



IMPOSSIBLE MAN

By the author of *The Taqwacores*,
“a *Catcher in the Rye* for young Muslims”
—*New York Times*

MICHAEL MUHAMMAD KNIGHT

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for mothers



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holly ghost and fire

My father's father, Calvin Sherrard

Unger, was born on Christmas Day, 1895, in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia.

Calvin's brother, John Wesley Unger, was a blind musician who wrote a well-known folk song, "The Miner's Doom," about an explosion in a nearby mine. The Ungers had a lot of history in Morgan County; there was an unincorporated "town" called Unger's Store (just an intersection of country roads, a post office and general store, population eighty), later shortened to Unger, where my great-great-great-great-uncle Washington Unger gave shelter to Stonewall Jackson's troops before they invaded Romney. Another Unger, also named John Wesley, served as a captain in the Confederate army.

Calvin married a local girl named Maude and left her pregnant to fight in the First World War. According to legend, Calvin's mother-in-law had disapproved of her daughter marrying a low-class Unger, and after delivering the baby in

her home promptly smashed its head against a chair. Maude died in the summer of 1920. Five months later, Calvin married sixteen-year-old Martha Irene Bishop.

When he wasn't working in the coal mines, Calvin preached the Gospel on street corners and in time became a Pentecostal minister. He gave immersion baptisms in the Cacapon River and sometimes received the Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire, which caused him to speak in tongues. Following the Lord's orders against birth control, between 1921 and 1947 Martha would give birth to twenty children, twelve girls and eight boys. Calvin's primary instrument of discipline in that crowded house was the Devil: *If you don't eat your vegetables, the Devil's gonna get you. Do your chores, or the Devil's gonna get you.* He even let them believe that the charcoal furnace in the basement led directly to Hell, and that he kept the Devil's fire burning.

With so much work and so many kids, Calvin and Martha delegated their older children to watch over the younger ones; as one of the younger ones, Wesley Calvin Unger was mostly raised by his sisters, one of whom would claim that Calvin had molested her. Wesley's surrogate mothers all left him in turn; at least half of the Unger daughters were married by seventeen, but that's how they did things in that time and place.

The twentieth child was Calvin and Martha's eighth boy; but because one of the boys had lived only six months, they thought of this one as the seventh son—which Calvin saw as full of religious meaning. They named him David Pine Unger; David after the Bible's King David, who was also a seventh son, and Pine after the hospital in which they delivered him (he was the first Unger born in a hospital).

One morning as the Unger kids crossed the road to get on

the school bus, a Harris Express Company tractor-trailer came speeding from behind the hill. Wesley was fourteen years old and right there in the road. He saw it coming full of violence but no personality—like the violence of nature—upon six-year-old David. And he saw up close as the eighteen wheels and however many tons absorbed the blonde child into itself. In less than a second there was no more of David Pine Unger, nothing that could have been recognizable as a boy or parts of a boy. Wesley watched men with shovels come to scrape his brother off the road. And he watched his mother lose her mind and attack the trucker with a butcher knife, screaming as the men dropped their shovels and rushed to hold her back.

Martha told her remaining children that the trucker was the Devil coming to get them. She died of grief in two years and Calvin married another woman with her own kids. Calvin's new wife tried to convince him that the Devil had possessed Wesley, that after Wesley left a room, books would start jumping off the shelves and flying around her. When she became too much, Wesley would live in his car in the church parking lot. He looked to the army for a way out of Berkeley Springs, but at seventeen he needed parental permission; his stepmother happily signed the papers, and he was soon shipped to Korea. Something bad happened there. Nobody knew what, and Wesley wouldn't talk about it, but his sisters all had their own stories. One claimed that he had witnessed the North Koreans massacre a truckload of refugee children, giving him twenty simultaneous flashbacks of David's death. Another said that his brain had been fried by chemical warfare. It might have been a jeep accident (and not in Korea, but off base in Niagara Falls) resulting in neurological problems; but for whatever reason, Wesley was honorably discharged and received benefits as a disabled veteran.

After coming home, he started to get weird. During the national headlines of Richard Speck raping and stabbing eight nurses to death, Wesley drove to the FBI headquarters in Washington, handed in his gun, and confessed. The FBI let him go but kept the gun. He did do some time, for what, nobody knew, but Mom thought it was drugs. He married two or three times. One of the women was Puerto Rican, for which the Ungers briefly disowned him, but she left Wesley after he slept with her mother. Another wife, remembered in Unger history only as "Cookie," gave Wesley two kids, a boy and a girl. After Cookie left him, Wesley showed up on her front lawn with an army-surplus bazooka. None of Wesley's sisters know how the kids ended up; according to Wesley, they were killed by the Kennedys.

Living off his monthly \$211 as a disabled veteran, Wesley never had to work and could drift as he liked. He wandered down to Titusville, Florida, and moved into a little bubble camper at the end of a trailer park. Driving his illegal yellow 1963 T-Bird one afternoon, he passed a tiny, dark-haired girl carrying two bags of groceries. He slammed on the brakes, then floored it back to her in reverse.

"GET IN THE CAR!" he barked at her. She was nineteen or twenty and he had a decade and a half on her. He was handsome and intense, his eyes burning through hers while he stretched his body across the passenger seat and kept his left hand on the wheel. She noticed that all of the stuffing had been torn out of his backseat. He opened the door for her, she got in, and that's how my parents met.



COMING TO FLORIDA from upstate New York, Mom had first lived with her aunt Trudy before moving into the trailer park.

After the wedding, Wesley developed a theory that Trudy was working for the Mafia, so they packed up and moved to Hagerstown, Maryland; but there he uncovered a new plot against him. At a local antique store he found a painting of a foxhunt and became convinced that his brother Jim had stolen it from them years ago. Lacking the money to buy it back, Wesley started hanging out at the store, examining the painting with a magnifying glass or chatting up the store owner, trying to trick him into admitting that he knew Jim. Once he even sent Mom in there with a camera to take pictures while he waited outside around the corner, crouching behind parked cars and mailboxes like a cat burglar in a Saturday morning cartoon. "He was trying to be James Bond about it," said Mom, "but he just looked ridiculous."

The next step was to go to Jim and confront him.

"That painting was a gift!" he shouted across Jim's kitchen table, my mother at his side. Jim listened quietly, neither calling Wesley crazy nor playing along, only causing Wesley to grow frustrated and his accusations to get more far-fetched until he finally realized that Jim was the Devil himself. Wesley stormed out of Jim's house, Mom running after him. "Jim's gonna kill me because I'm onto him," he told her. "He's a big shot down in Berkeley Springs and he knows that I'll ruin his reputation. He'll lose his family and his construction company and everything." At the time my parents lived in a retreat cabin that Wesley had been hired to build for a wealthy couple. Outside they kept a small mountain of slab wood for the fireplace, which Wesley spent an entire day rearranging into a bunker to hide my mom. "Stay in here," he ordered. "Jim would kill you too if he found you, because you know all about it." Then he covered her with wood and kept her there with a sleeping bag and flashlight, curled into

a ball through the night and the next day while he waited for Jim with his gun.

Jim never showed up, so Wesley did what he could to alert politicians on the state and federal level that his brother had stolen the painting. Soon he found the Devil in his other forms. My mother's mother was the Devil, so Wesley made threatening phone calls to Nan in the middle of the night. And the Devil was head of the Mafia, which wanted to kill Wesley, so he and Mom avoided staying in one place for any length of time. When Mom became pregnant, they were hiding from the Devil in a tent in the forest, hunting deer and rabbit for food. They'd go on long hikes in search of firewood, my mother loading heavy branches onto Wesley's back to carry to their tent.

"MORE!" he'd scream at her, even when it was too much for him.

"That's enough, Wesley," she'd say softly.

"MORE, BITCH!" One of those times she decided that he wasn't going to call her a bitch anymore, so she picked up their hunting rifle and pointed it at his face. The two of them stood motionless, Wesley hunched over with the heavy load on his back and Mom ready to leave him dead right there, miles away from the civilized world and its authority. She finally lowered the gun and they walked back to the tent without saying anything. The stress of life with Wesley, combined with the physical strain of life in the woods, caused her to lose the baby.

They were back in the rich couple's retreat cabin when she got pregnant again, but by then Wesley was receiving messages from his dead brother David and seeing the Devil fly out of the ground. David told Wesley to fulfill the duties of the lost seventh son; he must have seven sons of his own, and his seventh son must in turn have seven sons, because the seventh

son of a seventh son would possess special spiritual powers. But then David's story changed; the baby was not Wesley's at all but belonged to the Devil, who had seduced my mother as part of a plan to kill him. The Devil can trick you into raising his seed as your own, David told Wesley, and when the boy's old enough he'll turn on you. Wesley looked at Mom's belly, sensed the Devil growing inside it and knew that he'd have to send it back to Hell. So he wouldn't allow Mom to eat. She miscarried while he was waiting for his monthly \$211, so he had no money to take her to the hospital. It was around midnight that he found her lying on the bathroom floor in a pool of her own blood.

"Jodie!" he shouted at her. Mom's name was Sue, but for some reason he called her Jodie. "Jodie, get up!" He dragged her to their bed, the blood still spilling and leaving a trail behind her. She regained consciousness and seemed okay, so Wesley sat her up, causing the blood to rush out of her head, and she blacked out. Wesley put her down and she recovered, so he brought her back up and she blacked out again. They went back and forth like that for some time, Wesley sure that she was faking, until he finally panicked and ran down the road to call an ambulance from the fish store. In the emergency room her blood pressure was measured at fifty over twenty, and she momentarily went blind.

Less than a year later she became pregnant again and turned into a basket case, refusing to get dressed or leave the bed, hallucinating blood, and waiting for the inevitable miscarriage. Turning off his disease like a switch, Wesley feared that he might end up doing wrong again and wanted her as far from him as she could get. He bought her a bus ticket back to Geneva, drove her to the station, and left her there, a scared young girl with a big belly surrounded by drug dealers

and assorted shifty monsters giving her their evil eyes. A police officer, recognizing my mom as a walking target, pulled a chair over to a corner far from everyone, put her in it, and wouldn't even let her get up to go to the bathroom. "You stay here," he ordered. "I'll watch you."



MOM NEVER HAD a chance to tell Nan and Gramps that she was coming, or even that she was far along in another pregnancy; Nan was so shocked and overjoyed to see her walk in that she dropped my baby cousin Chrissy to the floor. Nan thought that my mother had freed herself of Wesley, but he'd show up a few weeks later.

It made for an uneasy house. Wesley maintained a hatred of upstate New York from his time stationed in Niagara Falls, but more important, my Nan and Gramps were Catholics, and Wesley hated Catholics. He managed to get along with Gramps, at least until losing respect for him for letting the women run the house. Wesley took charge, telling Nan what to do in her own house. He wouldn't even let Mom help her with the housework.

"Is this how you treat your own mother, Wesley?" Nan cried.

"My mother left me," he told her.

Wesley was confident that he knew how to work women, that he could tweak their minds in the right places to put himself in charge and have them accept it. He claimed that he could take a high school girl and tie her up in his house, and keep her tied up for so long that when he finally untied her, she'd stay because she loved him.

He had my mother tied up in her own head, and she was nine months with me when he decided to untie her. They were

sitting together in Nan and Gramps's living room when, without saying a word, he stood up and headed for the door. Mom asked what he was doing, but he only picked up his manual typewriter in its carrying case, pushed open the screen door, and walked out. He knew what it would do. Mom cried for him from the porch and then chased after him, her screams bringing out the neighbors. Wesley picked up the pace until she was sprinting. Mom followed him around the block, her womb bouncing hard with her steps, until she couldn't run anymore and fell to her knees. Wesley helped her up, walked her back to the house, and then went to the kitchen for a beer. Mom sat at his feet and waited for the stillbirth.



IT WASN'T ENOUGH to kill me, but did complicate the labor. I came out arm-first and required the help of forceps, leaving a scar on the top of my head and another by my right eye. Wesley had wanted to name me Frederick after Frederick the Great of the Prussian Empire, but he was nowhere near the hospital; when things were looking bad, he ran out of there and booked down the street to drink all of Gramps's whiskey. My mother named me Michael. I was healthy, but she wasn't. Her bladder had completely shut down, keeping her in the hospital for eight days after I was released.

For those eight days Wesley used me as a tool to antagonize Nan. After everything that she had done for my mother during her pregnancy, including waiting on Wesley hand and foot, Wesley would not allow Nan to touch me. "The sun is shining from his eyes," he'd tell Nan, dangling me in front of her. "You see it? That's his light. You'd like to take it away, wouldn't you?" A week after Mom came home, Wesley and Nan got in a fight over her alleged involvement in the Mafia,

so he put Mom and me in the truck and went south. On the road Mom caught botulism from bad truck-stop food. We settled into a nasty trailer in Bedford, Pennsylvania, where she would constantly vomit and have diarrhea at the same time. One afternoon that Wesley was gone, she had to pull herself out of the bathroom to answer the door for an older gentleman from the FBI, who expressed concern over letters that Wesley had written to senator Robert Byrd.



MOM WAS SO afraid of Wesley and what he might do that for the first two years of my life, she never let me out of her sight. In those two years, because of Wesley's growing paranoia, we lived in over twenty places. We had a gutted-out house in Morgantown, West Virginia, that was only one big room with no windows or furniture, just a mattress on the floor; and a motel room in Cumberland, Maryland, with windows that my mother had to crank open; and for a time we squatted in the servants' quarters of an old plantation house. The only meat we could afford to buy was chicken neck, so Wesley would hunt. Sometimes he'd come home and throw a fresh deer on the floor, chop off its head, and nail it to the wall for skinning. When he didn't catch anything, Mom made pancakes with just flour and water, adding ketchup or mayonnaise, or we ate off Salvation Army meal tickets. Wesley tried to supplement his monthly \$211 with odd jobs like painting, landscaping, or bean picking, but they never lasted long. When he decided that it was time to move, usually without warning, we took only what fit in the car. Sometimes I had things like a crib and a stroller and toys, but they were often left behind.

Wesley was drinking hard, whipping Mom with belts and calling Nan from payphones to tell her that he was about to

kill us both and bury us in the mountains. He started to shave his head to look like Charles Manson, and spent hours practicing what he called “Manson eyes” in the mirror. His stories went through revision; usually I wasn’t his son, but other times I was the start of his seventh-son-of-a-seventh-son plan to take over the world. Mom just took it as he gave it until November 1978, when she heard the news coming from South America and saw piles of dead bodies on the cover of *Time*.

The bodies had once been followers of the Reverend Jim Jones at his Jonestown commune in Guyana. They used to call him “Dad.” When he gave the order, they lined up to drink poisoned Kool-Aid and kill themselves in turn: first the children, then the elderly followers, then everyone else. Some of the cult members had argued for life, and Jones only told them that living, “raising up every morning and not knowing what’s going to be the night’s bringing,” was much harder than lying down and submitting to death. Seated at his throne when it was all over, surrounded by his adoring corpses, Jones emptied a pistol into his own head.

The sign above him read THOSE WHO DO NOT REMEMBER THE PAST ARE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT IT.

My mother looked at the bodies, considering what they might have been running from or looking for at Jonestown, and why they stayed even when they knew that Jones was wrong. Mom knew all the tricks; we were living in a Jonestown of three.

She began to steal money from Wesley and hide it in a sock, never so much that he would notice. After some months, one morning she asked him to leave the door unlocked so that she could take me for a walk. Wesley agreed. As soon as he headed off to wherever he went during the day, Mom took me and scooped up what else she could—diapers and one change of