

KEN HOOD

# Last Room on the Right

*A journey through the wilderness of evangelicalism*

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## Preface

This memoir is about my life in evangelicalism, and how I struggled to leave it. It's also a story about a scared little boy who needed to control his world and found out that he couldn't.

This book is difficult to write for two reasons. First, it involves sharing the embarrassment of my mental illness. Second, some friends may see it as throwing them under the bus along with religious systems.

This creates angst with every word I type. I love my family and friends. I love the individuals within evangelicalism. And I don't want to throw Baby Jesus out with the dirty bathwater of bad religion. Frankly, the Jesus of the Gospel stories hated the hypocrisy of his religion too.

Jesus' answer to the fraud and abuse of power: "They that worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth."

In the spirit of truth, let me talk about names and stories I've written. First, I have changed most of the names in the stories to protect individuals, and to protect me from having to defend myself against claims of slander. Second, I have freely retold the stories with editorial license to make each story more readable. I also, frankly, don't always remember every fact in perfect detail. Memoir, as a form of writing, allows some license with details. But each story is true in essence, as I remember it.

Finally, I make many claims regarding the intent of systems

and beliefs. These are my interpretations. If you do not share these interpretations, neither of us is “lying.” We are simply seeing things through different lenses.

As I write, I hope to find inner clarity. I also hope to help others looking for the same thing.

Blessings to you as you read. May we all find freedom and peace through the truth.



## Day 1 - Free at last

I'm glad that I'm out of the hospital so I can pee in private. I have been locked up for a week for suicidal planning. No cell phone allowed; no coffee either. Cigs not allowed, but I don't smoke. Double locked doors with cameras everywhere... there was even a camera in my room. The "private" bathroom was hidden from the camera by an old-west style batwing door that barely covered one's body. I stayed constipated for three days.

My peers and I called it the loony bin... or 'bin' for short. Gallows humor helped us get comfortable with each other. We cooperated with staff and said the right things to the psychiatrist. Or thought we did. I'm sure we weren't fooling anyone. They "charted" us constantly... every behavior, every word, and every silence. Since most of us were trying to get out of there (we wanted our phones and our coffee), we were careful with everything we said and did.

I made two good friends and plan to keep up with them on Facebook; we got out on the same day and we were glad to get into civilian clothes again. We rescued our phones. Our first stop was a coffee shop.

\* \* \*

My hospital admission was just a week ago, but the path that led to it began over a year ago. That's when I stood up to church leadership in an effort to stand by an abused young mother. To my evangelical soul, I was challenging "God's ordained authority." To challenge them... to tell them that they were wrong... was to go against God himself.

That does a number on your mind. Especially since for 50 years I had been raised to not question God's ordained ministers. But that story is for another post or two.

Anyway, I have been breaking down in anxiety and depression for a long while now. A few weeks ago, I had begun researching suicide on the Internet. That led eventually to creating a detailed plan and a date to enact the plan. Fortunately, I had a crisis that intervened.

A week ago, with my plan in place, I suddenly realized that I was in my car at the opposite end of town, and I'd no idea how I had gotten there. I had been losing increasingly large chunks of time before that. It was one reason why I wanted to end my life. I felt everything closing in on me, and I felt like I was losing control of my mind. But this missing time involved driving. I was terrified that I was slipping into insanity. So I pulled over to the side of the road, and looked up the number to our local crisis center.

When I called, they were quick to send someone out to meet at our house. My wife, Mary, had no idea how bad I was. I had hidden everything from her. On the outside, she could see that I was shutting down. But I had not shared with her the blackouts nor the suicidal planning.

When the crisis center person arrived, we went out on the

deck for privacy. She had a long checklist of questions.

“So, in the last few weeks, have you researched suicide?” It was like she was reading my mind. She started painfully pulling information from me. I knew as I answered truthfully that I was going to be committed to a hospital. Part of me (all of me?) was relieved.

\* \* \*

Now that I'm free from the hospital, I can post on Facebook again. I'm going to stay in a short-term residential treatment facility tomorrow. I'd like to Facebook my thoughts every day. You are my friends, and it will help me if you listen.

## Day 2- IRTS

I miss my bed. I miss having a window. But I'm glad I'm here. It's day two in my 60 day residential treatment program. I'm posting from the last room on the right in the basement, just before you get to the group meeting room. It's the quietest room in the building.

Even now I can tell you that residential care is so much better than the hospital. The coffee is wonderful and they cater the food. Excellent food I'd pay to eat in a restaurant. And I can have my phone! This is IRTS... Intensive Residential Treatment Services. It's a converted funeral home with a main level and a basement. The upstairs rooms surround a large living room with a big screen TV and a Wii game system. It's a fun place for everyone to gather, laugh and talk until lights out at 11.

I want to have hope. I'm still not sure that I want to live. But I want to give this a chance. A chance to have hope.

Please don't pm me if you get worried because of what I post. If I'm writing, no matter what I write, I'm alive and struggling to want to live, and that's the best I can hope for right now.

## Day 3- The divorce

**I**n group this afternoon, someone talked about their parents getting divorced when they were little. And that made me remember when my folks got divorced.

\* \* \*

I'm just 10 years old, and mom and dad flank me on the couch. The walls seem to close in. I'm all alone and afraid, even though Mom and Dad are so close I can feel their breath. The living room seems dark. It's afternoon, but it all wraps around me like midnight.

"Son, your mom and I love you so much. But we don't love each other anymore. It's not your fault, and we will love you the same no matter what. We're getting a divorce."

At that, my world closes in. My mom and dad are so caught up in their own hurt, they can't understand how much they just hurt me this minute.

Lots of words are coming out of their mouths. I can't hear them.

Lots of hugs. I can't feel them.

I'm alone. The firstborn. They dump this on me and expect that I will remain a child. But I can't. My little boy brain goes up in flames. The Phoenix that rises out of the ashes is cold and serious- an adult brain in a child's body. My little brother and sister won't be able to navigate this. She's so young, only 5. Will she even understand? He's 8 and he will have a sense what's going on. Will he have another asthma attack?

Mom says that I and my brother and sister will go live with her in our new home in Minnesota, two thousand miles away. Dad says you must be the man of the family now, son. Thanks, dad. I already figured that out. Mom is weaker than I have ever seen her. She can't do this alone. I take mom's hand, and with all the seriousness that I can muster say, "It'll be ok, Mom."

Then Mom cries, and Dad looks awkward. They get up from the couch and go away. Mom to her room to cry, and Dad to the garage. I follow Dad to the garage. I don't know what to say, and his face says, "Son, don't say anything." I punch the huge punching bag that Dad had hung the year before when he taught me to box. Punching the bag with all my strength, I remember when Dad taught me to hold my left up to protect my face. He said throw the first punch if you think there's about to be a fight. The first punch may be the only one you'll get in. So make it count.

My hands hurt as I'm punching harder than I've ever punched before. Dad looks at me and says, "Are you ok, son?" "Yes, I'm ok."

He gazes down. I look away. Mom is crying somewhere, my little brother and sister are playing outside, and my world has ended.

## Day 4- Getting saved

I was nine years old when Mom and I “got saved.” Mom went first. She did it in the living room all alone, with Billy Graham on the TV.

Afterwards, she took us to the nearest Baptist church that would allow blacks to attend. It was 1967 and there were still lots of churches that believed “colored” people would be happier elsewhere. Mom called around and found one that welcomed all races. The civil rights movement was in full swing, and Mom wished she could march with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Why Baptist?

Months before Billy Graham had her bowing her head, a Baptist minister had pestered her with door-knocking and gospel tracts. Those “how do I get to heaven” pamphlets that were so ubiquitous in the 60s and 70s. So we went to Magnolia Baptist Church. It was large and friendly and smelled like furniture polish. There was Sunday School, then Junior Church, and sometimes I’d slip into “Big Church” with Mom and enjoy the wonder of the stained glass windows and the huge choir.

I also liked to stare at Mrs. Sanders in the choir, next to Mom

in the Alto section. She was so beautiful and sang with such expression. I had a schoolboy crush on her. Like many school-aged boys, I made the mistake of telling my mom, who told Mrs. Sanders, who then started patting me on the head after church. I knew that Mom had told her. I was embarrassed, but I hid it well.

One day, after church, in the car, I stretched up over the back of mom's seat and asked her "can I "go forward" next Sunday and get saved?" ("Going forward" was what you did at the end of the sermon if you wanted to "get saved.") Mom held her breath for a moment and said of course I could. It thrilled her that her son wanted to go to heaven. She asked: "Do you want to talk about it now?" "No." And that was that until next Sunday.

That was a long week for me. Home was sadder than usual. Mom was miserable, and Dad had forgotten to come home one night to take me to a promised baseball game. On Sunday the church hymns sounded majestic in Big Church. Mrs. Sanders was more beautiful than usual. The aisle looked longer than it had the week before, and it scared me to death to walk down that aisle in front of God and everybody. But that's what you had to do if you were serious about asking Jesus into your heart. The congregation sang "Just as I Am," all eight or nine verses:

*Just as I am, without one plea  
But that Thy blood was shed for me  
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come*

Slowly. Somewhere in the middle of verse two I stepped out and tried not to glance at everyone, even though I knew they were staring at me. Pastor Loren met me at the front and took me by the hand. He asked if I wanted to be saved. "Yes."

“OK, young man. I’ll pray, and then you pray the same words after me: “Dear God, I know I’m a sinner. I’m sorry for my sins. I’m asking Jesus into my heart to forgive my sins. Thank you, Father. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” I said all the words, and I meant them. I was saved. At least the formula had been performed, so I must be saved. After almost a year in church, with repeated calls to “get saved” I had joined these people I loved. I was full of peace and happiness. I belonged. God loved me now (because that had been in doubt while I was a guilty sinner).

The formula wasn’t quite finished, though. I still had six weeks of membership class, getting baptized (dunked, since we were Baptists). Then I would be an official member of the church. I performed it all with zeal. I memorized the books of the Bible, the Romans’ Road of salvation, and read a book for new converts. Afterwards, the deacons interviewed me.

The day of my baptism was exciting. I came up from under the cold water believing that everything was going to be new and better now. But it wasn’t. Less than a year later, my folks would sit me down and have that awful talk.

## Day 5- Blocked memories

I'm thinking about my childhood. How do I write about my mom and dad without sounding like I'm throwing them under the bus? I need to meet with my "point person" here at IRTS and talk about this.

I've blocked most of my memories from before age 10 when we moved to Minnesota. Everyone has so many memories from childhood. But I don't. It's just beginning to hit me that that's not normal. The few memories that I have are a mix... some happy, and some unhappy.

I wonder if I've blocked memories because they are too painful. As if my brain is protecting me from pain. Whatever the reason, I have few memories. Little truth to tell about my childhood. But do I have the courage to tell that truth?

I love my mom and dad. My mom is Mom of the Century... a hero to the family, known as "G'Mom" by the great grandkids. Revered by her kids and her adult grandkids. And Dad has been my biggest cheerleader for 40 years. He's been a friend and a perfect dad and grandpa and I love to hear his voice on the phone when I call. My dad is awesome. But it wasn't always that way. How do I write my story without hurting those I love?

## Day 6- I love my parents

**O**K, I talked with my point person last night. She asked me who my parents are now. Today, I replied that they are my best friends. She said that best friends will understand if I tell the truth about my childhood. They will understand and remind themselves that they did the best they could with the tools they had.

My parents mean the world to me. I love them. I need to remember that the purpose of writing is not to accuse them of anything... it's just to share out loud how I perceived my life as a child.

Little Ken grew into Big Ken and there was no line in the sand where the anxiety of my childhood magically disappeared. It has stayed in my mind to this day.

## Day 7- Red shirts

**I**t's 7:30 at night and I'm exhausted. They keep you running full steam ahead from breakfast until two in the afternoon.

You get about two-and-a-half hours to yourself in the afternoon (but often there's homework), and then meal prep at 4:30, supper at 5:00 and chores at 5:30. Group at 6:00. Then after evening group, some required group recreation or crafts.

I want to write about my childhood. But I'm 62 years old with depression, feeling sleepy—and all I am going to do tonight is watch Star Trek reruns and eat some snacks I hid in my room. Yeah. There's no food allowed in rooms.

We watched a movie today in group that taught us about living in the moment. Mindfulness. We've been learning about mindfulness since I got here... it's one of the everyday messages we get.

But today it hit home. I need to live in the "now" more often... paying attention to the little things. Slowing down. So I'll start trying that. But for now... it's time to watch Captain Kirk save another planet and lose some Red Shirts along the way. Goodnight.

## Day 8- Mom and dad

**W**e moved a lot. Mom says it was 11 times before I was five. I don't remember any of them. Mom says it upset her each time. As I posted the other day, I remember only bits and pieces of my childhood before age 10.

\* \* \*

I remember Dad teaching me to fish, and once we went on a fishing barge in the ocean. It was one of my best memories. It was exciting, and we had so much fun. Dad taught me how to do other manly things, like play catch with a baseball. I remember him talking to me about his childhood. He taught me to work hard and try my best. And no complaining (I remember he hated that). I also felt afraid of disappointing my dad; I looked up to him and wanted his approval. I never felt like I got it.

Our home overflowed with tension. Dad worked a lot. When he was home, he and Mom had big fights. I remember hearing yelling. I remember Dad's anger. I have only vague memories of these... just little slivers of them. But what has stuck with me over the decades was this scary "look" that dad could give. It would freeze me and terrify me. I got that look whenever I disappointed him. The look has stayed with me to this day.

I also remember Mom crying a lot. I remember feeling like it was my job to comfort my mother.

Anxiety. I was anxious and on edge all the time. I remember not being able to relax. I was in a constant state of heightened alert. This is how I remember my childhood before the divorce. This may not be how it actually was; there may not have been so much trauma. But there may have been much more.

But this is for sure... by the time I was 10, I remember always being “on guard.” Never at rest. I always thought about what could happen next. The divorce cemented those feelings of “trust no one.”

\* \* \*

I was told later that Aunt Bea and Uncle Bill had arranged everything; a new apartment, a car, and airfare to get from Los Angeles to Minneapolis. We would live less than a mile from them, and I had time to get enrolled in the 5th grade.

I remember that quiet and somber car ride from the Minneapolis airport to our new home. I vividly remember it being late at night, pitch black outside. But saved ticket stubs that Mom held onto proved it was just two in the afternoon. She told me many years later that the sun was shining.

It's funny how powerful an incorrect memory can be. Was it dark outside because it was dark inside my mind?

I sat in the back on the passenger side. My brother and sister were beside me. Aunt Bea drove, with my mom next to her. This memory I am told is correct.

I said over and over to myself during that long ride that I would never trust anyone again. That I had to be a man now. My family needed me, and I had to make sure that no one ever

hurt any of us again. I was a mix of anger and bitterness and self-creating hero. I had recently begun reading Louis L'Amour westerns, and it was easy to put myself in the place of the tall, quiet gunslinger who saved widows from evil cattle barons. I would become the hero that my dad wasn't.

\* \* \*

I was an innocent child living in a stressful home. I have to believe that my constant hyper-vigilance and anxiety was not my fault. Because I want it to be my fault... just like I want everything to be my fault.

## Day 9- Aunt Bea & Uncle Bill

**L**iving near my aunt and uncle, I saw in my Uncle Bill how a gentle man could nurture a family. I saw in Aunt Bea, my mom's sister, how a confident woman lived without fear.

I spent more time with Aunt Bea than Uncle Bill. I'd take the bus after school to her house, since she was home all day and my mom was at work. I was in fifth grade and in love with her World Book Encyclopedia set, and her big house on the hill. I loved the big sledding run that started in her backyard, whipped around the side of the house, and dropped at a frightening angle as it sped straight into the neighbor's yard.

I talked Aunt Bea's ear off, and she never looked too burdened to listen. There was a lightness of love and confidence and wisdom about her. Uncle Bill would come home from teaching at the university and greet his kids with no alcohol on his breath and no anger in his voice. They would tease him by calling him SAM, which stood for Supreme Almighty Master.

In their home was the first time I had seen what a happy family looked like. It was heaven on earth.

## Day 10- Fights

**T**here was a huge verbal fight last night in the dining room, just down the hall from my room. I was almost asleep when suddenly I heard a loud fight and the f-bomb being hurled. It triggered me into a state of anxiety and fear. Of course, this is linked to my childhood. I can see that. But it also reminded me of the many fights I'd had as a child.

\* \* \*

I'm five years old and I have just hit Donny Manseau. My dad gives me that look that makes me want to pee my pants. Mom is crying and Donny is yelling and I don't know what to do.

Donny's dad is my dad's best friend, and Donny's two years older than me. He's taller and bigger than me, and he starts picking on my brother Matt near the Christmas tree, and no one is doing anything. Matt is crying hard because he's only three. Mom looks at Dad, and Dad looks at Donny's dad who is laughing and I yell stop picking on my brother and no one does anything. Donny keeps shoving Matt.

So I hit Donny in the stomach and then in the face, and then Donny's dad stops laughing.

Dad yanks me away from Donny and sends me to my room. I'm scared I'll get a spanking. I hope it's from Mom, but I'm scared it will be Dad.

\* \* \*

It's my second day in the 5th grade and already I'm in trouble. I punched a kid in the stomach. Duane Johnson has flunked out twice and is bigger than everyone. He teases the girls and shoves the boys. I'm the new kid in school, so I'm an easy target.

The hallway is crowded and smelly and old. "Hey Ken, why do you talk so much? You're a big-mouth!"

I don't answer him back. I don't want any trouble on my first day in school. Mom told me everything would be ok, but it's not. I'm the weirdest kid in school. I don't like school here, and I don't like the kids.

"Do you hear me? I said you're a big-mouth!" I turn and walk away. My anger rises. It makes me afraid of myself. Suddenly, I feel a painful punch in my back. It's so hard that I stumble and begin to fall.

I turn around and see Duane laughing at me. I punch him in the stomach. Hard. And standing right there a few feet away is our teacher, Mrs. Jones. I could swear I didn't see her before I hit Duane. Duane shouts in pain, and Mrs. Jones grabs my ear and pulls me towards the principal's office. I yell that he hit me first. But she didn't see that. Duane got lucky.

Mrs. Jones sits me down in a chair outside Principal Evans' office and tells me to stay put. I'm shaking and scared and wonder what will happen. The principal calls my mom at work. It takes forever for her to show up. When she does, she looks so disappointed and worried.

We go into the principal's office, and I tell them both that Duane had punched me in the back first. My mom looks at me with a serious face and asks me if this is true. I say yes. "Mr. Evans, if my son says that it happened this way, then it happened this way. He has never looked me in the eye and told me a lie."

I get sent to the hallway again, and they close the door to talk privately. I'm so scared. When the door opens, the principal says I have to go home for the rest of the day, but I can come back to school tomorrow. Then he lectures me about hitting, and that I have to tell a teacher when I'm bullied, and all kinds of other stuff. I'm not paying much attention to him. Instead, I'm amazed that he believes my mom and me.

I fought kids all the way until I was in the 9th grade. I lost more than I won, because I'd often fight kids bigger than me. By 10th grade I had grown much taller and had that same look in my eyes that my dad had... so there were no more fist fights.

Secretly, every fight terrified me. I stayed scared and on edge through all of Junior High School.

## Day 11- You look white from here

**T**here's a powerful desire in all of us to belong. I feel that here in the last room on the right. Do they like me? Will I fit in? But sometimes that feeling clashes with personal values. Never was this more clear than when I attended Bob Jones University. That marked the first time I experienced cognitive dissonance between my values and my religion. It wouldn't be the last.

\* \* \*

“Young man, from here you look white,” said Dean Liverman as he held his hand over his gray eyebrows, squinting over one thousand freshmen to the back of the auditorium.

“You look white.”

My Asian-American friend, Jim, had just asked the dean which race he belonged to. His mother was Japanese, and his father was Caucasian.

The answer was a visible relief to Jim, as it established his right to date white girls for the next four years. The dean's tone of voice showed that this was a gift to my friend who could

“pass,” and my friend received it as such.

The message was obvious: dating white girls was better.

It was the fall of 1976; I was 18 years old, and I was sitting in Freshman Orientation at Bob Jones University. BJU was a religious college with over 6,000 students at the time. During orientation, the dean highlighted particularly unusual or unpopular rules; for example, no hand holding for couples. Definitely no kissing. No unchaperoned time alone with a member of the opposite sex. These were the most unpopular rules.

And there was also a prohibition against interracial dating.

The dean explained interracial dating to be “unbiblical” and “against nature.” The biblical case for this was flimsy. It depended mostly upon Noah’s curse of Ham, and the creation story that mentioned everything was created “after its kind.” Finally, Acts 17:26 which said “he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”

All of this disturbed me. I had a crush on a good friend in high school who was black. Though I never asked her out... I had wanted to date her. (She’ll be surprised to hear this.)

I had been aware of the rule before coming. The rule was the reason that BJU did not accept Pell grants, making paying for college more difficult. My youth pastor in Minnesota had insisted that I ought to go anyway. Like thousands of seniors in high school all over America, my pastor swayed me to attend BJU.

Though I knew about the rule, I went anyway. But sitting there in the auditorium, watching the Dean pronounce who

was white and “ok to date” was a jolt. And yet I stayed. I did not protest, nor did I question out loud.

Inside the camp, supporting an overtly racist rule, was better than being cast out from the camp. Inside, I had a thousand friends. Outside, an existential crisis of faith would await me. So I stayed. Because “inside” felt safer than “out.”

## Day 12- Cognitive dissonance

The beginning of the end of my love for religion began over 40 years ago when I realized that my northern church supported a southern racist Bible college. I stayed at Bob Jones University (BJU) for three more years, searing my conscience each day. Cognitive dissonance was at work in my mind, and would not go away for decades.

\* \* \*

Bob Jones, Sr. founded Bob Jones University in 1927. It originally was located in Florida. Then it moved to Tennessee, and ended up in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1947. Bob Jones was a “fire and brimstone” Methodist preacher, who held three beliefs so strongly that he felt he must establish a college that would reflect these beliefs. He wanted a “Fortress of Fundamentalism.”

Belief one: The Pope was an antichrist, and Catholicism was a satanic religion.

Belief two: The theory of evolution would be the ruin of America.

Belief three: Blacks were a subservient race, and they should be grateful that we brought them as slaves to this country.

BJU didn't admit non-white students until 1971.

However, campus life at the day-to-day level did not reflect these origins. One way to deal with the dissonance in my mind was to focus on only the belonging. And there was a lot of comfort in belonging.

So when I saw whites-only couples dating, I sublimated my conscience. When I heard anti-Catholic sermons from the pulpit, I silenced the inner voice that was screaming NO! and focused on the loving friends I had made in this bastion of Fundamentalism.

It slowly became second nature to figure out how to live in the tension. It would take 40 years for it to finally break me.

## Day 13- A day in the life

**M**y day-to-day life here in IRTS is settling in. Rhythms work their calming effect. We are all “new” here at IRTS, and we are here with a common purpose—to get well. All of this makes me remember how religion got its grip on me.

Throw a bunch of newbies together in a close setting and create rhythms of belonging. The military does this in boot camp; IRTS is doing it right now, and Bob Jones University did it 40 years ago to me and my peers.

\* \* \*

Bob Jones University gave me a new equality with my peers; a common purpose. And new marching orders. Here, no one cared if you were raised in a poor single-parent family. We were all soldiers for Jesus. There was a very military feel to the campus.

In fact, Bob Jones Jr, the Chancellor of BJU, had grown up in a military academy, and when elected president of BJU in the 1940s, worked to install a military academy style to campus life.

Everything I had known as “normal” was redefined when I moved onto the campus. And though I occasionally complained, I secretly relished my new orderly life.

\* \* \*

## **A day in the life at Bob Jones University**

It's 6:30 am, and the bell in the dormitory has just gone off. The five of us in the cramped dormitory room have just minutes to get our feet on the floor before the hall monitor will come by to check on us.

I'm on an upper bunk, so I need to be standing. My Assistant Prayer Captain (APC) has seniority; he only has to swing his legs over and touch the floor from the lower bunk.

But as “upper-bunk” freshmen, we don't begrudge our APC and room leader. He's the coolest guy of all. Hank is a senior Bible Major from Utah, speaks with a cowboy accent, likes forbidden music, and doesn't like cats. He's all “dog-guy.”

When he walked into our room on the first day, the rest of us were waiting to see who our new room leader would be. We knew we had a good year ahead of us when Hank walked in and said, “Howdy.” The next thing he did was to close the door, look at the 10 “big rules” tacked to the door, rip them off with a grand gesture, and throw them in the garbage can. “We don't need these here” he said.

We all had an instant crush on Hank.

Anyway, it's 6:33 am. Our feet are on the floor, the hall monitor has just checked on us, and we close our door. At 6:34 am, we

all start violating Rule 1: Griping Not Tolerated.

We're groggy college students, and like all college students, we don't get enough sleep. Fortunately, Hank (the coolest guy ever) allows us to vent and gripe.

\* \* \*

### **"Hot water!"**

Much of the campus showcased beautiful new buildings; the 70s were the heyday of Bob Jones University. But the dorms were older. Students from all over kept coming, and five to a room that was designed for three was normal. Plumbing was taxed to the limit.

It's 6:45 am, and I'm in the shower. Just as I'm lathered up, I hear someone yell "hot water!" and I quickly step out from under the soon-to-be scalding water.

Someone flushes a toilet, and we all risk being burned alive.

There is no privacy; everything is open, and no one is in the mood this early to be chatty. Except for Ben.

Ben is "that guy" who pictures himself the paragon of Christian virtues. Each morning he greets people with a cheerfulness that makes you want to slowly peel the skin from his face. "How ya doin' Brother Hank!" as Hank is shaving. Hank mutters something like "pious jerk" under his breath and ignores Ben. Did I say how much we loved Hank?

\* \* \*

## Suit and tie

It's 7:30 am and I'm running late to class. My tie won't tie properly, even though Hank has taught me well how to make the perfect Half-Windsor. I'm panicking; my room job isn't done (it's dusting this week) and if I'm late to my 8:00 am class across campus, I'll get five demerits. Yes. We have a demerit system.

If I don't do my room job, it's only one demerit, so I choose one demerit over five, and run out the door still fighting my Half-Windsor, and violating Rule Number 1 under my breath the entire way.

I hate my tie, but my checkered brown sports coat is cool (to me anyway). I have to wear the coat until lunchtime, after which I can remove it and unbutton my top button and loosen my tie. Dress slacks are still required; jeans are for weekends only.

After 3 pm, I am finally free to ditch the tie entirely. Well, until dinner at 5 pm, when I have to dress up all over again.

\* \* \*

## Dating parlor

It's after dinner. I have time to date in the Dating Parlor (DP), which is on the second floor of the Student Center. It spans the length of a football field, and looks like a gigantic furniture store with mean-looking matrons patrolling everywhere to make sure no one touches anyone.

Freshmen boys are limited to the time allowance of the girl

they are dating: freshmen girls are allowed four hours a week, while senior girls are allowed unlimited time. I am lucky; I'm dating a Junior who has many hours available in the DP.

So I sit on the couch with Red-Haired Helen, one inch apart, staring into her beautiful eyes, and think some un-Christian thoughts.

Assistant Dean Agatha strolls by and glares at us as if she can read our naughty minds. We stare back and dare her to say anything. We have a whole inch between us, and all four feet on the floor. Ha! Love still thrives, even here at BJU.

\* \* \*

### **Snail mail and lights out**

The day ends with the running of the mail at 9:30 pm. You must be back in your dorm by 9:00 pm. That gives you just enough time to send a hot note (on paper!) to your girlfriend. They don't allow phone calls between dorms.

You write in longhand all of your juicy "I love you" notes using your best poetic skills, address it to the room number and dorm of your girlfriend, and place it in the 6 foot long box's bin corresponding to that dorm and floor. Mail runs at 9:30 pm... sharp!

Fleet-footed guys from an Honor Society (think fraternity without the drunkenness) run and pick up each long box from the five men's dorms and each long box from the women's dorms. With all the urgency that passionate love letters demand, they run across campus delivering the mail.

The runners have to yell "man on the floor" when they get to

the women's dorms in case a student accidentally steps out in her pajamas. Guys and gals lay on their beds and get starry-eyed as they read the love letters. Since love is important at BJU, this mail system runs seven nights a week and is seldom late.

Now that love's taken care of, it's 9:45 and time to be spiritual before bedtime. We have room prayer meetings, with Prayer Captains (PCs) or Assistant Prayer Captains (APCs) like Hank leading the 15 minute meeting. A small devotional, some prayer requests, and a few minutes of prayer.

There's also an individual confession of not living up to Christian standards well enough. They encourage this, and it reflects to your room leader the seriousness of your faith. The day's kidding is laid aside, and piety can shine through. If I'm serious enough, one day I can be an APC.

Lights out is at 11:00 pm, and they strictly enforce it. However, I'm ready with my flashlight. So are my roommates. Unofficial study hall begins at 11:00 pm under the blankets and continues until they catch us or we pass out from exhaustion.

\* \* \*

## **There is more**

For the most part, an average day was fun. It was filled with all the normal young adult drama that permeates any other campus. Good, bad, emotional. Highs and lows. Deep friendships and painful betrayals. In almost every sense, it was normal... and yet it wasn't.

We carried extra burdens, like guilt and shame. Expectations to be model Christians. Everything we did at BJU was expected

to reflect a level of “showcase Christianity.” We felt always on display... bright lights in a world of evil.

## Day 14- Others

**A**s we open up with our peers and staff in IRTS, more and more of our childhood experiences come to light. We are still children inside. The roots of the here and now began in the past.

\* \* \*

You could say that my path to Bob Jones University began in the 5th grade. We joined an Independent Fundamental Baptist (IFB) church shortly after coming to Minnesota. The church culture was uniquely centered on “us” versus “others.”

“Others” were not just those outside the faith; “others” included “compromisers” in the faith who befriended Catholics. Then add a third-degree of separation, where “compromisers” included those evangelicals who befriended folks who befriended Catholics. Billy Graham was a compromiser .

If that was hard to follow... welcome to Fundamentalism.

“Compromisers” and were shunned even more than “worldly” non-believers. Yes, this was all confusing, but over time, attending church at least three times a week, we eventually

learned this and it became normal.

Of course, there were other identifiers between us and them. For instance, “worldliness” was to be avoided, and Christians who thought worldliness was ok.

What was worldliness?

It wasn't so much a mindset or thought pattern. It was more a list of outward behaviors... ways in which you could easily tell who was “godly” and who wasn't.

Worldliness included dresses and skirts above the knee, pants on women (unless it was for outdoor activities), excessive makeup on women, long hair on men, going to movies or dances, rock-and-roll music, and smoking or drinking. There were more, but you get the idea.

Liberal Christians (“others”) did these things, so there was no close friendship allowed with them. However, “unsaved” people were not criticized for not violating these rules, since they were all going to hell, and they first needed to “get saved.”

The category lines between liberal Christians and the unsaved were blurry, so when in doubt, we were taught to ask our spiritual leaders. In short... my Baptist church groomed me to attend Bob Jones University.

## Day 15- Labels

**I**t's so quiet tonight. I'm thinking tonight about my childhood, especially beginning in 5th grade. These late grade school and early junior high school years were formative.

\* \* \*

“Whoever can memorize the most Bible verses in a week will win a brand new Bible.”

I am going to win that Bible.

Julie Richardson has the same idea.

It's the summer of my 6th grade year. Junior High is looming. But for now, on this hot August day, I have one goal... to beat Julie to that Bible. In five days of vacation Bible School, Julie and I each memorize over 100 Bible verses word-perfect. In the end, I don't remember who memorizes more. I do know it was close. So they award both of us a new Bible.

That competition sets us both apart as “spiritual” leaders among our peers. These labels get attached early and often

by adults; other labels include “lukewarm,” “worldly,” and “troubled.” At that time, there were no categories for kids with special needs. Everyone received a label, and the natural result was that we lived up to it.

Unless of course we had a religious conversion or re-dedication. Then all of your past labels get reset, and for a time, you can start creating a new label for yourself. Let me walk you through how that can happen:

We’re in 7th grade, and just like every Saturday afternoon, there’s a Youth Group activity. This week, just like we do once a month, we are taking a bus to a roller rink 20 miles away, where we’ll join a couple hundred other youth for a night of roller skating, followed by an evangelistic rally.

I can’t roller skate well... basically I just go around in the circle slowly and try to not get knocked down. I can’t do the fancy backwards skating and tricks that some of the other kids (usually the worldly kids) can do, since they hang out at roller rinks more than us spiritual kids.

(They have reserved the rink just for the Youth Rally, so there’s no rock-and-roll music. I don’t remember what the music was that they played... it might have been Big Band for all I know.)

After the roller skating, we go to a big church that seats all of us. That’s when the spiritual time begins.

They’ve scheduled an evangelist to preach, and he preaches for over an hour. He’s engaging and knows how to keep teenagers’ attention. Eventually, it’s time for the altar call.

The hymn, Just As I Am, plays on the organ for the required eight or so verses. We all sing the memorized lyrics. It seems like forever. But now is the time for me to rededicate my life to Jesus. I sometimes “go forward” for the altar call, along with

the “worldly” teenagers who need a fresh start.

Tomorrow is Sunday and our pastor will ask us during his altar call if any of us at the rally the night before had made a new commitment to Christ. The tears will flow, and hugs will follow, when one of the “worldly” kids goes forward. So that’s how you get a new label.

## Day 16- Faux repentance

I've been sulking all day. I'm not sure why I'm sulking, but I just am. Maybe it's because I'm still thinking about labels from last night's post. Thinking of labels reminds me of this story.

It's my sophomore year at Bob Jones University. 1977. I'm in a room with two new freshmen. The year is off to a poor start. It's obvious that these boys don't belong in a Bible college.

"Hey, Steve," says Bob. "Did you catch that gorgeous babe in the dining common this morning?"

"I did." Steve says it with a leer in his voice.

"Her boobs were just busting out and begging me to squeeze them" says Bob.

They both laugh, and the verbal undressing continues from PG13 to R quickly. "OK guys, knock it off," I say. "Girls are not your property to undress in your imagination just because you can.

The verbal undressing continues, and I leave.

Day after day this, and other sexist talk, continues. I ask them to stop. They won't. They escalate instead. One day I've had

enough. "I'm going to the assistant dean if you don't quit. I'm serious."

Steve says, "If you do, you'll pay. Don't push us. You'll regret it."

Once again, I leave the room. But this time, I head straight for the assistant dean's office in our dorm. "Mr. Radke, I need to talk to you."

So I go into his office and reluctantly spill the beans about the offensive conversations that Bob and Steve have been having.

"You realize that these are serious accusations, and since you are the only witness, I'll have to talk to these boys and get their side of the story."

"Of course, sir."

Later that day, there's a knock on the door. It's Mr. Radke. "Bob and Steve, I need to see you in my office. Now."

As they leave with Mr. Radke, I get a mouthed warning from Steve. "We'll get you."

I am only slightly hopeful that anything will happen. They'll deny everything, and I'll have to live with this for the rest of the year.

An hour later, they return with tears in their eyes. For a brief moment, I'm hopeful that justice has been done, and they've repented, and this will be a great year.

"Ken, I need to see you now in my office," says Mr. Radke.

"Sure." I'm excited to hear of Bob and Steve's change of heart.

I follow Mr. Radke into his office. Something is off about his walk; he seems stiff and stern. I'm suddenly on guard, and as I enter the office, he says, "Close the door."

As I settle into the chair, he says, "Bob and Steve have admitted to the allegations you made." So far, so good.

"They have made a complete confession and repented and

rededicated their lives to Christ.”

So far, so good.

“But they also told me you have been taking part in their lewd talk; in fact, you led them in it. And worse, they said that you were teaching them blasphemous limericks.”

“Finally, when they tried to stop you, you threatened to come to me to rat them out.”

“Ken, these young men have confessed and rededicated their lives to Christ. They are freshmen, and new here. They had no reason to lie; they are facing demerits for their behavior, and it will go on their permanent record. They could have denied everything, and nothing would have happened to them.”

“So I believe them.”

I have no words. To say that I’d been setup, that they had faked a conversion... all of it would have fallen on deaf ears. Nothing trumped a sinner’s prayer of repentance.

Bob and Steve have a new label; freshly converted sinners.

I have a new label... blasphemer.

The power of labels is huge in evangelicalism and fundamentalism. A certain amount of tears, faked humility, and the right words can wipe away accountability and clean any slate.

Don’t get me wrong; real repentance is a beautiful thing, and everyone deserves a second, or even a fifteenth, chance. But conversions can become like notches on a spiritual leader’s belt. They can, and do, obscure any discernment about motives. Fake conversions are plentiful.

Conversions are a system, and systems can be played. I’ve seen it for decades.

I received more demerits than Bob and Steve. Transferred from my room to another. They were held up as examples of Christ’s power to save even the worst of sinners; I was regarded

as a spiritual fake and threatened with expulsion.

## Day 17- Tari

**N**ot everyone was a fake. I remember many people from Bob Jones University who were angels in human form. One of these was Tari Winstead.

Tari worked with us in the Dining Common. She was a grad student, and most of us were freshmen. We were an all-male dishwashing crew, and her duties brought her into frequent contact with us every evening.

First, some background on the Dining Common.

The Dining Common seated over 5,000 students in what they billed as the fourth-largest sit down dining room in the world. It was huge. A sea of tables. Every evening, seven days a week, they required required students to eat at assigned tables. They used real china plates and all the traditional serving bowls and platters. Hot food was rushed out of the industrial-sized ovens and carried to tables by a fleet of almost 100 waiters and waitresses. They passed food around just like at a Thanksgiving dinner. It was an incredible sight.

It was also a well-oiled machine. After the meal, tables were cleared by the wait-staff, and dishes were piled high at the

windows that were the entry points to our dishwashing rooms.

The two rooms were large, and housed 25 foot long conveyor belt dishwashers. One young man would “feed in” the dirty dishes as fast as the belt would allow, hopefully leaving no empty spaces between dishes. Another would “catch” the scalding hot and spotless dishes at the other end, and stack them on four-shelved, six feet long wheeled carts.

Extra dirty casserole pans, stuck-on dirty serving dishes, and other hand-washed items were stacked in the huge sinks nearby.

It was here, at the sinks, that Tari had volunteered each night to wash dishes alongside “her boys.”

The work was hot and sweaty, and the conveyor belt dishwashing machines were loud. The entire experience was ripe for grumbling. But Tari’s presence each night alongside us changed everything. She sang and smiled and never complained. When one of us was depressed and discouraged, she would listen and care.

We were her mission field. This was appropriate, since she was getting a degree in foreign missions. In later years I heard that she got married in South Korea while working at an orphanage.

She was so selfless, and so giving of herself, that we forgot sometimes she was human like the rest of us. But she suffered too. Verses in the Bible would deeply move her, and she sometimes came to work with tears in her eyes. This didn’t happen often but when it did, it endeared her to us even more. It also made a better message than a dozen sermons from a pulpit. Her pulpit was the sink full of dirty pots and pans. Once, she had an unrequited love that broke her heart. She was our big sister, and her presence made that first year of dishwashing duty one of the most special things each of us treasured from

our freshman year.

Anyway, Tari was one of those world-changing people that you meet a few times in your life if you're lucky. And that we met her at a racist institution adds to the confusion in my soul when I remember those years.

## Day 18- Dishwashing crew

**B**ob Jones University dishwashing crew. We broke records for speed and quality of our work. Records that had stretched back for 20 years. The golden years were our freshman and sophomore years.

The seven other guys and I who made up this evening crew became close. I had joined the crew in the first semester of my freshman year. Brad was the other guy who joined with me. This was a work-scholarship job, and it was the last job on campus that was chosen. As we were both late in applying, it was the only job left. It was ugly work.

With the start of second semester, six of the eight guys quit. That left me and the other freshman left to decide who would become crew chief to the new recruits due tomorrow.

Brad was on academic probation. That left me. I protested. There was no way I wanted to be thrown into the position of teaching six new guys, all of whom would be freshmen with no other choice for a work scholarship job.

Mr. Davis told me that my reluctance bordered on griping, and I faced disciplinary action if I didn't shut up and take the job without another word.

So I became the crew chief in the (arguably) hardest job on

campus. When the six new recruits joined Brad and me on that first night, we all were strangers. But over the next year and a half, that would change. Trial by fire (hot water) forged us into a close-knit band of brothers. We looked to our “big sister” Tari for moral support, and together, we grew to take pride in our work and joy in our friendships. Our loyalty to each other was unbreakable. Until one of us broke it.

## Day 19- Betrayal

**R**eligion often brings out the worst in us. It feeds desires for power and control; it exalts “othering” others. It separates friends.

Charles became a larger-than-life fundamentalist leader in later years. But before all of this, he was just “Chuck” to all of us on our dishwashing crew. He was gregarious, fun-loving, and a close friend to all of us. He was an intimate part of our crew... until one day when he ratted out Dan, another crew member, for a technical rules violation.

Dan took Missionary Aviation so he could learn to fly. He had class at the airport every day, which was on the opposite side of campus from his dorm. There was a rule that you had to sign out on a sheet in your dorm every time you left campus. You then had to sign back in when you returned. The rule existed so that the school would always know where you were.

Dan couldn't make it from his previous class to his dorm and then to class at the airport in time. So he skipped signing out every day and signed both in and out on his return. The school always knew where he was, since he was in an off-campus class at the airport.

We all knew that Dan did this and thought it was a creative

(albeit rule-breaking) solution to his problem. In hindsight, of course, he ought to have simply told the dean about his problem and gotten a blanket excuse.

Chuck decided one day that his “conscience couldn’t live with” knowing about Dan’s rule-breaking. So, without giving Dan a chance to turn himself in on his own, Chuck went to the dean and ratted out Dan.

Dan was almost expelled for his semester-long habitual rule breaking. Each infraction, every day, was worth five demerits. Added up, it was enough to expel him. They made an exception and put him under disciplinary probation, took away campus privileges, (like dating) and permanently recorded his severe infraction.

The campus lived by a military honor code. So, Chuck, as a reward for coming forward to rat out Dan, was promoted in the dorms to Prayer Captain. This status was coveted and ensured future ministry opportunities. Chuck quickly resigned from our dishwashing crew, and Tari was heartbroken at this betrayal of a friendship. We all went through the various stages of grief... especially Dan.

