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# Cameron's Life

I know the very night he was conceived. It was a summer night in late June 1977. I was 19 years old and had been married about two years, since just after high school graduation. I'd been staying with my parents for a few days of vacation. I'd planned to swim in the pool and just relax, but I was getting bored.

This particular night was stalked by summer storms that circled but never pounced. The night was restless and so was I. I had thought I needed to be away from my husband a little while, but now I found I missed him. I just didn't fit in my childhood home anymore.

So I said, "Screw it." I wrote a note to Mom and Dad telling them I was going home early, and I stuck it on the refrigerator. Around eleven, I hopped in my car and started the hour-and-a-half long drive home from Phoenix to Prescott Valley.

I was high, I think. I don't remember if I smoked up before I got in the car or while I was driving. I had Pink Floyd on, loud. There's that one song, "Time," on the *Dark Side of the Moon* album, about how the days just spin by and all of a sudden you wake up one morning feeling old and wondering where your life went.<sup>2</sup>

And that's the feeling I had inside me those days. The feeling that time was just spinning on without me, while I was getting nowhere. The feeling that I needed to get on with it—whatever "it" was.

I tried to be quiet sneaking into our trailer home. It was after midnight and David got up early for work. I didn't want to wake him, and he wasn't expecting me for a few more days. I tiptoed into our bedroom, but he'd heard me. Only he didn't know it was me. We still joke that if he'd had his shotgun by the bed, he'd have killed me for a robber that night.

As it was, he reached out quicker than a rattlesnake and grabbed me roughly by the wrists. As soon as he figured out it was me and I got my heart swallowed back down, we had to find something to do with all that adrenaline. So we made Cameron. With a start like that, I guess we should have expected he'd be trouble.

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I often wonder what strings Cameron pulled to bring us all together in this lifetime. Looking back, I can sense his hand in it from the start.

My marriage was one of those cases of love at first sight. Except it didn't happen the first time we met. Mutual friends introduced us; my best friend was dating David's best friend, and the Perkins' house was known as *the* place to party most any Friday or Saturday night.

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years in high school, I spent many, many nights there getting wasted. David was just background noise at first, a convenient host. I dated a guy I met there for a couple months and, as I recall, David was seeing someone else at the time as well. I'm not sure what happened to David's main squeeze, but my knight in shining armor dumped me when he learned I wouldn't put out.

One night, David and I both found ourselves unattached, and we finally struck up a conversation. David asked me if I wanted to go outside and meet the goose. I told him, "That's the stupidest pickup line I've ever heard." He insisted that there really was a pet goose outside, so I followed him, out of curiosity.

We found the goose near the living room window, getting high on the smoke wafting out through the open screen and bobbing his head to the loud rock music. A party goose! Who knew?

We climbed onto the hood of an old car in the yard and stared up at the stars. Something in the clear night air sucked the cobwebs out of our brains and we looked at each other as if for the first time. There was instant chemistry and we kissed. I knew that very moment he was the one. It was like I'd never really looked at him before. So it *was* love at first sight. I'd just been blind for a while.

I wonder now if Cameron wasn't up there, in soul form, shouting, "Finally! What took you guys so long?!" I think he was anxious to be born, to work something out with us. I think that he'd been waiting a long, long time for all of us to be in the same place at the same time.

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It took a few more years for us to marry and finally bring Cameron into our lives. As soon as I learned I was pregnant, my whole life changed. It was as if I grew up overnight. I quit smoking cigarettes, stopped smoking pot, and curbed my drinking a lot. In those days, we weren't told to quit drinking (at least, I was never told to) and I didn't

realize it could be dangerous for the baby if I drank in moderation. I had been a wild teenager, a real party girl, but now all I could think about was being a mom. In retrospect, I wonder how much my lifestyle, before and during pregnancy, may have effected Cameron's development.

His due date was April 7<sup>th</sup>, but he must have been in a hurry. He nearly set himself up for a lifetime of teasing and torment by sending me into labor on April Fools' Day. He was spared that fate by an excruciatingly long labor, tempered in the final hours by a dose of Demerol that knocked me into a different universe. He finally arrived (assisted by forceps, as I'd long since lost the strength to push) in the early morning hours of April 2, 1978.

He was born with an insatiable appetite for attention and a fearless, boundless sense of curiosity that bordered on suicidal. He was born with ADHD, Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder.

Oh, I didn't know all that at the time. He was my firstborn, so I had no basis for comparison. He was a wanted and well-loved baby who did nothing but cry and nurse for the first six months of his life. Sleep was something that happened in fits and starts and never lasted for long. He was four months old before he slept through the night—and a short night at that. I was lucky if he would sleep until 4:00 or 4:30 in the morning. All the various "experts" had their take on it.

"It's just colic," my mother advised. "It will pass."

"Let him cry," said my mother-in-law, "you'll spoil him if you pick him up every time he cries."

"Nothing but breast milk for the first six months," insisted the pediatrician.

"Feed him some cereal before bed," my mother-in-law countered.

I was twenty years old. I didn't know *nothin' 'bout birthin' babies*, much less raising them. But none of these experts knew anything about what it was like living with this child.

Eventually he outgrew the non-stop crying and started to sleep through the night and nap in the day, and we settled into our lives together.

I loved that child with all my heart. He was such a beautiful little boy, his deep brown eyes always sparkling with curiosity and mischief. He had the longest, blackest eyelashes. He could be so

loving, snuggling in my lap for hugs and tickles. He was smart and clever and funny. It hurts me to think that the simple joys we had (and we did have them) have been so overshadowed in my mind by the painful memories of the difficult times that seemed to fill his life.

We didn't have speed-dial in those days, but if we'd had it, Poison Control would have been first on the list in our house. I quickly learned you could baby-proof a house, but you couldn't Cameron-proof it. He was curious and into everything. If there was something dangerous within 100 yards, including straight up, he'd find it: metal objects to put into electrical outlets, precarious heights from which to leap, arthritis rub to put in his mouth.

He didn't outgrow it, and he wasn't content to be the only subject of his lab experiments, either. I once walked into his baby sister's room to find that he had filled her ears with diaper rash cream and thoroughly powdered her head. Thank goodness he didn't take the next logical step and cover her face with a disposable diaper, blocking off her ability to breathe!

At the age of five, he nearly drowned in a lake near our Spokane, Washington, home. We'd gone for a nice summer day of relaxing fun with a neighbor and her children. I had turned my back for just a second to stir up some Kool-Aid for the kids. I turned around and asked, "Where's Cameron?"

Just like in the movies, everything seemed to go into slow-motion as the panic bubbled up in me. Someone pointed out into the lake and shouted, "There!" I spotted an empty inner tube bobbing in the water and ran toward it.

I found him under the waist-deep water, grabbed him around the belly, and ran back to the shore. When I pulled him from the water, his lips were turning blue and he was unconscious. I don't know if he was still breathing or not, but apparently my instinctual Heimlich-style grip just beneath his rib cage revived him. When I sprinted out of the lake with Cameron clutched under my arm, it was as though I'd applied a kind of accidental CPR. By the time we got to shore and I put him on a blanket, he was sitting up, talking and laughing, excitedly telling me all about the fish he saw under the water.

When he started kindergarten that fall, the teacher called me to say she'd never in her fifteen years of teaching seen a child as overactive as Cameron. This was the first inkling I had that maybe this wasn't

normal, average, kids-will-be-kids behavior. Maybe we needed to find out what was going on with him. My family doctor suggested it might be Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). This was a fairly new idea in 1983, not the rampant, epidemic diagnosis that it is today.

“Let’s try Ritalin,” the doctor said.

So we did, on and off, for the next five years. In some ways it helped, but in others it made things worse; it was like making a choice between having my child be a live missile with no guidance system or a zombie with headaches and moodiness. If you look on the Internet today, you’ll find article after article about Ritalin, its side effects and the rampant over-prescription of this drug to children who are labeled with ADD and ADHD. Given the same choice today, I wouldn’t put my child on Ritalin, but at the time it seemed wise to follow my doctor’s advice. Unfortunately, the Ritalin never curbed Cameron’s tendency to make poor choices.

As a young boy, he wouldn’t dream of backing down on a dare. He once ingested castor beans (the source of the deadly poison, Ricin) at the instigation of a neighbor boy who told him they were pinto beans and dared him to eat them raw. After he ate them, the boy panicked and told him they weren’t pinto beans and his mamma had told him never to eat the beans off that bush because they were poisonous. The episode triggered one of our many childhood trips to the emergency room. Cameron, under protest, was forced to down a bottle of liquid charcoal to absorb the poison in his system.

In elementary school, Cameron was the proverbial square peg in a round hole; he just didn’t fit in the system. The Ritalin kept him toned down a notch, but he still couldn’t (or wouldn’t) play the game by the rules.

Creative and intelligent, he’d find his own way around boring chores like in-class worksheets or homework. In first grade, he figured out that while the papers were being passed forward from the back of each row, he could erase the smart kid’s name from an A-quality paper and replace it with his own.

He became a masterful storyteller, which is really a euphemism for pathological liar. When he did something wrong and got caught, he would never tell the real story. He’d begin with complete denial, then, as evidence was produced, he’d cop to as minimal a part of the crime as he thought he could get away with. He didn’t eat *all* of the cookies;

he ate only *one*. The bag was almost empty when he found it. Someone else must have eaten the rest. Or, he didn't take *all* of the money from his sister's piggy bank; he borrowed only *a quarter*. She must have spent the rest.

I think he ended up believing his stories more than the reality of whatever he'd done. He never seemed to learn from his mistakes or their consequences. He never seemed able to relate the consequences to his actions in a cause and effect way. And the size of the trouble he got into grew right along with him.

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During his school years, he became moody and impossible to control. Adolescence was filled with individual and family therapy. Cameron never wanted to accept that he wasn't "normal." Who could blame him? What *is* normal, anyway?

Today he'd be called an Indigo Child, one of those special children thought to be the first in a new wave of human evolution, but in the '80s I'd never heard of the concept.

Some people think that children who are labeled with ADD, ADHD and other behavioral dysfunctions, as well as kids who exhibit extraordinary traits such as enhanced psychic abilities, may be the front runners of a more advanced human species. Unfortunately, these kids often struggle in life because they don't fit into the status quo. We don't know what to make of them or what to do with them. Their way of being collides with the world's expectations.

But Indigos are extremely intelligent, despite any appearance of disability or dysfunction. Cameron was so smart that he figured out the therapists right away; he told them what they wanted to hear during sessions and then came home without changing his behavior in the least.

Our home became a constant battleground. Anything that felt like a rule or a restriction, Cameron ignored on principle. Chores, homework, curfew and bedtime chafed, and Cameron resisted them with all his might. Punishments like no TV or being grounded simply fed the anger and sullenness that were always simmering just below the surface.

At the age of twelve, during one miserable year when we lived in Las Vegas, he ran away from home and spent the night out in the desert with a friend. I don't believe I had ever felt such panic. As I

paced the floor in our apartment while the police and my husband searched for him, I wrote a letter to him in my journal.

*I hope that you never have to experience what I'm going through (or worse) with any of your own children. Indeed, I hope you live long and fully enough to have children of your own —sometimes I am truly afraid you won't... You are out there somewhere in the desert. You're probably COLD and HUNGRY and THIRSTY. Maybe even hurt . . . And you chose to be there instead of here. That existence is preferable to the torture of living with us—with me. I don't understand how this has all gone so wrong.*

The following day he was found, safe and no worse for the wear. Dirty and tired, he returned home, sullen and unrepentant. After this experience, I took him in for evaluation and testing with a psychiatrist. The pressure of the testing, the implication that something was really wrong with him, pushed him over the edge for a time. The night before the final round of tests, I found him slicing the bottom of his feet with a jagged, broken plastic protractor. I guess he was acting out his self-loathing and trying to turn all his inner pain into something physical, something that could be seen. He may as well have been slicing up my heart, because I could feel every stroke as I raced across the room to take that unlikely weapon away from him.

The next day, after the battery of psychological tests was completed, an official diagnosis of ADHD was confirmed. Cameron scored in the genius range on the IQ test, but was nearly dysfunctional in the world in which he lived. Well, now we had a name for it, but we were no closer to a solution.

Nothing much changed after the diagnosis. We started a new round of counseling, but he already knew how to play that system. He didn't want to change, didn't want to accept a label like ADHD, didn't want to go on meds, didn't want to play by society's rules. He was playing his own game.

As a teenager, he began to hang out with gang-bangers. He started drinking and doing drugs. I wasn't completely aware of all that was going on at the time; Cameron was really good at covering his tracks and he had an answer for every question about what he was up to.

Looking back I realize there were lots of signs, like the industrial-style markers I kept finding in his room. Those heavy duty permanent markers were obvious tools for graffiti and also produced strong enough fumes for huffing (one of the first ways kids learn to get high). He rarely brought his friends around the house, preferring to go out to meet them. Hindsight tells me I should have paid more attention, but truthfully, I probably didn't want to know. I had blinders on and I preferred to attribute his bad attitude and behavior to the ADHD.

So, I didn't know all the details, but I knew things were getting bad. His behavior was getting worse and worse. There were lots of arguments, groundings, threats and punishments. None of it mattered. He'd just sneak out in the middle of the night and do whatever he damn well pleased.

He was skipping school all the time, failing classes. Detentions and suspensions were becoming commonplace. He wouldn't contribute at all around the house with chores and he would not even try to be civil to any of us. None of the "effective parenting" or disciplinary strategies we'd learned through counseling and taking classes seemed to work with Cameron. With patience growing thinner by the day, tough love seemed the only option.

When he was in high school, I gave him a choice: start doing his share around the house or get a job and pay rent to live with us. I wasn't interested in the money. I just wanted him to wake up and engage, be a part of the family, be decent to his siblings, be responsible for himself. He chose the rent, but then never paid it. So that just became another on-going argument.

I finally gave him an ultimatum: go to school every day and follow some minimal rules at home or move out. He moved out. He was only 16. I felt so guilty, like such a terrible mother. I'd thrown down the gauntlet and he'd called my bluff. He bounced around from friend to friend, and after some time, maybe six months, he came back home.

He barely finished high school, but finally got his diploma by going to night school. At 19, he joined the Marines. We all breathed a sigh of relief. Surely *that* would straighten him out. It would be just the discipline he needed. He'd develop a sense of responsibility and he'd learn what it meant to rely on people and to have them rely on him. I don't think I was ever prouder of him (or he of himself) than the day he graduated from boot camp.

## *The Deep Water Leaf Society*

But the glow tarnished pretty quickly. Faced with the 24-hour-a-day, in your face structure of the Corps plus the long spells of boredom when there wasn't any demanding training going on, Cameron started drinking heavily. And when he drank, all his anger came out. He would get into fist fights with anyone over nothing at all. Eventually, he decked a superior officer and it was all over for him. He faced a court martial, spent some time in the brig and was discharged for bad conduct after three years of service.

From that point on he was at loose ends. Unable or unwilling to hold a steady job, he spent a couple of years basically living on the streets. He started using crystal meth.

My husband, David, who owns a concrete company, gave him several chances to work full time and learn the business, but Cameron kept blowing it off for one reason after another. He once told me he'd rather dumpster-dive and panhandle than demean himself by digging footings and setting stems like any other simple laborer when his father owned the company.

My heart broke daily as I watched Cameron self-destruct. Life became a roller coaster of bailing him out of trouble, loaning him money, letting him come back home, and then kicking him out again. I could not have his drugs, guns and dangerous lifestyle in my home, yet I couldn't stand to think of him on the streets with nowhere to turn. I knew he needed to go into rehab. I'd have been willing to pay for it if I thought he was ready to realize he needed help. I didn't think rehab would do any good if he was forced into it. He'd just go back to his old habits once he got out.

I had two other children who were growing up to be loving, responsible, functional young adults, and I didn't want his influence ruining that. I had a loving husband who had long since let go of the notion that we could control or change Cameron. I had not yet figured that out and found it desperately difficult to let go. It was 2002 and Cameron was 24 years old. Although he was a young adult, he was still my little boy. I worried about him constantly and lived in a state of waiting for the next shoe to drop. I needed to find a way to distance myself from the constant drama his life had become.

