

Hattie's Advocate

Adopting a Family Through Foster Care

Matthew W. Hoffman

and

Krista Hoffman, L.C.P.C.



Praise for Matthew W. Hoffman
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Krista Hoffman, L.C.P.C

"Hattie's Advocate details the art of foster parenting. Many caveats wrapped into this easy-to-read storyline. An excellent resource for parents and professionals. Bravo!

-Rajendra Lowtan, M.D., Director of Committed to Change

"A beautiful story and firsthand account of the trials and tribulations of foster care and adoption. It is an inspirational read told with humor and heart. A must read... especially for anyone considering foster care or adoption."

- Harlee B. Levy, Attorney at Law

"This book is a good read and an outstanding guide for new and veteran foster parents. It is also an excellent resource book for understanding the multifaceted world of foster care."

- Wanda Soares Nottingham, UMBC Africana Studies Support Staff, Foster and Adoptive Parent

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Disclaimer

This book describes the author's experience with the American foster care system. It is an autobiographical work of fiction, and with the exception of the author's immediate family members, only fictitious characters fill roles throughout the story. The characters do not portray any particular person in real life, living or dead. Additionally, aliases protect the privacy of the author's immediate family as well as the privacy of anyone associated with the author's immediate family.

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Matthew W. Hoffman

and

Krista Hoffman, L.C.P.C.

In memory of

Evelyn Marie Grahl

&

Myrtle Watson

*They taught us an unforgettable brand of
no-nonsense love*

Hedwig Elisabeth Hoffman

Thanks for the "Going Away" Party

Grandy Lewandowski

Thanks for the foster furniture

*Finally, I dedicate this work to my entire family,
and to every child experiencing foster care*

About the Authors

Matthew and Krista Hoffman were licensed foster parents in the Baltimore/Washington area who specialized in therapeutic care for nearly a decade.

Matthew graduated with a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and spent time working in special education classrooms and healthcare.

Krista graduated with a M.A. in Clinical Psychology from Loyola University, is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, LCPC, and a Parenting Coordinator for the Howard County Circuit Court. Krista began her career in psychology at University of Maryland Medical Center's Division of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, and now works in private practice. She has mentored children through The Choice program at UMBC and has taught English and Psychology at Mount De Sales Academy.

Together Matthew and Krista have achieved their greatest accomplishment, nurturing several foster children in a therapeutic and loving environment.

Preface

From The Authors - Sharing Good Fortune

In one form or another, foster care has been around since the beginning of humanity, and is a function of society that touches the lives of countless individuals. Over the years, my wife and I have had the opportunity to foster parent a number of abandoned children in the Baltimore/Washington area. Through fate, we have learned the intricacies of the foster care process, which includes parental licensing, child transitioning, and aging out.

Foster care contains a complete lifecycle of advocacy that is a unique experience for each child and family involved. The foster children themselves, the birth children of foster families, and the extended families, all play important roles in the foster care process. Politicians, lawyers, social workers, teachers, and medical providers are involved in the process as well. As foster children experience our governmental system of regulated childcare, every member of society finds themselves directly or indirectly affected.

I, as well as those who know me, never imagined the unlikely chain of events that would lead me to an involvement with foster care. After fumbling through adolescence, I wound up subconsciously drawn towards sociology. Later, I found myself married to a psychologist and eventually became the impromptu father to numerous foster children. Ten years later, I ended up writing this book. My unintentional connection with foster care has become a part of my identity. Now foster care has become my true area of expertise.

– Matt

The children we have encountered have suffered from every form of misfortune and their stories have inspired our family. They are often subject to the results of luck, fate, and coincidence. Many unexplained moments occur throughout life and foster children have experienced their fair share. Sometimes these chance happenings are good and sometimes they are not. Creating good luck, facilitating a timely coincidence, or being the pivotal moment of redirection became our joint vocation. It is our hope that by sharing our foster care experience, others may find the motivation to assist these discarded children.

Acknowledgements

Without the experiences I absorbed from the individuality of my children, this book would not exist. I would like to thank each one of my kids for inspiring this piece of work. My family and friends stepped up to support my writing efforts with words of encouragement and with editing help. I offer a special thanks to my wife Krista, my mother Beverly, and my friend Bob Ferraraccio for proofreading and feedback. Thanks to Demarche Publishing for taking an interest in Hattie's Advocate and thanks to my father for his insight into patience. The schools, the medical professionals, the social workers, and our non-profit foster care agency played a pivotal role in my family experience. I send a sincere thanks to the teachers and faculty members of Howard and Baltimore County Schools; the pediatricians, therapists, and psychiatrists; especially the devoted and overworked social service staffs of our non-profit foster care agency, Baltimore County Department of Social Services, Baltimore City Department of Social Services, and Child Protective Services. Individuals in these organizations make decisions that affect the abandoned, neglected, and abused children of Baltimore. They carry the stories of success and failure for the rest of their lives. I would like to thank the collective grandmothers of Baltimore City, and beyond. As foster parents, kinship parents, and as concerned neighbors, you care for the lost children. You are an example to society that one person can adopt the responsibilities of another and make a difference. Thanks to all of the kindhearted and hardworking parents of foster care... may each child in your home find peace under your dedicated guidance. Finally, thank you Grandma Hattie, for who knows what you truly endured.

Part I – Getting To Know The System

Chapter 1

Once An Orphan

Hans called back over his shoulder, "Come on Hattie... hurry up!" then pushed forward through the moving herd of passengers. He and his wife Becky gripped hands tightly as they finagled their way onto the loading plank of a large grey ship. Bold black lettering on the side of the hull read, *S.S. George Washington*. "Keep up with us girl!" Hans called back again.

Following behind was a young lady named Hattie who had been placed under his care for the duration of their journey. Hattie could barely hear the calls of her temporary guardian over the clamoring sounds of the busy shipping port.

Today was nothing like the usual weekday back in Hattie's quiet Munich orphanage. Cautiously, she replied, "Coming." Before today, she had never boarded such a gigantic vessel. Previously, her only time spent on water had been a short boat ride along the Isar River with her father. Now the memories of past family outings seemed like dreams from long ago.

Even the smell of the river seemed foreign. Unlike the Isar River in Munich, the winds blowing on the Weser River emitted an odor of salt mixed with exhaust. The dreams from long ago were vanishing, displaced by a nightmare.

Hattie, the onetime child of a wealthy family, found herself sold down the Weser River. A day earlier, her father retrieved her from the local orphanage and placed her on a train, headed for Bremen. Without her knowledge, he decided her future over dinner the prior night and she was now bound for some place called Cincinnati, Ohio. The fourteen-year-old, now placed in the custody of two strangers, was traveling to a new world.

With only the clothes on her back and a black satchel of extras, she hustled onto the deck of the ship. She was functioning in a state of shock and felt numb to the commotion around her. Hans called out again, "Just keep up with us and don't lose track!"

He and Becky continued across the deck and moved towards the rear of the ship. Hattie kept shuffling along with the sea of immigrants that poured onto the surface of the vessel like bees buzzing through a hive. She kept sight of her travel companions as they veered left and headed down into a stairwell. Trying to keep up, she held firmly to the railing of the stairs and worked her thin, short frame through the masses.

The couple ahead reached the second level, two floors down, and moved forward along a grey corridor. They eventually turned right, into an available cabin along the hall. Shortly thereafter, Hattie reached the cabin and lumbered in with a family of travelers. Hans took Hattie's small black bag and stored it above the seats alongside his own luggage.

Hans spoke up, "Now that we have our spot reserved let's head to the main platform and say goodbye to the homeland."

"Yes dear," replied Becky.

Hans continued, "Hattie, are you going to join us?"

Nervously, she replied in a soft voice, "Yes sir." The girl was overwhelmed with all that was happening around her. Forlorn and confused, she followed closely.

Hans exclaimed, "Cheer up girl. We are heading to America... and on the German built ship that once delivered President Wilson to the shores of France. You should feel privileged." Hattie did not think she had much to feel privileged about... or much pride in her country. She felt abandoned by her father, orphaned by her country, and now, was being sent to work as an indentured servant in a foreign land. Hans led the trio with Hattie following the couple up the stairs and into a corridor towards the deck of the ship. Meanwhile, other passengers were settling into every available space along the dim hallway.

The three worked their way through the travelers and onto the outside deck until they found a tight spot along a small section of railing. Although Hattie stood surrounded by what should have been the warmth of the pressing crowd, she never felt colder or more alone. Just like the last six years of her life, she wanted to forget the dark skies of the Bremen docks. Like a tattered orphanage dress, she felt neglected, discarded, and simply donated.

A young man of seventeen stood next to Hattie, making room for her as she settled in along the railing of the ship. The lad was wearing a faded overcoat and a beaten driver's cap. He turned to her and passionately exclaimed, "I can't wait to get to America!" Hattie offered a hollow smile. She was not as excited about embarking upon this ten-day journey across the Atlantic Ocean. Her future was uncertain and she did not know what to expect upon arrival. The young man glanced over towards the young couple standing beyond Hattie and continued, "I'm Julius Rieter from Berlin. Are those your parents?"

Guarded, the frail girl stiffened, "No, I no longer have parents... and people call me Hattie."

"Well Hattie, what are your plans for America?"

Solemnly she replied, "I'm traveling with a couple on my way to Cincinnati... to work as a servant."

"What a coincidence! I am heading for Cincinnati to be a servant as well. What are the chances?" He smiled with the confidence of a young man embarking on a great adventure, "Perhaps we'll meet up in the city once we're both residents? I have family in Cincinnati, and since I have lost my family here, I have decided to search for my relatives in America. Are you another orphan?"

The shame of her father's abandonment brought tears to her eyes as she stared at the stains on her dress. "My father still lives in Munich... but he is starting a new family... and... it wasn't my place to remain."

"Sorry to hear that, but don't you worry, you aren't the only one in that situation. I have already met a few others in the same boat. No pun intended. Well, once we get moving and the decks clear I will introduce you to some of them including Johann, Rosa, Katharina, and Peter. This ship is full of similar stories."

The bellowing shouts of dockworkers drowned out the last of the young man's comments. As she turned to respond, the ship lurched left nudging away from the dock. The *S.S. George Washington*, free now from its moorings, moved towards the vastness of the Weser River. With nothing more than a small bag of clothing, Hattie was about to transition to her next placement in Ellis Island, New York.

In 1909, a little girl named Hedwig "Hattie" Elisabeth Weiss was born in the outskirts of Munich, Germany. Her young mother cared for her along with two other siblings, a brother and a sister. Their father Phillip worked long days as a furrier processing the pelts of animals that were delivered for manufacturing from varying outposts. Hard work and long hours were necessary to support a healthy lifestyle and family of five. Their mother helped with the business and taught the children proper etiquette along with the lessons of an occasional read. It was a good life for a young girl in the early 1900's. Life revolved around learning and growing while the family patriarch operated the family business. Life would not remain as simple and as carefree.

In the summer of 1914, a Serbian Nationalist assassinated the heir apparent to the Austria-Hungary throne and the German leader Kaiser William II declared unmitigated support for Austria. Several countries declared war against one another, eventually taking sides. This ignited the first Great War. At the age of five, the little girl named Hattie watched as troops wearing silver helmets amassed and marched through the city of Munich, but the soldiers of WWI were only one fragment of her impending nightmare. After three years of war, a more ominous agent of death had penetrated the safely protected borders of southern Germany. Death overtook the Western and Eastern fronts of war in the form of the Spanish Flu. It attacked the innocent and warmonger alike. This new plague would alter Hattie's destiny forever.

In 1918, Hattie watched as her mother, brother, and sister fell ill to the devastating pandemic crippling the world. With little she could do to help her dying family, she stood at their bedside. At the age of eight, she saw her siblings and mother pass into the dark shadow of death. Her father Phillip fell into a deep depression but continued his work as a furrier to support himself and his daughter.

After the end of the war and another year of mourning, Phillip met a woman and remarried. Ready to forget his past and start anew, he placed his only surviving daughter into an orphanage at the request of his new bride. Hattie would never forgive him. The young girl, not orphaned by negligence or abuse, was abandoned due to her father's weakness and the will of her new stepmother. Hattie spent the start of her teenage years within the confines of an overcrowded orphanage.

This orphanage in the main town of Munich was a better alternative than living on the streets of post World War I Europe, but it did not compare to the comforts of her youth. Fortunately, the orphan school and boarding house, supported by the Protestant Church, received mandated contributions through government taxation. The orphanage secured the welfare funding provided by a collective society so that children would receive clothing, food, and shelter. It operated like a village school with basic education and the functions of boarding. At the time, many children in Europe were dying of starvation and an orphanage was often the best option. Their state and church run facilities were the predecessors to our modern day Department of Social Services.

Still, Hattie's father searched to find a better option for his teenage daughter. Phillip managed to contact a sister named Ida who had immigrated to an American city called Cincinnati. The two designed a plan. As an indentured servant, Hattie would live and work for Aunt Ida. In a modern context, Aunt Ida was the designated kinship parent in exchange for promissory servitude. At the age of fourteen, Hattie transitioned from the Munich orphanage and began her journey to America. Phillip arranged for Hattie to travel to America with a local couple named Becky and Hans Olengarthy. They would oversee Hattie to New York. After the day Phillip placed his only daughter on a train for the port city of Bremen, they never spoke again.

On August 31, 1924, Hattie arrived at Ellis Island and logged into immigration as Elisabeth Weiss. Released from immigration on September 28, 1924, she was ready to begin her new life in America, free from abandonment and the orphanages of Munich. On the day of her release from quarantine, she informed the records clerk that the date of her birthday was the same day that she arrived in America. After several train rides to Cincinnati, she began her new life working as an indentured servant for her aunt. Eventually she found herself caught up with a wry sailor named William F. Hoffman, where her story continued until her death in 1988.

Hattie's story is my history.

I... as are so many others... am the American descendant of an orphan.

Chapter 2

I Can See Daniel Waving Goodbye

It was spring 2001 and she caught me in a good mood. The trees were blossoming with thick green leaves and the chill of winter had departed. I was almost thirty and overly optimistic. In other words, I was ripe for the picking. Krista appeared through the doors of the hospital lobby, walked over, and climbed into my car. She strapped on her seatbelt and turned down the volume of my radio. Immediately I thought, *What did I do now?* She looked over, sat up in her seat, and prepared herself to ask a question. Then she turned and spoke, "Do you remember my friend Desmond from work?"

I had met a number of her co-workers at a recent work party over the holidays, and I did remember Desmond. He was a likable fellow, friendly, tall, and burly. The guy reminded me of a football lineman that never played ball on account of his oversensitivity. He is the kind of man even Mr. T would just want to hug. I paused for a moment to think, *As long as neither Desmond, nor Mr. T wanted a hug from me, this conversation was going in a safe direction.*

"Sure I remember him. Nice guy."

"He has a second job working for a foster care agency. He thinks I would be a great candidate for foster parenting."

Once again, I paused for a moment... then asked, "What did he *think* about me?"

"He didn't mention you."

I would not have expected him to. My new wife Krista had recently begun working in a child psych unit at The University of Maryland Hospital. I had met her co-worker Desmond only once. He had worked alongside my wife while she accumulated the hours needed for a license in psychology. Their job included clinically treating children identified by the Department of Social Services as "in need of psychological services." In my mind, all children were in need of psychological services.

Many of the children on the hospital unit were foster kids gathered from the streets of Baltimore City. They had stories involving every form of abuse, neglect, and treachery possible. I had heard many of the stories more frequently than I would have liked. One particular boy named Daniel stood apart from the rest. In Krista's mind, he had reached a pedestal worthy of an angel. She regularly updated me on Daniel, the boy referred to as "the sweetest kid on the unit." All of the nurses and attending staff adored this kid as well.

I first noticed my wife's interest in the boy as the song *Daniel* continually played on the stereo of my car. The old song by Elton John was good, but not that good. Lately, whenever it was Krista's turn to select the music, she chose *Daniel*. The good news was that Elton John's *Greatest Hits* demoted her usual playlist of torturous Broadway musicals. I was thankful for that. Daniel had saved me from the musical rifts of *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon* so I owed the kid a favor.

"What do you think?" she continued.

I turned off the CD; then answered, "I think I'm tired of listening to that song." I knew where this conversation was going, and knew that it would end with my Terms of Surrender, so I nonchalantly replied, "Sure Why not? Can I change the music now?" I was overdue for some mind numbing techno sounds and needed a thumping vibe to wash away the sandy grains of this conversation.

She repeated my comment with a look of confusion, "Sure why not?"

I continued, "Yea... sure. Why not? You are talking about foster parenting... right? That *is* what you are suggesting? Well... what does it entail?"

She stared at me in a state of shock. My simple and non-combative reply threw her off balance. My wife had climbed into the car prepared for a good old-fashioned verbal beat down, and rightfully so. The fact is I would argue for hours over simple things like hanging curtains in the living room, but this time I gave no resistance to the idea of inviting a stranger into our house.

My Y chromosome had taken complete control of my thought process. Having the ability to make quick decisions is the best thing about having “The Y.” Amazingly, this single strand of protein molecules can completely stump a female in an argument. Decisions, big or small, usually come easily due to the Y.

Lacking the Y chromosome, my wife uses an entirely different decision making process than I do. Hers, based upon a double X chromosome configuration, often requires lengthy discussions using the word “feelings.” I avoid these things called feelings, meant to weigh the pros and cons of every conceivable scenario for every possible decision.

Logically speaking, the decision to become a foster parent was simple in comparison to hanging curtains. First, I knew that I could not tolerate curtains. They block light, cost money, etcetera... but I also knew that I liked kids. What harm could they do? For me the decision to foster parent was like a decision to buy Girl Scout cookies. There really was no decision to make. Cookies taste good and purchasing them helps a good cause, and more importantly, cookies taste good. In comparison, kids are pleasant and fun... and taking in a couple of kids helps a good cause, and more importantly... kids are pleasant and fun. Obviously, I had never been a parent.

To quote my wife quoting me, I declare the following: “*I am smarter than you will ever know.*” That is the wonderful thing about having a Y chromosome. It gives me that male chauvinistic, lack of reality trait that emits, “I know *everything* and I don’t have to ask ‘Why?’” Y is hardcoded into my DNA so why waste time thinking about why. I will use my brain cells for better things like video games and six-packs of light beer. In fact, before I had kids I do not think I ever thought too much about anything. I pictured my part in foster parenting similar to my role in our wedding. I would show up, smile a bit, and get it over.

As if referring to an upcoming church picnic, I turned to my wife and said, “Just find out the details and get back to me.”

She cautiously replied, “Uhhh, okay.” I reached down, ejected the CD, and handed *Daniel* over to my wife. I did not realize that choosing the next CD was actually the beginning of my parenting experience and ten years of wrestling with bureaucracy. Mindlessly, I had agreed to enter into the world of Baltimore City Foster Care. *Foster parenting... that sounds like a piece of cake.* As some coins vibrated in the ashtray of my car, my mind drifted off towards some other random topic. That was the last thought I had pertaining to whatever my wife was saying. Little did I know that thanks to some guy named Desmond, our life was about to change direction... drastically. Blindly, we moved forward, not realizing that a hidden world of child abuse, neglect, corruption, and abandonment was just around the corner.

Desmond was right about one thing: My wife was a perfect candidate for foster care. She was a young psychologist already specializing in the needs of disadvantaged children, and she had always taken an interest in less fortunate kids. In college, she had volunteered for the Big Sister program as a role model and as mentor for the kids of Baltimore City. I remember meeting one family back when we were still dating. Krista and I took the kids out for a day at the park and then returned them to their home on the crime-ridden streets of northeast Baltimore. I did not even want to unlock the car as the children casually strolled from my vehicle back to their dilapidated row home. Many of the neighborhood houses did not appear inhabited and had windows covered with boards.

I soon realized that Krista also enjoyed volunteering my time to the people of the inner city. One time she selected me for the job description, downtown deliveryman. In order to assist the hospital food fundraiser, my job was to transport the contents of a Thanksgiving food collection to a designated family in need. The family was located somewhere on North Avenue, just beyond Martin Luther King Boulevard – otherwise known as the MLK.

What Krista did not understand is that I had already signed a contract with the devil, and the upcoming Thanksgiving Day mission was in clear violation of that agreement. Following through with this particular philanthropy was surely a conflict of interest, which would guarantee a lack of success. I knew better than to attempt any good deed on my own, but still I followed through with Krista’s instructions and moved forward with the plan. That time the Under-Lord

punished me with a broken down truck. New and in excellent condition, my Chevy Silverado decided to die alongside the MLK and a squashed sewer rat. The mechanic never did figure out what went wrong with the truck.

I remember the evening well. Standing there stranded with Camden Yards at my back, I stared up at the Bromo Seltzer tower and checked the time. It was time to phone a friend. After several attempts at phoning for help, I managed to reach my goodhearted cousin, Ronny. He lived just outside of the city and fortunately owned a truck. The forty-year-old biker's life centered on work, a Harley Davidson, and a two hundred pound rottweiler named Sheeba. He came to my rescue and thankfully left Sheeba behind. With Ronny's help, we moved the food from the back of my truck to the bed of his and we picked up Krista at the nearby hospital.

My wife led us towards a rundown section of North Avenue to deliver the bounty of food and Thanksgiving supplies. Deep in the alleyways of the inner city, we found the location of our family in need. An elderly grandmother slowly peeled back the door of a dimly lit row house and welcomed us into her home. The woman appeared to be in poor health and somewhere near the age of seventy. I thought to myself, *How does this woman take care of herself, much less a handful of kids?*

A little boy stood at her waist blocking the entranceway until the voice of a teenage girl prompted him to clear out, "Come on D. Get out of the way! These people have food to bring in." Then the little boy scampered off, disappearing into a collection of kids that had formed in the living room.

The teenage girl stepped outside without another word and helped us carry the groceries into the kitchen. It was obvious that she was no stranger to carrying heavy items as she moved with the grace of a parcel pickup boy turned ballerina. We worked together moving the bags into the kitchen until the job was completed. After everything had been unloaded, my cousin elected to stand outside and wait by his truck. I followed the ballerina into the house and stopped near Krista as she talked to the elderly grandmother now sitting in the living room. The woman offered us a seat on the couch, but we graciously declined. Just then, several more children came downstairs to join the woman on the sofa.

I looked around the room and noticed that there were clusters of roaches nestled comfortably on the wall. They sat a short distance from the sole source of heat, a table lamp resting at the end of the sofa. It was as if the roaches were at ease, relaxed, and waiting for grandma to put in a movie. I considered introducing myself. The bugs held tight to the wall, perched around the couch, seemingly oblivious to the fact they could potentially die from the blow of a swift shoe. They were fearless little buggers that clung to the shadows like bloodthirsty vampires. Heaven help us if the light should falter; they looked ready to pounce and attack.

It was winter and the house did not appear to have heat. Yet the cold temperature of the place had not been a deterrent to the roaches. After the grandmother apologized for the infestation I retorted, "What, those? If you think those are bad you should've seen my place before Krista moved in... now those were some big roaches." She did not realize I was referring to my old collection of roommates.

We stayed for a bit as she and my wife continued their chitchat. Krista gave the woman words of encouragement and bantered with the grandchildren as I kept my distance from the kids and roaches alike. As the children searched through the bags of groceries, we bid them farewell. This was my first exposure to life in foster care. Many of the grandmother's kids were there under the kinship placement designated by the Baltimore Foster Care system.

As we pulled away, I looked into the rearview mirror. The children stood watching our truck until we turned left at the corner. They wore expressions of joy, mixed with longing and uncertainty. For the first time in my life, I understood my wife's desire for philanthropy. For the first time in my life, I could see Daniel waving goodbye. As Ronnie reached for the dial of the radio, I asked him a question. "Hey, do you happen to have any Elton John?"

I did not have much knowledge on the subject of foster care and like many an endeavor, I was jumping in feet first with my eyes wide shut. A week after our conversation in the car, my wife brought home some information and a potential start date for our initial forty hours of training. I

had recently switched to working nights and was just happy not to have to use all of my vacation on Krista's latest side project. I pictured this foster care adventure as lasting about as long as her last hobby, "The Juiceman."

The salesperson who successfully threw a pitch to my wife was an old man jumping around in an infomercial. A white-haired senior citizen wired on energy drinks convinced my wife that she should join him and his fluffy eyebrows on a quest to *juice!* A hundred dollars later Krista was juicing away as if she was in her own commercial. I walked into the door from work and she greeted me with a glass of her freshly squeezed juice. "Here, try this!" she exclaimed.

I took a sip and answered, "Ummm yummy." It was difficult to fight back the sarcasm in my tone. It tasted like she had just juiced my old shoe and the whole house smelled like rotten food. I could hear the dogs barking in the backyard. As I stepped in the kitchen to look for the remnants of my old Reeboks, I saw a pile of fruit pulp lying on the countertop.

Krista exclaimed, "This stuff is so good. I have never felt healthier, or had more energy! You've got to start juicing with me!" She spoke with the mania of an auctioneer.

If I did not know better, I would have thought the inside of the juicer came shipped coated with methamphetamine. In less than a month, she had already squeezed about half an orchard. The juice kept coming and the squished remnants of carrots, apples, and tomatoes piled up in my backyard. The dogs did not know what to think of it. She even tried feeding some of the pulp to them. "It will make their coats shine," she proclaimed. She continued to dump fresh pulp into the dog bowls, but our two Border Collies were not enthused about Krista's new endeavor and refused to partake of the fruit and vegetable leftovers.

My wife was on a juicing kick and pumped up like the old man on the television commercial. Then one day, it simply ended.

I came home from work and the juicer was sitting abandoned on the kitchen counter. A week later, I packed it up, and put it away. In just one month, the juicer fell silent, like the old man after his amphetamines wore off. I wondered, *Was I ever going to have to pack up a kid and store him above the microwave?*

Chapter 3

The Pursuit Of Maturity

It all started in January 2000, when the changes in my life were literally the changes of a new millennium. Feeling somewhat like a displaced foster child, I was an immature newlywed, still learning the ropes of marital sharing. My wife and I were married in the late fall of 1999 and our wedding ushered out my old roommates while ushering in my new matrimonial one. I had spent the previous six years living in the southwest suburbs of Baltimore County in a bachelor pad that I had furnished. Now, the pool hall atmosphere had vanished along with my past roommates and the smell of their musky colognes. Everything was different from what it was before. Although my house transformed from forest green to flowing pink, I was still green.

A year earlier, my father and I had performed maintenance throughout the interior of my home. Pre-marital changes included electrical, plumbing, and other physical upgrades to the structure that was once a former slave quarters. The building sat behind an original farmhouse that was once a part of Lord Baltimore's domain. My father could never have imagined the future changes for which he helped prepare. Unaware of what was to come we burned the midnight oil working to complete several construction projects on the home all at once.

My father appeared to enjoy the time we spent together; at least he relished the opportunity to convey his stockpile of knowledge. Interspersed with little home-improvement techniques, he often tossed snowballs of advice in my direction. Hidden within the opinionated snowballs were my father's rocks of wisdom like, "*Make sure you attach that electrical outlet to the ground wire, otherwise you might kill some little son-of-a-bitch!*" Much of what he said seemed