledger. The castle's first-stone budget is set at one hundred dollars.

October 2026. The council of AI assistants takes shape: Orders, Not Bots; Casa O'Faydin; mission Agape. Farthing, Garcia & Sons General Contracting forms with Jacob and Loreto. The barn arrives at Nana's. October 4: drums and harmonica at Texana, notes on Daniel, a conversation with Aisha in Edna. October 8: Fae as Aphrodite. October 10: road trip to Victoria; Grey at Home Depot. October 13 to 16: painting the front of Nana's house, the company's first showcase job.

October 22, 2026. This expanded memoir is assembled for Odin, Fae, and future generations.

Words Worth Carrying

Brick by brick.

Hold on for eight seconds. Then hold on for the next eight.

Over. Under. Pull tight. One plait at a time.

The bad play and the good play take the same six seconds.

Hard things get passed down until somebody decides to stop passing them.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 28, the Kingdom Check (p. 158) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

Appendix: The Workshop Wall

The family operating principles, a working timeline, and words worth carrying.

A book is always waiting on the shelf.

Just enough light for the next step.

Anything can be used for anything.

Do it right, you do it once.

Wear the goggles. Every time.

Thirty feet is driving.

Show up inside the thing your kid loves.

Go to the graduation.

Monday too.

The opposite of tomorrow is the next six seconds.

Never meet a stranger.

A name said out loud is a scroll.

I would rather be alive at eighty-seven than legendary at twenty-seven.

Wave from the truck. They remember.

They're only little once.

You aren't trying to impress them. You're sharing the things that actually matter to you.

Try it. Check it. Move on. Try again.

Use your tools wisely.

Give them hell for six seconds and you can pull the upset.

We ALWAYS leave it better than we found it.

Safety first, structure second, beauty third.

Remember. Connect. Build.

Can I afford it?

Commit to the bit.

The ministry just got another drummer.

Build bridges, not fires.

CONTINUITY REFERENCES

→ Ch 28, the Kingdom Check (p. 158) → Ch 25, Eight and Oh (p. 141)

Appendix: The Workshop Wall

The family operating principles, a working timeline, and words worth carrying.

Ask me after the next play.

Colophon

How the Full Edition was made

BLAKE'S MOTTO

My Kids are ONLY little ONCE!

These are the GOOD OLD DAYS NOW!

FOUNDING PURPOSE

PURPOSE:

Share the love of God.

METHOD:

Education and learning.

LEGACY:

Love God. Love people. Teach. Learn. Build. Pass it on.

THE FOUNDATION STONE

My purpose is to share the love of God through education and learning.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

- **Title.** The Pilgrim Chronicle, Full Edition. Cover and title page: Fae's drawing.
- **Author.** Blake Dylan Farthing, El Campo, Texas, 2026.
- **Text.** The Letter, the Prologue, and Chapters 1 to 3 follow the Copilot redo word for word. The rest comes from the Expanded Edition, in the same plain voice. A dated note from October 25, 2026 was added.
- **Design.** The DynamisBlake way, like the Brick 001 Archive Charter: header bands, one-sentence boxes, navigation paths, and continuity footers.
- **Type.** Large, clear Liberation Sans. Courier Prime for the movie-script scenes.
- **Living document.** Corrections and new pages are welcome, especially from Odin and Fae.

DYNAMIS BLAKE
DESIGNS

Book design by Dynamis Blake Designs