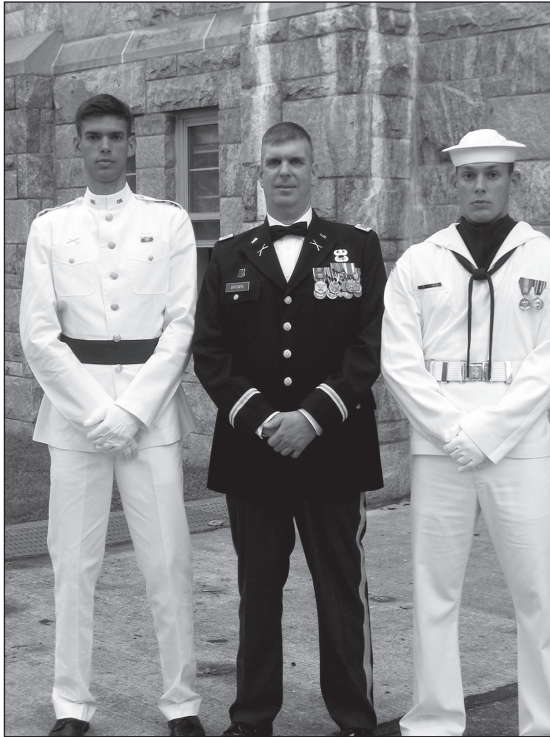


CHAPTER 9

HOPE AND MIRACLES



From L to R: me—getting ready to graduate West Point with my father and Daniel. Daniel enlisted and is wearing his Navy uniform. May 2006.

Teddy and I jostled each other good naturedly as we walked into Chemistry, the first Tuesday of the new school year. We'd become friends during basketball season the previous winter, but hadn't hung out much since then. "How was your summer?" I asked.

He nodded. "Good! I mostly hung out with my brother and his friends. You know—Chris Hess, Jake Barrett."

Jake Barrett. I knew him—or, knew *of* him. He'd gotten accepted to the Air Force Academy the year before which automatically made him a big deal in my mind. "How's Jake doing? Does he like the Academy so far?"

Teddy shrugged. "He's doing okay, I guess, but he's not at the Air Force Academy."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, he was dating Michelle and he was planning to ship off to the Air Force Academy in a couple of weeks, but then she made a big deal about it. She begged him not to go and said he should come to the University of Arkansas with her."

I was shocked. "What kind of girlfriend would ask him to do that?"

Teddy shrugged again. "Well, she must have made a pretty good case because he dropped out of the Academy and switched his enrollment."

My jaw dropped. "He switched his enrollment? He felt *that* much pressure from his girlfriend, that he walked away from the *Air Force Academy*?" The thought of Jake turning down the kind of opportunity that I literally dreamed about at night made me feel almost nauseous. I felt shocked and upset. "Well...hopefully that works out well for him, then."

"I don't think it is," Teddy replied. "Because she started dating someone else once she got there. She broke up with Jake three weeks after they moved into the dorms."

Our teacher called the class to attention before I could respond. I felt physically ill to think of the *waste* Teddy had just described. To give up an opportunity like the Academy...for a girl who didn't even

have the decency to respect his dreams...and then she broke up with him after all that?! I stared down at my chemistry notebook, ignoring whatever the teacher was talking about.

I picked up my pencil and in all caps, I wrote, *I'M NOT GOING TO ALLOW A RELATIONSHIP TO EVEN HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ALTER MY COURSE.*

In just a few more months, I'd be starting my own applications to the military academies. I made up my mind to avoid dating entirely until I was there: enrolled. Arrived. A cadet. I wasn't about to let any relationship mess that up.

As the months went on though, that was easier said than done. There were plenty of opportunities to get involved with girls from high school or youth group during my last two years of high school. Some of my buddies egged me on—calling attention to my crushes, urging me to ask a girl for her number, complaining that my resolution was stupid and pointless. At times, I wondered if that was because they wanted me to stay in Conway, like they planned. Maybe they didn't want me to head off to a military academy.

But I held firm: no girls.

Not even Dani.

Dani was a friend from high school—*just* a friend, I told myself, countless times. I was admittedly attracted to her. And there was definite chemistry. But I was determined not to date, and besides, she usually had a boyfriend. That helped keep the friendship platonic.

I still thought about her often though—even after enrolling in West Point. She was one of the only people from high school I stayed in touch with. I remember one phone call when she teased me: “You’re going to forget about me soon, I know it. You’ll fall in love with one of those West Point girls.”

“What West Point girls?” I joked. “Eighty-five percent of my class is dudes.”

“And I bet all fifteen percent of the girls have a crush on *you*.”

We flirted—that was part of the friendship, I told myself. Just playful banter—we joked around and teased each other.

Once, during my senior year, Dani took a trip to New York. She was checking out med schools in the city and offered to take the train out to West Point for the day. I eagerly agreed, remembering that Dani had told me in one of our recent conversations that she was single again.

I picked her up from the train station in the late afternoon. She was surprised at how chilly the wind was, and I gave her my jacket to wear. I took her to the Firsty Club for dinner—the West Point Seniors’ imitation of an Officer’s Club—and we stayed late, enjoying drinks. Dani sat next to me in a booth, cuddled up against me.

Should I say something? I wondered. Her warmth against me felt good.

“How many years have we been friends now, Sam Brown?” she asked sleepily, playing with my fingers.

“Not sure. Eight?” I asked. I felt distracted. *She’s clearly interested,* I thought. *I should just go for it. Maybe it’s finally time for us to try this. And if it is—I should take the lead and say something.*

I hesitated, trying to make up my mind. *We could do long distance until I graduate, then get a little time together before I leave for Fort Benning. There might be time for a visit between Benning and Texas, and then we could stay in touch while I’m on deployment.* Thinking through the logistics of what a relationship would mean instantly dampened my romantic instincts. Was long distance, followed by deployment, really fair to ask of her? Was it the best thing for me?

No, I concluded. The resolution was familiar and instantly brought a sense of peace. Right now—I *knew*—I needed to stay focused on the mission of preparing to be the best leader I could possibly be for my soldiers. That meant no distractions. No girls. I couldn’t let anything compromise my ability to stay the course.

When I put Dani back on the train that night, she blew me a kiss. “So long for now, Sam Brown.”

I nodded. “So long for now.” The train pulled away. I felt satisfied that I’d made the right decision. She was on her own mission, and so was I.

There would be other opportunities to date and have a family later on, I reminded myself. I wanted that—I'd always wanted that. *Later*, I told myself. *It's only a matter of time.*

* * *



Mother and me, excited to get dinner off the hospital campus. November 2008.

BROOKE ARMY MEDICAL CENTER, NOVEMBER 2008.

The day after Halloween, Mother and I noticed a harvest decal sticker in the nurses' office window. This seemed to cause her equal parts pleasure and anxiety. "Oh my goodness, it's almost Thanksgiving," she fretted. "And then Christmas." Mother had always loved decorating for the holidays—but in our sterile little hotel room, there wasn't much we could do.

“Do you think they’d let you go home for the holidays?” she asked. Then she seemed to make up her mind. “Let’s make it a goal.”

The medical staff deliberated over my status for a while, and finally determined I had stabilized enough to travel away from the burn unit right after Thanksgiving through Christmas—so long as I agreed to meet a number of conditions.

First, we established a contingency plan with the hospital local to my parents’ house, in case I needed medical care. Second, I had to continue doing physical therapy at a local clinic. The BAMC physical therapists spent several hours on the phone, briefing the hometown therapist about what was needed for my PT.

Third, I had to stay on top of my nutrition. I’d lost a lot of weight after the intubation, and even more as a result of my terrible eating. I’d also lost a lot of my lean muscle mass, a common result among burn patients. The BAMC dietitians had put me on a regimen of high-calorie protein drinks to supplement my caloric intake. Ahead of going home, they wanted to up the ante. A different kind of protein shake was known for helping to restore lean muscle mass, but it had some adverse side effects.

A few days before my scheduled departure, Mother and I waited in the seating area just outside the elevator on the seventh floor, where we’d agreed to meet with a dietitian. When the elevator doors opened, a young woman in scrubs stepped out. She held herself confidently, I noticed. And she was extremely pretty.

“Lieutenant Brown?” she asked, smiling brightly. “I’m Lieutenant Larsen, one of the burn unit dietitians.”

“You’re a Lieutenant too?” That was interesting.

“That’s right. And I understand we’re preparing you for convalescent leave? So we need to make sure you’re set with these nutritional supplements.”

She asked a number of questions—how many supplements was I already taking? (Ten a day.) Was this my primary source of nutrition at this point? (Yes.) “What do you know about these new supplements?” she asked.

“They’re going to make me ripped again,” I joked.

She looked at me, startled, then laughed. She was extra pretty when she laughed. “Okay, well—sort of. They will help restore your lean muscle, yes. But they can also be hard on your liver, so we’re going to do some tests to ensure your liver function is healthy. Are you okay with that?”

“I’ll follow any order you give me, Lieutenant.” Her eyes sparkled. And her hair was a simple but sporty bob cut. She just seemed so *bright*.

She blushed. “Well—okay. We wouldn’t recommend this supplement regimen for a lot of burn patients, but I’ve been told you’ve been working really hard and have made great progress. So, I think you’re a good candidate for them.”

“I think you’re a good dietitian.” I liked the way she talked to me. She spoke to me like a person, not just a patient. Many of the other nurses or therapists acted like I was just part of their job. But this dietitian seemed warm and open, like she actually cared about me as an individual.

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Assuming your liver function looks good, we’ll ship the supplements to you.”

Mother spoke up. “When will they arrive? He can’t go without these supplements for even a day. These drinks are how he’s getting most of his calories right now. I’d prefer it if we could just take some with us before we leave.”

The dietitian’s eyes widened nervously, looking at Mother. “We don’t currently have a month’s supply of them on hand, but I will make sure they arrive on time.” Mother looked at her critically. “In fact,” the dietitian continued, “I’ll call you to confirm you’ve received them. And if you haven’t, I’ll follow up with the shipping company and... raise hell. Or do whatever’s necessary to get them to you on time.”

Mother nodded, satisfied. “That’s what I like to hear.”

* * *

It was good to be home for Christmas—even if “home” didn’t totally feel like home. Mother and Father had bought a new house in Virginia shortly before my deployment and I’d only been there once before. Still, it was a huge improvement from the hospital hotel. My family was there: Father, still hobbling around from his motorcycle accident. My three younger siblings were running around, rushing off to get together with their friends, finishing end-of-semester projects, heading out for various Christmas church activities. Even Daniel managed to get home for a few days from his training at Fort Bragg.

The day after we arrived, Mother led us all in putting up Christmas decorations. We kept the fire going in the living room, and there were cozy leather chairs to lounge in next to the Christmas tree. Best of all, I didn’t have to be at the hospital, going through my relentless lineup of appointments every day. The daily visit to the local physical therapy clinic was nothing compared to what I’d been doing over the past month. It felt like a true vacation.



I was happy to get time with Daniel, although my injuries were understandably troubling to him—so much so that, when he deployed, he was intent on avenging me. Christmas 2008.

True to the dietitian's word, the special nutritional supplements had arrived the day Mother and I returned home. She called the next day on my parents' home phone. "Samuel!" Mother called. "It's for you! It's that Lieutenant Larsen from the hospital."

Lieutenant Larsen? I looked for a private place to take the call. I didn't want to take the phone outside—it was too cold. I hurried up the stairs to a small office just off the landing and shut the door.

"Hello?"

A young female voice spoke. "Hi, Lieutenant Brown? It's Lieutenant Larsen, the burn unit dietitian you met with."

She sounded bright and warm, even over the phone. "Yes, I remember you," I said. "How are you?"

"Oh—fine. I'm just calling to make sure you received the supplements?"

"Yes! Thank you. They arrived."

"Perfect! That's all I needed to know. Okay, well, enjoy the holiday—"

"Wait!" I said. I wasn't ready for the conversation to end. I searched for a question. "Are you going to be able to take some vacation time over the holidays?"

She paused. "Actually, yes, I'm home right now."

"You're calling me from *home*? When you're on vacation? You're such a committed dietitian!" She laughed. It felt good to make her laugh. "Where is home for you?"

She cleared her throat. "South Dakota. Okay, well, I hope your vacation is great, and—"

"South Dakota! I've never been there. What's it like?"

I asked question after question, trying to keep her on the phone. We talked about food for a while—I figured that was a topic she'd like, since she was a dietitian. At one point, I tried teasing her. "You kind of stick out on the burn unit, you know."

"Excuse me?" she said, in mock offense. "*You're* telling *me* that I stick out?"

"You do," I insisted. "You're one of the only Lieutenants, first of all. Most of the other military people there are either the enlisted guys that

got wounded, or the doctors who are Lieutenant Colonels or even higher ranks. And even though there are a lot of female medical staffers, most of them are older than you—like, ten or twenty years. How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

I was delighted. “We’re the same age! You’re like the female version of me.”

“Or...maybe not? I think I can spot a few differences.”

I managed to keep her on the phone for about ten minutes, but finally, in a very professional manner and with some finality, she excused herself. I had to let her go.

We talked once more during the vacation. She called a second time to confirm the arrival of the next shipment of supplements. I retreated to the same office and once again, tried to keep her on the phone as long as possible, looking to build on the little bit of connectivity we’d established before. I asked her about how her work was going. I asked her what she liked to do. I made a joke about donuts—surely dietitians would think junk food jokes were funny?

I wanted to ask if she had a boyfriend, but I didn’t. I sensed it would cross a line. I also had no illusions about how she might see me. Attracting a woman, I knew, was now fully out of the realm of the possible for me. But I was willing to settle for being her friend.

Each time after the phone calls ended, I sat in the office for a few extra minutes, feeling low. The energy I felt during the calls was replaced with a sinking disappointment.

Talking with her made me realize how lonely I was.

* * *

After the holidays, in January of 2009, Mother and I returned to San Antonio: back to the gray, sterile hotel room. Our arrival felt depressing. In Virginia, I’d been doing the bare minimum of maintaining my therapy routine, with no gauntlet of daily splint fittings, or surgical prep. Plus, I’d been in the warmth and familiarity of home, in the company of my family.

Now, we were back. I knew I'd have to pick up the intense therapy regimen again, and restart all the surgical procedures. I'd have to go to all the administrative meetings, and talk with the case manager, and do the occupational therapy. It sounded like a drag. And this hotel room only made it worse.

Mother stared critically at the space. "I don't believe there's anything we could possibly do to make this hotel room cozy." That was one of the most critical things Tanya Brown could say about a space. "I think my New Year's resolution is to find us an apartment." She looked over at me. "What about you, Son? Do you have any New Year's resolutions?"

I looked at her as though it were obvious. "Get back to the guys in Afghanistan."

My window to make that happen was growing smaller, I knew. There were only six months left on the deployment. My physical therapy progress had plateaued and—despite my high hopes for the "muscle-building nutrition shakes"—I was still extremely weak. I'd started running again, which ironically was easier than eating. Given that my lower legs hadn't been burned and the running motion didn't require huge flexibility or movements, it was doable to run two or three miles. But my overall mobility with all the contracting scar tissue remained limited. I still needed help bathing and bandaging myself. Most of the activities of daily living continued to feel like a challenge. And my skin was still a red, oozing, plasticky, scabby mess.

I was fully aware of the physical demands of being an Infantry Officer. To lead effectively, I would need to carry a huge amount of weight. I'd need to be able to respond quickly and flexibly in a crisis. I'd need a full range of movement. I would need to be able to eat an MRE, for crying out loud.

I still didn't have the strength or mobility to care for myself very well, let alone anyone else. Deep down, in a place I refused to acknowledge, I could see the writing on the wall.

I didn't have enough time.

The doctors and therapists had told me for months that my

recovery process was going to be longer and more intensive than I imagined—or even wanted to recognize. “You can set goals and plan,” one therapist had told me. “And you might see a lot of success as a result of those goals and plans. But at the end of the day, real life is going to play out differently. You may have to recalibrate.”

I didn’t want to recalibrate.

One day, a few weeks after Mother and I had gotten back, I heard that Sergeant Adam Clark had checked back into the burn unit. Sergeant Clark had been the patient I’d looked to as the example in my early days on the step-down unit: the one everyone praised as the model of how to keep a good attitude and engage with therapy. It surprised me to learn he was back.

“Is he getting another surgery?” I asked James, the Physician’s Assistant who ran the burn unit. “I thought he had completed all of his treatment.”

“He *had* completed his treatment,” James told me.

“So, why’s he here?”

James shook his head. “Confidential patient information.”

I walked down the hallway and saw a woman I recognized as his wife. She looked tearful. “Ma’am?” I said. “I’m Sam Brown, I got to know your husband when he was finishing up his treatment. I hope everything’s okay?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s really not. But I’m hoping, now that we’re here, things will start getting better.” Through tears, she explained that Adam had become so dependent on his narcotic pain meds that he’d needed to be brought back to BAMC for a medication detox. He’d been put into a medically induced coma so that he could be weaned off the opioids.

I was shocked, but tried not to show it. She was already distraught. Instead, I asked if I could pray for them, and she agreed. I could feel her shoulders shake under my hand as I prayed there in the hallway.

Later, in between appointments, I couldn’t stop thinking about Sergeant Clark. I did the math. He had gotten injured about eighteen months earlier—that meant he was way ahead of me on the timeline.

But he was still in the midst of his recovery. He wasn't ready to go out and lead troops. Even if he *wasn't* dealing with the narcotic dependence, it was obvious that he still needed to regain a lot of strength.

So—what did that mean for me?

It was also heavy to consider how addictive these painkillers were—painkillers I was popping multiple times a day. If I didn't take seriously how dangerous they were, I'd end up in Sergeant Clark's same position. There had been days when, in an effort to push a little harder and make a little more progress, I'd taken an extra dose.

I resolved to stop that, immediately.

As soon as I did, I realized my New Year's resolution to get back to my guys in Afghanistan wasn't going to happen. Recovery was going to be slow and intense. There was no way to hurry it up, even for the best of patients. Even for me.

I wasn't ever going to be able to redeploy.

It was a bleak realization. I sat on a chair in a waiting area by the elevator, staring at the fake succulent plant on the glass table. If I couldn't look forward to redeployment—what *did* I have to look forward to?

My mind cast around, leafing through the variations of my life plans I'd always maintained. I had wanted to advance my career and move to the Special Forces. That didn't seem likely now. I had always thought, once I was done with the military, I'd start a family. But that seemed impossible now too. What woman would ever fall in love with me?

I looked down at my frame, trying to picture how others viewed me. I was covered in pressure garments—knit tubing which wrapped tightly around my arms, hands, legs, and neck to put compression on the scar tissue. Anywhere that wasn't covered looked raw and red. One of my lower eyelids had contracted so much from scarring that it pulled away from my eyeball. My ears looked like cooked, shriveled bacon fat. When I moved, the movements were stiff, like Frankenstein's monster. The basketball shorts and T-shirt I wore hung loosely on my emaciated frame.

Hollowed out, I thought. Some years later, another veteran named David Rose wrote about his life experience in a memoir named *Spent Shell Casings*. That perfectly described how I felt.

A spent shell casing: that's what I was. A biological expenditure of war.

I looked down the hallway. One man lay on a gurney. Another glassy eyed soldier moved his arm back and forth in a repetitive motion, probably a PT exercise. My eyes landed on the door to Sergeant Clark's room where I imagined him lying there, comatose. It was impossible to move through the hospital without seeing the bloody and mangled impact of war on human beings.

All of us: spent shell casings.

And I wasn't going back.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, I searched for some sort of new motivation to sustain my efforts. It was too painful to have nothing to work toward, so I finally landed on a middle ground: if I couldn't get back to my platoon, I could still work to build back enough function to serve as an Infantry Officer. I had missed the rest of this deployment, but maybe I could still heal enough to be deployed further down the road.

It was a strategy built on die-hard denial, but it gave me a goal again. Before and after each next surgery, I did everything they told me to do, to heal as fast as possible. I drank my protein shakes. I shoved bites of solid food into the tiny hole of my mouth. Mother and I kept up the wound debridement and the bandaging and the lathering of pharmaceutical creams. I upped my runs from three miles to four. I kept working at it.

Mother was also motivated to see my continued healing—but her ideas of progress were more dramatic.

Or, maybe a better word is “supernatural.”

That January, Mother came up with a plan. “I’ve been reading up about a church in Northern California,” she informed me one day.

“They believe in miraculous healing. I think we should fly out there and have them pray for you.”

I was quiet. I wasn’t opposed to the idea—but I also didn’t have a sense that being miraculously healed was God’s trajectory for me.

“You’ve got so many people praying for you, Samuel,” Mother said. “Think of all the people here in San Antonio praying for us. Plus the folks from our church in Virginia, and our old church in Arkansas, and my friends, they’re *all* praying for you. And people keep telling me they believe you’re going to experience miraculous healing: your skin will be fully restored to its normal appearance and functionality. I believe that! God can do it.”

I believed that too. Miracles, in my mind, were fully possible. I also knew that the people Mother had mentioned wholeheartedly loved me and cared for me. Their faith was genuine—they really believed a miracle was imminent.

Part of me hoped they were right, but another part of me held back. I didn’t have the same conviction the rest of them did, that my face and body should be fully restored to normalcy. But I didn’t feel like I could voice that doubt to Mother. So many people—and her, especially—believed so passionately in my full restoration, I didn’t want to cause them to stumble in their faith.

It was a weird pressure to carry: for my mottled face and scarred body to be at the center of so many people’s fervent expectations of God.

But—why not? I accepted their prayers and their hopes. Maybe God *would* heal me.

Mother booked our tickets to San Jose. When we arrived on a Saturday morning, we rented a car and drove straight to the church.

I had never heard of this church, their pastor, or his reputation for miraculous healing, but Mother seemed well-informed. “Saturday afternoon is when they do their time of healing prayers. It’s okay to just show up. That’s what people do.”

The church volunteers must have known immediately what we were there for when we walked in. I was in my typical get-up: a col-

lared shirt which couldn't mask the pressure bandage around my neck; the sleeves unbuttoned to accommodate the bandages around my hands. And my face: thickly swollen from the hypertrophic scarring, a shiny, plasticky mask of reddish purple. My lower left eyelid had been essentially pulled inside out from the contracting tissue. The ball cap I wore couldn't mask the gnarled, shriveled stumps of my ears.

The smiling greeter at the door opened her eyes wide as we approached. Her smile faltered before returning with unnatural intensity. It was a reaction I'd gotten used to.

We were quickly shepherded to a small meeting room where there were a dozen or so people. The prayer volunteers introduced themselves, and a woman around my mother's age opened the meeting.

"We believe our God can do miraculous healings. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," we all answered. My answer was sincere. I did believe that.

Her voice raised passionately. "We know that when we pray, God *hears* us, and that when He hears us, He *answers*. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," we all said again. But inwardly I thought, *That doesn't necessarily mean He always grants miraculous healing, just because we ask.*

"But we must come to Him in *faith*. As the Apostle James states, '*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*' And Christ said, '*If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move.*' That is what faith can do!"

"Amen!" Mother chorused.

I felt a stab of guilt. Would my doubts prevent God from healing me? Was my faith insufficient?

The woman leading the meeting prayed fervently to open the time, then invited people to request healing prayer. One young woman spoke up and explained her ailment: she'd been experiencing severe stomach aches for the better part of a year.

Several of the prayer volunteers launched into a prayer for this young woman. They prayed powerfully and authoritatively, as though they were confident in God's willingness to do what they asked. After they had concluded prayer for her, another man explained that his

knee surgery had failed. Immediately, they began prayer for him, in the same zealous and confident manner.

Once those prayers came to a lull, Mother began to speak up about me. She was interrupted by the woman leading the meeting. “Yes, I can see that this dear brother is in need of healing,” the woman said. “We are going to pray for him in a special way.”

I felt seized by a bizarre desire to laugh at the position we were all in. Surely, I was a taller order than they were used to—literally and figuratively. I had shown up before this earnest team of prayer warriors as a massively disfigured burn victim, one who’d flown halfway across the country with his mother, asking them to pray for complete healing and restoration of a body’s worth of burned flesh. Talk about moving a mountain. God’s healing of me wasn’t going to be subtle, like disappearing stomach pains or a healed knee. If this prayer for a miracle “failed”—everyone would know it.

When the other people had all been prayed for, a smaller group of volunteers invited me and Mother into a private room. I sensed their nervousness. Were they scared that their healing prayers might not “work”? And if they didn’t, what would they conclude about their faith? Once again, I felt a burden of pressure. I began to hope the miracle *would* happen—not for my sake, but for theirs, and especially for Mother’s.

After separating me from the others, the prayer volunteers conferred quietly together in a corner, out of earshot where Mother and I waited. Finally, they came over. “Brother, we’d like to invite you to lie down,” an older man said.

One by one, they prayed for me. But this time, the tone of their prayers was noticeably different. With all the others, they had almost *demand*ed God’s healing. But in my case, their prayers were more tentative. It seemed as though they were weakly pleading with God, making their requests, but with an air of uncertainty. “Dear Lord, if you want to heal our brother Samuel, please do so.”

Is this prayer for God? I thought, my mind wandering. *Or are they trying to curb our expectations and prepare us for nothing happening?*

Mother prayed last. Her prayer was the only one that matched the confidence and fervor of the healing prayers from the other room. I listened to her repeat my name and prayed my own prayer. *Lord, You could heal my face for her sake*, I prayed silently. *She wants it so badly.*

Within me, I felt Him pressing back something full of love—something that felt like the kindest, most gentle *No*.

The amens came, one by one. We opened our eyes. Mother looked at me. She smiled, her eyes wet with disappointment. There was an awkward silence.

“Thank you,” I said.

The older man looked at me with a conciliatory expression. “God answers prayers for healing in all sorts of ways. And we will continue to pray for you.” He paused. “You know, Brother, I don’t even see your scars when I look at your face. All I see are your eyes.”

“Yes, I don’t even notice the scars when I talk to you,” another woman repeated softly.

There was a pause.

“Thank you,” I said again.

Mother gently took my bandaged hand, and we began walking out of the church. We didn’t speak. I could sense her disappointment, and I didn’t want to make things worse by talking about what had just happened. But inside, my thoughts bubbled up.

I’ve already experienced a miracle, I wanted to tell her.

I’m alive.

* * *

Mother’s preoccupation with my face was understandable. I couldn’t blame her for hoping for a miracle. In the past several months, my facial disfigurement had grown significantly worse.

A month after the accident, I had looked at my face in the mirror and concluded it wasn’t *that* bad. I could still recognize myself.

But I couldn’t recognize myself anymore.

Due to my hypertrophic scarring condition—the physical response

where the body essentially doesn't know when to stop piling on scar tissue—my face had started to transform in a way that neither I nor the doctors could control. Instead of the tissue calming down over time, the scar tissue on my face had seemed to grow angrier and more reactive. The tissue itself was becoming more and more red, thickening every day and becoming less pliable.

When I saw my reflection in the mirror now, it looked like I had a permanently contorted mask melted onto my face: immovable, frozen in its distortion. Every glance at a reflective surface confronted me with the reality that my image was now unalterably and severely disfigured.

There was no cream I could use to calm the skin down. There was no medication I could take that would shut off my body's scarring response. The only way to address such facial disfigurement was to replace each part of my face with a skin graft, harvested from somewhere else on my body.

Further complicating that option was the fact that I experienced hypertrophic scarring anywhere the doctors cut away healthy skin for the grafts. Those donor sites would begin scarring, and eventually become angry and red just like my face. So—I could put healthy skin on my face and hope it grafted in successfully, but it essentially meant sacrificing another healthy part of my body to do so.

Those were my choices: either accept the facial scarring and remain disfigured, or pursue highly invasive and permanent facial reconstruction.

It was hard to know what to do with the man in the mirror. My physical identity had been grotesquely altered. My professional identity was now seriously at risk. With the exception of my spiritual identity—which was the *only* part of my life that seemed to be growing rather than contracting—every aspect of who I was and had hoped to be was in major transition and beyond my control. None of it was moving in a direction that I had wanted or planned.

The loss seemed to encompass every hope I'd had for the future. I'd always hoped to have a family eventually, but had subordinated

that dream behind serving my country first. But now, my “service to country” had brought me to a place where having a family of my own seemed impossible.

What woman could look at me with love? What child could see me as anything but monstrous?

* * *

One afternoon in early February, I was lying face down on a padded table in the physical therapy room. The physical therapy assistant, Dawn, was working on stretching out the scar tissue between my back and arm. It was a painful series of exercises that required breaking the scar tissue apart. I had closed my eyes and gone to that quiet, dark place in my mind where it felt easier to endure the pain.

Suddenly, I heard the door open, and an unfamiliar voice greeted some of the other therapists in the room. They responded enthusiastically—apparently, this was a guy they all knew and recognized. I listened, interested.

The newcomer’s voice was chipper and upbeat. I started to glean snippets from his conversation with the therapists: he had also been burned; he was also a military guy. He’d come back to BAMC to check in on the people who had taken care of him and let them know he was doing well. He kept expressing his gratitude: “You guys did so much to help me out. I’m so thankful for all of you.”

I heard fast little footsteps and then a child’s voice breaking into the sound of the adult conversations. It sounded like a toddler—possibly two or three, I guessed. The little voice lisped out, “Who are you talking to, Daddy?”

“This is Dr. Scott, bud. He helped your daddy get all better after his accident.”

I heard the little running footsteps again—they were coming right over to me. I opened my eyes. The toddler was standing right next to the padded table where I lay, looking at me at eye level. His face broke into a delighted smile. “Daddy, look!” he crowed. “It’s another daddy!”

I craned my head around as best I could to get a glimpse at the guy who'd come into the room. Like me, he had significant facial burns.

I felt a huge surge of hope well up. If I ever *could* get married—if any woman would have me—maybe my own child would simply see me as “dad.” That toddler, in his innocence, had never known his dad to look any other way. When he saw me, he didn't feel fear; he didn't feel judgment. All he saw was another dad.

My thoughts seized on a longing. *If I ever became a dad, maybe my own children wouldn't be afraid of me.*

But as soon as I acknowledged that desire and hope, a sense of intensified loss followed. Love, marriage, and a family all seemed completely out of my reach.

After the appointment, I went to the hospital cafeteria and ate a silent lunch, my thoughts turning over, arguing with themselves. I took the elevator back to the burn unit and walked aimlessly around. There was no one to talk to and I still had an hour before my last appointment.

I decided to go find one of the hospital chaplains, Warren Haggray. He'd checked on me often in the past, but I'd usually waved him on. I'd never felt the need for any sort of in-depth conversation with the chaplains because, spiritually, I was doing fine and my recovery was going about as well as I could control.

Today though, I decided I needed an in-depth conversation.

Warren's office was down in the basement of the hospital. The door was open. When I entered, I felt surprised at the shabbiness of the space. It was small—probably only about a ten-by-ten foot room. There was no window, only a fluorescent light. But Warren had tried to make it more homey by adding a lamp. There were bookshelves piled high with books behind his desk.

Warren looked up from his book. He seemed surprised that it was me.

“Sam! Please, sit down.”

I sat down.

I didn't know how to begin.

After a pause, he prompted me. “Why don’t you tell me a little bit about why you’re here?”

I cast around for a starting place. “My mom and I traveled to California recently. We were hoping I’d be miraculously healed at this charismatic church.”

He nodded, his eyebrows furrowed. “Tell me about that.”

“Well—I’m not sure *I* was hoping for it. I know my mother was hoping for it. She especially wanted my face to be healed.”

“But *you* weren’t hoping for that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s not that I don’t believe in miracles... I just didn’t sense that a miraculous transformation of my face was God’s will for me.” I tried to explain myself. “If we believe that God is good, and that He has a plan and purpose for all things, then we’re supposed to trust God and be subordinate to Him as our leader—right?”

He smiled. “So far, we’re on the same page.”

“Well, so—here’s a situation that’s beyond my control, but it’s not beyond God’s control. He’s the one that allowed this reality for me. So, who am I to beg for something different and say, ‘This isn’t good enough?’”

Warren studied me. “So why did you go on the trip?”

“I went because...I thought God might intervene for the benefit of others. If I’m extremely disfigured and God heals me, maybe that’s how He demonstrates His healing power to others, as a way of confirming His existence. Maybe a miraculous healing would be a way to inspire faith in someone with an otherwise hard heart. I don’t know. I could see God doing something like that. And who am I to not be willing to be a tool for that? But I also don’t know what God’s plans are for me.”

“So...” Warren paused. “What happened in California? Did God heal you?”

I gave a sharp laugh. “*Look* at me.” Warren raised his eyebrows.

I backtracked. “I mean—yes, God healed me. In the most important ways, God healed me. But externally, I’m clearly still very disfigured. Obviously.”

“And how do you feel about your disfigurement?”

"I'm afraid..." I hesitated. "Well—I'm afraid that my scars will prevent me from ever having a meaningful relationship."

He nodded—a big up-and-down motion of dawning comprehension, as though we had finally arrived at the crux of the matter.

"I came here to talk to you because I'm trying to get some objective perspective," I said. "My mother says the right woman will see past all my scars, but...she's biased. I want to know if you think I should just accept that I'm probably not going to have a family. I mean—who would marry me now?" I waited. He didn't speak. "I can let that hope go if it's not going to happen. I just need someone to tell me clearly, so that I can accept it."

He looked at me with compassion. "You'd like to get married and have a family one day."

"Yes," I nodded sharply. I felt like I might cry. "But I don't see how that's possible. I get it—honestly. I can't judge anyone for being disturbed by my appearance, so much so that she would have a hard time being in a personal, intimate relationship with me. I'm just struggling to accept it." I gestured to him. "You're someone I consider to be an objective person. I'm hoping you can set the right expectation for me."

Warren continued to study me. He didn't reply. I looked back at him, impatient for his response and steeling myself against it. "So, is this something that I should realistically hold out hope for? Or should I just remove that hope from my mind, so that it doesn't torment me?"

Warren smiled. "Sam. You're a strong man, with a strong faith. And you have a beautiful heart. Do I think you could eventually get married and have a family one day? Absolutely. You *should not* give up on finding someone that you can love, who will love you back."

I began crying.

I don't think I stopped crying for the next ten minutes.

Anything that Warren said would have been tough to hear, but his denial would have been easier to believe. If he'd told me I should resign myself to never having a family, I would have agreed. That made logical sense: it was easier to accept that I could never have a wife or children.

Choosing to believe what he said—that I shouldn't lose hope—meant not walling off that desire. It meant not separating myself from it. It meant that I had to stay vulnerable and open to that hope.

Through my own eyes, I just didn't see how that desire could ever be fulfilled.

But Warren had told me to hope.

So, maybe it wasn't the most dangerous, foolish, reckless thing to hope.

I finally managed to stop crying. Warren prayed for me. He gave me a hug.

Then, I left.

I took the elevator back up to the fourth floor. I had one final appointment with James, the Physician's Assistant who ran the burn unit. He was going to talk me through the logistics for my upcoming surgery: an eyelid release operation, to allow my lower left lid to properly rest against my eyeball again.

Still thinking about my conversation with Warren, I only half listened as James explained the details: it wasn't a major procedure; it would probably only require one night in the hospital. "And before you check out, we'll have you meet with the dietitian to discuss your nutritional care, post-surgery."

That got my attention. "The dietitian?" I asked.

He nodded. "Lieutenant Larsen. Do you remember her? She set you up with your protein drinks before your convalescent leave."

I nodded. Yes.

I remembered her.

Thinking about Lieutenant Larsen made me equal parts elated and depressed. She was exactly the kind of woman I would have pursued before my accident, and exactly the kind—I was sure—who would now never be interested in me.

I left the hospital thinking about her bright smile. Her sparkly eyes. Her laugh. The way she talked to me like a person, not a patient. *But maybe that's an act, I wondered. Maybe she just pretends to see me that way out of compassion.*

I could still try to be her friend. Even if that was all I could hope for, a friendship would be better than nothing. Maybe I could stifle the desire for anything more.

If only, I thought.

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But speaking of Lieutenant Larsen, it's best that I introduce you to her directly.

She tells this next part of the story better than I do.