

# 2

## One Reader's Story

### Preview

Ryan Klootwyk's childhood was torn apart by drugs, alcohol, and violence. He had no one to turn to for help. But as a little boy, he discovered a safe place he could always go when times were hard. That place was the world of books. Ryan's story shows how a love of reading can carry a person through painful experiences.

1 "Drink it. It will make a man out of you."

2 Ryan Klootwyk jerked his head away from the cup of beer that his stepfather Larry was shoving in his face. "But I don't like how it smells," he pleaded. For a moment, Larry just glared drunkenly at the eight-year-old boy, his bloodshot eyes like two cracked windows. Then he raised the cup high in the air and poured the contents on Ryan's head. As Larry stormed out of the room, Ryan sat quietly at the table drenched in the stinking fluid. He was relieved. Larry could have done much worse; he usually did.

3 Nearly twenty years later, Ryan remembers that moment as if it were yesterday. He tells the story, sitting at another table—his own—with his wife and two young sons. Watching his kids

play, Ryan thinks how different their childhood is from his own. "My children will never have to go through what I went through," he says, shaking his head. "Never."

Ryan's childhood home was 4 shattered by heroin. Both his parents were addicts. When Ryan was six years old, his father died, an apparent drug-related suicide. Alone and vulnerable, his mother soon brought a new man into their home. This was Larry.

When Larry first entered Ryan's 5 life, he seemed friendly. He took Ryan and his brother Frank fishing. He bought new furniture for the house, and Ryan's mother told the kids to call him "Dad." The two lonely young boys started to accept Larry in his new role. But Larry was keeping a secret from the family. Underneath his pleasant exterior, Larry was a monster.

6 Ryan's first glimpse into Larry's true nature occurred a few months after he had moved in with the family. Ryan's dog—one that had belonged to Ryan's father—had an accident on the carpet. High and drunk, Larry announced he was going to kill the dog. Horrified, Frank shouted for him to stop. "That's my dad's dog! That's my dad's dog!" he screamed.

7 Larry ignored Frank's screams, but when their mother heard the commotion and yelled, "Larry, what are you doing?" he snapped. Seven-year-old Ryan watched in helpless horror as Larry beat her, hitting her face with his fists. "My childhood ended that night," Ryan says today. "I hid behind the table and watched him. I had no idea why he acted that way. I only knew I was scared that he would kill one of us." Ryan, Frank and their mother fled into the boys' bedroom. Immediately, Larry cornered them there and issued a stern warning. "Don't you ever, *ever* mention your father to me again," he hissed. Terrified, the little boys could only stare.

8 As Larry wandered away, Ryan felt emptiness and terror threaten to overwhelm him. There was nowhere to go; there was no one to turn to. But a comforting thought broke through his despair. Reaching under his bed, he pulled out a battered copy of his favorite book, *The Five Chinese Brothers*. Crawling into bed, he quickly lost himself in the familiar pages. Thoughts of Larry's brutality, of fear, of pain, of humiliation faded as he read the story of the brave, clever little brother who saved everyone. Ryan was only seven, but he had already found the lifeline that would keep him afloat through the horrifying years ahead. He had discovered books.



*Ryan Klootwyk today*

Larry supported himself by robbing nearby households and businesses. With the police constantly trailing him, he had to keep moving. The moves would often occur without notice. "I would come home from school, and we'd be out the door," Ryan remembers. Traveling from motels to shelters, from friends' houses to apartments, Ryan lived in six different states and passed through fifteen separate schools, never staying in one place more than a year and a half. The constant moving took its toll. "I wanted to be a normal kid," he says, "but transferring from school to school made that impossible. The only people that were constant in my life were my mother and my brother. They were the only ones who knew how bad things were. My biggest fear as a child was that I would lose them, that I would be totally alone."

10 When Ryan was eight years old, that fear almost came true. This time, the family was in Texas. Even drunker and angrier than usual, Larry began kicking and stomping on Ryan's mother. Frank, now nine years old, made a desperate effort to protect her. When he stepped between Larry and his mother, shouting "Don't hit her!" Larry turned on the boy. He kicked him in the face with his heavy black boots. Frank crumpled to the floor.

11 For the rest of that evening, little Ryan watched over his brother and tried to comfort him. "I could see that his eye was swollen shut, and pus and fluid were oozing out of it," he recalls. "Nothing Larry ever did hurt me inside more than when he hurt my brother like that," says Ryan, his voice wavering. Alone in the darkness with his silent, wounded brother, Ryan quietly sobbed through the night.

12 The next day Frank was a little better, and his mother took him to the hospital. Ryan went along. Larry instructed the boys to lie about what had happened. "Tell them you were playing baseball and Frank got hit in the head with the bat," Larry said. The boys and their mother obediently lied, but the injury still made people at the hospital suspicious. A police officer questioned the kids, but they stuck to Larry's story.

13 "I wanted to tell the truth, but we were so afraid of Larry," says Ryan. He still feels the frustration of those days. "We knew what would happen if we told the truth. They would take him away, he would be in jail for a short time, and then he would come out and get us, and he would kill Mom." Without the boys' cooperation, the police could do nothing. And a few

weeks later, Larry, aware of the watchful eye of the police, decided to move the family again. In yet another state and another school, the beatings continued.

14 Amazingly, amidst the constant abuse at home, Ryan did well in school. "School was the one safe place in my life. When I was in school, I was away from Larry. I was free from threats to my family. I could pretend to be a normal kid," recounts Ryan.

15 As a third-grader, Ryan won a school reading contest. The prize was a copy of *Charlotte's Web*. The book quickly became a new favorite. In it, a little runt pig, Wilbur, has his life saved twice: first by a kind little girl, and then by a clever and loving spider, Charlotte. Charlotte's first word to Wilbur is "Salutations!" Like Wilbur, Ryan had no idea what the word meant. He appreciated Charlotte's explanation to Wilbur: "Salutations are greetings," she said. "When I say 'salutations,' it's just my fancy way of saying hello." Ryan loved Charlotte for her friendship and kindness to lonely little Wilbur.

16 Charlotte and Wilbur joined the five Chinese brothers and Ryan's other favorite characters as pieces in a shield between him and the horrors of his home life. "Reading was a way I could forget about everything," he said. "It was the only thing that was completely in my control. I am not sure if I would have survived without it." He looked for things to read the way a hungry child might look for food that others had overlooked. "Once I even found some old history textbooks in the school trash can. To someone, those old books were trash, but to me they were a treasure. I took them home and read them cover to cover."

17 Ryan's success at school had no effect on his troubled home. Each time he transferred to a new school, he concealed the painful truth of his home, of his mother's addiction, of the constant moves, and of Larry. Ryan's strong grades and good adjustment to school were all his teachers saw. Outwardly he seemed to be doing well. Inwardly, he was begging for help. "Sitting in all those classrooms, I remember thinking 'Why doesn't anyone do something about what is happening?'" Ryan remembers. "I desperately wanted someone to ask about us, to investigate, to care. I was incapable of asking for help. I was ashamed about what was happening to us, ashamed at what Mom allowed to go on, ashamed that I couldn't do anything about it. And, on top of all that, I was afraid that if someone found out about our family, they might separate my mother and brother and me. I was so scared, I just kept it all inside," he explains. In silence, Ryan endured years of abuse, violence, and intimidation at the hands of Larry. "I just hoped that we would run away from Larry one day. That is what kept me going."

18 When Ryan was ten years old, his dream almost came true. His mother took the two boys and fled to Michigan, not letting Larry know where they were going. For three months, Ryan was free of the constant threat of violence. But the freedom did not last. Ryan returned from school one day to find Larry sitting on the couch with a smile on his face. "Hi," he said smugly.

19 Ryan could barely speak. "My soul dropped. I just wanted to cry. It was as if something inside me died." Again the

cycle of terror began. This time, Ryan's mother sought legal help. A judge granted her a restraining order that barred Larry from being near her home. Larry's response was to stalk the family. Lying in bed one night soon after the order had been issued, Ryan heard a window break. When he went to investigate, he found Larry punching his mother. She managed to call the police, but Larry ran away before they arrived. For three more years the family ran from Larry, moving from town to town and from school to school.

As Ryan grew up, so did his tastes 20 in reading. Instead of make-believe heroes like Charlotte and the clever Chinese brother, Ryan was drawn to real-life stories of brave men and women. He read biographies of Abraham Lincoln, once a poor boy who would walk miles to borrow a book. He read of Frederick Douglass, a former slave who became a fiery speaker for human rights. Larry's stalking continued until Ryan's mother became involved with a new boyfriend. The two men got into a fight in the street outside Larry's house, and Larry was almost killed. At last, he disappeared from Ryan's life.

At the age of 13, Ryan felt that life 21 was starting at last. Ryan's mother overcame her drug addiction and moved into a nicer apartment. For the first time in his life, Ryan was able to attend the same school for more than a year. He began to put down roots, make friends, feel at home. The future looked bright—briefly. Then Ryan's mother announced she could no longer afford the apartment they were living in. They were going to move again.

The news that he would have to 22

uproot his life once again shocked Ryan. This time, he rebelled. "I was 13, and I had *had* it," he remembers. "I did not want to move any more. For the first time in my life, I had gotten a chance to have a normal healthy life, and now someone was going to take it away again." Ryan begged and pleaded for his mother to stay, but she refused. "When we moved, something inside me snapped. It is sad to say, but in ninth grade I just stopped caring. I figured no one ever seemed to care about me, so why should I?"

23 Ryan's grades reflected his changing attitude. In just months he went from a B+ student to a student who got D's and F's. "I started skipping school, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and then using drugs. I just gave up. All the anger that had built up inside all those years was coming out, and nobody could do anything to stop me." A low point occurred when a cousin called, asking Ryan if he knew someone who would buy stolen jewelry. Ryan arranged the sale. After he and his cousin spent the eighty dollars they'd made on drugs and whiskey, Ryan asked who owned the jewelry. The cousin had stolen it from his own parents, Ryan's aunt and uncle.

24 Because of Ryan's poor performance in school, he was sent to a high school for troubled young people. There he was surrounded by students who spent much of their time trying to find a way to smoke marijuana in class. Fights were common. Far more attention was given to discipline than to learning. Once again, overwhelmed by the surrounding violence, Ryan retreated to the one safe place he knew—the world of books.

"I cut school to go to the public library and read," he remembers. "At school, it was clear that the teachers had given up on the students. They were more like baby sitters than anything else. But at the library—away from the dangers of school—I could read and learn about anything I wanted." By this time, he was drawn to stories from the pages of military history books. He read about prisoners of war who survived long years of unspeakable torture. One book in particular, *The Forgotten Soldier*, moved him. It told the story of a man fighting his own personal war against himself as World War II rages around him. The author had been a prisoner. Ryan thought of himself as a kind of prisoner, too. But unlike Ryan, the author had pulled himself out of his prison and into a better life. Ryan was still locked inside his own private jail.

26 Somehow, despite poor grades and a complete lack of direction, Ryan managed to graduate from high school. He went to work as an industrial painter. While working long hours at manual labor, Ryan had time to think about his life since Larry disappeared. "I realized that I had lost control of my life. I asked myself, 'Is this what I want? Is this all there is?'" In order to cope with his own dissatisfaction, Ryan continued reading. "I worked all day and read all night," says Ryan. "I read true stories about people who overcame incredible obstacles, about people who survived wars and concentration camps. I would get depressed because I'd read about people doing amazing things, and I wasn't doing anything except complaining."

Ryan's constant reading and the 27

drudgery of his work forced him to re-think the choices he had made. “I said to myself, ‘How did I get here? What am I doing? Where am I taking my life?’” His self-examination was painful. “I became aware of how I had hurt myself, how I had wasted time and made poor choices. But I could not see anything in my future except more of the same. It all seemed like a big nothing. I grew very depressed.”

28 Then things got worse. On the job one day, Ryan slipped off a pedestal and shattered his wrist. He couldn’t work. His wife was pregnant, and now she had to work more hours to support their household. Feeling scared and sorry for himself, Ryan went to see his brother Frank.

29 “I was looking for sympathy when I went over there,” Ryan admits. “I told him I had no income, no food, no money to buy food, no way to support my wife.” But Frank didn’t want to listen to Ryan’s complaints. Instead, Frank gave Ryan the best advice he could think of. With disgust in his voice, Frank said, “Why don’t you go back to school and get an education so you can

be somebody when you *do* grow up?”

“I wanted to punch his lights out,” 30 Ryan says. “I had come over to find a friendly, supportive brother, and instead I found someone telling me what to do.” Angry and frustrated, Ryan barged out of his brother’s home. Yet Frank’s words lingered with him. “The more I thought about it, the more I realized that what Frank said was right. I needed to take charge of my life, and I needed to hear someone say it. Today I thank Frank for telling me the truth.”

One of the next books to make an 31 impression on Ryan was *Embattled Courage*. In that book, soldiers who fought the long-ago American Civil War spoke of what the war had done to them and their innocent dreams. “Once again, I realized that people who go through hell *can* learn to cope with life.”

These long-dead soldiers were in 32 Ryan’s mind a year later when he enrolled in Muskegon Community College in Michigan. He was the first one in his family to go to college. The transition was not easy.

“The first day I set foot on campus, 33 I was terrified,” he says. “I looked



*Ryan in a meeting with Paula Doctor, a writing instructor who has helped him and many other students succeed at Muskegon Community College.*

around and saw that I was ten years older than most of my fellow students, and I thought, 'What am I doing here?' I was sure that everyone in the school was looking at me, thinking I was stupid for being so old. Sometimes I still feel that way," he admits.

34 "But worse than anything was my fear of failure. I was afraid that I wasn't prepared for the demands of college, since my high school years had been such a waste. I thought if I failed, then I would be a complete failure in life, that I wouldn't amount to anything, that everything that happened years earlier would have beaten me."

35 But over the course of his first semester, Ryan's fear faded. His constant reading over so many years had done more than help him to survive: it had helped prepare him for college. Ryan quickly became one of the strongest students in his classes. His love of learning had been buried under the years of abuse and poor choices, but it had not died. "I had given up on school for so long, but when I stepped into college, my mind woke up again," Ryan says. "It was like being reborn." After two years in community college, Ryan was a solid A student.

36 His college work inspired Ryan to decide on a direction for his life. "For years, I survived because I read books about people who kept on fighting, who kept on struggling in the face of horror. At college, I realized that I could teach these same stories to others. It became clear to me that what I wanted to do with my life was to be a history teacher."

37 Ryan has made his goal a reality. He went on to Grand Valley State University, where he earned a degree in secondary education. He is now

teaching history at the same high school where he had once been a student.

38 "When I read books about extraordinary people, when Larry was hurting us or when I was depressed, I would say to myself, 'If they can survive, so can I,'" says Ryan. "Today, there are people everywhere—kids and adults—who are fighting to survive just as I was. Abuse, drugs, violence—the problems are still out there; they aren't going away. But if just one person can learn to make it, either by my story or the ones I teach, then all that I have been through is worthwhile," he says. "You have to learn from the past to build your future. That is the lesson of history."

39 "I have another mission too," he says, watching his two sons playing nearby. His older boy, Ryan Richard, is five years old; Reid, his second son, is three. "It is to be something for them that I never had. . . ." He pauses for a moment, picks up Ryan Richard, and gives him a warm hug. "A dad," he says, cradling his son. His eyes are moist when he puts Ryan Richard down. Reid doesn't notice his father coming over to hug him. He is engrossed in his favorite book—*Goodnight Moon*—one which has been read to him so many times that he can recite the words by memory. Ryan puts his big hand gently on Reid's small shoulder and embraces him. "They are what I live for most," Ryan says, drying his eyes. "When I look in their faces, when I see them looking back at me—safe, secure, and loved—I know why I am here. And despite all my anger and resentment for so many years, I feel thankful."

40 He sits on the floor with Reid. "Can we read, Daddy?" Reid asks hopefully.

41 “Yeah, but you have to start,” Ryan replies.

42 Reid’s childish voice carefully recites the book’s first line: *In the great green room there was a telephone and a red balloon . . .*

Ryan smiles. He is writing his own 43 kind of book, the book of his life. A painful chapter has ended, and a new one filled with promise and possibilities has begun.



*With Ryan on the shore of Lake Michigan are his wife Ronda and their two sons, Reid and Ryan Richard.*

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As a child, Ryan used books as a “lifeline” to escape his troubled home life. When you are troubled or stressed, what do you like to do to make yourself feel better? Does your “lifeline” work as well for you as books worked for Ryan? Explain.
2. Ryan’s favorite book was *The Five Chinese Brothers*. Later, he found a new favorite: *Charlotte’s Web*. Judging from his story, why do you think these two books appealed so much to Ryan? If you also had a favorite book when you were younger, why did you like it so much? What did it teach you or make you think about?
3. Ryan tells about a “low point” in his life when he helped a cousin sell stolen jewelry and then spent the proceeds on drugs and liquor. Yet he managed to reject such behavior and eventually turned his life around. Have you or has anyone you’ve known come back from a similar low point in life? Describe the experience and its lessons.
4. “You have to learn from the past to build your future,” Ryan says. What lessons has Ryan learned from the past? What lessons from the past do you think can help you build *your* future?