

**Excerpt from *Kingdom of Simplicity*
by Holly Payne**

ONE

IN THE THICK BARK of a walnut tree that grows on the road at the edge of our farm is a scar that has haunted me for most of my life. Though the mark resembles a lightning strike, it is less visible to the unpracticed eye. Those of faith say it was the hand of God that put it there, but it's taken me a long time to see the imprint of anything holy.

They say an accident happens by chance, with no planning or deliberate intent. And people who knew my sisters would have said just that. *It was an accident.* But I would like to tell them there are no accidents. There are only opportunities.

Yes, in a perfect world, I'd like to tell them that, and most people who pass our farm consider it to be a sort of paradise. But my message would be misleading if I didn't tell them that by telling my story, I am rebuilding that paradise, word by word.



Like the old walnut tree, I, too, was struck. Not by lightning, not by a horse, and not by anything man-made. I was struck one year ago by the lot, an occasion more solemn and sobering to an Amish male than the day we choose to be baptized after years running around in *rumspringa*.

Nothing scares an Amish man more than knowing his entire life might change because he is asked to serve the church. It's not like we can prepare. There are no courses to study, no tests to take. Even when a man is chosen, the Amish traditionally offer condolences, not congratulations. It is not a moment to celebrate.

No boy I ever knew dreamed of growing up to be a minister. He dreams that the lot passes over him, for an appointment lasts not a few years, but for the rest of his life.



I was that terrified boy, even at the age of 45, head down, eyes closed, smelling the cracked leather hymnals as they were passed around the ten of us who had been named by our family, friends and neighbors as candidates for ordination. Not one of us had a dry shirt. We sat at the table and sweated together, looking at those hymnals with such intensity, I swear we could have started a collective fire with our fear. Inside one of them was a slip of paper with two verses, one from Proverbs and one from Acts, that basically said whoever finds the slip of paper in their hymnal was chosen by God. There wasn't a man among us whose fingers didn't shake, whose legs didn't bounce under the cover of the table and who, given the choice, would have run like mad to avoid the burden of living life as a chosen servant. I'm not sure any of us thought we possessed the traits of a qualified minister as iterated by Timothy. A man must be "vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach." Who among us could qualify for that? Who among us would ever be ready to serve *for the rest of our lives?*

I know I wasn't. I had a wife, children and a job, having inherited my father's auctioneering business and five acres of paradise to preserve. I had no more juice for my vocal chords after a busy night calling auctions than I had for a Sunday morning sermon. Of all the men sitting with me at the table, I was the least likely

candidate.

Didn't they know? I was no servant. I had been a thief. I wanted to tell them after all these years of secrets and shame that I had stolen a camera when I was nine years old. The Amish don't like to have their photos taken, though I have seen a few Amish gladly lift their eyes from the shadows of bonnets and black brims to smile for the camera and share the joy of our simple living. We believe in graven images. We believe that a single photograph has the power to steal our souls, though the photos don't reveal the secrets behind the smiles, all that we hold back with our eyes and all that we choose not to see. I never wanted the camera. Not really. I wanted what it held.

TWO

THOUGH IT HAS BEEN nearly forty years, I remember the day that led to the accident. July 6, 1976. Tuesday. Market day. A tourist family had left the camera behind with their change, a few dimes that I scraped into the cigar box behind my grandfather's candy stand, one of many side-by-side stands inside the market tent. My sisters had left me in charge of the counter while they snuck outside to watch local teenagers set off fireworks in the parking lot. I couldn't see them through the huge tent, but I knew what they would do. My oldest sister Hanna had been known to exchange our grandfather's confections for multi-colored smoke bombs that the girls would set off behind the barn, where they could dance unseen by our father. After every Fourth of July, when the fireworks went on sale, she'd make an extra block of fudge to barter with the local boys who supplied half the county with explosives from the Carolinas. She was bold. And although she did not see the harm in colored smoke, Hanna knew the damage of a photograph.

She had returned for more fudge and paused, seeing the family's teenage son had returned, too, with a camera, to take pictures of me. Hanna asked him to stop. She was nineteen and not afraid to ask for what she wanted. Her tone was warm and friendly at first, but the boy continued to snap at me.

And I let him.

Nobody had ever wanted to take my photo. Not that it mattered. We weren't allowed to pose for the tourists. My parents had lectured us countless times, but my oldest sister preached best. Hanna pulled Sarah and me aside one day when she was walking us home from school after a tour bus stopped to see us. "If they insist, close your eyes," she said. "Eyes are the door of the soul. Whatever you do, keep it locked. Look down. Look away." I wanted to know what happened to our souls if our photos were taken anyway. Hanna said as long as we didn't look directly into the camera, God would know we hadn't intended to give away our souls.

Tourists loved Hanna and my sisters, and had no qualms about shoving their way out of rental cars to gather at the edge of our farm, watching us work the earth between our bare hands and feet. We were used to the cameras in the same way we grew accustomed to the welts on our arms from spider bites and poison ivy. Cameras were like cars. We avoided them when we could. I don't think the tourists meant any harm though. My sisters possessed a universal beauty and for this, they became the darlings of all who laid eyes on them. They shared my mother's blue eyes and fair Swiss skin, faces framed by walnut colored hair spun with copper and gold at the temples, twisted into a bun and pinned at the nape of their necks. I shared only the color of their hair. I was a boy, and nothing about me matched their beauty or grace.

At nine, I was half their size, skinny, and barely able to reach over the counter. I usually hid behind my sisters and scooped candy from the cases, but something about the boy with the camera made me want to be seen by him. I held the spade that I used to shovel candy and stepped away from the counter so that he could have a better look at me. I pulled the brim of my straw hat over my eyes and bit my lip, chewing away the smile. It felt good to hear the click of the camera, and the click of his tongue when he got excited about

whatever he saw through the lens. I felt his eyes on me and I liked the attention. The boy moved closer, his red belly pressed against the counter. He was sunburned and sweaty and left round prints that looked like glazed donuts on the glass.

I flashed a toothless grin. I figured he wanted to see the gap in my teeth. I liked how it made me whistle when I spoke. "Sweet corn," I said and pointed to the gap.

"You get any money?"

"For what?"

"Your tooth."

"No." You get money for losing your tooth?

"Just hold your hands still," he said.

The boy snapped more photos. I watched his fingers press the button, bearing down with precision and purpose, like he was hunting. Suddenly, a pair of scissors and a hairy knuckled hand with thick gold rings covered my face.

"Please don't take his photo."

I recognized the voice. An authoritative boom, sharpened by a childhood lived in North Philadelphia. Unmistakably Leroy Fischer, an old family friend who had worked for us as a driver when we needed to travel long distances. We'd spent many hours with him in his big white van, a side business he'd started to help pay for the barbershop he wanted to buy in Strasburg. My family gifted him pipe tobacco during inclement weather when he made special trips to drive at night to my father's auctions. He took care of us, and we returned the favor by taking care of him. He was the only Outsider my parents had ever invited into our house. We never called him English either. He was Leroy. We loved him. And he was the only black man we knew.

He waved his hand in front of my face. His fingers smelled of talcum powder and Lebanon bologna, which he rolled with thin slices of white American cheese and called "lunch". I could see bits of cheese caught in his nails. He held a pair of scissors, blades stuck with quarter-inch pieces of silver nose hair from an Amish man who watched from Leroy's make-shift barbershop: a stool, drop cloth, and hand-held mirror, catty-corner to us. Besides granddatt's candy stand, Leroy Fischer was a fixture in the market for locals and tourists. He had a way of imitating the Amish like nobody we knew, affecting a Pennsylvania Dutch accent so precise with its attenuated and lilting phrases that when I closed my eyes and listened behind the candy stand, I swore that Leroy was Amish.

"Auch chust listen," he'd say, swapping a hard "ch" for j and a p for b. "It's my chop to make you laugh. Did chu know that Beter, Baul and Mary got a lot of choy from beanut putter and chelly? It's no choke. They did!"

I wondered how he learned all that and I asked him once. "God whispers the words into my dreams at night," he said, which confused me because I thought that sometimes Leroy might have been God. I asked the bishop once if God was a black man and he told me, "God has no face." I figured the color of his face didn't matter. There were no black men I knew about in Switzerland during the Reformation. Leroy's roots extended into the sidewalks of North Philadelphia.

Despite all the evidence that Leroy could have been God or at least a good substitute, he was not a religious man. He never spoke of Jesus like many of the English did. He didn't hang wooden crosses on the walls of his house, or the stand, and he didn't carry those strings of "rosy beads" that I'd seen draped around the necks of nuns who stalked the market for sticky buns and a pulled-pork sandwich. He offered his services every Tuesday in the summer, and I had watched for years, with awe and envy, the way his dark fingers maneuvered the scissors. But that day I didn't want him around.

"Go away, Leroy," I said.

"Suit yourself."

"Leroy's not going away and neither am I until this boy leaves you alone."

Hanna stepped between us. Leroy withdrew his hand. My ears burned and I crinkled my nose. I shifted my eyes to the purple smoke bomb she dropped on the floor then stared at her clenched fists. Her voice quivered.

“Step away, Eli.”

“I’m not finished,” the boy said.

“Eli Emanuel Yoder.”

“He’s not finished,” I said.

I pressed my heels into the floor, refusing to leave, feeling the cool concrete. The boy took more photos, and the more photos he took, the more I liked it even though I knew it was wrong. I liked the attention of the camera more than I feared losing my soul. For the first time in my life, somebody from the outside wanted to see me.

“If you don’t stop, I’ll take your camera,” Hanna said. My sisters had now trickled in one by one and smelled of smoke bombs and firecrackers, pieces of frayed paper caught in their prayer caps. They paused at Beiler’s bread stand across from us, arrested by the threat in Hanna’s voice. They whispered to the vendor and her daughter, Emma, who watched with flour-dusted hands clasped over their mouths. Emma and I had been friends since we were toddlers. Her father was the bishop of our district and she was like another sister to me. She stared, dumbfounded, and shook her head.

The boy lifted the glass case, inching toward me, near the licorice wheels.

“Give me five,” he said, knocking the spade from my grip, offering his palms in the gesture I had come to understand even though I hardly spoke English then. Even our dogs knew what “give me five” meant. I had seen older boys in rumspringa slap each other, strutting to and from their buggies with transistor radios, trying to be cool.

I held out my hands, expecting him to give me five, but he took a photo instead. He laughed then groaned.

“Woah. Those are some big ugly hands,” he said.

“What did you say?” Leroy asked.

“Big Ugly,” he said, slowly, winking at me.

It took me a few moments to translate. At home we spoke Pennsylvania Dutch, a dialect of Swiss-German, and we read almost everything, including the Bible, in German. Like most Amish kids, I’d been speaking English since I turned six and could understand more than I could express. Big. Ugly. Easy words that felt hard in my stomach, lumpy in my throat. I looked up at the boy’s parents, who had returned to squabble over the change my sisters had made from a fifty-dollar bill for two dollars and twenty-three cents of candy. I expected them to say something, anything, to their son.

“Please don’t make us angry,” Hanna said.

The boy laughed again and turned to his mother.

“Mom, the Amish don’t get angry, do they?”

“They can’t,” she said and snapped her purse shut.

Hanna reached out and slapped the camera with her hand, pressing the palm tight against the lens. The boy looked up, startled. Hanna held his gaze, waiting patiently for the boy to leave. Her cheeks burned and red splotches bloomed on her neck. I had never seen her so upset but we all knew why. That’s when Leroy turned and walked away. He knew there was only so much he could do help me that day.

The boy lifted Hanna’s hand off the lens and stepped away from her, toward me, to fire one last shot.

“Smile, Big Ugly.”

But I didn’t. I withdrew my hands and thrust my fists behind my back, pinching my fingers like Hanna. I could feel my own face flushed now and the burning in my neck. My lips flattened and the smile vanished. I stared at the floor watching the passing shoes pause, open-toed sandals shifting nervously, the white heels of a nurse itching an ankle. Nobody moved, but I wished they had. I felt a burning in my back work its way through

my kidneys, into my lungs. It hurt to breathe. I had watched with awe a Vietnam vet play an accordion in the parking lot of the marketplace, squeezing music through the folds in the instrument. My lungs felt like the accordion then, squeezed and suffocated, kicked with the brutality of reality. Nobody had ever told me that my hands were ugly. I knew they were different. A doctor had diagnosed me with syndactyl, a genetic disorder common among the Amish. He also said I'd be fine. "Make a good swimmer," he joked, "just like a Golden Retriever!"

The webbing began at the first knuckle and climbed up to the third knuckle, the skin translucent and waxy. I curled the webbing into fists and buried my face in them, suddenly and inextricably aware of myself. The boy was right. My hands were big and ugly. It was as if God had lit an oil lamp and said, "Eli, this is you," and I no longer wanted the attention of anyone.

I stood there, eyes pinned to the licorice wheels, unable to move, when an explosion of sorts scattered everyone but me outside. All frantic. One of the local teenagers had launched a M-80 through the tent arched over the market. The boy had left the camera on the counter when he ran outside and it sat there, waiting.

I'm gonna take it, I said to myself without apology or regret.

I knew it was wrong and I didn't care.

I scanned the empty market, spotting a row of faceless Amish dolls at the stall beside grandfather's candy stand. There were six of them, five girls and one boy just like my sisters and me, but without eyes to see. I bowed my head and whispered, asking the dolls for permission to take the camera. I dug a hole in the bin of licorice wheels and buried it, then closed my eyes and prayed the boy with the red belly would never return. When I looked up, beyond the dolls, I caught Leroy Fischer staring at me in his mirror.



I remember not wanting to go to bed that night because I didn't want to think about how I'd spent the day. During dinner, I imagined the bishop asking me, "In what ways have you contributed to good or evil?" I got the shivers thinking about my answer even though it was hot in our kitchen. How could I ever tell the bishop or anyone in my family that I'd stolen the camera? I had been quiet, and every time I tried to eat, I kept seeing that puzzled look on Leroy's face and I'd drop my fork and stare at my own reflection in the plate. The table felt crowded with my cousins, Uncle Isaac and Bishop Beiler visiting. The meal was supposed to have been a celebration of sorts. The week before, the twins, Katie and Ella, 18, had announced their decision to get baptized and join the church that fall. My parents thought they'd invite the bishop for dinner to offer our barn for the ceremony, since they figured, and hoped, that finally Hanna, their oldest child, would get baptized, too. But nobody talked about baptism. Instead, they stared at me, concerned.

Uncle Isaac was the only one at the table who asked if I was okay.

"Emma told me you had a big day at the market," he said.

I swallowed but said nothing and stared at the lump of Chow Chow, marinated carrots, cauliflower, yellow and green wax beans in my bowl. My mother paused behind me with a basket of rolls, then pressed the back of her wrist against my forehead. I held my breath, hoping any diagnosis would be better than being scared sick. She only sighed and stared at my sisters for more clues to my odd behavior, why I hadn't eaten anything and why I was sitting on my hands.

After the first few minutes, I didn't feel much of anything at all, just a numbing, tingling sensation in my fingertips—the only place where the webbing wasn't. If it had been winter, my posture would not have caused concern. But it was early July and 90 percent humidity, the air thick and buttered with heat. I wouldn't have cared if it had been a hundred degrees. I intended to sit on my hands all night. Maybe for the rest of my life.

There were other ways to eat, I figured. I didn't need a fork and spoon. I didn't need a table. I could eat alone.

This idea cheered me up a bit. I think I even smiled. Sitting on a hard wooden bench, hiding my hands from my family, I was suddenly hopeful. If I had pockets, I'd never have to show my hands to anyone.

Just then my mother set the spoon back and said, as if she'd read my mind,

"Then tell me what I can get for you."

"Pockets," I said, without a moment's hesitation.

My mother drew in a breath. My father raised an eyebrow as did the bishop. My sisters lay down their forks.

"Pockets?"

"Yep."

"Why do you want pockets?" my mother asked, casting a knowing glance at my sisters. They looked up from their plates but remained silent.

"I want pockets because it's time," I said, even though we consider pockets worldly. We wear mostly broadfall pants that button on each side, but most Amish boys get pockets in their pants when they turn six. I was overdue by three years.

"I'll see what I can do. But you're a growing boy. And you need to eat if you want your pants to stay on."

Sarah, who sat to my right, giggled. She was two years older than me, and at 11, the spitting image of Hanna, but shorter and more talkative. Ruth, who at 14, could hit a home-run with her left hand, reached across my lap and squeezed Sarah's leg until she said ouch. I looked up at my mother.

"Can you sew them tomorrow?"

My mother locked eyes with my father. He shook his head.

"Your mother has to work. There's been twenty births this week alone. Her hands will be sore."

I didn't believe him. She rarely complained about her work, a hobby called *Fraktur*, a form of calligraphy that looks like needlepoint on decorative paper. Since the Amish keep no photographs of the living, the only history we have of our existence is in the form of these family tree *Frakturs*, used mostly for family records. The Amish who'd heard of my mother's beautiful calligraphy hired her from places as far away as Montana.

"My hands will be fine, Reuben. I don't mind."

"I don't have pockets," my father said. "And I'm 45."

"You don't have my hands either," I whispered, feeling the blood flush my cheeks, wanting to believe that pockets would be enough to hide who I was from the world.