The Life of Daniel

An inquiry into Nature versus Nurture

A Novel by Curt A. Canfield

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Dedicated to:

John Kirpan,
my father-in-law and mentor

and to

Emma Kleinhaus,
my great-grandmother, who died in
1983 at the age of 106.

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Part I – The Accountant

Chapter 1

The screen door opened and broke the silence of an otherwise quiet Monday evening. Eli, my son, came out and took a seat in the rocker by my side. Sarah, my wife, was on the other side. "Dadi, can I sit by you?"

"Sure, son." I overlooked his use of "can" versus "may." There was no use in splitting those kinds of hairs with the Amish. Their simple language and behavior was what I sought when I joined them twenty-three years ago. I was forty-one then. I looked over into his bright, blue eyes and smiled. He was seventeen years old. Unlike his English peers, he didn't talk fast and wasn't carrying any glowing, electronic device. But unlike his Amish peers, he spoke perfect English with me. I made sure of it. The one exception I allowed was his use of "Dadi."

As I rocked on the porch chair, the sun began sinking over the rolling hills in the distance. I felt my sixty-four years. This lifestyle is hard. You have to get up early and perform manual labor all day. You tend to needs of the farm and all your animals. You age faster than the English outside, but I don't mind. It's been good for the soul. It all balances out.

I laughed to myself and Eli looked over at me. "What's so funny, Dadi?"

I smiled. "Well, I was just thinking that being an accountant before I joined the Amish was a little bit like playing God. Some of my clients had to face my judgment when I found questionable entries in their ledger. When I asked them about it, some would own up to being less than

honest. They knew those entries were wrong but worked with me to make corrections. Afterward, I could see that their consciences were relieved and we were both pleased.

"But there were others who didn't care. They became ornery as mules when I pointed out their errors. They bridled when I made suggestions on how to correct them. They wouldn't budge an inch. I guess their consciences weren't working,"

Eli smiled. I'm not sure he understood the English world as well as I did, but I think he was the better for it. He was a good child, always mindful of others. He was born with a gentle disposition. It was rare that we ever had to discipline him. He listened and learned.

My remarks to Eli brought back memories of my mother. She named me Daniel for a reason. In ancient Hebrew, it means "God is my Judge." She always told me to be mindful of what my name meant. She said every action and thought that I had would be judged by God. I kept that in mind as I grew up and moved through life. I always tried to keep things well balanced and in good order.

I looked over at Sarah, who remained motionless in her chair. Eli pulled my attention away with a rare question about my past. "Dadi, did you like working as an accountant? It must have been very different from what we do now."

Eli never asked about my pre-Amish days unless I brought it up first. "I enjoyed the work, son; not necessarily where I worked or who I worked for. It was a good feeling when I brought their ledgers into balance and in good order. It was honest work, son. I knew that one day, I would have to account for my days on earth. Do you understand, Eli?"

"Of course I do, Dadi. It's what makes us different from the English."

"Well, not all of them. There are some good ones."

"I suppose there are. I only know what I've heard and seen, Dadi. I haven't had much to do with them."

He smiled and turned away. I thought about what he said. Truth be told, his childhood wasn't so different than mine. We both grew up in homes that had many traits of the German culture; things like hard work, punctuality, efficiency, and being thrifty. My siblings and I all had our assigned set of chores at home. Everything had to be kept clean and orderly as did Eli. The only difference between us was that I was born into an English community while he was born into the Amish community.

I swung my eyes over to check again on Sarah. I wondered if she heard anything of my conversation with Eli. I wondered what she would have to say about it. Eli suddenly cleared his throat as if he had something to say. I sat up in my chair and swung my attention back to him.

"What's on your mind, son?"

"I was thinking of all the things that need improving around here Dadi."

Most kids would have been anxious to get off the farm. Not Eli. He didn't sow any wild oats on his *Rumspringa* like his peers. The only thing he joined them in was attending the Sunday night "singings." It was at these events that he met Katie. He and she were both of age to begin getting serious about each other.

"I was thinking that we ought to downscale the farm, Dadi. We can make it small enough to just feed us and small enough so you can handle it. I was thinking of getting into the furniture-making business with Uncle Samuel and Aaron. They offered to teach me the trade, and it would provide a good future for me when I got married."

That's when I knew his eye was on Katie. She would make a good wife and daughter-in-law. She was quiet, unassuming, and a good cook according to Eli. He often

went over to eat lunch with her family after Sunday services and indulge in her cooking.

"Uncle Samuel and Aaron want to make fancy, custom-made furniture to sell to the rich English. The furniture would have different inlaid woods and carvings. They wouldn't cost much to make but then they would make good money by charging much more than they cost."

I nodded to show my understanding, not necessarily my approval. Samuel and Aaron were older than Eli. It worried me that they wanted to involve him in working with the English in building this sort of non-Amish furniture. I also thought there was something more to their invitation than just looking after Eli's interests. I suspected it had something to do with my money.

Eli did not know it, but I had a large sum of money tucked away before joining the Amish. After marrying Sarah, I used some of it to buy property and construction materials for our home and outbuildings for our farm. We also spent a considerable amount for our livestock.

Since the Amish love to gossip, there was a lot of speculation over where that money came from. Sarah heard most of the talk and passed it onto me, but I never paid much attention to it. But now, years later, I wondered if Samuel and Aaron did. Perhaps they thought by involving Eli, they might be able to get my financial help to start up their business.

I looked back at Eli and tried to dampen his enthusiasm for the new venture. "Starting up a business is something to think about, Eli. It's not as easy as you might think. There's also a lot that you need to consider in doing business with the English."

Eli nodded in agreement and went back to rocking. If he was thinking of selling part of the farm to fund and work in this business, that would be okay with me. It was

probably the smart thing to do. I was getting older. It was getting harder for me to keep up with the chores. Besides, the farm was his inheritance. I just didn't want others to take advantage of him or me.

I thought about offering to do their accounting if they went forward with this but decided against it. It was not something that I wanted to do. It would be imposing and, frankly, I wasn't interested. I didn't want to get involved in their business. It might stir up more talk. My life here had become simple. I wanted to keep it that way.

"Eli, you should be careful about this furniture business. It might distract you from your family and church. Plus, you don't want to lose any ground with Katie. She is a good choice for a wife. Don't lose her. Don't take her for granted. Now or ever."

"Why would I do that, Dadi?"

"Many reasons, my son. All of them are involved with being successful or failing in this new venture. All of them are involved with material things. Things like pride, greed, anger, or envy. Don't let material things distract you from the spiritual things."

"I won't, father." He gave me a half-smile "I'm sure you'll correct me if I do." His smile made me worry a bit. He was still innocent. He had yet to work outside of our community. One day, I knew he would be tested though. I hoped his good nature would prevail.

I looked away and thought of people whose good nature seemed to have been stripped away from them. They were some of my accounting clients back in the English world. It's like they got tested and failed. I hoped that wouldn't happen with Eli after being involved in this furniture business But perhaps I was the one who was being naïve.

"Dadi, would you help us in setting up our business and doing our accounting? It would help a lot."

My answer was quick. It didn't require a lot of thought. "No. You should have outside help for that. I'll help in any way I can, but I will not get involved in your business. I will not let that get between us. I love you too much for that. "

He looked at me and smiled. I worried because he was such a wonderful son. I didn't want anything to change that.

"Okay, I understand. It's probably for the best."

I suddenly felt a chill and looked over at Sarah. She had a traumatic brain injury about sixteen years ago and couldn't say whether she was cold or not. She had gained quite a bit of weight since the accident. She was quite wiry and vibrant before that. She wasn't what the English would call a good "catch" when I married her, but she was pleasant and a good partner for keeping our home in good order and helping with the farm. More importantly, she helped me become a good Amish husband and member of the community.

I got up to tighten her shawl. It hung loose around her shoulders. I pulled on the drawstrings to make it snug around her neck. I looked down into her face. It was expressionless. Her arms lay still on the arms of the rocking chair. Her legs were planted on the porch in the same position since I had guided her out. I rubbed her arms, kissed her on the cheek, and returned to my rocking chair.

Eli and I kept rocking in silence until it was time to go in. It was dusk and getting colder by the second. I got up to take Sarah inside. This was no easy task. I straddled her legs and placed my hands under her shoulders. Eli got up and stood behind her to help push up and steady her. After we got her up, I gave her a hug and another kiss on the cheek. I was hoping for some kind of a response; sometimes I got one. But this time, there was none.