

BETWEEN TWO TRAILERS



A MEMOIR

J. DANA TRENT

FOREWORD BY BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK



Advance praise for *Between Two Trailers*

“*Between Two Trailers* is a love story of brokenness and heart-wrenching pain, all wrapped up in reconciliation that will invite readers to pause and consider the places where we are holding on to pain that isn’t ours to carry.”

—KARLA KAMSTRA, TikTok personality, author of *Untangling*

“I was gripped by the first gorgeous and terrifying line and could not put the book down. We walk with J. Dana Trent as she navigates a childhood of potentially suffocating factors of mental health, poverty, and a drug ring, to eventually explore themes of family and home, all while keeping it as messy and heart-wrenching as surviving and healing truly is. She does not flinch in the face of overwhelming pain and complexity, but rather offers a nuanced narrative full of uncommon warmth and grace. Trent and her story are truly remarkable.”

—ELLIE ROSCHER, author of *The Embodied Path*

“J. Dana Trent gives flesh to words we sometimes use lightly: *redemption, hope, miracle, legacy, home*. So much more than prizes for having survived astonishing pain, these words and their stories are born of an even more astonishing grace. In her willingness to enter both the pain and the grace, Trent illuminates the fractured treasures—not to fix them, but to bear witness to their part in a life that is whole.”

—JAN RICHARDSON, author of *Sparrow*

“Trent’s drug-dealing father (‘King’) and emotional mess of a mother (‘The Lady’) laughingly, maddeningly goofed up so many times during their crazy crash lives. But one thing these two got right: By the grace of God, they bumbled into giving us a daughter who knows how to tell their story in a way that’s believably beguiling, outrageous, revealing, tender, true, sad, and funny, all at the same time. Trent’s is a memoir you’ll always remember.”

—WILL WILLIMON, professor of the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School, author of *Accidental Preacher*

“J. Dana Trent’s memoir is a carnival of drug dealing, alcoholism, mental illness, and 1970s televangelism, all seen through the wide eyes of a child and young adult. A self-described ‘midfielder’ between two dysfunctional parents, Trent’s voice rarely judges and never wavers. She not only survives her childhood but somehow makes it ‘home’ to a settled peace with her history. Her story is a literary barn burner.”

—RICHARD LISCHER, author of *Our Hearts Are Restless*

“In a world of half-truths, shiny social media posts, and projections of perfectionism, Trent’s memoir offers us an alternative of wholeness. With profound transparency, she tells us the truth about her own life and invites us to do the same. What can heal our souls, she offers in *Between Two Trailers*, is simply this: to come out of hiding.”

—ELIZABETH HAGAN, author of *Brave Church*

“This is a book of miracles, the greatest of which may be the author’s capacity to transform a dirt-true human story into hope. J. Dana Trent relates a broken history with integrity, grace, and welcome.”

—ROSALIND C. HUGHES, author of *A Family Like Mine*



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| FOREWORD |

by Barbara Brown Taylor

HERE'S SOMETHING VERY FEW PEOPLE know about writing a book: If everything works out, other people are going to read it. That story inside of you that wanted out—the true one that has you right in the middle of it—is finally going to find its wings. You're going to lose the heavy narrative weight of it. Those who read it are going to rise with your assurance that they are not the only ones with secrets like yours, and because you have told yours with such grit and grace, they are going to consider what relief there might be in telling theirs too.

So you work and work on this book, practicing the delicate surgery of telling your story without invading other people's stories. When this turns out to be impossible, you do the moral math. Will the number of people you hurt be less than or equal to the number of people you help? How do the virtues of telling the whole story stack up against the virtues of holding back? You can always create composite characters or change basic details so readers can't identify the solo actors, but if the solo actors read or hear about the book, they will be able to identify themselves. So will everyone else close to your story. While you're not sleeping at night, you imagine being in the same room with them when they let your book fall into their laps and say, "I can't believe you wrote that about me."

If you finish writing the book, that's your evidence that you believe the story is worth telling. If your book finds a publisher, that's your sign that other people believe it too. This huge blast of confidence lasts all the way to the day you receive the page proofs from your editor—the ones you're meant to check for errors and make final changes on before it's too late. There's something about seeing your story laid out like that, with all the copyright information at the front, a formal table of contents, and page numbers on all the pages, that can liquify your guts.

All of a sudden, you're reading this thing you wrote and realize what's coming: first reviews, sales reports, Amazon stars and Goodreads bars, followed by messages from long-ago friends and distant relatives who just heard about it and can't wait to read it. *Why wasn't any of this real to you before?* With any luck, a lot of people are going to read this book. *That's what you wanted, right?* It's certainly what your publisher wants, which is why you're going to get a great many opportunities to talk openly about this very intimate, very spiky story you have worked years to write down. All that time it was just the two of you on a desert island, and now here comes the cruise ship.

Dana Trent was one of my heroes even before she wrote this book. She has written others, which sparkle with her gift for saying hard things with intelligence and humor. When you meet her, you can sense that same energetic willingness to look straight at real life and say something true about it that you can swallow even if it takes two or three tries. But she has never written a book like this. In this one, she who has taken such care with other people's stories has accepted the very great risk of telling her own. She has done it for herself, certainly, but she has done it for you and me too, to remind us that there is more at work in all of our stories than any of us knows. Wounds and blessings come in matched pairs, at least if we're willing to wrestle them to the ground. That's not a promise; it's a dare, and the only way to find out what happens next is to accept.

Barbara Brown Taylor
Clarkesville, Georgia

Story Shrapnel

HOOSIERS ARE NOT TEXANS. OUR stories don't unfurl in molasses-thick accents and *Dallas* tough-guy tapestries. Indiana is the land of *Stranger Things* and methamphetamine, not Mary Karr and moonshine jars. A solid Corn Belt story is as dusty as a grain elevator at harvest. We refuse tidy narratives because archives are for rich people, which we are not. We are raccoons, not raconteurs, spewing scraps of Americana alongside rusted trash barrels. Our listeners urgently piece together whose son stabbed whose brother at whose dining room table, because the culprit may be staring right at you. He may even be your own kin.

From gossip to family lore, the oral history of my hometown and namesake—Dana, Indiana—is told in story shrapnel. It's scattered in burnt minefields of time lines and spent bullets, where wounded characters echo across Vermillion County. Ask too much—you'll get a war. Ask nothing—you'll get more.

Indiana's landlocked erraticism creates the kind of culture that births steel courage like Ernie Pyle's. A Pulitzer Prize-winning Hoosier and patron saint of frontline war stories, Ernie came from this lush land of cornfields that offers America food it loves—and people it loves to disdain.

A battlefield is, after all, a *place*. It's dirt and people and weapons and stories. It's wounds and rage. These pages are filled with the casings of blown-up lives. Herein is a true story, one that is at its best when uncovering healing in the very places where violence thrives.

This is a book for anyone who thinks they can't go home.

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| AUTHOR'S NOTE |

THIS IS MY STORY, TOLD to the best of my ability through the lens of what I remember. Events are described from memories and corroborated by letters, photos, journal entries, medical records, military records, court records, and interviews. Names and identifying details of many living characters have been changed and/or composited to disguise identities. Some time lines have been shifted and combined for the reader's ease, for clarity, and to provide further confidentiality. Any resulting resemblance to other persons living or deceased that has ensued from these changes and/or composites is coincidental and unintentional.

The exceptions are my deceased parents, King and the Lady, whose complicated lives are depicted here with authenticity and empathy.