

Chapter Four

Drowned by Religion

WHEN I WAS NINE, I was baptized in the Kootenai River, committing my life to Jesus. I walked into the ice-cold water in my jeans, and when I emerged with my teeth chattering I was greeted by the sound of tambourines and voices breaking into song. Ruthanne wrapped me in a blanket and tearfully told me how proud she and Larry were of me for renouncing my old life of sin and embracing a new life in the name of Jesus Christ. As dramatic as the experience felt at the time, it didn't change my life all that much, given that Christianity had always been like breathing in our household.

I brought my newly invigorated appreciation of religion with me to school, where, with Bible in hand, I tried to peddle the Gospel to anyone who'd listen. I was on a mission to save souls before the apocalypse and the Second Coming of the Lord, but my pagan classmates were far more interested in playing Dungeons & Dragons and messing around with Ouija boards. They teased me that I would end up marrying a priest and dying a virgin.

As pious as I was, I couldn't come close to replicating Ruthanne's religious devotion, as she became increasingly obsessed with the pro-life movement. She made us watch the anti-abortion film *The Silent Scream* every year following its 1984 release, one of only two exceptions to the household ban on television. (Larry's insistence on watching baseball's World Series each fall was the other.) We had to rent a TV/VCR combo for these viewing parties. The "educational film" was only twenty-nine minutes long, but it contained

enough horrific images—babies' arms and legs being torn off, their bodies dumped in garbage bags behind abortion clinics—to give me nightmares for weeks afterward. Three decades have passed, and I still can't get the sound of one of the fetuses in the film apparently screaming in agony—hence the film's title—out of my head.

As far as Ruthanne was concerned, Josh and I were survivors of “a silent holocaust” because we were born after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a woman's right to have an abortion in the historic 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. She also believed that Justice Harry Blackmun, who wrote the majority opinion for that case, was the devil, and that anyone who killed a doctor who performed abortions was a hero for—note the convoluted logic and hypocrisy—saving lives. She even traveled to Washington, DC, one year to take part in the March for Life, the anti-abortion rally that takes place every year on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. It's the only trip I can remember her ever taking by herself.

Josh got caught up in our household's anti-abortion crusade as well. In middle school, he was tasked with debating students who took the pro-choice side of the argument. To help him illustrate his point, Ruthanne and I made stick figures out of paper, which expanded to form a long chain. Josh taped these to the wall in the classroom where the debate was held. Each stick figure represented ten thousand American fatalities suffered in a war. There were three stick figures for the American Revolution, sixty-two for the Civil War, twelve for World War I, forty-one for World War II, and six for the Vietnam War. Then in a moment of triumph toward the end of the debate, Josh marched around the room, unraveling a paper chain of stick figures holding hands that was so long it seemed to have no end. This represented all the “babies” that had been aborted in what Ruthanne referred to as the “War on the Unborn.” Game, set, and match, as far as the Doležals were concerned.

As fanatical as this viewpoint seems to me now, it felt perfectly normal when I was growing up because we only socialized with people who shared the same opinions. One of them was Fabian Uzoh. We often saw him at church on Sundays, and from time to time he would come to our house afterward to eat lunch. He was

especially fond of the habañero peppers we grew in our garden, which, combined with our homemade meals, reminded him of the food he'd eaten while growing up in Nigeria. Even though I was now ten years old, Fabian was the first Black person I'd ever met, and this, combined with his regal manner, made him seem like a king to me. I found even the most mundane stories he told about life in Africa riveting. He also had the rare ability to make me laugh, something I didn't do very often after learning earlier in life to suppress it.

Fabian had studied forestry at the University of Montana and hoped to get his PhD in the same subject. His goal was to go back to his home country one day and use his knowledge to improve its environment and economy. Sadly, he was never able to return to Nigeria. When his wife Rosie left the church, divorced him, and won custody of their son Emmanuel, Fabian chose to stay in the States so he could remain close to his son. Despite the allegations of domestic violence Rosie made against Fabian, Larry and Ruthanne sided with him. In their eyes, she was a heathen who was being controlled by the "Jezebel spirit." Leaving your husband and falsely accusing him of abuse was the ultimate offense a woman could make against God and the church. In their opinion, she'd committed blasphemy.

Larry and Ruthanne let Fabian sleep on our pullout couch until he got back on his feet, and I would often hear him vent his frustrations about Rosie letting Emmanuel watch TV and eat sausage and candy. I often wondered what was so demonic about junk food. To me, it sounded heavenly, like something only rich people got to eat. Books like *Oliver Twist* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* made me believe that one day I, too, might have access to the glorious world of commercial food. But I was in the minority. Fabian's opinion on this subject was shared by Larry, Ruthanne, and Larry's mother Peggy, aka Grandma Doležal, who'd banished her husband Herman to their cold cement basement because of his refusal to give up junk food and TV. He had his own refrigerator down there, where he kept soda, beer, ice cream, and candy bars, and he spent hours and hours watching TV and chewing Doublemint gum, one half-stick at a time.

Herman, or Grandpa Doležal as he was known to me, wasn't like the rest of us. He'd been in the Navy and had a tattoo on his forearm, visible only when he wore short sleeves in the summer, and his eyes would light up with a bad-boy twinkle whenever someone asked him about his glory days. He hadn't always been saved, either. Larry had led both of his parents to Christ when he was in high school, but instead of joining the Pentecostal church where people spoke in tongues, as Larry had, they'd joined the more practical and sedate Church of God denomination.

There were other differences between Larry and his father. In our house, we adhered to a God-man-woman-child-animal-plant model of value as presented in the Book of Genesis. We were taught that God was the head of the man and the man was the head of the woman. Men were the ultimate authorities, making all the important decisions, while women had very little or no say, no matter what their hearts were telling them. If you were a woman and didn't have a husband, your father was the ultimate authority over you, and if you had a husband, you submitted to him. Women who refused to accept their places in this strict hierarchy were considered godless Jezebels, like Rosie.

Life was much different in Peggy and Herman's house. It was a true matriarchy; Peggy ruled the roost. It was almost weird how browbeaten Herman was. Peggy kept the upstairs dustless, spotless, and, for the most part, Herman-less. During many of our visits, we'd barely see him, and when he did emerge from his subterranean lair, the only topics he seemed free to discuss at leisure without being cut off or reprimanded were weather and sports. As a result, he stuck to those talking points no matter how many times he repeated himself, issuing banalities such as, "It sure is nice out today," or "Looks like we're supposed to get some rain this weekend," over and over again.

More often, he would stay down in the basement watching TV or reading *Sports Illustrated*. Josh liked to sneak into the basement and rifle through Herman's copies of *SI*, and occasionally he'd bring some of them home with him. Magazines had been forbidden in our household when we were little, but as we grew older, Larry and Ruthanne eased up on this restriction a little bit. When

Grandma Doležal gave us the *National Geographic* subscription, they actually let us keep it.

Josh was especially pleased with this gift, as he would tear out and keep any photographs of topless African women he could find. He'd even make me search the magazines for these types of pictures and save them for him, and if I refused, he'd hit me. If he ever got caught hitting me, he'd get spanked, but if I ever got caught hitting him back, I'd also get spanked, so in the end the easiest and safest thing for me to do was help him gather the photos for his soft-porn collection. At the time, I was too young to know what he was using them for, and, besides, I thought the women were beautiful, so I didn't object too vigorously.

Josh was equally enamored with Grandpa Doležal's *Sports Illustrateds*, and after he was done reading the copies he'd absconded with, he'd leave them on the back of his toilet. It was from these magazines that I acquired my first glimpses of Black Americans, and I was enraptured by what I saw. To me, the images of the Black athletes I found on the pages of the magazines were the very height of human beauty. Their complexions, their hair, their features, they were all so captivating to me. Florence Griffith Joyner, aka "Flo Jo," and Jackie Joyner-Kersey became my idols. They were both beautiful and strong. I was also infatuated with the boxer Mike Tyson, the basketball player Earvin "Magic" Johnson, and the baseball player Darryl Strawberry. Three different men involved in three different sports, but they shared common ground. They were at the top of their fields at the time—world champions and All-Stars—and all of them were Black. Though all three soon faded from my consciousness, the idealized image of Blackness I'd developed while studying photographs of them never did.