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Hard Work

“A stirring road map
on how to live life,
not simply on the
basketball court,
but off of it.”

—BUZZ BISSINGER,
author of *Shooting Stars*,
with LeBron James,
and *Friday Night Lights*

Roy Williams

with TIM CROTHERS

foreword by JOHN GRISHAM

UPDATED WITH AN AFTERWORD AND NEW PHOTOS

ROY WILLIAMS

**HARD
WORK**

A LIFE ON AND OFF THE COURT

WITH **TIM CROTHERS**

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2011

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CHAPTER 1

Stress

ONE OCTOBER NIGHT it got so bad that I woke up at 4 a.m. and went for a walk in the neighborhood. It was a little spooky, and I wondered if anybody else was awake and if they were thinking, “Who is that guy walking around at this hour?” So I didn’t walk on the sidewalk. I walked right down the middle of the street, because I didn’t want anybody to think I was a burglar and shoot my rear end.

I just couldn’t sleep.

I never sleep very well in the preseason, but I got less sleep during the 2009 preseason than any year I have ever coached. From the start of practice, an average night’s sleep for me was about four hours. So many things were running through my mind. I keep a little notepad and pen on my nightstand and a lot of times I come up with an idea and turn the light on and write it down and then try to go back to sleep. But during the ’09 preseason there was never any going back to sleep. In all my years of coaching I have never felt more pressure.

It was all because of what I wanted for one kid. I so badly wanted Tyler Hansbrough to reach his dream. This was his last chance to win a national championship. I can never remember wanting something so much for one of my players.

I think part of it was because Tyler didn't come back for his senior year at North Carolina to improve his stock for the NBA draft. He came back because he enjoyed college and he wanted to win a national title. A very physical, no-nonsense kid from Poplar Bluff, Missouri, who had been the centerpiece of our team for three seasons, Tyler had received so many individual awards, but he never cared about any of them. All he ever really wanted was the big team prize. It felt like Tyler was carrying all of what is good about college basketball on his shoulders. I know it sounds corny, but I really felt it was only right for him to win a national championship.

During the preseason, I had tried to tell Tyler not to let a championship be his only goal, because odds were that it was not going to happen. He looked me square in the eye. "Coach," he said, "I want to win it so bad."

I remember it was the very end of August when I first heard that Tyler had a problem with his shin. He told the trainers he thought he got kicked, and they put some ice on it. When our preseason conditioning started in the middle of September, his leg was still bothering him, and it hurt more and more as we got closer to the start of the season. So we did an MRI and a bone scan and the problem was diagnosed as a stress reaction condition. The bone was weakened, leading to the possibility of a stress fracture or worse.

It's the kind of injury where nobody really knows what's going to happen next. Our doctors told me that in two weeks we might see some improvement or we might not. At four weeks we might see some improvement or we might not. I could let him have six weeks off and

then he could come back to practice for five minutes and break his leg. Tyler was worried he might miss the whole season. I told our doctors, “You know what they call the guy who finished last in medical school? Doctor. You know what they call the guy who finishes last in coaching? Ex-coach.” Every day I jokingly threatened to fire them, but I wanted them to understand how serious this really was.

I had no choice but to let Tyler sit out as long as he needed to, which was hard because he was the returning National Player of the Year and a guy that’s going to get 20 points and 10 rebounds every game. That’s a pretty big security blanket for a coach.

Tyler sat out of practice for two weeks and then we started working him back in a little bit at a time. That was the toughest part. We’d be doing a drill that was 12 minutes long and I planned to let Tyler do half of that, but we’d get nearly through half and I’d think, “Gosh, I wonder if I should take him out?” I always knew that if I let him go one more play, he could possibly hurt himself. Every time he jumped, I worried that he might come down and snap his leg. I was thinking every play could be his last. Every day at practice before I went out on the court, I’d say a little prayer: “Let this team play well. Let me help this team and let no one get hurt, especially Tyler.” In every drill, instead of coaching my team, I was peeking at Tyler with one eye and my watch with the other, wondering if I should pull him out. I finished every practice with a splitting headache. I was so worried I might end the guy’s career.

On top of all that were the expectations. While Tyler had never seriously considered leaving UNC early for the NBA, three other underclassmen—Ty Lawson, our lightning-quick point guard; Wayne Ellington, our deadly outside shooter; and Danny Green, an excellent all-around player on the wing—had all submitted their names for the NBA draft. In June, when those three guys opted to pull their names

out of the draft to improve their stock with another college season, I read a story in the newspaper that said North Carolina could have one of the greatest teams ever. Then, in the summertime when I was recruiting, other coaches would say to me, “The good news is you’re going to have a great team. The bad news is that everybody’s going to expect you to win a national title. And if you don’t win it, everybody will say your season wasn’t a success.” As much as I hated to admit it, I knew what they were saying was true.

The Associated Press preseason poll came out and we were unanimously voted No. 1. The *Sporting News* printed a story titled “They Just Can’t Lose” and said that we might be the best college team in 30 years, with a chance to be the first undefeated team since 1976, when Bobby Knight did it with Indiana. What scared me was reading that and knowing my players were hearing about it and, even more, that their families were buying into it. I knew that somewhere in the back of their minds, those guys who had considered leaving early for the pros were going to be thinking about what the NBA player personnel people had told them they should do to improve their draft positions, and they’d have their parents reminding them about it. I don’t care how good a parent you are, if you’re not careful you can really hurt a child by just focusing on what he needs to accomplish. That will also undermine his team. So I was trying to control what my team heard, but I couldn’t control what their parents told them. I couldn’t control their classmates saying, “We can’t wait until basketball season starts. We’re going to kill everybody!”

I have never coached any team that had so much pressure put on it. The year before we’d gone 36–3, won our conference regular season and tournament championships, and then lost in the Final Four. Some people thought the season was a failure. Now we were supposed to go undefeated in a time of parity in college basketball when there

are so many more high-quality teams that it just doesn't happen anymore. I knew that every game we played was going to be overanalyzed so that if we won by 25, people were going to say we should have won by 30. It was never going to be enough. That's an uncomfortable feeling when you can't be excited about winning.

Every day I said to the team, "I want you all to realize that our goal to win a national title is realistic, but also understand that the only people you've got to please are me and yourselves. That's it. Don't be concerned about what anybody else is saying. Those other people have nothing invested in it. You're the ones who are sweating in the weight room. You're the ones who are running yourselves half to death at the end of practice."

I told them to ignore the expectations and I think they tried to put them out of their minds. I knew I'd be fighting all year to try to keep that weight off my team. I still thought it was something that we could never rest on. We had to attack it every single day. I knew I'd have to keep reminding them to enjoy the ride. But in the back of my mind, I also knew it would always be there. I felt the worst stress of my entire life.

That night as I walked down the middle of my street at 4 o'clock in the morning, I was thinking, "How can I live with myself if I don't get Tyler and the rest of these guys back to the Final Four?"

I HELD TYLER out of the first two games of the season. That was a hard decision because we'd also lost Marcus Ginyard, a senior and our best defensive player, after he'd injured his foot in the pre-season, and we didn't have any idea when he was coming back. Then freshman Tyler Zeller broke his wrist in our second game against Kentucky, and we thought he could be out for the whole season.

In our third game, we went to UC Santa Barbara and Tyler felt

much better, so I let him play. I could tell he was pressing. He missed some shots that he normally makes. He also sprained his ankle early in that game, which added another question mark as to whether he was healthy enough to play.

Then we went to Hawaii for the Maui Invitational and I didn't play Tyler in the opener of the tournament against Chaminade. He played all right in the next game against Oregon, but we limited his minutes. He proved that the ankle was not a problem, but I was still concerned. I couldn't decide whether to play him the next night in the championship game against Notre Dame. I knew he'd be so fired up to play against a Top 10 team and against Luke Harangody, another big guy who was supposed to be pretty good. I talked to Tyler in warm-ups and I said, "Big fella, how do you feel?"

Tyler said, "Coach, I'm fine."

"No, Tyl—"

"Coach, I'm fine!"

"I just want to make sure I'm—"

"Coach, I'm fine!"

I thought I was going to have to fight him.

"Okay," I said, "I'll start you, but if I don't like what I see, I'm taking you out of the game and you won't play anymore."

I didn't really mean that, but I was just trying to remind him that I was the head coach. So I started him and he was sensational. He scored 34 points and we won.

A week later we went to Detroit to play Michigan State at Ford Field, where the Final Four would be played. Michigan State had been through a tough travel schedule leading up to that game and they had a couple of guys hurt, so we tried to establish a quick tempo right from the start. It was a close game for a while, but right before the half I noticed that the Michigan State players were not sprinting back on

defense and seemed to be tiring. I turned to my assistants and said, “They’re done. If we keep the hammer down, this one is going to be over with early in the second half.”

We were up by 14 points at halftime, but early in the second half we pushed the tempo even higher. Michigan State started coming up short on open shots. We took away their second shots and kept running our break, and they hit the wall. It felt like a snowball rolling down the hill getting bigger and bigger. We won by 35. After the game I said, “Guys, we were really good today, but that other team helped us. They lost their legs. Say good things about them, because we may play them again down the line.”

Then I added, “If we keep playing our tails off, we might even have a chance to come back here.”

A week before Christmas, Tyler broke the UNC scoring record against Evansville, but he was still saying that his shin ached and throbbled after games, so we did another MRI and bone scan. The doctors found no fracture lines, and the bone was healing, so I told him, “Tyler, your leg is okay. You’re driving yourself crazy and you’re driving us crazy. We need to put this to rest.” After that meeting he was fine. I don’t think he mentioned his shin again the rest of the year.

We won our first 13 games of the season. Tyler recovered to lead our team in scoring in the last six of those games, establishing himself again as the focal point of our offense. Ty was playing brilliantly at the point, rarely turning the ball over and making three-point shots whenever he was given an opening. Then in our Atlantic Coast Conference opener at home against Boston College, we got beat. We were so fat and happy and I think we were surprised by how emotional Boston College was. Rakim Sanders came into that game shooting under 30 percent from three-point range for them and he made four

against us. Tyrese Rice scored 25 points and made shots even when we had fingers in his nostrils. Boston College made plays they had not made the whole season. It was one of those games when the people in our locker room understood that we had to give Boston College some credit even when the people outside of our locker room would be saying that we screwed it up. We didn't play great by any means, but they had played really well and we had to accept that. That doesn't mean the media accepted it. They blasted Ty. They said he wasn't quick enough to defend Rice and that it was a mismatch. I had to handle that. I had to make sure that everybody knew that Ty wasn't the only reason we lost that game, and that it was just one game.

But the loss was a shock to everybody on our team—not just the fact that we lost but that we lost to an unranked team at home. It shook our confidence. A coach can see that right away. In our next practice there was no laughing and trash-talking between drills. It was deadly serious. We'd move the ball three times to a guy with a wide-open shot, and then he'd pass it up to a teammate with the same kind of shot. Our guys just weren't sure of themselves.

Our next game was a non-conference game against College of Charleston, and in the first half we came out tight. We won that game easily, but it didn't erase the lack of confidence that we felt, because we all knew we didn't play great. I knew that our problems could linger.

Four days later, we played our second ACC game at Wake Forest, an undefeated team that was ranked in the Top 5. It turned out to be one of those nights when everything felt like it was going in their favor. Their mojo was right, their cycle of the moon was right, their biorhythms were right—and we were struggling. Jeff Teague went absolutely bonkers from the perimeter and scored 34 points for them.

Tyler made only three of his 12 shots and Ty turned the ball over four times, the most turnovers he'd had all season.

That game was the first time that I saw my team have serious doubts. Our shot selection, our patience, our poise, our resolve—we lacked everything that helps you win a tough game. I tell our kids all the time that in every close game somebody's going to give in and let's not let it be us. But that night it was us. We panicked. We didn't defend. We didn't run back on defense. When our guys came over to the sideline for timeouts, they had a beaten look. They were not walking up on their toes, carrying themselves like they were going to win. They were shuffling around with their heads down and their shoulders slumped. None of them had the confidence that their teammates could get it done, so they didn't play as a team. Each of them was thinking, "I've got to make the shot. I've got to get us out of this mess."

We lost that game by three points. When we left the court, the crowd was chanting, "Over-rated! Over-rated!" I clearly remember walking into the tunnel and hearing one guy yell down at me, "That's right, Williams, your team sucks!"

Our locker room was split into two rooms. The players sat in one room, and I walked into the other to think about what to tell them. I never prepare what I'm going to say at the end of a game that we lose, because I'm always dumb enough to think we're going to pull it out at the end. So after losses I always give myself a little more time to collect my thoughts. I know they're more likely to remember what I say to them after a loss because that's when I have everybody's attention.

I paced around that room for about three minutes. I knew we were dealing with a lot of negatives. We'd lost our first two conference games. I knew that the media was going to go after Ty and say that he'd been outplayed badly by Rice and then Teague. After the Boston

College game there had been a sense of doom from the press and that had carried over to the public. I'd already seen people jumping ship, and now I knew everybody was going to say that we were sinking. All around us that night there was panic.

In basketball, no matter how good your team is, you're always one step away from falling off a cliff. If the players' confidence isn't restored quickly, a team that has lost two in a row can all of a sudden lose four straight, and then it gets to be five out of six, and then it's six out of eight, and there is nothing to grab onto, nothing to slow you down. You just keep falling. I knew our team was standing on the edge of that cliff.

When I walked through the door into the players' locker room, I expected to see some anxiety, but it was a lot worse than that. Some guys were crying. Some guys were really ticked off at themselves. Some guys were really ticked off at other people. Some guys were feeling sorry for themselves. Some of them were just disgusted with the way we'd played. The looks on their faces told me that I couldn't just say, "Hey, Wake had a great night." That wasn't going to work. They needed me to tell them how we were going to be all right.

As I turned to speak to them, I did what I have always done.

I drew from my past.

CHAPTER 2

Angels and Demons

I PROBABLY SHOULDN'T SHARE this because it's not really something to be proud of, but one part of my family tree goes back to the McCoys who feuded with the Hatfields all those years. On the other side of the tree, my mother's side, they changed their name from Dalton to Deyton because they didn't want to be associated with the Dalton Gang, some nasty folks who were killed trying to rob a bank in a small town in Kansas. There are no heroes in my family history, just a bunch of outlaws and fighters.

My dad had 12 brothers and sisters, and my mom had nine, and everybody lived within a few miles of each other in the mountains of Western North Carolina near Asheville, where I was born and raised in the early 1950s. It was a very hardworking family on both sides. My mother quit school in the 10th grade and my father quit school in the sixth grade, both of them to go to work. My mother started working in the cotton mill and my father, as a 13-year-old, started picking cotton before it went to the mill. I was brought up in a very uneducated family.

My grandfather on my mother's side owned a pool hall in Caroleen, North Carolina. Friday night would be the only night he'd drink, but he would drink a lot. He'd drink so much that when somebody brought him home, he couldn't undress himself. He'd come home with the money he'd earned for the whole week and he'd tell my grandmother, "I'll give you \$5 if you'll take my shoes and socks off. I'll give you \$10 if you take my coat and shirt off." That became Granddaddy's way of giving Granny the grocery money.

My grandmother on my father's side we all called Big Mom because she looked after the whole family. Her husband, Pop, ran his own little sawmill—a shed and a saw is all it really was—and when I was four or five years old, all the cousins and I would bundle kindling for him. Pop would cut logs to make furniture. The leftovers were kindling, so on Friday afternoons Pop and I would go into the African-American section of town and sell kindling to people that still heated and cooked with a woodstove.

My mother's name was Lallage. I thought she was an angel. She was intelligent. She was sweet. She was shy. She appreciated the most simple things in life. She lived by the Golden Rule: treat folks like you'd like to be treated. She enjoyed people and she was polite, but she had a fence around her and she wouldn't let anybody in until you passed her test. Very few people got inside that fence.

Family was all that mattered to my mother. Family was her first priority and second, third, fourth, and fifth. Nothing ever got in the way of that. She always put the rest of the family ahead of herself. All she cared about was providing, having a roof over our head, clothes for us to wear, and food for us to eat. Everywhere we'd go, she packed up my older sister, Frances, and me; it was like the mother duck and her little ducklings.

My mom was stronger than my dad.

My dad was so funny. His name was Mack Clayton Williams, but everybody called him Babe. His mama gave him that nickname because he was her favorite. She treated him like her baby, even though he was somewhere in the middle of all of her kids. Babe would pick on everybody in a jovial way, and they could pick on him. He had this laugh that made his whole body shake. For all of my cousins, he was their favorite uncle. He liked to play tricks, and if a rubber snake showed up somewhere, you knew who was behind it. Everybody loved Babe.

My dad could tell a story a hundred times and he'd laugh just as hard at the end of the hundredth telling as he did at the first. I remember one time a bunch of the Williams family went to a Baptist revival with my uncle Glenn, who was a deacon in his church. When we got back home, my daddy started teasing Glenn by saying, "Glenn is so cheap that when the collection plate came around, he put a five-dollar bill in there and then he reached in and took back four ones. Isn't he supposed to be setting a good example for the rest of us?"

He was giggling about it and Glenn swore that he didn't do it, but Daddy was never one to let the true facts get in the way of a good story. He was always kidding people. In fact, that was his life. He wanted to have fun, and sometimes having fun got in the way of some of his responsibilities as a husband and a father.

My dad was an alcoholic. He smoked. He cursed like a sailor. Every vice you could have, he had. He didn't play any sports; he just worked and worked and worked. I remember somebody once asked him about running. "The only time I'm running," he said, "is if I'm real afraid of the guy that's chasing me."

My dad was a good man, but alcohol changed him. When I was a

kid, I enjoyed being around him if he was not drinking and I hated being around him if he was. Drinking put him on edge. It could make him mean. It made me not even want to talk to him.

My first childhood memories are of having a lot of fun with my cousins playing cowboys and Indians. My favorite picture is of me holding a six-gun poised to shoot, because I remember how happy that made me feel to be a cowboy living in a time when you were either a good guy or a bad guy.

But at around age seven, it wasn't fun anymore. My dad started going to the beat of a different drum. A lot of nights he came home drunk at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. One night he came home with two black eyes, because he'd been in a bar and gotten into a brawl. But that was just him.

Lots of people in my family were drinkers and fighters. Every gathering, every reunion, and every family picnic on the Williams side ended up with two of the boys going at it. I remember at five or six years old asking one of my cousins, "Who's going to end up fighting tonight?" There would always be a fistfight over something that somebody said that somebody else didn't like, just because there was so much drinking going on.

There was one little area in Asheville where my grandparents and three of their grown sons lived, all within 100 yards of each other, in little houses along a dirt road. Maybe that's where the Hatfields and McCoys figure in, because there were several times when the boys from over the hill came by and they wanted to play with us, but at the end somebody always drew a line in the sand. That's just what we did. It was the Williams boys against everybody else. I'd bloody a guy's nose and he'd bloody mine, and then two days later I'd be playing and fighting with those same guys. I wasn't a great fighter, but I was never afraid of a scuffle.

One of my uncles, who we called “Hillbilly,” once told me the story of a night at a beer joint called the Silver Slipper. A guy came out of the bar and said that my dad and my uncle Gordon were about to get in a fight with some other guys and the other brothers might want to go in there and help them because there were three of theirs and only two of ours. Uncle Hillbilly said, “Naw, they ought to be able to handle that. Let’s just see if they’re tough enough.”

So Hillbilly and the others stood there and watched through the window while my dad and Gordon fought the other three guys. The Williams boys came out and they’d won, but they looked like they lost. That was the only kind of competition I knew. Were you tough enough? And when somebody drew a line in the sand, would you step across?

BETWEEN MY MOTHER and father there was a lot of physical abuse. He would come home drunk and push her around, and Frances and I would try to stop it. I’d try to separate them, but I was too small and my dad would just push me away.

My mother and father split for the first time just after I’d finished first grade. My mother took us away and the three of us lived all summer in a single room at the Shamrock Court Motel, which my aunt Doris owned. My mother would go off to work and Frances was off doing odd jobs for somebody, so I would go around with another of my aunts, Leona, who was a maid at the motel. She paid me 25 cents a day to take off the dirty pillowcases and put on clean ones. At lunch Aunt Doris would fix me a sandwich, and then I’d go and work some more in the afternoon. That was it. There was no ballplaying. Nothing that kids do. It was just survival.

When the school year started, we moved in with another aunt. We lived in her trailer because she had an empty bedroom. I slept on the

couch and my mother and sister shared the back bedroom. We lived there for four or five months, and then Dad started coming by and my parents got back together again. That lasted a little while before they broke up again. We left again and lived with another aunt. All of these aunts that put us up were my dad's sisters. They were all mad at Babe because they knew that his drinking and carousing was ruining my family. It was difficult for me to understand why my father was doing this to us. My mom and dad got together and broke up, got together and broke up, and the last time we moved out I was 11 years old.

Frances was four years older than me. She was outgoing but not very goal oriented. She was fun but not the life of the party. She was caring but she didn't dote. Even as a teenager, she was really looking forward to growing up, to moving on with her life. She was anxious to get out of our house and start the kind of family we didn't have. We didn't spend that much time together, didn't play much together, but we had a typical brother-sister rivalry. She would always tell people that when we washed dishes together, she would wash and I would dry but I wouldn't dry the pots and pans because I said they were too heavy. She always thought I was trying to get away with something, but she was a good sister.

I know Frances was also upset by our family situation, but she didn't seem to be as bothered by it as I was. She was older, more mature, and just handled it better. During the tough times, she was keeping an eye on me more than I knew she was, but I just wasn't willing to talk about our mom and dad splitting up. I never really talked to anybody about it. I pretended it wasn't there.

During one of the times when my mother and dad got back together, we lived in a house on Warren Avenue. That was the first and only house we ever owned. My mother, Frances, and I left and came

back, and left and came back, and then one day when we were staying with one of my aunts, my dad said, “Why don’t you guys come back and stay at the house, and I’ll leave and let you guys live there?”

We’d only been back living in that house for two weeks when these two guys pulled up in the driveway. They were wearing dark sportcoats, white shirts, and ties. I was on the porch, but I ran in the house to tell my mom as they came walking up the steps. I remember latching the screen door, and I wouldn’t unlatch it to let them in. It turned out that during that seven-month time period that we’d been gone, my dad hadn’t paid the mortgage. So they came and foreclosed on the house. They told us we had three days to get out. I went and packed up my stuff, and we moved back to the motel. To this day I still have a negative feeling about people in dark sportcoats, white shirts, and ties.

Every time my parents got back together, there was a lot of fighting. My dad never hit my mother with his fist, but he went as far as he could go without doing that. I tried to run away from home one time because I just wanted to get away. I didn’t get very far; I don’t know if I wanted to get very far. I just wanted to shock my dad into stopping. I was always feeling like I needed to escape.

ONE OF OUR NEIGHBORS at that house on Warren Avenue had a basketball goal in the backyard. I never had a basketball, but they had one, and when I wanted to get away from what was going on at home, I would just go over there and shoot. The goal was a pole with a plywood backboard, and there was no net, just a bent rim. I’d go over there for hours. If it was raining or snowing, I’d get filthy on the dirt court, but I didn’t mind. It was something I could do by myself. All I needed was a basketball and a goal and some sweat and I could lose myself in the game. I was in heaven, like a kid left all night

in a candy store. That court was my refuge, the one place where it felt like there were no problems in the world.

When I was 11, we moved to a place on Reed Street. We were 100 yards from Biltmore Elementary School, where there were some asphalt courts. Every day after school, I'd go home, change clothes, and head straight to the courts to play basketball until 6 o'clock.

When I was in the seventh grade, a few other boys and I started sneaking into the Biltmore gym to play. I always played with older guys. One of them had the idea of hiding someone in the bathroom, and then when the head of the physical education department would go home at 4 o'clock, our guy would come out of the bathroom and pop the gym door open and we'd play on the court inside.

One time we were in there playing and one of the guys started clowning around with a fire extinguisher, and it sprayed all over the girls' locker room. That just infuriated me, and that's when I started sneaking in by myself, because I didn't want to be responsible for anybody else. On one outside wall there were some uneven bricks I could climb to get to a second-floor window. I opened the window and dropped down to the balcony inside the gym. I never turned on the lights. There was just an exit sign lighting each end, and I would play in the half dark. I would just shoot and rebound and shoot again. It was peaceful, and at that point the peaceful part of it was more important than getting to be a better player.

I got caught several times. It became a little bit of a challenge for this one policeman to catch me in there and run me off. He came in the gym a couple of times and would find me mopping the floor. He probably thought I was trying to keep it cleaned up, but I was just trying to cover my tracks. I didn't want anybody to know I'd been in there.

Finally, one night he said, "It doesn't look like I'm going to be able to stop you. How do you get in here?"

I was scared to death. It was dark, and I took him outside and showed him how I climbed up the outside of the building. Then he said, "Okay, come on with me."

I had been in the junior deputy sheriff's program, and one day they were taking everybody to the jail and the courthouse just to show them what it was like, and I didn't go that day because they said they were going to fingerprint everybody and that frightened me. So when the policeman put me in the back of the police car, I thought he was taking me to jail. He drove over to Mr. Norton's house. Mr. Norton was the school principal. When we reached his house, the policeman got out of the car and said, "Stay here."

I was about to mess my pants, I was so dadgum scared. He knocked on the door, and when Mr. Norton opened it I could see them talking. After a little while, Mr. Norton went back in the house and then came out to the car. I sat there trying to figure out how I was going to tell my mom that she had to come bail me out of jail. Mr. Norton reached in the window and handed me a key. It was the key to the Biltmore gym.

"I don't want you to kill yourself climbing in the window anymore," Mr. Norton said, "but you are responsible for anyone in there with you."

I never took anyone in there with me. The only time I ever used that key was when I could be by myself.

ONCE MY SISTER got a job working weekends at Kress's five-and-ten store, I was on my own. Really on my own. I was 11 years old. On Saturdays I would get up at 8:30 and my sister and my mother

would already be gone to work, so I'd eat my Cheerios alone. It was Cheerios with canned milk and I would dilute that with water. That was my milk, because it was cheaper. Then I would go to Biltmore Elementary School and I would play there all day.

Some Saturdays I would go to the YMCA, riding the bus because we had no car. I played basketball there, too, but also I learned to play Ping-Pong and pool and chess. I learned to swim enough to stay alive. I would stay there until two in the afternoon. Then I would leave and go to Pack Memorial Library. I would sit there for hours reading the different newspaper sports sections and then catch the last bus back home in the evening.

Then, in the seventh grade, I joined a basketball league at the YMCA. In my very first game I remember I came down the court and I passed the ball to the guy on my right and he shot it and missed it. On our next possession, somebody gave me the ball and I passed it to the guy on my left, and he shot it and missed it. The third time I came down the court I shot it and it went in, and I've been shooting ever since.

During that whole time period when I was very unhappy, my mother was so strong and she took such good care of me. When I started going to town by myself, she would always say, "You just do the right thing."

One time, I said, "Mom, how do I know what's right?"

"You'll figure it out," she said. "You just make sure you do the right thing."

And so one Saturday I didn't save a nickel for the bus ride home from the YMCA. I told the bus driver, Mr. Haynes, "I don't have a nickel. Can I ride the bus home and I'll give you back the nickel next week?"

He said, "Come on in here, son."

I got on the bus and rode home. The next Saturday morning I wasn't going to the YMCA until 9, but I knew the first bus would come to my stop at 7:30. I waited out at the bus stop and when it came, I walked up the stairs and gave Mr. Haynes a nickel. "I'll see you in an hour or so," I said. "I'm not riding this bus."

He said, "Why didn't you just wait and bring it to me then?"

"I didn't want you to think I wasn't going to pay you back."

I HEARD MY MOM cry herself to sleep sometimes. I know she worried about how she was going to pay the bills. There were a couple of times she had to ask our landlord's secretary if she could pay the rent a few days late. Sometimes that lady was harsh to her. There were times when my mom didn't know how she was going to get through the next day, but she always found a way.

She had worked for Chakales Hosiery for a long time and then she went to work for Ball's, a place that made jars, and then she went to work for Gerber baby food, but she kept getting laid off. A couple of times my mother had to take unemployment and it embarrassed her. She would fill out 100 job applications to try not to take money she hadn't earned. Eventually, she got a job at Vanderbilt Shirt Factory and she worked there for 25 years.

In my seventh-grade year, my mom started taking in laundry to make extra money. She would do ironing for people, 10 cents for a shirt or a pair of pants. They'd come by to bring the clothes on Friday afternoon and I never wanted to go to the door. I didn't think it was right that she should have to do those kinds of things. It made me feel like people thought my mom was inferior. It was one of those things that really bothered me. So I would just leave.

AFTER SCHOOL MY BUDDIES and I used to go home past Ed's Service Station, which had a vending machine where you could get a Coke for 10 cents. One day my sister said she saw us at Ed's and asked what we were doing there. I told her and my mom that we liked to stop at Ed's after playing basketball and get Coca-Colas to drink while we'd sit there on the sidewalk and talk.

Now my mom knew I loved nothing more than a cold Coca-Cola, but she also knew I didn't have the money to buy one. "What do you do?" she asked me.

I told her, "Oh, they have a nice water fountain. I just get some water."

The next morning I'd gotten myself ready to go to school as usual, because my mom always left earlier to go to work. I walked into the kitchen and sitting on the corner of the table was a dime. My mom didn't have very much money, but she was too proud to allow her son not to have what other kids had. After that, when she cashed her paycheck at the grocery store, she'd get rolls of dimes so that she would be sure to have one there for me every morning.

She did that every day for years.

GROWING UP I ALWAYS knew my dad was wrong. I hated the drinking. I wanted my mom and dad to be together, but I didn't want them to be together if it was going to be that way.

The summer I turned 14, my parents had been apart for a couple of years. My dad hardly ever paid the child support. He'd pay one month and skip seven, then pay another month and skip nine. My mom talked to a lawyer and they served a warrant for my dad's arrest and said he had to catch up on child support. My dad came by the house. He was drunk and angry. It was the worst time I can ever remember. He went after my mom. I pulled him off of her, pushed

him down, and grabbed a bottle and put it under his chin. “Get out of here or I’ll bust this over your head,” I said. “I’ll kill you!”

The whole scene was very nasty, but I didn’t care. When he got up to leave, I said, “I never want to see you again. I never want you to set foot in my house again for the rest of my life.”

My dad never, ever came back to our house again. After that, I rarely saw him, only a couple of times when my sister made me go with her to visit him. Frances was more forgiving, but I was not. I was mad that he’d torn our family apart.