

LOVE, DAD

CONFESSIONS OF AN
ANXIOUS FATHER

Laurie Steed



FREMANTLE PRESS

Contents

Expecting	9
-----------------	---

BIRTH

It's Real, Love	12
Disquiet	22
After The Fall	32
Passenger	38
Reborn	43

TEETHING

New Kid	50
Home Life	57
Imperfect	63
Be Here Now	66
Fleeting	71
Brothers	77

DEPARTURE

A Simple Truth	84
Passing Time	94
It's Never Too Late	101
Role Play	106

CONNECTION

The Right Thing	112
Like Stones	120
The Light	126
You Belong Here	132

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Teambuilding	140
Safety and Security	146
Two Hands	153
Like Riding a Bike	158
Panic	162
Cooperation	171

HOLDING ON

Sanctuary	178
Faltering	186
Suburban Kings	197
We Belong Here	204
Music	210

LETTING GO

Red Sun	218
Last Time	225
Tiny, Fragile Hearts	232
Decadence	242
Trick Shot	250
Homecoming	259
The Gift	267
Inheritance	275
Accepting	283

EXPECTING

This is not the book I set out to write.

I was going to write a memoir about a strong, resilient, and triumphant man and father – only doing that would have denied what it means to be an active, present parent. I could have said I was killing it, barely raising a sweat, but doing this would have enforced the idea that to be a man means you never have to say, ‘I’m struggling’.

That tough, silent kind of manliness was sold hard to us as boys. When it came time for me to be a man, I thought ‘sorted’, because I already had my driver’s licence, a car and a set of dumbbells. Soon enough, it was time to graduate from high school. I smeared Vegemite along the handrails on muck-up day, a rite of passage and inspired piece of petty vandalism to hide the fact that I was already lost before I’d walked that sloping driveway and out the gates that final time.

From then on, I worked mostly menial jobs, somehow successfully completed three degrees around those jobs, and during the fourth, became a father. I thought I’d built my warrior-self up perfectly in the preceding years. Instead, I had fashioned an approximation of what I thought a man was supposed to be; an ‘Okay Laurie’ to assuage fears, concerns, or panic on the back of becoming a dad.

She’ll be right. I mean, it can’t be that hard, can it?

It *can* be that hard. It can be really hard if things cascade, as

if water were falling down around you. You go to take a breath but catch only a mouthful of water, barely knowing how this happened, or what, if anything, you can do to stop the flow.

Anxiety is a funny thing. It freaks you out, and then suddenly, and often without warning, the fear subsides. It comes back, of course, intensely sometimes, and yet I know that as a person living with anxiety, I can still be the best dad for my kids. I know that even in the midst of a storm, I'll find needed ways in which to connect with and validate their thoughts and feelings.

Working with my anxiety is like staring into the abyss. I'm now also committed to jumping into that chasm, to find out how it feels when I find a soft landing, or I'm caught by outstretched arms. It's deeply heartening to be held in such a space. I also know I won't always be caught, and so there's risk in writing these words. Still, I know that's where this starts for me; that in sharing my world there's the hope that others will relate to my story, and my intermittent feelings of 'not-enoughness'.

There are very few concrete truths about parenting that I can pass on without fear that they are at best simplistic, and at worst, grossly misleading. Instead, this book is the story of my slow (sometimes faltering) realisation that – as I continue on the life-changing and wondrous journey of parenthood – there is no right way to do any of this other than what works for me, and what frees me up to live a life in which I am my most authentic self.

I hope it helps you too.

BIRTH

It's Real, Love

I was born in Hamilton (Kirikiriroa), an inland city in the North Island of New Zealand (Aotearoa) and raised in a family of four kids. In my younger years, we spent most weekends in absurdly lush, cow-patted greenery, read *Footrot Flats* comics and argued whether 'One Step Ahead' was a better song than 'Dirty Creature'

I can't say I was the runt of the litter – I'm more stocky and a foot taller than any of them – however, I was the youngest. From early on, I was an epilogue to a family that already felt formed, on account of two older, more-established siblings, and then a third, who arrived soon after I was born.

Trent was adopted and brought into the family – and my bedroom – within the first three months of my life. Dad was a doctor at the time, doing the daily rounds at Waikato Hospital and had seen a boy on the wards. That boy, Trent, had been brought in because his mother was no longer able to care for him. My parents felt great empathy for the kid who at this stage had spent the first two and a half years of his life in hospital. Trent had health difficulties too, asthma and severe bronchitis, and the consensus was he wouldn't live past the age of three. Indeed, they would only let him be fostered with a doctor if he were to leave the hospital at all, such were his ongoing health concerns.

Mum and Dad made a decision that for however long Trent was around he would have a family to call his own. Looking back, I see how profoundly their generous decision to adopt my brother changed my own experience of childhood. As a brother, and a younger brother at that, I very much felt I existed alongside and in competition with Trent, and at times he received the attention I might otherwise have had, despite me at some point realising that the attention he'd received was mostly for the times he caused them concern rather than joy.

By 1986, when I was nine years old, my dad got a job opportunity in Perth, so the family moved from New Zealand to Australia, as my mum, dad, Luke and Eve had done a decade earlier when they moved from the United Kingdom to New Zealand.

That previous trip had led to some of the best years of their lives; this time around, Mum and Dad split up soon after our arrival in Western Australia.

There's not much to say about the divorce. Both Mum and Dad have talked to me about it, with each filling gaps in the other one's story. Watching it from the outside, it seemed at first strange, and then upsetting, and then just *done*. It felt a bit like looking at a building that was once a house but is now just a pile of bricks.

We got through it. I don't remember talking much about things with Luke and Eve but humour became the go-to for me and Trent. We created funny if unkind impressions of our parents' new partners to cope with just how much we missed the way things used to be.

Once we hit adolescence, we found unhelpful ways to deal with our hurt. Mine were less disruptive than Trent's, and I completed high school and immediately moved on to university. Trent dropped out of school and into a series of jobs, with those years dotted with time in prison and rehabilitation programs.

As I moved into adulthood, I realised I had taken on Mum and Dad's pact without thinking about it; that I, like them, would be there for my brother, sharing the load and the duty of care, even after the other siblings had all cut ties with their too-troubled brother.

I'd like to say being my brother's keeper never greatly affected me; by the time I hit my twenties, however, it was just another thing that was pulling me down. As therapy would soon show me, there was also more to discover.

I started going to counselling in 2002, just after my twenty-fifth birthday. I thought I was doing it to help my girlfriend, as she was due to go on antidepressants for the first time. It didn't take long, though, before we moved on to how I was travelling in my life and my relationships.

When I started therapy, I had no emotional literacy or self-awareness. Really, I sought psychology as an overweight person might seek a gym; it was a way to make the unmanageable more manageable, never really appreciating it might also greatly improve my mental health and give me a better outlook on life.

In the years leading up to 2007, when I met Annaya – my wife-to-be and herself a clinical psychologist – my counsellor

and I discussed how certain key incidents, most notably how my parents' divorce and my friend Jeremy's suicide when I was nineteen, had shaped my view of the world.

No one had helped me grieve the death of my friend. My mates didn't check in much in the aftermath, and I'll admit, I didn't check in much on them either. No pamphlets arrived, and no people came up, and said, 'Hey, mate, I hear you lost your friend. Are you okay?'

With that in mind, those conversations with my counsellor were immensely liberating. I'd not known how much my friend's death had turned me into a loner, how I'd presumed no one would ever understand my trauma, and how very afraid I was of loving someone as much as I had loved Jeremy.

We didn't talk too much about those years before things came to a head, when I was out of home at seventeen, moving from place to place, searching for something that felt stable and supportive, but mostly hamstrung by my friendship group being a roving three-man party forever looking for a place to kick-off, carry on or crash for the night. In the years after Jeremy died, I first spent time living in Scotland, and then, once back in Australia, began my first long-term relationships, which fell apart predominantly because I did not yet feel safe to be so reliant on another human being.

I eventually made inroads in this area with my psychologist and in time was ready to start a new relationship. Once I met Annaya, and after she had moved to Melbourne from Perth, I began working with a new psychologist. Almost immediately, Daniel could spot when I was genuinely sharing and when

I was performing, deflecting or people-pleasing. We trod water for a while: my thoughts, opinions and background, and then in time we moved on to my parents and their divorce.

‘It doesn’t affect you?’

‘Not really. It was a long time ago. And anyway, they didn’t love each other.’

‘You really believe that?’

‘They would have stayed together. They could have made it work if they had cared enough to do it.’

He paused, waiting.

‘Don’t,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘I’m serious, don’t do that. I know what you’re doing.’

Again, he paused. ‘What am I doing?’

‘Can we not talk about this anymore?’

‘Okay. Perhaps we’ll come back to it.’

Things went on like this for months, with me engaged to Annaya – sharing coffees, movies and dinner dates on the streets of Camberwell, in Melbourne’s east – while inside I felt the fear take over, telling me it would be better if I walked away.

And then one day, my fears seemed to have won. I walked into my psychologist’s office. I told him my marriage wasn’t going to work, the same way none of my relationships had worked. The way my mum and dad were never going to work.

‘Never? They worked for seventeen years, and four kids, right?’

I paused. ‘They said they loved each other.’

‘They did,’ said Daniel.

‘Then why did they split up?’

He turned the question back on me. ‘You know, don’t you. You just don’t want to admit it.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Yes, you do. You know why.’ He paused. ‘It just happened because sometimes, things just happen, and all the thinking in the world won’t put your family back together.’ He watched me for a while, irritated. ‘So you’re going to quit?’

I nodded.

‘See, here’s the thing,’ he said. ‘If you give up, the way your parents “gave up”, and the way you gave up those other times, then it wins. Not the fear, or your anxiety. But the pain, and all that suffering. You let it win because you’re not willing to take the risk.’

He waited. Passed me a box of tissues and waited some more. Not happy or particularly impressed with his realisation, but aware that I needed to be challenged before it was too late.

In December 2010, Annaya and I fly back to Boorloo (Perth) for our wedding, staying at her parents’ house. It’s an anxious trip and not just because we’re getting married. As with my dad, who suffered his first heart attack in 2005, Annaya’s father has been in and out of hospital with heart problems in the years prior. The related anxiety in coping with her father’s fragility is taking its toll on Annaya, especially because we are living on the other side of the country.

I have my own strained relationship with Boorloo. It’s not so much the city that’s the problem. It’s more that my parents

split up the moment we arrived. Their divorce and its subsequent fallout were simultaneously both a distressingly abrupt ending and one hell of an opening chapter. So, it's not all that surprising when, I turn to Annaya, having made it back to Perth, and say, 'I know, it's great to be back home and all, but if we end up living here, please shoot me.'

'It will pass,' says Annaya in her most soothing clin-psych voice.

It will come back, I think, because it always does.

On the day before my wedding, I drive to my father's house in York, Western Australia, a wheatbelt town where the powerlines drape from house to house and bark hangs off trees, dangling and dancing in the wind. My brother Trent's there too. Sharing this moment with the two of them feels like a particularly big deal. Marriage to me had always been a pipedream, and yet we're here on the precipice of the one day I could never fully picture.

Even so, it's not until we're driving to the wedding venue, playing 'You've Got the Love' by Florence + the Machine, that it hits me – that this time, I've conquered the mountain.

We reach the accommodation, a sleepy resort away in the Swan Valley, get dressed, and then it's time to drive over to the wedding venue. From there I have some nervous conversations with friends and family, as I wait for my soon-to-be wife to arrive.

Once the music begins and she walks into view, I see only Annaya. She's dressed in white, olive skin, petite, angelic and smiling back at me. Through the readings and our vows,

I can't look away, and in that moment, all my worries and fears disappear.

My vows are wordy, awkward. I am trying to say *I trust you and I love you and I cannot believe that I am here with you, now, and I will always be with you from this moment on.*

Holding her hand, as we lead into the 'I do', I see all I've ever done was leading me to her. That I'd been waiting for her. That I was terrified she would never come. That thirty years is but a blip once your true love arrives. That I would live another life just for her to kiss me, hold me close and say, 'I love you.'

And so we dance our bridal waltz to 'Real Love' by Regina Spektor. And on it stretches, that first night, and I don't know if I have touched a person's face or hand so often in the course of an evening to be sure that she, and this, is real.

Soon after we're married, my internal narrative changes from *Mate, don't mess this up to I think, if I open up and continue to talk with her then we are going to be okay.* It's the first time in my life I've had this thought. In my earlier relationships, the message so often seemed to be *It's just a shame that this could never work out.*

With Annaya, a couple of challenges led to greater connection between us. Being in a long-distance relationship for a year and a half meant talking a lot, and more importantly, missing each other like crazy. I remember the Skype calls from those first two years, wanting only to reach through the screen to be able to touch her. Those video calls gave us tiny moments of respite, whether it was making her laugh, or us sharing a

tough time, until the day she came to Melbourne to live while I completed my degree.

Which is not to say *life* became easier after that. It's more that for the first time in any of my relationships, we had two people on the same team. In the past, either me or my partner had issues that slowed us or otherwise got in the way of clear communication. In Annaya's eyes, I saw none of that. We had both travelled through various life challenges, were introduced to each other by a mutual friend with a huge heart and a way of knowing things one can't otherwise possibly know. Working outside of logic or grand plans, she simply put us in the same place to see what might happen. And in time, we made a life, and found much love on the leaf-strewn streets of Melbourne's inner suburbs.

And then, with my Master of Editing and Publishing completed, it was time to return to Perth, only this time with Annaya – two people in no hurry to leave the relationship or in any way shirk our duty to us, and to our future.

I move into her flat in a gated apartment complex in Joondalup, a satellite city of Perth. With our boxes hauled up two flights of stairs and our furniture in place, I wonder if I might be *that* kind of man after all: one more willing to let go of the past, to build a future, and no longer so scared of stepping into the unknown.

I start my PhD in Creative Writing later that year. I am quietly confident that the book I'm writing will be the making of me. I've also made a concrete decision to solely prioritise

my writing throughout these next three years. It's a promise to myself of sorts; a reward for those hard years working low-level jobs while in pursuit of a literary career.

Still, none of matters when halfway into that PhD, Annaya wakes me up, mid-nap.

She's holding a test and, judging from the lines on its indicator, we have passed with flying colours.