



Chapter 4 – Keep Paddling

Excerpt From *Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman's Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult* www.outofthecocoon.net

When I was twelve years old, my nineteen-year-old sister married a Jehovah's Witness, and one year later she delivered a beautiful baby boy. From the time Jon was old enough to walk, he adoringly followed me everywhere. I called him my shadow, and when I did, he giggled hysterically and repeated back to me in his gleeful innocence, "I'm Brenna's shadow!" A simple task such as going to the bathroom proved to be no small feat; Jon moaned and pleaded for me outside the door until I emerged. Jon gave my dreary teenage life purpose. I absolutely adored him.

During summer break I sometimes spent a week visiting my sister. She lived about sixty miles away, and although she was a JW, she didn't seem to live and breathe the religion as stringently as my mother. With her, I could have a conversation that didn't include scripture. We'd talk about "normal" stuff, and I'd help her clean house and make supper, giving her the rare break she needed from running after a toddler.

Sadly, Jon would come to know at the tender age of one year old the frustration I experienced sitting on that anthill during those long sermons in the Kingdom Hall. Since there wasn't a Sunday school atmosphere at these meetings; young children weren't allowed to amuse themselves with toys or coloring books. When Jon started fidgeting, I did everything in my power to try to keep him still. I allowed him to forage through the makeup in my purse, digging trenches into it with his fingernails. I sacrificed my necklaces to distract him. When I ran out of tricks and could no longer contain his energy, his father would grab him by the arm and literally drag him to the restroom and beat him. Jon's beating became such a ritual that when his daddy reached for him during a meeting, he knew it meant a beating. He cried and pleaded "No, Daddy" as he buckled his legs, refusing to walk willingly to meet his fate.

Everyone in the Kingdom Hall could hear his screams. The sound that echoed from the blow varied; sometimes Jon's father used his hand, sometimes a belt. After ten or fifteen minutes, they would return with Jon hyperventilating, desperately trying to catch his breath. Beaten into composure, he would sit still for a while longer. Usually he stared motionless into space, his eyes bloodshot from crying. If fate smiled on him, Jon fell asleep in my arms for the duration for the meeting. If not, then back again to the restroom he would go for another beating and the cycle continued, until the closing prayer.

It broke my heart. I wanted desperately to stop the abuse, but I was a child myself and didn't know what to do to save him, or me. (His was not an isolated incident. Sometimes there was literally a line to the restrooms so that children could receive their punishment for displaying natural restlessness during these incredibly tedious meetings.)

One heart-wrenching day in particular is forever seared into my memory....(continued)