

A Man Named Dave: A Story of Triumph and Forgiveness Study Guide

A Man Named Dave: A Story of Triumph and Forgiveness by Dave Pelzer

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

A Man Named Dave: A Story of Triumph and Forgiveness Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1, The End.....	5
Chapter 2, Fly Away.....	6
Chapter 3, Letter from Home.....	7
Chapter 4, Wishful Thinking.....	8
Chapter 5, Slip Away.....	9
Chapter 6, Regroup.....	10
Chapter 7, Foolish Crusade.....	11
Chapter 8, Changes.....	12
Chapter 9, Heaven Sent.....	14
Chapter 10, The Source.....	15
Chapter 11, A Personal Matter.....	16
Chapter 12, The Long Farewell.....	17
Chapter 13, The Last Dance.....	18
Chapter 14, Resolve.....	19
Chapter 15, All Good Things - Epilogue.....	20
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	34



Plot Summary

In "A Man Named Dave," David Pelzer offers an honest and often difficult account of his transition into adulthood. After suffering 12 years of abuse from his mother, he enters the foster system as a haunted young man. He applies himself to work from a young age, to prove his worth to society. This work ethic causes him to drop out of high school. However, the allure of success in the Air Force draws him. He enlists to become a fireman, like his father was.

Pelzer continues to suffer from setbacks in the Air Force, seemingly through no fault of his own, though he does possess a naiveté that is unusual for someone of his age. Though he continues to apply himself fully to his tasks, he feels discouraged in jobs that he does not enjoy. Due to his secluded upbringing, he lacks social skills and fails to make friends.

After several years in the service, Pelzer learns that his father lies sick in the hospital. He arrives days before his father dies, whom he only saw briefly since entering foster care. Pelzer watches as cancer takes his father. The loss makes him feel more hopeless, as he hopes to save enough money to buy a house for him and his father. Without that goal, Pelzer's life begins to feel pointless.

The only skill Pelzer seems to possess, though, is an unbreakable will to survive, which he continues to possess. After more years in the Air Force, he gains clearance as a crewman on a refueling plane. With this promotion comes a transfer to a base back in his home state of California. He relaxes his strict hold on himself somewhat by renting an apartment off base. Months later, he attracts the attention of Patsy, a young woman in his apartment complex.

Female companionship is something of which Pelzer has no experience. However, Patsy pursues him, even to the point of moving in. Though Pelzer recognizes their personality conflicts right away, he feels his scarred background damages him; he admits to himself that he does not deserve better anyway. After several months of living together, Patsy announces she is pregnant.

Determined to be a better parent than his own were, Pelzer pushes for a quick marriage. He faces marriage and parenthood with the same determination he shows for every task. Deep down, however, he fears that he is genetically programmed to fail as a parent. The birth of his son proves otherwise, however. He falls instantly in love for the first time in his life. His son's happiness even sustains him through his service in the Persian Gulf War. It causes him to stick with a broken marriage for nearly 10 years, through his retirement from the Air Force and transition into life as a motivational speaker.

Finally, however, Patsy demands a way out. She refuses to support his sometimes unprofitable life as a speaker. They remain amicable in the separation. In the process of taking over his own life, including publishing the first two volumes of his memoirs, Pelzer

meets his second wife. With the success of his books, he gains more fame as a speaker. Shortly after moving to his dream home on the Russian River, Pelzer remarries.



Chapter 1, The End

Chapter 1, The End Summary and Analysis

Chapter one opens in 1973 in Daly City, California. A 12-year-old Dave Pelzer sits shivering on a cot without blankets in his mother's garage. Due to his cold and hunger, sleep eludes Pelzer. He remembers how, at age four, his typically loving Mommy turned into The Mother, a harsh, demanding woman who often became abusive as she drank. She directed much of her rage at Pelzer, beginning with a dislocated arm at four years old. Pelzer believed that the shock would motivate her to change, but she only slipped more deeply into the role of the Mother. She banishes him from the house and refuses proper food and clothing. The Mother refers to him only as It. In the following seven years, Pelzer suffers burns, stabbings and poisoning at the hands of his Mother.

At first, Pelzer visualizes himself as Superman, able to fly away from his awful life. When he turns twelve, however, his parents separate and his hopes of becoming Superman disappear. He prays to God for any deliverance, even death.

After this detailed flashback, Pelzer returns the narrative to the present, 1973. He rushes to complete his chores before The Mother enters the kitchen, but weakness, fatigue and hunger prevent him from moving quickly. After he passes out at the base of the garage steps, the mother revives him and verbally abuses him for several minutes. She threatens his life and strangles him, threatening to arrange for a weekend alone for the two of them. Finally, she beats him with the handle of a broom, and Pelzer passes out again.

The Mother drives Pelzer's brothers to school, but forces him to run. Gasping for breath, he runs to the nurse, who initially diagnoses hyperventilation, but then notices the trauma to his throat. She catalogs his injuries, as she has done for years. He begs her not to call his mother, because such calls often result in more abuse. Finally, he falls sleep in the nurse's office.



Chapter 2, Fly Away

Chapter 2, Fly Away Summary and Analysis

Chapter two jumps forward to 1979, as Pelzer flies away from Southern California to join the Air Force in Florida. He remembers that day in 1973, when Child Protective Services removed him from his Mother's home. At 12 years old, he learns things in foster care that most toddlers already know. He learns a little about communication and uses shampoo for the first time. His foster parents, the Turnboughs, invest time and love into him in a way no one ever has.

In his teens, he becomes a workaholic, looking to prove his worth. His work soon overtakes his education, and he withdraws from school. He avoids the typical actions of teens, including dating and parties, to work forty or more hours a week.

However, he gets his GED and joins the Air Force. This requires piles of paperwork, including documentation for each of his moves while in foster care and in-depth psychological evaluations. He lies in the evaluations, fearing that the trauma from his past may prohibit him from being accepted into the Air Force.

Just before he leaves, he meets with his father, an alcoholic who is nearly homeless due to his addiction. Pelzer's father advises him to get out and not end up like he did. Pelzer feels that such advice serves to hide the family's terrible secrets.

While at boot camp, Pelzer spouts endless facts about planes. He dreams of one day flying. Pelzer's future finally starts to look bright. He dreams of building a home for himself and his father on the Russian River, where some of his few positive childhood memories took place. Before flying away, Pelzer calls Mr. and Mrs. Turnbough, his foster parents and the people he considers them to be his mom and dad.



Chapter 3, Letter from Home

Chapter 3, Letter from Home Summary and Analysis

In boot camp, Pelzer's drill sergeant reminds him of his mother, in the way he demands the men stand at attention as he barks orders. Further discouragement comes when his letters to his father return, unopened. Pelzer dreams of making enough money to buy a home for his father and himself on the Russian river.

Yet, finally, with the distance between them, Pelzer feels free of his mother. Yet, at night, he suffers from terrifying nightmares of his mother. Pelzer feels the power of his mother in these dreams; as a boy, her abuse prevented a good night's sleep. Now, these nightmares prevent it as well. He stays awake for days on end, to prevent a screaming nightmare while in the crowded barracks. His drill sergeant questions this practice, prompting Pelzer to request night guard duty, as a way to hide his secret struggle.

After submitting piles of paperwork simply to enter the Air Force, Pelzer suffers another setback, a misfiling of his paperwork prevents him from entering fireman's training. Instead, he receives an appointment as a cook. Though the job promises to be easy, it reminds Pelzer too much of the hours of fast food work during high school.

Soon after, he gets a letter from his father, confessing that his father now lives on the streets. Pelzer grieves that his former fireman, a hero, cannot rescue himself. Pelzer blames himself for his father's addictions, which causes his lack of success. Feeling guilty, Pelzer sends his father a large chunk of the money he has saved.

Instead of the easy cook's job he is promised, he receives an assignment as a field cook, which involves long hours of traveling to a training site, cooking all day, and driving back. After years of working hard, Pelzer feels degraded because he cannot seem to get ahead.

Finally, though, Pelzer's sergeant recognizes his hard work. He basks in the accolades. Yet, just as he seems to be enjoying success, he gets a call from his foster mother. Pelzer learns that his birth father is in the hospital.



Chapter 4, Wishful Thinking

Chapter 4, Wishful Thinking Summary and Analysis

As Pelzer travels back to California, he stresses about seeing his birth mother. In the same way a young child does, Pelzer hopes whatever dire situation his father lies in, his parents will get back together. He dreams that his mother will realize that his father needs a caring spouse.

At the Kaiser Hospital, Pelzer sees only a shadow of the father he remembers. The senior Pelzer lies helpless in bed, unable to speak, due to the strong pain medication he is on. From a hospital aide, Dave Pelzer learns that his father has terminal cancer. He has been sick for four months. What's more, the medicine prevents Pelzer's father from being in his right mind enough to recognize his son. Only Pelzer's older brother, now in the army, has been to visit.

Pelzer stays by his father's side, sharing the few good memories he remembers from his childhood. Even in this situation, Pelzer feels his mother's manipulation, in that she put off calling Pelzer's foster parents about his father's illness until after his father lost the ability to speak.

After several visits, Pelzer claims his father's fireman's badge, feeling that this is his father's will. Driving away from the hospital with his foster mother Pelzer decides he must visit his mother.



Chapter 5, Slip Away

Chapter 5, Slip Away Summary and Analysis

Pelzer returns to his childhood home and finds the once immaculate home is now dirty and smelly. His mother reacts with much drama and emotion over his father's death; in doing so, she attempts to make the situation about her. Pelzer begs his mother to visit his father, but she insists that she gave up on her marriage long ago.

Kevin, Pelzer's youngest brother, fails to recognize him and gives him a full tour of the house. Pelzer notices that his mother displays no pictures of himself or his father.

Back at his foster mother's house, Pelzer calls his mother's family to inform them of his father's situation. He discovers that his mother never told her own mother. In this first recorded interaction with his grandmother, Pelzer reveals that she acts in much the same irrational and selfish ways as his mother. Pelzer finally hangs up with his grandmother, takes an aspirin and rests for a long time.

Back at the hospital, Pelzer's father's aide suggests that Pelzer give his father permission to die; she shares that some people need this closure. Yet, Pelzer cannot let go. He stays with his father until his death and then calls his mother. Steve says Pelzer's father was proud of Pelzer.

After his father's death, his mother takes over his father's estate. She cremates the body and does not even arrange a funeral service. At the end of a mass, a priest reads a brief eulogy that neglects to list Pelzer as a son.

Outside the church, old neighbors congratulate Pelzer on his success in the Air Force. His father's former coworkers express their approval of Pelzer getting his father's badge.

Outside the church, after the funeral, Pelzer's mother demands that he hand over his father's life insurance policy, because they were still legally married. Pelzer tells her his true feelings for the first time and feels her grip on his dreams slip away. Yet, he hands over the papers and walks away.

Pelzer returns to his base and learns of the failed hostage negotiations in Iran. The stress of his trip proves too much. He falls ill, and Air Force doctors admit him to the hospital himself for the first time in his life. He learns he has mononucleosis.



Chapter 6, Regroup

Chapter 6, Regroup Summary and Analysis

Pelzer recovers in the hospital for one week. He feels that without the goal of buying a home for his father, his life has no purpose. After getting out of the hospital, Pelzer takes a job outside of the Air Force, in addition to his assignment as a cook. He hates his life and hides in his work.

However, Pelzer receives a new assignment to work as the cook on Project Phantom, in Egypt. Though the work remains the same, being part of a team with a purpose gives Pelzer satisfaction.

Upon returning to the States, Pelzer learns that his Uncle Dan, his mother's brother, died. His mother moves to Salt Lake City, closer to her own mother. Pelzer calls his grandmother with his condolences and again notices the similarities between his grandmother and his mother. After the conversation, Pelzer feels guilty that he never calls his grandmother.

He then calls his Aunt Jane, Dan's wife. They have a normal conversation and, despite the circumstances, Pelzer feels encouraged. After hanging up, Pelzer dwells on what could have made his mom the way she is. Yet, he places no blame, simply comes to accept the situation. He expresses his desire to break the cycle, should he ever have children.

Pelzer continues to aspire to be more than a cook. He enrolls in college but finds algebra impossible. In addition, he remains socially awkward. After three attempts, he finally passes algebra. Gradually, he moves up in rank.

Three years after his father's death, Pelzer receives a letter from his brother, Russell. Now in the Marines, Russell writes of their mother's abuse towards all the boys. After finishing the letter, Pelzer decides should he ever date someone, he must lie about his mother to protect those he loves from the ugliness of his past.

Yet, Pelzer feels that his own avoidance of his family since being placed in foster care fails to differ from his father's departure from their family. Three months after Russell's letter, Pelzer goes to visit his grandmother.



Chapter 7, Foolish Crusade

Chapter 7, Foolish Crusade Summary and Analysis

At his grandmother's house, Pelzer feels as though he is stepping back in time, as her house remains immaculate and unchanged. He feels only intimidation upon facing his grandmother. She remains bossy towards Pelzer and hateful towards his brothers. Dave finally interrupts her tirade to defend Stan, citing the young man's mental handicap.

Looking around his grandmother's house, he finds no pictures of his mother. This reminds him of the lack of pictures of himself and his father in his mother's house.

Pelzer seeks for information about his mother's past from his grandmother. Grandmother has few nice things to say about her daughter. She tells Pelzer how his mother never worked as a nurse, though this is one thing about which his mother frequently brags. In addition, Grandmother confesses that, one year when Pelzer received a bike for Christmas, his grandmother bought it. His mother had taken the credit. Finally, she confesses that, the morning he was removed from his home, she had called the authorities.

Pelzer realizes, after these revelations, that his father's advice for Pelzer to leave and forget his family had little to do with hiding the family's ugly secret and more to do with protecting Pelzer from ugliness in his future.

While in town, Pelzer sneaks to his mother's house to see his brothers, though his grandmother forbids it. He attempts to buy his brother, Russell, a beer, showing off a little. Sheepishly, Russell points out that the heavily Mormon area prohibits the sale of alcohol.

Russell describes the house after Pelzer left. Mother's abuse continued towards all the boys. Unfortunately, the youngest, Kyle, believes their life to be normal. Pelzer tries to remember the good times, but Russell was too young to recall them. After his visit with his brother, Pelzer decides against seeing his mother.

Before leaving town, he goes on a shopping trip with his grandmother. The outing begins pleasantly but, after lunch, Grandmother insists upon leaving immediately and nearly leaves Pelzer at the mall when he stays behind to finish paying for a book for his brother, Kevin.

Upon returning to Florida, Pelzer learns that there has been another problem with his paperwork. Despite his hard work and schooling, he will not receive a job as an aircrew member. Disheartened, he makes his way to the office to file discharge papers and leave the Air Force.



Chapter 8, Changes

Chapter 8, Changes Summary and Analysis

When Pelzer asks for his out processing papers, the official sends him back to speak with the station chief. Pelzer states that he has always tried his best. The Chief agrees to allow Pelzer to resubmit his papers. Once he receives the appointment to an air crew, he is stationed in Beale, California.

The summer of 1984 finds Pelzer on his first flight as an aircrew member. He works on a refueling plane. He feels his leads an adventurous life, as he must be available to fly at a moment's notice.

In Beale, he gets his own apartment, off base. As he reads next to the pool in his apartment complex, he meets Patsy, a young girl who, had she not taken the time, Pelzer would never have the nerve to speak to.

Patsy accompanies Pelzer on a drive to San Francisco to see his foster parents. She shows real interest in him, something Pelzer has never enjoyed from the opposite sex. Alice, his foster mother, assumes Patsy to be Pelzer's girlfriend, though they both deny it, having just met. Pelzer expresses concern about Harold, his foster father. Alice passes it off as a cold.

As Pelzer and Patsy drive back to Beale, Pelzer resists telling her about his real mother. He fears that his past will always prevent him from enjoying a real relationship.

In Patsy, though, Pelzer feels some commonalities. Patsy fails to get along with her own mother. She feels alienated from her family. The two date for several weeks and, though Pelzer feels things are moving too fast, Patsy soon moves in with him to escape her own mother.

Living together brings out their differences more than ever. Pelzer fails to understand Patsy's lack of drive, which stands in the way of her holding down a job. Patsy, though, expresses her love to Pelzer, though he cannot say the words.

Then, Pelzer learns that Harold has terminal cancer. He immediately begins regular visits to his foster parents, hoping to spend quality time with Harold that he missed with his birth father, before the cancer becomes too advanced.

Short months later, Harold dies, and Pelzer feels the loss to be extremely unfair. When Alice questions his relationship with Patsy, Pelzer admits that they seem incompatible. Frequently, they fight over Patsy's lack of a job. Yet, Pelzer feels protective towards her and wants to save her from herself, especially her uncontrollable drinking, which reminds him of his own mother.



Repeatedly, Pelzer insists that Patsy change. However, when she fails to do so, Pelzer feels, inwardly, that he does not deserve better, because of the emotional baggage of his past. After one year of living together, Pelzer's precious savings runs dry. He attempts to explain to Patsy that, though his job seems glamorous, it does not pay as much as she imagines.

Patsy finds a job, and the two move to more affordable housing. However, Patsy loses her job while Pelzer travels overseas. By the time he returns, many bills are months behind. In the midst of the crisis, he learns that Patsy is pregnant.

Chapter 9, Heaven Sent

Chapter 9, Heaven Sent Summary and Analysis

Pelzer fears being a parent. He apologizes to Alice for the disgrace of an unplanned pregnancy and proposes to Patsy in shame. Besides his own fears about becoming an abusive parents, like his mother, he worries about Patsy's immaturity as a mother. He calls and tells his mother of the marriage; she quickly guesses the truth about the pregnancy.

Patsy and David Pelzer are married in February of 1986. None of Pelzer's friends support the wedding, including coworkers and his friends from his time in foster care. None of them believes Patsy shows enough commitment towards him. Pelzer's own childhood friend denies to stand up as best man, even as Pelzer begs him. His friend warns that Patsy only wants a financial supporter.

After the wedding, Pelzer throws all of his energy in preparing for the birth. He buys endless presents for the baby. In addition, he decorates the nursery for their upcoming arrival. Patsy promises to reform her ways for the sake of the baby. In August, they welcome Stephen Joseph Pelzer. Pelzer feels love for the first time.



Chapter 10, The Source

Chapter 10, The Source Summary and Analysis

When Stephen turns one year old, Pelzer takes his small family to visit his grandmother. He seeks closure, though he knows he will never understand the reason for his abuse. He also visits his mother, dreaming that, perhaps, he will stand up to her.

He finds her house to be exceedingly unkempt. Dust lies everywhere and the odor is almost overpowering. Pelzer suspects that his mother only allows the disarray because she senses that her time is limited. She looks very unwell.

In her cryptic language, she tells Pelzer that his stabbing had been an accident, though Pelzer remembers the truth. She appears to separate David and the boy called "It" in her mind. David visualizes getting his revenge on this helpless woman, even as she continues placing blame on her drinking and even Pelzer's nosy teachers.

Pelzer writes how, once, he read his juvenile record. The officer told Pelzer that, at the time, not enough laws existed to put his mother away. Now, though, enough laws exist to thoroughly punish such offenses.

Pelzer resists becoming spiteful, fearing it will turn him into his mother. Yet, when she asks him to call her mom, he remains silent. When he confesses that he loves his son, she warns that she used to love hers, too.



Chapter 11, A Personal Matter

Chapter 11, A Personal Matter Summary and Analysis

After leaving the visit with his mother, he still fears turning into her. Yet, back home, he sees his neighbor treat her daughter harshly and feels sick because of it. He fears stepping in but desires to stop a situation, if it may be like his own. Pelzer understands how some of his own neighbors failed to step in during his own abuse.

Major Wilson, Pelzer's superior in the Air Force, suggests that he speak to foster children, that he may inspire them. Pelzer overcomes his fear of public speaking after months of engagements, some of which sent him to the bathroom to vomit due to nerves.

Pelzer finally feels like he serves a purpose. He refuses money for any of the engagements. Quickly, he receives acclaim in his new career. Patsy seems somewhat supportive, though she fails to understand why he refuses the pay.

Chapter 12, The Long Farewell

Chapter 12, The Long Farewell Summary and Analysis

By the summer of 1990, Pelzer feels a real strain in his marriage. He also suffers an emotional time professionally, when the Blackbird, the refueling jet he has worked on, is retired. He joins another team, refueling the secretive jet, the Stealth. However, he now has more time at home, which adds to the stress.

After one episode of being away, Pelzer returns to find a credit card with a significant balance, in his name. Patsy claims Pelzer only cares about money; feeling ashamed, he apologizes. Patsy leaves, only to return home drunk for the first time since before Stephen was born.

In August of 1990, however, Pelzer is forced to put his worries about his marriage aside when he receives orders to deploy to Kuwait for Operation Desert Shield.

While stationed in the desert, Pelzer continues to worry over his son's safety in his absence. After losing much sleep, Pelzer finally realizes he must let go of his son, somewhat. In the dark desert, during the war, he finds peace.

After the war, the Air Force institutes drastic personnel cuts. Pelzer takes a transfer to Nebraska. He also receives a call from his mother. She seeks his forgiveness, which he refuses to grant, but wishes her a peaceful final rest. She tells Pelzer that she is proud of the man he has become. In January of 1992, his mother dies of a heart attack.

Pelzer reunites with his brothers to plan the funeral and deal with his mother's estate. Finally, he forgives his mother.

Chapter 13, The Last Dance

Chapter 13, The Last Dance Summary and Analysis

In Nebraska, Pelzer's family suffers from many changes. Money continues to be a problem, especially when Pelzer learns that Patsy secretly borrowed money from his grandmother. He also feels discontented with his job, as he has now been regulated to passing out lunches to the aircrew, much like the assignment he started with in the Air Force. In addition, Patsy misses her family.

Pelzer continues his speaking engagements and, in 1992, takes early retirement from the Air Force to devote more time to his second career and publish a book about his childhood. Patsy agrees to support his decision, after Pelzer gives her some assurance that he should be successful and financially comfortable after two years.

One speaking engagement takes Pelzer to his old school. He presents his teachers with autographed copies of his first book, "A Child Called It."

Back home, Patsy remains frustrated over Pelzer's job, which brings in less money than she hopes for. In July of 1994, Patsy declares that, after two years, Pelzer has failed to provide as promised. She even calls his book untrue. Pelzer feels guilty for the tension in their marriage, but fails to understand the causes. He admits, to himself, that he feels he loves Patsy, but has no trust in her.

Chapter 14, Resolve

Chapter 14, Resolve Summary and Analysis

After eight years of marriage, Pelzer and Patsy separate. Pelzer feels guilty about leaving Stephen, feels that he is no better than his own father. Stephen seems to take the change well. Patsy believes the separation to be temporary, but Pelzer knows that it will be forever.

Patsy shows a sweet side in helping Pelzer find a place to rent in the Russian River area. Pelzer spends one week alone in his meager apartment cleaning. He calls his speaking engagement manager but is told he has no upcoming engagements.

To pay his bills, Pelzer does work at the nearby Rio Villa Resort. He continues to feel guilty about leaving Stephen. He saves all his money for Stephen's visits.

Since the separation, Patsy seems happy. Pelzer also receives an Outstanding Young Person award and works to exhaustion, yet feels like a failure. Finally, he discovers that Jerry, his manager, embezzled money from the company that manages Pelzer's engagements. Pelzer resolves to take control of his own schedule and, for now on, trust no one.

After returning from Nebraska and taking control of his professional life, Pelzer also takes control of his personal life. He apologizes to Patsy for the lack of love he has shown in their marriage and asks for a divorce.

Pelzer resolves to take life one day at a time. He learns that, though his old manager printed his first two books, they were never published and, therefore, never placed in bookstores. Soon after the divorce is final, Pelzer learns that Patsy remarried. Pelzer wishes her happiness.

During the publishing of his book, Pelzer meets Marsha, his editor. They spend much time on the phone, discussing particulars for the book. He admires Marsha, for her belief in him.

After four months, Pelzer agrees to meet Marsha. They enjoy their visits, but, towards the end, Pelzer pulls away, fearing a close relationship, given his past.

Marsha, however, reacts by pushing Pelzer to confront his feelings towards his mother. He confesses that he feels guilty because he never told his mother no. Marsha, though, insists that he did his best, and that he did what he needed to do to survive. Pelzer finds that he trusts Marsha, which he has ever enjoyed in a relationship up to this point.



Chapter 15, All Good Things - Epilogue

Chapter 15, All Good Things - Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Marsha quits her jobs with the publisher to become Pelzer's manager, despite criticism from her colleagues. She moves to the Russian River area, which allows the two to work on their personal relationship.

Business proves tough for a while. After time, however, and with proper management, Pelzer begins to enjoy financial and personal success. He buys a new home on the Russian River, the house of his dreams. He takes Marsha out to propose.

In 1998, Stephen enjoys a regular visit with his father. Since the publication of Pelzer's books, Stephen learns more about his father's past. He questions his father about this. Pelzer explains that he did what he had to in his childhood to survive. He encourages Stephen to be forgiving; he explains that a lack of forgiveness only continues to harm the injured party.

Pelzer vows that Stephen will make it as a young adult. He remembers his own positive times as a boy in this same area and enjoys the long chat with his son.

June of 1999 finds Pelzer at his wedding with Marsha. Stephen stands up as his best man; all his friends come to show their support, in stark contrast to his first marriage.

He feels his father's fireman's badge in his pocket, his talisman that he has carried on every important day of his life. He toasts his new wife, calling her his princess.

In his own perspective, David Pelzer writes that everything happens for a reason. A mental health professional, Claire, writes that, from Pelzer's story, she learns that love redeems suffering. Stephen Pelzer calls his father a good person, and Marsha writes that he always gives his all.



Characters

David Pelzer

Though Pelzer tells his own story, the book reads more like a memoir than an autobiography. Pelzer gives many thoughts and feelings and, though the historical events appear accurate, that is secondary to Pelzer's own internal journey.

In the beginning of this account, Pelzer is an adolescent boy. He lives like an unwanted pet in his mother's garage. For reasons he fails to understand, his mother treats him with utmost cruelty. Through this, though, he maintains an impressive will to survive. Through stabbings and poisonings, he vows he will live to see another day. Sometimes, though, in the cold and dark of the garage, he prays for release even in death.

After a particularly violent attack, Child's Protective Services removes Pelzer from his mother's home and places him in foster care. There he learns, like a child, to bath and dress himself. He remains social challenged for much of his adult life, though. As a way out, he joins the Air Force, hoping to achieve his dream of being a fireman like his father was. Misfiled paperwork, though, prevents this on several occasions. Pelzer eventually becomes a crewman for a refueling plane. He is stationed in his home state of California. There, he meets and marries Patsy; they have a son.

Much of Pelzer's fears about his own childhood come to the forefront with the birth of his son. He fears being a bad parent. On the contrary, he adores his son and treats him with much indulgence. His marriage, however, dissolves over time. They divorce, causing Pelzer to feel like a failure. Not until he publishes his first book does he meet another woman, Marsha, and remarry.

Pelzer as an adult is shy and insecure. He hides from society and feels, because of the abuse in his past, he does not deserve happiness. He also feels that a close relationship would cause someone unnecessary pain, because of the baggage of his past.

Pelzer's most important lesson, as the title suggests, is forgiveness. He explains to his son that a lack of forgiveness only continues to hurt the injured party. He finds peace and forgiveness towards his mother, though it only comes after her death.

Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Pelzer has two names for Catherine, his mother. As a very young child, he adored his beautiful mother, whom he called "Mommy." She reacts with affection at the name and showers love on all her boys. However, around the time when Pelzer is four, a new figure, "The Mother," emerges. This woman dehumanizes Pelzer, calling him "It." She abuses him with escalating cruelty that is hard to even read.



Occasionally, Mommy reemerges; often enough to give Pelzer hope that she can come back for good. Yet, The Mother always prevails. Alcoholism appears to be the main cause for the switch. The worse The Mother becomes, the more she drinks, in an unending cycle. The alcoholism eventually steals her beauty and, finally, her health.

As an adult, Pelzer suspects that some other trauma lays in his mother's past; he sees evidence of this in the similarities between his mother and grandmother. Neither woman seems capable of being honest about their past, however, and Pelzer can only speculate. Neither woman, in fact, sees their actions as abusive, only necessary in raising their children through difficult times. Pelzer sees the abuse perpetuate through generations and fears the same happening with his own son, though it never does.

Just before his mother dies, Pelzer goes to visit her. He finds closure but refuses to forgive her when she seems to be asking for it. He feels that she does not deserve to die peacefully. After her funeral, though, he does forgive her, in an attempt to help himself move past the tragedy of his childhood.

Stephen Pelzer

Though three men in this story are named Stephen Pelzer, father, brother and son, Pelzer's son is the most important. Though Patsy's pregnancy takes Pelzer by surprise, he immediately throws himself into becoming a great father. He insists that Patsy take care of herself, for the baby's sake; they get married.

When Stephen is born, Pelzer writes that he feels love for the first time. With Stephen's birth, Pelzer takes on many of the mother's traditional roles, from feeding and caring to worrying about Stephen's safety. While in Saudi Arabia, Pelzer lies awake, fearing that Stephen will get hurt in his absence. Shortly after this, Pelzer realizes that he must pull back some in his concern for his son and allow life to happen. Often, though, Pelzer goes without comforts, like dining out while traveling, to bring his son special gifts.

Divorce causes Pelzer to feel like a failure, only for his son's sake. He fears his son suffering as he did as a child. Yet, Stephen shows remarkable resilience in this change in his life. He asks Pelzer perceptive questions after the printing of his first book. This is when Pelzer warns his son about the dangers of harboring resentment towards a person. He encourages his son to always forgive.

Mrs. Turnbough

When Child Protective Services removes Pelzer from his mother's home, he enters foster care. He goes to live with the Turnboughs, who teach him about hygiene and manners. Mrs. Turnbough remains Pelzer's loving support and he always refers to her as Mom.



Harold Turnbough

Pelzer enjoys a loving relationship with his foster father, Harold Turnbough. A few years after Pelzer's birth father dies of cancer, Harold also is diagnosed. Pelzer goes out of his way to spend a lot of time with Harold before he passes.

Ronald

Ronald Pelzer is David Pelzer's oldest brother. He lives with their mother until age eighteen when he joins the army. After being stationed in Colorado, he suffers from nearly daily phone calls from their mother.

Russell

Russell Pelzer is another brother. Pelzer spends little time with his brothers, as any reminder of childhood seems difficult for them all.

Kevin

David Pelzer's youngest brother, Kevin, does not even seem to remember David when David pays his mother a visit after joining the Air Force. Kevin suffers from lack of adult supervision. During one visit with his brother, Russell, David learns that Kevin's teeth are rotten from too much soda and lack of hygiene.

Stan

Stan, David Pelzer's next younger brother, suffered from a high fever as a baby. This leaves him mentally retarded, which limits his abilities in life. The danger comes, though, when their mother fails to recognize Stan's limitations and encourages him to play handyman. His fixes causes fires and smaller catastrophes on multiple occasions.

Father

Pelzer's father fails to step in when the abuse starts from Pelzer's mother. The stress from the household drives him to drink also, and he throws away a successful career as fireman. Pelzer laments that, for years, he saves others' lives, but fails to save his own family. Pelzer envisions his father as Superman, one day coming to save him, until his parents divorce. At this point, all hope of salvation dies.

His father continues drinking and living recklessly until, penniless and homeless, he ends up in Kaiser Hospital with terminal cancer. By the time, Pelzer learns of this, his father cannot even speak. Yet, Pelzer stays until his father passes away. He claims his



father's only worldly possession, his fireman's badge, which he carries like a talisman from then on.

David Howard

David Howard is one of Pelzer's few childhood friends from after he enters foster care. Howard is also a foster kid. They remain reasonably close, though Howard refuses to support Pelzer's marriage to Patsy, and he feels it is doomed to fail. He gladly attends Pelzer's marriage to Marsha, however.

Patsy

Pelzer meets Patsy in his apartment complex after being stationed in California. She comes along for a ride into San Francisco and Pelzer feels amazed at the easy way they converse, though he usually feels socially awkward around the opposite sex. Patsy attaches herself to Pelzer, and, though he never really feels emotionally attracted, they move into together. Even without deeper feelings, Pelzer feels he deserves no better because of his own emotional scars.

To his dismay, Patsy shows some of the same erratic behavior as his mother, which she makes worse by drinking. Only after discovering she is pregnant does some of this settle down. Yet, she continues to live irresponsibly, spending money they do not have and demanding that Pelzer fix it. He responds by working harder and longer hours.

When Pelzer retires from the Air Force to pursue his public speaking career, Patsy agrees to support him for two years. At the end of this time, the family finances remain lean. Patsy demands a divorce. The two remain amicable, however.

Major Wilson

Major Wilson first suggests that Pelzer speak to a group of foster kids to motivate them. This begins Pelzer's new career as a speaker.

Mr. Ziegler

Eventually, Pelzer returns to speak at his own school. He meets some of his old teachers, including Mr. Ziegler. Any time Pelzer meets an adult who knew about his abuse, they remark that times were different back then, that no one talked. Pelzer remains inspired by Mr. Ziegler, however, and presents him with a copy of his book, "A Child Called It."



Jerry

Jerry serves as Pelzer's first manager as a public speaker. However, Jerry dodges Pelzer's questions about scheduling and pay until Pelzer visits the office himself and discovers that Jerry severely mismanaged Pelzer's account. At this point, Pelzer decides to work for himself.

Marsha Donohone

After buying the rights to his first two books, Pelzer begins to work personally with the publisher to get them into bookstores. His editor, Marsha Donohone, catches his attention from the start. He soon discover the feelings to be mutual and, after several months, the two agree to meet. Soon after, they marry.

Grandmother

Several times, Pelzer seeks to gain answers about his past from his grandmother, though none appear. Sometimes he enjoys talking with his grandmother, but she always turns manipulative in a way that Pelzer cannot tolerate. He also becomes frustrated that she fails to admit to the abuse that Pelzer suffered as a boy, though she does admit to being the source of some of his few gifts as a child.



Objects/Places

Daly City, California

Daly City, California is Pelzer's childhood home.

Garage

As a child, Pelzer's mother forces him to live on a bare cot in the garage, regardless of the weather.

Fireman's Badge

As a child, Pelzer admires his father's career as a fireman. After his father's death, he claims his father's badge, his only remaining possession. Pelzer carries the badge as a kind of charm.

Kaiser Hospital

Early in his career in the Air Force, Pelzer learns of his father's battle with cancer. He rushes to his father's side and remains until the older man dies. No other family member appears to visit.

Mirrors

Pelzer confesses that he never looks at himself in a mirror, because, as a boy, he remembers standing in front of the bathroom mirror and telling himself how bad he had been to his mother.

San Francisco

After receiving an assignment as a crewman, Pelzer is stationed outside of San Francisco, California.

Russian River

Pelzer's only positive childhood memories take place while visiting the fishing spots along the Russian River with his father and picnicking there with Mommy. As a young man, he vows to one day build a house there for his father and himself. This dream dies with his father, leaving Pelzer without a sense of purpose until the birth of his son. After his divorce from Patsy, he moves to the Russian River, where he continues to live.



Blackbird

Pelzer's first assignment as a crewman is on the Blackbird refueling plane, which he works on until the Air Force retires the plane shortly before the first Gulf War.

Saudi Arabia

Pelzer deploys to Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War. There, he realizes that he must cease being so overprotective of his son. He writes that he sleeps peacefully for the first time in the Arabian desert.

Christmas Figurines

Pelzer suspects his mother's failing health when he notices the dust on her prized figurines. These trinkets always represented his mother's own beauty. He guesses, correctly, that she would not neglect dusting them unless she did not plan to be around for another Christmas.

Rio Villa Resort

Near Pelzer's home on the Russian River is the Rio Villa Resort, where he works part time, to make ends meet, as he establishes himself as a speaker.

A Child Called It

Pelzer's first book tells of the severe abuse he suffers at the hands of his own mother.

Wally the Alligator

Pelzer tells how, the first time he travels overseas, after his son's birth, he saves his money by not eating meals to buy a souvenir for his son. Stephen always treasures his Wally the Alligator, a souvenir from Japan.

Air Force

Pelzer joins the Air Force as soon as he turns eighteen, as an outlet for his desire to work hard and earn his own way. He goes through much to gain entrance, due to his unusual background, but he finally gains acceptance. Even then, paperwork presents obstacles, as it prevents him from entering his field of choice on two occasions.



Themes

Forgiveness

As the subtitle suggests, David Pelzer's adulthood involves his forgiveness towards his mother. Shortly after he publishes his first two books, about his childhood, he warns his son that refusing forgiveness hurts one's self, not the person one refuses to forgive. Pelzer believes in order to have a peaceful life, one must achieve forgiveness, even for the most hurtful events.

Pelzer suffers much for which he must forgive, beginning with his mother. He suffers many feelings of inferiority until he forgives his mother. This affects all his relationships and causes a lack of trust in his marriage. For much of his life, Pelzer seems to hold the common view that forgiving his mother excuses her behavior. Even when he visits her, he adamantly refuses to offer forgiveness. In this way, he never admits to her she is forgiven, which he feels punishes her, because she never gains peace.

However, at his mother's funeral, he offers her that peace and finally forgives her, so he can move on. He realizes that her actions, while inexcusable, should not continue to plague him. He realizes that even the awful things in his life created the man he has become. This causes him to realize that truth he tells his son, that a lack of forgiveness only continues to harm the injured party; it does not, as he previously thought, injure the person who committed the offense.

Triumph

Many times in Pelzer's life, a positive break seems to loom on the horizon. Then, through events beyond his control, he misses the chance to achieve his dreams. Twice, in the military, paperwork problems prohibit him from realizing his goal, first as a fireman, then as a member of the flight crew. Likewise, though he pursues a relationship with his father for many years in adulthood, he only gets to see his father after the man loses the ability to talk and just before he dies of cancer. Finally, when he retires from the military, he seems to be pursuing a fulfilling life as a speaker and author, only to find out that his manager took advantage of him and never sold any books.

Ironically, Pelzer's eventual triumph as a successful and motivational personality results because of his many tragedies, not in spite of them. Without enormous obstacles to overcome, he would have no story of hope to offer those to whom he speaks. Pelzer possesses a resilient drive to press on, against seemingly hopeless odds, though he never explains where he draws such drive. Perhaps, this is because he cannot identify the source.

Not only does Pelzer desire to achieve triumph in his life, he strives to offer hope of triumph to others. He works exhaustively within juvenile systems to show the troubled adolescents that they can overcome their struggles. He even speaks to adults, hoping



to encourage them for the sake of their generation or the one to follow. Pelzer's ultimate triumph seems mundane; he achieves a happy marriage and a reasonably successful career that he enjoys. Yet, the distance he travels to arrive there puts such accomplishments in a loftier category.

Self-Worth

One may understand how, as a severely abused child, Pelzer feels worthless. He believes that his mother changes from a loving Mommy to the hateful Mother because of some unknown wrong committed by him. He strives everyday to be good enough to lure the Mommy back into his life. He feels guilty that the rest of his family suffers under the Mother because he feels it is his fault. He even takes responsibility for his father's departure from the family.

The real damage of abuse becomes apparent, though, when Pelzer, as an adult continues to feel unworthy of basic, human companionship and happiness. He feels he must work harder than other teenagers to one day provide for himself. Even in the Air Force, he never takes leave, feeling uncomfortable around his peers, socially. He feels that his presence would make others uncomfortable, and he does not have the right to cause discomfort to others.

Lack of self-worth shows up most starkly in his relationship with Patsy, his first wife. Her similarities to his mother compound his feelings. Though he does not feel love for Patsy and lacks trust in her, he maintains the relationship because he feels lucky that anyone would marry him. In the end, it is Patsy who must call for an end to their doomed relationship.

The separation shocks some sense of self into Pelzer, but he only channels it into his work as a speaker. He finds worth in that. Finally, his marriage to Marsha and success because of her support, give him the some sense self-worth independent of others. One lesson of this book, however, lies in the fact that Pelzer's self-worth remains damaged due to the enormity of the abuse he suffers as a child.

Style

Perspective

This account reads as a memoir, given in the first person point of view. Pelzer tells his story as he remembers it, and, though he often wonders about the motivations of other people, he never gives their perspective. With the exception of the first chapter, Pelzer gives his perspective as an adult. In the beginning, though, the story appears through the eyes of a twelve-year-old boy. Throughout life, he continues to think about these years as a boy, even after becoming a man. Finally, Marsha, his second wife, points out that his past occurred through no fault of his own.

Narrative makes up most of the story, with breaks in the narrative for dialogue at certain points. The lack of large portions of dialogue occurs because Pelzer himself avoids human contact through much of his life. In childhood, his mother prevents him from talking to others through isolation and abuse. This turns into a habit in adulthood, where Pelzer avoids going out socially or even seeking companionship. Only when Patsy fairly pushes herself on him does he develop a relationship with her.

Tone

Though the emotional matter of the account is tough, Pelzer maintains a conversational tone throughout. He offers no blame for the abuse, only his perspective and subsequent reactions. The subject matter prevents the book from containing much humor, but Pelzer offers lighthearted breaks in the otherwise serious topics.

He spends much time describing his indulgences towards his son, which vastly contrast with his own mother's treatment of him. In addition, he never makes excuses for himself, in his social awkwardness or mistakes. Yet, he describes some of his naiveté in such a way as to endear his simple character to the reader.

In the same unapologetic way, however, Pelzer describes his family, even when the descriptions are most unflattering. He tracks the changes in his mother from a beautiful young woman, to a decrepit, middle-aged woman. Not only medical issues but also her evil personality seems to cause her own decay and death. As the title promises, the book takes many twists, up and down, emotionally, but ends on a triumphant note.

Structure

Pelzer tells his story in 284 pages. He divides the book into fifteen chapters, followed by short sections called Perspectives. In the perspectives, different real people from the story give their impressions of Pelzer. Included in this are his son and second wife, Marsha.



The beginning and ending chapters cover a lot of time quickly. It seems that Pelzer gives less space to successful times in his life; the negative makes more of an impact. This agrees with his personal tendency to feel he does not deserve happiness.

Chapter titles give a clue to the subject of each chapter, but often the reader fails to see their true significance until the end of that chapter. In this way, they work to offer some foreshadowing.



Quotes

"Just a few more minutes before another day in hell begins." p. 1

"I felt that if I fell off the face of the earth, less than half a dozen people would even notice." p. 31

"But more so, I had hoped that by becoming a fireman, I would somehow ease the loneliness and pain I felt that Father had lived with every day—because of a son, a wife, and a family he could not, would not save." p. 45

"Before I left her, I clasped my hands together, then made the sign of the cross and leaned toward her ear, whispering, 'May God be with you, Mrs. Pelzer, for no one else will be.'" p. 97

"By focusing on my future, I was able to reject the present." p. 100

"Like I said, it was a different era back then; for your parents, and their parents before them. Whatever problems we had were swept under the rug." p. 106

"The only thing that was certain, as I raced my super bike toward the sun, was that I was heading into the heart of my childhood, and my life would be forever changed." p. 113

"Every time I zipped up my flight suit, I felt like my childhood hero, Superman, out to save the world from impending doom." p. 138

"After all I had been through, Patsy was the only person who had ever shown me any affection. Deep inside, I knew I didn't deserve any better." p. 160

"It was at the river when Stephen unknowingly taught me my first lesson: Do everything I possibly could as situations arose, but ease up a little and let go." p. 172

"With my hands slid under my legs, I wanted to jump up and scam into Mother's repulsive face, 'You twisted, sick Bitch! I was a toy for you to play with!'" p. 180

"'Do you love your son?' She asked...I stated, 'Yes! With every fiber of my being!' 'Just remember,' Mother cried, 'at one time I did...I loved mine, too.'" p. 188

"In a sense, Stephen was slowly becoming not only my outlet but my savior." p. 189

"Besides dedicating myself to being the best father I could, I had made a pact that I would do what I had to in order to ensure that no one became anything like my mother." p. 198

"In the stillness of the night, in the middle of the war, as a cool breeze blew from the desert, I somehow found serenity." p. 208



"Here I was, an Outstanding Young Person of the world, separated from my wife and son because I had chased a dream, only to have my trust violated again, and if I didn't freeze to death due to my firewood being soaked from the rain, I could celebrate with a Cup-O-Soup for dinner." p. 235

"My God! Marsha now yelled. 'Your mother was nuts! There's nothing you could have done to stop her!'" p. 248

"If you learn anything from my past, it's to hate no one. If you do, you'll become that person who did you wrong." p. 259



Topics for Discussion

Does this story have a happy ending? Explain.

Discuss positive outcomes of the hardships in Pelzer's life.

Who makes the greatest impact on Pelzer's life?

Discuss Pelzer's relationship to his father.

How do the problems with Pelzer's paperwork in the Air Force work out to his benefit?

How does the birth of his son change Pelzer's life?

What does the birth of his son represent in Pelzer's life?

What could cancer symbolize in this account?

When does Pelzer stop worrying that he will turn into his parents?

In the title, this book alludes to the themes of triumph and forgiveness. Discuss one of these themes.