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Big Words, Little Essays

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On the Way to California

Lake Charles: Sitting on boxes my Mom packed earlier in the week, I felt strangely lost and confused. Unusual for a southern boy who'd always known his place in the world, having lived in the same place his entire young life. But we were leaving Louisiana and moving to a place called California just as soon as the school year ended. All because my father "said so." He just sat my brother, sister, and I down in the living room and made his pronouncement. "We're moving. You can like it or lump it, but we're going." Mostly because he didn't want to hear any complaint. Only "yessir."

I didn't know moving was possible. My family never talked about such a thing. And where I grew up, no one moved away unless it was to another part of town. The actual act of moving was inconceivable in the realm of my geographic reality and I was feeling at odds with everything because of it.

Mom tried to soften the blow, coming to each of us privately in our rooms --letting us know moving would be "fun" and an "adventure" and we'd "really love it out in California." Her place of birth. Which I knew, but it didn't help me. I didn't feel comforted. I felt powerless. The year was 1983 -- the summer I turned fourteen.

Everything I owned were in those moving boxes including my baseball glove, my bats, all my trophies, pictures, clothes, and every one of my favorite books including Alfred Hitchcock Mysteries and Piers Anthony Xanth series. Right down to my toothbrush. I

knew my older sister was having a difficult time too – she cried packing her record player and all her albums, including the recently purchased Blondie record, into her boxes. My younger brother just tossed everything he had, stuffed animals, clothes, board games and all, into his box like it was a game. I don't think he even understood we weren't coming back.

It was a shock. Leaving Louisiana and all I'd known – baseball games in Huber Park, walking the railroad tracks behind our house to school, running around the neighborhood from Lily St to Rose Ave with friends. Weekends fishing for catfish and crab at the lake with my friend, Tim, and his father. Weekend nights playing board games on the front porch with my brother and sister. Lying in bed reading books when the day was too hot to play outside, picking wild blackberries in the back fields when they weren't.

As the oldest male child, I could've said something. Gone to my father and begged, "No, we shouldn't go. Why are we leaving?" But questioning my father was dangerous. And risked setting him off. Which, in turn, risked your personal health. His anger was quick, intense, and often too frightening to experience. Especially when his authority was challenged. He specifically wore cowboy boots on the daily, not just because they made him taller (which they did), but because when defending his "king of the castle" status having something hard to kick with worked best. And nothing hurt quite so much as being kicked in the backside by one of those damn pointy toe boots.

So I accepted the news. And re-arranged a few moving boxes in my room to create a desk and chair so I could write goodbye letters to my friends – Tim and Brian and a few of the guys from my baseball team. No summer at the park or swimming in the public pool for me this year. No trips down to the beach front under Westlake Bridge where we'd jump from towel to towel so our feet wouldn't burn on the hot sand. No more running around the neighborhood spying on neighborhood girls we had crushes on, or

hiding out in the local air-conditioned movie theater to get relief from the heavy humidity.

I didn't have any details to write either. I was moving to California, but didn't know where so couldn't leave a forwarding address. Nor would I have a phone number till we got there. (This was the ancient days before cellphones). I promised I would write once we settled, but I never did. It ended up taking nearly two months to reach California by the route my father drove. And once in California, I was busy with the whirlwind of working my first summer job at Hodgies on the Boardwalk, signing up for freshman classes at the local high school, two a day practices with the JV football team (a first) and finding my way in a brand new world unlike any I'd known. I can't say I forgot my friends, but I didn't write again. It just didn't seem important knowing I would never return.

Houston: We first drove straight to Houston because my father promised to take us to a professional baseball game – “to kick this whole trip off on the right foot” is how he put it, but I knew it was more a concession my mother insisted on. The Houston Astrodome -- Astros versus the Kansas City Royals. Where we sat in the cheap seats so high up, nearly to the top, I had an easier time spotting the cobwebs in the rafters than any of the players down on the field. And forget about catching a foul ball. Or eating any stadium hotdogs – which I was strangely obsessed with. Like it was a quintessential experience. And bugged my father so much about, he finally snapped in the fourth inning and growled, “Shut your fucking mouth about the fucking hotdog! You're not getting a fucking hot dog! Enough already! Just watch the fucking game.” So we ate the limp peanut butter and marshmallow whip sandwiches on Wonder bread from my mother's purse. The ones she'd packed at the motel before we left. Which meant, as I listened to the vendors walking around yelling “Hot Dogs! Peanuts! Cracker Jacks! Hot Dogs! Peanuts! Cracker Jacks!” and watched others fans partake, I wondered if rather than

poor, my father was just a tightwad asshole who secretly didn't like his children.* Still I was happy to be there.

**To be fair, my father was always tight about money – sometimes justifiably, sometimes not. I've since re-evaluated him as a father, in light of becoming a father myself, and conceded, at least regarding finances, the pressure he felt must've been enormous. He was trying to conserve what little money we had during the move, which wasn't a lot, so he could make all the stops he wanted along the way to California and still get us there. With enough left over to start up. He had plans. He had dreams. Fair enough. But they were HIS plans. And HIS dreams. And being a tightwad with money didn't justify his emotional immaturity. Or the way he treated his children, frightening us with his quick temper and faster punishments. Maybe if he'd shared a little of his plans and dreams, or realized a fifty cent hotdog on a special occasion could go a long way, we might not've resented him so much. But to my father, children were "to be seen and not heard," not to mention obey his instructions at all times. Plus, if you weren't paying your own way, at any age, then you didn't have any right to say or question anything. Remnants of his own father's child raising rules, I'm sure. So you just said thank you and accepted whatever was given. Or suffered his wrath.*

Somewhere in Oklahoma: We left Houston heading straight up highway 45 to Dallas before switching to highway 35 and driving all day to reach Sulfur, Oklahoma -- where, apparently, my father's second cousin and his family lived. I didn't know we had second cousins in Oklahoma. But I wasn't surprised – my father was always taking us places to meet "cousins" and "second cousins." Many of whom, I later realized, weren't actually blood relations, but people he and Mom knew during their freewheeling days before kids – old Navy drinking buddies and the like.

Cousin "Donald," his wife, "Barbie," and their twelve year old son, "David," lived quite a way out of town, "nearest our church. We're God-fearing, church going people now," Don explained. So it was no surprise, the evening after we arrived, Cousin Don

announced he and his family were heading off for their Wednesday evening church service. I wanted to go, but the rest of my family begged off. "We aren't church going people, Don," my father pronounced. "Just Husky here. He likes going every week."

"Husky" was my Dad's insulting nickname for me that summer -- as in Sears brand Husky Boy corduroy jeans. I'd gotten a little heavy -- what my Mom called "stocky" -- and had to get expandable waist pants before the school year ended. The kind designed for "the boy who needs a little extra room to roam." My Dad was embarrassed and wanted me to lose the weight right away. "Shit, it's costing me a fortune to feed you, Husky. Close that damn mouth of yours once in a while and push away from the table for fuck's sake." On the bright side, he never openly referred to me as "fat ass" -- though that was a term I heard him use behind closed doors when Mom berated him about motivating tactics and giving me something called "a complex."

Cousin Don was only too happy to take me to church.

We drove the few short miles to the Pentecostal Holiness Church -- a modest, single level building and parking lot plopped down right in the middle of open prairie in the middle of nowhere -- and went inside. Everything seemed normal as far as churches went. They said their hellos to friends and fellow church members before we found our seats in the pews. Service began and we started singing familiar worship songs like "Amazing Grace" and "Blessed Assurance," and "How Great Thou Art." Then the pastor took the dais and began to preach. Which also seemed pretty standard -- a bible verse to exemplify, a few words of exhortation, and a call to worship. But the next thing I knew, as the preacher's excitement increased, the people around me, Cousin Don and his family included, jumped up at various times, lifted their hands to heaven and yelled out "Hallelujah!" and "Thank ya' JESUS!" and "PRAISE HIM!" Everyone's excitement swelling till all around me, the entire congregation stood in a feverish whirl of praising Jesus! Dancing and crying and yelling out "LORD, LORD, LORD OUR GOD!" The

preacher, leading the way, practically giddy at the pulpit now, encouraged everyone to join in the religious ecstasy taking place. And I swear, stared right at me when he did. But I was too wide eyed and in shock to join in. I could stand, and I did, but not participate. The people I went to church with didn't behave in such a manner. It wasn't thought dignified.

To be fair, my Baptist church in Lake Charles was very devout. We were southern Baptist and valued quiet, disciplined worship – people sat still in the pews, sang the same songs by the numbers quietly each week, and listened respectfully to the preacher's weekly liturgy. Oh sure, there were "amen's" punctuating specific comments during the preacher's sermon, but always low in volume and with courteous tenor. It was expected. Not this chaotic, high-volumed cacophony of praise I was witnessing.

Then it happened. At the height of their revelries, a deacon brought out a box and set it in front of the pastor. And from inside, the preacher began lifting full grown snakes, squirming and hissing, which he passed out to the church. SNAKES! Dozens of snakes, two or three at a time, to nearly every man, woman, and child there – who lined up and took their snakes by the handful. Then held them high above their heads as they danced back to their pews hollering, "YES LORD!" and "PRAISE HIM!" and so on. It was quite the moment.

I honestly remember thinking, "What the Sam-Hill?!" But I didn't say "*Sam-hill*." I said, "*What the f*&%!*" and bailed when Cousin David tried to hand me one of his snakes.

Outside, I waited at the car for another forty-five minutes till they returned. No one spoke to me on the drive home. And when I got back to the house, found my father waiting in the living room drinking a beer with a half-smile on his face. I asked if he

knew. To which he just shrugged and said, "They ain't Baptist, that's for sure." Then he went to bed.

The Alamo: Back down to San Antonio, Texas so my father could visit the Alamo. A place he was fascinated by since childhood and always wanted to visit. But it was hot. Texas summer hot! Way too hot and uncomfortable to be occupying such a small space with so many tourists. The Alamo, I also realized, could easily fit inside Huber Park back home. And seemed incongruently out of place compared to the giant scale of modern buildings surrounding it. On the upside, my brother and I were allowed to pick out souvenir wooden flint-lock pistols that shot rubber bands. Until I shot my brother in the back with mine and he cried so much, my father snatched them away declaring I was "a little asshole" who ruined everything. The last I saw that pistol, it flew out the window of our Chevy station wagon on I-10 back enroute to the motel.

Buckeye Arizona: The station wagon broke down after a hard drive across Texas through the Arizona desert on route 85. Radiator overheating and smoking as we limped into the nearest town. Which the sign declared was "Buckeye, Arizona. Population 125." Town? That was a loose term considering there were only three buildings in sight -- a truly "seedy" roadside motel with a pool out front holding the last of some very murky brown water in the deep end, a grimy restaurant with the dirtiest waitress and grease stained cook I'd ever seen, and one gas station mechanic who must've been the cook's twin brother.

"Cain't get that part till Friday," the mechanic told my father. "Gotta order it from Phoenix and have 'em run it out. You might get lucky and it'll be here tomorrow. There's other people waiting for parts too so at least you'll have some company."

There were. Another family, car broken down, staying at the motel across the street for the last two days, is what we learned.

The motel was classic horror movie trope – floor to ceiling wood paneling, no air conditioning, no sheets on the beds -- with cockroaches that flew from behind the walls and across the room to underneath the beds when you turned on the single light bulb hanging in the middle of the room.

The other family, we learned, were from Los Angeles heading in the opposite direction to settle in Texas. I was pretty keen to see what Californians looked like in person because, for some reason, I had the distinct impression they would all be blond, surfer types who drank orange juice every day. What did I know? That's how television depicted them.

But when I met our fellow travelling family, I was shocked. Dumb-founded even. They were so odd looking -- even compared to the images from tv depicting California skateboards, surfers, long hair, and loose "tubular" attitudes. In fact, I stared so hard, I was surprised my mom didn't hit me for being rude. Only she was caught off guard too and had her mouth hanging open a little. We'd never seen people like this before. Whose mannerisms and speech were...well, perverse. And who dressed so...colorfully. Really. I mean, the man wore a plaid "Sammy Davis" fedora over a pink "alligator" polo shirt, with pink and purple striped Bermuda shorts, black socks and sandals. Who said, "Sure, sure" a lot and kept touching his nose for some reason. The wife, blond of course and a foot shorter than any of us, slinked over in her Birkenstock sandals, wearing a red and green, flower print, low cut summer dress that showed a whole lot of cleavage and accented her very large hips – and who openly laughed when my dad asked in heavy southern drawl, "How-do. Where y'all comin' from?" And the kid, the little girl, probably ten or eleven, with the same attitude as her mom, wore this short, pleated skirt under a blue striped, strapless halter, with hair tied up in a top knot like a volcano was spitting out pink and blue streaks of blond hair rather than lava. She stood with her hip out too, hand on her hip, constantly snapping little bubble gum bubbles in

between giggles. Which annoyed the hell out of me and made me want to sock her in the mouth. I later learned, after we reached California, she was behaving in newly minted "Valley girl" style, which was very popular in California that year thanks to some group called The Go-Go's. Which my sister, insecure as she was, fell hard for and immediately started imitating their dress and act. Which is why, even to this day, I tend to roll my eyes whenever I hear "We Got the Beat" or "Vacation" or just about any of their songs – all I can picture is my sister trying to be Belinda Carlisle.

Needless to say, we didn't hang out with this strange California family even though we were the only two families there. It was too hot anyway. And the pool was a horror show. I also think both sides were thinking, *If that's what people are like in the place we're heading, then maybe we should rethink this whole endeavor and turn around. Go back to where we came from. Where people are normal.*

"Aye God," is how my father classified them in his inimitable poetic style. "Them people were pure straight fucking *cooyon!*" (*Couillon* means "idiot" or "crazy" in Cajun). And I imagine the California father was thinking something similar along the lines of "redneck." So there you go.

For the next two days, I mostly sat outside our motel room on a dirty poolside chair trying to fan the heat away. Roasting while watching that damn California girl make trip after trip across the street to buy cold sodas from the vending machine in front of the gas station -- the old fashioned kind where you dropped a quarter in the slot and pulled the glass bottle out of the round hole. My brother, sister, and I had to refill our paper cups from the bathroom sink inside the room when we were thirsty while Mom and Dad laid on the bed, drinking beer and talking about what life would be like in California.

“They better have Budweiser is all I’m saying,” I heard my father grumble at one point, “cause this Coors sucks!”

Interstate 10 out of Arizona: The long road out of Arizona, straight and unending, through flat desert stretching to the horizon. A single cloud high up, strangely dense and unmoving, cast a singular shadow on the ground to our left. I didn’t know clouds could stay in one spot and cast shadows. We had no air conditioning in the U-Haul truck I shared with my father, while my mother drove the Chevy station wagon behind with my brother and sister. Who had air conditioning and an eight track player for music. And could be seen in the side view mirror laughing and singing along as they followed the U-Haul. All I had was one scratchy radio station that played Country. And a father who sang along every time “Love in the First Degree” played. Which, I swear, the radio DJ played on a 30-minute loop the entire time. I can still sing that damn country song from memory over forty years later.

Disneyland, Anaheim, California: We made it to California. And to Disneyland! The first time for us all. My father went to the trunk of the station wagon where, from underneath the spare tire in the back, he pulled out some cash. He had his service revolver, a .357 Smith and Wesson, in there too and all the money we had in the world – twenty-five thousand dollars from the sale of our home in Lake Charles. Minus the expenses we’d spent thus far.

“Shit, you kids are bleeding me dry,” he mumbled counting out twenties for our day at Disneyland. Needless to say, we all shared a single packet of tickets for the rides - A tickets through E, including the infamous “E” ticket rides. Which Disneyland, at that time, used as a ticket tier system for rides categorized A thru E. An A ticket got you rides like Sleeping Beauty’s castle and the other kiddie rides. B tickets were Swiss Family treehouse and the like. And E-tickets, the only one anyone cared about, meant Matterhorn, Pirates of the Caribbean, and It’s a Small World rides. Needless to say, we

each were allowed one E-ticket. My sister and brother chose the Matterhorn. I picked the Pirates of the Caribbean. Which I liked, but admit was jealous when my brother and sister wouldn't shut up about the Matterhorn roller coaster. My father must've been feeling good too, because he even bought each of us a Disney souvenir and let my brother and I buy cowboy hats from the Old Frontier kingdom. I still have the photo of me wearing that hat.

Carson City Nevada: We'd become fairly seasoned travelers after nearly two months on the road. So pulling into a low slung ranch house in the middle of the Carson City desert wasn't an event. Until my father threatened us to be on our best behavior because this was where Mom's mother and father lived. We were visiting my mother's parents, whom she hadn't seen since her and Dad married, and she was pretty anxious. He didn't want us "fucking things up" or "acting like little idjits." And we were to stay nearby in case we left in a hurry.

Another shock. My mother's mom and dad? My grandparents? I'd never met them. And stories about them were rare. Almost non-existent. All my mother had ever really told us was they were "abusive" alcoholic parents and she left home as soon as possible. Which was one reason she married my father so quickly after only knowing him for two months. She wanted to get away from them.

I walked into their house wondering what real, living monsters could possibly look like. And was disappointed to find this old couple who didn't say much. And didn't seem real interested in meeting us. So we kids sat quiet and bored in their living room for about an hour while Mom and Dad talked to them in the kitchen. And then we left. No real goodbyes or tearful moments. Just walked out, got in the car, and drove away. Neither Mom or Dad said anything. And in a rare moment of prescience, we kids knew not to either. We just drove away.

Santa Cruz, California; August 1983

One of my mom's youngest brothers, "Bob," who lived in Santa Cruz, was the first to show us around. He was the quintessential California surfer dude type – you know, never wore a shirt, always in a pair of "OP" corduroy shorts and flip flops. Long, "dirty" blond hair and a very deep tan all over. Pretty laid back too. Nice enough. Not southern nice, but certainly he tried with all his "dude" and "brah" speak punctuating most of his sentences. He was the first to show us around and really tried his best – taking us Twin Lakes beach to swim in the Pacific ocean for the first time, to Lexington Reservoir for a picnic and wind surfing, hiking in Henry Cowell State Park (where, to this day, my name is still scratched into the train bridge extending over the river). Santa Cruz was a lot different than Lake Charles, I can tell you that.

On one of the last days of summer, Uncle Bob agreed to drive my Mom, brother, sister, and I to the Vallco Mall off Wolfe Rd in San Jose so we could shop for a few "back to school" clothes. This was my first indoor mall, sure, and I was curious. But Uncle Bob kept pointing out all the little details like, "See how the mall has a walkway over the road? See how all the shops are indoors. See how there's even a food court. Bet you don't have that where you guys are from." Which became annoying after a time. Uncle Bob meant well, but he was being a little condescending. Probably because we still spoke with heavy Cajun accents and must've sounded like "The Beverly Hillbilly's" to him.

Food has always been a big thing for me. A central core in my life. Especially when I was young. I liked food. It was my emotional support when I was upset, which was often. So when we all sat down to lunch in a café at Vallco, and I noticed the "Specials" board had "gumbo" listed as a dish, I grew excited. I was homesick and gumbo would be a nice taste of home. Only my mom tried to talk me out of getting it. Not

understanding, I went ahead and ordered it anyway. But instead of gumbo, I got vegetable soup. Really. Vegetable soup with a side of hard bread roll.

“Mom, this ain’t gumbo,” I complained. “Don’t these people know what gumbo is? They got it wrong. I cain’t eat this. It ain’t right. There’s no gumbo in they’s gumbo. We should say something to them. Maybe you can tell them how to fix it.”

Mom just smiled and handed me half of her turkey sandwich. My first experience with California’s arrogance.

Within weeks of arriving in Santa Cruz, my father sent me to work at a place called “Hodgies” on the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. I was to be a busboy several days during the week and every weekend till the end of summer when school started. Which was something you could do in those days – send your teenage son to work, but make sure the owner handed his paychecks over to his father.

“For the family, you little shit,” my father explained after I complained about not getting the money. “I been feeding and clothing your fat ass all your life. So you can give a little back, you selfish prick. And don’t give me no shit about how you ‘worked’ for it. I been working for years and you don’t hear me complaining.”

Strange logic, but that’s how it was with my father back then. I realize now, he was barely past thirty, with a wife, three kids, and all the fiscal responsibility since my mom never worked. Patience was hard for him to come by. He must’ve felt the weight of the world trying to make life better for all of us.

Summer was mostly a grind – working, football practices, not knowing anyone, living in a small rented apartment till my parents found a house. But one bright moment saved it all. One day late in August, I was walking the three miles home from Hodgies when I stumbled across a block party on Pearl St near the Jessie St marsh. The road was closed to cars and loads of neighbors were milling about, here and there, drinking beer,

sitting in lawn chairs, having a good time, you know. No one noticed when I joined in – or probably cared assuming I was just one of the kids living on the street. This was my first block party and I was impressed. Streamers everywhere, people milling about the entire street – a very festive atmosphere. But what drew my attention most was the music being played loudly from one yard mid-block. They had speakers set up and music blasting that I'd never heard before. But I really liked it. It was mesmerizing and fit the moment perfectly! Giving an air of "being in the moment." Summer ease and no where you needed to be. "Laid back" is how Uncle Bob would have coined it. The music? The Police singing "A Do Do Da" and "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic" and the entire Synchronicity album. Blew my mind. I'd never heard such music before! And never forgot the feeling of being there. The sun shining, the music melding perfectly with a casual summer day, girls milling about in shorts and bikini tops smiling at me. And eating a hot dog (free!) on the happiest street in all the world. Shoot! This is what I wanted my life to be like every day! So, I stayed as long as I dared and then walked home, smiling the whole way.

My freshman year of high school began in September after Labor day and everything seemed hopeful – Dad had finally been hired by the Santa Cruz Police Department after spending the late summer and early fall working at the Brussell Sprout Canning factory on Chestnut St. He'd come home from his factory job after his twelve hour shift very dirty and smelling horribly. A smell hard to describe because, one, I'd never smelled a Brussel sprout before, and two, at this point in my life, I didn't know what a dead body smelled like. Surprisingly, I learned it was eerily similar -- the foul stench of brussel sprout decay, fetid dirt, and heavy, dirty human sweat from the canning process remain unequalled.

Dad had been a police officer in Lake Charles for six years before we left, but had to wait for his credentials to be forwarded to California before they would hire him. When

they did, I could tell he sighed a big sigh of relief. The money was good, real good, and took a big burden off his shoulders. He and Mom immediately bought a house on the east side of Santa Cruz, just a few blocks from my high school. Mom got a car of her own – a Buick Regal -- which made us a two-car family for the first time in our lives. And everything seemed...well, great.

We kids were proud of Mom and Dad. They'd made it! Dad did what he said and set us up for a better life. Despite his volatility at home, his hard work was an example of a man willing to do what it took to support a family. And though rich with faults, laziness was definitely not one of them! My brother, sister, and I always had a roof over our heads, food in our stomach, and clothes on our backs.

And Mom seemed like a new woman. She rose in the morning, made our lunches, sent us off to school and was there waiting for us when we returned home. Something her depression had never allowed back home. During the day, she even started sewing quilts again and found Santa Cruz had a vibrant sewing circle at Beverly's. Things were looking good.

524 Trevethan Avenue, Santa Cruz, CA 95062

When my parents bought the house on Trevethan – a three bedroom, one bath, 1500-square foot home four blocks from Harbor High, we felt like we'd arrived. We had our own place! Our own yard! Sure I had to share a room with my brother, but that was the norm all our lives. All seemed well. Pam made friends and discovered a new favorite musician to emulate – Madonna -- whom she and her girlfriends squealed over watching MTV videos for the first time on our living room tv. Joel found friends who liked Atari games like him, and played dungeons and dragons on the weekends. And I found a church to attend – Twin Lakes Baptist – that had a thriving youth ministry. During the week, I went everywhere with my two new best friends, Lance and Jay.

And I'd grown significantly taller, leaner and more muscular from adolescence kicking in, work, and playing football on the JV football team.

Which led to the discovery girls found me attractive. At least that's what I thought because every time I ran in from practice, and passed by the cheerleader practice, someone would squeal, "He's SOOOO cute!"

Of course, I never did have the courage to find out who that girl was. Nor apparently did she.

Sohings were so good in the fall of 1983. We sat down to dinner together again. Played our favorite card games -- pinochle and backalley bridge -- when Dad was home. Talked and laughed and enjoyed the time together. This was all nothing close to Louisiana where Mom would hide in her bedroom after dinner -- spending her time smoking, eating cookies, and reading books. And Dad would zone out in front of the tv drinking beer and whiskey till he went to bed.

I was starting to feel joyful. I had friends, had found a new church to attend at Twin Lakes Baptist, was doing well in school, and had gotten a job at the local movie theater for two shifts on the weekend till summer arrived. So I had a little money.

Sadly, it didn't last. Mom tried to kill herself again at the end of my freshman year just as summer started. Pills, always pills. Food and pills really. She'd gained another fifty pounds since Christmas eating secretly in her room. Always a big woman, now she was around 280, pushing three hundred pounds, on her 5'6" frame. I guess, their move to California hadn't really changed her life the way she and my Dad had hoped. Or ours. Mom just couldn't stop feeling worthless and needing to end it all. And because of this, our life, despite the new beginnings, went back to the way they'd been. My father started working longer hours, pulling double shifts and such while my mother spent an equal amount of time in bed. Though she did regularly attend therapy sessions with a

doctor she swore was helping. And my brother, sister, and I went back to caring for ourselves while trying to keep forward momentum in life. Unlike Lake Charles, no one in Santa Cruz knew us or our family and didn't know what was going on. So it was easy to pretend we were a normal, nice family in public.

I was the oldest boy which, in southern tradition, meant I was responsible for all the chores around the house – the lawn care, washing my Mom's car and my Dad's truck every Saturday, making sure wood was stacked on the front porch for the fireplace stove. My sister, Pam, handled the inside of the house, cleaning, laundry and taking care of Mom. And my little brother, well he was the "baby" and not expected to do anything. So he just sank into a world of his own, spending most of his time in our room watching tv and reading.

Three more years went by. I stayed till the end of high school – through four more suicide attempts, through Dad's increasing anger if things weren't to his specifications -- demands for dinner to be on time and house clean and quiet. His kids to be polite and respectful of him at all times. And accept punishment without a word when he felt we weren't. Thankfully, he was away a lot so, though unpredictable, we didn't have to deal with him on the daily.

We made it work somehow – my brother, sister and I. I worked when I wasn't in school or participating in school activities or hanging out at my girlfriend's houses. Which kept me in money, granted lots of time out of the home, and bolstered my self-esteem because girls liked me. My sister discovered social popularity and it worked for a while to provide her needs. Then she discovered drinking, drugs, and boys. Which started her own cycle of cutting with razor blades and promiscuous sex. Her way of compensating. My brother just froze in place -- arrested development. His isolation increased and he spent the majority of his time lost in tv, books and Atari games. Which made him seem more like a little boy than a teenager.

In the end, by the end of high school, I left. I had become obsessed with two goals – to get out on my own and live my own life on my own terms, and to get married so I could build the happy family I'd always dreamed of having.