

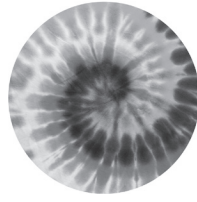
# FINDING YOUR WAY

ONE MAN'S SEARCH FOR SANITY,  
SOBRIETY AND SUCCESS

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PEARHOUSE  
PRESS



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1

**THE  
FOLDER**

**“Uncle John’s Band”**

I grew up with the story of my adoption told to me almost every night before I fell asleep. “There I was, painting the living room ceiling while your mother held the ladder,” my dad would start. “When we got the call that Catholic Charities in Utica had a 1½-year-old who needed a home right away.”

They added more details as I grew older, woven somewhere between my dad sitting on the end of my bed and my mother tidying the remains of my day until they turned off the bedside lamp. I’d been in foster care, they told me, with a family who had planned to adopt me until the father suffered some health issues and, sadly, couldn’t continue the process. The way my parents told the story, adopting me and my other siblings were strokes of good fortune.

Later, my older brother, Joe, told me more about my actual adoption. I don’t have a memory of being in court, but he remembers going to the courthouse just as strongly as he remembers no longer being the youngest when our parents brought me home. My best day wasn’t his; my mother told me that within the first few hours of my arrival, Joe stuck out his foot and tripped me as I walked past him. Unfortunately, our relationship never got much better, and he took advantage of every opportunity to mess with me.

Adopted kids usually struggle with belonging, wondering if their place in their new family is secure and if their adoptive parents were truly their mom and dad. Not me.

**Family is not defined by  
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## FINDING YOUR WAY

Family is not defined by our genes; it is built and maintained through love. If I ever doubted how wanted I was, I only needed to remind myself that my parents adopted me knowing I had multiple surgeries and lengthy recoveries ahead of me to repair my cleft palate. The hospital remains the main character in my earliest memories, even though I was so young that I was in the pediatric ward during those first surgeries. There were four cribs in my room, each holding a baby or toddler in recovery, all of us crying when the hospital rules stated that our parents couldn't stay with us overnight. When I replay that time in my mind, I see my mother's devastated face, my dad reassuring her as they disappeared into the hallway, and the terror I felt when the door closed behind them.

I didn't know anything about cleft palates, and I didn't know about painful surgeries until I experienced a few of them. The first closed the soft palate on the top of my mouth. When I woke up, they'd put splints on my arms to keep me from ripping out the stitches. These memories are tinged with the smell of antiseptic, that "nothing" scent of sterile environments, but most of all, masking tape, which they used to tape the splints to my arms. To this day, I still can't stand that smell.

I patiently endured surgery after surgery, endless orthodontia, and medical exams, and even my arrogant surgeon, who'd inspect my face closely at every checkup. "Oh, I do such beautiful work," he'd tell everyone in the room. I never liked him since he'd snipped something under my tongue—releasing my tongue tie without warning when I was young.

I didn't know what I was living was hard. I didn't think to complain. I guess I didn't know any other life. All I knew was that there'd be a present waiting for me every time I came home from a hospital visit. And, man, I loved coming home.

I grew up in a neighborhood in Upstate New York, overflowing with kids, house after house telling the same middle-class story. Ours was a two-story with a basement and an unfinished attic. The first

floor had a kitchen, a TV room *and* a family room, and a fancy-to-me wallpapered dining room with stiff-backed chairs that reminded me to sit up straight and behave. There were three bedrooms upstairs, and one small bathroom with a big enough sink for two kids to brush their teeth at a time. We had no more than a quarter-acre lot with a back yard just big enough for an above-ground swimming pool, but it still felt like a forest preserve to me.

I couldn't have dreamed of a better place to grow up. It was exactly as you'd expect. Waking up to the sound of Dad walking down the hall, knowing I had at least another hour of sleep before I had to get ready for school. Someone pounding on the bathroom door with a panicked "Don't use all the hot water!" or "Are you almost done?" Exploring the dark, dusty attic between old photo boxes and old family heirlooms looking for hidden Christmas gifts. Searching for a snack in the buttercup yellow fridge, my mother's exasperated voice gently admonishing us to "Close the door! You're letting out all the cold air!" Crowding around the kitchen table, hoping to get a scoop of the mashed potatoes before they lost their steam. Me hiding the yellow wax beans beneath a cloud of mashed potatoes, feeding them to the dog, or patiently waiting until my mom got fed up and took my plate away. All of us huddled on the brown plaid couch or splayed out on the carpet in front of the television, paying rapt attention to the latest episodes of *M\*A\*S\*H* and *The Waltons*.

It was perfect in my memories.

The best part of my post-surgery recoveries was the day my mom decided I'd healed enough to go outside and play. As safe and nurturing as the inside of my house was, the neighborhood was a wild adventure that always held the potential of danger. And, man, I've always loved danger.

My older siblings and I were among the youngest in the neighborhood, so we started off our street life watching the other kids play from afar until we got old enough to join them. We made up

games on the fly, and none of them required much more than a dive into garbage bins for some old cans, a few sticks, and maybe a couple of rocks. My favorite was a twist on the traditional Hide and Seek and Kick the Can, but I also loved playing baseball on the Montgomery Street Playground. The playground was where all the neighborhoods converged. It had everything: a large kiddie pool, monkey bars, swings sets, basketball, tennis, and a small baseball diamond.

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days and press pause.**

Sometimes looking back, I wish I could rewind to those days and press pause. Our games went on for hours, interrupted only when one of the moms yelled from their front porch for their kids to come home for lunch. There was always someone waiting to rotate in and take their place, a benefit of having more than 40 kids in the homes around us. And no matter how close the score or how competitive our games, we all ran home when the streetlamps lit up the dusty purple evening sky, calling out goodbyes and promising each other we'd kick their butt when we were back on the lot the next day.

I was pretty obsessed with the older kids, and thought everything they did was cool as heck. I'd see them up in the trees, behind playhouses, and behind houses trying to hide their cigarette smoke from their parents, drinking beer in the alleyway behind their houses, and a few even played in a garage band. The older kids in town always seemed to live life on the edge, and it was hardly shocking when they wrecked or flipped their cars or even fell to their death off Foxes Falls. They were wild, but they were also free—something I absolutely craved.