



1

THE WRONG FAMILY

I was always a fearful child. Not of ghosts or the dark or monsters under the bed, but that people would reject me. Or to be more precise, that they would reject me and my family. In my head, there were strict guidelines that indicated whether your family was acceptable or not. I had a tick list that went something like this. Parents still together – tick. Siblings all have the same father – tick. Stay-at-home mother – tick. Father in full-time employment – tick. Financially secure – tick. A fridge full of food – tick. On this

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imaginary list, my family barely ticked any of the boxes at all. But every day I went to school and pretended that I came from an ordinary family like everyone else. Until one day – at a Christian youth camp of all places – I was found out.

The camp was organised by the Christian Union at my high school and for the entire time it poured with rain. Not just a sprinkling of rain, but torrential downpours. If my memory serves me correctly, there was very little in the way of teaching or fun activities. Most of the time, us campers were left to entertain ourselves. I was incredibly shy at the age of thirteen and did not know anyone else at the camp, so I remember feeling rather lost and eager for the whole thing to come to an end.

There is one afternoon, though, that I have never forgotten. A group of us were sitting in the mess tent. The rain outside was relentless, and we were bored to tears. This was shown by the fact that there were long, awkward pauses in our conversation. Then suddenly, a girl piped up with a piece of gossip that she was sure would get us talking.

‘Have you heard,’ she began in an animated

voice, 'that the son of the vicar at St John's Church is dating an *older woman*? And she has two kids from previous relationships. The vicar's wife is *furious* about it!'

The girl continued gossiping, but I could no longer hear what she was saying. All I could hear was the pounding of my heart.

That was *my family* she was gossiping about! That '*older woman*' was my mother. *Those kids* were my brother and me.

Something welled up inside me. Before I could take control of myself, I blurted my thoughts out loud. 'That's *my family* you are talking about!' I bellowed.

Everyone fell silent and looked in my direction. I could feel my cheeks burning and my hands trembling. Inwardly, I berated myself for not keeping my stupid mouth shut.

Dating an older woman, who already has kids, may not seem like a big deal today, but it was back in the 1980s. Divorce, living together or having kids before marriage – they were all taboo subjects back then. We sat in a hush for what seemed like an eternity – although, to be fair, it was probably just a few seconds.

It was the gossiping girl who eventually broke the silence. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘I wouldn’t have said anything if I knew it was you.’ The poor girl was just as mortified by the whole thing as I was.

I remember little else from that camp. Only the humiliation of that moment. At the tender age of thirteen, what people say about you can be very hurtful and make lasting impressions. I returned home convinced of one thing – no matter how much I *wanted* to be a Christian, I could never truly be one. ‘I come from the wrong sort of family,’ I told myself. ‘Families like mine aren’t good enough to be Christians.’

Looking back, I can now see that this somewhat rocky childhood of mine was a fitting prelude to the years God had planned for me overseas. Coming from the ‘wrong sort of family’ was perfect preparation for the people group God would one day have me serve. God had a plan to use my background in ways I could never have imagined. As for my mother, she would one day learn to love and serve God in remarkable ways and in unexpected places too.



2

EMPTINESS

Surprisingly, despite that miserable camp experience, I still found myself drawn to the Christian girls at school. They seemed comfortable in their own skin, like they knew who they were and were even *content* with who they were. This was appealing to me and I especially enjoyed listening to them talk about their faith. I wanted to hang out with them, and kindly they let me.

Then my years at high school came to an end and I found myself at a university in Birmingham studying visual arts. I was a long way from home and desperate to make new

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friends. As I was used to having Christian friends, I tried going to the Christian Union in the hope I might make some friends there, but I could not see any recognisable faces. It was hard going to these events alone with no-one to sit with and no-one to talk to. Even at the age of nineteen, I could still be painfully shy at times. I gave up and instead began to socialise with the people I already knew – the people on my course and those living in the same dormitory.

With *this* group of friends, every evening was the same – a couple of beers at the campus bar, then a few more at some dingy nightclub, and then a packet of fish and chips on the way home. Blindly, we all followed the same ‘narrative’. A narrative that said, ‘Now is the time to live wildly. Don’t hold back. Go on, indulge yourself!’ And so we did. We got drunk, fooled around with the opposite sex, woke up with hangovers and missed most of our classes. But who cared – we were having fun, *right?* Yes! At first, it was fun. However, as the years rolled on, it became increasingly clear to me that this ‘narrative’ we had all been wooed by was a false one. I felt starved of meaningful conversations, of purpose

and of value. Living for *myself*, for the *moment*, quickly became not the highest point of my life, but one of the lowest and loneliest.

By the end of my third year, I was becoming increasingly restless. I remember one afternoon when a bunch of us sat chatting at the ‘boys’ house’. One of the photography students began showing us a new book he had purchased. The photos in it were supposed to be ‘artistic’, but in all truth, they were depraved and pornographic. I knew that if I looked too closely, those repulsive images would be stuck in my mind, so I went to sit on the other side of the room. They noticed I had moved and called me a prude. They thought it was funny to find the vilest images and then shove the book in front of my face. I tried shutting my eyes, but every time I opened them again, the pages were still there in front of me. Everyone fell about laughing.

I am sure they meant no harm by it. But for me, that afternoon was a pivotal moment. In an instant, my mind flashed back to something I once overheard my friend’s dad say: “The Bible tells us to choose our friends wisely. And, of course, the reason God tells us to choose our

friends wisely is because we become like them' (1 Corinthians 15:33). I looked at the people around me and asked myself, 'Do I *really* want to become someone who thinks it is funny to look at depraved images?'

As my three years at university ended, I had mixed feelings. Yes, some good memories had been made. Yes, I cared about the people I had met and the girls I had lived with. But ultimately, it had been an empty existence. I envied my old school friends, whose university experience had been very different to mine. They had got involved with a church and had blossomed. I had gone wild and had ... shrivelled. I was ready to put my student years behind me and start afresh. But what did 'start afresh' mean? If I was not going to live to satisfy my own fleshly cravings, who or what was I going to live for? And what was the point of life anyway? At the time, I honestly had no idea!