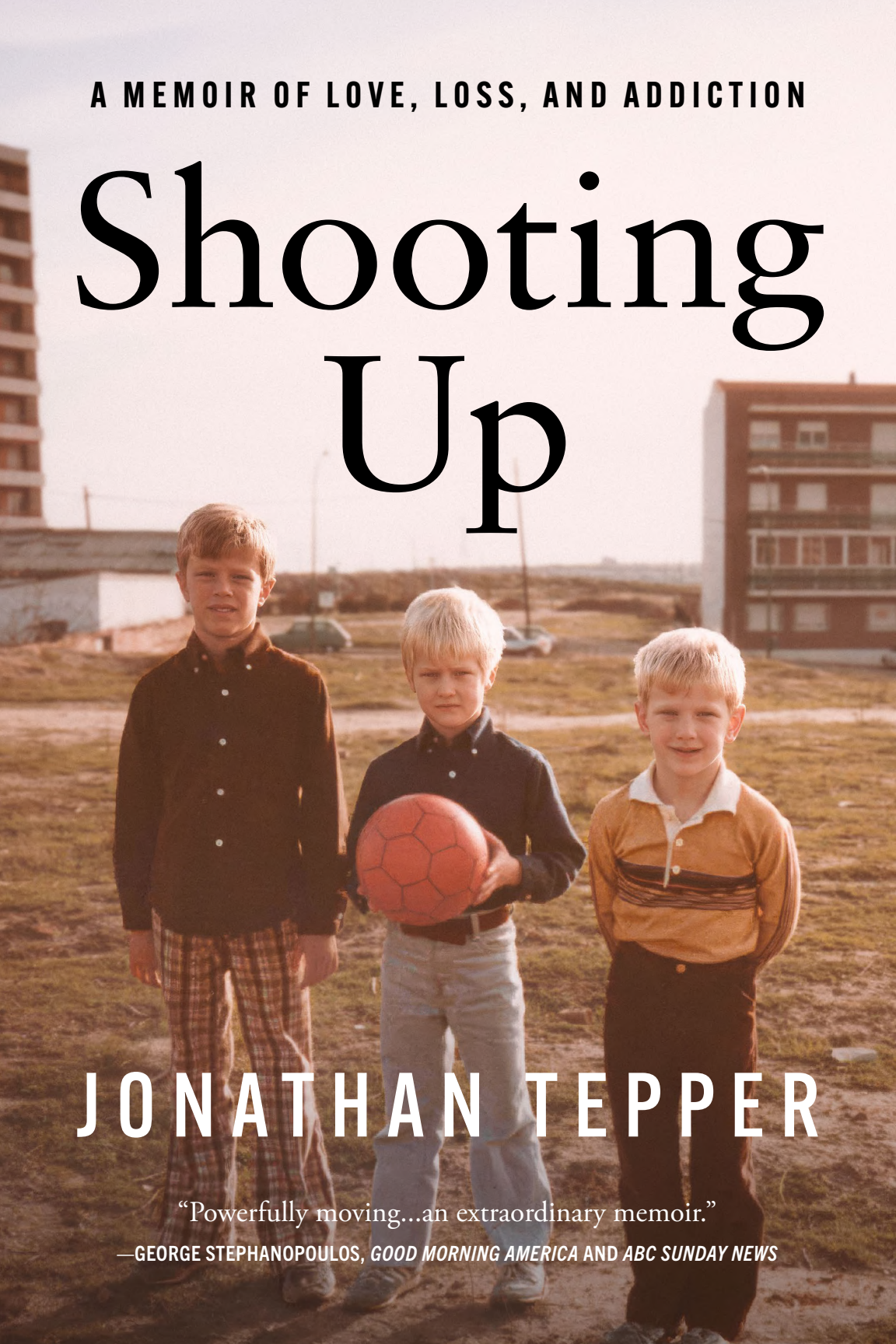
A MEMOIR OF LOVE, LOSS, AND ADDICTION

Shooting Up



JONATHAN TEPPER

"Powerfully moving...an extraordinary memoir."

—GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS, *GOOD MORNING AMERICA* AND *ABC SUNDAY NEWS*

PRAISE FOR *SHOOTING UP*

Shooting Up is an extraordinary memoir of a unique childhood among heroin addicts during the AIDS epidemic, but it is a universal story of love and loss that is powerfully moving. At a time when society is so deeply divided—and faith is a wedge that is often used—it is refreshing to read a missionary kid's true story of compassion and empathy for the outcasts. The book is also a tale filled with grace and humor in life's darkest moments.

—George Stephanopoulos, political commentator and Good Morning America and ABC Sunday News anchor

Shooting Up is an astonishing work that opens your eyes—and your heart—to a whole new world, one that is as beautiful and inspiring as it is gritty and harrowing. Jonathan Tepper is an extraordinarily gifted writer who has somehow managed to write a memoir that is at once heartbreaking, gut-wrenching, and joyous.

—Amy Chua, Yale Law professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and *The Golden Gate*

In stark, often heart-rending prose, Jonathan tells the story of growing up with his three brothers and missionary parents in San Blas, a drug-overrun neighborhood of Madrid. It is a tale of tragedy and triumph in the midst of loss and death. Ultimately, *Shooting Up* is a powerful testament to the redemptive power of faith, friendship, and love. I couldn't recommend it more highly. I cried, I laughed, I was changed.

—Tom Webber, author of *Flying Over 96th Street: Memoir of an East Harlem White Boy*

Shooting Up recounts a young man's coming of age in the unlikeliest of places and finds joy, wisdom, and humor in the darkest of moments. Reading this book made me think anew about grace, gratitude, and the hard roads that take us there.

—Daniel Swift, author of *Bomber County*

Jonathan Tepper's story is remarkable. From his father's dramatic conversion to the years pioneering Betel, this is the story of no ordinary family. I am so glad that Jonathan is sharing his extraordinary experience through this account.

—Nicky Gumbel, pioneer of the Alpha course and former vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) in London

Tepper's story about addiction, AIDS, and his parents' work with addicts in Spain in the 1990s is an insanely entertaining and wild account. In fact, it's the most riveting memoir I've ever read.

—Frank Schaeffer, author of *Crazy for God*

A remarkable, true-life story about an American family offering salvation in Spain's slums.

—Kirkus

It has been one of the privileges of my life to know the Tepper family and witness first-hand the marvel that is Betel, where countless people have found hope, healing, community, and new beginnings. Here, in his memoir *Shooting Up*, Jonathan Tepper, with great skill, eloquence, humor, and provocation, tells us the extraordinary story of Betel. This is not just another read—it's an event.

—Simon Ponsonby, priest, author, and teacher at St. Aldate's, Oxford

Jonathan Tepper's gut-wrenching, inspiring memoir *Shooting Up* immerses you so deeply in its characters that you feel as if you're living—and suffering—alongside them. Set amid the ravages of the AIDS epidemic in Madrid, this gorgeously crafted coming-of-age story is both luminous and profoundly humane. An unforgettable read that's impossible to put down.

—Joseph Luzzi, author of *My Two Italies* and *In a Dark Wood: What Dante Taught Me About Grief, Healing, and the Mysteries of Love*

Riveting memoir exploring missionary work, addiction, and human kindness.

—Booklife/Publisher's Weekly (Editor's Pick)

A fascinating story, brilliantly told… It is gripping, harrowing, and tragic—yet somehow also a story of faith, courage, and hope.

—Rt Rev Dr. Graham Tomlin, director of the Centre for Cultural Witness

Shooting Up

A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Addiction

JONATHAN TEPPER

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To my parents, Elliott and Mary,
and brothers, David, Peter, and Timothy, with love

How natural it all seemed then; how remote and improbable now!

GEORGE ORWELL, *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA*

FREE SAMPLE

Shooting Up

A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Addiction

by Jonathan Tepper

This sample includes:

CHUTANDO

Shooting Up

We were on the lookout for *yonkis*. My brothers and I shuffled our piles of pamphlets, hoping to get rid of them.

My father had been very clear. Before we headed out from our apartment, he called the family together in the living room, and we put our toy soldiers aside. Dad took a small mountain of religious tracts in his hands. He divided it into small piles, and we folded them neatly. It took forever, and we started aligning the edges one by one, but we soon learned to fold them ten by ten by pushing all our weight onto them. They covered our coffee table, and when we were done, the pile rose thicker than a phone book.

"Give them to anyone who looks like a heroin addict. Don't come back empty handed," he told us. "You will get an ice cream of whatever flavor you want if you do."

I would definitely have a chocolate ice cream.

"Do you hear me, Jonathan?"

I nodded.

Dad prayed to bless our endeavor, and we headed out to find junkies.

One of the best places to find the addicts was by the Metro near Parque El Paraíso. Little Timothy, who was only two, played at my

mother's feet, as she stood by my father. David, Peter, and I moved through the sand and patches of green in El Paraíso, glancing from side to side for anyone who might look like a *yonki*. I had watched the junkies shoot up near our apartment, so it wouldn't be hard to recognize them.

My older brother, David, took off, determined to give everyone a copy of the pamphlet. He sprinted in the distance and chased a frightened Spanish kid as he forced the tract into his hand. In his excitement, David forgot the pamphlets were only for junkies. My younger brother Peter stayed close to me.

The pamphlet said VEN, which means "Come" in Spanish. Our phone number appeared on the back, if they wanted to call us and get off drugs. It served as an unusual invitation to our home.

Under the headline, "*I AM DRUGS*," a smiling skeleton reached out his claw-like fingers toward the reader as he introduced himself:

> *It's me who in the beginning makes you live beyond the present world full of problems. But with time I am the very thing you cannot live without. After you have tried me, you're mine for the rest of your life.*
>
> *I am destroying your life in every area—physically, morally, and spiritually. It's me who has destroyed your family. It's me that caused you to go to prison.*
>
> *I have you trapped.*
>
> *You are in love with me. There is nothing in the world that can break our love affair.*

The skeleton scared me a little; that was the point.

I gave my first pamphlet to a young man drinking a *litrona* of beer and eating sunflower seeds. He examined the paper and mouthed the words as he read them.

By the grass I spotted a man leaning against a park bench. His skull tilted to one side, his eyes staring into nowhere. His hair appeared

oily and matted with dirt. I squatted and pushed the piece of paper into his hand, but he did not respond. I slid it into his shirt pocket.

"Keep it. It's got a phone number. Dial it if you want to get off drugs," I said, my small voice barely rising above a whisper.

He looked up, his eyelids moving as if time proceeded more slowly for him than for me. I stared at him, and he stared back at me.

"You're a *guiri*. You look Swedish but sound Mexican."

"I'm not Swedish. I'm American. My parents are missionaries."

"If I were you, I'd lose that fucking accent."

I was only seven, and I had spent almost all my life speaking Spanish the wrong way.

I nodded.

"You've got the pamphlet. Don't lose it, OK?"

Having escaped that encounter, I walked further ahead and found two men lying on a patch of grass. They were smoking cigarettes, but their sunken cheeks and rotting teeth told me they were junkies.

One man used the hollow of the bottoms of Coke cans to cook heroin powder with lemon juice before he drew it into the syringe. He shot up and blood speckled the syringe, and then he passed on the needle. My heart thumped as I approached. When they finished, they lay back, their eyes drifting into a hollow stare before closing and shutting out the world around them.

But I persisted, tapping the first guy on the shoulder and offering him a pamphlet.

"*Déjame en paz, chaval, o te rajo.*"—Leave me alone, kid, or I'll slit you.

I smiled nervously and backed away, relieved they did not get up to follow me.

Most of the addicts, though, took the pamphlets and put them in their pocket without saying a word. Others read the pamphlets as they drifted away. I hoped we would see them again.

As I walked up to *yonkis*, I studied them from a distance and learned to read their moods. Were they on edge and out to get money

to buy drugs? Were they already high? My father said addicts might hurt each other, but they'd leave us alone. Bullies who bark are scared animals who almost never bite, he said.

David, Peter, and I obeyed with unquestioning enthusiasm. Perhaps it was my parents' belief that God Himself would protect us that gave my brothers and me safe passage. Maybe it was the innocence of childhood. We were too small, too blond, and too odd to be a threat to anyone.

I stepped among the broken syringes, their needles glistening before me. They were everywhere in San Blas. I had seen them in the dump behind our apartment and by the buildings down the street. They blanketed the entrance to the Gypsy camp. The junkies scavenged for used syringes and rebuilt them, mixing a needle from one and the body of another if the blood inside had not dried. Then they shared them.

As the sun set, the distant orange glow of cigarette ends guided me like faint beacons. My pile was thinning out, and one by one I gave out the leaflets until none remained.

We returned home empty handed. No leaflets. But no addicts either. That was OK, though. My father told us we had planted seeds in men's hearts. Soon the harvest time would come.

My father was happy. I was too as I licked the chocolate ice cream.

When we arrived in Madrid, my three brothers and I—all blond-haired, blue-eyed American boys—did not look at all like the Spaniards around us. We were the only foreigners I knew in the neighborhood.

We had gone from being Christian missionaries in Mexico to missionaries in Spain. I had lived almost all my life abroad, as we marched wherever God ordered. We were to be His shining witnesses, following His call to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. Madrid wasn't a jungle in Africa, but our neighborhood of San Blas might as well have been the edge of the world.

The umbilical cord back to our homeland was a microscopic black-and-white TV that we had to crowd around to watch. My parents thought television corrupted, not only morally, but intellectually. They relented and bought one for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Spain only had two TV channels, but they showed Carl Lewis win his gold medals in track and field, and Michael Jordan crush the Spaniards 96–65 in the basketball final.

When America won, we danced and chanted, "USA, USA, USA!"

"Keep your voices down!" my mother scolded. "Our neighbors won't be happy tonight."

It wasn't only on the field and court that we beheld America's might. We felt it too when the F-16s streaked across the sky toward the NATO airbase in Torrejón. We had never visited, but the rumor was you could buy A&W Root Beer and M&Ms at the commissary. And I connected with American culture when I coaxed the radio dial. The Armed Forces Network station played Chuck Berry, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. But America remained far away: a place to which we only retreated on our missionary furlough every four years. Meanwhile, my mother's beautiful, handwritten letters to America took weeks to arrive, and transatlantic phone calls were a rare, expensive treat. We were adrift, on our own.

Millions of Americans lived scattered abroad, and Dad said we could be proud Americans and at home anywhere in the world. American expats had a long tradition going back to Thomas Jefferson and President John Quincy Adams, who spoke eight languages. Great writers like Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and T. S. Eliot had lived in other countries. Some Americans served in the armed forces, while others went to distant lands with Coca-Cola or the Peace Corps, and some were even missionary kids like me. Americans spread out, sprinkled about like specks of light in the night sky, brightening the world.

Our walls at home were sparse, even monastic. Not monastic like we were Catholics, because we were Protestants, even though

my parents said God loved Catholics too. My father said many only went to church for the photographs of the first communion. The only things that adorned the walls by our dinner table in San Blas were small plaques and two posters—nothing fancy and not even framed, because it was the message that counted.

In the entrance, a small plaque hung with a quote from C. T. Studd, the founder of our mission: "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of hell."

In the room, on one side hung *Freedom from Want*, a Norman Rockwell print of a perfect American family eating Thanksgiving dinner. America was a land we had left behind. The precision of the painting made it look like a photo. It reminded me of home, even though as a missionary kid, I never had a home—not that I particularly minded. In the picture the grandparents looked like my mom's parents back in the US, just a little shorter and chubbier. Or I may have been confusing things; my ideas of the place came from faded family photos and *Time* magazine covers.

On the other wall was a poster of a shepherd clinging to the edge of a cliff, his arm outstretched toward his lost sheep. An eagle swooped in the distance to seize the sheep with its sharp, giant claws. The way it looked to me, the shepherd was about to fall into the ravine with his sheep. He was barely holding on. Dad said the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. I just hoped he made it back up.

The images overlooked our family meals.

Dad quoted the Bible, as usual, "Which of you men, if you had one hundred sheep, and lost one of them, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that was lost, until he found it?"

He said that's what missionaries do, leaving behind the flock in America in search for the lost sheep. "Pastor" meant "shepherd" in Latin, after all…

We didn't have a church yet. In fact, we didn't have any sheep. We would have to find them. That was our mission.

Dad even placed The Great Commission with our family photo above his desk. It said, "Elliott and Mary Tepper, missionaries to Spain," and below that, Mark 16:15: "And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'" He had copies printed so American churchgoers could hang it on their refrigerators and wouldn't forget we existed as the years passed.

Dad explained to us in our usual morning devotional—our interminable daily Bible reading and prayer session—that God loves sinners, and we would bring them to Him. "I tell you that even so there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."

I thought Dad said that because he'd been a sinner and God saved him like the little sheep. Even though he grew up Jewish in Long Island, he found Jesus after doing LSD at Harvard Business School. Make money, not war, and avoid the draft, his friends said, but he yearned for something else. That was when he and the hippies used mescaline and listened to Dylan and Baez. Their words lit the steps on the path to truth. He lived on a commune, but not a seedy one, he said, more like one for people from Harvard and MIT. That was before he met God.

Dad's arms grew hard from college wrestling, and he only spanked us with a reluctant resolve when we did not do exactly as he and Mom said. He was a clown who could walk up three flights of stairs doing handstands, do thirty one-handed push-ups, and wrestled my brothers and me on the carpet all at once until we were sweaty and stinky before dinner, which Mom did not like. But he was soft too. Words tugged at his soul, and he cried at the dinner table when he read stories to us.

"My body is broken. I go to my fathers. And even in their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed." That's what Théoden said in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* before he died. And it made my father sad.

My father told us we needed to be wise and brave, but above all noble like Théoden: "True nobility is in our hearts."

Dad had grand visions of rescuing the lost sheep. He said he saw things beyond the veil that others did not. He told us at morning devotionals that when he died, we must put the words of Genesis 37:19 on his tombstone: "Look, here comes the dreamer."

We would find the sheep, he reassured us, even if I couldn't see them yet.

My mother didn't need to be rescued by God. She had known Him since she was a young girl in Sunday school. If she hadn't been born a Southern Baptist in Wilmington, North Carolina, she would have been a grand dame with a portrait in a museum. She stood tall and serene and always looked at ease. She spoke with no Southern accent like her parents, and when she talked in Spanish, she did so without fault. Even though she had never been outside of the US before becoming a missionary, she had poise, never looked out of place, and always had the right thing to say.

My mother was the Sancho Panza to Dad's quixotic dreams and the only one who could bend his plans and moderate his visions. Although she was tall and he was shorter, which was not like in my Don Quixote comic book. She was the one we went to if Dad wanted to spank us. She read my thoughts and looked after my brothers and me, yet not once did I wonder or ask how she felt about caring for four boys and a dreamer. She held little Timothy and smiled when we said goodbye to her parents in Wilmington, but she turned away to hide her tears and follow my father's visions into the distant unknown.

My mother packed our bags neatly and tightly; she fitted everything into the smallest number of suitcases possible. She had labeled and ordered everything. My father may have been the ringleader of the Tepper circus, but my mother kept the show on the road.

My aunt said they married first and fell in love later. They had a shared mission when they married, but had to figure out how to live with each other.

Mom and Dad were on a mission. Everything else, they told us, pales in the light of eternity. We had to abandon it all for the sake of the call.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Everything that is not eternal is eternally out of date." That was why we had few earthly belongings.

Next to our dinner table sat a bookcase Dad had made by hand from cheap wood to house our World Book encyclopedias and *National Geographic* magazines. David was ten and had read them all. He remembered how many pages were in each volume, and he knew which numbers were primes and therefore more beautiful. But I didn't see what he saw in numbers. I advanced more slowly as my curiosity flitted back and forth like a butterfly alighting on pages. I lingered at the letter S, lost somewhere between Somalia and Suriname.

The encyclopedias were my favorite things in the world, even more than my green World War II toy soldiers and Matchbox cars. I burned with desire to know everything, and in the *National Geographic*s and encyclopedias, it was mine for the taking.

If your parents are engineers, plumbers, or lawyers, it doesn't matter one bit to your life, but if your parents are missionaries, it changes everything. You can't pick your parents, but they get to pick your life. They decide where you'll live, when you'll pack your bags and go, and you'll get roped into their work saving the lost.

I couldn't decide almost anything about my life, but with my books and encyclopedias, my mind was free to roam where it wanted. Books could fit in any backpack, yet they contained entire worlds. They were my magic carpet to change reality and take me wherever I wanted.

Books filled every corner of our small apartment. My parents had made a study with bookcases that lined the walls from the floor to the ceiling, as my father had when he was growing up. Books were stacked randomly in piles on the carpet like stalagmites. My parents said books had the power to transport and transform you.

David shared a room with Timmy, and I bunked with Peter, who was only one year, two months, and one day younger than me. But my parents' books had a room all to themselves.

Theology, history, and poetry books were the only thing we brought with us to Spain. Forget Betty Crocker cake mixes, American candy, and other things that useless missionaries bring.

"They'll never cut it on the mission field," my father said of the weak missionaries who had heard God's call but were not prepared to pay the price. "They're chocolate soldiers who will melt when they face the heat."

No. Real missionaries were like the Olympic gold medalist Eric Liddell. He was our hero, and when we ran, we held our heads high just as he did. Like me, Liddell grew up in a missionary family. The film *Chariots of Fire* ends with the words: "Eric Liddell, missionary, died in occupied China at the end of World War II. All of Scotland mourned." He taught classes to the children in the Japanese internment camp until his dying day.

My parents wanted to start a church among university students—the sort of people who liked books and learning as much as we did, the sort of people you could have conversations with and argue with at the dinner table late into the night.

That was how my father visited universities in Madrid in search of converts, but he returned home downcast and empty handed. He shut the front door, took off his tweed jacket, made a cup of tea, and retreated to his study to read the Bible and pray. The students did not want eternal salvation, even if it was free.

Every day he ventured out to the universities to speak to students about Jesus, and every day he returned alone. This continued for months, but their response was always the same. I felt sorry for him that his job was not easier.

"Their hearts are hard," Dad said.

My father strained a smile and promised that soon God would send us sheep, but he retreated to the study where his cups of tea

and small lithographs of Cambridge University consoled him. They reminded him of the year he spent studying economics at Selwyn College and how he stepped into its chapel and heard the voice of God when the choir sang. But like the university students in Madrid, he did not heed the call the first time God came to him. That only happened later after Harvard Business School when he had a vision of heaven and hell, and God told him to give his life to Him. My father obeyed and threw himself through a storefront window close to Harvard Yard.

The doctors who sewed him up thought it was LSD. My father said it was God.

His story sounded weird even to me. "Why did God make you jump through a window?" I asked.

"Milton and Dante had visions of heaven and hell. The Apostle Paul's vision on the way to Damascus was strange, but Paul changed the world. Sometimes you've got to be a little strange to change the world."

Dad stared off into the distance, enraptured in thought. He played Joan Baez's "Forever Young" again. I pulled at his arm and twirled the hair on his forearms into curls to get his attention, but he put his finger to his lips. The music, he told me, was from a time when righteousness, truth, and beauty mattered. Today, no one cared. But we would bring light to the lost.

ERES VALIENTE… O MUY ESTÚPIDO

You must be brave...or very stupid

A few weeks later, David, Peter, Timothy, and I were getting ready for bed. Dressed in our Superman Underoos, we smelled of Johnson & Johnson children's shampoo, and our hair was wet and neatly combed. I clutched my copy of Kipling's *Just So Stories for Little Children*, waiting to go back to bed and read about snakes and mongooses. We sat on the edge of the sofa with our legs dangling, waiting to hear from my father.

My father spoke to us in the voice he always used to explain things. Planting a church among university students had not worked. Working with students was a dream that had to die. We would have to do something much bolder if we were going to succeed.

Fortunately, my parents told us that God had spoken. They said it as if he were our next-door neighbor.

I lived in a household where God talked back. My parents and God spoke to each other often. They chatted in the study among the books where they found peace and quiet, early in the morning before my brothers and I woke up. Perhaps that was why I had never seen God.

God sometimes sounded like a friend you could tell your problems to, and He would solve them if He wanted to. But other times, I imagined Him like a boss who told people where to go and what to do. It probably depended on God's mood. And if you rebelled, you might end up in the belly of a whale, like Jonah.

One morning, during one of these conversations, God summoned my parents to start a church for the *yonkis* in the San Blas. From then on, we were going to work with heroin addicts.

My mother and father had not been interested in the Gypsies or dope addicts. Their dream had been to work with students in a world of letters. Our home stood as a temple of learning and culture, and the heroin addicts did not understand our life or appreciate good books. Our worlds could never meet.

My parents had resisted His call. And though you can argue with God, you can't ignore His voice forever, they told us. They would have to sacrifice their dream of working with university students.

As Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required." We had a duty to help others.

If we strived, my father told us that one day we would be like William and Catherine Booth, who founded the Salvation Army. We were going to reach poor people in slums, bars, jails, brothels, and factories, like the Booths did in the East End of London.

My father made it sound simple, and I believed it was. We would hold devotionals and speak to them about God. The junkies would be our flock, and we'd go out to the streets and invite them to our home for meetings. My father said with great certainty—the kind that comes from convening with the Almighty on a regular basis—that we would establish a church and that we were going to fill it.

"If we're willing to work with drug addicts, prostitutes, and alcoholics, God is going to give us a church, a great church," my father said. And unlike the students, the addicts would be desperate enough to listen.

If we did nothing to help the *yonkis*, we would be no better than the Pharisee strolling by the suffering man in the parable of the Good

Samaritan. The addicts may have wrecked their own lives, but it was our duty to show them unconditional love. God would protect us and guide us in our task, my parents said.

We would live by the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary."

The next day David held Timmy in his arms and pressed his cheek against the glass to get a better view. From our enclosed balcony we looked out at the *barrio* from our small second-floor apartment. The neighborhood's red tiled rooftops waved and merged in the dry summer heat.

"Look at them," David said. "Those are *yonkis*. They could kidnap you."

Timothy started crying, and my mother dove in and took him away.

"Do not tease him like that again."

"Mommy's boy! Mommy's boy!" Peter squealed.

Thousands of heroin addicts came from all over Madrid to buy drugs, forming long uneven lines as they made their way toward the Gypsy camp. It did not matter if the sun was throbbing on summer days when Spaniards took their *siestas*, or if the ditches iced over in the dead of a Madrid winter; the addicts came and departed, like ants, forming a long line of pedestrians and vehicles. Their ashen outlines were a blur from a distance, only becoming clearer as they came closer.

Our neighborhood was the biggest drug supermarket not only in Spain but in all of Europe, and it was happening right on our doorstep.

My mother wouldn't have picked the neighborhood if given a choice, but San Blas was home because rent was cheap, and it was all penniless missionaries could afford.

Open fields bordered San Blas, but the red-brick apartment buildings within the neighborhood sat squat and packed together. In the *barrio* three generations often lived in the same apartment. The dirt lots between the buildings collected garbage and the air was filled with the smell of burnt-out cars.

Our apartment on Calle Butrón stood back as a lonely sentry on a steep hill. Garbage accumulated in the dump behind it. Brick-masons came from all over Madrid to discard their rubbish late at night, driving down the dirt roads at the far end with their lights turned off. Chunks of cement and cardboard boxes mixed with used needles.

Beyond the dump, a Gypsy village teemed with life. The Gypsy camp sat on the edge of Avenida de Guadalajara and Carretera de Vicálvaro, a busy two-lane highway that connected San Blas with the town of Vicálvaro. The *gitanos* lived on the periphery of Spanish society. The camp had electricity, stolen from the municipal grid. They built huts with odd pieces of wood and plastic sheets held down by tires. The small huts were like skulls; the glassless panes were sockets where dark children peered out at me like eyes.

The Spanish government set aside a few prefabricated houses on one side of the camp for the *gitanos*, but many sat uninhabited, the copper pipes torn out and the doors taken off their hinges. These prefabs were *Los Focos*, and they were the center of the heroin trade in Madrid.

My brothers and I stood at a distance from the camp entrance to watch the spectacle.

The Gypsies' mysterious presence intrigued me. They sold heroin but almost never consumed it, as if following some unwritten code. The Gypsies dealt for the same reason they sold tubs and pipes: there were buyers and the money was better. The Gypsies drove new Mercedes vans large enough to carry their meager belongings yet lived in dilapidated houses. They migrated from city to city and the Spaniards encouraged them not to settle anywhere too long.

At the entrance to the Gypsy camp someone had spray-painted a graffito in Spanish on a wall, "Abandon all hope, you who enter." The Gypsies didn't care what others thought of them, and I admired that.

I asked my father about the quotation.

"It's from Dante. One day you'll be old enough to read him."

Every Friday night we ventured out to the streets of San Blas to invite the addicts into our home. We went out to the camp, to El

Paraíso park, and to bars. My mother accompanied us and carried Timothy in her arms. He was still too young to hand out VENs, but he often played at my father's feet while David, Peter, and I handed out tracts. I felt a quiver of excitement every time we headed out to meet the *yonkis*.

Some junkies wanted us to send them to a rehab center. Others asked for money; perhaps they thought of us as marks to be conned, ready to support their habit. They weren't counting on my mother, who reminded us of Jesus's words from the book of Matthew: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." She hugged and kissed addicts no matter how much grime they had under their fingernails or if they had gone days without bathing. She treated princes and paupers alike, but she had a sixth sense of who needed help and who was conning us. I envied her skill—I had given too many hundred-*peseta* allowances to junkies who told me they were hungry.

Yonkis had no jobs. Instead, they spent their days wandering around the neighborhood looking for things to steal. Once they had succeeded, they sold the loot and bought drugs. Rest only came once they had shot up.

My parents worked with Lindsay, a young Australian fellow missionary who lived a few blocks away from our house, and Myk, a missionary nurse from New Zealand. Lindsay was a clean-cut man in his late twenties. He parted his brown hair down the middle and he wore a short, well-groomed moustache. Myk always brought her guitar along to play in the park. If nothing else, people gathered around to hear her sing.

After every song, my father and Lindsay invited people to come to our home for a Bible study, but almost no one came. Sometimes David, Peter, Timothy, and I found ourselves the only people in attendance besides Lindsay and Myk.

While my father spoke about how we all have a hole in our hearts and an emptiness that only God can fill, I squirmed on the living

room rug with my brothers and thought of other things. Could my toy Tyrannosaurus Rex beat my Triceratops in a fight, even if the Triceratops was quick and used his horns? If a Siberian snow tiger met a regular one, would they get along or fight? And what time was it anyway? I was hungry.

The talk went on, so I opened my *A Child's History of the World* by V. M. Hillyer that I hid under my Bible. With my crayons I colored in the faces of Xerxes, Henry VIII, and Anne Boleyn, as well as Abraham Lincoln. When I became somebody—a great man one day—would a young boy crayon my face a hundred years later? I trusted that with a little luck, he would make me look sharp and stay inside the lines.

The empty meetings did not dissuade my parents. Hadn't Moses and Jesus ignored rejection when they first brought their message? The sheep would come. So my brothers and I continued in our children's crusade to hand out tracts and bring *yonkis* back to our apartment.

Camellos worked everywhere in San Blas, and many of them did their deals in bars like El Nilo, Torre del Campo, and El Sila. The closest to our home was Torre del Campo on Calle de la Masilla. It was by the police station and would have been an unremarkable place if its clientele weren't dealers and *yonkis*.

The bar was in the middle of a maze of compact red-brick buildings. The passageways between them were covered so that you moved from one to the other without seeing the sun. Nearly every family living near the bar had a child who was a heroin addict, and many had lost a son to an overdose.

I stayed outside Torre del Campo with my brothers while my father and Lindsay entered. They talked to the *yonkis* there, sometimes interrupting the purchase of tinfoil *papelinas*. Torre del Campo had wrought-iron doors, and a large striped awning kept it in the shade. From a distance I could hear Michael Jackson's "Beat It" playing, and it was impossible to see where the black doors ended and the darkness inside began.

One day while my father and Lindsay stood at the bar, a man introduced himself. "You're looking for *yonkis*, I hear. I'm Ángel. Everyone calls me *Veneno*, but I don't mind."

He lifted his sleeve and showed a crudely inked tattoo on his right arm that read in bold letters *VENENO*, "poison" in Spanish.

Veneno was short and had brown hair that covered his eyes and ears. His green eyes darted and flickered as he peered through his long bangs, only relaxing when my father listened.

Without much persuading, he unburdened himself of his own story. He spoke with a *rat-tat-tat* of facts and anecdotes that he juggled in his mind. *Veneno* did not know who his father was, and his mother was a prostitute who had left him to be raised by her father in his cramped one-bedroom apartment. His grandfather suffered from wounds inflicted in the Spanish Civil War and the indignities of age. Once a month *Veneno* carried him on his back to collect his pension. After they collected it, *Veneno* borrowed a quarter of it to buy heroin. He always promised to repay the money, and he convinced himself he would.

Veneno was the man my father had been waiting for. He knew everything about everyone and promised he would bring many people to my father. He would point to someone, "See that guy..." and the stories would flow. Like a Russian doll, each story contained more stories nestled inside.

At the bar, my father learned dealers slashed *yonkis* in the chin when they failed to pay; the scars marked them as thieves. Others suffered from the impurities used to dilute the dope. Enrique, an addict my father met, went blind after shooting up. A dealer had cut his heroin with strychnine, a rat poison.

As my father looked around the neighborhood, I always caught *Veneno* glancing back, waiting for a smile or a nod. Information served as his currency, exchanging it only for rapt attention. He put his hand on my father's shoulder, guiding his audience, and took him over to meet his targets. He swooped on long cigarette butts by the

bus stop, even as he told his stories. David, Peter, and I stuck close behind like remoras to a shark, attaching ourselves to the conversation, hoping some of the juicier bits would fall our way.

Often the men wore Rolling Stones and Iron Maiden T-shirts, but in the summer they walked around with their shirts off, their skin deeply tanned and adorned with tattoos. When they wore shorts, I saw the marks of their addiction on the veins in their legs. The *yonkis* all looked the same to me. But *Veneno* knew them by name and was the keeper of their stories.

What addicts wanted was to shoot up, to chase the high. When they weren't using, they hunted for anything to make some cash to score. Not having the drug made them anxious, pulsing with a nervous energy. To keep themselves going they devoured candy and Cokes. The sugar gave them a burst of energy, but that was about it. If they were lucky, nicotine helped a little.

The *yonkis* took all kinds of drugs, but heroin was their daily bread. They were always desperate for money to score one more gram. Some addicts hawked Kleenex boxes at traffic lights, standing for hours in the sun as they competed against groups of Gypsy children who threw water on the windscreens. Other *yonkis* stole from shops at knifepoint or broke into cars to take the radios. They would not rest until they had scored.

Veneno introduced my father to the VIPs "*los que importan*" like Manolo, whose nickname was *Majara*, Crazy. He had been called that ever since a dealer stuck a gun in his face and Manolo grabbed the barrel, stuck it in his mouth and dared the dealer to pull the trigger. *Majara* was short but strong, with large, rough hands, and I liked to see the muscles in his jaw bulge and ripple when he gritted his teeth. The first time my father tried to talk to him, *Majara* threatened to slit my father's neck if he ever spoke to him again. *Majara* always carried a knife in his boot and brandished it, enjoying the dance of light on the blade, but it was not an idle threat.

"What kind of God permits all the hunger and suffering and misery that surrounds us?" *Majara* said. "He has a lot to answer for."

My father said something about God's love and grace and all that kind of stuff, but I stopped listening when *Majara* pulled out a gun and stuck it in my father's face. I was too excited to be afraid.

"I could shoot you if I wanted."

"I'm sure you could."

"You must be brave...or very stupid," *Majara* said.

Veneno was true to his word: Every meeting he introduced my father to more addicts and brought them to our living room. Some appeared deranged, others too high to be coherent. Many fell asleep in the meetings, and others came and left without paying much attention to what was happening—to the irritation of our neighbors. But the *yonkis* kept on coming for help.

My father hoped he'd find his Apostle Peter. He was one of Jesus's first disciples and the great fisher of men. Although Peter wasn't high most of the time.

"You have to meet Raúl, but everyone calls him *El Tocho*." *Veneno* said like it was news of great weight. It was Christmas, and *Veneno* offered him as a gift to us.

Veneno said that if you had no nickname, you weren't worth meeting. Most addicts had a telltale gaunt and weak look. Food came a distant second behind scoring a gram. But, somehow, despite his heroin addiction, Raúl never lost much weight or strength and earned the nickname *El Tocho*, Stocky.

Raúl teetered in, sweaty and wafting an aroma telling me he hadn't showered for a few days. Bandages covered his left arm.

My father's mother was visiting us from America. She thought my father displayed signs of insanity—hearing from God, wasting his life as a missionary. Raúl's gin-soaked kisses on both cheeks only confirmed her views.

"Elliott, keep him away from me!" she said as she retreated and firmly held her handbag close to her body. "What kind of life is this for your kids, exposing them to this? You will ruin their lives. They will never forgive you."

I felt relieved no one understood her English.

"What's wrong with your arm? Did it get infected shooting up?" I said as I poked at Raúl's bandage.

"You shouldn't ask questions like that at your age, kid. It's not polite," Raúl said.

"Does it hurt when the needle goes in?"

"You ask too many questions. You sound like a cop. *Tranqui.* Take it easy."

I considered myself a bit of an expert on track marks. I had watched my mother clean the bleeding, infected arm of an addict in the kitchen, between her duty serving lemonade and cookies and looking after little Timothy.

Track marks lined the arms of the *yonkis*. If they found a vein in the forearm, they shot up in the same place until they developed scabs. Their veins eventually collapsed. Addicts could shoot old veins, but they were liable to shoot the skin instead. They started with their left arm and then turned to the right when the left had wasted. Then they injected in the arteries behind the knees or on the back of the hands, and they moved on to the groin, the neck, or under the tongue.

Where was Raúl shooting up now? I'd ask him when he was in a better mood.

As I looked more closely at his hands, I saw the burn marks. After shooting up *yonkis* appeared to fall asleep, and sometimes while smoking a cigarette they burned their fingers. My brothers and I learned to identify addicts by the marks of their addiction—the track marks and the burns on their fingers.

I took Ángel and *Majara* back to the room I shared with Peter to play with our Matchbox cars. *Majara* displayed little interest in

the toys and pinched my arms for amusement. When he shook my hand, his strong grip crushed my fingers.

He squeezed and I winced in pain. Certain that my knuckles would break, I waited for the crack.

"Stop! Please, please stop!"

I tried not to scream.

I knew that if I called out for my father, he would ask me why I was fighting and not setting a proper example. *Be kind. Be Christian.* That's what my parents always said.

Majara only offered a pitying laugh. With my free hand I punched his arm, but he punched me back, hurting me far more than I'd hurt him.

"Leave the kid alone."

I turned around to see Raúl standing in the doorway with his bandaged arm.

"What are you going to do? You've only got one good arm," *Majara* taunted.

"My right's OK and that's all I need to knock you out. Leave the kid alone."

Majara held my hand as he glared at Raúl. He slowly let go and smirked as he left the room.

I rubbed my hand, trying to coax blood back into my fingers.

Raúl came over, kneeled by my side and gave me a playful punch on the shoulder. "Don't take it too hard, kid. It's got nothing to do with you. His dad used to beat him. Well...he did until his mother punched the old man down a stairwell."

"Thanks. Want to play?"

"You heard it. I've only got one good arm." He smiled. "And I've got to go."

"Will you come back and play sometime?"

"We'll see each other again."

I hoped he would be true to his word and stay around to protect me.

MEJOR SOLO QUE MAL ACOMPAÑADO

Better off alone than in bad company

As we entered the dim apartment block, my father stopped and smiled at me. "Want to race up to Pilar's house?"

I nodded.

"You're both crazy," my mother said. She was the sensible one and walked straight over to the elevators that rattled all the way up.

"OK. Ready... Set...*GO*!"

I skipped steps two at a time and pushed myself off the walls on the turns between floors. He was gaining on me, and in a few leaps, he disappeared around a corner. My mother was waiting by the door with my father at her side.

"Slowpoke, you may beat me someday, but it won't be soon..." my father said as he rustled my hair.

We rang the doorbell and Pilar greeted us with a kiss on both cheeks. Pilar had a thin face, pointed nose, and short dark hair. When we met her, she spoke softly and rarely smiled. She served coffee, hot chocolate, and biscuits while she talked to my parents.

I sat quietly eating as many cookies as possible, looking around the room, trying not to drop any crumbs. The room appeared spotless,

the lace on the coffee table gleamed bright white, and she had meticulously arranged the knick-knacks on the shelves that smelled of wood cleaner.

People from San Blas had *orgullo de barrio*, neighborhood pride, and tried to keep the streets clean. Spanish housewives kept impeccable apartments. Their white laundry blew in the wind on the balconies. It was important to have an immaculate, dust-free home—cleanliness itself became an act of defiance against what the neighborhood had become. There may have been a heroin-addicted son living at home, but a family's living room never betrayed the secret.

Pilar had photographs on the wall of her children during their first communions next to crucifixes with a bleeding Jesus. My parents said nothing about these. That might have been rude. To them, Catholics were obsessed with a suffering Jesus, frozen on the cross with a crown of thorns, while Protestants treasured the certainty that he rose from the dead and was no longer in pain.

While my mother and Pilar spoke, I eavesdropped, avoiding all eye contact. Their voices rose and fell, weaving around each other. At home Mom did not speak as often as Dad, uttering words only when they were better than silence. With her friends, though, the words unfurled themselves. I tried to follow the thread of their stories. They spoke of whose son was on drugs, whose daughter was walking the streets, who was in jail. When mothers spoke, they no longer felt alone; they tried to give context to each other's suffering, reminding each other that they belonged to a tribe that shared the burden of their struggles.

As I listened, it occurred to me that women were better talkers than men. They did not yak in clipped slang like the men on the streets, conveying their meaning by gestures and grunts. The colorful quilt of stories was something only women could make. I sat back, amazed by my mother, hoping that maybe one day I could talk to people like that too.

All the while, Dad stared off into space, probably thinking about J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, wondering what they debated at the gatherings of the Inklings in Oxford. Would they have invited him to join their circle?

Mom had a way of remembering everyone's name, how many children they had, and even what their birthdays were. She sent birthday cards to everyone and never sent the same one twice. I was more like my father, my mind prone to wander. But my mother had the kaleidoscope of faces, the calendars and family trees in her head. She would store away information from these conversations to retrieve later. Who needed to remember names or birthdays with her around?

Pilar said that at first San Blas was simply *el barrio*. Years before, the area had been dirt fields. It existed on the edge, standing forlorn between Madrid and the countryside towns.

"None of the older people are from San Blas. We moved in hope of something better." She came like the hundreds of thousands of others from the provinces, leaving their dying villages in search of jobs. "We lived like Gypsies then," she said, "and we had nothing."

The first people to arrive in San Blas built crude shacks that sprouted overnight and then, like poppies, quickly disappeared. The better houses were made of bricks unevenly cobbled together, washed bone-white with lime.

General Franco's public works ministry developed large tracts of housing, and Pilar was among the lucky ones who moved into government-built housing.

"There were no drugs when Franco was alive. When he died, it all went to hell. San Blas devoured its young."

I knew little about General Franco. His face was still on some coins, but he no longer existed, like some embarrassing, deranged uncle who was best forgotten. Dad said Franco was a dictator, but a friendly dictator, not like Hitler or Stalin.

When Franco died in 1975, Spain was free at last. Political parties were no longer banned, films no longer censored, and shops finally

opened on Sunday. Not everything was for the better. Franco's regime shot drug dealers, keeping drugs scarce. Afterward drugs were plentiful, and the *chavales* tried cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine and, above all, heroin.

Dad said Spain was finally catching up with the rest of the world, shuffling off the shackles of Franco's fascism. Spain had just joined NATO and was about to join the European market. But Pilar had her views, and we listened and nodded politely. We were there to win sheep, not correct them. I grinned, bobbed my head and drank my hot chocolate.

Four of Pilar's seven children became *yonkis*. The police killed her oldest son, José, in a shoot-out during a bank robbery. After his death, she was *muerta de disgusto*, dead from sadness. She recounted mundane stories in endless detail—José's *fútbol* games in the streets, walking him to school—details of little importance at the time, acquiring great resonance only after José's death.

Her daughter Begoña and a younger brother were junkies, and she feared they too would die like José. She pleaded with my parents for help.

I peeked at my Casio watch and pressed the button so the numbers would flash. Why did other people's stories take so long to tell? Would Pilar mind if I took another cookie while she finished?

As we said goodbye to Pilar, I felt really proud of the kindness we had showed her in listening to her troubles.

Some American families travel on vacation to Yosemite to learn how Sequoias can grow to three hundred feet or how geysers spew boiling water. Our vacations were visits to drug rehabs to learn if junkies would hurl when they went cold turkey.

Heroin sales were booming in Madrid, and the city did not have enough drug rehabs to cope with the wave of *yonkis* seeking help. When we traveled around Spain, we were not tracing the footsteps of pilgrims on the trail of Santiago de Compostela or gawping at

Spanish cathedrals. We headed to Burgos, Vitoria, and Santander, checking out drug rehabs. My parents were doing their research.

If my brothers and I could bring our *fútbol* and play in an open field near the rehab, we did not care about the ticking of time. But the worst of the trips was sitting in waiting rooms with uncomfortable, creaky chairs while my parents talked to administrators about detoxing. At least some rooms had televisions with *Superman* playing.

Our family piled into the fire-engine-red van my parents had bought to carry *yonkis* to distant centers up north. My mother packed sandwiches and Cokes, and my brothers and I sat in the back and talked to the addicts for hours as my father drove.

"How much does a gram of *caballo* cost?" I asked Cheli, the young woman accompanying us up north.

"Why do you care? You're too young to buy."

"I'm not too young to know. How old were you when you started?"

"Sixteen. And I'm not telling you how much a gram costs."

"Well…Did you know that they've deciphered the hieroglyphs? Jean-François Champollion taught himself a dozen languages and figured out the hieroglyphs with the Rosetta Stone. I read it in my encyclopedia."

"Talk to your brothers and leave me alone." She took her coat and bunched it up against the window to sleep. "Don't talk to me until we get there."

"Did you know killer whales sleep with half their brain and only close one eye?"

"Did you know that you're annoying?"

Some people weren't as intrigued by *National Geographic* and that kind of stuff as I was.

I had already learned that others did not see the world the way I did. When I was six, I stayed home sick, while David and Peter caught the school bus. In that moment, I realized the world did not revolve around me. I spent the day reading through flash cards of animals and insects, memorizing details of their lives and anatomy.

One of the cards was of a fly with six thousand simple eyes that formed two large compound eyes. Who knew that little flies had so many eyes? I realized then that the world was like a giant apple, and we were all the little eyes, taking things in from a slightly different angle, trying to figure out the bigger picture. But I had difficulty seeing the world from the perspective of others.

I talked the whole way, while David calculated how many killer whales could fit between us and the car behind us, given the average length of a killer whale. He had invented the game to speed our rehab express trips along. The game was not much fun because he had memorized the length of all animals, just as he had memorized countless digits of pi.

Over the coming months, my father meticulously wrote the names of people we took to centers up north, but he stopped after sixty-three. Some addicts stayed but many hitchhiked back to San Blas faster than my father could drive. Dad said that if you put a *yonki* on the moon, he'd find a way back to earth without a spaceship. At least some heeded God's call, unlike the university students.

I had handed a pamphlet to Pilar's daughter Begoña on one of our Friday night expeditions for *yonkis*. My parents took Begoña to a Christian center up north. Begoña did not stay long and was back, walking the streets to pay for her habit. My father found her near Torre del Campo and offered to help, but she was uninterested: "I'm pretty and can always get money," she said. I thought she was beautiful and probably right.

My father sent one of her younger brothers to a center on the northern coast. Every week he called home to reassure Pilar that he was doing better, and Begoña followed him. This time she stayed. She invited her friend Toñi to join her, and Toñi invited her husband José, who had just got out of jail for armed robbery, and he invited three of his friends. They all passed through our home—Hotel Tepper, as my mother called it, or Grand Central, as Lindsay called it—on their way to rehabs.

At last, my parents were finding their sheep, and I could scarcely believe the variety of the characters that came through our home. My parents, Lindsay, and Myk were fighting heroin one addict at a time, and the church grew.

Our family living room could no longer fit everyone who came to us, so with tithes that my parents received from churches in the States they rented a small storefront in Lindsay's building. My father called the church Betel, which means "House of God."

In Madrid, Catholics outnumbered Protestants a thousand to one. We were an odd minority, but no one cared. One old lady who lived by the church asked if my father was a con man or a real minister because he did not wear a clerical collar and gave his sermons in a polo shirt.

We were there to help, and many mothers and family members of the addicts continued coming to our church meetings even after their sons and daughters returned to heroin. So many came that my mother and Myk organized a women's group that met every Tuesday. Pilar brought her friends, and they brought theirs, and the group grew.

If *yonkis* hustled and couldn't rest until they scored, my parents showed an equal obsession in their quest to save the lost sheep.

Sending addicts one by one to centers outside Madrid was like using a teacup to bail a sinking ship. San Blas needed a drug rehab close by that could take in lots of people.

After much prayer and discussion with Lindsay and Myk, my parents decided to found a center of their own in Madrid. They put together a proposal for the mission to create a drug rehabilitation center like the ones they had visited.

Despite the engulfing need, the mission my parents belonged to wanted nothing to do with the project. Converting people was much safer than helping them. My parents were free to go ahead, but they would not receive any support from the mission—unless, of course, the project was a wild success.

"How convenient," my mother said. "As the Spaniards say, *mejor solo que mal acompañado*. Better off alone than in bad company."

Honestly, I think she was as distrustful of missionaries as drug addicts. Some missionaries once asked my mother if it was hard to work with addicts, and she said, "Oh, it's much easier than working with normal people. At least addicts know they're broken and need help. They don't pretend."

The mission deemed my parents reckless for starting a drug rehab with four young boys. Why not wait until we were older? Did they not know the danger they were putting me and my brothers in? It would wreck our lives. The addicts could rob or stab us when we handed out tracts.

"Excuses," my father said. "No one has hurt us so far. *Yonkis* want help to get off drugs."

What did the mission know about San Blas? Sure, junkies had broken our car windows many times to steal the radio, but that was my father's fault, I told myself. You don't leave valuables out in San Blas. That was the rule.

Less excusable were the two kids on a motorbike who knocked my mother to the ground when they snatched her handbag. I mean, nobody was too badly hurt. Nasty bruises covered her arms, but she recovered.

As far as my brothers and me, we could take care of ourselves. Honestly, who would mess with a bunch of little blond kids anyway?

At least the mission wouldn't stand in the way. My parents had permission for the project. It was better than nothing. And nothing was all we had.

My parents and Lindsay refused to abandon the call, but they were flying solo. Starting a charity from scratch is a daunting task, and neither Lindsay nor my parents were trained to work with junkies. But they believed God would provide the addicts and the answers. There was no turning back.

While my parents argued with the mission, Raúl had left the center my father had taken him to. He spent five months on the streets, robbing to support his habit. He said life was intolerable, and when drunk he often thought of killing himself.

But he kept coming back to our living room for lemonade and cookies, listening to my father's sermons. My father preached that every human life is infinitely valuable, as he quoted Romans 5:8: "But God shows His love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us."

I knew the devotional messages by heart and drifted off into my memory of the order of American presidents and dates of wars as he spoke, but Raúl took it all in.

One day Raúl came to Lindsay for help. It was two weeks before he was required to appear in court over an armed robbery. He wanted to show up clean and sober, and therefore needed to check in to a drug rehab. But he didn't want to leave Madrid.

Without thinking, Lindsay offered to let him stay in his apartment to detox. Lindsay figured that most addicts never showed up for appointments; Raúl would be no exception. But at nine o'clock the next morning Raúl showed up on Lindsay's doorstep, and we had our first addict in residence.

Raúl lived on Calle Porcelana near Torre del Campo. He came from a family of eight children. His father reeked of brandy, which he said made you warm and life more pleasant. I hated when Raúl's father pinched my cheeks, planted a wet kiss on them, and breathed on me when he hadn't brushed his teeth. The whiskers of his moustache scratched my face. When he stood at the entrance to the church, he smoked a cigarette with a drinking buddy who coughed and splattered speckles of bright red blood on the floor. David and I ran to the nearest bar to get sawdust so no one would track red footprints into church.

One Sunday after church, Raúl's mother invited us to her home and prepared Spanish *gazpacho* and *paella*. Her living room shelves were empty. Raúl had stolen the television and radio for a gram of *caballo*.

She called us *pequeños rubitos*, little blond boys, and ran her fingers through our fine hair, as if handling curious specimens. I found her equally strange. She giggled when we spoke English and gave me a twenty-five *peseta* coin to buy candy. Mothers giving us money

infuriated my parents. Who knows how long they worked for it, my mother asked? But I mean, they offered, so I kept it anyway.

She told us stories of Raúl. He had quit school when he was thirteen to work as a plumber. When he was not working, he smoked weed. He quickly moved on to amphetamines and coke.

Raúl hoped the *mili*, a year of mandatory military service, might help him kick the habit. When he returned to the *barrio*, his friends had moved on from weed to shooting up. Raúl joined in. With heroin he had found his drug.

Injecting heroin gave him such a sense of peace that when he had the urge to vomit the first few times, even the queasiness provided a strange, soothing warmth inside. As he stumbled around, nothing mattered; vomiting, pissing, drinking—it was all the same, making him feel better than ever.

Like some addicts in San Blas, Raúl dealt to support his own habit, always chasing the white-powder bliss of the initial high. He spent all the money he made taking larger doses. Not much of a dealer, though, he soon held up supermarkets, his face covered by a mask, threatening the cashier with a gun. He robbed shops throughout Madrid by day, and at night terrorized people who were taking their evening *paseos* around the neighborhood, as he held a knife to their necks.

One of Raúl's favorite methods for stealing was to pull a knife on a messenger of a *camello* to get the *papelinas*. Dealers wised up fast. After that, he pretended to be a dealer, and he took the customers to the toilets of Torre del Campo and pulled a knife. That didn't last long either. No one would buy heroin from him.

The thrill of the early high, though, was gone. "It's not even about fun," Raúl said. "It's about surviving until the next fix."

The first week Raúl lived with Lindsay in the apartment, his body functioned without heroin. Restlessness and insomnia troubled him, but Lindsay gave him chamomile tea and nothing stronger. For the first few days he said he had no feeling, no purpose, no desire to do anything. It was not painless, but Raúl did not hallucinate, his teeth

did not gnash, and Lindsay did not need to tie him down. That stuff only happens in badly written movies by Hollywood types who have never used. In a week, Raúl was eating and sleeping well.

My father, Lindsay, and Raúl became inseparable. Cooking, buying groceries, reading the Bible—they did everything together.

I visited Raúl with my father, and I sat quietly as they and Lindsay talked. He was getting the devotional treatment I got at home. I prayed God would give him patience.

One night, he sat alone in the living room in the dark and prayed, "Whatever love and kindness you've given Lindsay, give that to me. Come into my heart, forgive me of my sins. Give me love for others."

A warm sense of peace washed over him. He lay awake on the carpet, repeating "God, God, God..."

When Raúl told me about it, I wondered: did his heart cocoon in his ribcage like a caterpillar before breaking out, transformed into a beautiful butterfly? Or did his spirit soar out like an eagle sweeping over San Blas?

I was a missionary kid, and I mean I was supposed to be saved and all that, but I had experienced nothing like it. Perhaps my heart was hard.

Raúl was a changed man, in the same way my father was when he said God had spoken to him after Harvard. All Raúl wanted to do was tell others about what had happened to him.

After four months of living with Lindsay, Raúl was eager to help his friends on the streets. He asked if he could bring in more *yonkis*. Lindsay agreed. Raúl rounded up Victor, Luis Mendoza, Paco Corrales, and others, and soon the small apartment heaved with eight men.

To me it sounded like an exciting sleepover of *yonkis*. I kept the faces of the early addicts in my head, like sculptures filling a mausoleum, each labeled with notes on their stories I had overheard, even if I couldn't remember all their names.

We were in business. At last, we had a drug center, my father said. He'd bring back to the dinner table the stories of his time with Raúl

and the men, and we lapped it up. Dad's stories were genuine and even better than reading encyclopedias.

Every *yonki*'s life told a story, and I could always remember the most colorful. Victor, known as *El Granos* because of his pockmarked face cut with deep grooves, had long hair and wore a raincoat in the summer. His brother died in a shoot-out with police, and ever since he had not cared about dying. In shops, he opened his coat, pointed to an enormous axe and waited for the cashier to obey. Often, he would trash the place even after he got his money, just so they'd remember him.

Even Manolo *Majara* wanted in. My father found him sleeping in the entrance to the church with his clothes in a black bag. He said he would not move until Raúl promised to let him move into the apartment. When he entered the center, I avoided him unless Raúl was around.

Lindsay and Myk, my parents, and the small band of men were like a first-century Christian community, sharing everything they had. As my father had read at church one Sunday morning from the book of Acts, the New Testament's account of the early church:

> *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had...*
>
> *For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.*

This wasn't like socialism or some hippie commune where the dirty dishes piled up, my dad said. This was God's love poured out on a parched land.

To help pay for meals and expenses, my parents gave money from the tithes we lived on. Churches in America would send money to my parents, but much of it ended up funding the drug rehab. The mothers of the men came by, often to prepare lunch and dinner.

The center had no method to its rehabilitation, no formal technique. My parents and Lindsay had no offices, no staff, no accreditation. Those things would come later. The start was just love. Just grace.

My parents' donations were touching, but they wouldn't feed all the men or house them. For that they needed a lot more money. Yet the government in Madrid hadn't even started spending money on drug prevention or rehabilitation.

Fundraising from America would take too long—letters took weeks to arrive—and it might not even raise much money anyway. Who wanted to give money to a bunch of addicts, much less in a foreign country? The men needed to eat.

My father had his MBA from Harvard, but he didn't write a business plan. People needed to eat, and working paid the bills. It was that simple. Betel was not the first charity to run a business, and it wouldn't be the last.

My father reminded us that Saint Benedict wrote in the sixth century, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul." Benedict ordered periods of manual labor followed by prayerful reading. *Ora et labora*, work and pray, and *lectio divina*, divinely inspired reading. Honestly, I wasn't sure you could call that a business plan.

Raúl had worked as a plumber before he became a *yonki*, and most of the men knew a trade as well. To keep busy and help pay for the rocketing costs of the community, the men took on odd jobs, but they weren't steady.

Eventually they saved enough to start a furniture shop. People donated furniture they no longer wanted, and Raúl and the men took it away for free. They repaired and restored the pieces and sold them cheaply. They loved taking something others thought was rubbish, cleaning it, caring for it and transforming into something new with sandpaper, varnish and care.

Everyone in the center worked. Once addicts made it through the first few weeks, Raúl gave them a job. No one sat around alone

with their thoughts. Raúl was strict. Everyone had to attend morning devotionals and Sunday morning services.

The devotionals were like those at our house. In Lindsay's living room, my father read from the Psalms or the Gospels or from Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 4:

> *Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, And whose sins are covered.*
>
> *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not count his sin against him.*

My father had his go-to passages, but he always tried to find passages he thought would find an echo in the hearts of the men.

The only program was work, discipline, love, and grace. Grace was the oil that greased the center's creaking wheels; it was the balm to forgive insults, to settle petty squabbles, to bear others with love. The men said that they had never seen anything like it on the street.

Raúl invited his old friends into the apartment. When they lived as *yonkis* on the street, they broke into cars together and shared needles together. Letting Raúl supervise the addicts might have been encouraging the wolf to lead the fox, but it worked.

When Raúl stayed up late to clean up their vomit, prepared cups of herbal tea for them, and gave up his own bed for the men, they knew he was no longer the man they had known on the streets.

Not all the addicts who came to church picked up the Christian ethos. The visiting *yonkis* frequently stripped old ladies' handbags of valuables during sermons and pickpocketed the older men as they hugged them after the services.

One Sunday**,** as my father opened the meeting, he invited the congregation to pray aloud. Hippy, a *yonki* with shoulder-length hair and a tie-dyed shirt, stood to pray. He careened forward but balanced himself on my brother David's shoulder.

"Thank you, Lord, that while we were stealing from the slot machines last night you didn't let the police catch us. Thank you, God, for looking after your sheep. Amen."

"Amen," said the addicts.

"We're going to have to go over the Ten Commandments again," Raúl explained.

As more men entered the apartment, they slept on the beds, on the floors, and on the sofa in the living room. Lindsay became their older brother, mediating their fights, begging them to stay one more day.

The men always went out two by two as "shadows" to buy bread, tools for plumbing jobs, or even go to the bathroom. They could never sneak away on their own to score a gram. Some hated it, but it worked, and many stayed.

The rules of the center were clear:

Residents are to participate in the full schedule and activities of the community, keeping a structured day from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Smoking or using any tobacco product is not permitted. Using drugs, alcohol, or tobacco substitutes is not permitted.

All residents are to be accompanied by a "shadow" during their first few months.

My father preferred to err on the side of grace, but Raúl said that rules were rules. People were making progress, or they were not. It was that simple. When they were not, Raúl encouraged them to leave.

Raúl often did not take men in the moment they needed help, forcing them to come to a few meetings first. The *yonkis* came to the Sunday services weeks in a row, even if they were high. And as Raúl promised, he took them in once they had proved they were serious. Although he made an exception for Juan Carlos *El Rubio*, the Blond, whose mother had given him a big chorizo for the center. After all, Jesus had said that man should not live by bread alone.

Majara and *Veneno* entered the center but did not stay long. But Carlos, a short man and skillful thief, was so shocked Lindsay would trust him that he swore he would not touch heroin again. He had been to jail for robbery and dealing heroin, but Raúl had given up his bed for him and slept on the floor. Carlos would repay that trust and he too would bring his friends into the center. As my father said, people become noble because we love them and trust them, and they will do the same to others.

When I visited Lindsay's apartment, Carlos stood on the balcony with Raúl and me and pointed out his home. He lived about three hundred meters from our little apartment, close to the Gypsies' prefabricated houses. From Lindsay's balcony we could see the addicts on their way to score, and Carlos felt the hooks of temptation pulling him every day. But he stayed. He told me he did not belong to the street anymore.

Over time, the patience of the older women in Lindsay's building wore thin. They complained about taking the elevator with sweaty men marinated in beer whose arms were covered in menacing tattoos.

The protests mounted. Yet rather than fight them, my parents and Lindsay decided instead to search out a more suitable home for the men: a derelict farmhouse right outside the city near the airport. It had the benefit of being further away from the main points of drug sales in San Blas. At last, the men had their own place.

What began by accident, as a gesture of kindness to Raúl and his friends, was on its way to becoming a fully-fledged drug center. My parents and Lindsay formally founded *Asociación Betel*.

With the money the men earned and donations, the center bought used vans. My father created a logo, and on the side of the vans they painted a blue dove flying over a broken heroin needle.

One by one, the *yonkis* were changing, and they in turn wanted to change San Blas.

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SHOOTING UP: A MEMOIR OF LOVE, LOSS, AND ADDICTION
by Jonathan Tepper • Published by Infinite Books

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Reading Group Guide

Shooting Up: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Addiction is Jonathan Tepper's powerful story of growing up in Madrid as the child of American missionaries working with heroin addicts in San Blas. Through the eyes of a boy navigating innocence, danger, faith, and family, Tepper brings to life the contradictions of love and sacrifice, belief and doubt, community and loss.

These questions are designed to spark conversation for book clubs and reading groups.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Jonathan grew up as the son of missionaries, moving from Mexico to Spain at a young age. How did this shape his sense of identity and belonging? Did you relate to his experience of feeling both "inside" and "outside" a culture?

- Books and encyclopedias offered Jonathan freedom when so much of his childhood was controlled by his parents' mission. What role do books play in the memoir, and in your own life?

- Jonathan's parents saw themselves as "rescuing the lost sheep." How do you think that worldview shaped the way they raised their children?

- What tensions emerge between Jonathan's father's visionary/dreamer personality and his mother's practical steadiness? How do you think each parent influenced Jonathan differently?

- Jonathan's family switched from trying to reach university students to working directly with heroin addicts. How did this shift change their mission and the risks involved for the children?

- Did the missionary board's judgment that Jonathan's parents were "reckless" seem fair to you? Why or why not?

- What stereotypes about heroin addicts are challenged in the memoir? Which stories of individuals stood out to you most, and why?

- Jonathan observes addicts closely as a child, sometimes with fear, sometimes with curiosity, and sometimes with empathy. How does his perspective as a child change the way these stories are told?

- Addicts like Raúl and *Veneno* emerge as complex figures—dangerous at times, yet also deeply caring and transformative. How did you respond to them as characters?

- The memoir moves between moments of childhood innocence, such as ice cream, toy soldiers, and encyclopedias, and darker realities such as needles, overdoses, and violence. How did this tension affect your reading experience?

- What do you think Jonathan gained—and what he lost—by being exposed to so much danger at such a young age?

- Faith is a constant presence in the memoir, but it takes different forms, at times comforting, demanding, visionary, and isolating. How did you see faith affecting the family's life, and how did it shape Jonathan?

- Where did you notice the theme of love most strongly in the book, whether in family, community, or unlikely places?

- Transformation is a recurring thread. Addicts turn their lives around, Raúl becomes a leader, and Jonathan grows into awareness. Which transformations felt most powerful to you?

- By the end of the memoir, what do you think Jonathan is beginning to understand about the costs and contradictions of his parents' mission, and about himself?

SOBRE EL AUTOR

About the author

Jonathan Tepper is the author of several acclaimed financial books, including *The Myth of Capitalism*. A Rhodes Scholar, he earned degrees in History and Economics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an MLitt from the University of Oxford. Born in the U.S. and raised in Mexico as a young child, Jonathan came of age in Madrid's San Blas neighborhood, where his parents ran one of the country's first drug rehabilitation centers. *Shooting Up* is his first memoir, offering a deeply personal view of life at the intersection of faith, addiction, and resilience. He and his wife Stacey have a two-year-old who is a human hurricane of curiosity and keeps them busy. Jonathan returns to Madrid as often as he can.

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—NICKY GUMBEL, PIONEER OF THE ALPHA COURSE AND FORMER VICAR OF HOLY TRINITY BROMPTON (HTB) IN LONDON

"*Shooting Up* recounts a young man's coming of age in the unlikeliest of places and finds joy, wisdom, and humor in the darkest of moments. Reading this book made me think anew about grace, gratitude, and the hard roads that take us there."

—DANIEL SWIFT, AUTHOR OF *BOMBER COUNTY*