

# Thumbnail Sketches

It's summer in Southern California, and I'm in the narrow walkway under Angel Stadium. I hear the muffled roar of 40,000 people yelling, clapping and stomping their feet, and the last crashing chords of the band's big finale.

It's deafening, but still distant. Every step draws me closer to the stairway that leads to the field and the immense stage. The band finishes its set and I hear applause, like the thunder of waves crashing on a rocky shore. It's time for the message of the evening, from Greg Laurie.

I emerge from the third-base dugout and run up a few more steps onto the stage platform, sweating a little in my black T-shirt. I grab both sides of the podium and look out over the big ball field into the arena of tens of thousands of human beings. It feels as if they are all looking toward me, expecting something exciting to happen, hoping I'll say something fascinating or enlightening.

At that moment, my brain breaks into split-screen mode.

On one side I'm the guy who's been the pastor of a big church for 30 years, the guy who speaks at crusades all over the world, the guy who preaches and teaches on radio and TV . . . and I can't wait to tell them about what God can really do in their lives.

On the other side of my mind thoughts flit around like gnats I can't quite catch. *Look at this huge stadium! I hope I don't disappoint these people. How did I end up here?*

*Who in the world is Greg Laurie anyway?*

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It's a hot summer night in the mid-1960s in Honolulu, Hawaii. I'm 10 years old, wearing a white cotton T-shirt and pajama bottoms. I'm alone in our beautiful home overlooking Waikiki Beach. My mom is married to a guy named Eddie this time, and they've been out. I can't fall asleep until she gets home.

I don't look at the clock, but it's way past midnight when I finally hear the front door open. Then there's the familiar tinkle of ice cubes in glasses, the murmur of conversation, the slosh of more drinks being poured.

Then, like every night, the arguing starts. The volume rises. He yells something unprintable. She yells back. I hear an ashtray smash against the wall, and then the crash of more broken glass. Screaming.

I hunch in my bed like I always do, waiting for it to end, even praying a little, though I don't really know who I'm praying to. Now there's more cussing and yelling, and then I hear a dull thud that's somehow worse than everything that came before.

My stomach flips, and I get out of bed and run into the kitchen. My mom is lying limp on the floor, a puddle of red pooling under her platinum blonde hair. I've seen her passed out lots of times, but this is different.

Eddie is standing over her, breathing hard, a heavy, bloody wooden statue in his hand.

"She's okay," he says in a threatening tone. "It's just ketchup. Go back to your room! She's fine!"

He's an adult, and I'm a kid, but I know that's not ketchup. But I also know that he just might kill me, too, if I stay where I am.

"Okay," I say, backing down the hallway. "I'll just go back to bed."

I get back to my room and close the door. Then I run to the open window, pop out the screen, and fling my leg over the edge. It's not much of a drop to the ground. I sit on the sill, then push off and land hard on the grass, falling forward onto my hands. I jump up and run next door.

The neighbor's house is dark, but the windows are open. I pound hard on the front door, trying to be loud and quiet at the same time, terrified that Eddie will hear and come after me.

I'm panting, knocking so hard that my knuckles hurt. All I can think is that we've got to get an ambulance.

Finally, a light comes on and I hear someone calling.

"Who is it?"

"It's Greg!" I call, my voice shaking a little. "Greg Laurie!"

\* \* \*

It's 1970. I've got Beatles posters on the walls of my room and a tab of orange sunshine in my system. I've been influenced by people like Timothy Leary—who tells me to “tune in, turn on, drop out”—and the other heroes of my generation, like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin. I'm on my way to pulling off at least part of their creed: live fast, die young and leave a beautiful corpse.

But the LSD in my brain isn't pretty. I'm looking in the mirror, and all I see is melting flesh, drooping eyes, burning bones.

Is that me?

\* \* \*

I'm a new father with a brand-new life. My wife is sweet and beautiful; we are young and have big dreams. Our son is a toddler. I never had a dad, so I want to protect my child in ways I was never protected. I can't believe how great it is to carry little Christopher around on my shoulders, to tickle him and hear him laugh. He has shining blond hair and bright brown eyes. He's curious and into everything.

One day, I'm distracted for just a moment while Christopher is playing on the floor in our bedroom. There's a narrow, heavy, full-length mirror leaning against the wall. I look up in time to see Christopher pulling the mirror toward himself . . . just in time to see it falling on top of him.

I scream and run for my son. Broken shards of daggered glass are everywhere, and Christopher is covered in blood.

“Daddy!” he cries. “Daddy!”

\* \* \*

I am standing before an enormous polished mahogany table in an executive suite. It's a meeting of the board of directors for the Billy Graham Association. They represent hundreds of years of academic and theological training; dozens of degrees, awards and honors; millions of dollars of business success; and thousands of hours of counsel to people in need.

I have been nominated to become a member of this distinguished group. Before they vote me in or out, I've been asked to give a short talk. My friend Franklin Graham introduces me. As I speak, the most famous evangelist in human history is sitting before

me, nodding a little, listening to every word. I don't know what Billy Graham is thinking just then, but I sure know what I'm thinking.

*How in the world did I end up here?*

\* \* \*

The television studio is cold. I'm sitting across the desk from famed CNN interviewer Larry King. Larry is wearing his trademark suspenders, a crisp, teal-green collared shirt, and, much to my surprise, a pair of faded blue jeans . . . since viewers can't see what's under the big table at which we sit.

I've often watched this show at home. Lying on my living room sofa, I come up with brilliant responses to Larry's questions about Christianity and how biblical faith relates to today's issues, from abortion to the environment to lifestyle choices.

Yes, at home my imaginary repartee with Larry King is absolutely dazzling.

But this is reality . . . or at any rate, it's live TV. The big camera's red light flashes, and Larry leans forward in his chair, shoulders hunched. He says something like this: "So, Greg Laurie, you're a megachurch pastor. What can you tell us about a Christian response to this issue?"

My mind suddenly goes blank, inoperable. It's a frozen computer screen.

Larry just looks at me and follows up. "Uh, Greg?"

\* \* \*

It's a warm night in the South. I can smell the honeysuckle and hear the crickets chirping in the summer darkness. A colleague is driving my wife and me through the streets of a city I've never been to before. We're heading to a meeting of more than 200 pastors who have committed their churches to support one of our evangelistic crusades.

As we pull into the parking lot surrounding the mammoth brick church, I see the usual assortment of minivans with the usual assortment of bumper stickers. "My child is an honor student at Millbrook High." "UNC Tarheels." There are some fish symbols and crosses, too.

But here's what I can't believe: Most of these cars have the same big bumper sticker plastered across the back. All it says, in bright red and black letters, is GREG LAURIE. It feels weird. Embarrassing.

*Who in the world is Greg Laurie? I almost think.*

Then I remember. It's me.

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