was his first born son. The oldest of five children, I always felt a special bond with my father. Just like me, his pale skin was covered with freckles. He was an athlete and a gentleman. His average height and slender body never hinted to his incredible strength. He had a thick golden mustache that gave him the appearance of an older, more distinguished man. When I was small he lifted me high above his head and walked with me on his shoulders. He always wore a ball cap, and when he was in a joking mood, I enjoyed teasing him by pulling off his hat and polishing the bald spot that lay beneath. When I performed solos in school concerts, scored goals in soccer, or hit a home run, my father’s voice was heard loud and strong, “That’s my son!”

Before the little league games, school plays, and thinning hair, my father freely pursued his dream. He was intent on becoming a police detective just like Columbo or Kojak. He earned a criminal justice degree from Green River College and studied law at the University of Washington. When he was called by the Toppenish Police Department to protect and serve, he trained at the Seattle Police Academy where he graduated at the top of his class. At the same time I was learning to talk, my father was successfully tracking down and locking up bad guys. His white squad car, shiny silver badge, and sharp blue uniform made him extraordinarily proud. He worked very hard, but it wasn’t long before it became clear to him that his family could not survive on a patrolman’s salary.

By the time I learned to ride a bike, I had my own bedroom and a big backyard. The white squad car my father used to drive had been replaced by a big white painters van with stacks of ladders on the top. When he returned home each night his face was tired and his eyes dark. He rarely took the time to protect himself from the paint he sprayed or the chemicals he used to do his job. His odor was strong like the spray of a rattle can. The chemicals that soaked in through his skin during the day, slowly made their way back out of his body and into the air surrounding him.

He worked relentlessly. When his fa-
tigue forced him home, I was always there waiting, rushing to hug him as he walked through the door. When he sat to rest his aching feet, I untied his brown leather boots. First the right side, hook around hook, loosening the laces, then the left the same way. With all my might I'd pull and pull until finally his heavy footwear sent me flying backwards onto the floor. After tucking the long brown laces into the boot tops I would gather the pair and place it neatly in the closet. Even when fatigued, he was strong on his feet. After working eighteen hours a day during the week, he could still run a marathon over the weekend. Arrogant in character, but humble before his Heavenly Father, I often found him in prayer, or reading from the *Pearl of Great Price*. I think he found solace in this enterprise. A book of scriptures was always close by, and faith nearer him still.

Work never ended for the owner of the company. As his business grew, we saw him less and less often. In the night while I slept, he entered through the big green front door, walked silently across the living room, down the hall, and into his room to sleep. The newly formed corporation was making him large amounts of money, more money than he knew what to do with. The man who remained rarely ate at our dinner table, and was rarely addressed. When I was given the chance to speak to him during our meal about trouble on the playground, or a difficulty with fractions, his response was often short and apathetic, "I'm eating."

He had little time to spend with his family, and even less time to contribute to my upbringing or correction of my undesirable behavior. Corporal punishment seemed to be the best course of action, as it required little time and produced immediate results. My father's belt drawer lay at the bottom of an old wooden dresser downstairs at the end of the hall. The sound it made when opened terrified me. When my father was stressed, his temper was up, or his patience was short, I could hear that drawer open no matter what my hiding place. Through walls, behind doors, or under beds, the sound of the belt drawer was a signal that things were about to turn awful. A variety of straps lay nestled in the confines of that wooden container. Many times, I witnessed his rough hands selecting the proper tool for the job. I silently disagreed when he told me, "I do this because I love you," or "Trust me, this hurts me more than it does you," but I recognized his authority, and deferred to his wisdom. Deep red welts and carefully concealed bruises were the most effective way to correct my disrespectful behavior.

It was very late. For a short time, alone in my bed, a terror swept over me like a fog. The nightmare left the touch of its claws in my stomach and its icy breath on my face. The house was dark and silent. The dim light from the hall beckoned, pointing the way to comfort
and protection. I rushed down the stairs nearly tumbling as my stocking feet slipped on the edge of each carpeted step. Rounding the corner another fear gripped my already trembling body. Salvation rest at the end of the hall, strong and brave, yet unpredictable and intimidating.

He had been working very hard lately, sleeping only a few hours a night. As I turned the corner towards my father’s bedroom, I could smell the familiar chemical odor drifting in the still air. My emotions wild and uncontrolled, I began to feel guilt at my weakness. I stood in the hallway consumed by fear, my heart racing.

“Daddy,” I spoke quivering, “I’m really scared, can I sleep with you?” Loud, dangerous respiration broke the silence. The snort of half snores and labored breath reverberated out of the bedroom as he growled, “go to bed!” My body jumped, startled by the angry tone.

“But I’m really scared” the knot in my throat growing with every spoken word. “Please...I’ll sleep on the floor? I won’t make any noise I promise.” His body rolled towards me, “Dammit,” he yelled rising from his bed.

The fear of my phantasmagoric creature had now been replaced by the dissonance of the belt drawer. I turned to escape, saying “It’s ok, It’s ok, I’m alright now, you can go back to sleep.” Out of darkness emerged studded leather, the buckle gleaming in the pale light. “Please daddy, NO!” I cried out pleading. Turning quickly to escape, I tripped over my feet, his shadow falling over me.

“NO?” he threatened, “You don’t tell me NO!”

The air became thick with the sound of my whimpering tones. Pain seized my body as the belt hit my legs, then my back, moving as I struggled to break free of his hold. Then with a violent swing, there were stars, a brilliant floating manifestation, glimmering in my sight.

“Get out of my house!” my father screamed. I grabbed onto his wrist, desperately clinging to prevent him from throwing me out into the dark. I felt the cold air on my back as he scraped me off onto the steps, closing the big green door behind him. The cold pavement beneath my knees penetrated my thin blue and white striped pajamas. My face burned with cold air and tears. I placed my hands on the door, being careful not to scratch or pound too loudly.

“I’m sorry daddy,” I begged, “I’m sorry.” Blood dripped from my nose spawning a pattern of crimson polka dots that fell silently, sprinkling the cold concrete steps beneath my feet. “Please.”

Soon I heard a muffled commotion, the sound of voices in the living room. The door opened and my father rushed past nearly tripping over me on the steps. A haze of guilt and fear fell over me. My father was leaving and it was my fault. My mother’s face twisted at the sight of me. An engine started with a roar and the white panel van rolled away from under the street light. My mother took me into her arms and led me into the house. Soon I was lying in my parents’ bed, the surface of the covers still warm from my father’s body. His absence closed over my mind as my mother cleaned my hands and face of dried blood, and placed me
in clean pajamas.

Days later, my father returned from his surrogate home at the Super 8. His spirits were high, his attitude light and he nudged me a little in jest to assure me that the incident was all just a silly mistake. Everything was right again.

Later when the dark circle appeared under my eye, we joked together about how I would conceal the truth.

"While running in the living room I tripped, hitting my face on the doorknob on the front door?" I said.

My father smiled. "My son," he enunciated in a prideful cadence, hugging me a little, tickling me from the side, "My first born son."

**Epilogue**

My father's unpredictable behavior terrorized me throughout most of my childhood. His excessive exposure to toxic chemicals associated with his work as an "electro-static" painter, produced aggressive behavior and episodes of chemically induced psychosis. Unaware he was being poisoned by his occupation, he continued in this profession until the early nineties when he was told by a physician that if he continued painting, he would be dead within six months. For years he struggled with medical issues including "multiple chemical sensitivity" (MCS), a condition caused by his long-term exposure to paints and solvents.

From the first day that my father ended his exposure to paint chemicals, his demeanor changed. He was patient, sensitive, and kind. He never raised his hand in anger, and went to great lengths to ensure that all his children were healthy and happy. My three younger brothers never had to meet the angry and intimidating man from my early childhood.

In the nineties, several papers were released by the medical community describing the psychological and physiological damages suffered by workers in the commercial and industrial painting industries. As a result, workers today are better educated. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) ensure that the employers provide employees with personal protective equipment, and make certain they know how to use it.