

STUMBLING

A Sassy Memoir about
Coming Out of Evangelicalism

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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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This book is memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections and information gathering of experiences over time. Some of the names of individuals or institutions and their characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

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Before Reading

I didn't write this book for everyday Christians, or maybe any kind of Christian, for that matter.

So if you're happily sitting in pews on Sundays and contently studying Max Lucado on Wednesdays, you'll likely hate this book. I talk about sex, I curse, and I ask questions that make me look like a heretic (and come up with some answers that definitely do). Not to mention I'm gay.

Instead, I wrote *Stumbling* for the ones whose prayers went unanswered. For those who doubt, for those who got tired of jumping through intellectual hoops to make the Bible make sense, complete with its endorsements of genocide, the subjugation of women, slavery, and the murder of queer people.

It's for the scared, for those who want to have some semblance of faith but are terrified to look anything like the people who sided with Trump, those that chose nationalism over kindness, chose all lives over Black.

It's for the angry, for those who left the church because the people in the pews look nothing like the man on the cross, and they can no longer stand the hypocrisy.

It's for the hurting, for the queer people who gave everything to the church they loved but were cast out the second they came out.

It's for the tired, for those who wake up with a hangover on Sunday because they didn't want to feel anything on Saturday because Monday through Friday were simply too much, or rather, not enough.

It's for the "faggots." It's for the "faithless." It's for the "backsliders" and "Jezebels."

It's for you.

It's for me.

I don't claim to have the answers. Anyone that does is selling you something.

Rather, my hope is to, as Henri Nouwen writes, “cry with those who cry, laugh with those who laugh, and to make [my] own painful and joyful experiences available as sources of clarification and understanding” because while all our stories are unique, “all people are one at the well-spring of pain and joy.”¹

That’s why I wrote *Stumbling*—to leave some breadcrumbs for my fellow wanderers, to tie red string where briars and cliffs may lie, to carve markings on trees where one might find a quiet stream. But above all else, I wrote *Stumbling* to tell those anxiously afraid, desperately trying to keep themselves warm in the shadow of the night, alone by the fire of their soul, that there’s a glade just on the other side if they but raise their eyes.

And maybe, by beholding my stumbling, you’ll find your own path worth treading.

Some warning signs before your journey:

Pretty language not utilized: Yes, I say fuck. Because sometimes life fucks you up. And there’s no better word to explain it than fuck. Fuck.

Sex abounds: I talk about sex. Gay sex. Because people have sex. Including gay people. Because sex is a part of life.

Identities unknown: I have changed some of the names that appear in this book. But if a name wasn’t changed, I checked with the person, and they gave me their permission. However, in some instances, I kept the name because the meaning of the story would be lost. With that in mind, nothing was written to slander another human. My only goal is to simply share my story in hopes that it might help someone else, not ruin anyone else’s life.

Memory is a flawed and creative thing: if something was remembered incorrectly, I apologize. Lying was not my intention.

Happy stumbling.

Part One



Finishing

In my beginning is my end.¹

T. S. Eliot

How It Ends

My best friend dies. That's how the book ends.

But if you want to find out how or why that matters or why I'd tell you at the beginning of the book instead of the end, you'll have to turn the page...

And the next page...

And the next...

Till you get to the end...

The end you now know.

Part Two



Falling

Unmaking, decreating, is the only task man may take upon himself, if he aspires, as everything suggests, to distinguish himself from the Creator.¹

E. M. Cioran

Journey of Faith

“Dresden.”

That’s what our sign reads as Josh and I stand on the curb of the autobahn, thumbs out, pretending like we know what we’re doing.

We have *no* idea what we’re doing.

I anxiously smile at every car, trying to convince them we’re not psychopaths. I must be doing a horrible job because every one of them keeps driving by. But in spite of my pathetic attempts at not looking like a murderer, I’m excited.

We’re doing it. We’re finally doing it, I think to myself.

This trip had been in the making for quite some time. But rather than calling it a hitchhiking trip, like a normal person, I was branding it on my blog and social media as my “Journey of Faith” like a crazy person.

But that’s what you do as a good Christian missionary—you brand things.

Rather than calling a church sleepover a church sleepover, it has to be called “Caged”; rather than a weekend retreat simply being a weekend retreat, it’s “Rescued”; a building fundraiser: “The Nehemiah Project”; a mission trip: “The Commissioning.”

Branding. It’s all about branding.

So when I decided to travel Europe, I didn’t say, “Hi! I’m hitchhiking Europe. Please give me money.” I needed to brand it; I needed to make it look spiritual; I needed to give it that Christian spice, and all the better if there’s some Old Testament namesake, a scripture reference, or a sprinkling of biblical Hebrew and ancient Greek.

(Evangelicalism didn’t raise no chump.)

Over the past nine months, I had been working with an organization called YWAM—Youth With A Mission—and that mission was “saving souls.”

Saving them from what, you may ask? Hell. We were saving them from hell. You know, simple stuff, light stuff, stuff that everyone can get on board with, especially the unsuspecting strangers we'd accost every Tuesday.

During that time, I had "proclaimed the good news" on the streets of Berlin, ran an after-school theater program for underprivileged kids, led a youth group, volunteered for a Mother Teresa Home for the Sick and Dying, created a musical, toured through Europe with said musical, and saw "many come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ." Hallelujah!

(And that's just the good stuff you include in your missionary newsletters to get money so you don't starve. "Look at all the cool, shiny things I'm doing on behalf of Jesus with the money you gave me!" Remember, it's all about branding, and donors want to know you're spending their money well. It's an "eternal investment," one might say, "a jewel in their crown." So you better be wise with that investment. You better be faithful with what's been given. "Dance, monkey, dance! Go save souls and tell me about it so I can feel good!")

My time with YWAM was horrible and beautiful and difficult and lovely, full of moments that I cherish to this day...

...Telling strangers how beautiful they are.

...Telling a manipulative preacher how terrible *he* was.

...Crying when miracles happened.

...Crying when they didn't.

...Proclaiming, "Jesus can save you from homosexuality," even though I nearly joined a group of men having sex in the woods just a day prior.

...Oh! And starting to doubt that everything I believed in was a lie.

(You know, the kind of stuff you *don't* put in your newsletter. The kind of stuff you hide and pray no one finds out. *Look at all the chaos and trauma you're purchasing for the low price of twenty dollars a month! Thank you for your donation!*)

But now that my time as a missionary had come to an end, I'm off to the next adventure: my Journey of Faith.

The idea came from a desire to travel Europe and not wanting to return home.

Problem: I had no money. I was *paying* to be a missionary. Thus, the carefully curated newsletter. I was literally broke. (Guess I should have branded better.)

But a thought came: *What if I did it anyway? What if I traveled without any money and dared to believe that God might take care of me? Like the stories in the Bible! Like Jesus's disciples!*

Terrified to hitchhike alone, I texted my friend Josh, justifying my fear with the fact that even Jesus sent out his broke disciples in pairs.

Josh is the type of guy who chooses to sleep in his trashed Subaru over a nice suburban house owned by his well-to-do parents, smelling of essential oils rather than cologne. If anyone was going to say “yes” to bumming around Europe, it would be him. And if he said “no,” which most normal people would, I’d take it as some cosmic sign that I should just go home. But to my surprise, he didn’t just say “yes,” he was truly ecstatic.

“This is exactly what I need!” he said. “I went ahead and bought a ticket to Berlin for June 1. Does that work?”

And thus was born my “Journey of Faith.”

This wasn’t just about some kids traveling Europe, this was about God showing up; this was about seeing miracles; this was about moving past my fears; this was about faith! Glory to God in the highest!

(Or so I wrote in my newsletter.)

So here Josh and I stand, traveling as far as our empty pockets can take us, sticking out our thumbs and holding a cardboard sign like they do in the movies.

I take another deep breath as more and more cars pass by, my cheesy smile convincing no one.

I push down my anxiety, down the belief that no one would pick us up, down the fear that we’d starve to death on the side of the highway with no one to care or cry over our emaciated bodies buzzing with flies, burrowed by maggots.

*This is gonna be good. Journey of Faith! God is going to come through for us!
...Right?*

“It is illegal to hitchhike,” the stranger with a thick German accent says after he picks us up. “You are lucky I saw you before the police did.”

“Why did you stop, then?” I ask.

“Back in the ’70s I also hitchhike. I figure I would give back for all the times strangers pick me up.”

Huzzah! Journey of Faith, baby. God is coming through!

“But you can get arrested and fined, so I would not do this again. Try the trains. Much safer and not too expensive.”

Any money is too expensive for two guys traveling Europe, trying to trust God with nothing but youthful zeal. We couldn’t just buy a train ticket. That wouldn’t

be faith! It's okay. He doesn't get it. God is going to take care of us. He'll see. Maybe I should send him my carefully crafted newsletter. He'd be so blessed!

We're a few weeks into our travels, and it's been breathtaking.

Hikes in real-life Narnia. Homemade wine with cheese boards. Singing "Country Roads" by cozy fires. Castles upon castles. Intimate rooftop conversations with shit beer and kind strangers as the city around us danced and sang in revelry.

Now, we're in Nuremberg, staying at a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend's-cousin's house.

After a long day of exploring the city and eating great food and having picnics in castle gardens, we collapse on the bed, drunk on more than wine.

Journey of Faith!

I look over at Josh in the dark, smiling.

I've come to love these nights right before bed. Josh and I stay up late, talking about everything and nothing, feeling close and safe with each other. Eventually, at some point in the conversation, we'd pass out from exhaustion. The good kind. The kind that comes when your day is full.

"This may sound weird," Josh says from the shadows, "but I feel like I should pray for your eyes."

There are different flavors of Christianity: there's the flavor with potlucks after church where everyone gossips—I mean prays—about who is backsliding; there's the flavor that has a soup kitchen, preschool, and counseling department; and there's the flavor that marches outside vet funerals with signs that read, "Thank God for dead soldiers" and "God hates faggots."

The flavor of Christianity that *I* was raised in was somewhere after speaking in tongues (gibberish) and before flaggers (people who whip around a flag during the music part of church).

So the idea of praying for weird miracles, like the healing of my eyes, even though I had glasses, was not *that* out of the ordinary. Besides, I'm legally blind without my glasses—I can't even tell if someone is holding *up* fingers, let alone how many. If God wanted to heal me, my life would be a whole lot easier.

"Okay. Let's try." I scoot over to Josh, so he can touch me (an important Christian ingredient for miracle-making).

I close my eyes.

He prays.

I open them.

Nothing.

I'm still blind.

"Sorry, Brandon. I truly thought I felt something."

"No worries, Josh. At least I have glasses. Thanks for trying. Night!"

"Night."

"So you are taking holiday in Germany, yeah? How do you like our beer?" asks the German Chad (or whatever the German equivalent to Chad is) who picked Josh and me up.

The question is valid. We'd noticed the same thing. Every time we bump into other Americans during our travels, they've come for one thing: to get *impressively* drunk on the famed German beer.

"It's alright I guess," too-honest Josh replies.

The car becomes deathly silent.

Want to quickly offend a German? Talk shit about their beer. Well, that or talk too loudly in the U-Bahn.

The tension is palpable.

We're going to get kicked out. We're going to get kicked out. We're gonna get kicked out because Josh is too honest!

Normally, whenever conflict arises, I run. But I can't run while a car is doing ninety miles an hour down the autobahn. I'm trapped. So I do the next best thing—I stick my head out the window like a golden retriever and let the wind drown out the impending argument.

Look at that lovely tree! Look at that tall tower! Look at anything and everything as long as it keeps you distracted from this awkward tension. Look at that church! Look at that castle! Look at that—

My glasses fly off my face.

I jolt my head back and anxiously stare forward, pretending nothing happened.

"Did you just lose your glasses?" the assumedly annoyed, German-beer-loving, Chad-equivalent driver says.

I just nod my head. Words refusing to come out. I'm far too embarrassed. He starts laughing.

But not me.

I'm not laughing.

I'm the opposite of laughing.

I'm freaking out.

How the hell am I going to hitchhike through Europe if I can't see? Is this gonna be my Journey of Faith? Wandering cobblestone streets blind? Listen, God, it's hard enough trusting that you'll provide when we don't have any money, but now I have to trust you to travel while blind? I get it, that takes faith, but if you weren't listening earlier, that was more about branding and not actually about needing to trust you. Didn't you read the newsletter?

But Josh's prayer from the night before comes to mind.

Please, dear God, come through on that prayer.

"Here," the driver says as he hands me a pair of glasses. "Someone left these in my car the other day. I doubt they will work, but you can try."

I put them on.

"Are you kidding me? I can see! That's crazy! My prescription is super strong! But these are pretty dang close! Thanks, man! I really appreciate it."

"No worries! It is not like I will be using them."

The near-disaster changed the mood of the car—we all returned to casual conversation, avoiding heavy topics (like beer), and I thought to myself: *Maybe Josh's prayer worked! Maybe God does answer prayers. I can see! Well ... sort of ... I can sorta see. God is actually coming through for us! This is amazing! Journey of Faith!*

A headache starts, and I rub my head.

But a headache would quickly become the least of my worries...



... "Brandon, I need to tell you what's going on before you hear about it on social media." It's my mom. Her voice is shaking. "Nathan had a seizure while driving. He crashed into a flatbed truck. It's pretty bad, but he's gonna be okay. We're praying, so he's gonna be fine. After all, don't we serve the God of miracles? You really don't need to worry. Don't stress about trying to get back. Enjoy Europe."

But I wouldn't enjoy Europe. I would stress. Stress about what was going to happen to my brother.



... "Did you hear the news?" my friend Taylor writes me.

"What news?"

“One of our YWAM leaders had an affair with one of the student leaders!”

“WHAT?!”

“Yup. Glad I got outta there when I did. The whole place is a fucking shit show right now. No one knows what to do. I’ll be surprised if the ministry lasts a year.”

But it did last a year ... and the leader left his wife ... even though he had three kids ... to be with this girl who was his secretary ... while leading a missions organization ... while telling us every Wednesday to stand up on our chairs and roar in the spirit to see God move in our lives, roar like the mighty Lion of Judah!

(Guess he didn’t roar loud enough.)



... “Hey Brandon.” It’s another leader from YWAM. Not the one who had the affair. A different leader who now had to clean up his mess. “I just wanted to reach out and send a friendly reminder that you still owe YWAM €354.12. Please send it as soon as you can. You’re past due.”

Twelve dollars. That’s how much is in my bank account.

“P.S. Please stay connected with YWAM Berlin! We’d love it if you would consider giving a charitable donation for our next school with all God is doing. Hope this finds you well!”

I am not being found well. I am being found the *opposite* of well. I am being found *unwell*. My brother is in the ER, and the man who has been taking all my money and bossing me around for the past year has been having an affair with one of the girls he was responsible for. On top of that, now I’m broke. Very broke.

Journey. Of. Faith.



“I’m tired of the fakers,” I say to Josh as I stare at some stone wall in Geneva that I’m apparently very fascinated by.

(The masonry must be riveting.)

“I’m not a faker, Brandon.”

I break my gaze from the wall and glare at Josh.

“I never said you were, Josh! This isn’t about you!”

And in one moment, while yelling at my friend, the friend that flew from the States to hitchhike with me through Europe, I realize that this isn't just about having a brother with a broken body or a bank account with a balance of twelve dollars or a leader who betrayed all of us while we served him faithfully. In truth, this had been building for a while, and it's about so much more...

...It's about my childhood pastor preaching against homosexuality, then having an affair with a man.

...It's my Bible school founder expelling students for hiding secrets, then lying about millions of dollars of debt.

...It's my old pastor, who also happened to be my boss, firing my mom, then telling the congregation that she was "called to better things."

...It's that missionary back in India who tried to knock me over while praying for me, to make it look like God was "slaying me in the spirit," a.k.a. falling backward when a preacher touched you because of the power of God. (Side note: Why do we use a word that represents someone getting aggressively murdered for some manifestation of God?)

...It's about all the Christian leaders who have manipulated me and lied to me over the years so they could advance their own fame and glory at my expense.

...And now, it's about this YWAM leader, telling me to have more faith, telling me to give more money, to surrender more to God, to be holy as God is holy, to think about others before myself, all while having an affair (and using drugs), not giving a damn about anyone *but* himself.

It's too much, and all the pain of the past came rushing in with the crack of his betrayal.

But I don't tell Josh that.

I don't tell Josh anything.

I let it billow and rage inside, torrent upon torrent.

And on the outside, I turn my eyes back to the very old wall, in a very old city, for a very long time, writhing in silent pain because all of this was too much, and I didn't have the words.

"Wanna get drunk?" Josh asks.

I turn my head to see he has an open bottle of Jägermeister because, as mentioned earlier, he hates German beer. Apparently medicinal-grade incense wine is better libation.

Poor Josh, I think. He came out here to have an adventure, to explore the world, to live like there's no tomorrow like any other normal twenty-something, and here I am having an existential crisis like a forty-year-old.

So much for pillow talk after getting drunk on life. Now we're just getting day drunk to cope with life.

"Yes. Yes, I fucking do!" I grab the bottle from his hand and pound it back.

The liquid rushes into my throat, tasting of acrid mint and licorice. It burns.

Why do people like this?

I wince in pain and, a glare that says, *how could you betray me like everyone else?*

He only shrugs his shoulders, a shrug that says, "Hey, it gets you drunk."

Then I pound back more.

The day has worn on, and Josh and I stumble through Geneva, fuming about how much of a shit show life is, fuming about how terrible Christians are, fuming about how stupid all these stupid hills are that we have to climb with stupid forty-pound backpacks while the sun begins to set and we don't have a place to stay.

Geneva was the *one* place I didn't plan our housing ahead of time. All throughout our travels, I would message everyone I knew, looking for a place to stay. But Geneva was the one spot Josh and I wanted to go to but knew no one. Now, it's become some personal test of faith.

Will God come through when I didn't take care of us? Or will he fuck us over like everyone else had?

"Let's go to that church!" I slur through a drunken sneer. "Christians are supposed to let in the stranger and take in the foreigner, right? It's in the Bible. If they actually *love* God, they should let us stay there, right? After all, it's in their precious book!"

Josh scurries after me, really unsure and intimidated by my uncommon rage.

I march up to the door, emboldened by booze and cynicism.

I pound on the door.

Ohhhhh! This is why people drink Jäger!

A middle-aged woman answers.

"Oh, hi you two! Can I help you with something?" She speaks perfect English upon seeing us because, apparently, we don't look Swiss (might be the forty-pound backpacks).

That said, it's not uncommon for a Swiss to speak English. In fact, it's not uncommon for any European to speak English because many Europeans speak many languages, especially English. Come to find out, it's really just Americans

that speak only one language. As the phrase goes, “If you speak three languages, you’re trilingual. If you speak two languages, you’re bilingual. If you speak one language, you’re American.”

“Yes, you can!” I slur while holding my nearly empty bottle of Jäger. “My friend and I do not have a place to stay, and we were wondering if we could sleep on the floor of your church.”

“Oh ... oh, I see...” She gets a bit nervous. “Well, I don’t have permission to do that.”

“Figures.” I turn to go, but she calls after me.

“But I’ll call our pastor and see what we can do.” She takes out her phone and looks at us as she speaks in French to the pastor.

I glare at her, mad that she didn’t turn us away immediately like I thought that she would.

How dare she not disappoint me like all other Christians?

Her voice is a bit frantic. Although I can’t understand, I can sense that she actually *wants* to help, and it makes me feel a bit guilty for my tirade.

But after a few moments, her eyes dart, refusing to meet mine, and the anticipated betrayal left me satisfied.

She turns back to Josh and me after forcing a smile. “I’m afraid we can’t do that. If we were to help you, we’d have to help everyone. I’m so sorry boys! Do you want me to take you somewhere?”

“Nope! We’re fine! Thanks for nothing!”

“Are you su-”

I turn and stomp away.

“See! I told you, Josh! All Christians are fucking fakers! They don’t even believe in what they preach. Just a bunch of hypocritical assholes!”

Josh and I drunkenly wander the streets of Geneva as I continue my fuming rampage, now fueled by further evidence that all Christians suck, that all of them are hypocrites, that all of them just want your money and obedience while never actually helping you when it matters.

I’m such a schmuck for ever believing any of this crap.

And yet...

Disguised by anger, there’s a deep sadness. Sadness, because, underneath it all, I truly want to trust ... I truly want to believe ... But I am tired of getting let down ... I’m tired of getting my hopes up ... so tired ... tired of getting hurt ... tired of being betrayed ... by God ... by man...

Journey of Faith...

As the saying goes, “Life’s a bitch, and then you die.”

Death and hardship, pain and broken promises, stupid nine-to-five jobs that only give you two weeks of vacation, so you can escape that annoying guy named Carl who still hasn’t figured out how to *not* use the “Reply All” button, only for you to return to the life you’re trying to survive.

It sucks. It all sucks.

As my mind wallows in nihilism, Josh and I find ourselves on the edge of Lake Lemon, where hundreds of college students laugh to spite my pain, guzzling life, oblivious to its bitter aftertaste, while I sneer at the golden sun disappearing behind the Alps, its glow dancing on the water.

We need to find a place to stay. God didn’t come through. So we stumble toward a willow tree, thinking those drooping branches might offer some semblance of privacy.

When we pull back the leaves, we happen upon a convenient rug laid out as if it knew we were coming.

I look around, trying to see if there’s someone close it might belong to.

No one.

(But what exactly should I be looking for? A guy with a large Ikea bag who brings his carpet to the lakeshore on hot summer evenings?)

Huh ... odd...

Josh and I stretch out our sleeping bags on the misplaced rug and crawl in.

No cute pillow talk tonight. No cute prayers for miracles. We’re too exhausted. And not the good kind of exhaustion. The bad kind. The kind that comes from carrying *more* than forty-pound backpacks all over Geneva.

“Josh,” I say weakly.

“Yeah?” His voice is tired and annoyed.

“Can I put my arm around you?”

“Yeah.” His voice softens when he hears the desperation in my voice.

I pull myself close.

Normally, I’m insanely anxious when holding a man like this. I never want to look too gay, so I overcompensate and show no male affection. It’s safer that way.

But tonight, I don’t care. Tonight, I am too tired and too scared and too hurt. Tonight, I can’t add loneliness to the list of heavy things I’m carrying. That’s just too much. Far too much. And wondering where God is in this mess makes me feel a deep loneliness I had never experienced before.

Journey ... of ... Faith...

My eyes close, and I push out the thoughts and questions and accusations. They'll be there in the morning, greeting me with the day, that spiteful day.

I begin to drift as the Jäger carries me off, when...

Wake up!

The voice is in my head, and it comes with a tightening in my gut.

I gasp awake and sit up.

There, at the edge of the tree, is a shadow staring at me. It's frozen in motion, knowing it's been caught.

"Hey!"

The shadow runs away, becoming a person as it emerges from the curtain-like branches, streetlight illuminating his silhouette.

I lie back down, adding "fear for safety" to the list of things overwhelming me.

I'm never gonna get any sleep.

The voice in my head comes back.

If I could wake you once, could I not wake you again?

God? Jäger? Exhaustion?

Journey of Faith?

Is this God protecting me from a stranger? If it is, why didn't he get us a place to stay? Or convince that pastor to let us stay in the church? Or get me glasses that have the correct prescription? Or heal my eyes? Or heal my brother's leg? Does he deal in half-miracles? Does he only deliver kinda-sorta-but-not-really miracles?

If this is a Journey of Faith, it's fucking rocky.

I fall back asleep, comforted and yet annoyed by the voice in my head, when a few minutes later, I hear the voice again.

Wake up!

I immediately sit up and look behind me.

The shadow is back.

"Get lost!"

It runs away again, and I lay back down for the third time.

I slowly drift, till the thought hits me: "Fuck. We're totally sleeping on this guy's carpet."

About the Author

Brandon Flanery is an ex-pastor, ex-missionary, and ex-evangelical who writes about the tenuous intersection of faith and sexuality. He's conducted research on the consequences of beliefs and why people are leaving Christianity and is published with *The Scribe*, *Baptist News Global*, the University of Colorado, and the *Colorado Springs Indy* where he won first place for excellence in journalism with the Society of Professional Journalists. In addition to writing, he co-founded the LGBTQ+ Christian dating app—believer—and lives in Atlanta. Follow along at brandonflanery.com.