

Second Chances

A Christian Gen X What-If Novel

By

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

It was a clear, cool night when forty-seven-year-old Nathan Brooks turned off his truck with “*Yesterday*” by The Beatles still playing softly on the radio. He finally stepped out of the cab of his eighteen-wheeler freight truck after spending six hours straight on the road without stopping. Due to the Pandemic, the roads were mostly void of anyone but truckers, so he wasn’t stressed by all the nutty drivers on the road. The absence of traffic was almost comforting. His only company was the hum of the tires on the pavement and the quiet sound of the wind against his truck.

The gas station was just off the interstate, and the property was lit up brightly. The neon lights flickered in the night air, offering an odd sense of relief, like a time capsule from the past, when everything was simpler. Nathan could feel the weight of the night on his bones, but it wasn’t the bad kind of weight. It was the weight of exhaustion, the kind you get from long hours on the road.

Nathan’s first priority was to visit the restroom, then refill the truck’s gas tank, and finally, refill his own gas tank with a Coke and something to eat before calling it a night. He gripped the familiar, cool metal of the building’s door handle, a small reminder of how routine the world felt, even in times like these. Inside, the place was quiet, a low hum from the old refrigerator in the corner where the snacks were kept. A “classic” song softly played over the speakers of the gas station, “*Back in Time*” by Huey Lewis and the News, which was a song that felt like it was being played just for him.

After finishing in the restroom, Nathan walked over to the counter where the pepperoni pizza was kept under a heat lamp. How long the pizza had been warming up under there, he was afraid to ask, but he ordered two slices anyway, and a Coke. With his food in hand, he found a table in the corner and sat down. The warm, greasy slices of the pizza filled the small gap in his hunger. As he ate, he pulled out his phone and checked his email and scrolled through messages without much thought. When he finished, he opened YouTube and clicked on the video shorts, which kept displaying Gen X-related content. Watching the clips, he felt a mix of nostalgia, sadness, and loneliness. His childhood in the 1980s seemed like it belonged to someone else now. Life was

simpler back then. No social media, no cell phones, just a landline at home, and a sense of freedom that came with it. The days when you could leave the house and not worry about where your kids were or how to stay connected. In those days, if you missed something, it was okay, and no one really thought twice about it.

Nathan wasn't really into Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, and he hated cell phones. They always felt like a leash, keeping him connected to everyone, all the time, instead of allowing him to just *be*. He used to have a landline that stayed in one spot, a quiet space where he could unplug from the world and find his thoughts. Now, everything was always connected. It irritated him, and that was one of the main reasons he was a truck driver. It allowed him to avoid responsibilities of being married, having kids, and owning a home. The life he had was easy because it kept him distant from all the complexities of "adulthood."

A deep sadness welled up inside him as he thought about his own life choices. *What if I could have fixed things?* There were moments in his past that he'd like to change. Like when his parents moved him and the family away to another state in the middle of sixth grade. That was a turning point, especially in his social life, and he resented his parents for making that decision, even if they thought they did it with good intentions.

He remembered how his mom had always seemed anxious, overwhelmed by things no one else noticed. She would talk about people watching her or how the neighbors were whispering. As a kid, he didn't understand, but now, looking back, he saw the signs. How her worries had quietly affected their family, making everything seem a little off. His dad had tried to hold everything together, but Nathan also remembered how his dad would go silent, sometimes for weeks, when his mom got upset. The kind of silence that made Nathan feel like something was missing, like the family was living on a thin thread.

It wasn't until Nathan was in his mid-forties that his parents finally admitted to the kids what had been wrong. But by then, the anger and resentment had already consumed them. As the oldest, Nathan had been most affected by it, always trying to be there for his family, trying to make it all work, trying to honor his parents like the Bible

said. But the anger he had carried with him, the anger he never fully understood, left a gap. A gap that hadn't been filled by anything else.

It also made him angry now, in the present, because during his teenage years, especially from 1987 to 1992, he had barely paid attention to anything. His mind had been clouded by anger, regret, and confusion. Now, when other people talked about those years, he couldn't connect. *I don't have those same memories.* He was resentful of it, as though he'd been cheated out of part of his own life.

Loneliness had become his constant companion, something he didn't often acknowledge, but which crept up in small moments. The things he had once enjoyed, like movies and music, didn't fill the void. His loneliness didn't hit him when he was alone. It hit him the hardest when he was with others. Sometimes, he'd be in a room full of people and feel more isolated than ever before. When something good or bad happened, he wished he had someone special to share it with, but no one filled that role.

He pushed the thought away, focusing instead on watching YouTube videos. The nostalgia washed over him like a wave. It had always been easier to avoid people than to deal with his emotions, and for now, it worked. He tried to stuff down his feelings, his sadness, his nostalgia, and his loneliness because acknowledging them would make him feel things he wasn't ready to deal with.

As he clicked through the shorts, a thought nagged at him. The one girl he let slip away when they were teens, Gwen Donnelly. The one who had always been there, but he'd lost her due to that move. He quickly squashed the thought and refocused on the video. *Just forget it, Nathan,* he thought.

Finishing his pizza and drink, Nathan clicked off the YouTube app and then turned off the screen of his phone. He cleaned his table and threw away his trash before heading outside to fuel up his truck. He could've waited until morning to put gas in, but he knew he wouldn't sleep unless he did it first.

The sound of the gas nozzle clicking as it finished filling the tank brought him back to the moment, grounding him in the present. He stood there, staring into the night sky as the truck's tank filled. That's when he saw it, a shooting star, bright and streaking across the dark sky.

He made the same wish he had made countless times before, though he never truly believed it would come true. "I wish I could be thirteen again and start over." As the words left his mouth, he felt a sudden, cool breeze sweep past him, like someone had walked by.

The only word Nathan heard was: "Granted."

Startled, Nathan looked around. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

There was nothing but silence and there was no one in sight.

"Weird. Guess I imagined it." He shrugged it off, though the strange chill still lingered in the air, just for a moment.

Chapter 2

The sunlight streaming through his window woke an alarmed Nathan the next morning because he didn't have any windows in the sleeper and usually kept the blackout curtain closed between where he slept and the cabin. He had a timer on his cell phone that usually went off when it was time for him to get up and that was usually hours from now. The bed he was currently in felt like a waterbed, which wasn't what he slept on in the truck. The bed in the truck was a far stiffer mattress and sometimes made his lower back ache. Nathan vaguely remembered his parents had bought him a waterbed to calm his asthma and allergies when he was a kid, since regular mattresses seemed to attract lots of dust and pollen.

Opening his eyes because of the panic he felt from knowing he wasn't where he thought he was supposed to be, the first thing he saw were posters hanging on the walls. There were three *Star Wars* posters: one each of Luke, Leia, and Han Solo. Another poster was of the first-year cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, posing on the bridge of Enterprise-D, and lastly, a poster of Alyssa Milano only because he had a huge crush on her at thirteen. When *Saved by the Bell* started airing in a couple of years, his crush would be on Tiffani-Amber Thiessen, so her poster would replace

Milano's. Later, after high school, his last major celebrity crush would end up being Jennifer Love Hewitt.

The familiar scent of childhood filled the room. Plastic model glue, dust, and something else he couldn't quite place, all mingling together like a time capsule. Glancing around the room, he saw models of X-Wings and the Millennium Falcon displayed on the top of the dresser, while a *Star Wars*-themed JanSport backpack was placed next to it, along with a skateboard propped up against the other side of the dresser. The curtains covering the one window in the room had C-3PO and R2-D2 all over them. The blankets and bedspread were emblazoned with *Star Wars* ships. The room looked like it was usually occupied by a very nerdy boy in his early teens who took certain movies far too seriously. If Nathan didn't know any better, he would've thought it was his room when he was a kid.

Thinking to himself, *Was I really this obsessed with Star Wars as a kid?* He didn't even remember the last time he saw the original movies. He'd skipped all the ones that came out since 2015 because he got bored with the series after binging on the original three like every other kid his age. Then the prequels came out and that was the end of his obsession. *Anyway, this has got to be a dream. I wonder how I can wake up from it?*

Nathan tried shaking his head to see if that would wake him up, but all that did was to make himself dizzy. Then he tried pinching himself on the arm, but that really hurt since he did it so hard. On the nightstand next to his bed, the old-school clock radio's blocky, red-colored digital LED displayed seven o'clock, but Nathan still had no idea if he woke up on a school day or the weekend. He moved the switch on the radio from off to on, but only music played. He didn't really listen to what was playing before turning it off again.

Nathan pulled the blankets and bedspread off himself and discovered he was in the body of a teenage boy. It was his body, when he was thirteen.

This was far too weird for him.

Still not connecting what he wished for to the current situation, he sighed with exasperation, got out of bed, changed out of the pajamas he was wearing, and into Lee jeans and an Ocean Pacific T-shirt, deciding to skip the enormous number of *Star Wars* shirts he seemed to have. The feel of the denim against his skin was strange, and it

reminded him of a simpler time before everything became so connected and complicated. The room smelled like his childhood, but it didn't quite feel like home.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the bedroom door so he could find out what was going on and to see if the same thing had happened to the rest of his family. Passing the bedrooms of his siblings, he saw that they were still asleep, apparently not bothered by the fact that they had somehow gone back in time more than thirty years and were in their childhood bodies. Like him, they were wanderers. His parents had learned it from their parents, since his dad's father was career USAF, while his mom's parents weren't very responsible people and tended to move a lot to get away from bill collectors. Elizabeth, his sister, was the only one of the four kids who was married and had children. She was married to a traveling preacher who filled in for preachers at their churches when they went away for events, such as conferences, or went to the Holy Land, or whenever a church needed a substitute while they were looking for a new preacher, but he had never pastored a church of his own. The twins had very different careers. Josh had a career in the Army and didn't have a permanent post, while James was a pilot for a major airline and never stayed in one place too long either. Neither of them had gotten married, and unlike him, didn't seem to care.

Nathan was sorely tempted to wake the three up to see if they knew anything, but figured a ten-year-old girl and two eight-year-old boys would be grumpy and angry with him for disturbing their sleep, especially if they weren't aware that this was the past and not the present. Passing his parents' room, they obviously weren't in bed, making him panic a little more. *I hope they're here and know what's going on.*

Nathan kept looking for them, hoping they were in the kitchen or in the family room and would have answers to this craziness. He found his parents in the kitchen, sitting at the table, and quietly talking to each other. He was used to seeing the two as senior citizens in their early seventies and somewhat frail looking due to various health issues. Now, they were in their early forties, as young and as strong as they looked in some of their older photos from the era.

"Hey, Mom and Dad, do you know what's going on?"

To Nathan, the two seemed startled when he spoke up, like they had almost fallen out of their chairs. His parents thought none of their children would know what was going on, so they didn't wake any of them. Deanna and Ken were still used to seeing their children how they appeared in thirty-plus years. Nathan, for instance, was supposed to be balding, sporting a beard, and overweight, but now he was his thirteen-year-old self and seemed confused by this situation.

"What do you mean?" asked Ken, thinking only that Nathan probably wondered why his parents were talking at the kitchen table.

"I mean that yesterday I was driving a freight truck and in my late forties. Now, I'm thirteen again and in our old house from back then. If you don't know what's going on, then tell me to go back to bed so I can wake up,"

"We're just as confused as you, Nathan. Yesterday, we were sitting on our porch, in our rocking chairs, acting like the retired old people that we are, and now we're a lot younger. I'd like to know what's going on too," answered Deanna.

Before Nathan could say anything else, an unremarkable-looking man appeared in the kitchen, surprising the three since they weren't expecting him to show up.

"So, the three of you want to know what's going on. Right?"

"Who are you?" asked Nathan's parents at the same time.

The man shrugged. "Oh, who I am is of no real importance. I'm just here to tell you that your wish to relive this part of your life has been granted. Don't waste the opportunity,"

"You're not Clarence, are you?" asked Nathan sarcastically.

The man laughed. "From that movie? No, afraid not. Besides, this isn't about how everyone would be better off if none of you had existed, this is more like a reverse of that where other people might be better off if you stayed in their lives."

"Are we in an alternate universe of some sort, like the Marvel multiverse, where we can see how a different version of us lived?"

"Not that either, but feel free to keep guessing,"

“Let me guess, we’re stuck in some sort of Hallmark movie plot where the main character has to figure out the life they actually had is better than the one they wished for.” replied Deanna.

“Wrong again. Simply put, you’ve been given the opportunity to right what you think went wrong with your lives. Nathan, this is four months before your family moved to another state because of the biggest problem your parents encountered that they weren’t sure how to fix. So, this is the opportunity you’ve been seeking, since Deanna has also thought about it for years about what could’ve been done differently,”

“But what about the Butterfly Effect? With our knowledge, we could dramatically alter history, and probably not in a good way,” replied Nathan.

“I didn’t think I’d have to go into a detailed discussion, but it happens every single time. Humans, go figure. Anyway, the Butterfly Effect doesn’t apply here, since none of you have interacted with anything of historical significance. Sure, you could try to warn the authorities about various disasters, like the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but they’d either ignore your warnings or lock you up because they’d think you were threatening to do something. Deanna, you have an uncle, a veteran of the last world war and his daughter, who was impacted by the bombing of the Murrah building in Oklahoma City because it destroyed the VA office he went to and affected the daughter’s job a mile away. Neither he nor his daughter were nearby that day when it happened, but if you said something to them, they might very well get injured or die because of your interference. Other than that, your effect on history is at a purely local level, so you’ll only affect people you personally know,”

“I see,” replied Deanna.

“What are you three talking about? What’s the Butterfly Effect?” asked a more than confused Ken. He wasn’t much of a fan of science fiction or fantasy, thinking that was something kids, not adults, were into, and had no idea about all the complexities involved.

“Basically, what we think of as small, insignificant actions could have a ripple effect and cause huge, unforeseen and unintended historical changes. As I said, that won’t happen. You’re free to live your lives differently without anything significant happening.

Your memories from this period will surface over the next few hours so you won't have to struggle remembering various things or people and your future memories will begin to fade as you make changes, to the point where they'll seem like dreams. Ken, I know you wish you had invested in companies like Apple or Microsoft in the early days, before all the major tech they created took off, so here's your chance to do that. But, by the time stocks for Yahoo or Amazon are available, you're probably not going to remember what happened originally, so you might want to write it down so you can act on it later,"

"Okay, but doesn't investing when I originally didn't cause unforeseen changes?"

"Ugh. You people are overthinking this whole thing. Change what you need to and maybe you'll be happy in this timeline. I wish you luck in this endeavor. So long." The mystery man suddenly vanished before their eyes.

For the three of them, it seemed more like a dream than real life, and they weren't sure the last five minutes had actually happened. They were quiet for a few minutes, not really knowing what to do next. Nathan looked at his mom and saw a flicker in her eyes, an edge of worry that felt too familiar. He'd seen it before when he was far younger, in the way she used to pace the porch or whisper about things no one else noticed. It hadn't changed, even with the years peeled away. He saw Dad glancing towards Mom, his jaw tight with worry. Nathan remembered that look because it was the same one his dad wore whenever Mom had one of her bad days. Protective, but unsure. Like he wanted to help but didn't know how due to their current situation.

Nathan decided to speak first, "Okay, so what do we do now?"

"Well, I guess we should find out what day it is. This is one of those times I miss having a smartphone where I can just glance at the day and time on the display, so I'll have to call our city's automated information line. It's a good thing I have a knack for remembering numbers." Ken answered as he walked over to the landline phone. He picked up the receiver, dialed the number, listened for a minute, and then hung up. "Okay, today's Saturday, July 11, and the temperature is supposed to be in the upper nineties,"

"That makes sense. This is four months before we moved in the original timeline, which is at the same time we decided to help out some wayward girls who everyone at

church thought we shouldn't have. What we didn't realize at the time was how many toes we stepped on by doing that. To this day, I still don't understand why it angered so many. If we can get everyone involved this time, we might not get everyone so mad at me, which worsened my mental health issues, and then we made the mistake of moving because I panicked and your father didn't know what else to do." replied Deanna.

"We'll just have to see, I guess. You and I could talk to them tomorrow and see what they think,"

"That's a good idea; I think I'll do that. I suppose I could call Linda, our preacher's wife. Maybe it'll work out this time. So, Nathan, what do you plan on doing today?"

Nathan shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I could do what I used to do and ride my bike around the neighborhood to see what the other kids are up to, since nobody's attached to cell phones that don't exist yet. Speaking of technology, I know personal computers aren't too powerful, MS-DOS can be a pain to use, the hardware has less memory than my latest digital watch in the future, and the only thing I used it for as a kid was to play *The Oregon Trail* in the library at school using those huge floppy disks, but can we get one?"

"I'll have to do some research, but if I remember correctly, I think PC's currently cost a couple thousand dollars to buy, so we might not be able to. I was thinking of doing what that stranger said and investing in some tech stock, like AT&T or Microsoft, that way we'll have a little bit more money than we originally did and then we can buy things we want, like a PC. I'll probably see if I can do that Monday, after work." replied Ken.

"Okay, cool. I think I'll eat breakfast and then watch something that doesn't exist on broadcast TV thirty years in the future thanks to the stupid government, Saturday morning cartoons. After that, I'll go ride my bike, since it'll take me a while to get used to playing Nintendo again with games like *Super Mario Brothers* or *The Legend of Zelda* after playing stuff like *Fallout 4* or *Batman: Arkham Knight* as recently as last week on my custom PC. I mean, if that's okay with you guys,"

"It's fine with us, just remember to check in every few hours, all right?" Deanna replied.

"Okay."

“Well, I’ll go wake up your brothers and sister and we’ll eat breakfast together. Does everyone want bacon, eggs, and toast?”

“Sure!” Nathan and Ken answered.

Deanna went back to the bedrooms to wake up Nathan’s siblings, while he went into the living room, turned on the TV, and, as his siblings joined him, began watching cartoons he hadn’t seen in a very long time while waiting for breakfast.