



a dedication



one

It doesn't seem so long ago that I reveled in being labeled a loner, a troubled teenager, and I wore that badge with an angry pride, willing to challenge and ready to dismiss any type of authority. I believed solitude and loneliness were inseparable companions, that being different meant being ostracized, and that individuality precluded fitting in. Sadly, perhaps predictably, I was willing to pay the price.

But my life changed.

Some might argue maturity arrived—losing the attitude, gaining perspective, the transformation of boy to man—but that's too simple, like it's assumed and not special. I think it was more. I believe one of life's secret windows momentarily opened, and that I was invited to take a peek. Even though looking through that window complicated my world, it's when life became fulfilling and truly my own.

When I look back to that time in my life, when I sift through memories and recall events, I can't help but think of the teachers who guided me, the people who played both major and minor roles that made a difference. They took me to different vantage points of that window with their unique perspective, and each helped me define, or at least hone in on, who I am.

And then there was Joe Toscano. A retired warrior, gifted artist, and perpetual student, he was the person who, despite grappling with his own demons, somehow connected and kept me from the destructive path I was so bent on following. Joe's lessons—owning choices, defining my own success, accepting that even good people make mistakes—aren't difficult to remember, though they can be hard to follow. They've stayed with me through a gently persistent inner voice when day-to-day challenges become too difficult.

I'm sure there were books that dispensed equivalent doses of counsel, the self-help gurus with their formulaic programs and cute slogans, but they didn't know me. And besides, books don't offer Marie Callender's pie or blinking eyes or knowing smiles that pave the way for wisdom that can sometimes be too hard to swallow. Those belong to Joe.

Although I am now quietly confident with whatever tomorrow brings, it wasn't always so.

two

It didn't take much. A hot chat room, flipping through TV channels with the remote until something grabbed me, imagining circumstances that would transform my mostly geek status to popular, tapping a pencil or foot to a song I liked. They were distractions, basic tools for a procrastinator, and I was using them instead of writing a paper for my Contemporary American History class. I told myself I'd start in just a few more minutes, but I knew if I bounced back and forth long enough, it would be too late to work on the assignment that night. It was an unproductive habit that suited me well.

Discuss whether FDR allowed a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in order to thrust America into World War II.

Right. I was seventeen years old and basically didn't give a shit.

I suppose I wasn't all that different from other kids my age; I played loud music, wore baggy pants that threatened to fall off with every step, and I'd perfected that perpetual scowl, the one hovering somewhere between distant and dangerous. Still, I wasn't an extreme version—no tattoos or piercings, and I didn't do drugs—but that didn't seem to matter to most adults.

Rationalizations work better with larger numbers, so I think they lumped all of us together for the sake of convenience.

I knew my mom would be checking in soon. Her routine was annoying. She would knock on my bedroom door, walk in without being invited, and ask whether my homework was done. She'd list every subject—American Lit, Chemistry, Spanish, History, Pre-Calculus—and watch for any hesitation when I answered. I never hesitated. I was always caught up with my homework, or at least that's what I'd tell her before turning my music louder and flipping a page of whatever book happened to be open. She'd perform this ritual twice a night, three times if she was feeling particularly out of control, and then stomp off in a dramatic display of self-pity and frustration.

My dad jumped into the rotation every now and then. He was an airline pilot so he was out of town quite a bit, and I used that to my advantage. It was a big enough challenge for him to know what classes I was taking, so asking about homework just didn't happen. It seemed like all he cared about were my grades, anyway. What did I think I had so far? Could I get it to an A? I guess you'd call him a bottom-line type of guy.

My parents never asked about my other class. Mom didn't care whether the homework was done, and Dad never queried about the grade. Photography didn't count as a real class with them. Capturing images of joy and despair and pain and innocence just didn't compare to solving logarithms as far as they were concerned. Maybe they had a point. I spent three hours working math problems and deducing word analogies when I took the SAT. The damned thing never asked one question about photography.

My name is Quinnlan Marshall, but everyone calls me Quinn. Quinnlan is a family name from some guy in the Revolutionary War who led a battle against the British and got himself killed. I used to joke that he was the extent of heroes in our family, but what was really funny is that no one even knew how the guy was

related; they just liked his name. I didn't. It wasn't cool having a weird first name at seventeen—just something else to be ragged about—so when I heard the name Quinnlan, I never turned around. It was either someone I didn't know or didn't like, or I was in trouble.

We lived in Louisville, Colorado, a suburb between Denver and Boulder, and I was a junior at Monarch High School. I was tall, almost six-foot-two, and I weighed one hundred and forty pounds. I tried not being self-conscious about being skinny, but that didn't work. The truth was simple and painful: I felt awkward and clumsy when I wasn't in my room—which is why I quit playing sports. Falling down in front of spectators sucked.

When I looked in the mirror, if I was being really honest, I had to admit to being good looking. It was the blue eyes. A lot of people have blue eyes but not many have pitch-black hair and blue eyes. It's what everyone noticed—that and being skinny. Of course I was pretty good at disguising nature's statistical quirk; hit-or-miss personal hygiene, scruffy clothes, and less-than-disciplined hair sent a message that I didn't care what others thought. Unfortunately, I did.

I was locked in a kind of no-man's land at school; not cool enough to be popular and not dorky enough to be a loser. There were others in the same caste as me, but I kept my distance. They mostly imitated the cool kids and dreamed of being one of them. They were the wannabes. Me? I dreamt of the day when I'd figure out who I was, and that would be good enough.

Despite an appearance and attitude suggesting otherwise, I hadn't always been so cynical. I used to care about a lot of things besides blaring music and hanging out online. I played sports, joined a couple of clubs at school, even had a pretty good grade point average at one time. That must be why they kept me in honors classes—that and an IQ somewhere north of one-fifty. Like that mattered. Being cursed by intelligence was just another reason I didn't fit in, and I did my best to bury the

evidence. Sloppy homework, unread chapters, and careless tests kept me unremarkable and discreetly comfortable, though deep down I knew I was still smart. But I also knew there hadn't been a reason to show it lately.

The predictable rap on my bedroom door came during a temporary stereo silence, and my mom entered. "How's the homework coming?" she asked just as an angry electric guitar jolted the room with a new song. Of course I couldn't really hear her words, but the mannerisms and expression told me what I needed to know. I never asked, "What did you say?" That would have admitted the music was too loud.

"Still writing the history paper." With an effortless dexterity reserved for you-didn't-catch-me moments, I lowered the volume, moved the cursor on the computer and clicked on the article I'd already downloaded off the Internet. The article argued that FDR had advance knowledge of Japanese intentions because U.S. Navy codebreakers had intercepted and decoded several radio transmissions warning of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Sounded good to me.

Mom gave my room the once-over. Actually, it would have been correctly labeled the twice-over since she'd already made the rounds earlier that night. She noticed that the various piles of clothes scattered around my room still hadn't moved, but she didn't broach the subject. I was surprised by her lack of comment, but then again I thought maybe her battle-picking skills had improved a bit recently.

"How can you possibly concentrate with the music blaring like that?" she asked before looking at the images flashing across the television on my dresser. She sighed. Mom never liked *South Park*, not even the reruns.

"I'm writing a term paper," I said with just enough edge. "I already know the material, and I'm gathering my thoughts. Are you complaining because I like to feel comfortable when I study?"

“Comfortable is a lot different than being distracted.” She scowled at the collection of sheets and blankets twisted across my bed.

“Oh my God.” I raised my tone and rolled my eyes. “I have a B, and it’s an honors class. In fact, I have a B average in all my classes. Isn’t that good enough for you?” I held my eyes steady, hoping she wouldn’t tabulate the homework, tests and quizzes for each class. The truth was, except for Photography, I had C’s across the board. Okay, so maybe a D in Pre-Calc, but there were still three weeks until the quarter ended. I could have argued that I’d probably have B’s.

The tiny muscles tightened around my mother’s jaw as she debated whether to answer. Maybe she was counting to ten. “It’s not the grades, Quinn,” she finally said. “If B’s and C’s were the best you could do, then your father and I would be happy. The problem is we know you’re capable of so much more. You get decent grades without even trying. Imagine what you could achieve if you really focused.”

Of course I knew my mom meant well. She was always trying to do the right thing: timely thank-you notes, checking in on friends with problems, volunteering at church. Doing the right thing was an image Mom liked, but that she meant well didn’t matter to me. I only heard her telling me what to do.

“I get the same lecture over and over,” I snapped. “Can’t you come up with something original? And how do you know I’m not focused? Maybe grades aren’t as important to me as they are to you and Dad.” I had a winnable argument. Whose life was it, anyway?

“Getting good grades translates into being accepted at the best colleges. We’ve had this discussion before, Quinn,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

Mom was a forty-five-year-old homemaker and looked the part. Always precise makeup and appropriately outfitted before breakfast; her brown hair was cut short and painted by the

hairdresser every month to keep the correct shade. She was average height and always talked about the five pounds she needed to lose. I thought it was closer to fifteen.

“Argue all you want about the standard, but the coldhearted fact won’t change. Topnotch colleges demand good grades. You don’t get in without them.” Her tone was not encouraging or motivating.

“Bill Gates didn’t graduate from college, and Warren Buffett went to the University of Nebraska,” I fired back, wondering if she’d recognize the names. “The two richest men in America didn’t need topnotch schools to be successful, now did they?” Needless to say, *my* battle-picking skills needed serious work. I never backed down from arguments.

Mom’s eyes wandered through my room again, seeking confirmation that her only son was hopeless. The can of Mountain Dew and bag of potato chips with crumbs strewn across my nightstand did the trick. “Just get your homework done.” She sighed again and abruptly left the room.

I turned the music louder, but not as loud as before. Despite my combative nature, I just wasn’t in the mood to press the skirmish. Besides, deep down I got the party line that my parents provided for my sister and me, and that they only wanted the best for us. But “what’s best” came prepackaged. It only fit their terms.

I realize now that my never-ending rollercoaster ride of confusion and frustration and anger—unsure which emotion was next in line or when it would kick in—wasn’t all that noteworthy, or even distinctive. I was just at that anxious age; too old to blindly believe that my parents knew everything, yet too young to accept their experience. Sure, I knew it wasn’t all their fault, and sometimes I even felt guilty when I lashed out at them. Sometimes I even wished we would talk. But that had never worked before. My parents didn’t talk, they lectured, and I didn’t need to be told how to live my life. I needed someone to listen to how it was going so far.