

Tiny Little Earthquakes

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For Jan, Hugo, and Max-
my fraternity.

This is how we began.

“And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.”

William Ernest Henley

Part One: Fault Line

Chapter 1 - The Slow Burn

When I heard, “JESUS!” I knew I was on the right channel. The Lord’s name being hollered at me marked the beginning of my Sunday mornings as a child. I wasn’t worshipping in a church, but at a different altar. The place where I exalted daily: my appropriately named Zenith television. We lived on a 70-acre horse farm in North Carolina, which offered little in traditional entertainment for a young girl in the early 80s. There were no playgrounds or neighborhood children within a 30-mile radius. It wasn’t just that I had no friends, but there were no friends to be had. So, “JESUS!” being shouted by the television wasn’t odd, given my lack of playtime alternatives.

I chose TV over any physical activity, and still do, if I’m honest. I was all limbs and tubby body dressed in my best “Night, Jon Boy” nightie—you know, the kind with a high collar and tiny flowers? On a good day, Mom would grab a comb and brush my thick blonde hair until my eyes watered. Then she would yank it into two neat sections and pull extra hard to secure the Goodie elastics and felt ribbon on pigtails. The part always hurt along the back of my scalp until about midday when it loosened. So that was me, on the day of the Lord, scrambling to the TV to watch the most underrated D-list celebrity of all time. His name was Ernest Angley (pronounced “ainj-lee”), and he was divinely entertaining. I couldn’t get enough of this sweaty, bloated man in his tan three-piece suit as spit wadded near the corners of his mouth. I would quickly fix a bacon

and peanut butter sandwich and plant my face twelve inches from the Zenith's screen just as every unholy child should.

My name is Elliot Hase. Yes, a girl named Elliot, but we'll get to that later. The name Hase is Germanic, meaning hare or bunny. We weren't *German* German, but a mixture of English, Irish, and German. Anyhoo, Hase also means someone who is quick or timid, and I think both apply.

Now, many of you may not be familiar with Reverend Ernest Angley—unless you experienced the joys of growing up in the South in the 80s. Ernest was born in North Carolina, and along with his wife, Esther, had a small but committed following on cable television. They were original TV evangelists, alongside Jim and Tammy Faye. But Ernest was on the bottom of the evangelical movement's totem pole. Naysayers would claim he had a toupee, but toupee, smoopee, the *Ernest Angley Hour* was solid gold television. I was enraptured. No, I had not accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior, but I had pledged myself to Channel 6 for showing me a man who laid his sweaty palm on the faces of believers and shouted, "Amen!" (Actually, in his Southern twang, it was "AAAAAmen," direct from the back of his throat.) Angley believed in miracles because he believed in God. His philosophies were relatively simple. He would lay his hands on an infirmed person and say, "In the name of Jesus, foul spirits come out. OUT!" If he were healing a partially deaf child, the child would say, "Jesus." But it sounded more like a muted "Yeesus" because the partially deaf child was still actually partially deaf. It was life-changing.

"The angels are moving in..." Angley would reassure me, and I would relax. Thank God, because we need more angels, Ernest. Mr. Angley spoke directly to me, because I felt that the angels had distinctly abandoned me. My family was filled with foul spirits.

I was in third grade and Grandpa had recently died. Since his death, Mom was bumping around the house, glass in hand, and nothing felt right anymore. My older sister Poppy and I were scolded not to bother her as she grieved. It was 1982, and Mercury must have been in retrograde because, after that, shit got real.

Our farm was off Route 1, north of Southern Pines and south of Vass, towns the size of ticks. There were no exit or street signs. To get home, we just turned at the candle factory, a cheap remake of a log cabin with a ginormous *SCENTED CANDLES: ALL KINDS* sign. The factory's waxy perfume polluted the air for miles. Years later, when the candle factory burned, we woke to a sharp, disarming chemical smell, and our eyes watered. The stench lasted for weeks as the remains smoldered like a fuck you. Lesson learned: if you are going to burn down a candle factory, it's gonna take a while. The same goes for a family; if one is going to self-destruct, it will take years. It's a very slow burn, but slow or fast, it's equally devastating. It always starts somewhere, a match, a spark, such as a patriarch dying, and all else going higgledy-piggledy after that.

The day Grandpa died, I came home from school delighted to have made the last five minutes of *One Life to Live* and Jane Russell trying to sell me an 18-hour bra—before *General*

Hospital started. Poppy and I loved soap operas. We were ABC girls, enamored by *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, and *General Hospital*, in that order. We were home from school by three and could catch *G.H.*, as we called it, every day. A pivotal childhood memory was on March 30, 1981, when *General Hospital* didn't air. Poppy and I were outraged. We did not care that it was a defining moment in American history. Instead, we were appalled to be forced to watch footage of President Ronald Reagan being shot on an endless news loop. Hinckley took aim sometime between 2:30 and 3 pm, coinciding with *G.H.*'s three o'clock start time. To us, that was the travesty.

Sorry, back to my deceased patriarch.

The afternoon of Grandpa's death, Poppy aggressively breathed, "Be quiet, Elliot..." dragging me away from the kitchen. I wanted some Chef Boyardee, but Poppy was not having it. Her wide green eyes darted under her bangs, which looked frazzled after a day at school.

"He's dead," my sister said rather bluntly.

"Who?" I hadn't known anyone to die—only animals. They passed away all the time on the farm. We had a small red barn that Mom once filled with baby chicks for Easter. She wanted to surprise us and swung open the little barn door like, "Ta-da!" Dismembered, bloody chicks were everywhere, and it looked like baby animals had been in a Cuisinart. A fox had gotten into the henhouse, and Poppy and I will never forget the great Easter Massacre. Otherwise, our pets didn't die naturally. Usually, Mom called the vet, and that was it. Lights out. But people? They only died on TV.

"Grandpa!" Poppy whisper-shouted at me like I was stupid. Poppy, whose real name was Penelope, was five years older than me and had a natural air of superiority I hated. She was thirteen and thought she knew everything. But, to be fair, she did, because she paid more attention. Like when the door to the downstairs office was torn up. It had big gashes and wooden splinters popping out of the paint. I thought one of the horses had kicked it with its hind leg. But Poppy told me Mom had gotten mad at Skip, our stepfather. He had locked himself in there to hide from her. No one hid from Mom, so she grabbed an axe from the barn and went all Jack Nicholson *The Shining* on him. Poppy knew all about it. She clocked and registered every detail in the family like our in-house biographer. Me? No clue where I was, probably watching TV.

"Why can't I get a snack?" I whined. The fact a family member had died wasn't exactly sinking in because I had more immediate needs. No one was in the kitchen, and my stomach rumbled. And let's face it, Grandpa dying was out of my emotional reach. We weren't that close to our grandparents.

"Seriously, Elliot. Grandpa's dead!" Poppy was expecting some big reaction, but Grandpa was the guy who smelled like cigar smoke and slipped me a five-dollar bill when I saw him twice a year. There was a picture of him in the living room where he looked like Frank Sinatra. Dressed in a three-piece suit with a pocket square, the fairly large black and white looked like a headshot for the movies. Like maybe Dean Martin or Ed Sullivan was his best friend. Honestly, I

didn't know how to react, because Luke and Laura were waiting for me on G.H. I knew I was supposed to feel sad, but in all honesty, I didn't feel anything.

"Where's Mom?" I wanted more clarity on the situation.

Poppy whisper-shouted again, "In her room... CRYING." Poppy had a flair for the dramatic. Maybe we did watch too many soap operas. Poppy was on the small side at thirteen, with pencil-thin arms and legs. She looked like a lollipop if her altar boy haircut was extra downy. I told her once, and she whacked me in the arm so hard it left a bruise.

Poppy could sound harsh sometimes, but I also knew I was an annoying little sister. I often went into her room—uninvited, she'd point out—to ask her something stupid like, "Do you think we will ever go to Disney World?" Both Poppy and I knew the answer: No, duh. But I liked being near my sister. She was my touchstone and my best friend, given that we lived on a secluded farm. There weren't many best friend options aside from our cats and Jack Russells.

Poppy liked to tell me about the time she saved my life. "Once, when we were little, we were at a pool, and Mom wasn't paying attention." I sat before her, rapt because I loved any attention she gave me. "And you were in one of those circular inner tube things. You were only two years old, and you slipped right through it! I was the only one who saw you at the bottom of the pool, and I jumped in and saved you!" That was probably an exaggeration. Knowing my sister's penchant for the dramatic, I'm sure I wasn't near as dead as she described, and an adult scooped me up in time. Potato pahtato. When someone shows you this kind of love, well, you don't question the details or hold it against them if they get snippy with you. It's like when the mama gorilla whacks the baby to keep it in line; it's all out of love.

"Well, what's going to happen now?" I asked. What did Grandpa dying mean? We only saw him twice a year, Christmas and summer.

Poppy looked at me seriously. "Honestly, I don't know. I suppose there will be a funeral?"

"Will we go?" I got a little excited at the prospect of an adventure.

"I don't knowwww, Elliot," Poppy said, rolling her eyes. Yep, I had annoyed her again.

Officially, my sister was Penelope Grace, named after both our aunts. She was petite and fiery with reddish hair, and loved horseback riding with a natural zeal. She had the danger gene, and I did not. Poppy was my Mary, and I was her Laura (*Little House on the Prairie*), the leader of our merry band of two. We slept together, played together, and generally laughed together. I have a Polaroid of my young face where my sister wrote on the white strip below, *Elliot, Acid Trip, May*. We both have an inherently dark sense of humor. Although, at the time, I did not know what acid was. But she laughed, so I laughed. We sang Evita's "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" and "Jesus Christ, Superstar" at top volume. Poppy was very famous in her room. We watched *Xanadu*, the movie, a million times. On July 29, 1981, she dragged me out of bed at 4 am to watch panic-stricken Diana yoke herself to Charles. We marveled at the amount of material it took to make one wedding dress.

I loved having a sister because she could read my mind better than anyone. Also, she named me Elliot. My real name is Eloise Jean Hase. When Mom placed me in my sister's arms for the first time, I was a seven-pound raisin, wrinkled and unnaturally colored. "Looks like a boy. Are you sure it's a girl?" Poppy said to Mom. She was jealous that I had the name of her favorite children's book character, Eloise. But I wasn't named after Eloise at the Plaza; it was the family name of a great-grandmother. Poppy declared that it was wholly unfair when she had the name of our "stupid aunts." So she called me Elliot instead. She was relentlessly stubborn, so anytime someone called me Eloise, she promptly corrected them. Mom eventually gave in and called me Elliot too. We tend to pick and choose our battles poorly. The movie *E.T.* had recently been released, and now Poppy took great joy in saying, "Ell...III...OT," in E.T.'s voice, which was wearing on my nerves. She had even left some Reese's Pieces in my bed the other night. I thought it was funny, but refused to give her the satisfaction of besting me. I ate the candy all the same.

"Are we going to have dinner?" I was infuriating Poppy.

"Jesus, Elliot, it's not about you." Little did I understand the foreshadowing. I wish someone back then had told me it was never going to be about me for a very long time.

It wasn't just about Grandpa either. I wasn't that daft. It was about Mom losing her father, which I semi-understood. My father wasn't present in my life, and the idea of being fatherless rolled around loose in my mind. Something about the disappearance of patriarchy felt rather inconvenient, like it messed up something, but I wasn't sure what. I had the vague notion that was what I was supposed to figure out. Then magically, I would understand that every accident, coincidence, triumph, crisis, blessing, calamity, misfortune, and miracle I was a part of over the years *meant* something. That whatever happened to me or was caused by me was the means to an end, strokes on a painting, pieces to a puzzle, or whatever metaphorical bullshit people use. Then, when the picture revealed itself, it would be the sacred key to my very being. I then would run through a red, satiny ribbon and declare myself an adult. But I was miles away from that.

But back then, I didn't get shit. I was a child, and more urgent things weighed on me, like my hunger, and that did not seem to be anyone's priority. My only goal was to not piss people off by acting like a child. But that was kind of hard because, well, I was a child.

It was Grandpa who decided we should live in Southern Pines because Mom, at the veteran age of 28, divorced Dad and was not handling it so well. At the time of the divorce, I was four years old, and Poppy was nine. It's a hard memory, but I looked at it occasionally like a snow globe. I'd shake it up, but the same images would emerge in the same sequence. Poppy opening the bedroom door, creating a triangle of light on Mom's bed. My sister crying and shaking Mom's still, sleeping body. She wrote on a card, *We love you, Mommy*, and placed it on the bed. Then there were flashing blue lights, and suddenly, we were at Mom's best friend's house being put to bed on plastic sheets. I was told I may wet the bed, and felt humiliated. I didn't wet the

bed, and how dare Mom's friend accuse me, especially then...after Mom had taken too much medication, or that's what I was told. She was okay though, after a night at the hospital.

As compensation for being a newly minted divorcee and surviving her cursory self-destruction, my grandfather bought Mom a horse farm in the temperate climes of the Carolinas. With the moderate winters, heavy tobacco lobby, and Senator Jesse Helms trying to revive the Confederacy, it somehow seemed ideal. Yeehaw. You certainly didn't publicly comment on the burned cross you saw on the way to school, as in the night before, the KKK had had a little party on someone's lawn. Money looked different in the South. Signs of wealth were animals and acreage. Women wore riding clothes all day and didn't get their nails done. Attending "hunts" and drinking Bloody Marys while covered in dirt afterward was considered socializing. My grandfather thought it was a fitting place for us, away from Cincinnati, where Mom had become a Junior League outcast.

Within months of moving to North Carolina, Mom married Skip. He was tall, lean, and aging, with a cowboy air to him. He didn't have kids, but had a German shepherd named Gunther, who I adored. Poppy and I wore matching ugly pink dresses at the wedding ceremony and were largely ignored. So that's how the four of us ended up on 70 acres in North Carolina. The farm wasn't at all like the houses in *Dallas*. There was no grand entrance, but a simple post and rail fence coated in dark creosote oil. Mom designed a spacious apartment over the barn for us to live in, so the entire structure was one massive building. Mom situated her bedroom at one end, and over on the other side, Poppy and I had two bedrooms attached by a shared bathroom. That bathroom had seen so many horrors that it could have had its own reality show. Downstairs, we had eight horse stalls, a tack room, a feed room, a wash stall for the horses, as well as the office with the axed door. It was a fantastic but unusual playground, as long as you weren't scared of rats, ticks, snakes, ringworm, or horseshit. We had a lot of barn cats to keep the predator-prey ecology in balance. Mom and Skip were in the racehorse business. Not racing horses, but buying and selling them before they even made it to the track. It's called pin-hooking. They bought weanlings and sold them as yearlings at a profit. On the farm, we were surrounded by neighing young colts and fillies and a couple of ponies for my sister and me to ride.

Mom was in her early thirties, in her second marriage, and had two rather precocious kids. So when Grandpa decided to check out, she was already swinging on uneven bars, grasping for whatever she could reach. The day he died, I was deep into the 5 pm rerun of *M*A*S*H*, snacking on Snickers, when Mom came to my room to talk about it. I never had a preference for Henry Blake or Colonel Potter. Both were hilarious.

"Sweetie," Mom said, sitting on the edge of my bed, blocking my view of the TV. She looked disheveled, and her face was puffy from crying. Poppy was right, Mom was pretty upset, and I felt sad for her. I quieted and forgot about the TV. There was an earthy, bitter odor when she talked. Later, I learned that it was Scotch. Bleh.

“Ellie, Grandpa... He’s gone...” I didn’t know how to properly respond, but I was curious about how he died.

“What happened?” I ventured softly. I saw all sorts of death on *M*A*S*H*. But I doubted it was a mortar combat or Korean sniper.

“Well, his heart just gave out. It was his second heart attack, and he couldn’t make it.” Mom looked out the window. Second? Had he had a heart attack before? That was news to me. Maybe I knew before Poppy; wouldn’t that be something?

“Where did it happen?” I imagined him slumped over his model trains in his office. When I was little, I loved running around the table chasing the miniature engines. Grandpa called me Putt Putt.

“He and Grandma were on the boat. You know, in Key Largo.” I had no clue where Key Largo was, but I remembered we had gone there. We stayed on my grandparents’ boat for a whole week. People referred to it as a yacht, and I thought that was thrilling. My mind wandered... Would we go back to the boat, excuse me, *yacht* now that Grandpa was dead?

“That’s enough now.” Mom’s tone was terse like I had said something wrong. But what had I said?

Mom stood up, or at least tried to. She teetered and pushed herself off my bed with both her hands. My stomach lurched watching her. I didn’t like it when she was off balance. I felt scared but I didn’t know exactly why.

“We have to go to Ohio tomorrow. I’m sorry you’re going to miss some school.” Wait? Miss school? This was fantastic. My mood suddenly soared. Thanks, Grandpa.

“Are we going to have dinner?” I asked tentatively.

“Sure, yes, of course...” But Mom was in her dreamy state, and I didn’t count that as a positive answer. Maybe Skip would make me some macaroni and cheese. Or I could microwave some hot dogs.

Watching Mom leave the room, I felt off, like I, too, was floating. Something about when Mom wasn’t right, I wasn’t right. I couldn’t pinpoint or name it, but I didn’t feel reassured that I would have dinner or sure that, in general, we were going to be okay. There were so many things I loved about my mother, but also so many things I already hated. I was caught in her orbit all the same, like a planet reliant on the sun. I noticed then how much Mom looked like Grandpa. They both had narrow faces, but she was small-boned and pretty. Her blonde hair framed her face like an Ivory girl. Never one for fancy clothes, Mom was all about blue jeans, a Shetland crew sweater, and loafers. Although, she did love a diamond ring or two or three. She was a tomboy in a ladylike way, from riding horses and gardening to driving a mean tractor. She was happier with dirt under her nails than in a dress. The one family trait my sister and I gladly inherited.

Mom slowly closed my bedroom door but didn’t look at me. She was somewhere else. My stomach turned again, and I lost my appetite. I had wanted her to make me feel better, but she hadn’t. I stopped thinking about food and reached for the volume of the TV.

It would be a long time before I realized Mom just had no clue how to raise children and be an alcoholic at the same time. I didn't know or understand my role, so I stayed quiet as long as I could, trying to figure it out. All I understood was that if I didn't create any problems, if I didn't upset anybody, then maybe it might be okay. Maybe the key was to be invisible? Those were the years I found ways to entertain myself and be a good girl. I found ways to grow up without anybody's help. Maybe I wasn't the best at it, but I was giving it a shot. I waited to feel better, but Reverend Anglely had been wrong. The candles were lit at the altar, but Yeesus never came. Not for a very long time.