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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Last Lawsons

Written by Jason Hinojosa

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*Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

*Isaiah 43:18-19*

# Part One

# The Sins of Ed

# 1

"If you ever write any of this down, send it to my daughter." I don't remember exactly when Ed Lawson said that to me, but that's why you're reading this now.

The first time I talked with him, your father, he said his nose had been broken when he was a boy. He said it was an accident.

Your father told me he grew up close to here. I don't think I've ever been to the place where that house was. If I have, I don't know or I don't remember. I only know that your father described it as being all grass and trees, and all houses and yellow birds.

He told me about his family too. He said his mother was plain and his father was big and handsome. I guess your father was built more like his mother, your grandmother, because he had long thin arms, but he had his father's good-looking face. I could tell, even though by the time I met him, almost all of your father's handsomeness was covered up by wrinkles. Most of his hair had fallen out too, and all that was left was at the back of his spotted head.

To most people, I guess your father seemed angry and bitter, but he didn't seem that way to me. I'd like to think I understood him better than most people.

I didn't think he was angry and bitter, but I did think he carried something shameful inside him, like a foul smell in his mouth. I only say so because I could stand that foulness, and because I listened to the stories he told me about you and his parents, and about his sister. He said her name was Mary Anne.

The first time we talked, your father told me that on the side of his parents' house there was a small square window just above the level of a man's head. The glass was wavy and the window was hidden by the fence. "Only a person living in the house would know about it," he said.

The window had been put high in the wall because it was a window to the bathroom. Your father explained that during the day the bathroom would get bright with yellow sunlight and make everything in the bathroom seem clean. At night, he said, the light would come out from inside, like it was "spilling out in the dark."

He told me that there was a faucet rooted into the ground under the window, and there was a long plastic hose attached to it. The hose was usually coiled around the faucet, and your father was usually the one who coiled it. Because of the faucet's flat, wheel-shaped handle, he explained, a person could stand up on it. He said a person could balance himself on it if he also put his hands on the small brick ledge where the window had been set into the wall.

He had told his mother he was going outside to coil the hose. He didn't say why it hadn't been coiled already, and I didn't ask. Your father just said that he went outside and could see the light spilling out of the bathroom, and that he stood on top of the faucet. He could hear the water filling the tub inside, and he couldn't smell the soap or towels, but he could see his sister's wavy figure through the glass. He could see the shadows of her body, and he imagined the steam from the water was in his throat as he saw his breath on the glass.

As he breathed, he shifted his foot and tried to rise up, but the faucet's wheel-shaped handle turned and he fell onto the hose below, and twisted his ankle.

His big, handsome father came out when he called, though he'd called for his mother. His father, your grandfather, stopped

with his arms at his sides, and he examined the scene from a small distance. He saw the light in the window and heard the faint sound of the water inside, and he heard a small trickling rush of water leaking from the end of the hose, which was still uncoiled in the grass.

Your father said he remembered the movement of your grandfather's arm, like a big swinging wheel. He had pulled his belt from its loops and squeezed the leather in his fist, and when he hit him across the nose with his knuckles, the belt's silver buckle slapped over your father's shoulder and against his back. "It was one time, two times, or three times," he said. "But really it doesn't matter."

Then he drew a line along the ridge of his nose with his finger, showing me the knot where the skin had split. By that time, his nose was also covered with fine veins.

Your father said that his sister Mary Anne, your aunt, probably didn't know about him watching her or about your grandfather beating him because of it. Your grandfather didn't say anything to his wife or daughter about how your father's nose was broken. Your father explained that his mother "knew better" than to ask, and that he'd heard her say to Mary Anne that there are things about men that women shouldn't know and shouldn't try to understand. Your father said he agreed with that.

The night your grandfather saw him standing at the window, he drove your father to the doctor, and on the way he handed him a piece of newspaper to press against his nose. He'd said, "Press on it," and then they drove in silence. Your father said he could smell old gasoline in the truck, and that he looked at the grease and dried mud on the floorboard as they drove. He said the truck smelled like men's work.

Then he said he pressed the newspaper to his nose, tasted blood in his mouth, and fell asleep against the window.

The sound of your grandfather's door opening and closing woke him up. He felt his own door being opened, and he slid from his seat and stood. Your father said that even though it was late at night, the doctor must've heard the truck's tires on the gravel, because he met them outside as they walked toward the house. The doctor greeted your grandfather by his first name.

"Looks like a broken nose," the doctor said when he saw your father, and then he smiled. He led the two of them into the room for patients, and your father sat on a black stool. He said your grandfather stood watching with his arms at his sides.

Your father sat still on the stool and tasted blood in the back of his throat when he tilted his head back. The doctor filled a syringe and warned him that it would sting at first, and when he pressed the plunger, your father's eyes watered and the roof of his mouth went numb. The syringe had two silver loops for the doctor's fingers, and he'd pressed the plunger with his thumb.

Then the doctor tilted your father's head forward so that the blood would pour out, and it pooled in a metal dish. The doctor started asking your grandfather about his business, and he laughed and then pursed his lips and squinted at your father's face. Then he prepared a needle and thread for stitches. While he waited for the doctor to finish getting ready, your father pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth and swallowed, and felt vibrations in his mouth and inside his ears.

He couldn't see the needle very well, he explained, because it was so close up to his face, but he could see the doctor's hands moving. He could see the hairs on his knuckles, and that on one finger they stuck up on either side of the doctor's ring. He could see the thread, and see the doctor tie and slide down the knots above each of the stitches. He heard the scissors clip the thread and felt his skin being pulled. Then the doctor pushed gauze into your father's nose and said it was all over. He smiled

and told him to be careful.

The way your father explained it, your grandfather then grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him up off the stool. "It was like he was reaching down to pick up two cans off a counter to put them on a higher shelf," he said. His feet fell into place under him, and once he was standing up, your grandfather kept one hand on his shoulder, looked at the doctor, and said thank you. Then he put his hand on the back of your father's neck and squeezed a little, not warning or loving, he explained, just directing him toward the door.

After he told me this, your father turned his head and slid his tongue across his lips. His tongue was pale and dry-looking. He opened his mouth and breathed in, and then he swallowed and breathed out. He didn't have anything more to say. Then and the whole time I knew him, he only told me what he wanted to, and never more than that. He left me sitting where I was, and didn't come back until the next day.

# 2

When we sat down together again, your father looked at me with suspicion. "I told you about my father hitting me," he said. I nodded in agreement, said yes, and looked at his face. One side of his mouth was white with spittle, and his eyelids were like flaps under his eyebrows. He said again that his father had hit him, and that he'd been right to do it. "Boys need to be hit when they're doing bad things," he said. "But not girls," he continued, after a pause. "Girls shouldn't be hit."

That day, your father told me about his wife Josephine. He said your mother had blonde hair and little dark eyes, and he said she was plain-faced. He didn't say "like my mother," but I thought he probably meant something like that by describing them in the same way. He said that he and your mother "got along fine," but he admitted that he didn't know if they'd ever been in love. The way he said it, the word "love" sounded strange, like it had been rusting in some secret place for a long time, and like your father had just now come to take it out. I guess I never expected him to do that.

He told me that he asked your mother to marry him because he thought he was supposed to. He asked her at her parents' house, and she said yes and then started to cry into her hands. That was the first time your father wondered if he was really in love with her or if he could ever be, looking at her long hands, and thinking that maybe she was going to change her mind and say no.

After they were married, your father said he was quiet most of the time, and that your mother was patient with his moods.

She seemed to understand that some men prefer not to talk. That didn't surprise me at all. I just couldn't imagine your father and your mother, or anyone, sitting and chatting about politics or the weather or whatever it is that people who don't love each other talk about when they're alone together.

Your father said the second time she was pregnant, your mother gave birth to a girl, and named her Althea. That was you. He didn't tell me very much about the first child, only that it died soon after it was born. He said your mother didn't have the "sturdy heart" to deal with that kind of sadness.

He hesitated before adding that your mother loved you when you were born, but was afraid that you would die too.

He said he was distant as a father. He also said your mother was fragile and tense as a mother. Because of this, or maybe just because of your own nature, your father always felt like you were watching him, suspicious, like you knew that he was up to something secret or evil. "And maybe I was," he said, and his voice sounded raspy and sad.

He never said so himself, but I believe he was a good father. I can't explain exactly why. Of course I had no chance to see him with you, but I believe it anyway.

When I imagine him as your father, I imagine him sitting with you in silence. It may sound strange, but I imagine you as a shadow, and your father as a shadow too. Your father's head is turned toward you and his shadow is big. Even though I can't see any expression on his face, and I can't imagine your face, I can see only tenderness and protection when I imagine your father's shadow, the line of his chin, and his turned head.

But I also see your father, or his shadow, reaching to stroke your small head, and then drawing back his hand with shame and sadness. I don't know exactly why I think that your father might've loved you in a hesitating way like that, but that's what I see when I think of him as a father.

Right after he told me about you for the first time, your father told me that he had a workshop. He said it smelled like paint and old copper, and that he usually sat in the workshop on a bench that faced a wooden worktable, which was pushed against the wall that faced away from the windows. Part of the table, he explained, was covered in a big dark piece of scrap carpet.

A few drips of glue had landed on the piece of carpet, and a discolored line curved along it where a heated wire had burned the fabric. He had a few jars of screws and keys and almost everything at his worktable had become flaky with rust. "The truth is I didn't do very much work in there," he explained. He just liked being able to sit alone and press his hands flat into the piece of carpet and feel it give and press back stiffly, and feel its brittleness against his palms. He also liked the faint smell of paint, as people often seem to.

Your father kept a box of what he called "men's magazines" tucked under his worktable. He said he didn't look them over very much, but that he liked having them around, especially since he lived in a house "full of women."

When he told me about the magazines, something like fear passed across your father's face. He shifted his weight in his chair and looked down at his hands, which he had folded in his lap as he spoke. I guess you could say he looked like a boy.

He'd already told me about watching his sister in the bathroom, but I think he almost expected me to stand up and walk out after he said he had those magazines. I didn't stand up, and seeing me looking back at him when he stopped talking, your father laughed feebly and lifted his hands to the arms of his chair. He patted them and told me that he needed to rest, and then he left.

# 3

The agreement between us, I understood after a while, was that your father wouldn't answer any questions. He would only say what he wanted to say, and stop when he wanted to stop. He could laugh about the things he said, but I had to be sure he was joking if I was going to do the same. I learned this the next day when we sat down together. I asked him if he was "feeling like a man" and smiled at him, maybe too much in the crude way that grown men smile when talking to boys about peeping at girls.

Your father said that he wasn't, and then he slumped into his seat and looked out the window. He sat still for a long time, and I sat next to him, not knowing if I should apologize or leave. When I did finally lean forward, planning to apologize as well as leave, your father said that he never let you or your mother see his magazines, and that he never took them into the house. "I want you to know that," he said, and he looked at me, and then looked back toward the window.

I sat back in my chair, but your father didn't say another thing to me until it was time for lunch. I stood up first, and he explained that he would eat later. I didn't see him eat lunch, but it was possible that he simply didn't go that day. Old men don't need that much food I suppose, and the lunches in this place aren't very good.

Two days later, your father joined me in the same small room where the chairs face the window, and we sat at the table where they usually leave yesterday's newspaper.

He sat down and crossed his arms, and I thought maybe I

had really offended him in the days before. If I had, your father never said so. He just started talking again, not angry or happy about it, just talking.

By the time you were old enough to have friends over to the house, your father already had the job which he kept until he came here. He didn't feel the need to tell me what work he did, just that he worked "in a shop" and that he was "in charge of the books." I had started to get used to your father's half-accounts of things, even though we'd only been talking together for a few days. I accepted that parts of his story weren't going to be very detailed.

The part of his job that he explained in depth, and the part that interested me, was his own experience during the day. He said he sat in the back room most of the time, while the other workers dealt with the customers. He had a small desk and a hooded lamp that hung from the ceiling, and the lamp's beaded chain dangled a few inches above his head as he worked. He couldn't feel it when he was hunched over and penciling in his entries, or when he traced them over again in black pen at the end of the day. But when he sat up, whether to stretch or to look around the room, the chain would touch his forehead or drag along the edge of his ear. The chain had shone brightly at a time, but the color had been rubbed away and the brass was dull in the places where your father pulled at it when he turned off the light.

Your father said he felt lonely a lot of the time, but that at least his work occupied his mind. Then he spent a long while trying to make me understand that sometimes work made his loneliness worse. I thought I'd understood as soon as he'd said it, but your father went on about the difficulty of going to work and not talking to people all day. I had assumed he would've liked being able to work alone, but maybe that's wrong. Maybe even people that seem to want solitude need to be a part of

conversations. Maybe they need it even more. I don't know for sure, but the way your father explained it, it made me think so.

He said he would return home in the evenings, not very late, but around the time that the sun goes down during the fall. Most of the people in the neighborhood would be getting home around that time too, whether they were kids playing, or men and women coming back from work. Your father explained that your mother didn't work except for taking care of the house and taking care of you. He told me that she let you play by yourself most of the time, and spent her afternoons preparing the dinner that the three of you ate together every night.

Your father assured me that your mother was a fine cook, and that he looked forward to the meals most of the time. He added that it wasn't unusual for the three of you to eat an entire meal in silence, though. He said he would calmly chew his food and fix his eyes on the salt or on the butter or on the shining edge of his plate, and your mother would rest her hands in her lap and look over at your father every now and then, and you would eat quickly. I understood that you ate the way a child does when she knows exactly how a thing is, and doesn't need anyone to remind her. Your father said he thought you were smart because of how you ate. "Even then," he said, "she knew better than to ask questions and bother people."

When he'd been a boy, his own parents had had similar dinner table manners. Your grandmother rarely spoke, but unlike your father, your grandfather did say a lot at the table. Your father's parents sat opposite one another, and he and his sister did the same, and your grandfather liked to tell the family about his day. I guess he was something of a storyteller. In his own way, your father inherited this from your grandfather, but your grandfather spoke with "a handsome man's charm," and as far as I could tell, your father wasn't much of what you'd call a showman.

Your father explained that your grandfather made grand gestures with his hands as he spoke, demonstrating the direction of a car or the flight of a bird, or whatever his story happened to be about. Sometimes he would make a big arc in the air and lay a hand upon your aunt's shoulder. She wore dresses with straps that showed her shoulders, and your father remembered watching your grandfather's big hand where it draped on her skin. He remembered seeing the white finger marks where he squeezed her arm as he talked.

I didn't think much of this as he said it, but your father got quiet and stared at the wall for a while before he started talking again. When he did return to himself, back from whatever place he'd been to in his memory, he repeated something that he'd told me once before.

"My father was a good man," he said. "I do believe that."

It was a long time before your father told me anything more about his own childhood. He seemed to want to tell me more about his relationship with you, and about how it was good to watch you grow up when you were small. He said you inherited your mother's blonde hair, which was curly and cut short when you were young. Your father liked that, and said he thought that was the way young girls were supposed to wear their hair.

But something changed around the time you started to go to school and be around other kids. I assumed your father probably wanted to keep watch over you, or if it wasn't that exactly, that he just wanted to be around you and know who else would be around you too. Maybe all fathers are like that with their daughters. Maybe they all want to protect them.

Whatever it was that made him uneasy about you growing up and becoming a social person with friends and teachers and everything else, your father accepted it as much as he could. "I had to," he said.

He also said that not long after you started school, you

brought home the first person you would call your best friend. She was a girl named Amy Prince.

Your father told me that Amy came over mostly when he was at work. He said your mother let the two of you play in your room, and that you never made much noise. The first time he saw Amy, he had arrived home without realizing that anyone else was even there. The little girl's mother arrived at the door, was greeted by your mother, and then the two of you came down the stairs, hand in hand. You were sliding your hand along the banister, and both of you were wearing homemade feather headdresses, and all the feathers were yellow. Your father said Amy was wearing little overalls with brass buttons in front.

He explained that you and Amy began to spend more and more time together, and for some reason this bothered your mother. She had said to your father that Amy was not a good girl, and that she thought Amy was influencing you. He didn't think very much about it, especially because he so rarely saw you two together. But he said your mother remained unhappy about your friendship, even though she allowed you to continue playing together. He explained that he thought she was waiting for him to understand and take her side, but he never did.

During that time, your mother had made a regular habit of taking naps in the afternoon with a damp cloth on her eyes. She had headaches and sore muscles, and she smiled only rarely.

I'll admit that by then I'd started to get the feeling that your mother had never been a woman who smiled.

The last time Amy came over to your house, the two of you had decided to bake in the kitchen. Your father reminded me that you were still very young, and that your mother expected you to play quietly in your room.

He said your mother had been jarred from sleep by the sound of pans being moved and banged, and by the sounds of laughter. He was at work when the two of you were found in

the kitchen, and your mother cleaned up the mess after sending you and Amy to your room.

Your father returned home that day as the sun was setting, and he said he remembered smelling the fall's cold air for the first time that year. Summer had been hot and long, and he tried to explain that he could smell the end of it. I think he knew he wouldn't be able to say it right, so he said, "The cold. I just liked the smell of the cold."

When he got home, your mother was sitting at the kitchen table. The mess was gone and a tightly rolled cloth lay drying in front of her. She was staring at the table and squeezing her hands together and trembling. Your father stood watching her, and then she explained what you had been doing without looking up at him. She said her nap had been ruined, and added, "And you have to punish them."

Not being used to your mother's anger, and even less used to her confronting him, your father didn't know how to respond. He'd never seen her so mad, and he became scared. I never thought I'd hear him admit that, but he said it, and it sounded like he meant it. He said he asked your mother what he should do and that she just looked straight ahead. Then he said that even though she never asked him to, he knew she wanted him to hit you and Amy. He turned from her and walked to the stairs, afraid to look back, and even more afraid to move forward.

Your father stopped talking for a moment after telling me that. He looked down at his hands. Then he continued, saying he walked up the stairs, grasped the banister as he moved, and squeezed the wood for support. The door to your room was closed, and he knocked lightly. Your father heard your voice from inside the room, and he was ashamed.

He said that when he went in, you and Amy were both sitting on your bed. You were looking at the ground and Amy was swinging her feet. You both might've been happy, he

explained, and you probably didn't know how angry your mother was. It made him mad that you didn't understand, and that you didn't know what was about to happen. He said he told you that you'd both been too noisy and that you were going to be spanked because of it. But your father didn't know what to do or how to do it, and that angered him too. "I didn't like it," he said. "Not knowing how to hit someone and just knowing that I didn't want to."

But he did what was expected of him anyway. He told the two of you to turn around and repeated that you were going to get spanked. You and Amy had been wearing big dresses, like ball gowns or ballerina's costumes. Your father spent a long time trying to make me understand. He wanted me to know that he couldn't hit you right if you were wearing those clothes, so he told the two of you to lift your dresses up. He said Amy lifted her dress first.

He told me he only hit her once. When she lifted her dress he saw that she wasn't wearing underwear, and that angered him even more. He looked straight ahead and said, "I don't know why." But the way he said it, and the way he fixed his gaze, I had the feeling he did know.

He said he only hit her once, and he hit her hard. All of the combined anger he'd felt, and the anger he'd seen in your mother's face, moved to his open hand and he struck the girl so hard that she fell forward onto the bed. She lay motionless for a moment, and you looked at her and then back at your father. When Amy stopped being stunned, she stood, moved back to the edge of the bed, and lifted up her dress again. Your father said that suddenly everything went blurry. He turned and left the room with Amy still bent over. By that time, he said, both you and Amy were crying softly.

Your father also felt tears rising as he rushed to his bedroom. He walked toward his bed and stood still, then walked back to

the door, and then back to the bed. He sat down, raised his hands to his face, and pressed his fingers to his eyes. He breathed in deeply and stopped his sobs.

Your father said that of all the things he remembered from that day, nothing was like the smell of his hands. "It was just like the air outside, only opposite," he explained. "All I could smell was heat."

After he spoke, your father raised his hands to his face. In the same way he'd just described, he pressed his fingers to his eyes. I thought he was crying until I saw his shoulders rise with his breath. He lowered one hand and kept the other pressed to his face, then turned it to smell the backs of his fingers. I don't think he was pleased or disgusted. I think he was just remembering.

Your father didn't tell me much more about Amy Prince. He said she never came back to the house, even though you asked your parents if she could. He said you were upset, but that you knew not to ask twice. "And even if Althea had asked again," your father explained, "I don't know if the little girl would've wanted to come back, or if her parents would've let her if they knew what I'd done."

When your father said that, I wanted for the first time to console him. I wanted to tell him that he hadn't done anything terribly wrong, but as I leaned forward to start saying so, he pushed his hands to his knees and rose. He seemed exhausted, and he left without saying anything more.