



Leaving Los Angeles

A tale of fear, loneliness, and hope | KEVIN MELTON

There was pain soon after we arrived, and there was pain again on the day I left. All I knew, when I finally left Los Angeles, was that my world had been forever changed.

My parents divorced shortly after moving to Los Angeles when I was three years old. I don't remember ever living in the same house with my father. At that young age, my parents' divorce knocked my feet out from underneath me. I took the divorce personally, convinced that it was my fault.

Dad remembers taking my brother and me out to the movies on a Saturday, when I was around five years old. In the

middle of the movie, I turned to him and asked: "Did you move away because you don't love me anymore?"

We moved thirteen times while I was growing up. It seemed like every year I went to a new school. Mom worked long and strange hours as a waitress in order to support my brother and me. I became withdrawn, struggled with my self worth, and wondered, "Who else will leave me?"

My mother remarried when I was five years old. Her new husband's name was John. He was a stocky, muscular, and intimidating man, with a hair-trigger temper. He had grown up on the South Side of Chicago on some tough streets. In the eighth grade

he was arrested for severely beating up his teacher.

The day after Mom married him, John was suddenly and unexpectedly (at least to my mother) arrested. He had committed a felony several years earlier. The case made headlines in the *Los Angeles Times*, and John was sent to jail for six months.

After the arrest, my mother feared for my brother and me and sent us to Kansas City, Missouri, to live with my grandparents. All I understood was that I had just gotten a new father and I was now being sent away. Again, I took it as being my fault.

When John was paroled after six months, my brother and I moved back

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to Los Angeles and a shaky home life.

John was often an angry man and a militant atheist. He used God’s name constantly and purposely in vain, accompanied by many obscenities.

I remember one particularly nasty event, which both frightened and scarred me for years to come. When I was around eight or nine years old, we lived on the second floor of an apartment building. We had just sat down for dinner when there was a knock at the door. From my seat at the kitchen table, I had a clear view of the front door to our apartment. When John opened it, I saw two young men with some small tracts in their hands and smiles on their faces. One of them greeted John and began to talk about God.

John’s face burned red with anger. He grabbed a fistful of the young man’s shirt and completely lifted him off of the ground and slowly leaned him over the second-story railing. His rage spewed out in torrents.

The young man’s face went white with terror as John’s obscene tirade went on for several minutes. When John finally let the man go, he and his friend ran for their lives. John returned to the dinner table and subjected us to a thirty-minute obscene diatribe against God and those who believe in him.

John also loved to discipline. One night, he unhappy with how I washed the dishes and my response to his stinging criticism. He grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back, and threatened to break it. On another night, he was displeased with the way I swallowed my milk. He thought I was too loud. I ate my dinner in the bathroom for a week, until I learned to swallow my milk quietly. Like a dog that has been kicked too much, I learned to cower before John and lived in fear.

While I was in the seventh grade, John started to get in trouble with the law again, charging up credit cards and refusing to pay. He grew angry at the world and angrier at us. During the Christmas break from school, Mom woke me early in the morning, after

John had left for work.

“We have to leave now, let’s pack your things and get in the car,” she said.

When we got outside, I was surprised to see my uncle from Seattle waiting in our car. My sixteen-year-old brother had already left, driving his car and possessions over to my father’s house, an hour away. He would stay there the rest of his school days and in the separation we lost our connection as brothers.

With my uncle driving, we hastily slipped out of Los Angeles that dark December morning along Interstate 5, crossed over the mountain pass at the Grapevine and into the San Joaquin Valley. We never looked back.

Something deep happened that day. A line had been crossed. As fears diminished, I began to listen and deal with my heart.

We started anew in Bellevue, Washington. Once again at a new school, I became friends with an outgoing, friendly, and confident kid named Eric Stratmeyer. Eric attended a local Covenant church and started inviting me to the youth events and then Sunday morning.

The way the people spoke of and worshiped God disturbed me. In my head, I debated their talk of a loving God and compassionate father who desired a personal relationship with me, with the angry father figure I had known in John. But my heart was drawn to God as a loving father. “Could this be true?” I wondered.

Several months later, Eric’s family brought me along to several meetings of a Billy Graham crusade in Seattle. I did not respond until the final evening we attended. It was a fiery sermon on hell and judgment. In my warped understanding, I saw God as an angry father ready to strike and punish a worthless worm of a kid. This was a picture I understood and it prompted my immediate response. I stood and made a decision for Christ.

Gradually, however, since that day I stood at the crusade, the love of God

has been overflowing in my life, filling the empty spaces, and overcoming my fears. His tender mercies and compassion have reshaped my life and my understanding of God’s character. I am continually comforted by the fact that God not only loves me, but that love is the core element and expression of his nature. All his words and actions toward me shall always be consistent with his nature of love. He will never be a cruel and hateful father figure that I knew as a child.

God is a pursuing father. He has gone out of his way to find me, redeem me, care for me, and bring me home. This thought overwhelms me: that the God of the universe went to such great lengths to find me.

God is not a father who leaves. He is a father who runs to greet me, embrace me, and bring me home to stay.



Childhood picture of the author

I am still learning, growing, and understanding better why I do certain things in my life. But I have this sense that leaving Los Angeles that December day was the first step in a very long and continuous journey road along a highway paved with God’s mercy.

When I look closely I can see several piles of litter along the way, the places where I have dumped the garbage of my past fears and loneliness. It has been a road of glorious redemption—a highway of compassion headed straight for my home, where there is a father who truly loves me. □

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