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INSPIRED BY THE SONG, *Letter to Me.*
PERFORMED AND COMPOSED BY BRAD PAISLEY.

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Chapter 1

The Story Before The Story

The bedroom was dark, except for the hallway light streaming in through the partially opened door. My head was pressed deep into a feathery pillow and I was snuggled under the covers of my bed, feeling warm, tingly and clean from my soapy bath. At five years of age, I knew all too well the feelings of not being good enough, not being special, not belonging. But on this winter's night, I felt at peace. For the first time that I could remember, I felt wanted. I felt safe.

Mrs. Watson entered my bedroom just as she had done every night since I had arrived on her doorstep with the social worker several months prior. I watched this tiny lady venture across the room and sit on the edge of my bed. She turned on the lamp, smiled at me and then, as was her tradition, offered up a handful of books and asked me to choose the story I wanted her to read that evening.

As I recall, Mrs. Watson had a gift for captivating audiences as she read, a talent she had honed over years of reading aloud to her

classroom students and to her own children. On this evening I lay in my bed, my little hands clasped behind my head, my eyes focused on the ceiling, listening to her voice and imagining the characters depicted in the story. As she read, I visualized young David killing Goliath, a mountain of a man, with nothing more than a slingshot and a single stone.

The stories Mrs. Watson read to me at bedtime each night were marvelous tales for a young boy who could not remember ever being read to. On this particular night, I was completely transfixed. When she finished the story, she touched her forehead to mine, just as she had done every night. She whispered in my ear, questioning me about the details of the story to make sure I had truly understood its message. With my eyes locked on the ceiling and feeling her breath tickle my ear, I tried my best to answer her questions. With every answer I offered, Mrs. Watson responded with reassuring hugs or kisses to my forehead, and afterward she led me in prayer. She thanked God for all of the great things that had happened that day and, in particular, she thanked God for me. As she finished her prayer, she looked into my eyes, and just as she had done every night she said, “Tommy, we love you. I love you.”

She waited quietly at my bedside, searching my face for some acknowledgement, some emotion. I continued to stare past her at the ceiling, just as I had done night after night, showing no emotion and offering no reply. Finally, she sighed, squeezed my cheeks and started toward the door. Before she pulled it closed, she poked her head back into the room one last time and said, “Goodnight Tommy.” At that moment, after months of this same routine, my

heart's door opened and my quiet, hesitant voice broke the peaceful silence. "I love you too, Mrs. Watson," I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her silhouette freeze in the doorway.

Suddenly the door burst open and the hall light streamed fully into my room. Mrs. Watson rushed in and sat back down beside me. "What did you say?" she whispered. Slowly, I turned my gaze away from the ceiling, and I looked into her eyes for the first time. "I love you too, Mrs. Watson," I repeated. With that, she took me in her arms and pulled me close. I felt her chest heave as she quietly sobbed, and I lay there in her arms. I listened to her hum for the longest time until I felt the energy slide out of my little body and I slipped into a peaceful, happy sleep.

Years later, Mrs. Watson revealed that this night stood out as one of the most moving moments of her entire life. She likened it to the way she felt at the birth of her own children. For me, a child of 12 previous foster homes, who felt unwanted and beaten down physically, emotionally and psychologically, it was a rebirth. The child no one wanted had finally found his home. Who could have imagined that a couple in their late 50s – a preacher and a teacher – would find it in their hearts to take in a deeply troubled five-year-old child? In truth they did far more than just "take me in." They raised me as one of their own children. They loved, mentored, encouraged and supported me through some of the most exciting and difficult times of my life.

I lived a total of 13 years in the Watsons' home. When I first arrived, the last of their own children had nearly completed high school. Initially, we lived in the Canadian city of Grande Prairie,

a vibrant community in the northwestern region of the province of Alberta. Shortly after I joined the Watson family, they sold their home in Grande Prairie and purchased a farm some 45 minutes away. The farm was situated directly between the communities of Spirit River and Rycroft, Alberta, which is where I spent most of my youth. Years later, as a grown man I would often joke with the Watsons about how I had been the primary reason for them choosing to retire. I don't really think this was true, but for me – and probably for the Watsons as well – it was a good thing they were entering their retirement years. Raising the hellion I had become actually was a full-time, two-person job.



My journey to the Watsons in the fall of 1966 can only be described as traumatic. It was a path most of us would pray no child would ever have to travel. I was born to wandering and neglectful parents. From time to time, my mother would drop me off at her sister Donna's home while she ran out "shopping" for the day. Aunt Donna and her husband Roy would care for me, and invariably what was supposed to be a few hours turned into days and often weeks before my birth mother would return. In time, Aunt Donna and Uncle Roy realized my parents couldn't properly care for me. Understanding they had no legal guardianship and believing my mother would never allow them to keep me, Donna and Roy concluded that the only way they could ensure my safety was to inform the Ministry of Social Services about their concerns. The

Ministry conducted an investigation and in the end I was removed from my parents' guardianship and placed into foster care at the age of one. I'm sure the decision to contact Social Services must have been very difficult for my aunt and uncle. I can only imagine the scrutiny and ramifications they must have endured within their family for taking such a bold step. To this day, I am grateful for their concern and their courage in doing what they felt was right.

I spent the better part of the next two years moving from one temporary foster home to the next. Although I don't remember most of what occurred, it certainly must have been a very unsettling experience for me as a young child. Eventually, I was placed in the home of a family who claimed they wanted me. For a time it seemed little Tommy had finally found a family who cared about him. Unfortunately, however, it was not long before my welcome wore out. The unsettled first three years of my life had shaped me into a difficult child, and I suspect the family's patience for me ran thin. In an effort to curb my poor behavior, the family began to dispense some unique disciplinary measures. At times "bad Tommy" would be taken to the basement where a large barrel of water was stored. The adults would hold me upside down by my ankles over the barrel and lower me down into the water until my body was fully submerged. I would begin to thrash around in the water and eventually they would lift me out, just long enough for me to catch my breath before lowering me back down into the barrel again to continue my punishment.

Other times my foster parents would hold "bad Tommy" by the arm until they had removed their belts from their pants. With belts in hand, they would let go of me and shout, "Run!" If I did not run,

they would whip me with their belts until I fled, and then the “game” was on. I would race as fast as my little legs could carry me around the house with my abusers in hot pursuit, laughing and hooting as they whipped me at every opportunity. I can still remember the terror welling up inside of me as I ran. It was a game I could never win and I paid a stiff price for tiring and slowing down.

At the age of three, I was expected to wash the dishes after meals. My foster parents would place a chair in front of the sink for little Tommy to stand on so that he could “do his chores.” Before I got started, my foster parents would start an egg timer and tell me that if the dishes weren’t finished when the timer sounded, I would be punished. As one might expect, on more than one occasion I failed to finish the dishes on time. No matter how hard my little three-year-old hands worked they just couldn’t get the task completed in the time allotted. True to their word, my foster parents would lift me off the chair and punish me with a stinging spank on my backside. Then they would place me back on the chair and tell me to hurry up and finish the dishes or I would be punished again. In fear, I would hurry to wash the remaining pots and pans as best as a little boy could while the “tick, tick, tick” of the egg timer drummed in my ears, reminding me that my next beating was on the way if I didn’t finish my task quickly.

At times, as I rushed to wash the dishes, I would splash water on the counter or the kitchen floor, and a look of scorn would cross my foster parents’ faces. Fear would well up inside of me because I knew that those drops of water on the counter and the floor likely meant I would be punished for being so sloppy.

More often than not, upon spotting the first drip of water, my foster parents would order me down from the chair. While one of my guardians held me by the arm, the other would take the electric floor polisher out of the closet, plug it in and turn it on. Then the parent holding me would release me and block the doorway so I couldn't escape while the other would chase me around the kitchen with the floor polisher. In my panic, I would race about the kitchen, jumping to try to keep my feet off the floor. Eventually, I would tire and they'd corner me and run the polisher over my bare feet again and again, laughing as I screamed. By the end of the torture, my feet would be a bloody mess and I would be sent to my room, traumatized beyond belief.

Looking back, I realize I suffered far more than physical abuse while living with this family; I endured deep mental and emotional abuse as well, the effects of which linger in me to this day.

As I endured this abuse, it didn't take long before I became the little boy who lived in fear. Anxious and afraid, I trusted no one and hated everyone and everything. I had become a caged animal.

One day, the family's disciplinary actions went horribly wrong and I suffered a broken arm and a badly damaged ear. A day after inflicting my injuries, the family had no choice but to take me to the doctor. They concocted a story of Tommy's accidental fall down the stairs. He was a clumsy boy, they said, always falling. Upon hearing my guardians' explanations, the emergency room nurses and attending doctor decided to investigate further. They took me into an examination room, and it was there the sad story of little Tommy's painful life began to unravel in front of them as they removed my

shoes and socks, then my shirt and then finally my pants. Without hesitation, the Ministry of Social Services was contacted once again. Little Tommy Plum was removed from the “house of horrors” and placed back into temporary custody.



When I arrived with the social worker at the Watson’s home that crisp fall day, I carried with me two small grocery bags filled with all of my earthly belongings. Mr. Watson welcomed us into their home and listened to the social worker’s account of my life. Mrs. Watson was at school when she received Mr. Watson’s call about the little boy sitting in their front room. He quickly relayed my story to her and then asked her what she thought they should do. Her answer was instantaneous and firm: “No child should have to live like that – make up his room.” Although I had no way of comprehending it at the time, my life would be forever altered because of the Watsons’ decision to rescue me.

I was a messy handful to deal with when I first arrived in the Watsons’ home; but not even I fully understood just how challenging a child I was until I was much older and began listening to Mr. Watson’s stories about me at family gatherings. With tears of laughter streaming down his face, Dad would talk about how young Tommy shimmied up the support pole in the middle of the classroom, while classmates and a dismayed teacher looked on in shocked amazement. He loved the story of how Tommy had been banned from playing ice hockey after the first shift of his very first

game. As the story goes, some poor young unsuspecting boy from the opposing team took the puck away from me during the early moments of the game. Apparently, I chased him across the ice and used my hockey stick like a club to clobber him over the head. The boy was knocked senseless and fell to the ice in a heap. While he lay there, I dug the puck out from under him and began skating away, seemingly unconcerned about the boy's condition. Apparently, I was surprised when the referee blew his whistle, stopped the game and escorted me off the ice. I spent the rest of that year sitting on the sidelines – the first child in the history of Spirit River Minor Hockey to be banned from the ice during the first shift of his first game ever! I was a work in progress, Mr. Watson would tell people – a work in progress for sure!

At the end of his Tommy stories, Mr. Watson would dry the tears from his face and look at me with a twinkle in his eye. He loved the stories, he loved the positive changes that had occurred in me over the years, and he loved me. As his son, I would look at him and Mom, and marvel at their perseverance. No matter what I did while growing up, the Watsons never gave up on me; they just kept coaching me along, hoping and praying I would begin to adapt and transform. Amazingly, thanks to them, their family and friends and the guidance of many people in Spirit River and Rycroft, I did change and grow. I eventually came to understand the life formula the Watsons were trying to instill in me: My Choice + My Actions = My Life. Slowly but surely, as I learned to make better choices, my life improved greatly. It's a lesson I have tried to instill in my own children and in my professional colleagues and employees. Taking

responsibility for who we are, I believe, is the key to living successful and honest lives.

As I grew older, I realized I was using my difficult start in life as an excuse for my poor behavior. I wasn't living a productive life as a youngster because I was living my past instead of my future. The Watsons taught me to make better choices and act more responsibly and appropriately, and my life gradually began to improve. It's a lesson that not only changed my life, it saved my life.



By 1980, I had grown into a happy, successful young man. At school, I had many good friends who looked out for me. I had become a relatively good student, I loved athletics and drama, and I was looking forward to the rest of my life. Like the story of the ugly duckling that eventually emerged as the swan, I too had been greatly transformed. The monster child no one wanted was long gone, and a young man with a world of potential had emerged. I was excited and ready to take on life.

I have often wondered what it would be like if today's Tom Watson could send a letter back in time to myself at 18. What advice would I give myself? I think the letter would encourage me to remember and appreciate the fact that the Watsons saved me at age five. It would include a lot more insight and gratitude towards those community members who assisted the Watsons in helping to shape my character. I would tell myself that although I really had no clue at 18 about the joys and difficulties life would bring, my family,

friends and mentors had groomed enough faith, common sense, grit and determination within me to ensure I was ready to take on life's challenges. Thanks to them, I have triumphed as a husband, father, friend, businessman and contributing member of society.

The Watsons are gone now, but their laughter is still fresh in my mind. Whenever I get together with my foster brothers or friends from the old days, stories of my notorious childhood pranks often slip into our conversations. My wife and sons often listen in amazement while we laugh until tears roll down our cheeks. Mr. Watson's storytelling legacy lives on, and I can still see the proud twinkle in his eye to this day.

If I could write a letter to the distraught little boy I was at five, I would tell myself, "Have a little faith and you'll see..."

FOOTPRINTS TO REMEMBER

Children are resilient. With enough love and support, they can overcome horrendous hardships.

Fresh starts and “rebirths” are possible at any age. It may take years to make the fundamental changes to grow and find inner peace, so be patient and enjoy the journey.

Unconditional love can change your life, healing the most damaging traumas and tragedies.

Remember the golden rule: My Choice + My Actions = My Life. We choose the life we want to live. Don't use past hardships as your reasons for being unsuccessful in the future!

TRADITION

As your children grow and change, surround them with like-minded mentors who can help you support and guide them.

— ■ *What's Your Tradition?* ■ —

