



CHAPTER 1

SACRIFICE

IT HAS ONLY BEEN A FEW DAYS, AND MY HEART IS
already exploding with joy.

It has only been a few days, and I already feel at home.

It's amazing what can happen in a matter of days when you're on the other side of the world. Maybe that's what it takes sometimes. From the mansions of politicians to the shacks of humble farmers, I've seen the city and the countryside and everything in between. But everywhere I go I am told the same thing: you are welcome here.

Despite all that has happened since I arrived, the event that stands out to me the most is when I went to the local church Sunday morning to worship. The joyful energy in the room was incredible, and the angelic voices of the children's choir were enough to make me feel like I was worshipping with these wonderful people in the throne room of heaven. I promise, an African church service will ruin you to anything else. When the sermon was over, I was greeted by more people than I could count. The adults showered me with handshakes and hugs. The children greeted me with curious looks, shy smiles, and contagious laughter.

—Jonathan's blog post, written on his third day in
Cameroon, West Africa

For nearly a year Jonathan had agonized over how to save the world. What was his part? What was his purpose? And then within six weeks every detail fell into place. Eight thousand dollars of support were raised in just over a month. Thirty guitars were donated so that he could give African orphans the gift of music, teach them what he had been taught in a privileged youth of weekly music lessons. The newspaper covered his story; his college highlighted his sacrifice. He got all his shots, was granted his visa. The insurance company bent the rules so that he could secure a year's worth of antimalaria medicine. He was prayed over, sent out, chosen. His path was made straight. He aced his last exam of the semester, finished up his thank-you notes, and boarded the plane—all on the same day. We, his happy family—his father, his mother, his sister—cried and hugged him and said good-bye at the airport, never more sure of anything in our lives.

When did you first know things had gone terribly wrong? I asked him months later. About six days in, he admitted. Six days into a yearlong commitment. Just three days after his heart had been exploding with joy.

It was the first morning of a new year, and I made the discovery on Facebook. Someone—most likely the culprit with the shears—had posted before-and-after pictures. I ran

upstairs to Jonathan's closet, where he slept on the floor, to find out if it was true. There he was, like a slumbering Samson, shorn of his beautiful mane of curls. He looked like a new recruit, or a cancer patient. Or a monk.

This was not Jonathan's first act of renunciation. His bed was gone, along with most of his bedroom furniture. He slept on the floor of his narrow closet, just long enough to accommodate his six-foot frame. Once he left the house while his meditation candle, the one emblazoned with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, still flickered in his closet, and his prayers must have been heard because she spared the house from catching fire. I made a little poster to put on the door, with a smiling friar in cassock and tonsure, with the caption "Brother Jonathan's Cloister Closet." (It was meant to be a joke, especially since the friar had more hair than Jonathan.)

Soon he began to scratch out short messages in pencil on the closet wall, a quote from Mother Teresa or a Bible verse about caring for the poor. Before long he had covered the walls with the words of St. Basil the Great, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Merton, Albert Einstein, Che Guevara, Frederick Buechner, Martin Luther King Jr., tragic hero Christopher McCandless, and Jesus himself. It was always a message of self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

I framed a photo and hung it on his closet wall, in the midst of the quotes, when he returned from Honduras. It was a picture of him reaching out his hand to a poor, bare-footed Honduran girl. She was tiny for her age, thin and expressionless, with an oversized T-shirt slipping off one

shoulder, the applique butterflies muted by dirt. Jonathan noticed that her movements were robotic, as if she didn't have the energy to move fluidly. He knelt down beside her and reached out his hand to her. She stood motionless, looking straight ahead, never acknowledging his presence. He waited. Then slowly, very slowly, she raised her hand and placed it in his. But she never shifted her gaze, her eyes looked straight ahead. Her expression was still blank. But a great change had come over his.

Jonathan was a youth leader at church, and he was asked to speak during a Sunday morning service about his work with the homeless. He wanted to mention how hopeless he felt after seeing the suffering in Honduras, but the pastor edited that part out, asking him to keep things upbeat and positive. After the service, we planned to take Jonathan out to lunch, to celebrate the occasion. He drove on ahead to the restaurant, but when we arrived he was nowhere to be found. We searched inside and out, checked the bathroom. I looked outside a second time and found him behind the building, sitting on the curb near the dumpster. A petite woman sat next to him. Her name was Carmen, and even though the weather was temperate, she was wrapped head to toe in heavy winter clothing.

The next day he told me that a van had stopped in front of him and Carmen as they sat near the dumpster, and a young boy jumped out and handed them each a bag of chips. The boy assumed Jonathan was homeless too. Jonathan's hair was long and curly then, his jeans were ripped, the sole was coming off one of his shoes. And that was his preaching attire.

He and Carmen were old friends by now; he gave her rides from time to time, ran errands for her. He had bought her a luggage cart to transport all her worldly goods when hers was damaged. Sometimes she would ask him to meet her someplace and then not show up.

She had wide, beautiful eyes, but her speech was hard to follow. She wanted to tell me she saw Jesus in the clouds once, or in a rainbow. We invited her to lunch, but she said she was too dirty to go inside. Jonathan thought she was worried about leaving her luggage cart, so we brought her lunch to her. Your son is beautiful, she said.

Later Jonathan admitted, "I felt guilty approaching a homeless person if I hadn't given something up first." So he slept on the floor, shaved his head, broke up with his girlfriend.

Before Jonathan left for Africa, he was invited to the Washington, DC, premiere of the film adaptation of *Blue Like Jazz*. He was one of the thousands of associate producers credited on the film, which boasted one of the largest fundraising efforts in film history. There he met author Donald Miller, shook his hand, and told him: I'm going to Africa because of you.

And it was true. If it hadn't been for that book, which Jonathan had read two years before, he might not have realized his love for others was conditional. He might not have gone to Honduras or held the hand of a little girl or dreamed of a little African boy when he got back. He might

not have started a ministry to reach out to the homeless. Or met Carmen. He may have never felt he was needed by the orphans of Cameroon, West Africa. He wrote about the transformation in a blog post.

After I finished *Blue Like Jazz*, I felt different, like I was walking around with a secret I couldn't contain. The secret that everyone matters, everyone deserves love. Suddenly no form of human interaction felt too small or insignificant. And that's when I started noticing people all around me I had been ignoring, people I could be loving but wasn't. I wanted that to change. So I reached for the outcasts, the ones deemed "worthless" by society. The homeless.

His love for the homeless expanded, extended, and then he was taking in other outcasts. Mentoring teenage boys who even the church folk didn't want. The test of love being to give to those who couldn't give back. Then he saw the scope of suffering in Honduras. Then he had the dream.

Jonathan had given away most of his material possessions, including his clothes, but there was one thing he didn't relinquish: his books. He assigned me a list of books he wanted me to read when he left for Africa, the books that had paved the way for him to go. Jonathan had always been deeply affected by literature, had loved books since he was a little boy. He was only five when he packed up his favorite books, including his father's boyhood copy of *The Wizard of Oz*, in a pale blue suitcase that he sealed with duct tape for good measure. He alerted us that this suitcase was to

go with him should Jesus come back. He could part with everything else but his treasures in heaven had been stored up in the written word, with color illustrations. He would fill a suitcase with books when he left for Africa, too.

I had read *Blue Like Jazz* shortly after he did, at his request. But the new books on his list were different. Less philosophical, more directive. They were filled with the kind of zeal that might fuel an idealistic college student to leave school, to travel alone to a continent he was unfamiliar with, to join forces with people he didn't really know, to stay longer than he should have. But I only figured that out later, after he was already gone, after I began reading the list of books he left behind.

When I missed Jonathan, I sometimes visited his cloister closet. His bedding was still there, unwashed, some blankets and a pillow. That's when I noticed new quotes had been added to the wall. They were less encouraging, more accusatory than the others. Each one issued a challenge. Each one pointed a finger. No longer a wall to inspire, but more like the markings of a prisoner biding his time. Not counting the days to freedom, but further closing him in.

If it was Donald Miller who was responsible for getting Jonathan to Africa, it was these other voices who were responsible for keeping him there. Because there was always more to do. More to give. More to sacrifice. No matter the cost.

I think people are tired of being told about a Jesus they haven't experienced. If someone has never been shown love

or peace or mercy, but I claim that Jesus is all of those things, I have done nothing to help that person understand. Instead of just telling people that Jesus loves them, what if I showed them love first? Instead of just saying that Jesus is peace and mercy, what if I showed them what peace and mercy feel like? If I do that, then at last I can say the next part, the most important part: “Friend, the same way I have loved you is how Jesus loves you, and he loves you even more than I can.”

This is my journey to make the words of Jesus jump off the page. In three weeks I will be boarding a plane that will take me to Africa for a year to volunteer. I will be teaching orphans and schoolchildren how to play the guitar, traveling to remote villages to do medical outreaches, and helping to build a bakery that will not only teach the orphans a trade but will make the orphanage self-sustaining. This wouldn't be possible without the gracious support of friends, family, and fellow followers of Jesus.

Thanks for loving the world with me.

And so my beautiful son, with a suitcase full of books and a luggage cart transporting all his worldly goods, boarded the plane, poised to love the world.