

Autobiography of an American Orphan

No Push—No Pull

*by
Walter James*

Autobiography

of an

American Orphan

by
Walter James



Eloquent Books
New York, New York

Copyright © 2009 Walter James.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, typing, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the publisher.

Eloquent Books
An imprint of AEG Publishing Group
845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor—6016
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.eloquentbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-62857-854-6

ISBN-10: 1-60693-911-4

Book Designer: Bruce Salender

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to
the Orphans of Mount Loretto

Chapter 1

“Well, what do you know? Something good came out of Mount Loretto!” A half-smile and cynical snicker accompanied the words. It wasn’t the response I expected. I’d just told the administration receptionist that I was raised in this orphanage and had earned a Master’s degree. “Something good,” was supposed to be me. Being referred to as an object brought me back to my childhood, and that helpless, naked feeling before the beating. I felt sick inside—undone. It must’ve been the expression on my face, that made her continue at a personal level. “It’s a good thing you came today. If you came a few days ago, you wouldn’t have been able to get in the place. They had guards at the roads, and all the gates were locked,” she said.

“Really?” I answered.

“Yes!” It got so bad that they had to close the place down. It’s not an orphanage anymore. Now, they take only retarded children and kids with disabilities. Maybe you saw the group that passed by as you were coming in the door?” She waited a few seconds for it to register. I hadn’t paid much attention then, but now the picture of stumbling children flashed across my mind.

“Oh yes,” I said. “I saw them. I was just wondering if anybody I knew was still here—maybe some of the old nuns.”

Walter James

“I doubt it. They’re all gone. There’s an old nun still alive, but she doesn’t go out much. I think her name is Sister Angela or something like that.”

“Oh! I see. Thanks anyway,” I said. Suddenly feeling like an intruder, I turned to go. The standard California goodbye spilled out of me. “Well, have a nice day.” I stepped into the late-afternoon sun and started towards my car, aware of a burning in my eyes. I felt weak and sick inside, as her words echoed in my head.

“Well, what do you know? Something good came out of Mount Loretto!”

I sat in the driver’s seat and put on my sunglasses, unable to move. The oak trees spread long shadows on the green stretch of field in front of me. A slight breeze rippled through the leaves. Where did it all begin?

I leaned back into the seat, slipping into my subconscious. The view in front of my eyes faded, as a gallery of fast-paced pictures on a broken projector, flew past my inner eye: The smiling face of my mother, my brother David running for the subway—glancing over his shoulder, my sister June smiling. Then suddenly I was there—the first day I came to this place.

You should know that we were seven in the beginning, though only six were sent to this place. We were five boys and one girl then. They took my other sister Mary to another place—a different kind of place. All the rest of us grew quiet, as we stepped off the bus. Feelings of uneasiness and wonder instinctively drew us closer together. No human voice, birdcall, or rustling wind broke the stillness of the late afternoon air. At the far end of a long, open field, a huge cathedral-like church towered over the landscape. That structure of gray, granite blocks, centered over a wide, open field, dominated and anchored the grounds together. Gigantic, towering oak trees lined two wide roads on both sides, while a row of flat-topped, high, rectangular, redbrick buildings hid behind them off on the right. Their weather-beaten bricks faded long ago, all six-monopoly pieces lined up in a perfect row behind the oaks, trailing off into the distance. We were all alone in some story-

Autobiography of an American Orphan

book land, dazed and gazing about us in wonder. I half expected to see a curious giant peek out from behind one of those massive oak trees.

We started up the left road, all of us alone in our separate thoughts and fear. Holding me by the hand and leading us on, my older sister June broke the silence first. It came out of her in spurts of small talk about the grounds and buildings. My brothers followed close behind, in a huddled, slow walk, which finally drew us past the front of the church and to the first of the faded, brick buildings. My sister led me around the side of it, to the front. Half turning to my brothers, she told them to wait there and walked me up to the front doors. It was her duty to deliver me up, and she had no choice but to do it.

So, they knew then. They must've known then. They must have talked about it beforehand, planning it out. We were all to be separated and placed with our own age groups. At four years of age, I was the baby and I would be the first to go.

My older sister and I stood facing two big wooden doors, painted thick, military green and held closed with a rusted, latch handle. Lifting the handle and pulling the heavy, creaking door open, June stepped inside with me. My eyes struggled to adjust in the heavy, suffocating darkness that fell over us. Frightened and speechless, eyes and ears straining, I held her hand tightly. Soon I caught a soft, rustling sound and sensed the presence of a shadowy figure moving closer in the dark, a spider shuffling down its web to inspect its latest prey. Fluttering nearby in the dim light, it was suddenly there before me. Crouching down, with hands on knees, the black-robed figure leaned in for a closer look. An old, wrinkled face, wrapped in stiff, white cloth appeared before my own then zoomed forward. Through thick rimless glasses, a pair of cold, grey, beady eyes shot into mine. Instinctively I drew back from this strange, face-only figure, wrapped in white and covered in black. It didn't take me by the hand. No, I think I would have fainted dead away. No, it was my older sister June who led me to that little side door, coached by the old nun. As we stood there facing it, the small door squeaked open. Bright sunlight seeped

through the outline, and then flooded the space. A flat hand on my back propelled me forward. Stumbling down stone steps, I fell into another world.

Continual screaming and blinding light struck at once. Struggling to catch my balance and rubbing my eyes to clear them, I blinked into the sun. As my vision cleared, it was flooded in swirling masses of children—screaming, shouting, and running about aimlessly in an open, concrete courtyard. I was turned to stone. The slam of the door behind me broke the paralyzing shock. Cut off and alone, I spun around, grabbing instinctively at the doorknob and pulling with all my strength. It was locked shut! Desperately, I braced my foot against the wall, yanking at the knob with both hands and screaming my sister's name. It was useless: the door wouldn't budge. Spinning back around, I spied a tall, white, picket fence at the other end of the courtyard. Tearing through the swirling crowds and jumping up on the concrete base, I pressed my face between the narrow slats just in time to see my brothers and sister walking away. They were fading into the distance, and soon would be out of sight. With my long blond curls and blue eyes, I was Momma's darling. They would save me. I screamed out to them. It seemed to me they hung their heads, but none looked back. My heart sank as they continued to fade away. I screamed louder, then even louder, as my screams had no effect—then louder yet. Yanking furiously at the wooden slats, I screamed then for all I was worth. They never looked back. I wasn't worth much. I'd been abandoned.

In that instant, I became aware of the hands trying to tear me from the fence. The wild crowd was all over me at once—prying at my fingers, pulling at my hair, punching at my back and kicking at my legs. Reaching the end of hope I released the slats, giving myself up to them. Falling down at the feet of this wild pack, I threw my hands before my head, covering my face as I dropped to the concrete. The beating began with the crowd kicking and punching at me from all sides. It grew larger as more joined in the sport, shoving each other away to get at me.

Autobiography of an American Orphan

“Baby!” “Baby!” they shouted, laughing and kicking furiously. I curled up into a ball, sobbing away—forsaken.

Suddenly a heavy shout broke through the uproar. I heard it again. The kicks and punches slowed down. I peeked between my fingers to see a massive woman knocking my attackers left and right, with heavy, open and backhand slaps. At each powerful blow, one flew sideways into the surrounding crowd, or backwards, his arms sweeping wide backstrokes, heels clicking in front of the body, in a struggle to stay on his feet. Other nearby demons, yanked from behind, were flung left and right, sending them tumbling away in all directions. Recovering and jumping to their feet, their faces flushed in guilt and fright, they ducked quickly into the covering crowd. The big, fearsome woman reached down with one huge hand, swinging me effortlessly up and onto her hip. Then covering my entire back with it, she pressed my body into her heavy frame. I was saved!

I glanced up. My savior was well over six feet tall and came in a grey and maroon paisley-print dress. Stern-faced and massively built, she wore her steel-gray hair pulled into a bun at the back of her head. Burying my face into her hip and squeezing my eyes shut, I clung tightly to her dress with both hands as she strode through the heavy, screaming flow of insanity around us. Standing on one of her feet, I felt my body float through the air with each giant stride of her leg. Wading through the mindless, noisy mass, she suddenly stooped to pick up a crying child and set him back on his feet. In the next few steps, she was pulling two fighting kids apart. Moving on and on, she waded through the thick of it, lifting, separating, pulling and pushing. Her pace slowed and I felt secure enough to open my eyes. I’d become part of her now and no other child looked our way. The creatures had quickly forgotten me, turning their attention once more toward the closest moving body.

After some time I released my right hand, clinging on with the left only. With the balls of my feet half-running, half-skipping along the concrete ground, I tried to keep up with her huge stride. A rare moment of stillness found me staring about. From the safety of my formidable island, I began surveying the

Walter James

surrounding insanity. For the first time I saw pockets of kids here and there, and noticed open spaces between the bodies in the courtyard. I stood there wide-eyed, hanging onto her dress with one hand, while sucking the thumb of the other. I'd found my balance now and was upright on both feet. After standing silently for a minute with her arms folded, my protector looked down on me. A soft voice flowed down from that stern face in a tender caress. "Why don't you go and play now?" she said to me. But I wouldn't let go of the only one in this world I could trust, and she knew it, letting me cling there in my lingering terror.

My real life had begun, and in a way, I was lucky. I found out later that her name was Mrs. Mann. The name, oddly enough, fit her appearance perfectly, but not her heart. My first day's experience had touched Mrs. Mann. Buried deep in the breast of that massive, masculine-looking body was a gentle, maternal heart. She must've felt guilty that she hadn't gotten to me sooner on that first afternoon, because I never had to take another punch, kick or slap in that long, open, brick house in all the time I stayed there with her.

In this first house, a small side door to the left of the main hall led to that stone courtyard where I had first seen the light. We entered and left from there, where most of our time was spent. High, white, picket fences set into concrete at both ends completed the enclosure between the first and second buildings. Although no toys were provided, we were all given freedom of motion, and I soon ran with the same abandon as my caged companions. The night nurse (Mrs. Mann), our giant shepherdess, remained on continual watch. Some of my fellow rejects were also vigilant, but for a different reason.

Whenever they tired of playing with, or preying on one other, their natural curiosity led them to the limits of their cage. Pressing their faces hard against the spaced openings of the wooden slats there, and rolling their wild eyes in the sockets as far as nature permitted, they scanned the forbidden universe for other signs of life. They were bent on reward for their patient

Autobiography of an American Orphan

guard duty at the posts. Eventually spotting prey, they set off the alarm in a screaming singsong call of measured cadence, first high then low:

“There goes Vince—the barber shop! There goes Vince—the barbershop! There goes Vince—the barbershop! There goes Vince—the barber shop!”

This sudden scream always attained the intended effect. It cut through the din behind them, interrupting the play of their curious fellows, and drawing them to the slats.

“Here comes Tony Shoeshop! Here comes Tony Shoeshop! Here comes Tony Shoeshop! Here comes Tony Shoeshop!”

At the sound of these screaming chants, almost every wild-eyed child dropped what he was doing and came running to join in the excitement. Accompanying their moving target along the other side of the fence, while pressing their shouting faces into the slats for a better look; the pack screamed out the memorized chant as it flowed along with him. When their target moved out of sight, behind the front of the next building, “There goes Tony Shoeshop! There goes Tony Shoeshop!” trailed after him, growing weaker and weaker and finally fading out, as they lost interest and went back to their play.

The lookouts were the stars of the show and remained indefinitely at their self-imposed post. Their patience was blessed with the privilege of leading the scream. Moreover, they were rewarded with great diversity in their relentless hunt. Once in a great while, one of the children would spot Charlie. This was the most rewarding prize of all. Only the most vigilant would see him before he hit the slats. Beginning his personal gauntlet meant moving close to the building and out of sight of the courtyard. He waited there for the fewest possible number of fingers showing on the outside slats. Then, with his head tucked down for the running walk and shoulders hunched forward, he silently glided by those slats faster than any other moving creature. However, for all his precautions and to the best of my knowledge, he was never successful in passing by that fence undetected. One of the “babies” always spotted him.

Then suddenly, a frenzied, breathless screaming, surpassing all that went before, would ring out:

“Charlie Bashed-in, Charlie Bashed-in. Here comes Charlie Bashed-in. Here comes Charlie Bashed-in!”

The entire swarming crowd immediately stopped what they were doing and taking up their special call for this rare phantom where they stood, all charged the fence at once. Leapfrogging each other along the well-built barrier, they pulled and shoved in a mindless, moving mass as each one struggled for the best possible view through the slats.

“Charlie Bashed-in! Charlie Bashed-in! Here comes Charlie Bashed-in! Here comes Charlie Bashed-in! Charlie Bashed-in! Charlie Bashed-in!”

Long after he passed out of sight, their call followed: “There goes Charlie Bashed-in! There goes Charlie Bashed-in! There goes Charlie Bashed-in! There goes Charlie Bashed-in!” Their multi-chorus singsong lingered long, where the slats of the fence met the wall of the next building. They bunched together in that crowded corner, savoring the delicious moment. Eventually though, it too passed, as one-by-one their blood lust dimmed. The shrill shouts became weaker and weaker, softer and softer, and finally died out as they lost interest and drifted away.

This unfortunate man’s face had been disfigured in some long-ago boiler room explosion or accident. It left the right side a caved-in mask of horror. The cheekbone sank deeply into the face, with a flap of skin covering the missing eyeball socket. This horror mask was the best touch of finesse the surgeon could give his wretched patient. For Charlie, a normal face was out of the question. The expense of the necessary plastic surgery put it out of reach of the common man, and so he was forced to live the rest of his life with it. Although his brain appeared not in the least bit affected, this deformity completely controlled his day-to-day existence. Experience had taught him to spare himself and other people, as much as possible, the horror his flesh-mask evoked. So that whenever he had to be out walking, he would anticipate the direction of oncoming people,

Autobiography of an American Orphan

inevitably passing them on his left. As they drew nearer and the gap between them closed, slowly, almost imperceptively, he moved his face away to the right, timing the passing perfectly to give them a view of his handsome left side only. In that way he did his best to cover his curse and spare himself the unmistakable look of horrified shock, on the faces of those who beheld it.

Unfortunately, this was impossible when he received an order to work in one of the houses. The first house had to be passed on his right side, because it was the first in line, on the way to the others. Therefore, the “babies” were treated to the full, right-sided view. Yet, instead of horrifying and traumatizing the little ones, as you might expect, it had the exact opposite effect. Each time he passed by, their curiosity pulled them—magnetized, to that picket fence and the gruesome face behind those slats. They sensed his pain and panic in those desperate attempts to hurry by undetected. Naturally, it brought out the predator in their dear little hearts. Their prize catch of wounded “Charlie Bashed-in,” always left them flushed and breathless in anticipation of the next encounter. Some lingered at the fence all afternoon long, for the sights behind those slats. Of all their sightings though, this one attracted the largest number and kept them at the fence for the longest time.

Shunned by all living things, no doubt, he sat alone by the furnace of the boiler room—stoking coal and reliving the lost life of his handsome, teenage years. Charlie’s life must have been more bearable here, in this secluded dumping lot for unwanted souls. Yet, even here he was a rare sight and recluse, and in all the years I spent there, I saw him less than a handful of times thereafter. Nevertheless, I carry with me forever—the deep and haunted, one-eyed look, which he always gave me in passing on the left, and I wonder now what became of the mortally wounded Charlie....

Buy the B&N e-Pub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/autobiography-of-an-american-orphan-walter-james/1018885670>

Buy the Kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/Autobiography-American-Orphan-Walter-James-ebook/dp/B00HZ354LA/>