



BAPTISTLAND

A Memoir of Abuse, Betrayal,
and Transformation

CHRISTA BROWN

FOREWORD BY BOZ TCHIVIDJIAN

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THE FOURTH DEATH

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FOREWORD

I GREW UP believing that the church is supposed to be a refuge—a safe place. My years as a child sexual abuse prosecutor opened my eyes to the deeply painful truth that abuse is all too prevalent *inside* of the church. Tragically, it is not a refuge for many.

Over the following years, I started an organization whose primary purpose was to address abuse within the church, with the hope that one day it would truly become that refuge I had once believed it to be. A few years later, I found myself really struggling with the painful reality that the most horrific consequence of sexual abuse within the church was not its tarnished reputation or even the fact that it had turned so many people away from God. What increasingly horrified me about this evil reality were the decimated lives of countless individuals who had been abused by a “Christian” leader and then betrayed by the very institution they had hoped would be their greatest advocate.

These precious people are the beaten and bruised who lie on the side of life’s roadways having given up hope. Their stories understandably haunted me; however, I increasingly realized that their stories didn’t seem to haunt or even concern so many who called themselves Christians.

Eventually, I too began to lose hope. And then I met Christa Brown.

I first met Christa through her powerful and sobering life story found in the pages of her first book, *This Little Light*. The abuse perpetrated on her by a “trusted church youth leader” and the subsequent betrayal, marginalization, and eventual vilification of Christa by her church, the Texas Baptist Convention, and eventually the Southern Baptist Convention and beyond angered me, grieved me, and most importantly, prompted me to reach out and meet this hero over a decade ago. Since then, Christa has become a dear friend, teacher, and confidante.

Christa Brown was one of the first survivors I met that prevented me from losing hope. In fact, her tireless advocacy on behalf of abuse survivors within the Southern Baptist world inspires me and so many others on the front lines of advocacy work to keep pressing forward.

One thing I’ve learned in almost thirty years of advocacy work is that it truly takes a village to help the hurting and to work toward transforming the

church into the refuge it was always supposed to be. In many ways, I consider Christa Brown to be the glue that keeps this village together as we keep pressing forward.

Baptistland is a book that tells the rest of Christa's story. She dives deeper into the world of her dysfunctional childhood and the Christian fundamentalism and patriarchy that was the bedrock of her religious upbringing and early church life. We learn how that toxic culture stole her individuality, her voice, her agency, and in many ways, her life. It was only after Christa made the monumental decision to report the abuse and to expose those who protected her abuser that she finally began down the road of reclaiming what had been stolen from her.

Baptistland is the story of that journey and what happens in many religious communities when a woman steps forward and uses her voice, her agency, and her life to speak out to bring light to dark places. At first, the institutions ignored her. When that was impossible, they attempted to marginalize her. When they realized that Christa Brown is not one to be marginalized, they took private and public steps to vilify her. Needless to say, they failed.

I believe that Christa Brown would be the first to acknowledge that all of this has come at a significant emotional, physical, and spiritual cost. However, *Baptistland* is also a story of hope.

You can hear a voice of growing strength, especially as Christa emerges from Baptistland to become her own person in a career as a successful appellate attorney. And you can hear, especially today, a voice of gentleness, peace, and self-assuredness that has not lost any of its sharpness, as she has moved away from Baptistland, raised a family, and is now enjoying her grandchildren.

I did not really know where that voice came from, but now I know, and I dare say that Christa's example shows that such a voice can rise within anyone who needs to speak truth.

Christa Brown remains my hero, and I think she might become your hero by the time you've finished this beautiful book.

Boz Tchividjian
Attorney advocating for abuse survivors inside and
outside of courtrooms

AUTHOR'S NOTE

CLAUDE MONET PAINTED the same waterlily scenes over and over. Each time, the truth of the waterlilies appeared slightly different, depending on the light.

The truth of a person's trauma story is similar. It may appear slightly different with each telling, depending on the light in which it is captured.

I've done my best to tell the truth as I know it, as it lives in my body, mind, and spirit. But necessarily, like most memoirs, the book derives in large measure from my memory, and memory isn't perfect.

Many of the dialogues have been reconstructed according to my memory, and some have been edited, condensed, or paraphrased.

I've changed the names and identifying characteristics of many of the people in the book. But they are all real.

And if you're wondering about that blue tree on the cover, that's real too. As a kid, I wanted to slither out of my skin, to become invisible. But now, I've put my skin onto a book cover. So much that was so terrible was done to my body—to me—and the tattoo was my way of reclaiming my own self. This is an intimate story.

PROLOGUE

*When despair for the world grows in me . . .
I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light . . .*

—Wendell Berry

DAD TAUGHT ME to see patterns in the dark. On the rare nights when he wasn't working, he'd hold my hand and take me out into the yard where I would watch in wonder as he looked up into the darkness, extracted a pattern from the points of light, and then shaped that pattern into a picture. At first, feeling swallowed by the inky enormity overhead, I struggled to see what Dad saw. But over and over, he would drop to one knee, wrap an arm around my shoulder, and with his other arm outstretched, he'd point to each of the seven stars of the Big Dipper, and one by one, I would follow his line of sight out beyond his index finger to mentally connect the sparkling dots. Eventually, I managed to see it, and over time, I learned to spot the pattern all on my own. After that, I never lost it. The Big Dipper was always there waiting for me.

As Dad moved on to the Little Dipper, Orion, and the Milky Way, the patterns of the dark grew familiar, and together, we made wishes on shooting stars. Usually, it was just the two of us. I guess my sisters weren't interested. Or maybe they were afraid of the dark. So was I—and still am—but leaning up against Dad and wafting in the smell of his Old Spice, I felt safe.

After we moved to Farmers Branch, those magical nights ended. Maybe the big-city lights of neighboring Dallas made the sky too bright, or maybe Dad was just working too much overtime. But many years later, when I was out in Marfa, I looked up and saw the Milky Way stretched like a wide white ribbon across the sky, and I swear I suddenly caught a whiff of Old Spice. I felt the warmth of Dad's arm, and the stars seemed like old friends.

Whenever I think of Farmers Branch, a host of memories fills the air around me. Like stars on a West Texas night, they shine so bright that, eventually, I can hear the voices in the memories and see the patterns in the points of light.

It's not always easy. There is little that is linear in my memories. Time to me seems more circular and associative. Many of my memory fragments are a

chaotic mess, but I try to impose order on them anyway because how else could I talk about them? I navigate into narration, but really, the memories are more like stars in an endless night sky.

When you're raised in a "what happened didn't happen" sort of family, things aren't necessarily what they seem and the patterns aren't always apparent. Even the bare bones of figuring out what's true and what's not is fraught. So let me just tell you up front that at least two of my sisters, and maybe all three, would see family patterns differently from me. Their views would tell different stories, as though they were seeing the sky in some alternate universe. All I can do is tell you my *own* story and tell it from the vantage point I hold at this moment.

I died four times. Four times when the elemental structure of my being was flung into the dark void. This book is my attempt to make sense of those deaths. Rather than fleeing from that darkness, I have chosen to walk into it, following the threads of my memory through the labyrinth of my life—and my deaths—connecting the points of light as best I can. The labyrinth was long and arduous, but as each death rebirthed me into a new self, it ultimately led to a center of peace.

My first life ended when a Southern Baptist pastor took an unholy hankering to my young Lionette legs. Of course, I didn't know my life had ended. I was just a naive, far-too-trusting church girl. But everything my life had been before his hankering came screeching to a halt, and I was never a kid again. My second life ended when my lousy brother-in-law decided he had "married the wrong sister" and made a move on me. In some ways, that second death was sort of like the first, but maybe that's just the nature of death. There's a before and there's an after, but even though there's no blending of the two domains, it's only much later when you realize you're in a different place. My third life ended when I started talking about what that predatory preacher-man had done to me, and I was confronted with the truth that no one gave a flip, except for trying to shut me up. Stepping into that reality was like stepping into an alternate no-exit universe in which the Dantean layers just kept going deeper. It was a death so hellish that my very cells mutated in rebellion. Then, just a few days after Mom died, my fourth life ended when all three of my sisters stood in front of the credit union and decided to split the money without me—as though I never existed. They swore each other to secrecy, but since I refused to die quietly, their secrecy didn't succeed.

Of course, the devil is in the details. This is the story.

The First Death



1

The Good Days

*What we remember from childhood we remember forever—permanent
ghosts, stamped, inked, imprinted, eternally seen.*

—Cynthia Ozick

THAT FIRST SUMMER in Farmers Branch, tar bubbled up in the street like some sticky, stinky ooze from the underworld. Judy and I took turns riding our shared hand-me-down bike up and down the block, popping tar bubbles with the tires. Our rules were that we had to keep pedaling forward and we couldn't put a foot down. So we would twist and turn the handlebars, trying to stay upright while we followed the black lines that filled the asphalt's cracks in chaotic patterns. At the end of each turn, we would report back on how many tar bubbles we had popped. Judy always won.

Of course, it was really the Texas heat that always won. No matter how many tar bubbles we popped, more kept boiling up. Dad hadn't yet put the window units in, and Mom could hardly bear the heat. She had shut all the blinds to block the sun and was trying to get some unpacking done, but every time we stepped in the kitchen for Kool-Aid, she'd be sitting with some iced tea and a folded paper fan. The air inside our west-facing house was flat-out stupefying. So we'd hustle back outside just as fast as we could. Besides, we knew it was better to stay out of Mom's way.

I wasn't happy about the move, but still, I'd seen one good thing right away. Dad had found us a house right across the street from a school, and as soon as we pulled into town and turned a corner around the school's back side, Mom

pointed out that it was where I would go for fifth grade in the fall: Valwood Elementary. It was a long, low, flat building.

No stairs. That was the first thought I remember having in Farmers Branch as we drove past the back side of the school on the last couple blocks of our road trip from Wichita. I stared at the building even as Mom claimed victory on the game we'd been playing. Ever since we'd crossed the Texas border, she'd been egging me on to guess the name of our new street. "Think about faraway places," she'd said, her arm thrown over the back of the front seat. So, while staring at her hand as she picked at the skin around her thumbnail, I'd guessed names like "Paris Lane" and "Taj Mahal Boulevard."

"Think about the last report you did," she'd hinted. It was a school project Mom had helped me with, clipping pictures of Egypt from old copies of *National Geographic* that we got at the thrift store. "Camel Street? Nile Way? Red Sea Road?" With every guess I tossed, Mom just smiled like the Sphinx. Somehow, I never guessed Pyramid Drive.

"You see, I told you you'd like it," she exclaimed, pointing to the street sign. But I was still fixated on the school. *No stairs.*

To this day, I can hear the cackle that Judy would let loose whenever she managed to shove me on the stairs in that two-story schoolhouse in Wichita. I was always so afraid I might tumble all the way down, yet I could never manage to keep an eye out for Judy and look where I was going at the same time. So I just held my breath and held the rail. Not that it ever made any difference. If Judy was in the mood for a laugh, she would find me. That was pretty much the core of our relationship.

In Wichita, we had always been in the same school, and even the same classroom for a couple years. That was because I'd been placed in an experimental program which kept me at the same grade level but put me, and a half-dozen other kids, in a classroom with kids a year older. It meant I wound up in the same classroom with Judy.

That was the downside of being in the "gifted" program—no escape from Judy. The upside was that, for those early years in Wichita, the program kept me with the same small group of friends, and they got used to me. For a kid with a facial scar and a speech impediment, that continuity of friendships was invaluable.

Things changed in Farmers Branch. Not only would I never again be in the same classroom with Judy, but for a while, I wouldn't even be in the same

building with her. Sixth graders went to junior high in Texas, which meant Judy would be at a different school. So she wouldn't be lurking around corners or shoving me against walls at *my* school. She simply wouldn't be there.

Another good thing about the move was that Mom decided to stop dressing Judy and me in look-alike clothes. I figure I'd better tell you the good things like this right away, because things went downhill fast in Farmers Branch, and once I start telling the bad things, I might forget the rest. I don't want to do that.

It was one of the few ways that Judy and I were alike. We both hated those matchy-matchy outfits Mom made us wear. She sewed them herself, and she always beamed with pride when people told her how cute we looked. But whenever I see old photos of Judy and me in our look-alike short sets with the rick-racked crop tops, what I see is how Judy is glowering at the camera, looking like she's ready to punch someone. She probably did just as soon as the picture was taken. That someone was probably me.

Occasionally, Judy would punch my younger sister, Nancy, but it was rare. Mom tended to protect Nancy, and Judy was simply more habituated to tormenting me. My oldest sister, Rita, was above the fray and untouchable. So I was the one on whom Judy dissipated her rage.

Sometimes I wonder if Judy was just born mad. Mom occasionally talked about what a difficult baby she'd been. When she got old enough to pull herself up, she would stand in her crib screaming while she held the rail and yanked herself back and forth, banging her head over and over until she exhausted herself.

"I wasn't going to give in to that," said Mom. "She just had to learn."

Whenever Mom recounted this, she seemed to have a measure of pride in her voice, as though she had won some battle by not letting Judy get the best of her. She would laugh at how hardheaded Judy was, extending her arms and bending her elbows back and forth to mimic how Judy would bang her head in her crib. I always laughed along and wished that I myself could win some battles with Judy. But for me, there was never anything to do but curl up in a ball and wait for my sister's rage to pass.

Nowadays, I try to keep that image of Judy in my mind—a child so desperate for attention that, incessantly and futilely, she kept banging her head against her crib. It's an image that helps to soften all the ugliness that came later. Besides, I figure I probably had something to do with Judy's deprivation. My

birth came just one year after hers, and with my medical issues, I imagine I kept Mom busy.

My sisters and I were all born in Texas—I doubt that Dad would have had it any other way—but we moved to Kansas when I was barely three. Our house in Wichita had five huge cottonwood trees at the back of the lot where Judy and I caught lightning bugs on summer nights, and during the days, we'd sit there in the sandpile, conjuring schemes for getting rich off the tiny fluffs of "cotton" shed from the trees. We planned everything we'd do with the money we'd make from bunching all the little fluff bits together and selling them. After we'd exhausted our dreams for an extravagant future, Judy would get up and start singing "Waltzing Matilda." She'd throw her head back, thrust her chest to the sky, and weave circles in the grass, singing at the top of her lungs. I'd get up and join her, and we'd hold hands and twirl round and round, faster and faster, until finally we dropped, dizzy and exhausted. To this day, whenever I see cottonwood fluffs in the air, I hear "Waltzing Matilda" in my mind.

As far back as my memories go, there was always at least Judy to contend with—her pinching, punching, shoving, pushing, arm-twisting, hair-pulling, clawing, kicking, hitting, and terrifying tickling. She couldn't tolerate frustration. If she didn't get what she wanted, which was often, she threw a fit, and frequently her fits centered on lashing out at me. Heck, even my Woody Woodpecker coloring book wasn't safe from Judy. Just two days after Santa brought it to me, she tore it apart. No reason at all. That's just how she was.

I cried about that coloring book. I suppose that's why Judy destroyed it—because she could see how much I loved it. But with a raised palm, Mom just said, "If you keep on crying, I'll give you something to *really* cry about."

So, I learned there was never any point in complaining to Mom about Judy's torments. "Just don't rile her up," she'd say. Or worse, she'd make us *both* apologize. "Tell your sister you're sorry," she'd demand, and even though I never could figure out what I was supposed to be sorry for, I knew I had to do it. Then, after Judy and I had each taken our turn at phony contrition, Mom would insist we hug one another, and almost always, Judy would be giving me a good hard pinch where Mom couldn't see.

Up until I was about six, I shared a trundle bed with Judy in a room with animal print wallpaper. Every night, after Mom was through reading to us—*Five Little Peppers* was my favorite—we said our prayers:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Judy recited it as fast as she could, but I prayed it earnestly, terrified of the possible truth of it and always knowing that if I didn't wake, it would be because Judy had finally held the pillow over my face for too long. After my prayers, I would turn to whisper a second plea to the animals on the wall. They were the ones I counted on to protect me in my sleep.

Every day, from the moment I awakened, I was always scanning the air for danger. Whenever one of Judy's rampages started brewing, if I could spot it soon enough, I would crawl into the bottom of the pantry and tuck myself behind the bags of beans and rice. There, I would slow my breath and imagine myself invisible, suppressing my own life force so Judy wouldn't find me.

Eventually, when I got too big and couldn't cram myself into the pantry, I had to find other places and use other tactics. It was high-stakes hide-and-seek, and whenever I failed, the cost was painful. Hiding under the bed was fast but seldom worked; Judy would just drag me out. Inside the laundry hamper was better, but I needed a head start because it took a while to get into it. Once, I just flat-out locked her out of the house.

We were playing kickball in the backyard, and I'd sent the ball straight into a rose bush. Judy ran to retrieve it, and while she stood trying to hold her finger over the hole left by a thorn, I heard her low growl: "I'm gonna kill you." I turned and ran for the house. Judy was always way faster than me, but that was one time when I got enough of a head start. I locked the door behind me just as Judy flung her fists against the wood. She pounded and kicked at the door, and screamed at me to open it, but I didn't.

I inched back the curtain on the utility room's window and peeked at her face. She was transformed. A monster.

"I'm gonna kill you," she shouted, spewing spit on the window.

I hovered there behind the door, trying to decide what to do. Judy's murderous rage showed no sign of abating, so I went to my room and took out my New Testament—the little white one that Brother Morgan had given me when I got baptized—got on my knees, and began to pray. Since I was "saved" by then, I must have been at least seven, maybe a little older. "The Lord is my shepherd, I

shall not want.” While I held the holy book in my hands and pleaded with God to protect me, I recited the prayer I’d learned in Sunday school.

After a small eternity of recitation and prayer, I heard Mom’s car in the driveway. Knowing she’d be mad if she saw that I’d locked Judy out, I ran to the back door, quietly turned open the lock, and scurried back to the bedroom. Clutching the New Testament to my chest like some magic amulet, I heard Judy open the back door just as Mom came in the front door. “Thank you,” I whispered.



SO, IT’S NOT as if my life in Wichita was ever safe. But it was normal and predictable. Even the “duck and cover” drills at school seemed normal, although those images of nuclear bombs always terrified me, and even as a kid, I never could understand how my school desk would protect me against *that*. But “duck and cover” was what our teacher said we should do, so I did.

Our kickball games caused trouble more than once. When one of us accidentally kicked the ball into the backyard of our fearsome neighbor, Mrs. Smith, we couldn’t figure out what to do. Whenever we walked to our friends’ house, two doors down, we’d balance on the curb to avoid touching Mrs. Smith’s grass and incurring her wrath. But Judy mustered up the courage to knock on her door, and when no one answered, we went around to the gate. It was locked, but Judy climbed over, found the ball, tossed it to me, and then started climbing back over the gate. Just when she was at the top, Mrs. Smith’s face suddenly appeared in the garage window right next to the gate, and she was screaming bloody murder. Startled, Judy fell from the gate. She hit the pavement hard but scrambled right up, and we both hightailed it home.

By then, Mom was back, so we figured we were in trouble. But instead of yelling at us, when Mom saw how scraped up Judy was, she marched right over to Mrs. Smith’s house, knocked on her door, and let loose a piece of her mind. We could hear Mom all the way from our own porch. “They’re just kids! How dare you terrify them that way? She could’ve broken her skull!” It felt good to hear Mom sticking up for us.

On weekends, Mom would sometimes whip us up piles of pancakes, as many as we wanted, shaping them into elephants, camels, and giraffes. It was magical. My heart would skip a beat as soon as I saw her take the Aunt Jemima syrup from the pantry. Sometimes, while we ate our zoo-animal pancakes, Dad

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NAMED AS ONE of the “top 10 religion newsmakers” of 2022, Christa Brown has persisted for two decades in working to peel back the truth about clergy sex abuse and cover-ups in the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. As one of the first to go public with substantiated child molestation allegations against a Baptist minister—and documentation that others knew—she has consistently demanded reforms to make other kids and congregants safer. She’s the author of *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang*, a retired appellate attorney, a mom, a grandma, and lives with her husband in Colorado. Learn more at christabrown.me.

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