

Surviving Family, Religion,
and the American Dream

American Leftovers

NY Times Bestselling Author

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HEIDI WILSON MESSNER



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Print: 9780827201101
EPUB: 9780827201118
EPDF: 9780827201125

ChalicePress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Richard and Sandi Case

~ ~ ~

You are warm and generous souls.
Holed up in your cabin in the redwoods,
we were able to churn out these pages—
and we had a “doozy” of a time.

Mark Wilson

~ ~ ~

You will always be Daddy to us.
Home is wherever we’re together, and we couldn’t have
completed these edits without your amazing hospitality
and your willingness to air the truth.

And So We Begin

Olympic Peninsula, Washington — June 2019

At dusk, the three of us gather blackberries in a basket made of reeds. We later make dessert in the camper while telling stories from our childhood. It is our tenth night together near glacial peaks and the roar of the mighty Pacific. We haven't been alone like this in over thirty years.

Not since everything came undone.

Here on the peninsula, we remember, argue, laugh, and cry. We jot down some of our accounts while skipping over crazier ones we can't verify. We consolidate time lines for clarity. We change a few names and some physical descriptions to avoid causing hurt or distraction. All the while we drink wine, eat Brie, and nibble on craft chocolate. We trek to the lighthouse on Dungeness Spit, hike snowy Mt. Townsend, and stand in the spray of Marymere Falls. Black bear, osprey, and harbor seals make appearances as we log over 60 miles of trails. In the flush of nature's glory, we seek healing.

Every life involves pain and we certainly haven't suffered more than the average person. We have, however, shared some experiences which helped us hang on as our evangelical framework and family crumbled.

We clung to each other. We kept breathing.

We survived the deception, the dream, and everything in between.

Three siblings, three varying sets of memories. As we talk, we sift through the debris for the truth. We search for those trapped and wounded beneath the rubble, all those who lived through these experiences with us. And we look for the fractures which caused the final collapse. Simply put, we want to better understand our part in it all.

Even now we're still trying to find our place. How do each of us hold onto what was good and move forward? How do we forgive?

This is the story of our young lives.

— Heidi, Eric, & Shaun

An excerpt from our mother's out-of-print cookbook, *Global Delights*:

In 1972, the Lord sent Mark and Linda Wilson on an adventure ...
As they were stretched spiritually and emotionally through their journeys,
they were also being challenged physically to adapt to
new climates and cultures.

Through this, Linda came not only to love the peoples of
the world but their cooking.

This cookbook is a small sampling of culinary delights and wisdom gleaned ...
These recipes are designed to be flexible, to encourage substitutions ...
sale items ... and leftovers.

PART 1

RAGAMUFFIN KIDS



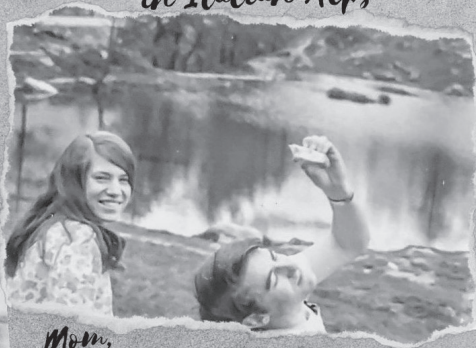
Ragamuffin: appealing in poorness, yet lively enough to cause trouble

A Field Guide to Street Children

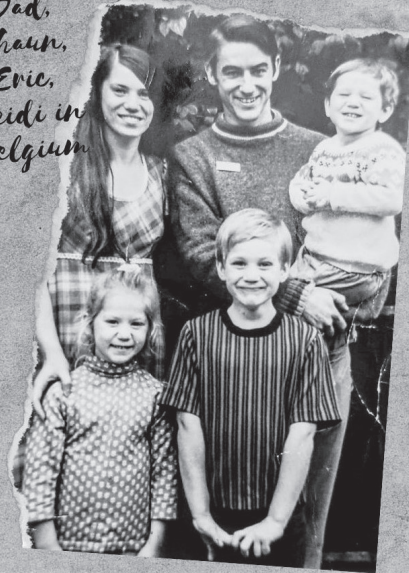
*Dad & Mom
cutting
wedding
cake*



*Dad & Mom on picnic
in Italian Alps*



*Mom,
Dad,
Shaun,
Eric,
Heidi in
Belgium*



*Eric, Heidi, Shaun
w/ guinea pig in Vienna*



1

Heidi

We have only minutes to spare. Mom's red hair is the beacon we zero in on as my brothers and I race through San Francisco Airport, ages five, four, and two. Eric is the oldest, tall and observant, followed by me with my blond pigtails, and Shaun, whose stubby legs work hard to keep up.

"Where's Daddy?" I moan.

"Airplane, airplane," Shaun mutters.

"Almost there," Mom calls over her shoulder. "Hurry, kids."

Eric waits as my Goodwill tennis shoes flap on tiny feet and as Shaun drags his silky blue blanket through the terminal. A TWA attendant checks our tickets, then waves us down the ramp. It is June 4, 1972. We are on our way.

The plane accelerates down the runway, and the cabin shakes as though tearing apart. I grip my armrests. My tummy drops as we lift into the sky. Is this what going to heaven feels like? Mom says we won't have to take naps there or be sad our bunny rabbits died. But I like naps. I even like to cry sometimes.

Nudging my arm, Eric points down at the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Wave goodbye," Mom tells us. "I don't know when we'll be back."

"Are you crying?" Eric asks her.

"Oh, honey," she says softly. She shifts Shaun on her lap and squeezes each of our hands. "We're all going on an adventure with Jesus."

This adventure started months ago. Our house in Eugene, Oregon, was sold to pay off debts, and our furniture and toys went to charity. We now have only our suitcases, the clothes on our backs, and \$70 to our family name. Soon, we'll be smuggling Bibles into Eastern Europe in a camper van, defying communist guards, with me and my brothers as part of the tourist disguise.

What do we know? We are kids.

Our parents, in their early twenties, are practically kids themselves.

Of course, we have no idea Dad fled America months ahead of us to avoid a felony warrant for his arrest.

2

Heidi

No, this isn't heaven, and I don't care. After switching planes in Chicago, we land in London's Heathrow Airport. From the crowd at the arrivals gate, a wiry figure comes into view. Our father has dark sideburns, darker eyebrows, and bright blue eyes over a radiant smile.

"Daddy!"

I run toward the man I love, the one who cracks jokes to cheer me up and soothes me when I skin my knees. He is everything to me, my hero. The time away from him has been way too long.

"*There she is,*" Dad responds. He sweeps me into an embrace and looks into my eyes. He is larger than life and pulsing with energy, his lean arms still corded with muscle from his days as a high school gymnast. "How's my sweetie doing?"

Mom can't possibly compete with his big personality and she doesn't try. She never wears makeup or draws attention to herself. Whenever Dad takes over a room, she just giggles and laughs along with the rest of us. She adores him. Over the next three years we will travel to more than twenty countries across Europe and Asia, and even then she'll insist he is the most handsome man in the world. Her love blinds her to the troubles that simmer.

"Why'd you leave us?" I pout. "I missed you, Daddy."

"Awww, sweetie, I missed you too. And who's *this* guy?" he says, ruffling Shaun's hair. My little brother stares up with big round eyes. "I hear you turned two while I was gone."

Shaun holds up a pair of fingers, then sticks them into his mouth.

Dad gives Mom a quick kiss before pulling us all in for a family hug. "I didn't *want* to leave you guys, but I had to come find a place for us to live. For the next month or so we'll do our initiation in the Italian Alps, giving out Bibles, and then head to Vienna. You ever heard of Austria? Do you know what a Ferris wheel is?"

Though Eric rarely admits not knowing something, I shake my head.

"You'll get to ride one of the biggest in the world," Dad says. "How's that sound?"

I grin. As long as Dad's with us, it sounds perfect.

We reach Austria's capital by early July. We've already been through Holland, Belgium, France, and Germany, not to mention the alpine vistas of Switzerland. Vienna is different, though. It is known as a city of spies, hosting dozens of embassies and thousands of diplomats.

Since our family is on a secret mission for God, we blend right in.

Out to save the world. All for a higher call.

In the center of Vienna—or *Wein*, in German—fountains, statues, and palaces hint at past glories. Beneath the soaring spires of St. Stephansdom, bakeries display rows of treats, from fresh *Apfelstrudel* to *Sachertorte*, a triple-layered chocolate cake with apricot filling. I bounce on my feet, convinced I will love it here.

Our new residence isn't far from the Alte Donau, a quiet offshoot of the Danube River. Gated walls hide the two-story structure, a local base for Operation Mobilisation. Other OM team members already live here, so our family of five is relegated to a damp and dreary attic.

The children at the house seem well behaved. While they are polite and refined at meals, we are talkative and playful. They are quiet, keeping out of the way. We are constant explorers. They have playthings of their own. We do not. Our parents think we should be like the Christians in the early church, owning nothing, sharing everything.

"That's not always practical," argues one of the senior team members.

Mom smiles. "We're just trying to live as Jesus did."

At least when my brothers or I need clothing, we can rely on OM's community closet, nicknamed Charlie. If someone grows too big for their britches, as Eric does regularly, they get to visit Charlie. I, on the other hand, never seem to grow. I am the waif. I only see Charlie when my fabric wears thin from my rough-and-tumble play.

I'm still not sure about this adventure with Jesus.

And I miss my toys.

One afternoon, Eric and I decide to take matters into our own hands. We see Mom draw Shaun onto her lap as the adults gather for a prayer meeting on the first floor. Shaun is our unwitting accomplice as he rubs Mom's blouse sleeve between his fingers. She won't be going anywhere for a while.

Eric and I sneak down the hall toward the basement door. Treasures call to us from their hiding spaces below and we know just where to find them. A stair creaks beneath my foot. I can barely see. If I fall, I'll alert everyone to our escapade.

"Should we turn on the light?" I whisper.

"The grownups are already singing," Eric notes.

This means we can complete our operation undetected. The moment my hand finds the switch, the basement goods hop into view—piles of toilet paper, buckets of laundry soap, canned food, tubs of potatoes, and stacks of breakfast boxes. The cereal is our target. Each one contains a prize. Normally, whoever pours the wrapped item into their bowl is the lucky winner.

Eric and I are done waiting around for such luck.

Today, we will be the victors.

We open the box tops carefully so the flaps can be refastened. We plunge our grubby fingers to the bottom of the bags, seeking our plastic surprises, rescuing them one by one from the depths.

"Look," Eric exclaims. "A Porsche 911."

"Mine's a..." I'm not sure what to call it. While my brother can identify all the fancy sports cars, I just know what looks nice to me. "Mine has a trunk that opens."

"Is it a trunk or a boot?"

I shrug. I think I've heard people in our house even call it a bonnet. Isn't that something you put on your head? With British, Dutch, and German team members, we hear many words used in ways we don't understand. Continuing our plunder in the musty basement, we stuff toys into our pockets and close each box fastidiously so no one will notice our thievery.

What a haul.

A few weeks later the adults unearth the raided supplies and realize squalid little hands have rummaged through their food. Who is responsible? There's a big commotion, then dismayed faces glare down at my brother and me. We're the obvious miscreants. Who else? These ragamuffin Wilson kids, with their boisterous father and their spiritually-minded mother. From now on, we better toe the line if we want to continue as part of this OM team.

All Eric and I hear is, it's our fault. Twelve months later, we will wonder if we're to blame for our family's sudden dismissal.

~ ~ ~

Our journey over the next eighteen years will lead from Austria to India, to America and South America. The five of us will have wild adventures, face individual trials, and share mountaintop experiences.

When it all unravels, people will wonder how this could happen to a young, zealous, Christian family?

They want answers. Explanations.

Some obvious sin or problem to blame.

Who are we to say? We're probably too close to see the whole picture. But I can tell you this: It doesn't happen overnight. It is a death by a thousand cuts. Little compromises. Little things left unsaid. Things we take note of as we grow older.

The truth is, Eric, Shaun, and I will spend the rest of our childhoods watching, listening, and emulating the stuff our parents model for us. Our futures, our very survival, will become increasingly dependent on our ability to sift the good from bad, the truth from lies.

When all is revealed, what will we hold onto?

What will be left once everything around us is torn apart?

None of this matters to us now, of course. Our parents are all we have and we love them. To me, they're just Daddy and Mommy. We are one big happy family.

And we have some smuggling to do.

3

Eric

Our dark-green camper van rolls up, ready to go and loaded with contraband.

"Hop in," Dad calls from the driver's seat. "We're off to Romania."

Throughout Eastern Europe, drugs, weapons, and pornography are forbidden—as well as the Holy Bible. It's too revolutionary. It says to feed the poor, care for orphans and widows, and forgive your enemies.

Our parents, for obvious reasons, haven't shown us the wall's secret compartment—codenamed *gizli*, the Turkish word for "hidden." Dad and Mom aren't in this for the money. They deliver these Bibles to Christian homes for free, where the local believers could be imprisoned and tortured if caught. We don't realize that if our parents are arrested, we could become wards of a communist state.

Here's what we do know: God is love and we're making trips to help others.

My feet drag. "How far is it this time, Dad?"

"Listen, bud, I know we went over some bumpy roads in Czechoslovakia, but I've added extra bedding for you kids in the back."

I pause at the camper door. So much for our playtimes with the Banker girls, who also live in the OM house. They are a Midwestern family, quieter

than ours, with no pretense. I have a secret crush on Deneen Banker, who is my age. Heidi and Debbie, they get along, testing each other's bravery on the backyard jungle gym. Shaun and Dawn, they love the household pets. All six of us play hide-and-seek.

Heidi clears her throat. "Daddy, who's going to feed the rabbits?"

"And guinea pigs?" Shaun pipes in.

"Good *grief*, guys, it's the same as before. We have other OMers to take care of the animals. Let's get going. C'mon, Eric, set the example."

I feel the usual squeeze of being the oldest and I step into the camper. Heidi follows. Shaun slides in on his belly, then finds a cushioned seat. Mom closes the panel door, and the engine fires up. Minutes later we rattle south from Vienna toward dangerous territory.

Mom settles beside me and asks, "Did you pack your swimsuit, honey?"

"Doesn't matter. We're always stuck in this camper."

"Oh, I don't know, we might go to the Black Sea this time. You'll be fine in a pair of shorts." She taps my knee. "I have something else for you."

My head tilts up.

"You'll be six in a few months. Since you've learned to play chess, Daddy and I thought you might like an early birthday present." She hands me a travel chess set.

"Is it mine to keep?"

She grins. "All yours, Eric. Hopefully, we can play a few games together."

As I cup a black knight in my hand, Shaun inches closer for a look, but I give him a view of my back. For a few minutes at least, I want this all to myself.

~ ~ ~

It is early August as our camper groans along a fringe of the Carpathian Mountains. The weather is hotter here. We've gone over 1300 kilometers, past farmland and castle ruins. Though we masquerade as tourists, our parents are risking our freedom to spread the gospel. Sightseeing is not the goal.

At twilight, we chug past men and women wearing colorful garb. Their children have dirty caps and threadbare clothing. They will be called *Roma* in the future, but for now they're simply known as gypsies.

Our camper slows as we roll by. We pull off between some fir trees to set up camp for the evening. Dad lights a small fire. Two boys catch up with us on foot and proceed to entertain us with juggling and somersaults. They play tug-of-war with their hats, then toss them back and forth over the flames, making me and Heidi chuckle. Shaun is in awe. Mom warms up lentils on a propane stove.

"Kids, over here," Dad orders.

We hesitate to turn away from our free roadside show.

"Now."

We scurry toward our father's voice, afraid of getting in trouble. Instead, he directs our attention to a third boy who has crept through the woods toward the back of our camper. The boy realizes he is busted and he whistles. He and his buddies vanish in seconds, lost to the evening shadows.

“Did you catch what was going on?” Dad says. “It’s called the robber’s dance. As the first two pranced around, the other was trying to sneak up and rob us.”

“Can’t we just give them some food?” I suggest.

“*Love* your heart, bud. Those poor kids, they’re just trying to survive, and Jesus wants us to be generous, doesn’t He? But there’s a lesson here. If you don’t stay alert to the devil’s schemes, he’ll try to steal from right under your nose.”

When bedtime comes, Mom and Dad crack the windows in the front cab. It’s hot and stuffy with all five of us. We lay on top of our sleeping bags with thousands of books in the wall beside us, hidden in the gizli. My eyes remain open in the dark.

We’ve been taught to be thankful for everything. Each piece of clothing is a heavenly provision, each bite of food a gift from above. Why am I so blessed? I’m no better than those gypsy boys. Somewhere out there the devil is scheming, and all I have are questions:

Did the boys get any dinner? Where will they sleep tonight?

Do they know there’s a God who loves them?

My thoughts flash back to a year ago. It was a Sunday evening. My parents stepped into my sister’s and my bedroom, then lit a candle. They read scriptures to us, and revealed a plate of broken crackers and a cup of unsweetened grape juice.

“Jesus is the Bread of Life,” Dad said. “These crackers remind us how much He loves us, how His skin was pierced and beaten as He died on the cross.”

“And this juice reminds us of His blood,” Mom added. The candle’s flame flickered through the burgundy liquid in the cup. “Sin, no matter how big or small, deserves punishment by death. That’s why Jesus paid the price to forgive us.”

I sat up in my bed. “But I don’t sin.”

“We all do, honey.”

As little kids, neither Heidi nor I seemed convinced.

Dad tried to explain. “Sins aren’t just the big, bad things. God loves you, but anytime you disobey His Word, it puts a barrier between you and Him. If you lie, that’s a sin. If you want what *you* want more than what *God* wants, that’s a sin. Even not sharing or grabbing one of Shaun’s toys from him can be a sin.”

Our little brother, only a year old, seemed an unlikely mark. He was asleep in his crib in the other room.

Heidi’s eyes welled with tears. She seemed to catch the seriousness of all this.

“What if I haven’t?” I pressed. “I don’t think I’ve done those things.”

“Honey,” my mom said, “do you know what pride is?”

I shook my head.

“Pride is thinking you are better than you are, thinking you don’t need anyone else’s help. That was the devil’s problem. He was convinced he was as wise as God and that was the very first sin.”

Mom's words peeled back something in my child's heart, and my pulse pounded. I saw clearly I was a sinner. I did selfish things. I didn't want anyone's help, and there was pride in me for sure. The guilt felt heavy in my bones, and I realized I needed forgiveness as much as any soul alive.

"I have sinned," I whispered.

"Do you want to confess that to Jesus?" Dad said. "Would you like to ask Him to forgive you so you can have a relationship with Him? He loves you so much."

I nodded. So did Heidi. We prayed with our parents there in the bedroom, then ate the salty crackers and drank from the cup. As I pictured Jesus on the cross, those nails hammered through His wrists, my tongue puckered with the tannins in the grape juice. Shivers coursed down my neck and through my arms as though I'd been plunged into cold, crystal-clear waters, and a wave of grace swept over me.

We were saved. Washed in the Blood.

Forevermore God's children.

Staring now at the camper ceiling, I am aware of a love without boundaries, a love beyond explanation, and I wonder how I can close my hands to others? How can I shun some gypsy boys just doing their best to survive?

~ ~ ~

We are in Constanța, Romania, a day later, splashing around in the Black Sea, when Dad spots jellyfish and gestures for us to get out. Heidi, Shaun, and I are having so much fun in the sand and surf that we're reluctant to respond, until Dad points out the rubbery, blue-white creatures with their lacy tentacles.

"Those things can sting," he warns us. "We're done swimming."

Back in the camper, we drive into the afternoon. We turn down a dirt road, passing a sign we can't read. Dad says we'll wait here until nightfall. The moment he kills the engine, though, he realizes something is wrong. Military vehicles careen our way from a base just over the hill. We have trespassed on government land.

Soldiers jump out, rifles in hand. Jutting their fingers, they shout.

"We're tourists," Mom explains to them in her soft, earnest voice.

"Dumb Americans," Dad agrees. "*Americanos.*"

"Go." The soldiers gesture for us to turn around. "You go now."

As though this isn't motivation enough, a fighter plane takes off from a nearby runway. We all watch it thunder into the sky. Our dad is courageous but not stupid. He's now more than willing to comply, considering the illegal cargo we carry.

An hour later, Dad finds a safer spot, and Mom takes us on a walk while he fumbles around in the back of the camper. What is he doing? We're told not to ask. While we're gone, he unloads boxes into a local pastor's barn. The pastor covers them with straw and urges my father to leave. It's not safe, he warns.

We get back on the road as shadows fall. Dad's eyes dart between his mirrors, and his knuckles tighten on the wheel. He tells Mom we are being followed.

"Are you sure?" she says. "We're less than an hour from the border."

"There's two of them back there in a black Mercedes."

"Secret police?"

Dad edges off the road. "You know, I'll just let them pass."

"They... look, they pulled over too."

I peer through the window in the camper's rear door and see the car facing us. My heart pounds. What have we done wrong? Why does Mom sound so concerned?

Our father checks the mirrors and taps his fingers, then inches forward again as the Mercedes tracks us from a distance. His agitation grows, despite Mom's mumbled prayers. "Shit," he mutters under his breath. "I mean, pardon my French, but why won't they leave us alone?"

My eyes widen. I never knew Dad spoke French.

Only later will we learn he has a history of run-ins with American cops. He doesn't trust authority and he's willing to buck the system. As a born-again Christian, he's here in Eastern Europe trying to use his bad-boy spirit for good.

There are plenty of examples of righteous defiance in the Bible. In the Old Testament, Jewish midwives hid male newborns from Pharaoh, and Daniel still prayed to his God after King Darius forbade it. In the New Testament, the apostles went back to preaching in the streets after officials arrested them for doing so.

Dad is fixated on the black car. "What're they up to?"

"They just want you to react," Mom says. "Please, can we pray together?"

"It's all a *game* to them, that's obvious. They're messing with us."

Yanking the wheel, Dad swings the camper into the gravel where a pothole jars us from our seats. Heidi's pigtails bounce. Shaun's fingers pop loose from his mouth. I pick up my fallen chess set, then fish for strewn pieces on the floor.

Mom purses her lips. "Honey, they're still back there."

The Mercedes idles right behind us. Two men in dark suits fill the front seats, their faces expressionless. Their hats look like props from a spy movie.

"When did you first see them?" Mom asks.

"Give me a minute, okay? I'm trying to think."

She looks back at us kids. "Dear Jesus, surround us with your angels."

"This is ridiculous. I'm *done* playing games." Dad throws open his door and runs at the vehicle, waving his arms. "What do you want? You have a *problem*?"

I latch my chess set. Adrenaline shoots along my arms. Heidi and I lean toward the glass, wondering what these guys will do when they realize our dad's not afraid of them. He's not afraid of anyone.

Dad's still yelling. "Don't just *sit* there, you cowards."

The men in the Mercedes stare at the flailing apparition before them.

"You want to talk?" he says. "Okay, well, I'm *right* here!"

The men, it turns out, do not want to talk. Tired of this game, they steer around him and disappear down the straightaway. Dad climbs back into the camper, exchanges a glance with our mom, then twists around to look at us.

“Hey, *hey*, kiddos. Nothing to worry about. Papa Bear to the rescue.”

Though Heidi and Shaun giggle, I notice Dad’s hands shaking as they settle back on the wheel. It makes no sense. He is our superhero. I refuse to believe anything else, and I look away..