# BLOOD CALLS TO BLOOD

## Chuck Smith

When I was a teenager, my adoptive father Felix set a few rules for me to follow.

They were very simple rules: Do not do drugs. Do not get a tattoo. Do not get ear piercings. Have a girlfriend. In fact, have many girlfriends. But don't get them pregnant. Stay in school. Don't hesitate to let him know if you need him. He'll fetch you wherever you are if you call him.

And based on these rules I was pretty much a model of a stellar, outstanding young man, at least in my father's eyes.

I didn't do drugs and was deeply terrified of illegal substances.

I did not get a tattoo and I did not have ear piercings.

I didn't get anyone pregnant; I didn't even have a real girlfriend.

I stayed in school.

All that should make me a pretty well-adjusted young man. But it didn't, not really. Not at all.

Truth be told, being an adopted child bothered me a lot.

At first, being adopted had its perks for me. It helped, I guess, that the woman who I thought was my biological mother was Pepsi Paloma, the bold star from the 80s who committed suicide when she was 18 or 19 years old. When I told people that I was the son of Pepsi, I would get a combination of pity and curiosity. It made things… easier for me.

For instance: In the sixth grade, I told one teacher—probably our Math teacher—that I was Pepsi's son, because she asked me about my parentage. People often do, because I'm white and I have an American surname, and many think it's a license for them to pry into the details of my life. And anyway, I didn't want to lie.

A few days later, my other teachers called me to the faculty room to show me off to their fellow teachers who would then ask me, "Is it true that you're Pepsi Paloma's son?" This was followed by a barrage of questions and statements.

"How did that happen?"

"You really look like Pepsi!"

"Where is Pepsi's family now?"

"Who takes care of you now?"

"Your family is very nice."

"You're so lucky!"

I had no problem answering these questions, except for one: "*Sino ang tatay mo?*" Who is your father—the question everyone asked. Of course they would ask it. It was well-reported that Pepsi lived in Olongapo, so they immediately assumed I was Pepsi's child with an American stationed there. And they would tell me as much. (What they forgot was that Pepsi's father was American and I could have gotten my looks from her.)

"*Anak ka ni Pepsi sa Kano?*" You're Pepsi's son with an American? I've been asked on several occasions. And I would say, truthfully, that I didn't know. My adoptive parents said they didn't know who my biological father was. I had no reason not to believe it, so I left it at that.

That assumption was repeated to me so often that I just accepted it to be my truth.

In my head, this was what happened: In Olongapo, where her family lived, Pepsi had a baby with an American who was based in what had been Clark Air Base then. Pepsi gave birth to me but had to hide it because she was an actress. The American left the Philippines. Pepsi killed herself.

It's not a pretty story, but as far as narratives go it ties everything together nicely. It's a clean narrative. And maybe I even believed it, if only for a bit; an inaccurate story is better than no story at all.

How I answered these, I don't remember, though I did sometimes feel adults shouldn't really be asking me, a child, those questions.

The perks arrived after my sixth-grade teachers practically paraded me before the school faculty. My teachers were nice and considerate to me and I got good grades I didn't always deserve. I received extra attention. I was chosen to play God the Son in our school's Living Rosary—a big deal in our very Catholic elementary school. I was asked to recite the responsorial psalm during our masses—even though I had a lisp.

I probably sounded like this: "Rethponthorial Pthalm. Let our rethponth me."

For our school-wide United Nations Day program, I was Pope John Paul II. With my batchmates playing other prominent figures like Lee Kuan Yew, Mother Teresa, Michael Jordan, and Jaime Cardinal Sin, my Pope John Paul II danced to the song "Fame" by Irene Cara from the movie of the same title: I feel it comin' together/ People will see me and cry, fame/ I'm gonna make it to heaven/ Light up the sky like a flame, fame/ I'm gonna live forever…"

"Who's Lee Kuan Yew?" I asked my friend Marc who played him during the United Nations Day show. "I don't know," he said. "But he's part of the program so he's probably a rich man."

Predictably, it was in high school when my resentment about being adopted grew.

I wanted to know who my biological father was. My family refused to answer my questions.

There is a very Filipino belief about adopted children that assumes we, at some point, will look for our birth parents in order to fill the void that we supposedly have in our metaphorical inner selves. The Filipino's sense of family is supposedly so strong that we should supposedly feel if someone is or isn't related to us. *Lukso ng dugo*. Literal translation, according to Google: leap of blood. We should feel our blood leaping when we see, say, a long, lost daughter or an estranged father.

But I wasn't looking for that. I didn't want that leap in my blood. I just didn't want the identity of my father to be a literal blank.

When I was young, it was easy to deflect questions about my parentage. As a teenager in high school, however, my parentage—among other things—turned me into a freak. I was white and I have an American surname. For a while my classmates thought I was cool, because I was white with a very American surname.

Later, they found out my white father was nowhere to be found. That I didn't even know who he was.

To them it meant one thing: I was the son of a G.I. stationed in the US naval base in Clark with some girl from Olongapo, where the red light district was located.

The questions they asked—unlike those asked by my teachers in Grade 6—were difficult to answer.

"You don't know who your father is?" "Your father left you?" "You're the son of a prostitute?"

Suddenly, the narrative wasn't so clean anymore.

I didn't want the identity of my father to be a literal blank because it meant the answer to those questions could be anything anyone wanted it to be. And I didn't always like their answers.

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I was 15 years old. I followed the rules my father had imposed, but barely.

I was a weird, fat G.I. baby with a lisp, so I didn't have a lot of friends (though I had a few)—hence, no opportunities to get drunk or do drugs. I did not get anyone pregnant because I still did not have a girlfriend.

I was also doing very poorly in school. But I was still in school, so I was still well within the standards set by my father.

My teachers, who didn't know I was the alleged son of Pepsi Paloma, showed a bit of concern because of my poor academic standing, but there's not a lot they could do. I was no different from the other lazy, indifferent students in class.

I have learned how to cope with the void.

If the identity of my father was a blank, then it means he could be anyone I wanted him to be.

I learned how to lie about him. Whoever first said that lying is bad was probably not an adopted child.

Someone might ask:

"Is your father an American?"

"Your mother's Filipino, right?"

"You know who your father is?"

"Where's your father?"

And I would say, yes, my father is American, that's why my surname is *****. Yes, my mother is Filipina, so that means I am half-American. Yes, I know who my father is, of course. He's in the States, with my mother. No, I have no plans of migrating to America. Why are you so nosy?

Of course, I didn't say that last bit.

There's a hidden, perverse joy in the fact that you don't know who your biological father is. He could be anyone and everyone. This is a perk, because you may not like who or what he is in real life.

My favorite imaginary scenario: My father is a billionaire! And he's looking for me, his long lost son in the Philippines!

Or: He is a decorated war hero! (my father could still be a G.I., after all)

(Were there war heroes among the G.I.s stationed in Subic?)

There was a time when I became fixated with the late American actor River Phoenix. I read about him in one of the US tabloids my mother had lying around in the house. There was something intriguing about him. He wasn't handsome; he was pretty. He had long, blonde hair and clear blue eyes. River was a tragic figure even before he became an actor—he and his family were members of a religious cult. According to the tabloids I read, River was rumored to be in a secret relationship with Keanu Reeves, his co-star in the Gus Van Sant movie *My Own Private Idaho*, before he died at age 23.

I felt like he could be my brother. Why not? *Lukso ng dugo!* I felt as if my blood called to his blood the first time I saw his photo. His parents were hippies and they traveled all over the world, so maybe it's possible? Of course, a quick Google search revealed River's parents were nowhere near Asia at the time I was conceived.

It wasn't *lukso ng dugo*; I was just attracted to River Phoenix.

You can say my crush on River Phoenix was sort of my sexual awakening. He was the first person that made me realize that I liked boys.

But homosexual awakening, at least for me, wasn't an instantaneous moment; it was a gradual progression until I reached the moment when I could admit to myself that I'm gay.

I studied in an all-boys Catholic school. Most of my classmates—perhaps much like every other high school student in the history of Philippine education—were mean and rough to those who weren't like them, which made me a target. I was fat, check. I had a lisp, check. They knew I was hiding the fact that I was gay, even though they probably figured that one out before I did, check. It was just a bonus for them, I guess, that I was a *putok sa buho*, a fatherless child. It's a low-hanging fruit in the joke and bullying tree.

They didn't bully those who were already openly gay. Openly gay guys were fine; it was what they didn't know or understand that they made fun of. But the openly gay students were often subjected to sexual jokes (I realize now that what we considered "jokes" as kids was actually abuse).

On campus, it wasn't uncommon for a guy to grab someone's hand and place it on his own crotch. "It's big, right?" the guy would say. "Stop it!" the subject of the abuse, usually an openly gay student, would say. "I'll blow you if you don't."

I was a sophomore in high school when I first saw a real-life penis of someone my age.

Q (I still remember his name, but let's call him that) was one of my friends in school. Which meant he teased me a lot, though not to the point where I considered it bullying. We went out every Friday with other friends to watch movies or play bowling at the mall that was an hour-long jeepney ride away from school.

One afternoon during lunch break, a few minutes before the start of our classes, Q and I were left alone in the classroom.

"Chuck," he asked. "Are you gay?"

I was nonplussed. This wasn't the first time someone questioned my sexuality. However, it was probably the first time someone questioned my sexuality and expected an answer. How should I respond to that?

"No!" I might have said.

As if not really waiting for my response, Q unzipped his pants and pulled down his underwear, revealing his erect penis.

"Do you want to give me a blowjob?" Q asked.

I'm not sure how long this exchange took place. In reality, it couldn't have lasted more than a couple of minutes. Our classmates were starting to

fall in line outside the classroom; class was about to start. Even if he was the one who propositioned me, I was certain he wasn't keen on letting our peers know he was giving me—as one of the characters in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* said—unfettered access to his dick.

The moment felt like an eternity. Thoughts rushed through my head like an unstoppable stream. What the fuck is happening? Is he serious? Are homosexual sex acts part of my father's rules? I may have asked myself later on.

More importantly, I thought: What happens if I say yes?

Do I want to say yes?

I didn't know, but I know I shouldn't say yes.

"Stupid," I told Q and walked out of the room.

Q and I still remained friends after that; this was how high school was like for boys, and we were conditioned not to be offended. Occasionally, Q would go to my house, which was only a couple of blocks away from his, to play video games or just hang out.

"Do you have a diary?" he asked one time we were hanging out in my room.

"No," I answered. "Why?"

"Nothing," Q said. He added: maybe you're hiding a nuclear bomb that could save the world someday. Then you die. How would the world know of your heroism if you don't have a diary?

After watching a movie at the mall one Friday, Q invited me to stay at his house for a bit before I went home. I thought nothing of it and said yes. His family was watching TV in their living room when we arrived. We went straight to his room.

"Wait," Q said. "I'll just change my clothes."

I sat on his bed and tried not to look at him while he was removing his clothes. He wasn't trying to hide his body from my sight.

Q removed his shirt and his pants, leaving him in his underwear. Q looked at me; he caught me looking at him.

I write this story now and realize this is the point where my choice dictated whether the narrative would be neatly tied together or not.

I'm not sure what my choice ended up doing.

I just sat there, looking at him, not moving, trying my hardest not to move as he stood still, looking at me. He just stood there. As if we were waiting for something, but we didn't know exactly what we were waiting for. It felt like an eternity. Me, sitting on the edge of his bed. He, standing there, almost naked.

Q started to move. He got clothes from his closet and started dressing up.

Memory, I'm sure you know, can be a fickle thing. Every story I tell you is true, but the veracity of its truth depends on the limits of what I can remember.

Still, I swear this is what happened next: Q looked at me. Then he smiled, as if in acknowledgement that we now both share a deep, deep secret.

"Come on," he said. We stepped out of his room, out of the house.

He offered to walk me home. No need, I said, it's only a couple of blocks away. I'll manage.

Okay, Q said.

I didn't keep a diary. But if I did, that was probably something I would have written down immediately.

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My father Felix and the literal unknown entity that was my biological father had one thing in common.

My biological father was presumably American. Felix, my adoptive father, is also an American, although via naturalization.

In the early '90s, he and my adoptive mother Luz left for the States to work. Felix was a police officer and Luz was a businesswoman in Manila. They made enough money to support their three sons and one daughter. My four adoptive siblings went to good schools; three of them were almost done with college when their parents decided to take care of me. Both Felix and

Luz were in their late 40s when they took six-month-old me in. I was already an adult when I learned that some of their relatives cautioned against that decision; they were too old to raise another child. But they raised me anyway, perhaps confident in the fact that they were earning good money.

Then, they stopped making good money; Luz began having a hard time with her business when dictator Ferdinand Marcos was forced out of office and Cory Aquino came to power.

After staying in the US for a couple of years, Luz eventually returned to the Philippines to resume her work as a businesswoman and take care of me and my older sister. Felix stayed in the US for several more years, long enough to qualify for US citizenship.

Because Felix was in the US for most of my young life, I grew up without the presence of a father.

In my late teens, people still asked me if my father was American and if he was in the US. They still asked if I knew who my father was.

And I would say, yes! My father is American! He is living in the States! In California! In Sacramento, specifically! I made sure to give little details ("He lives near a place called Arden Fair Mall and a hospital called Kaiser Permanente!) to make my answer believable.

Of course they were asking about my biological father. But I was talking about Felix. Felix was, after all, also my father, and he was also American, and he was also in the US. Technically, it wasn't a lie.

I was 16 years old and in my last year of high school, when Felix returned to the Philippines for good, after more than a decade of working in the US. He would stay in the Philippines on vacation once a year before coming back home, so I felt I had a good gauge of him as a person. It was during these vacations when he would tell me his rules. Often casually, sometimes intently.

When Felix came home for good, I understood where his rules came from.

"Only criminals have tattoos," he said, a belief he gathered from his time as a police officer. The same could be said about his belief in drugs. He would often use celebrities as examples of outstanding people who hit rock bottom because of their alleged drug use. Occasionally, he would mention

an old family friend, Jenny—an '80s actress known as Sarsi Emmanuelle—who was arrested for possession of drugs. I'm not sure why he didn't like ear piercing in men. His concept of the ideal man was someone clean, simple, quiet, without embellishments. He also didn't like men with long hair, which dashed my dreams of having River Phoenix-long locks.

Like a typical Filipino male, he believed a young man should "collect and select" before being tied down by marriage, which explained the "many girlfriends" rule. And a man had to choose his wife wisely, he said.

Before getting married, Felix claimed he had two other girlfriends besides Luz. When it was time to settle down, he chose Luz—the smartest among his three girlfriends, he explained—because he thought she would make a good mother.

"And I also love her," he added.

Felix valued education. He was a child during World War II. When the Americans retaliated against the Japanese in the Philippines at the tail-end of the war, his family was uprooted from Tanauan, Batangas to Meycauayan, Bulacan, where he worked at his aunt's bakery to help support his siblings. When he started earning a living, Felix sent his younger sister Nena to school.

My brothers said our father brought them to the slums of Tondo when they were younger. "This is what will happen to you if you don't study well," he told them.

He did not believe in ghosts and refused to watch horror movies. 'What's the point," he said. "It's not real."

He liked sports. He believed Ferdinand Marcos was a good president; it was his wife Imelda who made him corrupt. He was once an extra in an action movie starring Fernando Poe Jr., the so-called King of Philippine Movies. He was featured on the front pages of newspapers in the late '60s after he returned a huge sum of money to its owners. He was very proud of that. He also claimed a photo of him hitting a protester during the First Quarter Storm appeared on the front page of a newspaper. He wasn't very proud of that one.

Felix also did not answer my questions about my biological father. "You know," he would say calmly. "Your life is not perfect here. But you're lucky to have what you have right now." There was no malice whatsoever in

his answer. But it was hard not to dwell on its real meaning: Do not look for things you do not have. You know you're adopted, right, my father seemed to be saying. Imagine what your life would be like if you weren't with us. It was the equivalent of my brothers' trip to the slums.

I guess that's another rule, although an unspoken one: Don't ask about your biological parents. Be satisfied with what you have now. It's a good rule, and I tried to follow it to the best of my abilities.

At 16 years old, I was getting to know my father Felix for the first time. Felix was trying to get to know me, too. Trying, because there were a lot of things I was hiding from him: That I didn't agree with a lot of his beliefs (I didn't believe Marcos was a good president); that I wasn't doing very well in school; that I was gay. I didn't know him well enough to know how he would react if he found out.

We were taught to love our family naturally, unconditionally. Blood is thicker than water. Familial bonds are stronger than bonds of love or friendship. But as I got to know Felix, I wondered if this applied to me too. I was adopted, so there was no biological connection between us. No *lukso ng dugo*, his blood did not call to my blood. And I didn't grow up with him around, so we didn't have the chance to develop a familial bond.

I loved my father Felix because I did. He was my father and my family was my family; I was never given a reason to believe otherwise. I knew the sacrifices he had to make to raise me and support me.

And—pragmatically speaking—I didn't have a choice. It wasn't like I had any other fathers around.

But Felix had a choice. He had three sons and a daughter. He didn't need another one. He chose to be my father even when he didn't have to.

And—pragmatically speaking—he could very well have chosen not to be my father, right?

Blood is thicker than water. As an adopted child, am I blood or am I water? Is there a chance that I'm neither?

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One of the requirements for graduation in my Catholic high school was to attend a three-day religious retreat in Batangas, a few hours' drive away from Manila.

My classmates loved these retreats because it meant they got to hang around with their friends in an out-of-campus setting. I didn't have a lot of friends in my class. And I was constantly teased—though no longer just because of my size, lisp, parentage, and sexuality—so I didn't exactly look forward to spending time with them. But attendance was mandatory. Stay in school, as stated by my father's rules.

The facilitator of the retreat was a young priest named Father Oggs. My classmates liked him; he liked making jokes.

"You cannot take anything with you when you go to the Kingdom of God," he said. "You like working out, but your muscles will just turn to dust when you die. Worms will just eat your body. What if the worms were gay?"

Father Oggs did an impression of what he thought a gay worm would say while devouring the body of a fit, young man, with limp wrists to match: "I'm so lucky! These muscles are yummy!" Everyone laughed. I didn't know if I was going to laugh or get mad.

During our last night in the retreat house, we were divided into groups for a group confession. We were asked to share our sins, our secrets, whatever was ailing our hearts that we would want to share to God.

"I masturbate every day," R said. Father Oggs told him to stop the self-abuse until Christmas and offer his release on that day to the Lord.

"I hate my father," said E. He revealed his parents weren't married. He resented his father for it. He lived with his father while his mother was in the States; he hoped to migrate to the US after he graduated from college to stay with her. Father Oggs asked the group to pray that the anger be lifted from E's heart.

"Your turn," Father Oggs told me. "What is bothering you, *****?"

I had been asked a lot of questions in my young life. I had been asked questions people probably shouldn't have asked me. But no one had ever asked me this.

I was not prepared. What was I going to say? I thought. What was bothering me?

For a while, I considered saying I didn't like being bullied. I considered admitting that I was gay.

I considered just saying that I was an adopted child and that my biological mother was Pepsi Paloma, a '80s softcore actress who had killed herself. That was the easy way out, an automatic sympathy card. Telling people that I was the son of Pepsi Paloma had made things… easier for me. But that was not what ailed me. Not at that moment, anyway.

"I'm adopted," I said. "My mother committed suicide. I don't know my father. I don't know who he is." That wasn't a lie. I no longer remember what Father Oggs told me after my confession.

We went back to school the next day. As a surprise, our teachers called our parents while we were at the retreat house and asked them to attend mass with us in school as the culminating activity of our retreat. I looked around the room; my father Felix wasn't there. Call me if you need me, his rules stated. Apparently, he was allowed to break his own rules.

E's father wasn't there either. We sat at the back of the room, along with the others without their parents in attendance. We didn't talk to one another. But sitting there, together, by ourselves, I felt like I knew what we wanted to say to one another. I immediately went home after the mass. When I got home, I saw Felix, washing the car in our garage.

Didn't you get a call from my teacher? I asked.

I did, he said. Was I supposed to go to your school? I didn't understand your teacher when she called.

Yes, I said. It's fine. It wasn't, of course, but I wouldn't tell him that.

Later, we were in his car. Felix took me with him to run some errands.

Out of nowhere, he started telling a story.

Felix narrated: "Did you know that when Pepsi died, her boyfriend Joey (who, he clarified, was not my father) wanted to take you away from us?

"Pepsi's family wanted to take you, so Joey took you to Olongapo during Pepsi's wake in Manila. But on his way there, his car (a relatively new car, Felix emphasized) malfunctioned in the middle of the highway.

"When he got to Olongapo, a sudden gust of wind opened the windows in their house. (When Felix told me this detail, I imagined the lights in the house flickering, the windows opening violently, like in a low-budget horror movie.) Joey took those as signs that Pepsi wanted you to stay with us."

"He returned you to us," Felix said.

Why are you telling me this, I asked him.

No reason, he said. "I just remembered."

There was no easy way of knowing if the story he told me was true. Why even tell me this story in the first place?

But if you ask me, I'd choose to believe it's because Felix felt a leap in his blood.